

JENIFER WHITING
Drew University

BOOK PROFILE: *THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL CULTURE*

A profile of William Dean's *The American Spiritual Culture and the Invention of Jazz, Football, and the Movies*. Continuum, 2002. 240 pp. \$24.95 cloth; \$16.95 paper. ISBN: 0-8264-1593-8.

AN ENERGETIC THINKER ON RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN AMERICA, William Dean is professor emeritus of constructive theology at Iliff School of Theology since his retirement from that institution in May 2004. He has co-edited one book on the theology of Bernard Loomer, authored several others, including *American Religious Empiricism*, *History Making History*, and *The Religious Critic in American Culture*, and is editor of the "Religion and American Public Life" series for the State University of New York Press. Like the jazz rifts he examines in American music, Dean's latest work has spun creatively out of his earlier work and given it new life in an expanded form.

Dean's *The Religious Critic in American Culture* (1994) argues that American public life is in need of serious religious critics who can interpret deeper meaning in the intellectual and cultural life of the country. Drawing strongly from that work, his latest offering, *The American Spiritual Culture and the Invention of Jazz, Football, and the Movies* (2002), moves confidently toward providing a model of how such a critic might begin to engage American lay people, theologians, academics, and public leaders in an examination of what we do as a collective people—how what we create, sell, found, and celebrate as a nation signify America's belief that its own culture, its very existence, "speaks for a truth, even a reality, greater than America" (9). This Ultimate Reality, called God by the Christian majority of the country, encompasses the multiplicity of religious perspectives that makes up modern America, while unifying its diverse peoples in a shared spirituality created through public life shaped by immigrant and displaced individuals. Created as something out of nothing (i.e. without an overarching ancient cultural tradition in which to root itself), American culture nevertheless is distinctly spiritual, Dean argues, for it is an arena where certain values and standards continue to appear and be reinforced again and again throughout history, although these values remain largely unexamined critically by intellectuals, public officials, and average citizens.

Following acknowledgements and an introduction, the text is divided into two parts that establish a useful dichotomy for Dean's discussion. "Part 1: God the Opaque," meditates on the concept of an American spiritual culture, analyzing four characteristics of American culture in relation to the concepts of God/Ultimate Reality, religiosity, and morality. "Part 2: American the Visible," examines the genesis of jazz, football, and the movies within American spiritual culture, arguing that the rise of each of these arts was uniquely fed by the diverse well-springs of that culture.

The first part of the text "Part 1: God the Opaque" is divided into four chapters which analyze important elements in Dean's definition of American spiritual culture: skepticism, displaced peoples, pragmatism, and mystery. First, Dean addresses skepticism as a national characteristic by briefly exploring modern Russian history and drawing out an argument that Russia's political and economic decline was precipitated by a "failure of Russian spiritual culture" (34), that is, by a lack of a shared ideology among its citizens. Turning his attention stateside, Dean turns to an examination of reductionism, naming it as this country's current form of religious skepticism. According to Dean, by "reducing" the examination of religion to human-centered, and not God/Ultimate Reality-centered thought, reductionism has too long directed religious thinkers and public discussion. He ends with an exhortation for a revival of creative, outspoken religious critics in American life.

Dean begins his second chapter by describing America as a society of displaced people, of immigrants, slaves and freedom-seekers who moved or were forced into a new land not fully aware of what the future held for them. Displacement in its broadest sense is what the American "place" itself has been established from, and Dean asserts that this paradox, left unexamined, has the power to cripple the country spiritually, unless an overarching cohesion and unity binds its citizens together. He identifies three episodes that have set the cultural and spiritual stage: "The first episode is the realization that to have left home is to have abandoned an identity. The second episode is the realization that American does not provide a profound, tradition-based identity. The third episode is the realization, both terrifying and exhilarating, that Americans have little choice but to stand up at the edge of the void, to light their own lamp, and to invent a new identity" (51-52).

Next, Dean establishes a parallel between this country of displaced peoples and the ancient Israelites, noting that both societies were necessarily focused on daily survival in strange lands and, therefore, understandably developed pragmatic theologies to discuss the action of God in their dramatic histories. Summarizing religious pragmatism in America, Dean describes the impact of various thinkers

and groups on the country from the Calvinist Puritans, with emphasis on behavior in the covenant relationship, to William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey. Dean argues that a concept of God/Ultimate Reality can be understood to function in American history as a “social convention...a social construct or habit that evolves in and from a society and then takes on a life of its own in that society, until it can accomplish for a society what a society cannot accomplish for itself” (71). To make up for the shock of describing God as a sacred convention, Dean quickly launches into three pages of defense of his use of the phrase, assuring the reader that any language for God is an analogy that does not depersonalize or reduce God to a human construct, but rather that discussing God as a “living convention” (72) has theological antecedents. This presents the only weakness in Dean’s book. His defensive clarification of terms is presented negatively first, before being affirmed from positively. It can be presumed that readers along for the journey will understand Dean’s description as a functional tool in his examination of American spiritual culture; his clear writing style communicates his message, intent and tone without confusion.

The fourth chapter addresses the concept of mystery as it has continually resurfaced in American history and its tension with atheism in intellectual, cultural and spiritual history. He begins the chapter with a lucid, engaging summary of atheistic thought and the treatment of atheism and radical empiricism by James, Peirce, and Jonathan Edwards.

It is when Dean turns to his analysis of the birth of jazz, football and the movies in the American historical and spiritual context that the book begins to sing. In particular, Dean’s engaging, free-ranging writing style becomes magic in his analysis of the development of jazz from African-American church music and African-American and other immigrant musical forms. The violent displacement and extreme dispossession of African-American slaves (stripped of names, families, freedom) is the history from which jazz developed. Indeed, “jazz is more than socially and psychologically pragmatic or useful ... it is therapeutic partly because it is enjoyable, enjoyable enough to overpower rather than yield to the effects of displacement” (121). Jazz developed in an unsettled place, by individuals under multiple forms of restraint—hence the motivation for the ingenuity and improvisation, for free expression at the creative control of the musician.

Approaching history through improvisation is an important method for dealing with the surrounding world. It can be found in pre-Israelite and Israelite history, in, for example, “the changing meaning of the law of the Israelites in the Pentateuch” (130). Dean draws a parallel between the improvisation inherent in jazz and the tradition of Israelite oral history which spun variations on old

stories, continually updating the community's articulation of its understanding of God in changing, painful times. The act of improvisation becomes holy and prayerful creation, signifying a faith in God's "role as co-improviser with humans" (143) in history.

While most theologians in the Christian tradition from Eusebius of Caesara onward, in conjunction with the church considered as an institutional body, have articulated God's historic role with a more Hellenistic, "just-the-facts-m'am" approach, Dean asserts that the laity's practice of private prayer to God has preserved theological improvisation in Christianity. By elevating private prayer in this way, Dean is more than tipping his hat to the faithful multitudes over the centuries, something that is not done often enough in theological discussion. He is also redirecting the attention of scholars to the serious, creative theology that has been humming in the pews all along.

The freedom and elegance with which Dean moves back and forth through centuries of theology in articulating his argument is energizing and eye-opening, highlighting connections in a way that makes the past feel real, not dusty. The only response to so good a chapter is, "Yes, of course. Now it is perfectly clear." He performs similar feats in the chapters dealing with football, where he draws connections between the game's violence and the American spiritual legacy of displaced conquerors of an untamed territory, and with the movies, where he suggests that the outsider status of early Jewish studio heads figured primarily in the creation of a fictional culture of gunslingers, gangsters, and glamour, a culture that is not real but nevertheless has become American history. The tension between the secular and divine is, and ever was, taut in American spiritual culture.

A useful and wide-ranging notes section follows, along with a serviceable index, providing a variety of historical, socio-political and religious book, article, and film sources from which the reader can dive deeper into the discussion of spiritual culture and American cultural and religious history. The breadth of source types also indicates Dean's necessarily inter-disciplinary approach to the discussion.

This text could be useful to scholars and participants in several fields, including historians of jazz, film and sports in the United States, who might well benefit from the thoughtful lens that Dean trains on his subjects. The book would also dovetail nicely with discussions in undergraduate and graduate courses on American intellectual, religious or cultural history. It could also serve as an engaging selection for a church adult study group.

JENIFER WHITING is a doctoral student in the Modern History and Literature program at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. Her areas of interest include religion and spirituality in literature, American intellectual history, and the history of the book.

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Whiting, Jenifer. "Book Profile: *The American Spiritual Culture*." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 1 (December 2004): 146-150. PURL:
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