

What does Bob Dylan really believe? –by Kees de Graaf

Ever since Dylan was converted to Christianity in 1979, there has been a lot of controversy among fans – believers and non- believers- focusing on the question whether Dylan in some sort of a way has adhered to his decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ, or that he has abandoned this faith a long time ago. For those who feel that he has abandoned his faith in Jesus, one may ask the question if there is enough evidence that proves that he has in fact given up his faith in Jesus. A clear statement that he has in fact given up his faith would be very helpful for them. A statement which could run like: ***“There was a time, a brief period, a couple of years, when I thought I believed in God and in Jesus, a time when I believed that the Bible was right, but not anymore. I was confused at the time but later on I realized that it was all just a hoax. Forget the whole thing; there is no God and there is no heaven, the only thing I now believe in is myself and in the spirit of creativity”***. But the fact is that such an unequivocal statement does not exist. Those who believe that Dylan has given up on Jesus were forced to take resort to all sorts of ‘circumstantial’ evidence to prove that they are right or to make it at least credible that Dylan’s faith in Jesus is passé. We mention some of these arguments:

1. It is true that during his so-called Christian period (1979-1981) Dylan often talked about Jesus and the Bible, not only in his songs but also during raps on stage and in interviews, but in later years he is elusive about his faith in Jesus and hardly ever explicitly speaks about Jesus or the Bible, not in his songs, not on stage or in the press.

2. Dylan denounced Christianity and returned to some sort of Judaism; he attended the Bar Mitzvah ceremonials of his children; he frequented (s) synagogues, in 2007 he went to Chabad- Lubavitch for Yom Kippur, where he got an aliyah to the Torah. (an ‘aliyah’ is an “ascent” and represents the immigration of Jews to Israel and Chabad- Lubavitch is a philosophy, a movement, and an organization. It is considered to be the most dynamic force in Jewish life today).

3. Dylan no longer believes in Jesus or in the Bible as the word of God, but he finds solace in the religiosity and philosophy of the music and the songs. This is apparent from an interview that Dylan gave in 1996 for the magazine Newsweek. Novelist David Gates asked Dylan what he believed. Dylan replied, *“I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. I don’t find it anywhere else. Songs like ‘Let Me Rest on a Peaceful Mountain’ or ‘I Saw the Light’—that’s my religion. I don’t adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists, all of that. I’ve learned more from the songs than I’ve learned from any of this kind of entity. The songs are my lexicon. I believe the songs.”*

“Those old songs are my lexicon and prayer book,” Bob Dylan said in 1997, after the release of his album "Time Out of Mind" which was his first album of original material in seven years. Dylan said *"All my beliefs come out of those old songs, literally, anything from ‘Let Me Rest on that Peaceful Mountain’ to ‘Keep on the Sunny Side.’ You can find all my philosophy in those old songs. I believe in a God of time and space, but if people ask me about that, my impulse is to point them back toward those songs. I believe in Hank Williams singing ‘I Saw the Light.’ I’ve seen the light, too”*. Also somewhere in 1997, Dylan gave another interview about American roots music-like the songs of Bill Monroe and the Stanley Brothers, some of these songs were on his set lists. *"That’s my religion,"* he said. *"I don’t adhere to rabbis,*

preachers, evangelists .I've learned more from the songs than I've learned from any of this kind of entity."

What may be the counter- arguments of all those who believe that Bob Dylan has not denounced his faith in Jesus and is as committed to Jesus as ever before?:

1. There was indeed a time (1979-1981) when Dylan was very overt about Jesus. However, if Dylan would have continued to spread the good news of the gospel in the same way like he did in the years 1979-1981 his influence would have been minimized. His message in the years 1979-1980 was so unequivocally uncompromising that it alienated a large percentage of his fans. If he had continued in the same way- also by performing only his Christian repertoire-, he would not only have lost his worldwide influence as a secular artist but at the same time his sphere of influence would have been reduced to a small gospel scene only. Although Dylan later on said that what he did in 1979 and 1980 was something he had to do, those gospel songs had to come out, in 1981 however, Dylan started again to incorporate songs from his pre-born albums into his shows and from then on also his songwriting took a new turn. The new lyrics became less and less overtly Christian and more and more all kinds of universal and secular elements were introduced in his lyrics. The message was more and more hidden and fellow believers had to learn to read the same old message of the gospel between the lines. From then on it also meant that his new songs could be interpreted in various ways, not always necessarily only in a Christian way; the new lyrics were open for debate. The debate about the interpretation of his new lyrics between believers and non-believers began, and has continued up to this very day. As the internet progressed in the nineties, a worldwide forum was created where this discussion has been going on. The fact is that Jesus, in some sort of a way, did the same thing. There was a time when Jesus- just like Dylan did in his own way and on his own level in 1979 and 1980- spread the message of the Kingdom of God overtly and openly, but when Jesus met with a lot of hostility and resistance (Matthew 13:13-15) he started to use parables to spread the message. A parable is a comparison, a similitude; specifically, a short fictitious narrative of something which might really occur in life or nature, by means of which a moral lesson is drawn. What did that mean?

Firstly, a secret is hidden in the parable (Matthew 13: 10). Secondly, it takes effort to find the message which is hidden in the parable, you have to study, you have to ask to find the solution (Matthew 13:36) and thirdly, although the public at large does not come to grasp the message hidden in the parable, the parable in itself, as a story, is palatable for the public at large. The parable of 'the prodigal son', (Luke 15:11-32) is an example of this. As a story, this parable is fascinating on itself.

The road which Dylan has been following in his song writing process is comparable with what Jesus did. It may also have to do with the bargain, the deal, which Dylan said he made with God. For more information on this subject, we refer to my analysis of ["When the deal goes down"- Part 1](#)

2. Christianity does not exclude Judaism; in fact the historical roots of Christianity are in Judaism. If someone converts from Judaism to Christianity, he or she is not forced to denounce his or her Jewish roots. One may say that converts expand and enrich their view and experience of God. And that is something which happened to Bob Dylan. In the Bible we read that when the Apostles spread the good news of Jesus all over the world, the first place

in any town they visited on their mission tours was always the Jewish synagogue. The apostles never asked the Jews to give up their Jewish lifestyle but they only begged them to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, which was promised in the Torah and by the Prophets. Somewhere on a forum I read: "Dylan is in some ways an ultimate Christian. Why? Because he started as a Jew! Like Mary; Like Jesus. As Christ says, *"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill."* (King James, Matthew 5:17). The events of the New Testament are not merely a sequel to the Old, they are intimately related."

3. If somebody would say: *"I find the religiosity and philosophy in the Book of Common Prayer. I don't find it anywhere else.* If we would like to know what such a person believes, the only thing we have to do is to take a look and see what's in that Book of Common Prayer and what it refers to. When Dylan says: *"I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. I don't find it anywhere else"* and *"Those old songs are my lexicon and prayer book,"* we just have to take a close look at those songs to find out what Dylan actually believes. Let us make an effort.

Chris Gregory in his commentary on the songs of 'Modern Times' has also made an effort and writes about the bluegrass spiritual: "Hallelujah I'm ready to go": *"his concert performances in the late 90s and early 2000s of bluegrass spirituals by the Stanley Brothers and others can be seen as affirmations, not of the religion they proselytize as such but of Dylan's 'faith' in the songs themselves. ...Hallelujah!... he sings, in the Stanley Brothers song he's covered most of all ...I'm ready to go!..."*. This statement of Chris Gregory hardly seems to make any sense, to say the least of it. Does Gregory want to suggest that with 'I'm ready to go' Dylan intends to express that he is ready to abandon the traditional faith? If that were true it would be only wishful thinking on Gregory's part and I'm sorry to put it that way, but this would be sheer nonsense. If it is not the message expressed in the lyrics of the song the poet has faith in, what else is there left in this song to have faith in? Take away the message of the song and there is nothing left in the song to believe in. The message of the song is crystal clear: The poet is ready to go (to God) because 'he let his Savior (Jesus) in, and he saved his soul from sin' and he is ready to go because 'he is a wonderful Savior to know, I fell down on my knees and he answered all my pleas'. The message of the song is: Jesus is a wonderful Savior, he saved my soul from sin and because of that I'm ready to meet God. That is what the poet believes. (*'One sweet day, I'll stand beside my King'*) Apart from that, I'm a little surprised to read that according to Chris Gregory this is the Stanley Brother's song Dylan's covered the most. 'Hallelujah I'm ready to go' was covered 38 times. But 'I am the man Thomas', however, was covered 59 times. In this song Dylan introduces Jesus in the "I" form. This song about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is even more overtly Christian than "Hallelujah I'm ready to go", and touches upon the very center of the Christian faith.

The message which the bluegrass gospel songs deliver is basically the same in most of the songs of that kind. This message is that we are all sinners by nature. But we have a wonderful Savior, who loves us and has paid for our sins. If we go to Him, he takes away the burden of sin and fills our hearts with great joy. This is also the case in the bluegrass gospel songs Dylan says he believes in, and of which Dylan says that in these songs he finds his religiosity and philosophy and that these songs are his lexicon and prayer book. For instance,

Dylan mentions Hank Williams's "***I saw the Light***". What does this song say:

"I wandered so aimless , life filled with sin.

I wouldn't let my dear Savior in.

Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night.

Praise The Lord, I saw the Light".

We conclude that the bluegrass gospel songs Dylan refers to, focus on the very heart of the Gospel. The center and the heart of the Gospel is, that there his redemption for man through the Savior Jesus Christ. Therefore it seems obvious to me that when Dylan says that he finds his religiosity and philosophy in these songs and these songs are his prayer book and lexicon, he wants to make it clear – in his typically Dylanesque, somewhat elaborate and elusive way- that he is still committed to Jesus as his personal Savior. This is just an inseparable part of the deal, the bargain he said he made with God a long time ago. It is true, Dylan is a stand- alone Christian. No generation, no church, no denomination, organization, political or social movement can claim Dylan as spokesman. On the other hand, there seems to be a growing consensus, also among non-religious scholars and historians – as you may for instance read in Professor Sean Willentz' latest book '**Bob Dylan in America**' – that Dylan, in his own way, adheres to the basic principles of Christianity.

Furthermore, I'd like to draw attention to something else Dylan said in the 1997 interview we referred to above. Dylan says: "***I believe in a God of time and space***". Again, this is a very Dylanesque statement. No matter how enigmatic this statement may look at first glance – in the same way as Dylan calls Jesus the 'The Commander in Chief 'Dylan in his 2004 CBS interview – it nevertheless gives us an important clue to understanding Dylan's conception of God. "***I believe in a God of time and space***" is just another way of saying that Dylan believes in a personal God. God entered our **time** and **space** when He incarnated in his Son Jesus Christ. God became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. The eternal becomes temporal. What Dylan may have had in mind with this statement could not be better formulated than John Allister did in 1999, when he wrote an article about God, Space and Time. We quote:

*"All of that (that God is a God of time and space) doesn't make God any less real than us. In fact, if anything, it means that he is more real than we are. We have a beginning as people and, at least in this world, an end as well. God doesn't. We are constrained by time. He isn't. When God revealed his name in the Old Testament, he said he was "I am". Apparently the Hebrew for that means "I am, always have been and will continue to be". God is the one true constant, going beyond the universe. **What is amazing then is that in Jesus there is someone who is God and yet is confined within space and time.** People could literally see and touch God. It is not amazing that God could do this - after all, he is omnipotent. Rather what is amazing is that he loves us so much that the eternal Second Person of the Godhead became confined within space and time for us".*

It looks as if, when in this interview Dylan said: "***I believe in a God of time and space***" Dylan somehow must have realized in the back of his mind that this was quite an enigmatic statement. That may be the reason why he impulsively tries to clarify and simply this statement by saying, "*but if people ask me about that, my impulse is to point them back toward those songs. I believe in Hank Williams singing 'I Saw the Light.' I've seen the light, too*". This is as if Dylan said: "If you want to know what I mean when I say that I believe in a God of time and space, take a look at these songs. These songs point to the Light, these

<http://www.telegraaf.nl/dft/?cid=rdft>songs point to Jesus, my Savior, he is the One who entered time and space for me”.

Finally, to wrap this up the following: Chris Gregory in his analysis of Dylan’s ‘*Ain’t Talking*’ writes: *“A number of commentators (particularly on Christian or ‘faith-based’ culture-commentary websites and blogs) have referred to the plethora of Biblical allusions on Modern Times as ‘proving’ Dylan’s continual ‘faith in Jesus’. But this is surely just wish-fulfillment on their part”*. Through this article I hope to have shown that my personal conviction, that Dylan is still committed to Jesus is no wishful thinking on my part but may have some solid grounds in the facts. To deny this may equally be qualified as wishful thinking. There is something to choose, or it may be like Dylan once said: *“It’s either one or the other or neither of the two”*. Please press ‘reacties’ below if you are willing to respond to this article.