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Book Review

Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas

By David Johnstone

Introduction

Considered by some as the most visible and recognizable rock star in the world today, the lead singer for U2 is profoundly enigmatic, particularly when the world tries to pin down his faith in Jesus. Bono himself has not bothered to be specific about his faith. The church has wrestled with this enigma in good and bad ways. Some say Bono is a believer; others say he is not. Bono has said that he is, but many challenge, "Really? Show us." In 2003, Steve Stockman ventured into the fray with *Walk On: the Spiritual Journey of U2*. *Walk On* provided plenty of history and affirmation for the evangelical faith that exists among some of the band members. Also in 2003, a volume on the spiritual implications of U2 songs was published (Whiteley & Maynard). There have been many conjectures about the level of faith among the band members, and this discussion will continue unresolved to the frustration of some and satisfaction of others.

Until Assayas' volume of conversations was published in 2005, there were few moments where Bono was clearly and unabashedly articulate about his faith. Because of the sheer power of his influence, this is a book that needs to be considered by those connecting with student culture. As a man who has met with popes, prime ministers, presidents and chancellors, Bono has profoundly impacted not only the world's music and its associated culture, but also the world of finance and politics. At a basic level, college cultures are immersed in music; therefore, they are affected by Bono's life. Thus, this book is a valuable resource in the attempt to understand student culture and its influences. This book of exchanges provides a glimpse into the way Bono views his role in shaping youth culture, how he articulates his advocacy for those struggling with justice issues, and further how his very real faith has shaped and keeps shaping him.

Centuries ago, John Calvin challenged followers of Jesus that whenever they encountered unbelieving writers, they should:

learn from that light of truth which is admirably displayed in their works, that the human mind, fallen as it is, and cor-

rupted from its integrity, is yet invested and adorned by God with excellent talents. If we believe that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we shall neither reject nor despise the truth itself, wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to insult the Spirit of God. (Willimon, 1998, p. 9)

Calvin dared believers to search for truth in scripture and look for hints of truth elsewhere. Assayas' volume of conversations with Bono provides us with many glimpses of truth and the gospel. While this book touches on some issues of faith, Bono also covers a myriad of other topics that are important to him. The interview format works well here. The book is a series of transcripts that span a two-year period between late 2002 and August 2004. Bono clearly enjoys the conversations with Assayas, a music journalist who has been tracking U2 since the early 1980s. A friendship has developed between the men that facilitates candidness from Bono and allows for penetrating and provoking questions from Assayas.

While the conversations range over the band's history and Bono's life, the topics invariably come back to those things to which he is dedicated.

Music

Obviously music is central to his passions. Reflecting on the early days of U2 and the pressures they felt from the music culture as well as believers around them, he acknowledges that the band nearly dissolved as they wrestled with how to glorify God with their music. He relates how, after lengthy corporate reflection and struggle, they "came to a realization: 'Hold on a second. Where are these gifts coming from? This is how we worship God, even though we don't write religious songs, because we didn't feel God needs advertising'" (Assayas, 2005, p. 147). While their music is not used for worship and praise, it often reflects the angst and the spiritual journey that Bono has encountered over the decades. One would hesitate to compare Bono's lyrics with the Psalms, yet he displays the same bewilderment, transparency, and hope articulated by the Psalmists.

Faith

His lyrics and comments have been known to create uncertainty about the veracity of his personal faith. In spite of this confusion, Bono articulates one of clearest expositions of the gospel that I have encountered. He cuts to the core of why following Jesus is good news:

The center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth...along comes this idea called Grace which upends all that "As you reap, so will you sow" stuff. Grace defies reason and logic... I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge... It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I am holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity. (p. 204)

Bono clearly understands that the good news of Jesus Christ is that we no longer get what we ought to receive. Simply put, grace is getting what we don't deserve. Bono's understanding of grace is rooted in Jesus' teachings and scripture, which he refers to frequently throughout the conversations. Bono demonstrates a consistent respect for the Bible and its implications. One of these implications is the way that he advocates for the desperate and poor. While he does not clearly state this, Bono has embodied Christ's admonition that "to whom much is given, much is required" (Luke 12:48).

Action

As I write these paragraphs, the nation is wrapped in an attempt to care for and rescue thousands in the Gulf region of the United States. One of the frustrations I have heard over and over again is the sense of the limited way an individual can help. It struck me how Bono has a deep understanding of how to act on his own as well as how to be the representative of many. He has a grasp of the power and authority which has been given to him, yet he is deeply aware of the responsibility that comes with his position.

He starts by reflecting on the notions of kindness and charity, eventually focusing on what

is important to him: "Charity is OK, I'm interested in charity. Of course we should all be, especially those of us who are privileged. But I am more interested in justice.... Holding the children to ransom for the debts of their grandparents was a justice issue.... These things are rooted in the scriptures" (p. 123). This concern for justice propelled him into his advocacy with regards to debt and his work with AIDS.

Bono has a realistic sense of the power that he wields in order to "change" the world. "I don't have any real power, but the people I represent do" (p. 149). He does have the ability and freedom to speak for many people. This has allowed him to speak with people as varied as Jesse Helms, Vladimir Putin, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. He has a voice and uses it. However, he is also cognizant of the presumption in representing his fans in such a manner. In his attempts to represent those who "count the least," he acknowledges that it is "cheeky" and presumptuous to advocate for those dying of AIDS in Africa. Yet he sees that "in God's order of things, they're the most important" (p. 149). He links that understanding with the influence he has been given, and he knows he must act.

His advocacy for the weak and poor is strategic in manner. He knows that he is a major player in the world of perceptions and pop culture, and he is not hesitant to use his fame to accomplish the pursuits important to him. Asked if he is not afraid of being used by politicians, he asserts that he knows he is being used and is willing to be used. "I'll step out with anyone, but I'm not a cheap date" (p. 87). Bono is prepared to use the gifts and influence that he has to further those things which are important to him.

Conclusion

The range of topics discussed in this book is fast paced and broad, but the dialogues keep the reader engaged. One of the things that caught me off guard was the language that Bono chose to use throughout the conversations. While not frequent, it was enough to jar me. His coarse language is uncreative and

unnecessary, but obviously a part of his life. For a man who has written deeply emotive melodies and spiritually profound music, there are moments when strong expletives do come from his mouth. The positive thing that can be said for this fact is that it reinforces the notion that Bono does not wish to and does not seize the grandeur often associated with his name. He does not presume and does not desire to be a model to emulate. I believe his transparency is refreshing—he does not take himself too seriously. While there is no illusion of grandeur, he does take his faith and role in the world seriously.

The conversations end with a penetrating observation. Mr. Assayas asks Bono, who always has something to say, what makes him speechless. Bono's answer provided what I thought was the deepest insight into his spirituality. His answer was "forgiveness" (p. 322). This comment may provide the most incisive look into Bono's faith. He seems to be a man deeply appreciative of the gift of redemption and the mercy that comes with forgiveness.

While Bono will probably remain a perplexing figure, often creating more confusion (intentional or not) by his own statements, it is worthwhile to glimpse into the world as he sees it. For many (including myself) his comments are

not satisfying, yet they are usually penetrating and are never trite. In light of his immense influence, both in the international world and on our campuses, it would be prudent for those seeking to touch the lives of students to understand Bono's impact—both subtle and overt. Whether one is happy about his role or not, it is not wise to ignore his ability to connect with those in our world. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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