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Political World of Bob Dylan

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Abstract

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Keywords

Bob Dylan, American music, political views, social views, worldview

Disciplines

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Comments

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The Political World of Bob Dylan
by Jeff Taylor
(and Chad Israelson)

According to Bob Dylan, we live in what his 1989 song calls a “Political World.” He is correct. But what does this mean? And what is Dylan’s relation to this world?

The political themes most commonly appearing in Dylan’s work are freedom, suspicion of power, belief in universal sacred truths, and justice for the vulnerable. He understands that to be free is to be empowered and the downtrodden enjoy very little of either. Power is at the heart of politics and Dylan distrusts both the exertion of power and the ability of human beings to utilize it to correct the wrongs of society.

In an oversimplified nutshell, we could say that Bob Dylan’s political philosophy since 1979 has been that of Woody Guthrie supplemented by the gospels of the New Testament, of C. Wright Mills supplemented by the prophet Isaiah, of *Merchants of Death* supplemented by the book of Revelation. This being the case, ideology and theology are naturally intertwined.

Dylan’s Roots and Traditional World

From a purely statistical standpoint, Bob Dylan—Jewish and hailing from Minnesota’s Iron Range—should reliably vote Democratic. Loath to have labels

put upon him, his political outlook cannot be reduced to statistics. Dylan's political world has proved too broad and independent to be classified simply as left or right, conservative or liberal, though he has often been assumed to be decidedly leftist. His political outlook is partly derived from the atmosphere of his home state and partly from his religious upbringing. Placed into those two cultures by birth, Dylan melded what he learned from them with traditional American ideals and roots music. His appreciation for the ideals of an America rooted in the past, a powerful sense of the sacred, and identification with the underdog coalesced into a belief system that transcended contemporary politics. This combination intermingled in the fertile and artistic mind of a sensitive young man and reappeared consistently over the years.

Beyond his own Hebraic culture, Bob Dylan is indebted to several musical traditions with deep roots in America: Anglo-Celtic folk; popular, old-time country; and Delta blues. One of the salutary cultural contributions of the South has been its preservation of English, Scottish, and Irish traditional and popular ballads that were brought from the British Isles to colonial America. Settlers in the Shenandoah Valley, Appalachia, and Ozarks were largely responsible for passing these songs on to later generations, thereby serving as the foundation for early folk music and country music.¹

The South also produced the African-American genre of Delta blues, coming out of slavery and spirituals. Dylan has been an important transmitter of these largely-lost traditions in an era of trendy, commercial entertainment. This is surprising because Dylan has neither Anglo-Celtic nor African heritage and is just a third-generation American with all four of his grandparents having been born in the Russian Empire.

Dylan's reliance on folk and blues music has sociopolitical implications. It is liberal because it recognizes the value of the common people, of the poor and powerless, of the despised and discriminated-against. It is conservative because it recognizes the value of tradition, of the old and spiritual, of the familiar and time-tested.

Voice of a Generation

Though he has shared certain characteristics with conservatives and traditionalists, Bob Dylan's "Voice of a Generation" title came from his contributions to causes associated with the New Left. Over a long and remarkable career, Dylan expressed populist, traditionalist, and egalitarian beliefs. What Dylan called the "finger-pointin'" songs from his early 1960s folk style, fostered an image that he was a protest singer. His artistic output during this period dovetailed with the emergence of a group of politically active young people often called the New Left. This convergence gave added potency to his civil rights, anti-

war, and other social justice-minded anthems and created an impression of a synchronistic mass movement that drafted Dylan to be its musical spokesman.

Throughout the years, Dylan evolved as an artist, though many wanted what was not possible. Those who expected him to return to a lost era did not grapple with the question of how long Dylan could write the same type of song before people stopped listening. Had he remained the darling of the New Left by writing topical songs, he would have been relegated to a hopelessly dated niche market.

During the years following World War II, the notion of freedom in America manifested itself in a myriad of new ways. There were Freedom Schools, a Freedom Summer, Free Speech Movement, free love, free markets, and Young Americans for Freedom. To some, particularly those on the Left, freedom was a legal concept being denied to minority groups who sought equality within an oppressive society. It also existed as an abstract ideal pursued by those who felt shackled spiritually or intellectually. In June 1963, the New Left group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) approved the essay “America and New Era,” which stated bluntly that their “hope is human freedom.”² Dylan exemplified both types of freedom in the 1960s.

Conversion and Culture

It is important to consider the authenticity of Bob Dylan’s Christian conversion and on-going faith in Christ. If we are going to describe Dylan as an

example of Christian anarchism since 1978, we have to show two things: that he remains a Christian and that he is an anarchist. His anarchism—before and after 1978—is easily established, but a brief flirtation with Christianity in 1979-81 does not a Christian anarchist make . . . at least not when speaking of Dylan in the present tense. So it is important to verify his continued Christianity.

In the two-year period between the release of *Shot of Love* (1981) and *Infidels* (1983), two contradictory rumors suggested that Dylan's "Christian phase" was over. He had either lost interest in religion and returned to his worldly lifestyle of drinking and carousing, or he had embraced Orthodox Judaism as an alternative to Christianity. No doubt Dylan's personal life was not above criticism from a moral perspective—as is true for all of us—but that says little about his faith commitment or his status in relation to the grace of God. As for a return to his Jewish roots, this perception was sparked by events such as attending the bar mitzvahs of his sons and studying with some rabbis in Brooklyn. But this proved nothing. Dylan did not reject his Jewishness when he knelt before Yeshua, whom he saw as the Jewish Messiah.³ From a spiritual point of view, Dylan did not see Christianity as a rejection or replacement of his Jewishness. He saw it as a completion or fulfillment.

In 1984, Dylan told *Rolling Stone* that the Old Testament and New Testament were "equally valid" to him. He also said, "I believe in the Book of

Revelation,” and went on to refer to the coming Antichrist. Twenty-eight years later, he repeated the line about Revelation word-for-word to a different interviewer for the same magazine.⁴

During his 1986 world tour, Dylan introduced the song “In the Garden,” from the album *Saved*, by saying, “I want to sing you a song about my hero.” This was not the act of an Orthodox Jew since the song is all about Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Dylan sang both the black spiritual “Go Down, Moses” and his own “In the Garden”—upholding both the Old and New Testaments—when he performed in Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1987.⁵

Dylan the Christian: A Passing Phase?

Like a submarine, Dylan’s faith has been mostly submerged since 1981. This does not mean that it has disappeared. Dylan’s concert set lists (including his choice of cover songs), his cagey-yet-illuminating interview remarks, and his use of biblical language, including New Testament words, in his songs all attest to his continued Christianity.⁶ In addition to evidence cited above, in connection with the Judaism rumors, there are many things that can be mentioned from 1983 through 2015.

When asked, in 1983, if he still considered himself to be born again, Dylan said, “I don’t think it is relevant right now. First of all ‘born again’ is a hype term. It’s a media term that throws people into a corner and leaves them there. Whether

people realize it or not, all these political and religious labels are irrelevant.”

When asked if he regretted anything from the *Slow Train Coming* period, he responded, “I don’t particularly regret telling people how to get their souls saved. I don’t particularly regret any of that. Whoever was supposed to pick it up, picked it up. But maybe the time for me to say that has come and gone. Now it’s time for me to do something else . . . Jesus himself only preached for three years.”⁷

Interview magazine later published some outtakes from Scott Cohen’s *Spin* interview of 1985. In response to the prompt “One Last Favor I’d Like to Ask,” Dylan said, “Resist not evil, but overcome evil with good.” When asked to identify “Several Things Still Blowin’ in the Wind,” Dylan’s second answer was “the wages of sin.” His responses were quotations from three New Testament verses—one by Jesus and two by Paul. The verse containing Paul’s warning about sin makes reference to “Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁸

In a 1991 interview—discussing “Every Grain of Sand,” from *Shot of Love*—Dylan reiterated Jesus’ comment that the hairs on our head are numbered and his belief in a God of purpose.⁹ A dozen years after performing the contemporary Christian song “Rise Again” in concert, Dylan recorded it in the studio in 1992, with a Chicago choir.¹⁰ It is a song about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

In 1997, Dylan was a recipient of the Kennedy Center Honors Lifetime Achievement Award. He chose three songs to be performed for the televised concert event: “The Times They Are A-Changin,’” “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right,” and “Gotta Serve Somebody.” It is significant that Dylan chose his hit Christian song as the only example of his post-early-1960s work.

In 2009, Dylan surprised people by releasing a Christmas album that combined his ragged voice with smooth arrangements and female backup singers reminiscent of the 1950s. People wondered, Is *Christmas in the Heart* a joke or satire? It was sincere. Dylan included secular songs celebrating season, snow, and Santa, but also religious songs devoted to the birth of Jesus. In November 2009, Dylan gave an interview promoting the Christmas CD. The interviewer, Bill Flanagan, told Dylan that he sounded like a true believer on “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Dylan replied, “Well, I am a true believer.” When asked if he had a favorite Christmas album, he replied, “Maybe the Louvin Brothers. I like all the religious Christmas albums. The ones in Latin. The songs I sang as a kid.” Flanagan noted “A lot of people like the secular ones,” which prompted Dylan’s response, “Religion isn’t meant for everybody.”¹¹

When we consider Dylan’s recorded output during the past 30 years, the only other main component, besides Christian spirituality, is the love songs that he has included on his albums since *Freewheelin’*. There is a bit of overt

sociopolitical content, which will be noted elsewhere, but not much. There are no lyrics of rabbinic Judaism or political Zionism. There are no suggestions that Dylan is interested in atheism or astrology, Buddhism or Hinduism. The Christian influence stands out.

A full-length interview of Dylan by Mikal Gilmore was published later in 2012. He told *Rolling Stone*, “No kind of life is fulfilling if your soul hasn’t been redeemed.” Asked about accusations of plagiarism in recent years, Dylan was defiant: “These are the same people that tried to pin the name Judas on me. Judas, the most hated name in human history! . . . Yeah, and for what? For playing an electric guitar? As if that is in some kind of way equitable to betraying our Lord and delivering him up to be crucified. All those evil motherfuckers can rot in hell.”¹² Over 30 years after his conversion, Dylan’s words during this interview make his spiritual allegiance crystal clear. Even if we had no other evidence concerning the status of Dylan’s faith today, these three words—“betraying our Lord”—would be enough.

Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*

H. Richard Niebuhr’s book *Christ and Culture* was first published in 1951 but has had lasting influence because he created a model that is time transcendent. Its ongoing relevance can be seen in the thought and music of Bob Dylan beginning with his conversion to Christianity in 1978-79. Niebuhr devised a

classic framework for analyzing the relationship between Christianity and the world. He identified five responses to the question, “How should the church relate to the surrounding culture?”

Referring to those who hold the Christ Against Culture position, Niebuhr speaks of

their common acknowledgment of the sole authority of Jesus Christ and the common rejection of the prevailing culture. Whether that culture calls itself Christian or not is of no importance, for to these men it is always pagan and corrupt. Neither is it of first-rate significance whether such Christians think in apocalyptic or in mystical terms. As apocalyptics they will prophesy the early passing of the old society and the coming into history of a new divine order. As mystics they will experience and announce the reality of an eternal order hidden by the specious temporal and cultural scene.¹³

For each of the five Christian cultural positions, Niebuhr identifies several examples from church history. For Christ Against Culture, he identifies the apostle John; Tertullian; Anabaptists; Society of Friends; Leo Tolstoy; and Søren Kierkegaard. Two decades after Niebuhr was writing, the Jesus People Movement in the United States would exemplify the same tendencies. The ideology of Christian Anarchism is associated with this position. Bob Dylan is an example of someone who, for the most part, identifies with Christ Against Culture.

Christian Anarchism

Dylan as Christian anarchist sounds like an exotic, maybe unbelievable, concept but that is because Christian anarchism is rarely considered or examined.

Dylan's Christian conversion was revolutionary. It affected every area of his life, including his politics. For half of his life, Dylan has been a Christian. He was converted at the age of 37. We should not think of him only as the left-wing protest singer of his youth. Even when young, he was more than that. Certainly he was more than that by the 1980s.

Christianity is commonly seen as a preserver of tradition, as a bulwark of social order and patriotism. A superficial understanding of history lends credence to this perception. A superficial interpretation of the New Testament also supports this perception. The apostle Paul's words to the Christians in Rome seem to settle the question of the relationship between believers and the state: it is to be a relationship of respect and obedience.¹⁴

The words of Romans 13 notwithstanding, Christian anarchists in the past and present have drawn upon other passages of Scripture to explain their attitudes toward the state. These passages provide the bases of Christian anarchism. In his song lyrics since 1979, Bob Dylan has shown that he is in sympathy with the nine general bases of Christian anarchism. There are also three specific bases that are relevant to Dylan: eschatological, ethical, and countercultural. His identification with these bases can be seen through his songs, concert raps, and interviews.

Dylan's Christian conversion and discipleship occurred largely within the context

of a Christian anarchist movement: the Jesus People. The Jesus Movement was primarily countercultural and eschatological, with an ethical component as well.

Dylan and the Jesus People

Bob Dylan was a latter-day Jesus Person who joined Christianity five or six years after the heyday of the Jesus Movement (1967-73). The movement had dissipated by 1979 but its impact continued and part of its impact was the conversion and discipleship of Dylan.

Beginning in 1979 and continuing through the early 1980s, Dylan's politics were intertwined with one of the most important legacies of the Jesus Movement: Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). Based in Southern California (L.A.-area), it was originally known as Jesus Music, with the harder-edged type called Jesus Rock. What mostly began, in the early 1970s, in Calvary Chapel churches and other informal, grassroots examples of spiritual revival, morphed into a religious music industry that imitated the secular music industry.

By the late 1970s, CCM was big business. Its commercialization took a toll on its spirituality. Early fathers of CCM such as Larry Norman largely avoided the worldly excesses of the burgeoning industry and, in some ways, acted as a conscience or reminder to newer artists. CCM stars who were affiliated with Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Fellowship, and other countercultural remnants of the Jesus Movement tended to take a less-worldly approach to their music. Politically,

they were affiliated with what we are calling Christian anarchism. It was to this camp that Dylan gravitated in early 1979.

Dylan the Christian Monarchist

Bob Dylan is a premillennialist when it comes to eschatology.

Premillennialism is built upon a belief in the literal reign of Jesus Christ on earth.

Dylan believes that Jesus will rule as king for 1,000 years when he sets up his throne in Jerusalem and he sees this as a supremely good thing. Dylan can be described as a monarchist in this way.¹⁵ Dylan is also an anarchist and a populist.

One person ruling over everyone else on the planet is the opposite of decentralization. Unelected, absolute monarchy—even if benevolent—is about as far removed as one can get from democracy and anarchy. How do we account for this apparent discrepancy between Dylan’s support for anarchy and democracy in the present and his support for monarchy in the future? A serious Christian knows that allegiance to Jesus Christ takes precedence over everything else, including ideology, but there must be some way to integrate support for these competing forms of government into one intellectual framework.

Ironically, a solution is suggested in the writings of a pagan philosopher. In contrast to the elitism and hostility toward democracy found in the *Republic* of Plato, his later, smaller, and less-well-known work the *Statesman* sees some value in democracy and contains remarkable parallels to biblical eschatology.¹⁶ The

Statesman has direct application to the seemingly conflicted ideologies of Dylan and other anarchistic Christians. Plato comments,

The rule of the many is weak in every way; it is not capable of any real good or of any serious evil as compared with the other two. This is because in a democracy sovereignty has been divided out in small portions among a large number of rulers. Therefore, of all three constitutions that are law-abiding, democracy is the worst; but of the three that flout the laws, democracy is the best. Thus if all constitutions are unprincipled the best thing to do is to live in a democracy.¹⁷

Christians such as Dylan believe that all national rulers in our world flout God's laws and reject the principles of his Kingdom. For this reason, democracy is the best form of government. In a sinful world with politics dominated by Satan, the safest situation is for political power to be as decentralized as possible. Satan being the prince of this world, it is best that government be "weak in every way." Of course, a far more desirable situation can be envisioned: the overthrow of Satan's power and the commencement of rule by Jesus Christ. In such a situation, the value of democratic rule by the people pales in comparison to monarchic rule by the Messiah. As Plato says, "When constitutions are well ordered [according to laws], democracy is the least desirable, and monarchy, the first of the six, is by far the best to live under—unless of course the seventh [i.e., the statesman-king] is possible, for that must always be exalted, like a god among mortals, above all other constitutions."¹⁸ In Dylan's view, Jesus Christ is not only a man capable of being a

just and wise king; he is also God and can thus be a statesman-king. He is truly a god among mortals and will rule as such during the Millennium.

In reconciling Dylan's simultaneous belief in divine monarchy and human anarchy/democracy, we could say that the political philosophy of Christians should be that of "All or Nothing." They should look forward to monarchy—specifically, a world government headed by Jesus Christ (the *All* form of government). In the meantime, they should support anarchy because humans are sinful and Satan is the current ruler of the world (the *Nothing* form of government). Although abolition of the state is a noble ideal, it is not realistic, so Christians should concentrate on other types of anarchism—namely, ignoring the state and minimizing the state. They can attempt to ignore the state by realizing that they are citizens of heaven and by recognizing the church as an alternative society. They can attempt to minimize the state by supporting genuine democracy (the *Little* form of government). In theory, Christians should support "All or Nothing," but in practice they may have to support "Little" until they are given "All." According to Dylan—and the New Testament—on that day, "the kingdom of the world" will become "the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ."¹⁹

Dylan the Christian Anarchist

Intentionally or not, Bob Dylan was "the New Left's most resonant troubadour," as the biographer of New Left father Dwight Macdonald puts it.²⁰

Dylan was also the preeminent hero of the less-overtly-political, more-lifestyle-oriented Counterculture that developed in the late 1960s. Like the New Left, the Counterculture was anarchistic. The message of Dylan's first all-electric album, *Highway 61 Revisited*, was clear: Protest is not going to change the world; change yourself and you will change the world.

Bob Dylan's electorally-apolitical, anarchistic stance, so evident in the 1960s, did not change when he became a Christian in late 1978. Two years after his conversion, Dylan said, "When I walk around some of the towns we go to . . . I'm totally convinced people need Jesus. Look at the junkies and the winos and the troubled people. It's all a sickness which can be healed in an instant. The powers that be won't let that happen. The powers that be say it has to be healed politically."²¹

In a 1984 interview, Dylan remarked, "I think politics is an instrument of the Devil. Just that clear. I think politics is what kills; it doesn't bring anything alive." When asked whether it makes any difference who is president, Dylan said he didn't think so.²² Around the same time, on tour in Madrid, Dylan said, "There's a lot of different gods that people are subject[s] of. There's the god of Mammon. Corporations are gods. Governments? No, governments don't have much to do with it anymore, I don't think. Politics is a hoax."²³

In a 2009 interview, Dylan was asked about politics. He gave a typical disparaging assessment: “Politics is entertainment. It’s a sport. It’s for the well groomed and well heeled.” Flanagan asked him if he doesn’t “believe in the democratic process.” Dylan: “Yeah, but what’s that got to do with politics? Politics creates more problems than it solves. . . . The real power is in the hands of small groups of people and I don’t think they have titles.”

A little over a century ago, the world recognized the spiritual radicalism, the Christian anarchism, of Leo Tolstoy. He made a name for himself as a novelist but became a social philosopher. Dylan follows in this tradition of literary-figure-as-cultural-critic. Sadly, though understandably, Dylan’s role as an explicitly Christian witness has been muted. Since the 1990s, he has also been too willing to give precious space on his infrequent new studio recordings to second-rate love songs rather than to spiritually-informed denunciations of folly and evil. This is regrettable but we should be more grateful for what we have than frustrated with what we don’t. Dylan remains standing as a voice of cultural dissent. A personally-inconsistent but still-compelling scourge of institutionalized nonsense. An undercover example of Christian anarchism.

Dylanesque Politics in the Real World

“All or Nothing—or Little” may be an interesting abstraction but what relevance does it have for the real world? Successful politicians do not go around

calling themselves Christian anarchists. Even Christian politicians are discreet and selective in talking about the lordship of Christ. They do not want to alienate voters and donors. They do not want to acquire the reputation of being a religious nut. Are there examples of politicians who are different from their peers—in the way that Dylan is different from fellow singer-songwriters—when it comes to religion and philosophy, rhetoric and policy? If we cannot identify such examples, talk of Christian anarchism remains pie-in-the-sky. An intellectual abstraction is neither helpful nor historical.

Can Dylan’s politics be applied to the real world of power in Washington, D.C.? While Dylan himself is indifferent or hostile to electoral politics, are there any examples of Dylanesque politicians? Are there examples of Christian anarchists who are sincerely committed to the Kingdom of God and are encouraging decentralized power, liberty, community, democracy, morality, social justice, and peace in the fallen world in which we live? Are there examples of Christians who seem to have an “All or Nothing—or Little” philosophy who believe not only in worldly separatism but also social ethics?

Dylanesque Politicians

When thinking of Dylanesque politicians, one possibility is Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ). In his *Chronicles* memoir, Dylan surprisingly says that Goldwater was his “favorite politician” in the early 1960s.²⁴ Another possibility is

Senator George McGovern (D-SD), a man with Christian roots who was born and raised in one of the states that borders Dylan's Minnesota. In some ways, McGovern was the most Jeffersonian ("radical") Democrat nominated for president since W.J. Bryan in 1908. He was an electoral hero of the New Left and the Counterculture.

Of course, in some ways, this is an exercise in absurdity. Many politicians have had a Jeffersonian vibe but none have had a Dylanesque vibe. Bob Dylan is a unique individual and his career as a poet and musician does not easily lend itself to finding close equivalents among the political class. Still, if Dylan has a discernible politics—and we think he does—we must be able to find ideological compatriots who share some of his basic values and tendencies. Specifically, those who try, as Christians, to be loyal to the Kingdom of God even as they live out their daily lives in the portion of the fallen world we call the United States of America. Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR) and Senator Harold Hughes (D-IA) probably come closest to the Dylan model, if we can imagine that model being translated from music into statecraft.

In the case of Hatfield and Hughes—pacifists, consistent pro-lifers, advocates of social justice, skeptics of centralized power (private and public)—it was their radical Christianity that allowed them to rise above the falseness of party

labels and ideological categories to see the common good and the deeper principles. The same has been true for Bob Dylan.

International Relations

The foreign policy of Bob Dylan can be summarized as a trio of negatives: anti-militarism, anti-imperialism, and anti-globalization. If we want to put things more positively, we can say that Dylan stands for peace, republic, and local economy (with corresponding skepticism toward war, empire, and global capitalism). More specifically, we can say that emphases of nationalism over internationalism, peace over war, hostility toward the military-industrial complex, and belief that wealthy Northeastern interests drive U.S. foreign policy have been present in Dylan's recordings and interviews since the early 1960s. These tendencies were supplemented by his full embrace of the Jewish/Christian prophetic tradition beginning in 1979. As a "midwestern isolationist" from Minnesota, Dylan could be thought of as a musical latter-day Charles Lindbergh Sr. or Henrik Shipstead.²⁵

Economic Globalization

"Isolationists" like Congressman Ron Paul (R-TX) oppose globalization treaties such as NAFTA, GATT, and CAFTA because they argue that these are managed trade for the benefit of large transnational corporations rather than free trade for the common good. True laissez-faire free trade would not require

thousands of pages of government-negotiated, government-enforced agreements. Bob Dylan has a similar perspective, with an added eschatological dimension of Babylon and Antichrist.

Despite his American patriotism and Jewish ethnicity, Dylan does not seem interested in assisting or glorifying any particular national government (U.S.A. or Israel). At the same time, he opposes the type of internationalism that is promoted by capitalists and imperialists. He sees “traitors to America” behind this endeavor.²⁶ He also sees this as setting the stage for the Antichrist. He warns that Satan sometimes poses as a “Man of Peace” (1983). Dylan sees evil lurking behind the push for political globalism and economic globalization.²⁷

Sexual Politics

Although many of the young Jesus People of the late 1960s shared outward traits such as long hair, beards, and groovy clothes with their secular generational peers, they tended to be more “conservative” (biblical, really) in their sexual attitudes because they were following an ancient book rather than contemporary trends.²⁸ When he became a Christian, Bob Dylan imbibed some of this skepticism toward free love and its ethic of “If it feels good, do it.” By following the scriptural path of the Jesus Movement, Dylan confused and angered many of his admirers among the larger American Counterculture and secular society in general.

As noted above, when asked about abortion in 1984, Dylan dismissed its importance. When pressed about abortion being used as a form of birth control, Dylan provided some provocative insights. He called the birth control pill a “hoax.” Drawing a responsibility parallel between contraception and prostitution, he decried the double standard that puts the burden on women instead of men. Expressing the suspicion that birth control pills are not safe for women, he connected the dots between scientists creating a drug and drug companies making money off of sexual promiscuity.²⁹

Dylan was asked about homosexuality in the 1984 interview. He agreed that the Bible says that homosexuality is an abomination but also agreed that his friend Allen Ginsberg, a homosexual, was a good guy. He took a libertarian, and arguably biblical, stance on the conduct of others without denying that there are biblical and moral problems with homosexuality.³⁰

Even though Dylan has not always practiced what he preached during his zealous years (1979-80), at that time he publicly rejected American cultural norms of hedonism and sexual promiscuity. In 1984, Dylan said, “It’s very popular nowadays to think of yourself as a ‘liberal humanist.’ That’s such a bullshit term. It means *less* than nothing.”³¹ Dylan seemed to be yearning for a liberalism that was more authentic and more traditional. A liberalism of someone like Harold

Hughes and Mark Hatfield, or of their antecedents William Jennings Bryan and Robert La Follette.

Partly because he was attracted to at least part of the Left, with its emphasis on individuality and common good, Dylan found manifestations of the Religious Right unappealing despite some overlap in viewpoint. In 1980, when asked about political activism by fundamentalist Christians in groups like the Moral Majority, he told an interviewer, “I think people have to be careful about all that. . . . It’s real dangerous. You can find anything you want in the Bible. . . . I just don’t think you can legislate morality. . . . The basic thing, I feel, is to get in touch with Christ himself. He will lead you.”³² This statement reflects the Christian anarchism of the countercultural Jesus Movement.

The Politics of Bob Dylan

Where does all of this leave Bob Dylan? Is Dylan a Democrat? No. Is Dylan a Republican? No. Is Dylan an Independent? Maybe. Dylan does not seem to care about electoral politics. He will perform for a President Clinton or a President Obama but he is not partisan. (He would likely have played for a Republican president but was not asked.) Dylan’s post-1978 ideology is what you might expect from a Christian whose first loyalty is to the Kingdom of God. It is a little of this, a little of that. No worldly ideology is a perfect match with Christian principles so it is not surprising that Dylan is part liberal, part conservative, part

populist, part libertarian, part communitarian. In relation to Christian anarchism, Dylan can be described as both a monarchist and an anarchist. If Christian anarchism says “All or Nothing—or Little,” it has elements of monarchism and anarchism plus the Little translates into the ideologies of libertarianism (minarchism) and populism.

Dylan’s personal history with corporate-driven oppression found in the professional music world—so different from the freedom symbolized by the folk, blues, and gospel music traditions—may well be an important factor in his political outlook. Other likely influences are his Jewish heritage, his observation of economic imperialism at work in northeastern Minnesota, his state’s tradition of populist major-party and third-party electoral politics, and his eventual embrace of a biblical, anarchistic type of Christianity.

Conclusion

Bob Dylan’s life and career have been filled with seeming inconsistencies. Still, certain thematic constants have emerged, specifically as they apply to his political outlook. Since childhood, he has cared about liberty and justice, democracy and individuality, truth and morality. Dylan has exemplified freedom on personal, societal, and spiritual levels. His refusal to accept the legitimacy of human power structures reflects an anarchism that he brought with him when he converted to Christianity. Dylan has also consistently advocated justice, whether

lending support for the legally dispossessed and economically downtrodden, or issuing moral directives urging people to reconcile with divine law.

Dylan's political worldview has remained essentially the same over six different decades and numerous private and public transformations. Whether he appeared as a New Left protest icon, rock music and Counterculture innovator, rural family man, Christian associated with the Jesus People, or cantankerous social critic distrustful of worldly leaders, Dylan's notions of freedom and justice, power and sin, have tied all of these roles together.

This paper is adapted from the Palgrave Macmillan book *The Political World of Bob Dylan: Freedom and Justice, Power and Sin* by Jeff Taylor and Chad Israelson. © 2015. All rights reserved.

¹ Jeff Taylor, *Politics on a Human Scale: The American Tradition of Decentralism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Press, 2013), 273.

² "America and New Era." Contained in: Massimo Teodori, ed., *The New Left: A Documentary History* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), 172.

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⁵ Bob Dylan, with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, *Hard to Handle* [videocassette] (CBS/FOX Video Music, 1986); Marshall, *Restless Pilgrim*, 89-90.

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⁸ Interview, February 1986. Contained in: Artur, *Every Mind Polluting Word*, 873; Matthew 5:39; Romans 12:21, 6:23.

⁹ Luke 8:30; Artur, *Every Mind Polluting Word*, 1097, 1098, 1098-99; Luke 12:7.

¹⁰ Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: A Life in Stolen Moments, Day by Day: 1941-1995* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 351.

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¹³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, c1951, 1975), xliii-xlv, 82, 64-65.

¹⁴ Romans 13:1-7. Cf. I Peter 2:13-17.

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¹⁶ Plato, *Statesman*, ed. Martin Ostwald, trans. J.B. Skemp (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 29, 32-33, 66, 72, 78.

¹⁷ Plato, *Statesman*, 83.

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²⁰ Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Critical American: The Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1984), 105.

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²⁶ Robert Hilburn, “How Does It Feel? Don’t Ask,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 2001.

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²⁸ Larry Norman, “Nightmare,” *So Long Ago the Garden* [sound recording] (MGM Records, 1973; Phydeaux, 1980); Larry Norman, “*Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music*” [songbook] (Hollywood: One Way Publications, n.d.), 5.

²⁹ Loder, “Bob Dylan,” 24, 78.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³² Hilburn, “I Learned That Jesus Was Real and I Wanted That.” Contained in: Benson, *Bob Dylan Companion*, 163. Evangelical philosopher Francis Schaeffer, an intellectual father of the Moral Majority, quoted Dylan’s “When You Gonna Wake Up” in his influential book *A Christian Manifesto*. – Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1981), 105.