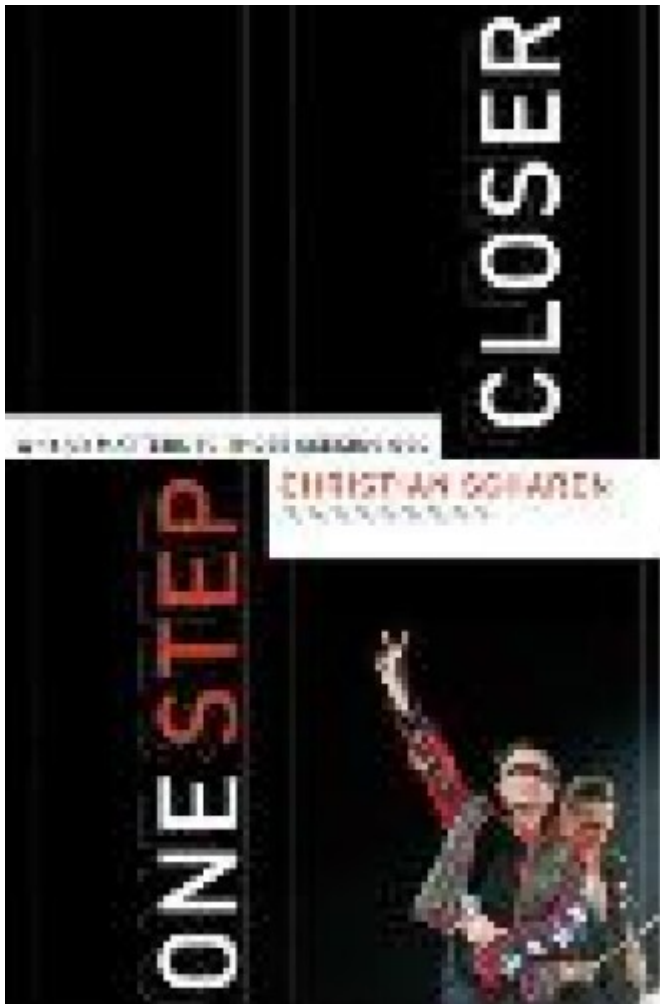


One Step Closer

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [August 8, 2006](#) issue

In Review



One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God

Christian Scharen
Brazos

Reading this book prompted a minor conversion on my part. You can hardly be a member of my generation and not love the rock group U2, but I'd found the

enthusiasm about its theological significance annoying. The rush to baptize the band seemed to me a matter of Christians' desperation to be cool. I was happy to turn up the volume when U2 came on—and I didn't need to be told they're "one of us" to do so.

Christian Scharen's book has shown me that those who follow U2 with religious zeal are closer to being correct than I was. U2 has about it more than a religious veneer, Scharen explains. And more than a profound moral seriousness, as is made clear in the band's impassioned singing for peace in Ireland and against nuclear proliferation, its moving praise of Martin Luther King, its work against apartheid and its championing of the poor by way of Jubilee 2000 and the One Campaign. The members of U2 are genuine theologians who have digested the scriptures and reiterate them in their songs in what Scharen describes as iconic fashion. They speak in parables, offering discourse about the soul for those with ears to hear.

Take, for example, "Mysterious Ways," a smash hit from the 1991 album *Achtung Baby*. I used to roll my eyes when friends pointed proudly to the line, "If you want to kiss the sky better learn how to kneel." Aren't Bono's impassioned voice and The Edge's signature guitar riffs enough by themselves? But Scharen points out that the song is about Salome, the step-daughter of King Herod, whose dance so pleased the king that she was able to ask for and get the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And the song is not only about that. It morphs into a description of Wisdom, who danced at creation; whose movements, Jesus tells Nicodemus, can't be anticipated; who teaches her people how to love. "I've always believed that the Spirit is a feminine thing," Bono has said. Suddenly the song takes on layers of theological depth.

As a preacher I've been stumped on more than one Sunday at the lectionary's selection of the Salome story. Bono has given us something profound to say about it that will connect with younger listeners who are U2 fans and point them toward a deeper connection with God.

Scharen, a Lutheran minister and Emory-trained theologian, uses Martin Luther's theology of the cross as a lens through which to read U2's theology. This approach is handy as a way of deflecting the criticism of more conservative believers that U2 is insufficiently Christian, with its members' salty language and rock-and-roll lifestyle.

Actually, Bono is married to his high school sweetheart, and he sings that “I could never take a chance at losing love to find romance.” The salty-language charge remains valid, as does that of irregular church attendance. Others have worried about the band’s brazen announcement—in one of its greatest songs—that “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

Scharen, for whom that indeterminacy was a compelling factor in his beginning to like the band years ago, describes the question as one inspired by scripture itself. During that phase of its music, the band had turned away from what its members describe as a sort of insufferable earnestness (some would say it never completed the turn) and toward the Old Testament wisdom tradition of ironic questioning—drawing attention to a corner of the Bible neglected by the Bible’s most public defenders. U2 effectively turns the charge back on the church—arguing that it is the church that is insufficiently Christian, not the band. The argument may not get the musicians off the hook entirely, but they do have a point.

Scharen devotes an appropriate amount of attention to U2’s recent public crusading on behalf of the poor and in favor of nonviolence. The earnestness can be a bit much here—remember the *Time* magazine cover asking, “Can Bono Save the World?” But Scharen again illuminates a favorite song I’d previously heard nontheologically. “Where the Streets Have No Name” has its origin in a realization that Bono once had about Belfast in Northern Ireland. He’d learned that one’s address in that city is a surefire clue as to one’s religion and socioeconomic status. So when he sings about a place “where the streets have no name,” he’s praying that such mindless categorization of people will cease. Bono says that the lyrics are “not great” but that the theological concept is thrilling: “It puts the hair up on the back of my neck.” In the 1990s Bono would often end that song with a couple of extra lines: “Then will there be no time or sorrow / Then there will be no time, no shame.” The musicians recognize in these moments that they are a bunch of “cockeyed idealists,” as Scharen calls them, whose work is “painfully, insufferably earnest,” as Bono says, but eschatological hope has that sort of effect on people.

Scharen organizes his book around scriptural and theological themes: prophecy, parables, apocalypse, faith, hope and love. In each case he offers an accessible description of the theological locus. These descriptions are not watered down—he quotes from such luminaries as Rowan Williams, Ellen Davis, and his own colleague at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Miroslav Volf. Yet they are also free of technical jargon, so they can be understood by interested nonreligious readers. After

each description, Scharen shows how a U2 song—sometimes a smash hit, sometimes an obscure song or B-side single—illustrates the theme. These sections take color as Scharen peppers them with quotes and vignettes from interviews and stories about the band itself.

U2 in conversation with a professional theologian is rich fare indeed. I found myself eager to share *One Step Closer* with a Sunday school class. The only reservation I have is that the book seems to have been written with an eye to outsiders to the faith who love U2 and for whom the band can be an introduction to Christianity. I have no objection to evangelical zeal—U2 was instrumental in Scharen's own conversion to caring for the poor and hopeless, a conversion he tells about here. It's just that I think it far more likely that the book will be used by preachers, Sunday school teachers and theologians. This "weakness" is also a strength: as Scharen notes, U2 is a force for religious leaders to reckon with.