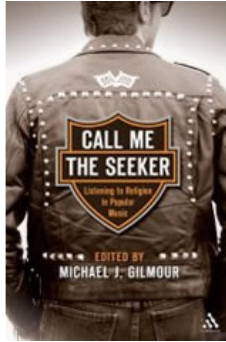


○ REVIEW OF MICHAEL J. GILMOUR'S *CALL ME THE SEEKER*

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Philip Culbertson reviews *Call me the seeker: Listening to religion in popular music*, edited by Michael J. Gilmour (New York/London: Continuum, 2005).



During my recent trip to the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Philadelphia, I noticed that virtually every publisher who was displaying books at the meeting had new titles in the general field of the relationship between popular culture and biblical or religious studies. The field is burgeoning, driven largely by the needs of the North American and British tertiary classrooms, but also reflecting the powerful global influence of the music and film industries. The variety of these books was itself fascinating, spanning the theological spectrum from sceptical evangelicalism to the most progressive of liberal theologies.

Many of the books in religion and popular culture now on the market focus on issues of theology and popular spirituality, more than they do on the biblical text. The first wave of books in religion and popular culture seemed to focus on film; the more recent wave focuses on a variety of popular music, including reggae, hip-hop, rock, pop, and country & western. Few of these books, whether on film or music, are as adventurous as Roland Boer's earlier *Knockin' on heaven's door* (Boer 1999), but at least it is possible to claim that over the past five years, a solid literature base has been built for those who wish to teach or explore further the field of religion and popular culture at an academic level.

Michael Gilmour's edited collection, *Call me seeker*, arrives hard on the heels of his previous through-written book in the same field, *Tangled up in the Bible: Bob Dylan & scripture* (Gilmour 2004). Both are significant contributions to the new field. Gilmour, of Providence College in Canada, has assembled an eclectic collection of essays by 17 scholars from the US, Canada, Finland, and the Czech Republic. Notes appear at the end of each chapter, and the book is well-indexed.

Perhaps the most unusual essay in the book is Daniel Moaz's exploration of the relationship between Kabbalah and Bob Dylan's record *Infidels*. The essay requires some prior knowledge of Jewish mystical theology, and to my mind, was a strange choice to begin the book with, because it seemed less accessible to a general readership, and thus less inviting. On the other hand, this allows the development of the book to build to a brilliant climax: Maxine Grossman's humorous

and theologically practical essay entitled 'Jesus, mama, and the constraints on salvific love in contemporary country music'. Because Grossman explores both gender and sexuality in her essay, I found great delight in thinking how much fun it would be to set her essay alongside Ang Lee's hit movie, *Brokeback Mountain*, which also raises questions about the nature of salvific love. Both Grossman's essay and Lee's movie are useful examples of queer hermeneutics.

Reviewing a collection of essays is always tricky, because invariably some essays will appeal to individual readers more than others. In the case of this book, I confess that I found myself more interested in essays that would appeal to New Zealand university students, since I will be co-teaching a course called 'The Bible in Popular Culture' at the University of Auckland in second semester 2006. Thus, for example, I was more interested to read the essays on Bono and U2, on Nick Cave, on rave culture, and on rap, than I was the essays on Woody Guthrie or Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Les Misérables*, simply because the latter have little currency among 18–22 year old New Zealanders. This is not to reflect negatively on any of the essays; all are carefully argued, and presented in an academic manner that would be accessible to educated readers of whatever age.

Irish rockers U2 have long been recognised as one of the most 'Christian' of the 'grizzled generation' of bands. Their lyrics reflect an ongoing attempt to make sense out of life, on a confusing journey with a God who is barely knowable. Gilmour's own essay, 'The prophet Jeremiah, Aung San Suu Kyi, and U2's *All that you can't leave behind*: On listening to Bono's Jeremiad', makes strong connections with the prophetic biblical texts and the search for justice in the world. Brian Froese's "'Comic endings": Spirit and flesh in Bono's apocalyptic imagination, 1980–1983' explores two themes in U2's lyrics: masculinity, love, and sex; and justice and the prophetic conscience.

Nick Cave, whose work is often paralleled with P. J. Harvey's, writes lyrics that are both sardonic and satirical, and which as well, like U2, have the character of a committed faith-struggle. Cave is in fact a published biblical scholar of sorts, having written an introduction to the Gospel of Mark (recently published in a collection called *Revelations*, edited by Richard Holloway [2005]), as well as a longer and more complex theological essay entitled 'The flesh made word.' Essays by Anna Kessler and J. R. C. Cousland explore Cave's *via negativa*, often expressed by Cave in the most personal of possible terms.

Rave culture receives attention in the collection through two essays – by Tim Olaveson and Melanie Takahashi – both focusing on the 'Christ-like' nature of the DJ, cleverly called a 'technoshaman'. Takahashi, already well known as an analyst of popular music, has written particularly effectively on the ritualistic nature of the interaction between the crowd and the DJ in the club scene, and lays down some serious challenges to the way that the spirituality of ravers is expressed relationally. Angela Nelson's "'God's smiling on you and he's frowning too": Rap and the problem of evil' explores the confused theodicy of rap and hip-hop, so heavily influenced by traditional Gospel music, arguing that the theology of the poor and marginalized which is expressed through rap and hip-hop is simultaneously accepting of and rejecting of traditional Christian explanations for why people suffer.

Different writers draw on different theory bases in their essays, but in general the writers' approaches proceed out of the 'softer' side of postmodernism, such as Foucault and de Certeau. The theologians cited tend to be masters of the mid-to-late 20th century, such as C. S. Lewis,

Reinhold Niebuhr and James Cone, rather than contemporary, edgier theologians like Marcella Althaus-Reid or the radical deconstructionists. In general, while biblical texts are cited with relative frequency, the theoretical sources of these essays seems to be situated more in sociology and anthropology than in theology.

This is a very rich and rewarding collection of essays, and Elaine Wainwright and I, in co-teaching *The Bible in Popular Culture*, plan to use it as one of our foundational texts. For those who need a basic introduction to the field of popular arts and culture, Gilmour's collection serves as a fine beginning. For those who want to explore the types of theology and spirituality that contemporary youth are being exposed to, this collection is invaluable.

REFERENCES

- Boer, Roland. 1999. *Knockin' on heaven's door*. New York: Routledge.
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