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Review of 'Spirits Rejoice' by Jason C Bivins

Vaughan S Roberts
Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion

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Donald Trump was ushered into office by capturing roughly eight in ten conservative Protestant votes. To be sure, a culture war paradigm is not the best framework for making sense of the religion and politics connection today. However, contentiousness abounds, comity is scarce, and religious divisions in political outlooks beyond the large-scale issues tackled in *Secular Faith* remain pronounced.

Secondly, there are certainly cases where religion did not simply respond to social change but was, it seems, an engine for social change. The most famous and convincing of these cases is African American social and political activism during the Civil Rights Movement. In an early and oblique reference to this period in American history, Smith correctly acknowledges that white pastors were often careful to avoid positions that seemed too ‘extreme’ during the Civil Rights era. However, Black congregations were central platforms for Civil Rights activism among African Americans. Thus, arguments about the largely reactive nature of religion run into some challenges when the number of historical cases is expanded and where social cleavages such as race–ethnicity are concerned. These debates about religion causing change or merely reacting to it stretch, of course, back as far as Marx and Weber, as Smith readily acknowledges. While the arguments and supporting data presented in this book are quite compelling and are masterfully rendered for the cases under investigation, an overarching (somewhat nomothetic) framework for making sense of religion and social change always raises pressing questions about significant cases to the contrary. None of this is said to detract from the excellent work of scholarship and meticulously researched monograph that is *Secular Faith*. This book is an engaging read and one that will provoke thoughtful discussion for years to come.

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A recurring analogy in Jason Bivins’s insightful book on the relationship between religion in the US and jazz is the *griot*/*griotte*—travelling poets, musicians, and storytellers, who maintain a tradition of oral history in parts of West Africa. At one level, Bivins himself stands within this narrative inheritance as he shares a fascinating story of the relationship between different forms of jazz and various expressions of faith. However, this is more than a good story as he brings together his academic insights into religion with his enthusiasm for his favourite musical *genre*.

In the opening chapter Bivins makes a bold claim for jazz: “It is no longer possible to understand the religions of the United States since 1900 without making central this music.” (14–15) However, he is acutely aware that both categories of ‘jazz’ and ‘religion’ are very slippery. His title *Spirits Rejoice!* comes from a mid-1960s track by Albert Ayler and gives an indication of the breadth that his definition of religion encompasses. Although Bivins
acknowledges the widespread distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, he clearly feels that such a distinction is of limited value. Thus religion is: “In some ways whatever musicians say it is, since it is from these avowals that emerge the lipstick traces, ephemera, and evocations reflecting on the category ‘religion’ itself.” (20) By the same measure, jazz is an equally elusive term, such that trying to pin it down is like trying to “grab smoke” (25). With such an all-encompassing approach to both religion and jazz the author sets himself a daunting task in bringing the two together in what he calls a “sonic chronicle” (110) or a narrative which does justice to both.

Bivins’s methodology enables him to make some absorbing links between a wide range of jazz musicians and their spiritual wellsprings. To take just one example: he notes the importance that religious music from the Holiness church played in the musical and spiritual formation of Charles Mingus. African American history and religion, Duke Ellington, blues and gospel music also played a key role in Mingus’s compositions and live performances. But it would be a mistake to make a simple connection between this artist’s faith and music. His work was also affected by life events and social conditions—the Watts riots, the assassination of Malcolm X, anger at a white Congress all played a part. Even while attending church he read widely: on karma yoga, theosophy, reincarnation, Vedanta. In Bivins’s judgement: “Far outside the simple, deceptive identification with Christianity, Mingus revealed what was in his music all along, a complex brume of the sacred.” (74)

The author then argues that this swirling mist can flow in many different directions. For instance, in his discussion of guitarist John Carter he observes that even when music does not “obviously code the sacred, then, it may nonetheless ineluctably resonate with it” (107) by linking and celebrating a variety of themes from history, community, religion, and more. An important concept here for Bivins is ritual, which works in a number of ways. For example, it creates a sense of spirituality: “improvised musical performance facilitates becoming religious” because some musicians are seeking “to create the conditions for spirits to manifest” (156). Furthermore, musical ritual consciously and unconsciously helps to create religious identity for performers, audience, and a wider community that extends well beyond the collection of jazz aficionados. Biovins argues that this has been seriously neglected “in our stories of American religion” (263).

Human bodies remain vital locations for musical and religious expression, the importance of which is highlighted in the conclusion where the author teases out the significance of the embodied nature of jazz and religion. It is this physicality which enables participants and observers to begin to understand the nature of the cultural brume he is exploring: “Both ‘jazz’ and ‘religion’ are formed and embodied in multiple ways … [creating] an archive of sound and words improvising on the condition of smokiness” (270, emphasis in original).

I am sure that for some readers, Bivins himself would be too much of a griot—telling a tale of religion and jazz, well illustrated by biographies of musicians and artists. That aside, I would argue that this is nevertheless an important contribution to the ever growing body of academic work which explores the interaction between the categories of popular culture and religion.