

Religion, Politics, and Public Discourse: Bruce Springsteen and the Public Church of Roll
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Abstract

The thesis of this paper is that Bruce Springsteen's art participates in a musical public square in which the outsider can come up close and overhear a dialogue that has been going on for centuries. Following the work of Robert Detweiler on religion and public life, this paper starts from the premise that the bard's music, like literature, creates a type of public square or a form of public discourse where urgent matters of human survival, like the nature and nurture of a just state, are expressed, a call for social justice can be heard, and faith and hope for the future can be assimilated. Using the theory of Martin Marty on religion and civic life, the paper further describes Springsteen's work as the creation of a "public church" beyond sectarian demand which is open to all and approximates, in his language, a true "land of hopes and dreams."

The paper uses the theory of Walter Brueggemann on the ancient church idea to demonstrate the nature and dimension of Springsteen's "public church." Using Brueggemann's theory, Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball* album is shown to have both a prophetic and priestly function. As a writer and performer, Springsteen demonstrates on this album and on the *Wrecking Ball* tour that he not only speaks truth to power, but attempts to create a sense of alternative vision and alternative community to the unjust status quo. His songs on *Wrecking Ball* issue a call for justice with a critique of the way things are, and his music affirms the worth and dignity of all those who get on board his metaphorical train. His music not only eulogizes the past, but it celebrates the open road, and the stubborn human ability to find hope when it does not appear to exist. When listening to Springsteen's music, one can come to experience the quest for union with the divine through music and poetry, but also join in the civic enterprise of a communion of communions challenging the nature of a just state.

Introduction

Bruce Springsteen is an American song-writer and musician whose politics have been visible, well-known, and well-charted. Prior to 2004 and the American Presidential election, most of his activity was in the support of Vietnam veterans and food banks for the hungry. He has built a career singing about people left out of the American Dream. However, with the events surrounding the national catastrophe known as "9/11," and the presidential elections of the new millennium, Springsteen attained new visibility and strengthened his reputation as something of a poet of the American Dream. In attaining this status Springsteen has traveled the road from rock star to cultural symbol, and in so doing has taken the cause of the common man. In this journey Springsteen has become something of a fellow traveler with Woody Guthrie, John Steinbeck, and Pete Seeger.¹

¹ <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/513468/911-concert-tributes-10-unforgettable-moments>. See also Springsteen with Obama published at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/bruce-springsteen-joins-obama-onstage-in-wisconsin-20121105>. The album "The Rising" was in some sense a response to the events of 9/11. When the four major American television networks put together a national telethon to help the families of the victims of the terrorist attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001, Springsteen opened the show with his

Though there are many sides to Springsteen, what is not well known about the musician is the way that religion shapes his dialogue with his various audiences. In a recent Paris interview, Springsteen admitted that his Catholic upbringing was a major influence on his music and that it had given him “a very active spiritual life.”² In a review of Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball* album, Melissa Maerz wrote that it has lyrics with “near-biblical significance.”³

The thesis of this paper is that Bruce Springsteen’s art participates in a musical public square in which the outsider can come up close and overhear a dialogue that has been going on for centuries. Following the work of Robert Detweiler on religion and public life, this paper starts from the premise that the bard’s music, like literature, creates a type of public square or a form of public discourse where urgent matters of human survival, like the nature and nurture of a just state, are expressed, a call for social justice can be heard, and faith and hope for the future can be assimilated.⁴ Using the theory of Martin Marty on religion and civic life, the paper further describes Springsteen’s work as the creation of a “public church” beyond sectarian demand which is open to all and approximates, in his language, a true “land of hopes and dreams.”⁵

The paper uses the theory of Walter Brueggemann on the ancient church idea to demonstrate the nature and dimension of Springsteen’s “public church.”⁶ Using Brueggemann’s theory, Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball* album is shown to have both a prophetic and priestly function. As a writer and performer, Springsteen demonstrates on this album and on the *Wrecking Ball* tour that he not only speaks truth to power, but attempts to create a sense of alternative vision and alternative community over against an unjust status quo. His songs on *Wrecking Ball* issue a call for justice with a critique of the way things are,

song “My City of Ruins” which he introduced as “a prayer for our fallen brothers and sisters.” With the Presidential election of 2004, Springsteen publicly threw his support for John Kerry. His album *Devils and Dust* (2005) can be understood, in part, in response to the invasion of Iraq. In the campaigns for 2008 and 2012, Springsteen supported Barack Obama for president. Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball* album (2012) has been understood as his most political musical statement to date.

² Bruce Springsteen interview at the Theatre Marigny, Paris (Mid-February 2012) posted online as “An American in Paris,” (2 March 2012) at <http://www.backstreets.com/paris.html>

³ Melissa Maerz, “Music Review: Wrecking Ball (2012),” *Entertainment Weekly* (March 2, 2012). Also available online at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/06/showbiz/music/bruce-springsteen-wrecking-ball-ew/index.html>.

⁴ Robert Detweiler, *Uncivil Rites, Religion, and the Public Square* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 1, 213.

⁵ For the image of a “public church,” see Martin Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline—Evangelical—Catholic* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), 3. Springsteen’s lyrics here refer to his song “The Land of Hopes and Dreams” on his *Wrecking Ball* album.

⁶ See especially Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 11-79.

and his music affirms the worth and dignity of all those who get on board his metaphorical train. His music not only eulogizes the past, but it celebrates the open road, and the stubborn human ability to find hope when it does not appear to exist. When listening to Springsteen's music, one can come to experience the quest for union with the divine through music and poetry, but also join in the civic enterprise of a communion of communions challenging the nature of a just state.

Springsteen as Bard and the Musical Public Square

Like the bards of old who were steeped in the traditions of clan and country, Springsteen has taken up the role of the poet/musician of the American working class, and has celebrated their worth, dignity, and human struggle by writing and singing their stories.⁷ In so doing, he has brought the ongoing narrative of the American people into the public square for all to hear. Throughout his career Springsteen's music has attempted "to explore the crossroads of escape and redemption and the hard realities and cold compromises of American life — as well as the paramount need to keep hold of hope at all costs."⁸ Yet for Springsteen this seems to be more than an effort to sell records. He seems to write and perform with intentionality beyond his peers, and thus appears to be a minstrel with a vocation, a calling, a "preacher of the 'majesty, the mystery and the ministry of rock 'n roll.'"⁹ In his 1999 E Street Band reunion tour, he shouted "I cannot promise you life everlasting but I can promise you life — right now!"¹⁰

Bruce Springsteen and the Ancient Church Idea

Bruce Springsteen grew up in the Catholic Church in New Jersey. In his recent Paris interview for the "Wrecking Ball" tour Springsteen admitted that "Once you're a Catholic, you're always a Catholic. You get involved in these things in your very, very formative years. I took religious education for the first eight years of school."¹¹ Springsteen seems to suggest in this interview that some idea of the Church is

⁷ Todd Leopold, "Bruce Springsteen and the song of the working man," found online at

<http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/18/showbiz/bruce-springsteen-wrecking-ball-working-man/index.html>.

⁸ <http://www.springsteeninireland.com> and, <http://www.brucespringsteen.net/the-band/bruce-springsteen-2>.

⁹ This appellation of Springsteen as a "preacher of the 'majesty, the mystery and the ministry of rock 'n roll'" appears on the official Springsteen website located at <http://www.brucespringsteen.net/the-band/bruce-springsteen-2>.

¹⁰ <http://www.springsteeninireland.com> and, <http://www.brucespringsteen.net/the-band/bruce-springsteen-2>.

¹¹ Bruce Springsteen interview at the Theatre Marigny, Paris (Mid-February 2012) posted online as "An American in Paris," (2 March 2012) at www.backstreets.com/paris.html. See also Andrew M. Greeley, "The Catholic Imagination of Bruce Springsteen," *America* 158: #5 (February 6, 1988): 110-115. Greeley argues that Springsteen's poetic imagination was shaped as a child by the Catholic Church and that he "sings of religious realities—sin, temptation, forgiveness, life, death, hope—in images that come (implicitly perhaps) from his

formative for his world view. Based on an appraisal of his music and his own activism in public life, it appears that the church, as an agent of social awareness and justice, is part of that heritage.

The idea of the church as an agent of social awareness and justice begins in the Hebrew Bible with a call to intentionally form a new social reality—to counter the way of oppression found in the slavery of Egypt. That is, the church idea to which Springsteen is heir is the creation of an alternative community which has an identity as a radical revolutionary, counter-community and which views the world with a counter consciousness. In this view, the poets of the church have the task to offer symbols adequate to the horror of oppression; to bring to public expression the fears that have been suppressed; and to speak metaphorically about the deathliness that hovers over the community. Thus the language of the poet of the church is the language of grief. Yet the poet extends the language to include a critique of the status quo, and the positive force of energizing the birth of a new reality, a new community.¹² It appears that the church idea appropriated by Springsteen has two dimensions: the first, the church of rock ‘n’ roll is a celebration of life and a quest for union with the divine through music itself; the second is a quest for a civic dimension, the public church of rock ‘n’ roll which takes measure of the status of the promise in the American Dream.¹³

Looking for the Promised Land: Bruce Springsteen and the American Dream

The ancient but dynamic church idea as an agent of social awareness and justice is clearly an element in the world view and creative imagination of Bruce Springsteen. Yet he is also heir to another major tradition which is his birthright as an American citizen, the American foundation myth sometimes referred to as the American Dream. Springsteen has often noted that “my work has always been about judging the distance between American reality and the American Dream—how far is that at any given moment.”¹⁴ This aspect of Springsteen’s musical imagination has a history as does the church idea. Indeed, in working with the theme of the American Dream, Springsteen is appraising the religious and philosophical dimensions of the meaning of America. As he explores the theme of American reality and

Catholic childhood. See also Jon Pareles, “Bruce Almighty,” New York Times (April 24, 2005). Also published online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/24/arts/music/24pare.html>.

¹² This concept of the church idea is taken from Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978) 11-79.

¹³ See Maria Rodale, “Bruce Springsteen and the Church of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” The Huffington Post (23 April 2012). Published online at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maria-rodale/bruce-springsteen-and-the_b_1445248.html.

¹⁴ Bruce Springsteen interview at the Theatre Marigny, Paris (Mid-February 2012) posted online as “An American in Paris,” (2 March 2012) at www.backstreets.com/paris.html

the American Dream he is working from the perspective that a coherent society must draw on a commonly accepted set of moral understandings. Consequently his songs outline and trace the basic elements within the American national consciousness. On the level of mythic meaning, Springsteen's songs explore the proposition that America represents newness, openness to the future, and a sense of unbounded possibility.¹⁵

From the beginning Americans understood their history to have religious meaning. Biblical imagery provided the basic framework for this imaginative thought in America. Early citizens envisioned America as a "New Israel," the very chosen of God. In this pattern of thought the old established countries of Europe represented the "Egypt" of oppression in the biblical tradition while America with its openness and newness stood for the "Promised Land." Eventually early American writers like Henry James, Hawthorne, and Melville called into question the simple optimism of the promised open future as they explored the underside of the American mythic tradition.¹⁶ Later, Springsteen would extend and validate this critique with his own analysis and writing and conclude that the primal crime against the Native Americans and African Americans, embodied in the early history of the new land, continues to take place again and again without regard to race or nationality.

Swamps of Jersey, Some Misty Years Ago: The Crucible of a Working Class Home

When recently asked about the anger in America and its source, Springsteen responded: "I think our politics come out of psychology whether we like to think so or not. And psychology, of course, comes out of your formative years."¹⁷ Then Springsteen went on to describe the crucible of his own working class home. That crucible began when Bruce Frederick Springsteen was born to parents Adele and Doug Springsteen in the working class town of Freehold, N.J. in Monmouth County in 1949. When Springsteen looked back on his formative years, he concluded that the "deepest motivation" along with the reasons to ask questions about the larger society "comes out of the house that I grew up in and the

¹⁵ See Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) ix; and Robert Benne and Philip Hefner, *Defining America: A Christian Critique of the American Dream* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 9.

¹⁶ Benne and Hefner, *Defining America*, 2.

¹⁷ Bruce Springsteen interview at the Theatre Marigny, Paris (Mid-February 2012) posted online as "An American in Paris," (2 March 2012) at www.backstreets.com/paris.html

circumstances that were there.”¹⁸ In a sense that home became the crucible that ignited his later musical imagination and provided the genesis for the themes that span his career.

His mother’s parents immigrated to America from Italy. Her father, Anthony Zerilli, embodied a fresh and glowing American Dream. He quickly learned English. Then almost as quickly earned his citizenship and a law school degree and landed a job with a promising firm. They were a young, wealthy and vibrant family until the Depression hit in 1929, when Anthony, having lost money, began to borrow more money. The borrowing led to borrowing too much, which led to a conviction for embezzlement.

Springsteen’s paternal grandparents, Alice and Fred Springsteen, were from Irish and Dutch immigrant families. They settled in Monmouth County where tragedy struck their family. In 1927, their five year old daughter, Virginia was playing on her tricycle. As she crossed the street an oncoming truck could not brake fast enough, and struck the young girl leaving her unconscious but still breathing. She soon died in the hospital in the presence of her devastated parents. Out of paralyzing grief, Alice and Fred neglected their toddler son Doug, Springsteen’s father, to the point that Doug spent much of his childhood in the care of his aunts. Peter Ames Carlin in his recent biography on Springsteen sums up the dark cloud of trauma and frustration which became the background for Springsteen’s early years. Carlin described how “both sides of Fred and Alice’s lineage came with a shadow history of fractured souls.” As Carlin put it, “These were the relatives who lived in rooms you didn’t enter. . . . Their stories were the ones that mustn’t be told. They inspired the silence that both secreted and concentrated the poison in the family blood. Doug could already sense the venom creeping within himself.”¹⁹ This powerful casting from his ancestors provided a poignant set of images of what it means to be human: to struggle and fail, to laugh and dance, to brood and question, to keep going in spite of it all.

Adele, Bruce’s mother, became the light of his life. She was the main breadwinner for most of Bruce’s life and subsequently presented a strong work ethic Bruce would later adopt for his own work life. She also instilled and encouraged a deep love of music, especially the Pop and Doo-Wop music of the era. She would regularly turn up the small transistor radio and dance as a young Bruce would smile bopping along to the beat as he ate his breakfast. She loved Elvis and she took Bruce to his first rock n

¹⁸ Todd Leopold, “Bruce Springsteen and the song of the working man,” found online at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/18/showbiz/bruce-springsteen-wrecking-ball-working-man/index.html>.

¹⁹ Peter Ames Carlin, Bruce, 6.

roll concert.²⁰ She scrimped, saved, and borrowed to buy him his first guitar. She went to his early teenage gigs as a doting mother and consummate fan.

On the other hand, his father reflected the shadow-side of the family ethos. He had trouble holding down a steady job. As Springsteen, in a 2012 Paris interview, later reflected on his father's situation he stated that as his father struggled to find work, he "saw that it was deeply painful and created a crisis of masculinity, and that it was something that was irreparable at the end of the day."²¹ His father would often remain at the kitchen table after dinner with the lights off, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes in silence well into the late hours of the night. Many nights Bruce would come home from some gig or rehearsal and tip toe past his father still up and brooding in the darkened kitchen only to be called back by the father to talk. Sometimes it was a veiled effort to connect somehow to Bruce, to find out what was going on in his life, but it almost always ended in a screaming match that his mother would have to break up.

Search for an Alternative Faith: Rock 'n' Roll as Religion

Yet Bruce Springsteen was the true son of his father. He grew up with the brooding temperament that he saw in his father, Doug Springsteen.²² At St. Rose of Lima parochial school in Freehold, Bruce was a "loner." He had trouble making friends. But he also tended to resent the strictures imposed upon him by the nuns who ran the school. By the end of the eighth grade Bruce was ready for a change. He did not want to go back to the Catholic school.²³ Though later years will show that the Catholic school had helped to form his musical imagination, the rigidity of the church was too much for him at the time.²⁴

Springsteen was also struggling to find his father who suffered greatly from the inability to find work. Springsteen would later say that he thought the "lack of work creates a loss of self." In the midst of that struggle, he later noted, he lost his father. All of this would later push the young Springsteen to look at psychological and social forces. For the moment, however, he was looking for something new, and in some sense, he was looking for a new model to follow. In music, Springsteen turned to what

²⁰ Ibid., 21-22.

²¹ Bruce Springsteen interview at the Theatre Marigny, Paris (Mid-February 2012) posted online as "An American in Paris," (2 March 2012) at www.backstreets.com/paris.html

²² Marc Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock 'N'Roll, 7.

²³ Ibid., 11-14.

²⁴ Andrew M. Greeley, "The Catholic Imagination of Bruce Springsteen," America 158: #5 (February 6, 1988): 110-115.

Roland Barthes called “the son’s search for the father, narrative [being] always a searching of one’s origins.”²⁵ Eventually, he would find a new “father” and a new way of being.

When Springsteen looked back on his early life, he described his “musical genesis” as “1956, Elvis on the Ed Sullivan Show.” He said he realized then that “a white man could make magic, that you did not have to be constrained by your upbringing, by the way you looked or by the social context that oppressed you. You could call upon your own powers of imagination and you could create a transformative self.”²⁶ For Springsteen, Elvis was a “new kind of man” who gave access to a new language, communication, ways of being and thinking. He was for Springsteen the “first modern Twentieth Century man.”²⁷ What this assessment of Elvis means for Springsteen is that he is finding new models for living and being—a new religion and faith, alternative to the strict environment of parochial school. He could be different and that was all right.

In time, Springsteen would find in the promise of rock ‘n’ roll “a ritual and communion that replaces older forms of religion” like the strict interpretation of the church that he had come to know. He would eventually come to understand that “the best rock performances are in search of that elusive moment when the familiar once again becomes vital.” He would also learn that “spirituality is present in such moments as home and as a quest...Faith in the power of Rock is simultaneously individual and communal.”²⁸

Creating a New Universe: Springsteen and the Church of Rock ‘N’ Roll

In his quest for an alternative way of living and being in the mid-sixties, Springsteen, as a teenager was also greatly influenced by the Beatles who led the British Invasion conquering everything in their path with power, charisma, and innovation. When he heard their version of “Twist and Shout” it resounded deep within himself as exactly the kind of music that he wanted to make. The song seemed to carry “the sound of teenage boys’ energy busting out of its institutional restraints.”²⁹ Then there was Bob Dylan, whom Springsteen calls the “father of [his] musical country, now and forever.” Dylan was the

²⁵ Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 10, 47. See also Peter Ames Carlin, Bruce, 12-16.

²⁶ Published online at <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/16/148778665/bruce-springsteens-sxsw-2012-keynote-speech>.

²⁷ Ibid. See also Peter James Carlin, Bruce, 19-21.

²⁸ Marc Dolan, Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ‘n’ Roll (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012) xii.

²⁹ Ibid., 10.

personification of the consciousness of the 1960s that swelled into social and political activism, and drifted into disillusion with the changing times. Springsteen said of Dylan what many true believing fans would later say about him, that “he gave us the words to understand our hearts.” As a young teenager, all of this was now Springsteen’s life; it was all consuming. Rock ‘n’ Roll was now his faith in the service of a developing identity and world view.³⁰

In his late teenage years and in his early twenties, Springsteen began to learn more about rock ‘n’ roll and the creation of a “transformative self”—how one could be different from the world around himself and create a new way of living and being. Springsteen was determined to move away from the world of his father, as well as the strictures that he had known in his Catholic education. He began playing for teen shows in school gyms, and clubs along the Jersey shore. It was not long till he started singing lead and writing his own songs. He drifted through an unexceptional high school career, and made it through a couple of semesters of community college to appease his parents. But Springsteen’s true education was in the world of music and his own creative imagination. There he was learning what Ernst Cassirer had written: that a “...man can do no more than to build up his own universe—a symbolic universe that enables him to understand and interpret, to articulate and organize, to synthesize and universalize his human experience.”³¹

Music became the new realm of sacred texts for Springsteen, and in writing his own songs he began a long process of attempting to universalize his experience. For Springsteen, music seems to be multifaceted. It could be just pure fun, like the Beatles rendition of “Twist and Shout.” But even a song like that began to take on a spiritual dimension for him in the sense that it carried with it the energy of bursting out of institutional restraints. Thus, from his earliest days Springsteen came to see that rock ‘n’ roll had a spiritual dimension—that his music was never simply music for music’s sake. In his hands rock ‘n’ roll became also a spiritual technology involved in creating a new universe for its author, but also attempting to universalize that experience for his audience. The special relationship that he developed with his audience can be described as his “rock ‘n’ roll covenant.”³² The success that Springsteen

³⁰ Published online at <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/16/148778665/bruce-springsteens-sxsw-2012-keynote-speech>. For the concept of rock ‘n’ roll as faith, see [Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ‘N’ Roll](#), xii.

³¹ Ernst Cassirer, [An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture](#) (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1944) 278.

³² Cornel Bonca, “Save Me Somebody: Bruce Springsteen’s Rock ‘N’ Roll Covenant,” published online at <http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/witness/save-me-somebody-bruce-springsteens-rock-n-roll-covenant/>

eventually achieved in this quest can be seen in the description of his performances as the “First Church of Rock.”³³

Springsteen eventually came to see that rock ‘n’ roll music should be “demonstrably moral”—it turns to “...moral account in a way which forces. . . passion to face the disasters that often follow in its wake.”³⁴ In time, Springsteen also came to see that rock ‘n’ roll was ministerial—that it ministered to its audience, and that it was redemptive. He came to understand that rock ‘n’ roll music, like other forms of art, has the ability to transport the listener or viewer to a “different state of consciousness”—to a place of being where the world can be seen in different perspective. Music can impart the human will to be different, to be good or do better.³⁵ An illustration of the power inherent in Springsteen’s music comes from Jon Landau who wrote: “On a night when I needed to feel young [Springsteen] made me feel like I was listening to music for the first time.”³⁶ In the early years, Springsteen’s music was filled with “fallen Catholic school boy images,” but the religious was given little or no weight. Since the late 1980s, however, his lyrics have been filled with “unironized religious images” including “Life, love, faith, hope, transformation, sanctification, resurrection, sexual healing, companionship, joy, [and] happiness.”³⁷ In the early years, the Church of Rock ‘N’ Roll seemed to be something like the collective quest for “the ecstatic joy of feeling union with the divine through music, rhythm, poetry.”³⁸ But in later years, Springsteen sought to give his music more of an “intellectual and emotional” base.³⁹

The Search for a Good Society: Creating the Public Church of Rock ‘N’ Roll

There came a time in Springsteen’s career when he began to mature in his vision and vocation, and began to take up the call to be a poet of the American Dream, a minstrel for the working class, and to accept the roll of a preacher of the “majesty, the mystery and the ministry of rock ‘n’ roll.” In so doing, he took the church of rock ‘n’ roll to a deeper level—it began to take on a civic dimension of not only

³³ Chet Flippo, “Blue-Collar Troubadour,” *People Magazine* 22:10 (September 03, 1984). Also published online at <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20088574,00.html>.

³⁴ Cornel Bonca, “Save Me Somebody: Bruce Springsteen’s Rock ‘N’ Roll Covenant,” published online at <http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/witness/save-me-somebody-bruce-springsteens-rock-n-roll-covenant/>

³⁵ See Huston Smith in an interview with Bill Moyers, *The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith* (New York: Public Affairs Television, 1996)

³⁶ Landau quoted in Peter Ames Carlin, *Bruce*, 180.

³⁷ Cornel Bonca, “Save Me Somebody: Bruce Springsteen’s Rock ‘N’ Roll Covenant,” published online at <http://killingthebuddha.com/mag/witness/save-me-somebody-bruce-springsteens-rock-n-roll-covenant>.

³⁸ Maria Rodale, “Bruce Springsteen and the Church of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *The Huffington Post* (23 April 2012). Published online at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maria-rodale/bruce-springsteen-and-the_b_1445248.html.

³⁹ Peter James Carlin, *Bruce*, 246.

measuring the nature and status of the American Dream but also promoting it for all its citizens. At that point, one could say that Springsteen joined the “public church” which is a paradigmatic metaphor used to describe persons of commitment who are willing to join others in working for the common good.⁴⁰ Such persons, like Springsteen, become especially sensitive to the *res publica*, the public order that surrounds and includes people of faith.”⁴¹ This enlarged communion is “tinged with prophetic reminiscence,” and has at the core of its witness responsibility to “the God beyond the gods.”⁴²

With *Born to Run* he widened his cinematic lens to capture more of his vision of America. He saw an America that was reeling from Vietnam, trudging through a gas crisis, and economic depression affecting the towns and community with which he most identified. Springsteen wanted to capture this wide angle shot of America musically too, and, consequently, looked to the dramatic, orchestrated, pop-production of Phil Spector to provide a template. His characters from that era know they have to get out while they can with their souls intact. He framed this panicked “runaway American dream” with a Hollywood sheen of spiritual hopefulness. With this album, he took a step toward universalizing his narrative. He was no longer simply concerned with people like himself but he began to chronicle the lives of everyday working class people who were not like him.⁴³

Born to Run brought with it massive attention, the kind of fame of which Springsteen had dreamed, but it now seemed to bring on a thick paranoia and self-criticism. Was he betraying the people and goals to which he was committed? He still needed his music to say more, to do more. In the late 70’s he searched for further range to his music, to his message. He looked to country music, which he discovered dealt with adult matters with brutal and poignant honesty. He also was influenced by the raw power and rage of the new Punk bands tearing the world apart like The Sex Pistols and The Clash. He began to think he needed to write about characters who, for whatever reason, could not “run” to a brighter tomorrow outside the town that held them captive. For his next album he would turn squarely around and face the *Darkness on the Edge of Town*.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ The reference of a public church is to the work of Martin Marty. See Martin Marty, *The Public Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3, 164.

⁴¹ Ibid. For Marty, the Public Church is a “communion of communions” drawn from elements of the old mainline, the newer evangelicalism, and Roman Catholicism.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jeffrey B. Symynkywicz, *The Gospel according to Bruce Springsteen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox: 2008) 26-28.

⁴⁴ Peter Ames Carlin, *Bruce*, 240.

It would be on the album, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, Springsteen would later say that he had found his “adult voice.”⁴⁵ As he reflected on this period he recalled he was “twenty-seven and the product of Top 40 radio.”⁴⁶ He began to ask himself new questions when he realized that much of pop music was egocentric and infused with class consciousness. “That, along with my own experience –the stress and tension of my father’s and mother’s life that came with the difficulties of trying to make ends meet – influenced my writing.”⁴⁷ Then Springsteen notes that he had a reaction to the good fortune that had come his way. “I felt a sense of accountability to the people I’d grown up alongside of. I began to wonder how to address that feeling.”⁴⁸ The answer would be, in part, a new civic dimension in his work.

The songs on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* began to preach a hopeful defiance in face of the lingering and ever approaching storm. There was a witness to the tension and rage of age old father and son struggle with family, place, and duty in the biblical imagery of “Adam Raised a Cain”. “The Promised Land,” might only be found by bravely driving into the storm and letting it “blow everything down that ain’t got the faith to stand its ground.”⁴⁹ These characters were proud to march into their daily battles and became the truth and imagined truth of Springsteen’s tracing of the American Dream. These songs demonstrated a new sense of engagement with civic responsibility and marked the birth of Springsteen’s public church. Springsteen would grow this congregation steadily from this point onward, with albums such as *The River*, *Nebraska*, and *Born in the USA*. He would extend his portrait of America on the razor’s edge of the nation’s heartache, and hope and at the same time attempt to find musical balance by alternating rock with ballad.

Wrecking Ball: The Quest for a True Land of Hopes and Dreams

In his Paris interview for the new album, *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen noted that the genesis of the record was after 2008 when the financial crisis occurred in the United States and there was no accountability for this economic disaster. He said “People lost their homes. . . and nobody went to jail. Nobody was [held] responsible. People lost enormous amounts of their net worth.” Before the Occupy Wall Street Movement, there was no one saying how outrageous this was. It was a “basic theft,”

⁴⁵ Bruce Springsteen, *Songs*, 69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 65

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁹ Springsteen “The Promised Land.”

Springsteen declared, and that robbery “struck at the heart of what the entire American idea was about without regard to history, context, or community. It was, in his mind, completely about “what can I get today,” something like “an enormous fault line that cracked the American system wide open. So around 2009 or 2010, Springsteen wrote “We Take Care of Our Own” which became the opening track of the new album. The idea behind that song was that this was what should have happened in a supposedly just society like that of America, but it did not.⁵⁰

The *Wrecking Ball* album, which Springsteen wrote and produced in response to this economic theft, indicates that his poetic and musical imagination has a basic moral dimension which includes a severe critique of the “fat cats” on “bankers’ hill.” This new album is a call to a radical and revolutionary counter-consciousness embodied in a genuine alternative community. Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball* shows that his poetic imagination is comprised of not only critique (a shattering of the status quo) but also a musical imagination that energizes and evokes a new way of being in the world.⁵¹

Wrecking Ball as Musical Critique

The thunderous opening beat of “We Take Care of Our Own” swings like a wrecking ball through the speakers, clearing the way for the screeching wail of a distorted guitar, blasted through an overdriven amp which echoed a police siren and an ambulance racing to the scene. Before the album really even starts one knows there is an emergency. Someone needs help; a crime has been committed. Before the listener hears a word there is a call to emergency action. When the band kicks, heads are turning to identify the problem. Within thirty rock ‘n’ roll seconds Bruce Springsteen is responding to the scene to describe the problem and suggest what to do. The cavalry did come to New Orleans and the Superdome, but they left their “own” to be “lost in the flood.”

Where are the people who are going to help America? Springsteen has, throughout his career, displayed a bold patriotism but never with an empty superficial wave of the flag. His is a “very critical, questioning, often angry sort of patriotism.”⁵² In this light, one can see the song “We Take Care Of Our Own” as revisiting what it means to be “Born in the USA” in the manner he explored these themes in

⁵⁰ Bruce Springsteen interview at the Theatre Marigny, Paris (Mid-February 2012) posted online as “An American in Paris,” (2 March 2012) at www.backstreets.com/paris.html.

⁵¹ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 11-27.

⁵² Bruce Springsteen interview at the Theatre Marigny, Paris (Mid-February 2012) posted online as “An American in Paris,” (2 March 2012) at www.backstreets.com/paris.html

1984. Like “Born in the USA”, Springsteen’s opening track blasts out the anthemic “4 on the floor revolution” rock ‘n’ roll that has been misconstrued by some critics and listeners as a shallow sort of flag waving. But the flag waving here on both powerful tracks is a call to arms and action, a rallying cry.

The opening number, “We Take Care of Our Own” asks the question “Do we take care of our own?” The verses seem to suggest we do not, or at least we have not been doing so recently.⁵³ The music is rough and challenging but like much of Springsteen’s music, it is ultimately triumphant, suggesting that if we were to only respond that we could easily take care of our own. Through the siren blast, he calls attention to the emergency at hand and tells his audience that you can be the cavalry that shows up to do the work that will set our hands free, our souls free. This central thesis, presented in the opening track, is tested throughout the album lyrically and musically. The question the title asks is answered in various ways by the many characters. So through these “everyday” characters and stories, he implicates his audience in the problem as well as in the solution.

By drawing from varied genres and styles such as Civil War-like horn arrangements, Irish folk stomps, stormy country blues, hip-hop, and gospel, mixed with his distinctive Springsteen brand of rock ‘n’ roll he is trying to say these problems have happened again and again and again and again, throughout history. Jon Landau, music critic turned producer and long-time Springsteen collaborator, describes the record as “a summary, or perhaps a modern iteration, of themes Bruce had explored throughout his career.”⁵⁴

The Fat Cats and a Royal Consciousness

On the second track “Easy Money” Springsteen portrays some of the culprits (in the financial system) in the recent economic crisis as being brazen, .38 wielding, thieves looking for the easy money to be had robbing America blind. Meanwhile the fat cats, perhaps on Wall Street, “think it’s funny” to see the average American’s “world come crashing down.” The easy money is represented by a back-porch, country stomp complete with a swirling fiddle, and dobro backing. The exuberance in the music seems to show how “easy” it is to get swept up in the greedy pursuit of easy money without the thought of

⁵³ Springsteen’s own answer to the question is “We often don’t. We don’t provide an equal playing field for all of our citizens.” So other questions are found in the first track. “Where are the merciful hearts? Where is the work that I need? Where is the spirit that reigns over me? Where are the eyes that see?” See the Bruce Springsteen interview at the Theatre Marigny, Paris (Mid-February 2012) posted online as “An American in Paris,” (2 March 2012) at www.backstreets.com/paris.html

⁵⁴ Carlin, Bruce, 451.

how it affects the rest of society. Just like “Bonnie and Clyde” reveling in their crime spree across America, the song’s narrator is joyously ambivalent to the destruction about to come along with that easy money. The “Easy Money” character demonstrates a specific mode of consciousness—a form of triumphalism along with oppression and exploitation. This character, illustrative of the Fat Cats on Banker’s Hill, is essentially numb to the pain of victims, and his politics of oppression serve the desired need of his private economics of affluence.⁵⁵

The Pervasive Royal Consciousness and the Language of Grief

On the third track, the audience is taken down among the people whose “world has just come crashing down.” The character is “shackled and drawn” singing a gritty, hammers-down-on-the-back, beat-and-holler “work song”. But the problem is the singer is not being shackled down in order to work against his will, he is being held from his work. So it becomes a work-less song, a lament. But it is a defiant lament with a triumphant image of Springsteen hope built into the sound. There is a sense that the shackles can only be temporary. The singer knows how to pick up the rock and carry it on; he knows how to do the work that “will set his hands free, his soul free” if only he were allowed by the fat cats up on bankers’ hill.

As the song ends a gospel voice pleads for everyone to stand up and be counted. Springsteen is conscious of the significance of merging gospel sounds with back-porch country; he is painting in broad musical strokes, painting in broad historically American colors. All of America is shackled and drawn, not just the poor, rural whites or the poor, urban African Americans, but everyone. Yet, there is hope imbedded even in this indignant and defiant blues lament.

The language of lament is an important element in Springsteen’s repertoire. It is only the language of grief that has the power to cut through the numbness of the royal consciousness. So Springsteen’s task as poet is to find a language with sufficient emotion to reach those who no longer feel. In this regard, Springsteen as poet is working to keep the imagination alive. The fat cats on bankers’ hill want to dominate and manipulate what is thought. With the use of a severe image, like “Shackled and Drawn,” Springsteen as poet is doing battle for the human imagination and the ability to propose alternative futures for his audience. While the perverse royal consciousness from bankers’ hill seeks to promote numbness especially about death and oppression, Springsteen’s task as poet is to

⁵⁵ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 36.

engage the oppressive experiences in such a way to penetrate the numbness; offer symbols that are adequate to the horror that brings denial; and bring to public expression the fears and terrors that have been long denied.⁵⁶

Poetic Energizing and Evoking: Models, Images, and Future Survival

Springsteen then shows his audience how America can function if only allowed to do so. One can be resilient; one can do anything and everything to get by. The narrator tells his companion that it will all be all right because he is a “Jack of All Trades”. He shows the working model needed to survive when careers are stolen away. The instrumentation here is stately, almost hymn-like, and has echoes from early American music around the time of the Civil War, perhaps to reflect the internal struggle that currently has the nation divided. The song has the sound of “picking up the pieces,” of walking past the scattered bodies, and checking the pulses of the economic casualties. A lonely, mournful trumpet, backed by military snare, clears the smoke on the battlefield. The narrator, although getting by and telling his partner that they will be all right, is not “all right” with the situation. Even though he believes that a “new world” is coming and that he can see the light, he also knows whom to blame. His hopeful resilience and patience shift to rage toward the bankers who grow fat while the working man grows thin. If he had a gun, as he says, he would “find the bastards and shoot ‘em on sight.” To close the song, Springsteen recruited Tom Morello to play an electric guitar solo contrasting with the earlier old world military trumpet and snare solo. Morello is a well-known and outspoken political activist, member of the labor union “Industrial Workers of the World,” and advocate of social and economic justice. He was aligned with “Occupy Wall Street” and other “Occupy” movements. Consequently, Springsteen made a political statement by asking Morello to guest star on two album tracks as well as later join him on the Wrecking Ball tour.

Wrecking Ball as Shattering: Symbols Adequate to the Horror

With the use of severe images such as “Death to My Hometown,” “The Depression,” and “Wrecking Ball,” Springsteen sought to employ symbols from the poetic imagination that were adequate to what he had seen and understood. In so doing, he could metaphorically penetrate the numbing process hoped for by the Fat Cats on Bankers’ Hill, and accepted by the status quo. His images sought to do

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

nothing less than “shatter” that triumphal and oppressive royal consciousness and call for accountability for this devastating crime.⁵⁷

In 1984 Springsteen ended the *Born in the USA* album with a sort of somber nostalgic look at the narrator’s “Hometown”. In that song the hometown was pushed and pulled through racial tension and later took a massive economic blow—factories were closed and main street stores were boarded up.. The narrator tells the audience this with a sort of melancholic distance. But almost thirty years later, possibly that same narrator is called to arms in violent rage against those that have brought on the very “death” of his hometown. He is called to arms and then calls others to arm themselves. In Springsteen’s ideology, a song is a weapon—an idea that he got from Woody Guthrie. In the case of “Death to My Home Town,” the song has the power to send the robber barons straight to hell. The music here is also consciously crafted and enlisted to serve. It is an Irish folk rock, protest, marching song, with a tin whistle-riff carried through the streets, backed with a heavenly choir of Sacred Harp shape-note singers. The old world religious outsider choir, mixed with the revolutionary fervor of Irish folk rock, creates a righteous, raucous howl of indignation. This is not nostalgia; this is war as evidenced by the shotgun cock and blast percussion.

The song, “This Depression,” further widens the landscape of emotion that is brought on by these trying times in America. Bruce Springsteen has battled emotional depression and fought the mental struggles that seem to have plagued his father before him. The loss of his friends and fellow E Street Band members Clarence Clemons and Danni Federici also had a devastating effect on Springsteen. So a song like “This Depression” works on many levels and becomes a meditation that “this” depression is just one more in a long line of those that have come and will continue to come in the future.

Written back in 2009 in honor of Giants Stadium as it faced imminent demolition, “Wrecking Ball” was an ode to the Jersey toughness and resilience embodied by the Giants football team and its devoted fans. But the meaning was larger and the metaphor of the Wrecking Ball was tied to an economic and political crane, operated perhaps by the fat cats on banker’s hill, who swing it to demolish the backbone of America. Even in the live versions of the track in 2009, the song turned into a reactionary challenge to the Wall Street fat cats. The hopeful declaration is that not even a wrecking ball will be enough to tear down the audience as long as we “hold tight to [our] anger” and don’t “fall to [our] fears.” The

⁵⁷ Ibid., 49.

music is a classic Springsteen anthem full of bravado, swagger, and joy surrounded by a Phil Spector-designed and E Street Band-constructed, wall-of-sound. The audience begins to know that a wrecking ball does not stand a chance.

Land of Hopes and Dreams: Evoking an Alternative Community and Vision

The work of the poet is not all critique, not all “shattering.” “Wrecking Ball” is, in fact, a double entendre; it implies destruction for the sake of building. At the end of the album, Springsteen turns to the evoking and building of community and vision. The inclusion of a song like “You’ve Got It” on an album with such intense focus as *Wrecking Ball* might strike some as puzzling or misguided, even a mistake. But Springsteen, like Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie before him, has always tried to balance his portrayals of America. Throughout his career he has tried not to forsake the expression of joy and the quest for love in his music. “You’ve Got It” seems almost a welcome celebration of love and life in the midst of frustration and rage. Consequently, Springsteen shows by this inclusion that a simple moment of love between two people is just as important to recognize, as is the urgent call to political action present in the rest of the album. There is joy and love present even in the hardest times. Expressing that love and joy is an act of hope. So perhaps the instrumentally-simple love song represented here also serves to bridge the outrage of the beginning of the album to the resolved hope and spiritual tone of the last few tracks.

On “Rocky Ground” there is a call to leadership, a prayer for help, and a promise of hope. The track uses an excerpt from “I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord” to set a militantly religious tone to which the audience is called to rise up and act. The audience has been traveling over the rocky ground of America’s present musically on the album. But now reflection is necessary. Springsteen calls the “shepherd” to rise up and gather his flock that has “roamed far from the hill.” Perhaps, Springsteen calls the audience to rise as shepherds to guide and lead others out of the rocky ground. The floodwaters are very real but the troubled economic and political floods are also rising fast above the heads of the audience. Even in a restrained and reflective call to service, Springsteen channels Jesus’ rage against the moneychangers who have profaned the temple. He seems to blame them for the forty days and nights of flood.

On this track, Springsteen lays a subtle mix of gospel, hip-hop, and electronic soundscape as a bed for his gruff and weary, but somehow, hopeful vocals. Springsteen’s classic Americana stands in musical

unity with the gospel choir while the short rap section at the end seems a deliberate attempt to join hands across genres, across social stigmas, and stereotypes. This is an American hymn meant for all to sing. The church organ calls to the audience: rise up, come down the aisle and up to the front of the church that is America, pledge help and stand as shepherds. The narrator declares with confidence that a new day is rising, maintaining the thread of hope running along with the rage and frustration of this album. But the confidence of the new day is conditioned upon the audience choosing to act and lead.

In 1965 The Impressions sang “people get ready there’s a train a-coming, you don’t need no ticket, you just get on board, you don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.” Springsteen, using elements of this original song “People Get Ready,” elaborates on where this train is going and exactly who can climb on board. While this figurative train in 1965 seemed to have been just moving into the station at slow, meditative groove, the train Springsteen describes barrels through American fields toward the sun-filled “Land of Hope and Dreams.” Aboard with Springsteen and his companions are saints, sinners, losers, winners, whores and gamblers; all lost souls who wish to get on board can. No dreams will be thwarted and faith will be rewarded.

Springsteen’s joyous rock-‘n’-roll gospel is in high gear here with the power to bring metaphorical resurrection. On the album, one of the last recorded “takes” of the recently passed Clarence Clemons is used for a sax solo for lost souls and saints. The music again uses elements from all of America to give life to the life-giving train. Springsteen uses southern front-porch banjo, gospel choirs, electronic beats, and E Street Band “thunder” on the tracks for the metaphorical train to race along as if to shovel American hope and swagger into its engine, like coal in earlier days. The audience gets on board and thanks the Lord.

The last track, “We Are Alive” rises from the dusty ashes of record static and begins with an ominous electronic drone; then comes a jaunty, acoustic guitar and cheerful, whistled melody. In this fashion, Springsteen sets up an eerily triumphant ghost story. Those already passed shine as a crackling fire beyond the stars teeming with mythic energy to fight along the side of the living “shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart.” There is an almost mystic beauty to the poetry of the lyrics such as “a dead man’s moon throws seven rings,” perhaps suggesting the powerful energy one’s deeds can leave behind to light a righteous path for others to follow. Springsteen concludes this album lyrically and musically on an eternally hopeful note. He tells his audience that those who have passed in the service

of justice and change do not lie still in the grave of time but rise up as the audience rises to fight for social, economic, and political change.

Conclusion

A reading of Bruce Springsteen's music suggests that he has a moral imagination, and that he envisions his work as a type of public service, indeed the ministry of rock 'n' roll. From the early days of his career, his music has included thoughts about redemption, spiritual struggle, moral choice, and the invocation of God. His musical imagination appears to be indebted to his Catholic background, but it also seems that throughout his career he has attempted to take the inner landscape that was given to him in his early years and to make this powerful imagery his own. Consequently, the special relationship that he maintains with his band and his audience has come to be construed as the "church of rock n roll." The element of public service that he has found in his work can be understood as the "Public Church of Rock n Roll."

Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball* album (2012) is his most political musical statement to date. In this album, he carries on his career-long tradition of writing and performing for people left out of the American Dream. Springsteen also carries on the understanding of musical performance as public service and promotes a dialogue with his audience and the larger public square about what makes for a just society. This album shows that his musical imagination is in the service of a prophetic agenda—to challenge the type of activity that brought economic harm to millions. His music on songs such as "We Take Care of Our Own," and "Easy Money" indicts the moneyed elite with a type of "royal consciousness" that breeds numbness and a genuine disregard for the needs of others. The songs "Shackled and Drawn," "Death to My Hometown," and "The Depression" show Springsteen searching for metaphors adequate to the horror of the disaster. The title of the album, "Wrecking Ball" is a double entendre which demonstrates that this event and its musical rendering must be understood in terms of both "shattering" and "evoking"—complete devastation, but also the creation of something new.

The entirety of the album appears to be in the service of the creation of both alternative vision and alternative community. The stark and penetrating, grief-laden images seek to penetrate the numbness brought on by the slick maneuvers on bankers' hill. As a poet with revolutionary vision of his own, Springsteen, in a song like "Jack of All Trades," calls for a new sense of community with a spirit that not only endures but survives. With the dramatic force of poetic energizing, Springsteen turns in the

last half of the album to the hope of a “new world” that is coming. He calls upon leaders in the song “Rocky Ground” to see that their work is in the service of a larger task—to help save those in danger. Springsteen proclaims that a new day is rising. People—all people in need— are called to get ready for a train that is coming which is bound for a true land of hope and dreams. In a dramatic conclusion, Springsteen sings that the dead will rise to fight for social, economic, and political change. Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball* is in the service of the Public Church of Rock n Roll. In poetic and prophetic fashion, Springsteen shatters the imagery of bankers’ hill and calls the underprivileged to a new day of faith and hope in a land where American Dreams come true.