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Displacing the Divine: The Minister in the Mirror of American Fiction (Religion and American Culture)

Douglas Alan Walrath

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As religious leaders, ministers are often assumed to embody the faith of the institution they represent. As cultural symbols, they reflect subtle changes in society and belief-specifically people's perception of God and the evolving role of the church. For more than forty years, Douglas Alan Walrath has tracked changing patterns of belief and church participation in American society, and his research has revealed a particularly fascinating trend: portrayals of ministers in American fiction mirror changing perceptions of the Protestant church and a Protestant God.

From the novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who portrays ministers as faithful Calvinists, to the works of Herman Melville, who challenges Calvinism to its very core, Walrath considers a variety of fictional ministers, including Garrison Keillor's Lake Woebegon Lutherans and Gail Godwin's women clergy. He identifies a range of types: religious misfits, harsh Puritans, incorrigible scoundrels, secular businessmen, perpetrators of oppression, victims of belief, prudent believers, phony preachers, reactionaries, and social activists. He concludes with the modern legacy of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century images of ministers, which highlights the ongoing challenges that skepticism, secularization, and science have brought to today's religious leaders and fictional counterparts. *Displacing the Divine* offers a novel encounter with social change, giving the reader access, through the intimacy and humanity of literature, to the evolving character of an American tradition.

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