

Bob Dylan's "With God on our side" –an analysis by Kees de Graaf

It was **Abraham Lincoln** who said: *"Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right"*. This statement says it all.

This well-known protest song was written somewhere in 1962/ 1963 and recorded for the album "The Times they are a-Changin' ". The melody of the song is identical to "The Patriot Game", a song written by Dominic Behan, the melody is borrowed from a traditional Irish folk song. The song was written in strenuous days, in the days of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October-November 1962, which led the world to the brink of nuclear disaster. This nuclear threat still looms large in the background of this song.

"God's own country" is a name which a lot of Americans liked to give their country. In the face of this high-pitched pretention that the nation is indeed "God's own country", this song is an attempt to confront the American nation with its own bloody history. Once a nation is convinced that it has a special chosen position in the eyes of God, almost any political or military action to expand and consolidate this high position is in the end justified and sanctified with an appeal to the will of God. *"If God is for us, who is against us?"* the Bible says in Romans 8:31. *"I'm gonna do whatever circumstances require"* Dylan wrote in "Honest with me". This Machiavellian inspired line was and is used as a shibboleth to justify any political or military action, in disregard of the basic human rights of other nations and people and in disregard and disrespect also of the biblical principles of justice and love for your neighbor. Any moral scruples, those who are involved in this kind of war may have, are in the end waved aside and silenced by the overruling principle: 'we have to do it because God is on our side'. Dylan shows us, in the first seven stanzas of this song, the horrible consequences of such a narrow minded world view. In *'Cat's in the well'* Dylan wrote: *"grief is showing its face, the world's being slaughtered and it's such a bloody disgrace"*. That is exactly the picture Dylan confronts us with as he walks through the short American (military) history. In the final two stanzas Dylan draws some sort of a conclusion. He then does some deep thinking on the relation between the will of God – destiny – and our own personal, individual, responsibility. We'll deal with that later in this article. Let us first deal with the first seven stanzas. The picture Dylan shows us is crystal clear, so we do not need to dwell on details.

In the first two stanzas the poet starts with the very beginning of the American nation. ***"Oh my name it is nothing, my age it means less, the country I come from is called the Midwest"*** is a somewhat ironic statement from the poet. These words sound like mock modesty and are in contrast with what the average Midwesterner stands for and is proud of. In the very beginning of the American nation it was the very Midwest region which took the initiative and from there on the early pioneers from the Midwest spread and expanded westwards. At the beginning there was no organized social structure or coherence and everybody had to stand up for his own rights, it was really the "survival of the fittest" and even today Midwesterners are still proud of their pioneering spirit which guided them through those rough times. The poet ***"is taught and brought up there, the laws to abide, and the land that I live in has God on his side"***, which means that he is a typical product of the American soil of the 20th century. The poet was taught and brought up in a society where law and order were predominant. There were a lot of hard working, law abiding, orthodox Christians and obviously there was nothing wrong with that. At the same time, among those

law abiding people, there was a strong undercurrent of nationalistic feelings which easily led to conformity and to the idea that the Americans are a chosen nation and that ***“the land that they lived in had always God on its side”***. There was a strong sense that no matter what happened, they Americans were always ready to stand up for their country and to fight and to do whatever circumstances required; with only one goal: to defend American material immaterial interests, not only in their own country but all over the world. The consequences of this ideology were disastrous as the following verses show us. Let us take a look at the history books:

“Oh the history books tell it, they tell it so well. The cavalries charged, the Indians fell, the Cavalries charged, the Indian died”. It was well recorded in the history books. This is again an ironic statement. The history books show us a rose-coloured picture of the facts when the history books say that the Indians “fell”. It looks as if this were some kind of a heroic fight where unfortunately soldiers have “to fall” for their country. The fact is that the Indians were slaughtered. When the poet repeats the same words “The cavalries charged” but then adds: *“the Indians died”*, this is really an understatement, which was presumably inserted for the sake of making it rhyme with “side”. He meant to say that the Indians were butchered, slaughtered and murdered. In the year 1500, just after the arrival of Columbus, there were said to be 12 million Indians in America, in the year 1900 there were only 237.000 left. The Indians were wiped out in one of the greatest genocides of all times, although it is also true that many of them died because of foreign diseases like smallpox, a disease which the Europeans imported from Europe. ***“Oh the country was young, with God on its side”*** ironically suggests that as a nation you have an excuse to commit a crime when you are still a young nation, like it says in Psalm 25:7: *“Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions”*. Two things are stated here as an excuse to kill the Indians: 1. We were young. 2. If the first excuse does not convince you, you have to remember that God was on our side.

“Oh the Spanish-American War had its day”. The Spanish-American War of 1898 was a war between America and Spain about the independence of Cuba and other islands in the Caribbean area. Officially troops were sent to Cuba to stop brutal killings by the Spaniards but the real reason for the war has been an attempt ‘to create a new imperial empire’, the U.S. gained control over Cuba and colonial control over Puerto Rico. Number of casualties: more than 4000 in battle and 5000 through disease.

“And the civil war too, was soon laid away” The Civil War (1861-1865) was a war in the United States of America. Officially the goal of the war was to have slavery abolished in the 20 rebelling Southern States of America. In reality however, economic motives triggered off this bloody Civil War. Number of casualties on both sides: between 618.000 and 970.000. Both the Spanish-American war and the Civil war were officially fought for idealistic reasons, but when you take a closer look, these idealistic motives were only a pretext to start these wars. The Civil war soon laid away, collectively forgotten, but what remained are ***“the names of the heroes, I’s made to memorize, with guns in their hands and God on their side”***. It reminds us of those old war photographs in black and white, but most of the time in a brownish color. On those old pictures you see these so-called heroes, proudly stand with guns in their hands. The Civil War was a brother war. It is hard to imagine that the ‘enemy’, the 20 Southern States called ‘The Confederacy’, could equally show you the same pictures of *their* heroes, also with guns in their hands and also thinking that God was on their side. It

reminds us of another anti-war song Dylan wrote in 1963: "John Brown" where it says: "But the thing that scared me most was when my enemy came close, and I saw that his face was just like mine". "It was the brother you never had" Dylan wrote elsewhere.

"Oh the First World War, boys, it closed out its fate. The reason for fighting, I never got straight. But I learned to accept it, accept it with pride, for you don't count the dead, when God's on your side" On 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne was shot dead in Sarajevo. This event caused a chain reaction in which more and more countries became involved, within weeks the major powers were at war; via their colonies, the conflict soon spread around the world. The First World War was a fact. Total death toll of the First World War: about 37.5 million people. Although the poet could not really figure out why this war was fought in the first place - this war was called the bloodiest ever – he learned to accept it with pride. Nationalistic pride obliterates both your sense of reality and compassion with the result that you do not count the dead, God is after all on your side isn't He?

"When the Second World War came to an end, we forgave the Germans and we were friends. Though they murdered six million, in the ovens they fried, the Germans now too have God on their side". The poet shows us the shocking image of the holocaust. Six millions Jews were murdered and burnt in the ovens of the Nazi regime. The total death toll of the Second World War is estimated between 62 and 78 million people. After the war these staggering figures did not prevent the Allied Forces from drawing the Germans into their camp. After the war Germany had become a democratic republic and joined the Allied Forces, in particular the U.S., in their fight against Stalin's communism. Ironically, the poet says that the Germans were forgiven and that they became friends. This was obviously only for political reasons. First the Americans fought against the Germans, with God on their side. Now the Americans fought *with* the Germans in the Cold War against Communism also with God on their side. It is as if the poet ironically says: 'God is *always* on the side of America, and any nation who joins America may be assured that God is on their side too, no matter what crimes such a nation may have committed in the past'. Just like Dylan said in "Talking John Birch Paranoid Blues": "Now we all agree with Hitler's views, although he killed six million Jews, it don't matter too much that he was a Fascist, at least you can't say he was a Communist! That's to say like if you got a cold you take a shot of malaria"

It is also reminiscent of what President George W. Bush once said in 2001 in the fight against terror: "You're either with us or against us". As if he said: "If you are with us, God is also on your side".

"I've learned to hate Russians all through my whole life. If another war starts, It's them we must fight, to hate them and fear them, to run and to hide and accept it all bravely, with God on my side". This verse is somewhat rendered out of date by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent ending of the Cold War. The poet grew up during the so-called McCarthy era, when thousands of Americans were accused of being Communists or having at least sympathy for communism. These Americans became the subject of aggressive investigations and questioning by the authorities. In those years of witch hunt against communism, paranoia and hatred against Russia and its communism was continuously pumped into the American society, as Dylan shows in his song "Talking John Birch Paranoid Blues": "I wus lookin' high an' low for them Reds everywhere, I wus lookin' in the sink and

*underneath the chair, I looked way up my chimney hole I even looked deep down inside my toilet bowl
They got away . . .”*

“But now we got weapons of the chemical dust. If fire them we’re forced to, then fire them we must. One push of the button, and a shot the world wide, and you never ask questions when God’s on your side”. In this verse the narrator confronts us with the unthinkable, the total destruction of all human civilization through a nuclear war. As said, this song was written around the time of the Cuban Missile crisis, which took the world to the brink of nuclear destruction. Although some people call the ‘balance of terror’ between America and Russia a blessing in disguise, this balance of nuclear power is also a very delicate one. If conflicts escalate, one push of the button is enough to set the world ablaze, not to think of what may happen if nuclear weapons get in the hands of terrorists. But also in the most unthinkable scenario, you never ask questions, when you are sure that God is on your side.

“Through many dark hour, I’ve been thinking about this, that Jesus Christ was betrayed by a kiss. But I can’t think for you, you’ll have to decide, whether Judas Iscariot had God on his side”. The poet has now gone through the whole of the American military history and comes to a conclusion. All the things he was taught ever since he was a schoolboy pass through his mind’s eye: The ‘war’ against the Indians, The Spanish-American War, the Civil War, the First and the Second World War, the Cold War and the nuclear threat. When he sees all those people killed, all the casualties pass by, the misery and upheaval which all those wars have caused, then it is getting dark, ‘It is getting dark, too dark to see’ The poet starts to knock on heaven’s door for an answer. Amidst all darkness the poet starts to think on a higher level. What is it all good for? And who is behind all this? If there is a God, who is responsible and why doesn’t God stop this? He tries to find the answer in the Bible. He finds that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus, the Son of God, by a kiss (Luke 22:48). How could God ever have allowed that a kiss, which is a token of love and friendship, would be turned into a device of betrayal of His own Son? It gets complicated when it is at the same time clear from the Scriptures that Jesus had to be “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23) Acts 1:16 says about Judas: “the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus”. All that happened to Jesus and all that Judas did was in accordance with God’s plan. Is Judas able to get away with it? Could he have said: “I can’t be blamed for this, I did it in accordance with God’s plan, I have God on my side, you can’t blame me at all!?” It reminds us of a song Dylan wrote in those same days: *“Who killed Davey Moore”*. It proves that Dylan at the time was very preoccupied with the question of human responsibility and destiny, the will of God. When in this song *“Who killed Davey Moore”* everybody denies responsibility for death of boxer Davey Moore it says: *Don’t say ‘murder,’ don’t say ‘kill’ It was destiny, it was God’s will”*.

The Bible makes it also clear that in spite of the fact God has foreknowledge of all that happens on earth and that everything goes according to his plan and will, the personal human responsibility to do what is right, remains. Judas and every other human being is personally responsible for the ethical decisions that he or she takes. That is why Dylan says: ***“But I can’t think for you, you’ll have to decide”***. It is as if Dylan says: “Each individual will have to draw a personal conclusion that although what Judas did was according to God’s foreknowledge and plan, Judas is nevertheless and at the same time personally responsible

for the bad choices he made and the bad things he did". The masters of war that build all the guns, that build the death planes, that build the big bombs, they can no longer hide behind their walls and desks, but they will have to come out and they will be held personally responsible for all they did. Blessed as the American nation is, this blessing on itself never sanctions unethical and immoral motives to wage a war. No matter how blessed America as a nation may be, the slogan 'God is on our side' is a slogan no nation can ever take for granted.

"So now as I'm leaving, I'm weary as Hell, the confusion I'm feeling ain't no tongue can tell. The words fill my head, and fall to the floor, if God's on our side; He'll stop the next war". The problem – the problem of God's predestination and foreknowledge - is still hard to tackle for the poet. A man is trapped in the fires of time and space. Man misses an extra dimension God has. The divine dimension to understand that two things which seem contradictory are at the same time both true. The concept that although everything that happens on this earth is 100% in accordance with His plan and His will, man nevertheless remains 100% moral responsible and accountable for his actions and the decisions he makes, either good or bad. When he looks around this world and he sees all the evil things that happen, he feels terribly confused; it wears him down beyond words. ***The words fill my head, and fall to the floor***, there is a moment when you think you know the answer to all the problems you face, but the next moment however, when you are confronted with the harsh reality in this world, you find out that it does not work; your words fall to the floor. But the poet concludes that there is one thing that will always remain true: God is a God of peace; He does not want war between people. *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God"* (Matthew 5:9). The poet does not say that a defensive war is by definition always wrong, such a war may sometimes be forced upon a nation and may therefore be inevitable, a government has the duty to protect its citizens against aggression (Romans 13: 1-7), but he does say that God is on the side of the peacemakers. And if you are a peacemaker as a nation, you will be careful not to wage war for wrong, unethical and immoral motives. If that is your attitude, if that is the moral basis on which you stand as a nation, God will not only stop the next war, He will prevent it from starting in the first place.