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# U2: Unexpected Prophets

BY STEVEN R. HARMON

Arguably the most successful rock band in the world, U2 not only cries out against injustice, but also dares to imagine an alternative in light of the Christian vision. The band searchingly examines the distortions of our world and proclaims with Scripture “the place that has to be believed to be seen” and “where the streets have no name.” Will we hear them?

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The function of a Hebrew prophet is to bring “the divine reality directly to bear on the sphere of moral conduct,” Walther Eichrodt famously noted.<sup>1</sup> Prophets envision and proclaim how God’s goals for the world are relevant to the way we live in the present. Since that is what theologians, whether they minister in a local church or teach in the academy, seek to do, we *expect* to hear prophetic words from them.

Yet even the most widely recognized pastors and professors do not have the ears of as many people as do vocalist Bono (Paul Hewson), guitarist The Edge (Dave Evans), bass player Adam Clayton, and drummer Larry Mullen, Jr., members of the Irish rock band U2. These Christian believers, arguably the most successful rock band in the world with a discography and touring history spanning a quarter of a century, are unexpected prophets. In their music they imagine, through their glimpses of the divine reality, a world that might be. Several recurring themes mark the band’s imagination as distinctively Christian.

## **GROUNDING IMPLICITLY IN WORSHIP**

Healthy Christian theology must be rooted in the worship of the Church: “The rule of praying is the rule of believing,” the ancient theologians maintained.<sup>2</sup> Although U2’s music is written not for services of

Christian worship but for concert tour performances in arenas and stadiums, it still has an implicitly liturgical context. “They’re all songs of praise to God and creation—even the angry ones!” Bono said in a recent “People in the News” interview on CNN.<sup>3</sup>

In U2’s live concerts, the context of “praise to God” frequently moves from the background to center stage. “Gloria”—a song from the band’s

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second album, *October* (1981), that has been featured again in recent performances—incorporates the opening words of three psalms in Latin: *In te domine*, “In you, O Lord” (Psalm 31); *Exultate*, “Rejoice” (Psalm 33); and *Miserere*, “Have mercy” (Psalm 51). Indeed, the Psalter is a significant influence on U2’s Christian imagination, and Bono con-

tributed the preface for a pocket version of the Psalms published recently in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

During the band’s world tours in 1983, 1984-85, 1987, and 1989-90, the concerts customarily ended with “40,” a paraphrase of Psalm 40 with a refrain lifted from Psalm 6:3. After the band had left the stage, concertgoers would continue to sing this refrain, “How long to sing this song?” as they made their way out of the arenas and into the parking lots. The refrain from “40” served as the transition between “Bad” (*The Unforgettable Fire*, 1984) and U2’s signature song, “Where the Streets Have No Name” (*The Joshua Tree*, 1987), in many of the concerts of the 2001 Elevation Tour, the final concert of which concluded with “40.” Most concerts of the 2005 Vertigo Tour once again sent the twenty- to eighty-thousand members of each “congregation” out into the world singing these words adapted from the Psalter. That’s something that doesn’t happen at a typical rock concert.

Nor do rock concerts normally spotlight a lead singer who gestures heavenward with an uplifted hand when singing lyrics addressed to God, kneels in prayer onstage, recites the psalms, or works bits of hymns into the set list. During the segue into “Where the Streets Have No Name” in some concerts of the Elevation Tour, Bono knelt and quoted Psalm 116 from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* paraphrase. At the same point in U2’s halftime performance at the 2002 Super Bowl, Bono’s recitation of Psalm 51:15—“O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth show forth thy praise”—closely paralleled the invitatory responsive reading in the Morning Prayer service of the (Anglican) Church of Ireland’s *Book of Common Prayer*:

O Lord, open thou our lips  
*And our mouth shall show forth thy praise.*  
 O God, make speed to save us;  
*O Lord, make haste to help us.*<sup>5</sup>

The familiar hymn “Amazing Grace” has made occasional appearances in U2 concerts over the years, most recently at the end of “Running to Stand Still” (*The Joshua Tree*) during concerts in Berlin and Paris after the London terrorist bombings in July 2005.

The standard “second encore” in the concerts of the first leg of the *Vertigo Tour*, dubbed the “worship encore” by one online fan reviewer, featured a trio of songs directed toward God: “Yahweh,” “40,” and “All Because of You” (in which “I am” in the lyric “All because of you/I am” is a double entendre referring both to the singer’s existence grounded in God and to the God who is the ground of existence). These echoes and outright expressions of Christian liturgy point toward the context and content of U2’s Christian imagination: God and creation.

#### **STEEPED IN THE BIBLICAL STORY**

The Christian imagination must be formed by the story around which the worshipping Christian community gathers—the story told by the Bible. In bringing the divine reality to bear on human existence in their songs, U2 alludes frequently to Scripture. One Internet fan site, though it is not yet exhaustive, identifies approximately one hundred biblical references in U2’s lyrics.<sup>6</sup>

Some songs retell biblical stories. “Until the End of the World” (*Achtung Baby*, 1991) is set during Christ’s descent to the dead on Holy Saturday and imagines from Judas’ point of view the aftermath of his betrayal of Jesus. “The First Time” (*Zooropa*, 1993) retells the parable of the prodigal son with this interesting twist: after being welcomed home by the waiting father and receiving his gifts, the wayward son soon “left by the back door and threw away the key”; nevertheless, he is pursued by his father and continues to feel the father’s love despite his seemingly final rejection of it. “Vertigo,” the lead track from 2004’s *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, is rich in allusions to Jesus’ wilderness temptations. The song’s video 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 noone gets hurt.”

These and many other songs make sense only in light of the biblical stories in which they are rooted. But their deepest import may be veiled from those who do not share the framework of biblical narrative out of which the U2 catalog offers a distinctively Christian rendering of the world. In a conversation with a journalist about the difficulties inherent in singing about faith while being acclaimed as the most popular rock band in the world, Bono said, “We’ve found different ways of expressing it, and

recognized the power of the media to manipulate such signs. Maybe we just have to sort of draw our fish in the sand. It's there for people who are interested. It shouldn't be there for people who aren't." As with the parables of Jesus, the effect is often "that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand'" (Luke 8:10b).

### **PORTRAYING THE TRIUNE GOD**

Christians do not worship a generic deity, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who made Israel the people of God, was incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, and continues to send the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower the Church. While U2's songs are not theological treatises on the Trinity, they do portray the divine reality in these specifically Christian terms.

The One whose name was disclosed as "Yahweh" is the ultimate audience for their music, and the Name is honored in the title for the final track on *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* and the penultimate song in most concerts of the Vertigo Tour. Scattered throughout the U2 catalogue are references to the persons of the Trinity. In "Wake Up Dead Man" (*Pop*, 1997), a brutally honest prayer of lament addressed to Jesus on an existentialized Holy Saturday awaiting the resurrection, Jesus is the Son of the Father who is "in charge of heaven" and "made the world in seven." On *Achtung Baby*, the Holy Spirit is "God's only dove" (in "So Cruel") and is identified with the biblical personification of Wisdom, she who "moves in mysterious ways" (in "Mysterious Ways"). One song, "The First Time," is fully triadic with verses that correspond to the persons of the Trinity: "I have a lover...," the Spirit; "I have a brother...," the Son; and "My father is a rich man...."

The early church found it necessary to narrate its story of salvation in triadic fashion, for the earliest Christians had experienced the saving work of Yahweh in the risen Christ and the indwelling Spirit, and they believed that only the one God could save. When U2 sings about the divine, the band likewise finds it impossible to do so without this distinctively Christian understanding of God pervading the lyrics.

### **SHARING CHRISTIAN HOPE**

Eschatology, the doctrine of Christian theology that focuses on the "last things" for which Christians hope, often is distorted by two extreme and inadequate perspectives on God's work in the world. A wholly realized eschatology has no need of a future hope: it has the fullness of salvation, "the power of his resurrection," now and is quite satisfied with life as it is. It has little place for "the sharing of his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10) as a paradigm for the Christian life. On the other hand, a wholly future eschatology gives up on the present world as the arena of God's reconciling work and waits instead for a new heaven and a new earth that are radically discontinuous with the present order.

The eschatology of the Bible as interpreted by the mainstream Christian tradition, however, maintains a tension between the “already” and the “not yet”: the reign of God is at hand and people have the opportunity to participate in it in the here and now, but it is not yet fully realized and cannot become so without the participation of people in the reign of God. This tension is the key theological concept for understanding the spiritual significance of U2’s music.

This already/not yet tension echoes in the psalms of lament scattered throughout U2’s music. The cry “How long?” rises from the first and final tracks of *War* (1983), an album filled with prophetic awareness of the not-yet-transformed nature of the world on the one hand and hope for its transformation on the other. “Sunday Bloody Sunday” recalls the 1972 massacre by British paratroopers of Northern Irish protesters against British occupation, an event that became a “battle call” for IRA enlistment campaigns, but Bono sings “I won’t heed the battle call.” Instead, he holds forth the hope that “tonight we can be as one” if people “claim the victory Jesus won”—yet he must continue to ask “How long? How long must we sing this song?” Similarly, the “How long?” refrain in “40” balances the new things that have come in God’s saving work—“He brought me up out of the pit, out of the miry clay” and “You set my feet upon a rock, and made my footsteps firm”—with the plea for God to make all things fully new: “How long to sing this song?”

This tension is most clearly rendered in “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” (*The Joshua Tree*). The “already” dimension of Christian faith is stated in no uncertain terms: “You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains/carried the cross and all my shame.” But even that has not yet completely transformed all that is wrong with the world (or the singer): “But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” On *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, “Yahweh” voices a similar hope: “Always pain before a child is born...still I’m waiting for the dawn.”

When Vertigo Tour concertgoers were sent out into the world singing “How long to sing this song?” tens of thousands strong, they were leaving an event that many characterized as a transcendent experience—perhaps for many people it was an encounter with God—with a sung reminder that outside the concert arena all is not as it should be and that their lives should have something to do with changing that.

### **BASING SALVATION IN GRACE**

As Christians we believe that God grants salvation and wholeness by grace; it is not something we attain by human merit. Or as “Grace,” the final track on *All That You Can’t Leave Behind* (2000), describes grace personified, “She travels outside of karma.” In other words, grace is alien to the common expectation that people ultimately get what they deserve.

Bono recently offered these thoughts on grace in a series of interviews:

You see, at the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics—in physical laws—every action is met by an equal or an opposite one.... And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that.... Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions,

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which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff.... It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to

depend on my own religiosity.... The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled.... It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of Heaven.<sup>8</sup>

Grace, of course, not only is at work in our redemption, but also is the foundation of our very existence as a creature made for relationship with God. Augustine began his *Confessions*, "You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."<sup>9</sup> Bono echoes this idea in "Mofo" (*Pop*), in which the singer is "lookin' for to fill that God-shaped hole."<sup>10</sup> The song "All Because of You" associates not only the creation of life but also the creation of the cosmos with God's gracious work: "I was born a child of grace" and "I saw you in the curve of the moon" leading to the confession, "All because of you/I am."

#### **CALLING FOR PROPHETIC SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

No expression of Christianity that is worthy of its namesake can proclaim what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," the idea that salvation is an individual affair and has no impact on how one lives in society.<sup>11</sup> U2's songs about God's grace are rather about Bonhoeffer's "costly grace," for they demand that we view the injustices of this world through Christian lenses and identify with those who are marginalized. Identification with those who suffer injustice is the proper response to our receiving God's grace. Thus, *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, the album that ends with "Grace," begins with "Beautiful Day," a song about Jubilee 2000 (a

movement that encourages rich nations to reduce some of the international debt owed by poorer countries), which specifies the motive for seeking economic justice: "Someone you could lend a hand/In return for grace."

Beginning with the album *War*, multiple songs on each album have brought the divine reality to bear on the sphere of social morality. Each of the first three songs of *War* addressed a social issue: the fighting in Northern Ireland ("Sunday Bloody Sunday"), nuclear proliferation ("Seconds"), and the plight of Soviet political prisoners and the promise of the Polish Solidarity movement ("New Year's Day"). Through the years, other songs have offered a Christian protest against violence in Northern Ireland: for example, "Love is Blindness" (*Achtung Baby*), "Please" (*Pop*), and "Peace on Earth" (*All That You Can't Leave Behind*). "Pride (In the Name of Love)" from *The Unforgettable Fire* memorialized the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the American struggle for civil rights, and "Silver and Gold" (*Rattle and Hum*, 1988) lent support to Desmond Tutu's call for economic sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa. "Bullet the Blue Sky" (*The Joshua Tree*) originally cast a spotlight on American support for repressive military dictatorships in Central America, and retooled versions of the song in later concert tours have addressed the international arms trade and the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal. Two songs on *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, "Miracle Drug" and "Crumbs from Your Table," have joined the previous album's "Beautiful Day" in taking up the cause of Africa's need for debt relief, medical intervention, and trade reform.

In these and other songs of social engagement, Bono and U2 continue to be unexpected prophets. They not only cry out against injustice, but also dare to imagine an alternative in light of the Christian vision. They searchingly examine the distortions of our world and proclaim with Scripture "the place that has to be believed to be seen," the place "where the streets have no name." Will we hear them?

#### **RESOURCES FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION**

U2's lyrics, songs, and concert videos, which are available through the band's official website [www.u2.com](http://www.u2.com), make ideal discussion starters for youth Bible studies on the themes in this article, but youth leaders should be judicious in their selections.<sup>12</sup>

Three fine books explore the connections between the music of U2 and Christian faith. *Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2*, revised edition (Orlando, FL: Relevant Books, 2005) by Steve Stockman, a Presbyterian minister and chaplain at Queen's University in Belfast, has been updated to include *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* (2004) and the 2005 Vertigo Tour. Episcopal priests Raewynne J. Whitely and Beth Maynard recently edited and contributed to *Get Up off Your Knees: Preaching the U2 Catalog* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2003), a collection of sermons that employ U2's art to communicate the Gospel. An appendix provides study

guides for adult spiritual formation groups. And soon to be published is *One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006) by Christian Scharen, a Lutheran minister and associate director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

## NOTES

1 Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, translated by J. A. Baker, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:362.

2 Prosper of Aquitaine, "Official Pronouncements of the Apostolic See on Divine Grace and Free Will" 8, in *Defense of St. Augustine*, translated by P. de Letter, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 32 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963), 183.

3 "Profiles of U2 and the Dave Matthews Band," *CNN People in the News*, aired 14 May 2005, 17:00 ET (<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/050514/pitn.01.html>, accessed 26 November 2005).

4 *The Book of Psalms: Authorised King James Version*, with an introduction by Bono (Edinburgh, Scotland: Canongate, 1999).

5 "The Order for Morning Prayer," in *The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of Ireland* (Dublin: Church of Ireland Printing and Publishing Co., Ltd., 1926).

6 Available online at [www.atu2.com/lyrics/biblerefs.html](http://www.atu2.com/lyrics/biblerefs.html) (accessed 26 November 2005).

7 Bill Flanagan, *U2 at the End of the World* (New York, NY: Delta, 1995), 480.

8 Michka Assayas, *Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2005), 203-204.

9 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 1.1.1. This translation is by Maria Boulding in John E. Rotelle, ed., *The Confessions*, part 1, volume 1 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 39.

10 Bono's phrase is closer to the expression of this Augustinian idea by Blaise Pascal in *Pensées*, 11.181. See *Pensées and Other Writings*, translated by Honor Levi (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 52.

11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, translated by R. H. Fuller (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1995), 43-56.

12 Bono's occasional lapses into the language of the streets of Dublin do not serve as the best model for Christian speech. For instance, in the *Rattle and Hum* concert film, Bono uses the "f-word" to denounce IRA terrorist attacks in a passionate performance of "Sunday Bloody Sunday" on the evening of the November 7, 1987, bombing in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, that killed eleven people and wounded sixty-three others. In the song "Wake Up Dead Man" (*Pop*) and the Boston and Slane Castle concert DVDs from the 2001 Elevation Tour, he laments to Jesus, "I'm alone in this world/ And a [messed]-up world it is, too" (expletive deleted). Many parents will not consider that acceptable language for Christian youth, and they may want to preview CDs and DVDs and make decisions about what they will allow their youth to listen to and view.



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