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

Rodney Clapp
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When Johnny Cash died in 2003, he left a gaping hole not only in the fabric of country music but also in the crazy quilt of American popular culture. The Man in Black, guitar slung over his shoulder like a gunfighter striding into town both to keep the peace and to tear the roadhouse down, embraced an image of mystery, loneliness, and individuality. Cash acted like a highwayman and an outlaw even though he held conservative religious and political beliefs.

In this ingenious book, Clapp, the editorial director at Brazos Press and author of numerous books on popular culture, uses Cash and his music as a means to examine the contradictions that exist within American Christianity. He argues that contemporary Christianity often embraces ideals that are contrary to the historical demands of the religion. Thus, he explores "America's simultaneous embrace of holiness and hedonism, its pining love of tradition as it carries on a headlong romantic affair with progress, its extreme individualism coursing beside a gigantic, gaping yearning for community, and its insistence on innocence at the same time it revels in violence." Cash exemplifies such struggles in his own music, and Clapp focuses, for example, on the late-career song, "The Man Comes Around," to demonstrate the ways that Cash's Christian faith gave him the strength to admit lonesomeness, need, and vulnerability.

Clapp's eloquent little book is a must-read for an understanding of the relationship between contemporary American Christianity and popular culture.

Henry L. Carrigan