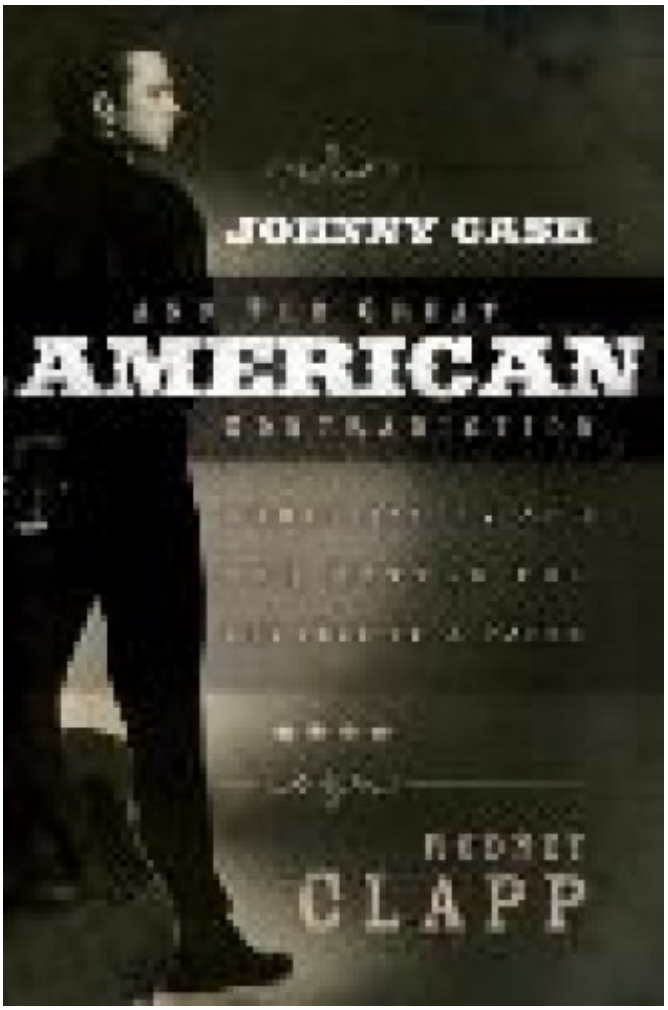
Johnny Cash and the Great American Contradiction: Christianity and the Battle for the Soul of a Nation

reviewed by Jason Byassee in the May 6, 2008 issue

In Review



Johnny Cash and the Great American Contradiction: Christianity and the Battle for the Soul of a Nation

Rodney Clapp

Westminster John Knox

Alasdair MacIntyre famously compared dying for the modern nation-state to dying for the phone company. One cannot imagine a more dismissive claim about this country for Americans, whether on the left or right, for whom the U.S. has a special place in God's saving dispensation.

Rodney Clapp sees Johnny Cash as an exemplar of American citizenship who lies between these extremes. America is not so absurdly impersonal, but neither is it God's Israel. It is more interesting than either caricature.

Clapp is a master observer of popular culture and a theologian in the tradition of Stanley Hauerwas. His book is a theologian's survey of Cash's extraordinary life and work, and also a tweak to his fellow Hauerwas readers: if American citizenship means Johnny Cash, it ain't all bad.

Not that the America to which Clapp and Cash are devoted as professing patriots makes sense. It is, as Clapp's title indicates, a "great contradiction." As a country we pride ourselves on having broken from old-world tradition, and yet we zealously keep the oldest tradition of them all by prizing redemptive violence. We cherish our individualism and yet wish deeply to trade our vast loneliness for community. We champion the free market and yet sympathize with the underdog.

For Clapp, these contradictions come out of the cultural heart of America: Dixie. The South, with its deep piety and its viciously violent racial history, is a microcosm of America. Republicans tapped into this culture with their "southern strategy" after the 1960s—appealing to the latent racism that lay under a thin veneer of opposition to government. The Republicans understood the culture. They tapped into everything that "imparts to us our sense of the American 'we,'" to which the left has been largely tone deaf because it fears all things religious and leans toward economic determinism. This culture is even more full of contradictions if you count the religious contradictions that are shot through our music. Jerry Lee Lewis is both a son of Pentecostals and a symbol of sexual liberation—his "great balls of fire" refers both to Pentecost and to other sorts of "shakin'."

Johnny Cash is exemplary for Clapp because he understood these contradictions, embodied them and crooned about them beautifully. Here was a man who "tithed" his music, singing one song in ten to or about God. One late compilation of his music is titled *Love*, *God*, *Murder*. Just the basics. This was a man who sang for Billy

Graham and yet, when he won a Grammy with almost no play from corporate Nashville's radio playlists, he thanked the industry for its support by taking out an ad in a trade magazine that showed the Man in Black with his middle finger raised at the photographer, his sneer as terrifying as ever. He was a follower of Jesus who was entirely without piety. And so his life and music fascinate.

Clapp sees Cash as an invitation to American democrats to practice democracy as "grownups," rather than moral infants. How odd that the religious right arose largely in Orange County, California—its thunderous denouncements of government spending made from a place created almost entirely by government spending on the defense industry. How strange our maudlin horror at the arrival of terrorism in the U.S. on 9/11—as though the Klan had not terrorized whole black communities out of existence for decades. How peculiar our love of the tradition of the frontier, with the cowboy as its icon (Clapp suggests that the plowboy would be more accurate), when corporations and the feds, not individuals, worked in tandem to tame the frontier. These are not topics you bring up with the average citizen or Christian. Clapp sees Cash as an invitation to grow up and practice the morally aware politics of the mature.

Cash sang about violence a great deal. But he never glamorized it or even justified it. Many of his most powerful songs and life experiences suggest identification with victimizers and victims—not with the morally unsullied. When Cash sang in prisons, he identified with prisoners. Though he never did hard time, people would approach him to say that their daddies had served time with him at some point. He knew he was no better than those accused and convicted. In fact, as a boy he felt guilty, rightly or wrongly, for his older brother Jack's death in an industrial accident. Jack refused to look at Johnny as he lay dying, and Cash grew up almost believing that he'd murdered his brother. "He never again thought of himself as innocent," Clapp writes. What a profound place of Christian identification—rather than embracing the American myth of innocence, Cash saw himself as a sinner.

Clapp also has a word for Christians who would say amen to his criticism of America but leave no place for patriotism or citizenship. Surely, he suggests, one can love one's own family while not despising other families, as one can love one's country without believing or blessing everything sent down from D.C.

The contradictions that are America are fascinating. They are signs of brokenness that call for interpretation, correction, even lament—not reasons to simply condemn

the whole. Cash loved his country while singing about its treatment of Indians like Ira Hayes, who raised the flag at Iwo Jima and then died drunk in a ditch after the feds took the Pimas' water rights. You can love a place like this if you're clear-eyed about its moral horrors as well as its glories. "Of this much I am certain," Clapp writes. "The man was a Christian, and he was an American. And so am I."

This is not a "gospel according to Johnny Cash" book. But Cash does preach. Friends made fun of me when I took to Cash's American Recordings series. That's old-man music, they said. I retorted that Cash had covered a song about addiction from Nine Inch Nails and shot a video so racy that MTV had censored it. If they would listen to "I Hung My Head," about a man who accidentally shoots another, they'd hear the gospel itself: "I orphaned his children, I widowed his wife. And all for no reason, just one piece of lead. I hung my head." As the killer stands at the gallows, off in the distance he sees the man he killed: "He come to fetch me, to kingdom come." That's the gospel: we're guilty of murder, and the one we murdered saves us. That's Johnny Cash. And that could be America.