

The Americanist: An interview with Ken Burns

by [Timothy Larsen](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

Ken Burns's acclaimed documentaries include The Civil War, Baseball, Jazz and, most recently, an account of World War II titled The War. His work has won Emmys, Grammys and numerous other awards and has been nominated for Academy Awards. He is working on a series on the national parks.

What is your own religious background and identity?

I was born an Episcopalian and was at best a haphazard attendee. I have had a rich spiritual life that has its roots in Christianity, but I have not been afraid to explore. I find myself in the tradition of the founders—what Thomas Jefferson would call a deist, I guess—interested less in the organized forms of religion than in spiritual pursuit as a way toward the perfectibility of an imperfectible species called human beings.

One of your earliest films was about the Shakers. What attracted you to that subject?

The thing that draws anyone to a spiritual pursuit—feeling a larger “why,” a why bigger than oneself. I remember driving past Hancock Shaker Village in western Massachusetts, seeing the exquisite proportions of a round, stone barn, slamming on the brakes and going to the museum, then reading meticulously the interpretive materials on the walls—and still needing to know more. Who were these people?

There is a theory of secularization according to which modernization means that religion is becoming less and less significant in the West. The Shakers are literally dying out. Were you thinking in that framework at that time? Do you think religion will become less significant in the American experience?

One looks at Western Europe and sees the decline of the formal teachings of faith. One is mindful of a human history that is filled with so much slaughter and

inhumanity, which is quite often sponsored by religions or is the result of tensions between religions. Part of you wants to dispense with the unnecessary structures of a church in favor of what is part of the genius of the United States—being able to worship God on my own.

At the same time, I would hope that spirituality does not succumb to the logic of reason and empiricism. We are all faced daily with mysteries beyond our comprehension. Part of what we do in literature and in art, as well as in religion, is attempt to superimpose some order, some meaning, on what seems to be the randomness of the cosmos. In that superimposition are often the most beautiful things that human beings do—not just in the production of art and literature or the glory of cathedrals but in human relations. I would hope with every fiber of my being that that would not leave us.

Do you have any plans to return sometime to religious subject matter?

You can't approach American history in any form without religion entering in. Would I choose it as the main topic again, as I've done with *The Shakers*? I don't know. But if you look, for example, at my most recent film, *The War*, you will see that issues of faith and spirituality abound in it, in very poignant moments and in humorous ones. At Anzio, where the Germans had the American troops pinned down, one soldier says, "God help us." And then he adds, "Don't send Jesus. You come yourself. This is no place for children." At one point when we were in the editing room with nothing better to do, we counted a dozen references to spirituality or God or faith in every episode.

It's also there in my baseball series. On April 17, 1947, when Jack Roosevelt Robinson, the grandson of a slave, made his way to first base, becoming the first African American in the modern era to play at the major-league level, it was Passover. The youngest male in a family in Brooklyn, as I recall, was asking the familiar question, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The father said, "Because a black man is playing in major-league baseball." That still brings tears to my eyes.

At the heart, every religious teaching is about reconciliation. It is about making one out of the many. It is *e pluribus unum*. All of my films are about that in some way.

It seems that you choose subjects that you think are worth celebrating. Do you think that the Christian faith in the American experience is worth

celebrating?

Absolutely. I think I am leery about pursuing it in a direct way—only because it then becomes appropriated by those who wish to use religion as a bludgeon, as a tool, as a political wedge, and that is not the purpose of religion or what I'm about. My mission—and I'm happy to say that there is a huge evangelical dimension to what I'm doing—is preaching the gospel of Americanism, but one that is mindful of the fact that it is not separated from questions of the spirit and the soul's survival.

Having said that, I think it's also important to say that I believe absolutely in the separation of church and state. I would make the wall even bigger and wider. The genius of America, again, is being able to worship God on our own. When religion becomes a force in government, it has lost its *raison d'être*.

What is “the gospel of Americanism” to you?

The image in my mind is of free electrons in an atom, careening in random ways. It's the associations of certain political and personal impulses toward freedom, a certain relationship to the land and place, and the willingness to understand that a component of my participation is being bound back to the whole that is bigger than myself. We watch Europe—states that have spent a lot of time fighting each other—now finding strength in a common market. But that is something Americans figured out early on.

Are there religious leaders, either historical or today, whom you particularly admire?

I would like nothing more than to do a biographical film on Martin Luther King Jr. I think he was the epitome of a great religious leader—someone who could be utterly American, bring a political and social as well as a spiritual dimension, and do so with authenticity and grace, so that his work did not become a cudgel with which to separate people.

Do you ever think about doing a story that does not have an American theme?

I think about it all the time, but I can't seem to do that. It may be like marrying outside my religion. My religion is here, this is what I know. I can be drawn in an abstract or intellectual way to a subject, but what finally pulls the trigger for me is a

deeply emotional response to something. And the only ones that I've had this response to are American subjects.

I was approached a number of years ago to see if I was interested in doing a film on Freud and C. S. Lewis, having as its main theme the question of faith. Freud spent his entire life trying to prove the folly of religion. C. S. Lewis grew up in the world that Freud helped to create and came up with an almost scientific proof of God's existence. It could have been a wonderful project, but I found myself interested only in the time that Freud visited Worcester, Massachusetts!

What would you think of working on subject matter such as the history of evangelicalism, the Roman Catholic experience in America, the ministry of historic mainline Protestant churches, or the Mormons?

I find the Mormons hugely interesting. In my history film *The West*, one of the story lines follows the Mormon experience. I could see revisiting that anytime. And I could see myself tackling any of the topics you have brought up. I made a film about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in which the story of the temperance movement intersected with religion. Happily, abolitionism was born in the church. History intersects with religion all the time. I am working on a film on the history of Prohibition right now. Prohibition too, of course, was born in the church.

I am never far away from these concerns. In a sense, I make the same film over and over. Each film asks the same deceptively simply question: Who am I? This is the resounding question that has animated all the great religions: Why am I here? What is my purpose? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is bigger than me? One can ask that question standing on the edge of Yosemite Valley, as naturalist John Muir did, or standing in awe on the rim of the Grand Canyon and reaching out for the hand of someone next to you as you look at—as the first episode of my series *The National Parks* describes it—"the scripture of nature."