BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by: Barbara Pemberton, Ouachita Baptist University, AR, USA
pembertonb@obu.edu

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U2 and the Religious Impulse, edited by Scott Calhoun, Professor of English at Cedarville University, USA, is a collection of multidisciplinary essays considering the Irish rock band U2 and the enduring spiritual influence it has on fans. The aim of this book is to address new questions: “why the religious impulse in fans is so satisfyingly met by U2 … and why a broader group of religiously inclined fans are interested in U2” (p. 6). Calhoun has gathered an impressive group of scholars from a variety of fields including literature, theology, music, ethics, history, and political science, all providing excellent, thought-provoking essays. While all of the contributors share an interest in popular culture, several profess lifelong U2 fandom.

Since its formation by four musicians in 1976, U2 has been writing and giving landmark performances around the world, including the highest grossing concert ever—the 360° Tour. These critically acclaimed and immensely popular artists are unapologetically guided by their Christian faith, and their lyrics display a spiritual depth far beyond what may usually be expected from rock music. Fans say the music is transformative—not with particular dogma but with an uplifting message and exhortation to live lives of consequence. The foreword by David O. Taylor aptly labels Bono (né Paul David Hewson) “Everyman: the emissary of higher things for the sake of things below” (p. xii) and calls him a peripatetic prophet who along with the band can “evince a religious experience … for both believer and skeptic alike” (p. xiii).

The book is divided into four sections. The essays in sections one and three analyze sonic aspects and the experience of sacred space. Parts 2 and 4 analyze the ideology of U2, considering why fans from differing spiritual practices find U2 uplifting. I do not know why the editor chose to separate the thematically similar essays of Parts 1 and 3. However, all the essays are excellent—but space allows mention of only a few.

The first chapter analyzes in detail the guitar techniques and equipment of the Edge (né David Howell Evans) and their contribution to the spiritual tone of early U2. Chapter 6 offers a psychological study of U2 motifs, particularly the connections between shame and joy. The author relates that Bono (who loves the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ by John Newton)
sincerely believes music can be an instrument of grace, restoration and confidence that leads to joy.

Returning to the sonic and spatial aspects, Chapter 7 provides a fascinating analysis of U2’s 360° Tour as a study of the relation of religion and media spectacle as it creates a sense of congregation in an “audiovisual cathedral” where “musical rituals” are performed. In Chapter 8, “The Moment of Surrender: Medieval Mysticism in the Music of U2”, the author provides an intriguing creative analysis of the music of U2, suggesting they create cathedrals of sound offering spiritual pilgrimages toward mystical union with the Divine.

I found Chapter 10 to be one of the most interesting and informative essays as it explores the symbols and motifs in U2 that resonate with Judaism, such as kindness, social justice, forgiveness, universal love, refuge, joy, faith, hope and the sacredness of life. The essay of Chapter 11 places theists and nontheists in an interesting dialogue. Bono’s philanthropic work with nontheistic world leaders provides a model of finding common ground with people of different perspectives. The chapter includes an interview with Bono in which he articulates his Christian core beliefs.

Chapter 12 asks why U2’s faith was an important discussion for evangelical American teen fans of the 1980s. The author argues U2 was part of the teens’ creation of an imagined authentic community right when Christianity was becoming more and more private. Concerts seemed more real than church; it was transcendental, and all were welcome. U2 took them higher and challenged them to live better. Through writing the essay, the nostalgic author memorialized the community of which he was a part. Chapter 13, “U2 and the Art of Being Human”, provides a perfect last chapter offering religious humanism as a framework for understanding the continuing influence of U2.

Fans will appreciate the diversity and depth of the essays in this book, as will scholars of popular culture, and in fields such as religious studies, ethics, musicology and psychology. The reader needs to know the music and the history of the tours to appreciate the book fully. Readers less familiar with the band will still find the essays quite interesting and may find they are drawn into U2 fandom themselves and come to agree “that sound moves us most mysteriously so” (p. 8).