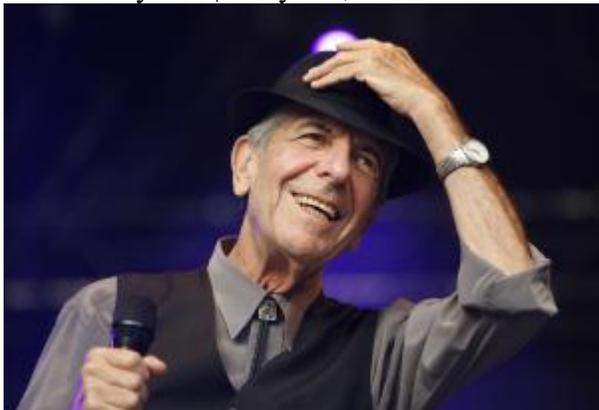


VIEWPOINT: 'Nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah'

Thomas Ryan | May. 27, 2009



Leonard Cohen performs in Germany last year. (Newscom/Rolf Haid)

At 74, Canadian singer and writer Leonard Cohen is in the midst of a two-year world tour undertaken for partly practical reasons. Several years ago, his business manager absconded with his life's savings, and Cohen is now replenishing his retirement account.

For fans and others, it affords an opportunity to reflect back on his career. While never Catholic -- he is Jewish and has dabbled in Scientology and lived as a Zen Buddhist monk -- he has cultivated an abiding fascination with Catholicism that he attributes to his Irish nanny who raised him part Catholic.

As a result, some of his work is overtly Catholic, such as his songs about St. Joan of Arc, St. Bernadette Soubirous and the Sisters of Mercy. More often, it is allusive; it gestures to Christ, grace and the sacraments. As a brief review shows, he shares some of Catholicism's sensibilities, re-presents it poetically and warns, at least implicitly, of a temptation Catholicism continues to face.

Cohen's work has often been characterized as despairing, yet it is perhaps better described as ambiguous and even playful. For example, take the reference of Cohen's pronouns. Characters in his songs often exist solely in the first person 'I' or the second person 'you.' These pronouns frequently point beyond themselves to people and use their relationships, frequently sexual, to express hoped-for intimacy with divinity. Like ancient and medieval exegetes of the Bible's Song of Songs, Cohen employs this I/you ambiguity to open a space for G-d (as he writes the divine name) to address and be addressed with words of love.

Throughout his career, Cohen's lyrics have evoked love. In 'You Have Loved Enough,' he sings of being 'raised up in grace' and chosen by love.

I am not the one who loves
It's love that seizes me
'You whisper,
'You have loved enough,
Now let me be the Lover.'

Cohen often links love to finitude, as in "Anthem" (which Oliver Stone uses to ironic effect in his film "Natural Born Killers"). Its refrain concludes:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Brokenness, like Christ's incarnation, provides an opening for light and love to disclose themselves.

The song "Here It Is" is even more explicitly Christological. It relates the abject to the sublime by aligning the chronic and malodorous suffering of today with the crucified one. The divine gives preferential love to the former and manifests all-embracing love through the latter.

Here is your cart
And your cardboard and piss
And here is your love
For all of this
... Here is your sickness
Your bed and your pan
And here is your love
For the woman, the man
... Here is your cross
Your nails and your hill
And here is your love
That lists where it will.

Cohen dwells on what presents itself to the senses. He smells the urine-soaked homeless, sees rampant injustice, hears conversation and feels the wind. Put otherwise, he lives in the physical world and encounters the divine through the material. He opposes, thereby, the recurring temptation, sometimes referred to as Gnosticism, to prioritize the spiritual at the expense of the physical.

For Cohen, sex is good and to be sought after, but he often suggests that what can come to pass in sex, its intuitive and ecstatic moments, can come to pass in other contexts and other than through physical contact.

Similarly, Catholicism, like all Christianity, believes in the salvific effect of the thoroughly human and therefore physical life, death and resurrection of Jesus. With its sacraments and sacramentals, Catholicism in particular prizes the corporeal. Salvation comes precisely through it not apart from it.

Moreover, Cohen is realistic. He can sing about human brokenness so effectively because he knows it so intimately. Yet, he, like Catholicism, is ultimately hopeful. Human brokenness is worth singing about in part because it is the arena in which grace works. It is also where we in this life receive a foretaste of glory.

As "Hallelujah" -- one of Cohen's most popular and most frequently covered songs -- suggests, human destiny is simple: It is to sing God's praises.

In the end,

I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but

Hallelujah.

For Cohen, our destiny now is no different, yet we sing from a context of fallenness. If sinfulness precluded praise, then we would live in spiritual silence. Thankfully it does not. The "broken Hallelujah" on earth conveys praise of God's glory now as the "holy Hallelujah" will in heaven.

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