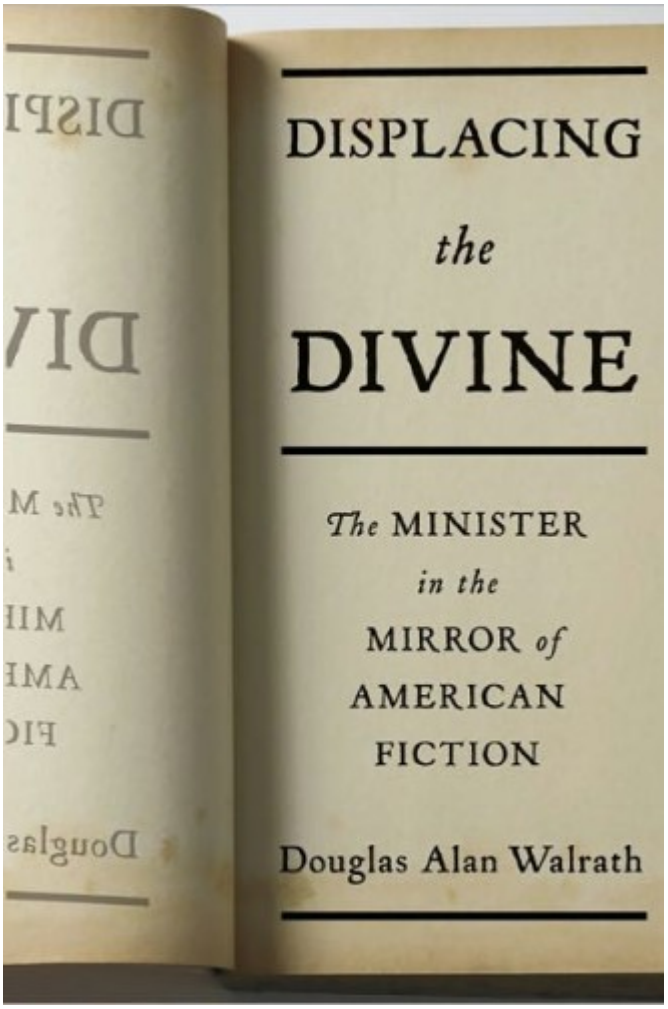
Fictional pastors

by William H. Willimon in the April 19, 2011 issue

In Review



Displacing the Divine

By Douglas Alan Walrath
Columbia University Press

Some years ago, teaching a seminary course called "The Ordained Minister in the Protestant Tradition," I became convinced that there is no better way to know the truth about us clergy than by reading fiction. A novel like *The Leatherwood God* (William Dean Howells) or *The Mackerel Plaza* (Peter DeVries) can provide a more complex, accurate picture of clergy than the more abstract ideas of St. Gregory the Great or Richard Baxter. If I were king rather than just a bishop, I would make Gregory Wilson's *The Stained Glass Jungle* or Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* required reading for all pastors under my care.

Douglas Alan Walrath, pastor, church consultant and professor emeritus of practical theology at Bangor Seminary, has written an encyclopedic and astute survey of American novels about clergy that ought to become a standard text for every budding mainline Protestant cleric, as well as essential reading for anybody who wants to understand why we American clergy are the way we are.

Walrath announces his thesis on page one: "Fiction provides a historical record of the declining regard of ministers and their God." It isn't so much that American culture set out to kill God or God's professional agents; it is rather that the divine was "displaced." This thesis Walrath pushes relentlessly, finding his suppositions confirmed in just about every clergy novel ever written, from Nathaniel Hawthorne to John Updike. Like any good interpretive device, Walrath's "displacement of the divine" yields some compelling insights about dozens of novels. And yet, particularly when Walrath discusses novels like Howells's *The Undiscovered Country* and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead,* I expect that a good deal more is going on in these good novels than a reflection of America's collective, modernist obsession with being done with an anachronistic God.

The first thing that impresses about American ministerial novels is how many there are. Walrath can find ministerial protagonists among the fiction of nearly any decade. These earliest American post-Puritan divines, like Arthur Dimmesdale and Father Mapple, served a cosmic tyrant of a God, a God who was feared rather than loved, an inaccessible God whose creation is a pitiless place that offers little consolation for creatures who falter. I was surprised to find that the faltering parson

is a persistent theme in American fiction. It was one long, unabated slide from the vulnerable Arthur Dimmesdale to that rogue Elmer Gantry.

In Walrath's account, a Calvinist God is the only God America ever had—and that God was on the way out by the end of the 18th century. After Hawthorne, novelists routinely depicted any seriously believing—that is, doggedly determined Calvinist—clergyman as, at best, an anachronistic throwback to the Old World or, at worst, a bigoted, clenched-fisted fanatic.

Fictional 19th-century pastors alternatively mourn divine displacement or accommodate themselves to it. Some attempt to keep up appearances, either railing against a godless modern world and thus earning the scorn of their communities, or busying themselves with good works and sometimes gaining the admiration of the culture, as in Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps.*

By the early 20th century in serious fiction, such as the novels of Sinclair Lewis, no thinking person can stomach obeisance to a Calvinist God. Ministers are almost universally held up as objects of contempt. When Gantry earnestly prays to God to heal him of his immoral ways, no one seriously expects God to intervene; even Gantry's prayers are an aspect of his self-deceit.

When clergy appear in the most recent American fiction, the worst are hypocritical rogues; the best are sometimes heartwarming but always ridiculous, typically a sort of trope, a cliché, a mere footnote to Dimmesdale or Gantry. The exceptions are the gentle, comic clergy depicted by Garrison Keillor, Norman Maclean and Jan Karon. Their stories prove that clergy and the God for whom they work can be positively portrayed in fiction—if they are set pieces of small-town nostalgia. About the only sincerely believing pastor that Walrath can find in contemporary fiction is Marilynne Robinson's John Ames. Walrath says that Ames is able to be a convincing "comic Calvinist" only because his faith is a nonthinking, emotive type of religion, an innate aspect of his naturally gentle and charitable personality. The only way Robinson could pull this off, says Walrath, was to set *Gilead* in an idyllic Midwest of the 1950s; otherwise nobody would have believed her.

Walrath's constant attempt to correlate ministerial fiction with sociological analysis provides a few stunning insights into clergy novels, but I wonder if he would have been better served by a more literary approach. While his close readings of novels like *Moby-Dick, The Damnation of Theron Ware* and *The Song of the Lark* are

wonderfully revealing, I came away thinking that there had to be more. To be sure, art is often a mirror of changing cultural contexts, but Walrath comes close to implying that clergy fiction is little more than a predictable result of the contemporary widespread low estimate of clergy.

Modernist reductionism that now imprisons us in our flat, godforsaken terrain specializes in flat, moralistic readings like Walrath's: "The story of church and clergy in American fiction is the unbroken line of the displacement of the divine." However, one reason for our love of fiction is our hunch that it is a great medium not only for mirroring reality but also for exposing heretofore inaccessible truth. In any good novel, as opposed to a bad one, there is always more in which to delight, sometimes even the possibility of revelation.

A couple of questions lingered in my mind after I finished this remarkable book. First, because Walrath focuses exclusively on the story of American Protestant Christianity as the story of spent Calvinism, I wonder what he has missed. He looks at almost no novels that represent evangelical sensibilities, presumably because there are few that are worth serious literary attention. But are there no evangelical, orthodox Christian novels that suggest that divine displacement is not the only story about us and God in America? (Interestingly, I can think of a number of fine contemporary English novels—by Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, for example—in which God and God's servants make a dramatic comeback.) Are American novelists really so incapable of swimming against the cultural stream that they cannot see something that modern naturalism has missed, and are they therefore forced to conform to the widespread cultural prejudice that God is dead and clergy are irrelevant?

Which leads to another question: Why did Walrath give such meager attention to the great southern novelist William Faulkner and none to Flannery O'Connor? Of course, O'Connor was a Catholic, but her clergy—most of them misfit antiheroes—tend to be wild fundamentalist Protestants. She is too good a novelist to make them models or heroes of anything, but she is also too truthful to avoid treating them with a tinge of admiration for their wild God-hauntedness. Nor am I so sure that Updike is just another representative of the cleric-as-adulterous-rogue cliché.

Is Walrath's failure to engage these writers in any depth due to their inability to be confined within Walrath's sociologically derived thesis? Do we have in Faulkner and O'Connor novelists who are suspicious that we may not have so securely displaced God? And if we have not fully succeeded in ridding ourselves of the divine, then might it be that clergy (crazy and maladjusted though some of us are) may be on to

something after all?