

Bruce Springsteen as Post-Christian Pastor

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Abstract

This article explores how Bruce Springsteen embodies a North American/Western European twenty-first century religious sensibility that encompasses a secular outlook but is colored by the Christian tradition and is informed by biblical language, images, and ideals. Because Springsteen is able to give voice to an orientation to the world that resonates with the experiences, aspirations, and religious understanding of those who have grown up in the same world as him, Springsteen has become a pastoral/priestly figure to the extensive community that identifies with his work.

The poet's job is to know the soul.¹

– Bruce Springsteen

The pastor's job is to care for the soul.²

– Eugene Peterson

The venture of trying to know the soul has been a driving force behind the songwriting of Bruce Springsteen for a long time. Of course, the word “soul” is nebulous and notoriously hard to define. But at its core it connotes the deep place of human existence, the spiritual (another nebulous term) side of life. For many, it carries an inescapable religious implication. No matter how one understands the term, there is little doubt that Springsteen's music

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¹ Bruce Springsteen interview with Will Percy in *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches and Encounters*, ed. Jeff Burger (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 251.

² Adapted from Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 57.

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goes to that deep place for many of his fans, even those who would not consider themselves religious and even for those who may not think of themselves as fans but who have been touched by his music at a particular moment in their life.

While exploring matters of the soul does not have to be an explicitly a religious pursuit – and Springsteen places it squarely in the artistic realm of the poet – it is still very much the work of the religious leader: priest, pastor, Imam, rabbi, guru. Further, even when not tied to organized religion, any venture into the realm of the soul is sure to touch on spiritual sensibilities. As this article will suggest, Springsteen’s attempt to ‘know the soul’ has resulted in numerous people having a spiritual experience (or experiences) similar to encounters of those who belong to a religion or who are connected to a religious leader such as a priest or a pastor.

This article will explore how Springsteen functions like a pastor/priest to the extensive community that identifies deeply with his work. Specifically, it explores how Springsteen embodies a North American/Western European twenty-first century religious sensibility that encompasses a largely secular outlook but is colored by the Christian tradition and is informed by biblical language, images, and ideals. This blend of characteristics, which may once have been thought of as contradictory, positions Springsteen as a kind of post-Christian pastor to his fans and followers. He embodies and gives voice to an orientation to the world that resonates with the experiences, aspirations, and religious understanding of those who have grown up in and currently live in the world that Springsteen himself inhabits and describes in his music. The fundamentally irreligious but referentially Christian body of work and persona that Springsteen

offers has formed a community who have found in him one who knows the soul, and this fact places him in the center of the community as its chief poet but also as its spiritual leader and pastor/priest.

In order to explore this role that Springsteen plays for his fans, this article begins by exploring the term “post-Christian,” the community of Springsteen fans, and also the meaning of the designation “pastor.”³ Thereafter, it will consider some ways that Springsteen has emerged as a pastoral figure for his fans and even to the larger culture. This article draws primarily from two of Springsteen’s twenty-first century albums, *The Rising* (2002) and *Wrecking Ball* (2012), as well as his live performances around the time of those recordings. Both of these records are explicit responses to occasions of human tragedy and suffering: the attacks of 9/11 in the case of *The Rising* and the financial scandals and economic crises of 2008-2009 in the case of *Wrecking Ball*. While the power of Springsteen’s music to engage the human spirit and to ignite religious consciousness goes back well before these albums, these works might be considered as pastoral responses to these crises in that they are explicit attempts to help people reflect on these events and provide perspective. As well, these records offer comfort, hope, love, critique, personal identification, and even an encouragement in faith. Further, as Irwin Streight has argued, there has been a notable rise in the prominence of explicit Christian language in Springsteen’s music in this part of his career. Streight

³ I use the term “pastor” for several reasons: it is reflective of the Christian tradition that shaped Springsteen in his childhood (although his is the Catholic tradition and “pastor” is largely a Protestant term). Also, as this article demonstrates, this term is more malleable in its usage and application than other terms that designate a religious leader.

notes the increase in positive references to religious and even specifically Christian ideas in Springsteen's music since 9/11. He states,

even more than on *The Rising*, with its gospel themes and anthems, or on *Devils & Dust* [2005], Springsteen's songs on *Wrecking Ball* inhabit the "internal landscape" of his Catholic sensibilities and reflect a growing Christology. With only six references to Jesus in over forty years of songwriting preceding *Wrecking Ball*, and four of them decidedly irreverent, it is noteworthy indeed that Springsteen reverently uses the name *Jesus* twice in the *Wrecking Ball* songs and makes two references to the salvific nature of Jesus' crucifixion.⁴

While it is important not to read too much into this recent trend in Springsteen's music, it does correlate with the fact that two of his most recent albums are clear responses to specific American crises, responses like those of a pastor coming to the aid of his community.

The Post-Christian Context

For centuries, Christianity stood at, or at least near, the center of Western culture, and, until the end of World War II, the social practice of religion in Canada and the United States reflected this cultural reality. This meant that Christianity could presume for itself a privileged voice in the public discourse. Of course, over the last few decades, this (somewhat loose) consensus has begun to unravel and the church has watched its long-held place at the center come to an end in most parts of Western Europe, Canada,

⁴ Irwin Streight, "The Christology of Bruce Springsteen," Paper presented at the CLSG/ACCUTE conference, Ottawa, Ontario, June 1, 2015.

and the United States. This is evidenced in numerous studies and polls which demonstrate that, by most measurable standards, involvement in church life and the practice of traditional Christian beliefs and values has waned in the past several decades.⁵

Walter Brueggemann's observations concerning the impact of these changes upon the practice of Christian religion in American culture apply to Western culture as a whole:

There was a time ... when a Christian preacher could count on the shared premises of the listening community, reflective of a large theological consensus. There was a time, when the *assumption of God* completely dominated Western imagination, and the holy Catholic Church roughly uttered the shared consensus of all parties. That consensus was rough and perhaps not very healthy, but at least the preacher could work from it.⁶

Brueggemann's comments present a fair picture of the contrast between a previous era and the situation as it now stands. Bruce Mullin traces this change in *A Short World History of Christianity* (2008). He writes that "in the 1960s many began to question foundational assumptions that marked the careful marriage between Christianity and Enlightenment that had been a hallmark of Western society for a century and a half."⁷ While this questioning

⁵ For Canadian data see Reginald Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back: Religions Demise and Rise and Why it Matters* (Lethbridge, AB: Project Canada Books, 2011). For an American perspective see the Pew research data of May 2015 as reported by CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/12/living/pew-religion-study/index.html>.

⁶ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 1.

⁷ Robert B. Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 262.

goes back further than the 1960s, it was at that point when Western society began experiencing the brunt of the shifts that were taking place in the relationship between Christianity and culture. At its core was a rejection of traditional views on the Bible and important ideals of the Christian faith. Even Protestant writers began to question whether the God of Christianity could be the object of faith. In his reflection on this development in Western culture, philosopher Charles Taylor defines the change as one that takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.⁸ Clearly, Western civilization has experienced a decisive move away from a culture that was shaped by Christian faith into one that no longer is. Stuart Murray puts it this way, "Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence."⁹

Murray captures the changing place of Christianity in the contemporary culture that was finding its legs in the 1960s. The generation that was coming of age at that time may have had some connection to the church and its teachings, but they were not as actively engaged in the life of a congregation as they, or their parents, intentionally began to separate themselves from institutional Christianity. These changes in Western culture seeped into the lived reality of people growing up in the 1960s, even in

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MS: Belknap, 2007), 3.

⁹ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 19.

small, conservative towns like Freehold, New Jersey, where a young Bruce Frederick Joseph Springsteen was growing up and entering his teenage years. However, the shift in Christianity's cultural status did not mean a complete departure from faith altogether. There remained (and remains) a collective religious, even Christian, memory that still resides in those who were raised in the mid-late decades of the twentieth century, when Christianity was waning but still held an influence in the collective psyche. This meant that many from these generations embraced a less explicit religious commitment. They rejected many of the forms of established Christianity and were shaped by secular influences.

However, for many who grew up and entered adulthood during those decades, their departure from the church did not mean an outright rejection of everything that it stood for. In fact, the Christian faith that they were raised in may still provide a certain touchpoint in their lives. The values that Christianity espouses, and maybe even in some cases the positive memories of church experience, provide an anchoring ideal or at least a language that points toward the possibility of stability and hope. They remain spiritual, if not religious. However, their spirituality is at least somewhat shaped by their Christian heritage, even if they have rejected institutional religion and its authoritative claims.¹⁰

In a number of ways Springsteen embodies this experience. Many of Springsteen's songs allude to biblical and Christian scripture, drawing on his own and the United States' predominantly Christian heritage. Thus, they resonate with his audience in part because in many cases the religious imagery is familiar and his listeners feel called to action or to personal

¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 508.

reflection based on familiar ideas. While these images are Christian in nature, Springsteen's use of them is post-Christian in that they are not a summons to Christian dogma as much as an invitation to embrace a humanistic spirituality that may be informed by Christian tradition because it is what the majority of Americans grew up with.¹¹

Thus, Springsteen mirrors the experience of many of his generation and even subsequent ones. Many people feel alienated by the church, are secularized by an increasingly post-Christian culture, yet remain connected to the Christian faith that was central to the cultural and family life of their youth. While Springsteen, like many in his audience, has been alienated from traditional, organized religion and is largely secularized in his outlook, Christian faith remains a foundational, formational story that informs his work and his identity. While he is leery of heavenly decrees and theological certainty, an appeal to the kind of virtue that is found within the Christian religion permeates his music.¹² For Springsteen, the Christian story remains a dominant force in his psyche and some of its ideals—hope, faith, love, forgiveness, redemption, and even the possibility that God is present in all of the realities of life—come through in his music. Springsteen's songs, while largely rooted in a secular worldview, often reinterpret the Christian story of salvation history in a way that

¹¹ Of course, Springsteen's own experience with the Christian religion is famously negative. He was abused and made an outcast in his Catholic schools and Church. See: Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 16.

¹² See David Masciotra, *Working on a Dream: The Progressive Political Vision of Bruce Springsteen* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 149. Masciotra compares Springsteen to Confucius and offers that both act as spiritual and moral guides.

suggests he remains connected to that story in a formative way.¹³ This likely mirrors the experience of many who have brought his music into their lives.

Springsteen as Post-Christian Pastor

Applying a term like ‘pastor,’ usually denoting a religious leader, to a rock star may not seem appropriate at first. However, this designation becomes more clearly fitting when one understands the role that Springsteen plays within the community that has developed around him, his band, and his music.

Over the years, Springsteen fans have developed a distinct community around the musician. In fact, the cultivation of this community has been central to Springsteen’s work.¹⁴ “Community” can mean a lot of things; the term can be used to identify a geographic location, but it also indicates identification with others who share common interests, customs, and behaviors. The Springsteen (or E Street) community comes together around the words, ideas, and vision of Springsteen, who functions as its tacit center and leader. As Linda K. Randall reminds us, citing the work of sociologist Amitai Etzioni, community is often established by a moral voice that brings people together to encourage one another to behave in a more virtuous way than they would if they were not a part of the community.¹⁵ Springsteen acts as that kind of

¹³ Irwin Streight, “The Flannery O’Connor of American Rock,” in *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen*, eds. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight (Lanham: Lexington, 2010), 69.

¹⁴ In an interview with John Pareles, Springsteen calls his career “community in the making” (Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 214).

¹⁵ Linda K. Randall, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2011), 61, 62.

catalytic voice for his fans. This community is both ideological – it is formed around the music, persona, and vision of Springsteen and his band – and geographic – when fans congregate to experience a concert or to discuss Springsteen on internet message boards.

David Masciotra describes the ethos of the community that can be observed before, during, and after a Springsteen show. “Fans exhibit a mutually reciprocal understanding, kindness and in-the-know dialoguing that can be called cultish by some less dedicated attendees or warmly charming by others.”¹⁶ Beyond these rudimentary markers of community, the Springsteen community takes on religious overtones in ways that make it distinct from other communities of fans of rock artists. Randall, reflects on her experience researching the Springsteen community, noting that she was “intrigued” by “the way that Springsteen fans referred to the concerts and to their discovery of his music and fan community; the language was that of religion, where fans spoke of ‘conversions’ and ‘redemption,’ ‘epiphanies’ and ‘faith.’”¹⁷ In many ways, Springsteen’s music and the community it forms functions in the way that a religious community does.

From religious upbringing, to rejection of the faith, to a personal reinterpretation of the faith that keeps him connected to the religion of his childhood, Springsteen embodies an alternative spirituality that reflects the culture’s evolving relationship with Christianity. He rejects traditional, organized religion, but faith still provides a source of wisdom, values, and meaning-making. Thus, many people find a like-minded community as they come together

¹⁶ Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 209.

¹⁷ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 12. This argument was initially posited by Daniel Cavicchi in *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998).

around Springsteen and his music. The Springsteen community is very similar to the communities that used to be centered around more explicitly religious ideals.¹⁸ Within this community, Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde write, Springsteen is venerated like a “spiritual master, a pop philosopher, a revolutionary, a head of state, or a saint.”¹⁹ It is not difficult to add pastor to this list.

At its core, pastoral ministry is akin to the ancient work of shepherding. The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines the term ‘pastor’ as “A shepherd of a flock.”²⁰ In fact, the word ‘pastor’ is derived from the ancient Greek word *poimain*, which literally means “shepherd.” Thus a pastor is one who comes alongside the people under his or her charge and helps them make their way through the realities of life. While in the truest sense it is a deeply religious vocation, it is a necessary role in human community. We need people who provide guidance and perspective, and who help us make sense out of life by describing the world for us. Some of these people live close to us; others serve their pastoral purpose from afar. But their ministry is still profound. If pastoral ministry is, as pastoral theologian Michael Jinkins states, at least in part “helping people to understand their lives,” then for many fans and followers, Springsteen fills the role of pastor.²¹

In the post-Christian context of Western culture, where definitions of religion have expanded to allow new ways of believing and to meet our need for belonging, for meaning, and for

¹⁸ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 21, 25.

¹⁹ Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde, “Introduction” in *Reading the Boss*, 7.

²⁰ Donald K McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 203.

²¹ Michael Jinkins, *Letters to New Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 27.

experiencing the transcendent, a figure like Springsteen can function in a pastoral role in a way that would not have been imagined in previous times. Because his music moves in ways that reflect explicitly biblical language and spiritual themes, and because his live shows provide an almost religious, revival-like atmosphere, Springsteen is particularly suited to this role. Streight comments that “Springsteen is an artist whose songs seek both to reflect and to remediate the social and spiritual malaise of America.”²² While on personal matters of faith Springsteen has taken a conflicted approach, he demonstrates, according to Masciotra, how “one can acknowledge the sacred and the mysterious but still find happiness without solely leaning on the promises and platforms of organized religion.”²³ This is a perspective that connects with the community that has formed around him in an age that has increasingly become post-Christian in its outlook.

If pastoral work is partly about helping people make sense of their lives and journeying with people as a shepherd journeys with his or her flock, then Randall captures part of the essence of Springsteen’s pastoral power when she writes, “To have a meaningful artist who has aged with us, remained vital, and not drifted into nostalgia to become a rock caricature tells us that we, too, can still maintain the optimism and vitality of our younger selves.”²⁴

It is true that the role of pastor has evolved and emerged in Springsteen’s relationship to his community in his more recent

²² Streight, “Flannery O’Connor of American Rock,” 73.

²³ Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 127.

²⁴ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 13.

work, especially in the twenty-first century. *The Rising* and *Wrecking Ball*, in particular, represent pastoral responses to great American crises: the 9/11 attacks and the financial meltdown of 2008-2009. In these works, Springsteen is clearly interested in trying to respond in a way that brings comfort, hope, perspective, and justice. It may even be that he wants to help his listeners engage with God as they process these events. Through these albums, Springsteen seems to believe that he could make a difference to his listeners' lives. In an interview following the release of *Wrecking Ball* he talked about the "need to be constructive." He is clear that the motive of his work is to address the realities of people's lives. "I'm motivated circumstantially by the events of the day," he noted, "that's unfair, that's theft, that's against what we believe in, that's not what America is about." As an artist/pastor Springsteen wants to speak into the deep realities of his community's lived experience. He wants to be useful to them. In the same interview he goes on to say, memorably,

My work has always been about judging the distance between the American reality and the American dream. If you look at this record the question is asked, 'Do we take care of our own?' Then there are scenarios where you meet the characters who have been impacted by the failure of these ideas and values.²⁵

In this way Springsteen embodies classical pastoral impulses. He wants to identify the struggles of his community and to speak meaningfully about their lives.

²⁵ Bruce Springsteen interview at International Press Conference in Paris, February 2012, in *Talk About A Dream: The Essential Interviews of Bruce Springsteen* eds. Christopher Phillips and Louis P. Masur (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 407-408, 415.

What enhances the pastoral aspect of Springsteen's work is that there is often a spiritual element to his music. For example, Springsteen explains that the inclusion of the song "Land of Hope and Dreams" represented a direct attempt to bring a spiritual element onto the record.²⁶ In this way, Springsteen embodies and expresses the life that members of this community have themselves lived. He is one of them, and he has been called to shepherd them on their collective journey. He desires to offer something that is transcendently meaningful and will help his audience to find and experience something, both within and outside of themselves, that will provide hope and sustenance for their individual journeys.

The Rising and Wrecking Ball as Pastoral Response

During the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978) tour, Springsteen often broke into mid-song monologues to tell a tale about his past and its relationship to a particular song or the history of his relationship to the E Street Band. An example of this came in Cleveland, Ohio, on August 9, 1978. That night Springsteen told a story that was a regular part of the concerts on that tour. He spoke about how his parents had sent him to see his priest to talk about his "vocation." The priest advised him to consult with God for clarity about his calling. Springsteen then tells about meeting God and asking him about what he should do with his life. He concludes the story by reporting that God said to him, "Let it rock!" While the story is meant to be humorous and heavily tongue in cheek, it nonetheless offers some insight into Springsteen's sense of identity. While he may feel alienated from the church and the Christian faith overall, he still has a sense that what he is doing is part of God's

²⁶ "Wrecking Ball," around the 8:16 mark.

calling. What he does is important, it is a God-given vocation, even if it is outside of what his parents and perhaps his priest would have wanted for him. He is a religious outsider, but that does not mean that he cannot serve God's purposes.²⁷

Years later, Springsteen disbanded the E Street Band and then regrouped them in the late 1990s for a reunion tour. In a concert at Madison Square Garden on July 1, 2000, near the end of the main set of their final concert of the tour, Springsteen addressed the crowd and expressed his desire that this tour would be a renewal of his and the band's commitment to "serve you."²⁸ This is a telling statement regarding Springsteen's vision of his and the E Street Band's work. With its emphasis on the audience and their needs, Springsteen's utilizes pastoral language. He expressed a realization that the fan community that has formed around him and the E Street Band is a unique coming together of people whom Springsteen and the band serve through their art and their performances.²⁹

In his biography of Springsteen, Marc Dolan writes about the "gospel impulse" that Springsteen acknowledges drives his

²⁷ My recounting of this story comes from hearing it told numerous times in concerts broadcast on E Street Radio. Springsteen himself reflects on this sense of calling when he writes about his friendship with Clarence Clemons and remarks on them together "doing our modest version of God's work." See Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 475.

²⁸ This sentiment was a recurrent theme throughout the Reunion Tour. See Peter Ames Carlin, *Bruce* (New York: Touchstone, 2012), 400.

²⁹ Just prior to the beginning of the Reunion Tour, in his Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction speech on March 15, 1999, Springsteen "insisted in mock-preacher tones that he had *re-educated and re-dedicated, re-animated, resuscitated and reinvigorated [the band] with the power, the magic, the mystery the ministry of rock 'n' roll.*" (italics original) Marc Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock and Roll* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 348.

music. Specifically, the reunion tour brought out a pastoral persona in Springsteen as he engaged his audience around the theme of needing others, in his case “a band,” to get through life. The need for connection – described through the performance of songs such as “Blood Brothers” and “If I Should Fall Behind” – was at the heart of Springsteen's personal revival at that time, for the band as well as the audience.³⁰

Subsequent to the reunion tour, Springsteen often recounted a famous story about an experience a few days after the 9/11 attacks, while he was at the Sea Bright beach in New Jersey looking at the drastically altered Manhattan skyline in the northern distance. Springsteen was pulling out of a parking space when a man driving by shouted out of his open car window, “We need you man!” Springsteen recounted in a television interview a year later, “I knew what he was talking about.” He understood that the man was calling him to help his fellow Americans process the tragedy. In the interview, Springsteen continues, “We’ve worked hard for my music to play a very central and ... purposeful place in my audience’s life. [So] it was a small wake-up call.”³¹ This experience reflects how Springsteen perceives his work and is perceived by his fans in particular, but also by American culture more broadly. He is someone people look to for meaning, perspective, and guidance. As Springsteen himself recounts, this experience was an affirmation of, or renewal of, this calling.

In response, Springsteen wrote and recorded *The Rising*. He saw that his role as a prominent music artist required him to speak to the grief, fear, and confusion that resulted from the horrific

³⁰ Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock and Roll*, 348-349.

³¹ Carlin, *Bruce*, 407-408.

events of 9/11. *The Rising* represents the most specific pastoral response Springsteen had offered to that point in his career, as he was motivated by a desire to provide counsel and, most importantly, to give voice to the pain surrounding the experience of 9/11. As Springsteen told biographer Peter Ames Carlin, “everything I wrote after September 11 was contextualized in some way by that event. I tried to find some emotional center that just felt right.”³² For most pastors, responding to tragedy is directed by both compassion and duty. Few pastors are eager to engage the depths of human despair, the raw emotions that come with terrible, senseless loss and the difficult questions that naturally ensue. However, engage they must, in part because it is their job. But for most pastors it is more than that; it is an accepted part of their calling. There is an inner desire to be there for people, to offer God’s help.

The Rising provides explicit pastoral care to its audience in the form of a collection of songs that provide a lens through which to examine some experiences of 9/11 and subsequent moments of recovery. In many instances, the songs point to the possibility of God’s presence and suggest that spirituality may play a role in healing traumatic memories. For example, in the title track, Springsteen takes us into the experience of a New York City firefighter wearing “the cross” of his “calling,” who climbs the stairs of a Trade Center building to perform his duties as a first responder. However, the image of ascent moves beyond the loss of life that many like this firefighter experienced that day and offers a vision of life. The song breaks away from the focus on duty, personal calling, and the horrors of the day and into the hope that

³² Carlin, *Bruce*, 180.

the first responder's sacrifice offers, and perhaps even into the hope of the afterlife. The song's main character speaks of "spirits, above and behind me," and he clings to the hope that their "precious blood" will bind him as he stands before the Lord's "fiery light." Here the song hints at an eschatological vision. The image of spirits all around, the reference to the efficacy of blood as a form of hope, and the picture of standing before the Lord, all point to the idea of the first responder slipping from one world into the next. In the song's refrain, the narrator speaks of a vision of Mary in the garden with "holy pictures" of their children. It could be a vision of the narrator's wife as he catches final glimpses of his life in this world, or perhaps it is a reference to Mother Mary as he catches initial glimpses of life in a world to come. In its essence, as Roxanne Harde comments, the song is a hopeful affirmation of life that looks past mourning to offer hope.³³ Masciotra reflects on this as he observes that the song depicts its characters "entering into something more dramatic, beautiful and uplifting. It is the gospel."³⁴ As a post-Christian pastor would, Springsteen in this song clearly offers hope in response to the terrible realities of 9/11. In part this hope is situated in the example of those who sacrificed their lives for the sake of others, and perhaps it is also found in the possibility of a life to come.

In "Into the Fire," Springsteen offers the perspective of a 9/11 widow who understands her lost husband's calling (presumably that of another first responder) to a greater duty. That higher calling implies that his death can have meaning in the lives of others by inspiring them to live lives of greater virtue. Azzan

³³ Harde, "May Your Hope Give Us Hope," in *Reading the Boss*, 262.

³⁴ Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 224.

Yadin-Israel notes that this song connects to the story of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who upon his death disappears into heaven on a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11-12). Elijah's death provides inspiration for his successor Elisha, who goes on to preserve Elijah's prophetic mission. Further, Yadin-Israel offers that the allusion to the laying of hands motif that is part of the song is a biblical motif that often signifies the transference of power from one person or leader unto another. In Springsteen's song, the allusion to the Elijah-Elisha relationship and the theological motif of laying of hands acts as a transfer of inspiration, as Yadin-Israel states, "both entail the imminent death of a leader and bespeak the hope to be worthy successors. And this is precisely the hope of 'Into the Fire.'"³⁵

Here Springsteen is doing the pastoral work of helping people make sense of their lives and giving his community direction in making sense of the tragic death of a heroic first responder. His death has meaning if it inspires us to live better lives ourselves.

Other songs in the album continue in this vein. In "Nothing Man," Springsteen offers a reflection on the post 9/11 experience of a man who becomes a local hero because of his actions but who wrestles with his newfound status and the thoughts of suicide that he struggles to keep at bay as a result of his experiences that day. The desire for revenge flickers through the song "Empty Sky," and an exploration of the differences that divide those who orchestrated the attacks and those who may be sympathetic to them is articulated in "Worlds Apart." The album culminates with the song

³⁵ Azzan Yadin-Israel, *The Grace of God and the Grace of Man: The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen* (Highland Park, NJ: Lingua, 2016), 169, 170.

“My City of Ruins.” Originally written as a lament for the economic and physical deterioration of Springsteen’s adopted hometown of Asbury Park, New Jersey, on *The Rising* this song evokes a deep empathy with New Yorkers and moves into a gospel tinged chorus that seeks to raise up his audience. The song closes with prayers for strength, love, and faith and provides a hopeful conclusion to the record. Throughout, the album is an empathetic, honest, and loving response to the events and experiences of 9/11.³⁶ Springsteen’s songs offer not only perspective, but post-Christian spiritual direction to his flock or community and to the country as a whole.

What makes a pastor (or a rabbi or an Imam) different from all the other helping professionals is that his or her orientation to provide aid is explicitly centered around God. In offering *The Rising* to his American audience, Springsteen did not forget that element. As a post-Christian pastor, Springsteen brings God and faith into the conversation as a way to inform the experiences of those who engage with his music. Jeff Symynkywicz in *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen* observes that there is a dependence upon God intrinsic in the culminating song on *The Rising*, “My City of Ruins.” This song, he writes, “suggests that we look within (and beyond) and seek to discern the divine light we will need to find our way

³⁶ In the aftermath of the tragedies, Springsteen was reportedly moved by the many times his name was mentioned in the obituaries of 9/11 victims. Further, it is widely known that he contacted a number of family members of these victims to offer condolences and in order to better understand their experiences so as to represent them faithfully in his work. See Ryan White, *Album by Album* (New York: Sterling, 2014), 180-81. Any good pastor who is about to preside at a funeral or memorial service essentially does the same thing, particularly if they did not personally know the deceased. Genuine compassion and the hope to be of use to those who remain demands such courtesy.

through this encircling gloom.”³⁷ The repeated admonition to rise up, suggests Symynkywicz, alludes to the hope of resurrection and points to the possibility that God will provide a renewed life to America despite the death and destruction of 9/11. This is the kind of work pastors attempt to perform regularly.

If *The Rising* is Springsteen’s most specific pastoral response to a particular event, then 2012’s *Wrecking Ball* follows in that vein by responding directly to the financial scandals and subsequent crises of the late 2000s that cost many Americans their homes, jobs, and life savings. With *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen offers a collection of songs that gives voice to the experiences of those who lost not just money and property but dignity and control over their own destiny. Springsteen says of the album, “*Wrecking Ball* was a shot of anger at the injustice that continues on and has widened with deregulation, dysfunctional regulatory agencies and capitalism gone wild at the expense of hardworking Americans.” Further, he reflects on his sense of responsibility to respond when he writes, “I knew this was the music I should make now. It was my job.”³⁸

Like *The Rising*, *Wrecking Ball* introduces the listener to many different characters who embody disappointment and struggle in the aftermath of the debacle of the financial crash. The opening track presents the sentiments of a cynical victim who sarcastically recites the well-worn American slogan, “we take care of our own,” as an indictment of a system that cannot deliver on what it promises. We meet a “Jack of All Trades” who promises his wife that they “will be alright” because he is determined to use whatever

³⁷ Jeffrey B. Symynkywicz, *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen: Rock and Redemption From Asbury Park to Magic* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 139.

³⁸ Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 468, 469.

skills he has to cobble together the work “that God provides.” The narrator of the song wistfully longs for the day when people will take care of each other “like Jesus said that we might.” This line offers a contrast to the lack of care shown by those who have caused the crises that have now deeply affected his and his family’s life. The working man in “Shackled and Drawn” just wants to go to work because that is where he finds dignity and self respect, but while the bankers keep the party going strong, he is left below in chains. The song “Death to my Hometown” is a lament to a hometown once vibrant, now destroyed not by cannonball, rifles, or dictators but by economic distress perpetuated by robber barons who go unpunished for their crimes.

However, there is also hope infused throughout this album. Two older concert songs are included, and each takes on new meaning in the collection. The title track is a song originally written for the occasion of the demolition of Giant’s Stadium. On *Wrecking Ball*, the words to the chorus become the cadence of one’s determination not to be bowed by those whose actions have impacted so many lives negatively. Additionally, “Land of Hope and Dreams” offers a vision of a better land where all are welcome. In certain ways it rings not just of a better country that awaits us but of an eschatological land where all the travails of life find their resolution. It is a land of sunshine, not of darkness. The song “We Are Alive” reminds us that the past can inform the present as it offers hope for those freedom fighters and justice seekers who have come before us. Their lives can inform our own if we are willing to let them speak to us from the grave.

Like *The Rising*, *Wrecking Ball* also directly addresses the issues of God and faith. “Land of Hope and Dreams” offers

listeners a vision of redemption that plays with the line between the hope that there is a better land still possible in this world and the ultimate eschatological hope of a land that is to come. The land that Springsteen speaks of is a place where you “don’t know where you’re goin,” but you know “you won’t be back.” It offers a picture of beauty that reflects the world but signals something more perfect. While Springsteen’s own vision of faith is firmly rooted in the realities of human life, “Land of Hope and Dreams” engages with the traditional American gospel song “This Train,” sometimes titled “This Train is Bound for Glory,” and is laced with a definite eschatological vision. In addressing the financial meltdown, Springsteen informs his flock that there is still the hope of redemption, and perhaps that this redemption comes in multiple forms. Unlike the original “This Train” that presents an exclusive version of salvation for only the “righteous and the holy,” Springsteen’s song is wide and inclusive.³⁹ Having a seat on Springsteen’s train does not necessitate that the passenger be free from all sin. To get on this train “all you gotta do is just thank the Lord.” This calls for faith and also points to the Christian idea that salvation is by faith and that trust in God is at the heart of salvation and the key to entry into the life to come. Springsteen’s song clearly offers a message of hope, a word of encouragement to persevere, and a call to faith in God.

“Rocky Ground” is also thoroughly Gospel-tinged and contains several biblical allusions. The singer addresses the “shepherds” who care for their flocks and enjoins that they take them to “higher ground.” The narrator speaks prophetically that the shepherds’ lack of care for their people will result in their being

³⁹ Dolan, *Promise of Rock and Roll*, 353-54.

judged, presumably by God. However, besides being a prophetic rebuke to the lax shepherds, the song is also an exploration of personal faith. The narrator's faith is not without its own struggles. Even when you "pray your best" and try to raise your children to do right, when you ask for divine guidance, you find none. Thus, where there once was faith now "there's only doubt." Nonetheless, in a clear allusion to Noah's flood (Genesis 6-9), the song assures that a flood is coming that will bring a new world. The closing chorus reminds listeners that "there's a new day coming," perhaps once again pointing to an eschatological ideal that is the ultimate answer to the corruption of this world. Hope that is attached to faith in God's deliverance, despite the struggle to remain faithful, is at the core of this song. Any pastor acting faithfully on behalf of his or her congregation in the aftermath of a national disaster would be serving the people well to offer a message like this. Springsteen points his audience to a biblically-informed hope that is often uncertain about where God is, yet acknowledges the need to trust His work in this world. Nonetheless, Springsteen assures his audience, a new day is coming when God's justice and judgement will bring better times.

Despite being a religious outsider who has been ambiguous about his own theological beliefs, on these albums, Springsteen serves his flock by engaging with the specific challenges they face. As Ryan White notes regarding *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen takes religious language usually used by those on the right of the political spectrum and co-opts it for those on the left.⁴⁰ This is central to Springsteen's pastoral method: he is able to take religious ideas and employ them in ways that evoke the power of their meaning but in

⁴⁰ White, *Album by Album*, 250.

a way that is accessible and meaningful to his largely secular and politically diverse audience. Guided by a sense of responsibility for his gift as an artist, his connection to his fans, his country, and his desire to be of service to others, Springsteen offers two collections of songs that go where a pastor goes and try to do what a pastor tries to do.

Live Performance and Springsteen as Pastor

Pastoral work is public work. While much of a pastor's time is spent away from the public eye engaged in one-on-one discussions, board and committee meetings, and preparing weekly sermons, inevitably the pastoral calling involves standing in front of an audience and doing the public work of one's craft. For pastors, this may take the form of presiding at a wedding or a funeral, preaching a sermon, leading prayers, or giving direction to a worship service. The public nature of the pastoral office is a crucial element of the work because in these times of public gathering pastors have the potential to serve the entire community. What takes place in times of collective experience is the stuff of transformation. Any pastor who understands his or her calling understands that their leadership when the community gathers will determine their overall effectiveness as a ministering voice in that community. The right words at the right time, the right demeanor, the appropriate vision shared, and the ability to portray an authentic solidarity with the daily lived experience of the congregation is crucial to a pastor's ability to serve a church effectively.

For Springsteen, the public aspect of his work has always been one of his greatest pastoral strengths. As a performer, often

with the backing of the E Street Band, Springsteen has always been able to connect deeply with his audience, so much so that his concerts almost take on a revival-like atmosphere. Indeed, for many who attend, Springsteen's concerts provide experiences of transcendence. Robert Duncan captures this notion in his article for *Creem Magazine* that recounts his experience of covering Springsteen and the E Street Band in 1978:

I was on the road three days and nights with Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, and that's about as good a time span in which to hold a resurrection as I can think of . . . [some] speak glowingly of Bruce in terms of "charisma." But charisma has the odor of the secular. After what I saw, heard, and felt, I'm looking for a word that's something more in the religious price range.⁴¹

Perhaps one of the most significant markers of Springsteen's pastoral role was made clear immediately after 9/11. At a fundraiser for the families of 9/11 victims in his local community, Springsteen was asked if he was going to respond to events with new songs. He reportedly replied, "What ever music we can do, we'll do." Further, shortly after 9/11, a fundraising telethon was held broadcast on all four major television networks and viewed by millions of people around the world. This was more than a fundraiser; it was also a communal event of coming together to continue the healing process. The opening slot was a key place and needed a particular touch (one may say a pastoral touch). For a time such as this, Springsteen was asked to offer his services. With just

⁴¹ Robert Duncan, "Lawdamercy, Springsteen Saves," in *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches and Encounters*, Jeff Burger, editor (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 87. (reprinted from *Creem*, Spring, 1978).

an acoustic guitar, harmonica, and a group of back-up singers, including his wife, Patti Scialfa, and bandmates Clarence Clemons and Steve Van Zandt, Springsteen performed the song that would eventually close *The Rising*, "My City of Ruins." It was sung as a lament, a prayer, and a vision of hope. It was a pastoral offering for a grieved and confused nation.⁴²

In the summer of 2002, *The Rising* was heralded as the first major cultural response to the events that had taken place on September 11, 2001. NBC's *Today Show* dedicated a whole two-hour episode to the album. Springsteen and the band also appeared for two consecutive nights on *Late Night with David Letterman* and three straight on *Nightline* with Ted Koppel. It seemed like a significant portion of the American population was looking to Springsteen to give some perspective to the national tragedy of 9/11.⁴³

There are times when a pastor is asked to step into particularly sensitive situations to help make sense of them. However, usually a pastor's work is day to day, week to week, offering pastoral gifts to a congregation. This may be done in public, at times in situations that are highly volatile or emotional. Nonetheless the pastor's job is to help people connect with the deeper things of life, to facilitate experiences of transcendence that help to provide people's lives with meaning and insight. Springsteen's live performances offer exactly this. Masciotra writes, "The fact that Springsteen walks into each concert with the aim ... to create such a well-rounded spectacle of transcendent, challenging, and comforting music is of particular interest to anyone who finds any value in his body of work because it is in the

⁴² Dolan, *Promise of Rock and Roll*, 167.

⁴³ Symynkywicz, *The Gospel*, 140.

live setting that it most potentially thrives.”⁴⁴ Likewise, Linda K. Randall gives testimony that the only other “public” experience in her life that came close to resembling a Springsteen concert was “a Billy Graham crusade I attended as a young teen.”⁴⁵

Recently at a show at State College Pennsylvania, I experienced what is a normal occurrence at a Springsteen concert. During the performance of “The Rising,” as the band slowed the song down for the bridge, thousands of hands went up throughout the crowd just as they do on Sunday mornings in many evangelical church gatherings. This gesture is a response to something transcendent that is taking place between Springsteen as a pastor/artist, the band, and the people gathered. As the song continued and Springsteen sang the pensive lyrics of the song’s bridge, arms remained outstretched and hands were held high. People were responding to the way that the song takes them back to the losses of September 11, 2001. When the band kicked back into the high-powered chorus, more hands went up and they remained there until the end of the song. Then the people started moving, swaying, bouncing. The crowd was celebrating the hopeful idea of a rising. Perhaps it was the strength of the human spirit determined to not be defeated by terrorism, perhaps it was hope in the eschatological idea of resurrection, when the dead will rise and we will once again all be reunited. Perhaps it was both, or something else entirely.

Ultimately, this experience is a combination of communal solidarity and deep resonance with the poignancy and performance of the song. The experience is both an act of

⁴⁴ Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 208-9.

⁴⁵ Randall, *Finding Grace*, 8.

remembering the great loss of that fateful day and a celebration of the people who acted so heroically. Moments of reflection and emotion like these are indicative of what often takes place during a Springsteen show. The crowd is invited to reflect on the ups and downs of life and is inevitably offered hope in the journey and for the future. These moments are honest: they may remind us of our pain, but they always seem to give way to celebration and joy. Pope Francis says, "A good priest can be recognized by the way his people are anointed: this is a clear proof. When our people are anointed with the oil of gladness, it is obvious: for example, when they leave Mass looking as if they have heard good news."⁴⁶ Few ever leave a Springsteen show feeling as if they have not heard and experienced good news.

The performance halls, hockey arenas, and football stadiums that host Springsteen's concerts function today like the cathedrals of a by-gone era. They are the primary gathering places for the masses. While it may seem to be the desire to be entertained that brings people together in these places, there are always deeper impulses at work. What brings us together is the desire to experience something unique, to be transported beyond the mundane, and to go there with a community of others. This is also at the heart of religious life and practice. Thus, many who come to see Springsteen in concert are drawn by all these things as well as a desire to connect, or to re-connect, with a message and a messenger who provides a degree of sustenance, meaning, and hope for the ongoing journey of life. Where the church and the

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, *Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola, 2014), 93.

pastor may have played this role in days past, today it is artists like Bruce Springsteen who fulfill this crucial role in people's lives.

