

## The spiritual-and-maybe-religious Dylan

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

May 23, 2016

Bob Dylan is 75 today. He's not the only one who's still making records after 50+ years, but it's hard to think of anyone else with as many good ones.

["Keep it religious,"](#) the *Century's* longtime editor liked to say. Many people find this hard to do when talking about Dylan, at least if they want to focus on the good stuff. His brief sojourn as an evangelical Christian is widely considered a weak creative period, the bard reduced to propagandist. You don't have to be a secularist to sense strongly that ["Covenant Woman"](#) is light years dumber than, say, "Like a Rolling Stone."

But Dylan's born-again period only scratches the crude surface of the religious themes in his writing. Religious undertones abound throughout the stronger pages of his vast songbook, a songbook that boasts (among many other things) a rich moral vision and a solid biblical vocabulary.

Jeffrey Salkin [offers a great list of songs](#) featuring Dylan, the grandson of pogrom survivors in Ukraine, at his most Jewish. My first reaction was, hmm, interesting, though some of these are much *better* songs than others. Every time I hear "When the Ship Comes In," I'm deeply stirred by the liberationist exuberance of the thing. But "With God On Our Side" has always seemed a bit too on the nose, Dylan the straight-up protest singer instead of the guy who transcended the genre's limits.

Salkin points something out that I, in my relative youth, hadn't considered: back in the early 60s, artists with big audiences didn't really address the Holocaust as explicitly as Dylan does here ("Though they murdered six million / In the ovens they fried / The Germans now too / Have God on their side"). That changed over the decades, and by the time I first heard this song as a teenager, *Schindler's List* had won its seven Oscars. Before my time, Dylan played a significant role in the effort to never forget.

My favorite religiously tinged Dylan song didn't make Salkin's list. It's not for me to say how Jewish it is, but its language isn't specifically Christian:

I don't love the title/refrain; I'm not sure what a "political world" is or isn't. What's striking here is how Dylan walks us through cultural decay, using words that hold deep meaning as aspirational language for us and attributional language for God: love, wisdom, mercy, courage, peace. And then:

We live in a political world.  
Everything is hers or his.  
Climb into the frame and shout God's name,  
But you're never sure what it is.

We don't know God's name because God is distant—and/or because we worship something else now. Dylan calls this something else politics; I think maybe *power* would be a better word. In volume one of his *Chronicles*, Dylan describes this song as "almost an update on 'With God on Our Side.'" In any case, it packs a punch.

Another highlight from the same album (*Oh Mercy*, from 1989) uses explicitly Christian language to subtler ends:

And of course there's this one, the only Dylan song I've used routinely for congregational singing. It contains no explicitly churchy language yet crackles with religious hope:

There are also individual songs on the born-again records themselves that rise above the mess. Everybody says that "[Every Grain of Sand](#)" is far and away the best song from this period; everybody is correct. But I also love "When He Returns," the closing track on *Slow Train Coming*. Dylan's gospel dabbling works better down tempo, and he sings his heart out:

What's more, while the lyrics may be inspired by [Dylan's exposure to](#) Hal Lindsey's [popular dispensationalism](#), theologically they aren't limited by it. It's a song about the second coming but not the rapture; if Dylan was on board with the escapist dualism of Lindsey and his followers, it doesn't show up here. "Like a thief in the night" he sings, and those of us who grew up believing that Christians would

suddenly disappear from earth think we know where this is going. We don't: "He'll replace wrong with right."

The constantly touring Dylan hasn't played "When He Returns" since 1981. It's a snapshot of a moment in his life and beliefs. A few years later, he had left behind the movement evangelicalism thing—but was writing songs like "Political World." His religious vision is hard to pin down; it's also deep and rich. I hope he's got a few more albums in him.