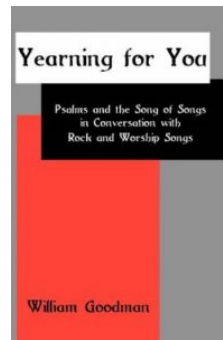


Yearning for You: Psalms and the Song of Songs in Conversation with Rock and Worship Songs,
by William Goodman

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William Goodman—inspired by Leonard Cohen’s anthem to love, “From your lips she drew the Hallelujah”—explores the connection between the erotic and the religious in both secular and Christian contemporary music.

Goodman’s first task is to provide evidence that religious language is rife in popular music and “romantic” language in Christian music. He sees this connection as a kind of blurring of boundaries between desire for God and sexual desire. Furthermore, Goodman wants to explore song texts in scripture and draw these together with a set of relevant samples from contemporary music. Psalms and Song of Songs are his biblical touchstones and his next moves are to inventory and to analyze the interpretive writings of various historical commentators of these two biblical books, focusing on “themes of desire and intimacy” (69). Goodman engages both Christian and Jewish traditions of interpretation of Psalms and the Song, albeit briefly. This is an accessible chapter where Goodman admirably traces the ebb and flow of exegetical opinion over centuries of biblical engagement in less than fifty pages.

Goodman’s comparison and contrast of the Psalms and Song of Songs in “My God . . . My Beloved” (chapter 3) is rewarding. Goodman gives a strong summary of various relational themes such as desire, absence, longing, feasting, and so on before moving on to consider samples from the contemporary music scene.

In Goodman's final and most significant chapter he presents several explanations for the religious-romantic language connection in the Psalms, Song of Songs, and selected contemporary music. He considers both the possibility that behind such language is the notion that sex is a means to experience the divine, and that sex might be conceived as sacrament for the divine. He discounts both of these in favour of a careful notion of sex as a metaphor for the divine. This outcome was perhaps a *fait accompli*, set up from the prelude, which introduces the book via recourse to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, *hieros gamos*, and the Song of Songs. Rather transparently, Goodman presents this provocative mechanistic or shamanistic conception of the erotic-divine relation as a straw man that he will dismantle in this concluding chapter. While the point Goodman is making is entirely valid, he has gone about it in a slightly disingenuous way. Metaphor is the obvious conclusion given that a text-based poetic analysis of any kind will inherently involve metaphor as a central concern as opposed to Goodman's two discounted presentations which are embedded in actual physicality and practice (201–2). For the fleshing out of Goodman's preferred explanation he wisely goes to Ricoeur and Ricoeur's notions of the living metaphor.

Goodman extends the investigation by postulating a series of metaphors for the human-divine relation relevant to the Psalms, the Song of Songs, and his sample of contemporary songs: eros, patriarchal marriage, master-servant, and parent-child. Of these, Goodman claims only one is "hinted at" (222) in the Song of Songs. This is a fair observation as the presence of the divine in the Song of Songs cannot be accounted for in the text and yet neither can it be discounted. However, Goodman goes on to make such claims regarding the Song that it "does not depict hierarchy between the lovers" and "does not explore this metaphor [parent-child] in the relationship between the lovers." I am surprised at Goodman's conclusions here given the Song is one where lovers may overwhelm each other (Song 6:5) and where one lover may say of the other they are awe-inspiring/terrifying (Song 6:4, 10). The lovers of the Song clearly find power part of the erotic play. Ironically, earlier in the book, Goodman makes this very point about the Song, calling it "a fantasy about marriage, with one or both of the lovers playing at royalty in ways which both uphold and undermine traditional power relations" (183). The parent-child metaphor is another with which the Song's lovers intersect, for example, where one lover dreams of the other at her mother's breast (Song 8:1); where one lover will seduce the other in the same place that his mother gave birth to him (8:5); or, in another erotically charged scene, where one

lover feeds the other with pomegranate juice in her own mother's room, and at her mother's instruction (Song 8:2).

In Goodman's book there is a tension detectable underneath his apparel of objectivity, perhaps an underlying concern to protect God from indecent sexual exposure. It is perhaps by reason of this concern that Goodman appears to privilege the Psalms, which are undoubtedly less erotically charged than the Song of Songs (201). This is evident particularly in what he contends is the true mood of biblical voice: that biblical voices actively resist a notion that human sexuality can facilitate encounter with God (234). But the incendiary voice of the Song of Songs, at least, cannot be completely predetermined in this way. Goodman himself regards the boundaries as blurred (4), repeating this assertion of blurring multiple times. It is curious then that Goodman seeks to over-determine boundaries in his conclusions when considering to what degree biblical voices resist the sexualization of God. "The presence of both the Psalms and the Song in the Hebrew Bible encourages canonical readers to see desire for God and sexual desire as neither identical nor opposed, but clearly distinct from each other" (230). The Song, for one, leaves the possibility of this merger or this distinction uncomfortably unresolved.

Goodman provides a strong investigation of his topic, and one which supports the innovative and deeply nuanced engagements of the intersections between sexuality and spirituality provided by Carr's *The Erotic Word* (2003) and Rob Bell's *Sex God* (2007). One of the most interesting discoveries from Goodman's work is Bono's short yet insightful introduction to the Psalms from the perspective of a lifetime in the upper echelons of rock "Humorous, sometimes blasphemous, the blues was backslidin' music; but by its very opposition, flattered the subject of its perfect cousin Gospel" (*The Book of Psalms*, [Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999], loc. 77, Kindle edition). This is an astute understanding from Bono of what is at stake in contemporary music when religious language is used—and a point that Goodman does not make as plainly in his own work. The Nine Inch Nails lyric Goodman quotes is one which bears this up. When Reznor writes "I want to fuck you like an animal ... you get me closer to God," he is perhaps not expressing as Goodman suggests "an understanding of sex as a means to intimacy with the divine" (197) but, as Bono suggests, a kind of resistance, a satire, a deliberate use of religious language to deride, ridicule, oppose and attack the authority associated with religious tradition, and which yet at the same time brings close the very subject it seeks to challenge and deconstruct. Industrial Rock is thus a

purposeful blasphemy that does two things at once; it resists the status quo, establishment, society with church at its decaying core, and then in spite of itself opens up the possibility of engaging the divine anew, having removed the legalism that separates body and spirit long holding prominence in Christian worldviews. The provocative visual symbolism in the music video in which Reznor performs his song “Closer” provides further indication that this is the case. Goodman largely fails to identify resistance or deconstruction as a motive for the use of religious language in popular music.

As can be inferred from this review, Goodman’s *Yearning for You* was stimulating work that this reviewer found both rewarding and frustrating. This work is well placed in Sheffield’s Bible in the Modern World series and is worthwhile engaging. As Goodman may well agree, there is a lot more at stake than sex plain and simple in any relationship, but it is the way language facilitates the play between spirituality and sexuality in song that is fascinating and Goodman provides some grounds for a comprehensive investigation of such. The biblical texts, the many commentators and also singer-songwriters for which Goodman accounts on this topic bear out a multitude of overlaps, intersections and collisions between human-human and human-divine relation, opening up rather than closing down the possibilities that come with encounter.

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