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Scott CALHOUN, *U2 and the Religious Impulse: Take Me Higher*

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Scott Calhoun (ed.), *U2 and the Religious Impulse: Take Me Higher*, London, Bloomsbury, 2019

By Nicholas P. Greco

Does the world need another edited collection on the Irish rock band, U2? Maybe not. After all, the band have gained enough commercial success and garnered enough attention already. They have received so much visibility that it has gone to their collective rock star heads. Bono, the band's lead singer and, arguably, the biggest ego of the group, has used (and perhaps abused) his cultural capital to mingle with those with political capital (not to mention monetary capital) to try to affect change in the world. But the change comes through what Nathan Farrell in 2012 called "philanthrocapitalism," an ultimately impotent strategy for making a real difference. (Farrell 2012: 395)

Nevertheless, Scott Calhoun has presented an edited collection that wants to fill some holes in U2 scholarship: space and sound in U2's music; and fan interaction with the religious aspects of U2's works. W. David O. Taylor, in his Foreword to this edited collection, wants to present a reading of U2 beyond what he calls "a series of problematic binaries" (xii). But this seems almost

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impossible, and not necessarily desirable: it is in the conflation of the binaries that U2 sit, and so, to remove them from the midst of those binaries seems to unnecessarily redeem them. Taylor continues by hoping that the book achieves a “friendship” between those who see religion in U2’s music and those who do not, but this might not be something that is ultimately important. (xiii) Bono might be a spokesperson for both of these factions, but this is, yet again, because U2 can easily be described with that so-called “problematic binary” of being both sacred and secular.

What is particularly compelling is editor Scott Calhoun’s introductory suggestion that U2’s music is sacramental: it is somehow transformative for its listeners and the world. He suggests that fan approaches to U2 are “similar to how a seeker comes to a sacred text and ... attends gatherings organized for inculcating the values and practices developed from that text” with the aim of achieving some inward or outward goal or change that they are unable to achieve on their own (5). Contributor Kimi Kärki later uses theologian Beth Maynard’s idea of *leitourgia* to describe U2 as a “public service that can have spiritual undertones” (110). The title of Calhoun’s introduction, “U2’s Sacrament of Sound,” works well to give some sense of how the book approaches U2 differently than other studies. The book focuses not only on the notion of lyrics and their intersection with Christian theology, or the reception of the band’s Christian message, but also of the sound of the band’s music and the physical space that they inhabit and employ, both overlooked aspects in the study of the religious impulse of the band.

Steve Taylor draws from the work of Stephen Webb, writing that sound “invites

the hearer out of themselves, into a posture of being fully present, embodied in our bodies, yet becoming open to another.” Thus, there is “sonic participation in the life of God,” what Taylor develops as a “theology of sound” (56-57). While U2’s sound has certainly been discussed elsewhere (though perhaps not as thoroughly as, say, the band’s lyrics), the physical space that the band inhabits has been left to the wayside. U2’s popular discourse, though, has included broad discussions of stage design, particularly in the early 1990s and U2’s tour in support of *Achtung Baby*, with a stage covered in television monitors in various sizes and types. Bill Flanagan’s *U2 at the End of the World*, an important text for a description of the band at that point in their career, points to the stage there as a sort of postmodern pastiche of various disparate elements leading to a kind of freedom, “where there is supposed to be no moralizing, where

symbols are held up to raise questions and examine contradictions” (266). This idea seems to go against some of the arguments of U2’s stage as evoking the sacred or the (technologically) sublime, as is argued in the essays by Kimi Kärki and Brenda Gardenour Walter in the collection, for instance.

Kärki calls ZooTV a “postmodern collage of Europe that felt to be on the brink of a new promisingly lighter, -era after the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall.” PopMart was a “criticism of capitalism and brainless consumerism.” And in all of this, Kärki describes U2’s tour as “both intimate and far-reaching,” an example of Taylor’s unwanted binaries that seem so necessary to understand what U2 do and how U2 function. (111) Gardenour Walter explores how “in their [that is, U2’s] cathedral of sound, the mystical experience echoes across the centuries, preparing the heart’s tabernacle for the reception of God, waiting in hope for the future and acting through love in the present” (129).

In the second part of the book, Calhoun suggests that the chapters therein “demonstrate a nonsectarian presumption in U2 that music is for counterbalancing a heaviness in this world” and that U2 offer “a power to break whatever holds the spirit of a person down at a lower plane” (7). Towards the end of the book, though, the studies engage in (well-meaning and well-done) analyses of the religious in the band’s lyrics. MacLeod and Harvie explore what they call “spacial sacredness” in U2’s lyrics, which is a novel way of expressing how the band creates theoretical space *outside* of actual space.

One novel connection that Naomi Dinnen makes is between U2’s music and Jewish spiritual thought (the “Judeo-” part

of what is so often included in U2’s greater discourse, “Judeo-Christian” influence or impulse). She claims that “themes of refuge, rejoicing, and mercy are as enduring throughout U2’s catalog as they are in *Tanach* and the writings of the Jewish scholars through the ages,” extending their reach to fans who hold to different faiths. She makes the case that U2 “deliver messages of universal, inclusive faith that reaches beyond the constructs of organized religion” (158). While U2’s appreciation of the so-called Abrahamic faiths, of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, is clear (Bono has sported the graphic of the word “COEXIST” with Islam’s crescent in the place of the “C,” Judaism’s star in the place of the “X,” and Christianity’s cross in the place of the “T”), Dinnen makes the important *explicit* link between U2 and Judaism, something that is overlooked in U2’s discourse too often covered under the shadow of Christianity. Angela Pancella extends U2’s links even beyond the Abrahamic faiths to those without any faith, calling it “theist/nontheist dialogue,” identifying faith and doubt in the lyrics of U2 from both of those positions. Bono speaks of loss of faith, not just arguments with God, displaying “ambiguity... [that is] helpful as conversation starters in these dialogues across difference” (169).

Even with the book’s tendency to focus on how U2’s music seems to “lift” the listener from hardship to transcendence (which results, admittedly, in a bit of a caricature of Bono and his bandmates), it does provide a serious view of the band. This is lacking in so-called “U2 Studies,” primarily made up of quasi-academic books that look to the band’s lyrics as puzzles that reveal allegories for the Christian faith. This is not to say that a

general audience will dislike this collection; rather, they will find what they are looking for, if they seek a thoughtful and sustained critique of a band so often overlooked as preachy and out of touch, good only for the purpose of a devotional or as a “slacktivist” figurehead.

The book is an excellent contribution to the study of both space and sound, and fan engagement with the musical and celebrity “text” in popular music. There continues to be a lack of critical engagement with *very* popular subjects within the world of popular music studies. One reason for this would be the propensity of a general interest approach for books on such subjects (meaning that the more academic approach is eschewed for books more attractive to a general readership,

and thus more profitable for the publishers). It is important, though, to properly examine those popular culture actors who are consumed in such large quantities. This book is, thus, a welcome contribution to the realm of U2 scholarship, and the broader area of popular culture studies, in which rigour and sustained analysis is very much needed.

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