The Location of Religion in Bruce Springsteen’s
Wrecking Ball: Common Ground Prior to ‘Religious’
and ‘Secular’?¹

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Introduction

Bruce Springsteen’s music is filled with religious language and imagery, principally Christian and/or Catholic in origin, although lately some Buddhist imagery can be detected as well. Springsteen himself has indicated that religion is at the root of his music. In a 1984 interview he said about his first album Born to Run: “there’s that searchin’ thing; that record to me is like religiously based, in a funny kind of way... That searchin,’ and faith, and the idea of hope.”² The presence of this language and imagery has, of course, led to a great deal of discussion on what the language actually means or signifies in his music. Some commentators have a tendency to claim Springsteen and his music for their religion. The most famous example of this is Andrew Greeley in a 1988 article called “The Catholic Imagination of Bruce Springsteen” (Greely 1988). More recently, Jeffrey B. Symynkywicz’ The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen reads like a list of sermon illustrations drawn from Springsteen’s music (Symynkywicz 2008). Even more recently, a review in Christianity Today of Wrecking Ball claims that Springsteen’s “work is characterized by a buoyant hope that can only be seen as rooted in the person of Jesus Christ” (Whitman 2012). The writer of this review, Alan Whitman, finds that Springsteen has more to say to him than any other songwriter, even though he finds this ‘curious’ because “Springsteen does not claim to be a Christian” (Whitman 2012).³ Still others, like Kate McCarthy, see Springsteen as positing an alternative vision (McCarthy 2011: 20–40) or even, like Matthew Orel, a secular morality (Orel 2012: 150).

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² Cited in, among others, Masur 2009: 115. We will present the full quote below.
³ For a Christian critique of even posing this question, see Keuss 2012.
The question such speculation raises is: Are such discussions warranted? Or is there something more basic, more fundamental going on in Springsteen's music? Springsteen's use of religious language and imagery is significant for the very fact that he appeals to a wide audience, a secularized audience, and, even more precisely, a disenfranchised secularized audience. His use of religious language and imagery is not necessarily Christian. But neither is it completely secular. In this paper I would like to explore Springsteen's use of religious imagery and language by looking at the 'place' of space and place itself in his music. I will argue that Springsteen's use of religious language and imagery forces the (Christian) listener to re-evaluate his or her own understanding of that religious language and imagery, seeing new connections and new understandings in his or her own appropriation of that religious language.

I will do this by looking at three songs on his latest album, two of which belong to the album proper and the last was included as a bonus track: “Rocky Ground,” “Land of Hope and Dreams,” and “Swallowed Up (In the Belly of the Whale).” While religious language and imagery are present in the other songs on this album, they are much more dominant in these songs. My discussion here will involve two different aspects of place and space in these songs. I will begin by looking at the religious imagery in these songs, particularly the imagery that relates to place, for place is important in Springsteen, and concentrating on this will help focus the discussion. Then I will explore the larger sense of place in these songs, specifically looking at the album and concerts as, to use Henri Lefebvre's term, “representational spaces” (Lefebvre 1991: 39; Knott 2005: 39). I will then take up the question of the sense in which we can talk of Springsteen and religion, here utilizing insights gained from narrative theory.

**Religious Imagery and Place in Wrecking Ball**

Place is important in Springsteen's music. One might even say that place and space are foundational, for many of his songs involve a journey from one place to another. Such places and journeys can be found throughout his whole career, whether we are talking about “Born to Run,” “Thunder Road,” “Badlands,” “Downbound Train,” or “The Rising.” This sense of journey is very much present in the three songs we will look at here. In each of these songs—and in the album as a whole—what is emphasized is the lack of place, as the locator, anchor, and indicator of 'belonging,' and the displacement of the people involved. In each case they are involved in a journey of some kind: a journey to Canaan over rocky ground, on a train to the land of hope and dreams, on a boat trip that ends in their being swallowed up. They can be unemployed people