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BOOK PROFILE:
JOHNNY CASH AND THE GREAT AMERICAN CONTRADICTION: CHRISTIANITY AND THE BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF A NATION, BY RODNEY CLAPP

A profile of Rodney Clapp. *Johnny Cash and the Great American Contradiction: Christianity and the Battle for the Soul of a Nation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008. xix + 159 pp. \$16.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-664-23088-3.

Rodney Clapp's *Johnny Cash and the Great American Contradiction* is not so much a book about Johnny Cash as it is on the American South. In fact, the book makes a good argument that to understand the current political and cultural milieu of the United States in 2008 one must understand the Southernification of the U.S. The book will be disappointing for those looking for a spiritual biography of Johnny — which this reader assumes is largely the target audience of the book — but it succeeds at making its argument and joins company with some of the best cultural theory texts available on American popular music.

The most interesting discussion in the book is Clapp's theological parsing of the Christianity of "southern music." He suggests three tropes: southern music identifies the hypocritical use of Christianity by politicians and others with power; the music often sings of a "faith genuinely held, but gone astray"; and similarly, "a faith genuinely held...but not always lived up to always and absolutely" (58-59). These "basic theological considerations" lead us to recognize, "understand," and "respond to the Great American Contradiction between holiness and hedonism" (59). Other primary contradictions include individualism and community; tradition and progress; guilt and innocence; and violence and peace.

A pervasive theme throughout the book is that Cash not only represented, but contributed to a significant cultural exchange between the Northern and Southern U.S. and led to some of the healing between the two among white Americans. Comparisons to Lincoln, both direct and indirect, abound (16-18). While Clapp acknowledges that to compare Cash to Lincoln might be a bit audacious, we should recall that, rock critic and theorist, Greil Marcus made similar claims about Elvis, writing in his now classic *Mystery Train* that the greatness of Elvis resides in his lincolnesque character. Clapp's argument is stronger than Marcus'. Elvis may have been more popular and died younger, but Cash maintained a deeper complexity in his music throughout his career,

and at the end of his career, Cash had achieved a new height of cultural relevance by bringing generations of music listeners together.

Thinking about popular music in such a serious manner is difficult to do, especially from a theological perspective. It is unlikely that casual readers – the ones searching for a spiritual biography – will stick around once Paul Tillich and “ultimate concern” become part of the discussion (beginning on p. 13). The theme of music having the cultural power to bring people together is refreshing in a time where the music industry is largely generically Balkanized and economically broken: clearly, the music industry prevents the lincolnesque power of popular music from being heard (65). Here we have a theological work that encounters Tennessee Williams, Rick Rubin, Herman Melville, and Michael Corleone along the way to conclude in an essay on the public and private tensions of baptism (121ff.). It is my hope that more serious engagements with popular culture continue to appear.

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