

2017

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Sarah Binau  
*Pomona College*

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### Recommended Citation

Binau, Sarah (2017) "He Loves to Tell the Story: The Rock'n'Roll Religion of Bruce Springsteen," *essay: critical writing at pomona college*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 9.  
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay/vol1/iss1/9>

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# He Loves to Tell the Story: *The Rock'n'Roll Religion of Bruce Springsteen*

BY **Sarah Binau '19**

Bruce Springsteen, the iconic musician, singer, and songwriter known for his sweat-fueled, exhaustive, several-hour-long concerts, is now in his fifth decade of music making. Since his first album in 1973, Springsteen's fan base has only grown. His legacy, the stories that his songs tell, and his presence on stage may have changed in style throughout the years, but they have not lost their genuine emotional intensity. His dedication to performing and writing about what many consider the "American story" in song has created a community of fans whose devotion rivals that of a religion. Can a case be made that Bruce Springsteen's music, at its core, provides a religious experience for his fans?

In the documentary *Springsteen & I*, fans were asked what three words they think describe Bruce Springsteen. A great many of the words that fans offered have intensely religious connotations: joy, hope, loyal, power, belief, togetherness, redemption, and even supernatural and divine. One man even offered, "in him we trust," a direct play on the inscription on U.S. currency, "in God we trust."

Jonathan Gottschall points out that religion has been present in some form in every society that anthropologists have ever studied. A religious text, like any powerful story, "binds a community together" (Gottschall 124). Gottschall defines religious texts as "intense narratives about the biggest stuff in human life" (117) and uses the phrase "sacred fiction" (119) as an umbrella title for all religions and the stories they tell.

If people are using words typically heard in religious contexts to describe Springsteen, could that support the claim that Springsteen and



Fig. 1. "Bruce Springsteen at the New Haven Colis." Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC-BY2.0). Photo by CLender.

his music offer fans a religious experience of sorts? Yes and no.

The above ascriptions give credence to the claim that Springsteen does in fact provide a religious experience for his followers. Moreover, Daniel Cavicchi mentions more than once in his book *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* that Springsteen often takes on the role of an "evangelical preacher" while performing, a preacher who shouts things to the audience such as: "Does anybody have any faith out there tonight?" ("Yeah!") "Does anybody have any hope out here tonight?" ("Yeah!")" (30). Patricia Smith calls Springsteen "a preacher with a subtle approach" (67). Springsteen himself has said "some people pray, some people play music" (Marsh 16), which seems to imply that both are ways by which people can identify what is most precious and most needed in their lives. Mike Appel, known for his involvement in Springsteen's early career and

for getting Bruce an audition with John Hammond at CBS, said, “Bruce isn’t a rock act. He’s a religion” (Marsh 16). In his book *Born in the U.S.A.* Jim Cullen draws particular attention to Bruce’s Catholic upbringing, arguing that Bruce sees the world in a distinctively Catholic way that is “communal, emphasizing God’s presence in the world” (168) and calling Bruce a “missionary” (172). Christopher Sandford even called “Born to Run” a “teen-angst hymn” (82). And like all great hymns, it has a way of staying in your head for days after the worship event is over.

Let’s examine “Born to Run,” the title track of Springsteen’s third album, one of a handful of albums that arguably changed popular music in the U.S. forever (C. Smith 114–116). *Born to Run* catapulted him to major mainstream success. Springsteen said that it was “the album where I left behind my adolescent definitions of love and freedom” (Springsteen 47). The *Bruce Springsteen Video Anthology* depicts Springsteen’s performance of “Born to Run” as a sweat-fueled, blue-jean anthem that chronicles the story of an unnamed boy and a girl, Wendy, who are trying to escape the “death trap” they’re stuck in. The boy tells Wendy that “we were born to run” and that “someday... we’re gonna get to that place / where we really want to go / and we’ll walk in the sun” (Springsteen 54).

These penultimate lines tell us that at its core, “Born to Run” is an “American love song” (Cullen 38) about salvation. The narrator hopes to someday “walk in the sun,” which can loosely be compared to the religious idea of heaven or some sort of enlightenment: he aspires to a better life, to move from darkness to light and from despair to contentment. But the boy in “Born to Run” seeks this deliverance by way of things conventional religion might call worldly (cars, Wendy, the promise of the highway). But if there is anything to Paul Tillich’s claim that “the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of ultimate concern,” Springsteen is directing adolescent male faith straight toward the things that ultimately concern most adolescent males.

It certainly seems as though Springsteen fans have a religious relationship with Springsteen’s music. But personal anecdotes and mere ob-

servances are not sufficient to establish a firm answer to the question posed earlier: is Springsteen's music religious at its core?

Perhaps a more relevant question to tackle first is: what is the purpose of religion? If we can broadly define the purpose and effects of religion, we can compare it to the purpose and effects of Springsteen's music and fan-following.

Gottschall discusses David Sloan Wilson's descriptions of religion, boiling down Wilson's position to there being three main benefits of religion for societies: it creates community, coordinates behavior within a group (providing rewards and punishments) and creates a powerful incentive system that promotes group cooperation and suppresses selfishness (Gottschall 127). By this approach, a religion's worth isn't measured by how factually accurate its principles are. Instead, a religion is valued by its effect on the community that follows it. Gottschall draws a parallel between religious community binding and what a movie at the cinema does to its viewers: the movie takes "a motley association of strangers and syncs them up" (136). Therefore we see that this syncing or binding response that occurs in the presence of a talented storyteller is not restricted to religious experiences only. Stories told in church and at the movies bind people together, and so do stories told onstage by one of the greatest music icons of the twentieth century: Bruce Springsteen.

Do the effects of Springsteen's music on his fans fit Gottschall's outline of a religion's effects on community? Let us consider Gottschall's first criterion: the creation of a community. There certainly seems to be solidarity among Springsteen fans, but they aren't centered in any one geographic location: Springsteen has fans worldwide. Is it possible for people to have community when they don't live close to each other? According to Yuval Harari, it is.

Ever since the Cognitive Revolution, fiction has allowed humans to communicate outside of their intimate social groups (Harari). The Cognitive Revolution, Harari says, allows us to "cooperate in extremely flexible ways with countless numbers of strangers" (25) because it

enables us to believe in “common myths” (27). This has huge implications for human life: we form communities as we can believe in, ponder, and share with others about things that may not be factual or historical, but are nonetheless real. By this line of thinking, Springsteen fans constitute a community, or a “large-scale human cooperation” (27) as Harari calls it, because all Springsteen fans believe in the wonderful, powerful experience of Springsteen’s music. Consider Cavicchi’s description from *Tramps Like Us* of what it means to be a Springsteen fan:

Springsteen fans, while obviously not claiming to experience a revelation from God, are nevertheless claiming to experience a new and special relationship to another with whom they have not had any conventional contact or interaction. Most fans have not physically met Bruce Springsteen... Yet, despite that distance, they report feeling an odd closeness to him, referring to him by the familiar ‘Bruce,’ as if he were some sort of close friend whom they have known for many years (52).

Cavicchi’s book continuously highlights the intensely personal nature of many fans’ feelings for Springsteen and his music, which, as he points out, is rather remarkable considering most fans haven’t had any one-on-one contact with Springsteen. But because of the Cognitive Revolution and the human ability to believe in the power of stories, knowing Springsteen personally hardly matters at all. Cavicchi even says that most fans aren’t “so much touched by Springsteen himself as by his performance” (55), which enables them to feel a sort of “invisible magnet” (158) pull towards other fans, who by all other accounts would be considered strangers. The human ability to believe in and share with others the power of a Springsteen concert is what makes communities like Springsteen fans possible. Springsteen said himself in the documentary *Glory Days* that “isolation to me feels like about the most dangerous thing on earth.” Before an acoustic rendition of “Born to Run,” Springsteen said that community was at the heart of his work:

I realized that in the end, individual freedom, when it’s not connected

to some sort of community...ends up feelings pretty meaningless. So I guess that guy and that girl, they were out there looking for connection. And that's what I'm doing here tonight. (*Bruce Springsteen Video Anthology*)

Let's move to the second element of Gottschall's three-pronged description of a religion's purpose in society: coordinating group behavior, which involves setting rules, norms, rewards, and punishments. Here we seem to run into a problem. Being a Springsteen fan doesn't involve applying yourself to a system of rewards and punishments.

But it is plausible to scrape together the argument that Springsteen's music trades ideas of traditional religious paths to enlightenment/heaven, such as prayer or meditation, for more worldly means, namely women, cars, and music ("Blessing or curse?"). In this sense, Gottschall's second contention holds true as it pertains to Springsteen's music. Instead of praying, the characters in Springsteen songs such as "Thunder Road" take to the road, often with a girl, in search of their own kind of salvation.

Springsteen doesn't stand on stage and explicitly tell the audience what they should or should not do. Rather, the stories in his music implicitly provide people with examples of how one might cope with a problem. Consider "Thunder Road." The narrator tells Mary, the girl in the song, that she can hide, waiting "for a savior to rise from these streets," or that she can climb in his car because "the night's busting open" and "these two lanes will take us anywhere" (Springsteen 49). The boy in the song tells Mary that "heaven's waiting on / down the tracks... / we're riding out tonight to case the promised land." Instead of praying or reading scripture, for example, the boy in "Thunder Road" hits the road with a girl in search of his own version of salvation. In this respect, Springsteen's music fulfills the requirements of Gottschall's second element of a religion's purpose in society.

The third contention in Gottschall's description is that religion creates an incentive system that promotes group cooperation. One need not look farther than a Springsteen concert to find evidence of how his

music and performances are able to sync up an audience and make thousands of people cooperate.



Fig. 2. "Bruce Springsteen." Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC-BY2.0). Photo by crosathorian.

In one of Cavicchi's descriptions of a Springsteen concert, he writes, "people were smiling, wiping the sweat from their foreheads...Whereas most rock concerts last two hours at the most, this one lasted four" (35). Why would thousands of people actively choose to pay for the chance to stand up for four hours, jammed together like sardines? Because they are Springsteen fans. In this sense, Springsteen's performances and music have an incredible power over people's behavior (Fig. 2).

An enormous amount of cooperation is needed to create a concert atmosphere of thousands of fans. If we remember Gottschall's first contention as it relates to Harari's argument, these are fans who feel



connected to Springsteen even though most have never met him: “like most fans to whom he has spoken in his music, I have never met Bruce Springsteen. But like most, I feel as if I know him” (Cullen xiv).

In a way, it’s surprising that Springsteen has any fans at all, because he’s not a “good” singer by most musical standards. Patricia Smith even described his voice as “a gravelly growl.” And Springsteen isn’t the classiest dresser either. As Ann Powers explained, her first impression of Springsteen’s physical appearance was less than wonderful: “here was a bony dude with the worst haircut ever, who wore T-shirts covered in holes...he looked like the fry cook at the amusement park where I worked as a counter girl in the summer.”

If his appearance and technical vocal abilities aren’t attracting fans, what is? It’s the way he tells stories.

Springsteen is a fantastic storyteller, and according to Gottschall, humans love storytellers: our minds “yield helplessly to the suction of story” (3). Just like the Kung San storyteller (Gottschall 19) Springsteen’s music works as a “social glue” of sorts that brings “people together, skin against skin, mind against mind” (28).

What’s truly fascinating about our desire for story is that we don’t tire from hearing the same story again and again, Gottschall tells us. As Marcus Greil said in a review of *Born to Run* for Rolling Stone, “the stories Springsteen is telling are nothing new, though no one has ever told them better or made them matter more.” Springsteen isn’t dazzling his fans with completely original tales: he’s doing quite the opposite. His stories aren’t amazing, but his ability to tell them is. As President Barack Obama said, there are only “a handful of people who enter your lives through their music and tell the American people’s story. Bruce Springsteen is one of those people” (“Bruce Springsteen Rocks”).

What *is* so amazing about the way Springsteen tells stories? In *Springsteen & I*, director Baillie Walsh asked Springsteen fans to send in answers to this question. One fan said that Springsteen’s “storytelling

is perfect.” Another fan said, “Bruce’s lyrics always made me feel like I was going through someone’s family photo album and looking at their life.” This fan, who’d taped his submission for the documentary in his car, proceeded to cry for a full 32 seconds, showing the viewer the stunning power that Springsteen’s storytelling has over his fans. Another fan, describing the passion and intensity with which Springsteen performs, said “you can just see his veins popping out because he’s working so hard” (fig. 1).

These same veins have been popping out for over 40 years now, and it doesn’t look as though Springsteen intends to quit anytime soon: in 2016, he embarked on an 89-concert “The River” tour. We can’t say definitively whether Springsteen’s music is identical to a religious experience, but perhaps a firm answer to this question is irrelevant. Even if the comparison between Springsteen’s music/fans and religion does break down, it remains true that both religion and Springsteen’s music touch the same need for community in people. They accomplish the same goal: creating meaning where there essentially is none. Maybe it isn’t so much that Springsteen’s music is a religion as it is that his music gives us another vehicle through which we can feel many of the same emotions a religion lets us feel. As Springsteen sings in his song “Badlands,” “I believe in the love that you gave me / I believe in the faith that could save me” (Springsteen 71). Springsteen certainly is a master storyteller, and people look for phenomenal storytellers in all facets of life. Some go to church, some to the movies, and some to Springsteen concerts.

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SARAH BINAU '19 wrote this essay for her ID1 course, The Storytelling Animal: Evolution, Cognition, and Narrative, with Professor Jack Abecassis, in Fall 2015. It was selected as one of the two prize-winning papers from that semester.