

Football fills the void

by [Richard Fox](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

William Dean's book begins ominously. A "distinctive spiritual culture" guided Americans in the past by speaking "for a truth, even a reality, greater than America." But "there are signs" today that this culture is dying. If it dies, then "so, in most important respects, will the American nation." All, thankfully, is not yet lost. A vibrant "common culture" can still be reborn on the foundation of a revived spiritual culture.

This trope--an impending cultural breakdown can still be averted if Americans will only wake up--is a familiar literary and homiletic device going back to early New England. Such now-classic works as Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown* (1929), David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978) and Robert Bellah and colleagues' *Habits of the Heart* (1985) have become lasting monuments because they play original variations on this standard theme. Dean's effort is modest when put in that company. He does make some intriguing claims about theology and culture in America, past and present. But he never enters fully into the ongoing debate about how to conceive or build a common culture. And he doesn't say enough about jazz, football or the movies to establish their significance for his vision of a vital spiritual culture.

Dean summarizes his argument as a series of propositions about spiritual culture in general and American culture in particular. Americans from the start were a "displaced people." White Americans, cut off from their European roots, shared that condition of alienation with Native Americans and African-Americans. Like ancient Israelites, Americans coped with their unmoored existence by positing "something greater than themselves who worked within that culture." The person they called God "worked" in the sense that he functioned as an effective "sacred social convention."

Yet the use of God to bolster culture promoted a creeping atheism that threatened the whole structure. Like the old cartoon characters who ran off cliffs but stayed aloft as long as they thought they were on terra firma, Americans preserved their

cultural buoyancy only so long as they took for granted the reality of a force greater than themselves. Having awakened to the conventionality of their belief, they began to plunge.

Hope remains, however, because in Dean's construal of theology and culture (here he leans to the metaphysical Tillich rather than the historicist Niebuhr), ironic reversal is always possible. Atheism may be the logical opposite of theism, but in practice it is never far removed from the springs of a renewed theism. Dean detects the promise of such a reversal in an apparently unlikely arena: the "popular arts" of jazz, film and football. Originally infused with religious force of their own ("religious" in the sense of a Tillichian "ultimate concern"), those deeply American phenomena have lost most of their spiritual savor. But the "irony of atheism" is that it can give rise in spite of itself to a sense of "mystery." And the apprehension of mystery can ground a new spiritual culture.

Why does Dean single out jazz, film and football? Because, he says, they are distinctively American cultural forms that came into being to meet a pressing social and religious "need." Since Americans were a "dispossessed people" without a traditional culture to draw on, they invented a kind of music that mirrored their displacement: improvisational jazz.

Yet holding a mirror up to themselves through jazz could take them only so far. It could not fill their cultural void. So Americans invented a "new identity" for themselves via the fantasy world of the movies. Like jazz, film was a response to emptiness. Football was a response to displacement too, a "ritualized violence" that recapitulated the historic battle white Americans had fought to clear the wilderness of obstructions.

I think Dean's approach, while abstract and sketchy, is on the right track in two ways. Cultural practices as deeply engrained in America as football, film and jazz are not fully grasped if we see them only as secular entertainments. They are capable of expressing yearnings for a more vital life. Perhaps when fully embraced as ultimate concerns they are even able to spark the kind of "inverse insight" (Bernard Lonergan's term) that Dean calls "ironic." When an apparently secular cultural practice is undertaken with religious intensity, the practitioner may discover that it points beyond itself to a realm of transcendence. John Coltrane's quest "to live the truly religious life," as he put it himself, is one of many apt examples Dean cites to support his point.

The second way that Dean's perspective strikes me as promising is in his insistence that any viable common culture needs a spiritual basis. Nowadays, to argue for the idea even of a nonspiritual common culture (à la Richard Rorty) is to court dismissal by multiculturalists and pluralists, who often regard it as a cloak for white-male traditionalism. Yet Dean's analysis falls short because he never engages the arguments of either Rorty, with whom he disagrees, or Bellah, with whom he shares a great deal. He mentions them, but only in passing.

Moreover, Dean's historical analysis of American culture is inadequate. His view that Anglo-Americans were a displaced people cut off from their cultural roots is not supported by historical scholarship. Eighteenth-century America was a site of Anglicization as much as Americanization, and trans-Atlantic exchange was a basic cultural fact in America from the late 17th century until at least the 19th century if not the 20th. The central premise of Dean's argument, that Americans were a displaced people severed from European traditions, won't survive scrutiny. And if American culture has never been distinctive in the way that Dean imagines, then football, jazz and film can't have arisen to fill a distinctive America void.

Yet Dean should be praised for raising big questions that others avoid. His analysis of three popular secular practices, however incomplete, suggests a corresponding study that might look at religious practices invented in America: for example, Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism and Christian Science. One wonders if these cultural forms could be seen the way Dean sees football, jazz and film: as American sacred rituals capable of generating the inverse insight that America is rightly subject to judgment as well as deserving of celebration.