

People have as many opinions on the U2 frontman Bono as they do on religion, and all the better if they're misinformed. An Irish friend asked me recently if Bono was "still Catholic". I was unsure how to answer; somewhere between "he never really was" and "about 50-50" might have been correct, but incomplete.

The new film based on his memoir, *Bono: Stories of Surrender*, gets us somewhat close to an answer. His formative experiences of faith often switch between the more concrete and the mystical, with the poisonous nature of Irish sectarianism always in the foreground. His father Bob Hewson, a Catholic, was shunned by his family for marrying a Protestant. Although he allowed Bono (real name Paul) and his older brother to be raised in their mother's faith, he never felt comfortable stepping inside the church where his sons worshipped. Nonetheless, Bob's favourite tipple was Black Bush, a Protestant whiskey he often imbibed instead of Guinness – a sign, in the words of his offspring, that he was "his own man".

Bob also consented to his son being educated in a non-denominational school. It was around this time that the young Paul got religion, just when he was free from it. In the film Bono recalls calling on God at his mother's death bed (she died of a brain haemorrhage when he was 14), seeing a guitar gifted him by his brother as "another voice to pray with", and briefly signing up to a charismatic evangelical sect called "Shalom". He and his bandmates left when the group tried to make them choose between rock and religion, but that need for a space where Ireland's religious divisions could be left outside was its lasting influence.

This is apparent in one of U2's first mega-hits, 1983's "Sunday Bloody Sunday", whose lyrics are almost aggressively anti-sectarian. In a brazen move for an Irish band at the time (particularly one whose drummer was brought up a Catholic), the song cast the Troubles in the north as a pointless feud that on

The father and the son

Maddy Fry takes in a film that speaks of Bono's religious wanderings in the course of his career

all sides had left "mothers, children, brothers, sisters torn apart". Bono later raged at an audience member after mistakenly thinking they were waving an IRA banner. After news broke of the Enniskillen bombing in 1987, he shouted, "Fuck the Revolution!" on stage and ranted against support for the IRA by credulous Irish-Americans. Gerry Adams called him "a little shit" (although he denied putting a price on his head).

Bono's tone became more conciliatory in the 1990s. "Sunday Bloody Sunday" was replaced by "Please", a song whose lyrics implored those on both sides of the Good Friday talks to "get up off your knees". The white flags and chants of "no more" from the crowd gave way to a more muted reminder to extremists that "the heaven you keep, you stole".

Bono went on to meet two popes; John Paul II famously got to try out his iconic shades.

When he morphed into an anti-poverty crusader in the early 2000s, Bono used references to both Jesus's

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Bono at this year's Cannes Film Festival



concern for the poor and the liberation of the Israelites to appeal to faith groups on all sides when lobbying for debt relief and aid to lower-income countries. U2's lyrics went on to be included in sermons by clergy across denominations, and for a while the "U2charist" was a popular way of fusing mainstream pop with the energy of a worship band.

When much of his efforts on foreign aid were obliterated this year at the hands of Donald Trump, he was quick to say that both Catholics and evangelicals were among the outrage. Rather than a creator of division, faith in his eyes was an engine for justice.

Yet the subtext of *Stories of Surrender* is that the politics stuff is all a sideshow. The film is framed as one long conversation with his father, "the da", and one suspects it's actually a dialogue with the Almighty. Bono craved his dad's attention and acceptance his whole life, a yearning that would go forever unfulfilled, even when he was schmoozing Princess D (he even engineered a meeting with her and Bob Hewson, who was so charmed that his son credited it with ending "800 years of oppression") or writing songs for Pavarotti.

"The journey from father to friend he intones, "is the only one to be on." A quarter of a century after Bob's death, he asks: "Is the son starting to make sense of the father?"

Perhaps. In a particularly telling moment, he voices his wife's concern that despite his efforts to the contrary he might not want to give up "that emptiness" that he credits with giving him "everything". His dad could possibly sense this; before dying of cancer, he urged his son not to lose faith the way he had.

Stories of Surrender suggests that there's no risk of that. Bono's career has been one long attempt to get close to two unknowable beings. With one of them, you sense he might have got there. Maybe the God-shaped hole can be filled after all. **CH**

Maddy Fry is a journalist and author. Bono: Stories of Surrender is streaming on Apple TV+