

Sightings 8/10/06

Religion in *Modern Times*

-- M. Cooper Harriss

While it may not constitute as momentous a cultural event as it would have thirty years ago, Bob Dylan will release *Modern Times*, a new album of ten original songs, on August 29. Early reports and "leaked" online audio fragments indicate that *Modern Times* recalls Dylan's two recent and highly acclaimed efforts, *Time Out of Mind* (1997) and *Love and Theft* (2001), completing what one record executive calls a "trilogy" of albums on which the aging master (now sixty-five years old) utilizes various genres of American popular song -- blues, tin-pan alley, torch ballad, rockabilly, etc. -- to ruminate upon the exigencies and absurdities of, well, "modern times."

Religion looms large in Dylan's worldview. It always has -- most explicitly in his turn to evangelical Christianity in the late 1970s that yielded another "trilogy" of albums: *Slow Train Coming* (1979), *Saved* (1980), and *Shot of Love* (1981). But scholars and/or practitioners of religion (especially Judaism and Christianity) should find the rest of Dylan's career no less interesting in this regard. Through biblical allusion (among scores of examples, "All Along the Watchtower" essentially paraphrases Isaiah 21: 5-9), eschatological orientation ("The Times They Are a-Changin'"), and apocalyptic imagery ("A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall," "Desolation Row," and "Angelina"), Dylan has channeled American religious idioms through his words and music to manifest what critic Greil Marcus calls "the old, weird America." In recent years, Dylan in concert has performed hymns by Fanny Crosby; in 2000 one could expect to hear "Rock of Ages" as well as "My Back Pages." As Dylan told the *New York Times* in 1997, "Those old songs are my lexicon and my prayerbook All my beliefs come out of those old songs I believe in Hank Williams singing 'I Saw the Light.'"

What, then, shall be the religious orientation of *Modern Times*? Writer Seth Rogovoy, who attended a secretive, invitation-only "preview" of the album in New York City, reports: "There are poetic references to prophecy; there is much talk of religion and the moral (or immoral) state of humankind; ... there are references to violence, vengeance, and murder, including many phrased in the first person. Perhaps ... Dylan has vengeance and murder on his mind at a time when the world is seemingly obsessed with both." Thematically Dylan appears to remain interested in the historical weddedness of religion and violence in the American popular imagination. For a songwriter who has engaged "topical" themes in the past (including civil rights and the Cuban Missile Crisis) there has been no dearth of potential source-material in the form of natural and human-made disaster since the release of his last album on September 11, 2001.

But Dylan's method has always been more expansive. As the songwriter himself has noted, he has avoided "finger-pointing" songs in "protest" of current events for more than forty years. Rogovoy rightly links *Modern Times* to the current state of domestic and world affairs -- the title certainly seems to indicate such a move at first blush -- but one wonders if something more is not afoot in Dylan's reliance upon "traditional" sources in an album with such a title. "Modern" not only characterizes the flashing lights of up-to-the-minute Internet "news." According to the

OED, it also concerns "the current age or period." In this way, "modern" signifies the *now* of any moment in time, but simultaneously relates to a broader historical context that spans generations. Dylan appropriates this double meaning, giving his "modern" album of 2006 the same title as Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film, *Modern Times*. Furthermore, as recent newspaper headlines make clear, many contemporary expressions of religious violence worldwide relate to older, "traditional" grievances.

Dylan's aphoristic definition of "modern times" as "the New Dark Ages" in the liner notes to his 1993 album of traditional songs, *World Gone Wrong*, also conflates "old" and "new," past and present, insisting with Qohelet that there is "no new thing under the sun," or with T. S. Eliot that the most arresting quality of the past is frequently its "presence." Such notions resonate even more profoundly when one recognizes that the songs slated for *Modern Times* include "Rollin' and Tumblin'" and "The Levee's Gonna Break" -- two of at least seven titles that allude to specific phrases from the blues and other American vernacular musical traditions often imbued with religious motifs.

The explicit religious significances of this album remain to be seen. In these weeks before the album's release, one can only speculate as to how closely these "modern times" will hew to Dylan's response when asked in a 1995 interview if he still saw a "slow train coming" -- the eschatological metaphor he employed for his first gospel album of the same title. His response: "It's picked up quite a bit of speed. In fact, it's going like a freight train now."

M. Cooper Harriss is a Ph.D. student in Religion and Literature at the University of Chicago Divinity School.