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OF GOD AND JUSTICE THROUGH A COUPLE OF ROCK SONGS



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Partly and freely based on “100% American – La Classicità Del Rock Americano”  
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During the early era of Catholicism, music was used in the liturgy and, starting from that, it formed, in the course of time, a repertoire from which the entire patrimony of classical music originated. There's a persisting spiritual valence also in rock, specially perceivable among the components with an African-American matrix, inherited from blues, rhythm 'n' blues and soul music.

Another side of the coin, that I consider worth being discussed in deep, is the influence of religion on the imaginary evoked by the rock of the artists. Religion provides a collection of images, stories and archetypes adding themselves to the mythology that revolves around their music. There is a number of examples in many tracks, such as: *Adam Raised A Cain*, *The River* and *Reason To Believe* by Bruce Springsteen; *Before The Deluge* and *I Am A Patriot* by Jackson Browne; *When Jesus Left Birmingham* by John Mellencamp; *A Hard Rain's A- Gonna Fall* and *Knocking On Heaven's Door* by Bob Dylan.

An archetype that frequently appears is the one of the river. I'd like to explore its meanings in the Springsteen's song featuring it in the title and in *I Am A Patriot* by Browne, in order to introduce another important topic related to religion, that has a specifically American acceptation, in US: justice.

The analogy of the lyrics of Bruce's *The River* with the poems-epitaphs that can be read in the *Anthology of Spoon River* by Edgar Lee Masters suggests that the title (the same of the entire album containing the musical piece) hasn't been chosen by chance. The song tells the story of an ordinary person. In *Spoon River* the dead were the ones talking about themselves through the epitaphs exposed on their graves. Here, the main character/narrator is still alive, but it is as if he were dead, because of what he says:

I come from down in the valley where, mister, when you're young, they bring you up to do like your daddy done. Me and Mary we met in high school when she was just seventeen. We'd ride out of this valley down to where the fields were green. We'd go down to the river and into the river we'd dive. Oh down to the river we'd ride. [...] At night on them banks I'd lie awake and pull her close just to feel each breath she'd take. Now those memories come back to haunt me, they haunt me like a curse. Is a dream a lie if it don't come true, or is it something worse, that sends me down to the river though I know the river is dry, that sends me down to the river tonight. Down to the river my baby and I, oh down to the river we ride.

The feminine character is an ordinary American girl pregnant of a child, she's called Mary, as in many other musical pieces of the Boss (the song tells her name almost at the beginning), and this circumstance already evokes the multiple meanings that are linked to the evangelic character. There is a young protagonist, doomed to grow up in the image and likeness of his father and that, therefore, ends up doing a humble job in the construction field. There's a green valley, where they would like to go. There's a lake, where the narrator remembers he went with his tanned (solar tanning or natural color of the skin?) and wet (whatever meaning or interpretation this circumstance, the plot of the song and the scene it pictures may recall) Maria and

wanted to embrace her on its shores just to hear her breathing, but Mary gets pregnant. Is it a dream, a lie or what?

Most of all, something in particular urges the characters towards a river, to jump into it and to look at it. In the religious symbolism, the water where we immerse is associated to baptism and purification. The river consists in water that, in addition, flows, as time or history. The river par excellence, in America, is Mississippi, with its banks on which the black people used to live and work, as slaves in the plantations. Or Colorado, that, with its wide bed enclosed in canyons and with its dangerous rapids, was a difficult obstacle to pass in the path of the early pioneers. To summarize, there is a blend of symbols, both deriving from Catholicism and pagan ones, and an ordinary story of an ordinary American life, easy to identify with, featuring myth and drama at the same time.

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*I Am A Patriot* is a song written by Little Steven, the first, and uppermost among others, guitarist of Bruce Springsteen's E-Street Band. The lyrics lend themselves to some further considerations.

And the river opens for the righteous. Someday. I was walking with my brother and he wondered what's on my mind. I said: "what I believe in my soul ain't what I see with my eyes and we can't turn our backs this time". I am a patriot and I love my country, because my country is all I know. I want to be with my family, the people who understand me. I've got nowhere else to go. [...] I only know one party and it is freedom. I am, I am, I am - I am a patriot and I love my country, because my country is all I know. And the river opens for the righteous.

In the Old Testament, Red Sea can be interpreted as a river, when its waters open up, allowing the Jews, exile in Egypt (not unlike the black deported in America), to go back home. The river is also the disquieting road leading *into the wild*, in the savage of the jungle, the American soldier in Vietnam, as it is portrayed in *Apocalypse Now*, or the door to the internal lands in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (the book inspiring the movie by Coppola). Even the slave merchants used to venture into the African continent from the western coast by following rivers' upstream. The utopia of going back home is also a fundamental element of the African-American culture (home is Africa, where the black were free and kings, as the lion in the forest).

Here we have some more topics, eventually useful also to introduce a discussion about African-America. Although the lyrics of this song could seem empty rhetoric, they remind us of embarrassingly powerful images. The literary form it uses is the one of the biblical parable. The message is that of the survival ("I am, am, am") of the righteous.

These subjects brings us, at last, to the final topic, justice. Is it right that the

American soldier in Vietnam (or in Iraq, the Vietnam of the recent decades) that follows the river to kill his enemy survives? Is it right that who deports the slaves survives? Both of them serve their country. Giving an answer to these, right and correct, questions is impossible. We will find out one day (“someday”), says the song, when the river opens up for who was righteous, and with this word the song ends, as if to suggest that it is life, and not the ideas, the agent defining, through the course of history, what is right, refunding the wrongs suffered and punishing those who committed them, and that justice is something that has to be deserved.

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And nowadays we’re in it again. The war in Ukraine. Another war and everybody should be convinced by now that war is neither just nor right, also because of the fact that in war the discrimination line between right and wrong, justice and vengeance, truth and lies is blurred by the nonsense of it all. Again, after the end, history will tell us where justice, rightfulness and truth were. Most probably we will find them, alongside all the pain and suffering, violence and destruction caused, on the banks of a river endlessly flowing downstream, where most probably a most probably unjust and most probably inexistent God lives the life of a most probably perennial and immutable state of death consisting of a most probably endless Time defined only by the sequence of the pain and suffering, violence and destruction, the sad clock ticking the changes in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years, centuries and millenniums but not in the brutal substance of History and apparently of human nature.

Will this history ever end?

Will a real justice ever come?

Who will have deserved it?