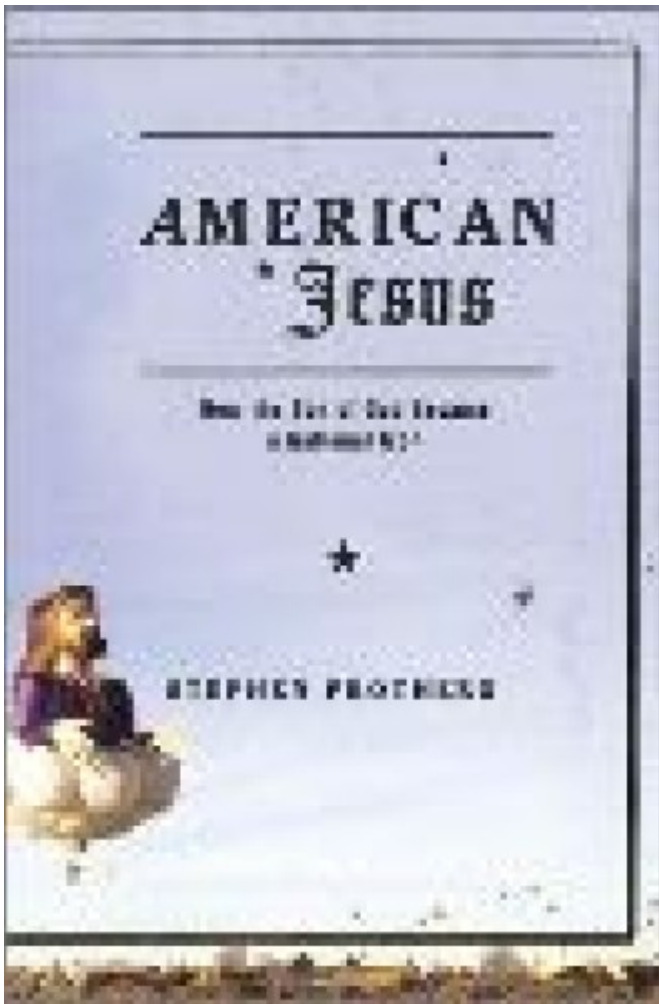


# American idol

By [Randall Balmer](#) in the [July 13, 2004](#) issue

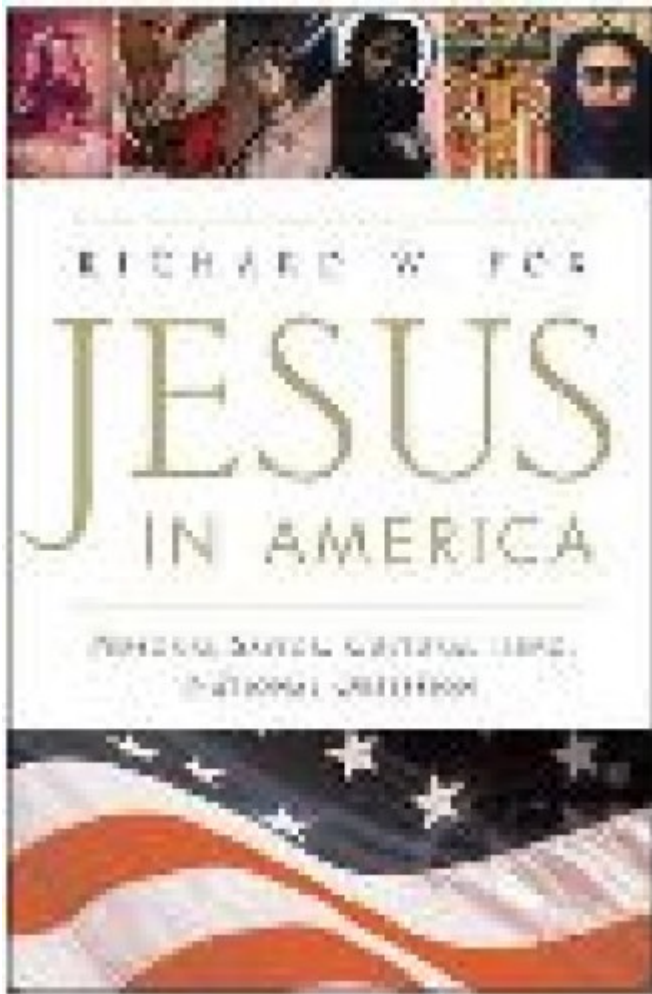
## In Review



## **American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon**

Stephen Prothero

Farrar, Straus & Giroux



## **Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession**

Richard Wightman Fox  
HarperSanFrancisco

For Stephen Prothero and Richard Wightman Fox, the bad news is that they each published a book about Jesus and American culture at roughly the same time (calling to mind the 1981 contemporaneous publication of books on sexual mores in 19th-century utopian movements, authored by Louis J. Kern and Lawrence Foster). The good news is that both *Jesus in America* and *American Jesus* appeared amid the media frenzy over the portrayal of Jesus in Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*.

The topic is timely, but if the authors are correct, there has seldom been a moment in American history when a discussion of Jesus was not relevant. The American

Jesus, Prothero writes, “has been something of a chameleon,” and he amply demonstrates that with a deft survey of how Jesus has been appropriated by virtually all Americans, Christians or not. While Fox confines his treatment largely to *Christian* interpretations of Jesus in North America, Prothero ranges more broadly to include Mormon, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist views. “Jesus became a major personality in the United States because of the ability of religious insiders to make him culturally inescapable,” Prothero writes. “He became a national icon because outsiders have always felt free to interpret him in their own fashion.”

Inevitably, both Fox and Prothero traverse some of the same territory, from Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps* and Bruce Barton’s *The Man Nobody Knows* to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell* and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (in which Willem Dafoe, playing the title character, memorably articulated his lines through the entire film without moving his jaw). Both Prothero and Fox discuss Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ* and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise’s December 1925 lecture, “A Jew’s View of Jesus.” They ruminate about the feminine Jesus wrought by the 19th-century cult of domesticity and the masculine images of Jesus conjured by the Social Gospel. Both attribute Americans’ libertine reinterpretations of Jesus to Thomas Jefferson, and both note the radical demise of the austere, Calvinistic deity around the turn of the 19th century. Neither reflects on the paradox, however, that Arminianism, the ideological truncheon used to topple Calvinism, gave rise to two divergent streams of Christianity: Finneyite revivalism, on the one hand, and Unitarianism *cum* Transcendentalism, on the other.

In the genocidal 20th century, Americans had to choose between Jesus as pacifist and Jesus as avenger of evil. During the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1910s and 1920s and throughout the remainder of the century, liberals opted for a soft-breasted Jesus who functioned as moral exemplar, a kind of superstar older brother whose attainments in the classroom and on the athletic field lay just beyond the ken of younger, less talented siblings. Conservatives, on the other hand, confused God the Son with God the Father, a stern and demanding presence who brooked no nonsense. Fox quotes Harry Emerson Fosdick: “What present-day critics of liberalism often fail to see,” Fosdick wrote in 1956, “is its absolute necessity to multitudes of us who would not have been Christians at all unless we could thus have escaped the bondage of the then reigning [turn-of-the-20th-century] orthodoxy.”

Curiously, both authors seem rather uncurious about why Americans perpetually reinvent Jesus to their own purposes; Prothero comes closest when he talks about “the power of religious dissent.” The fuller explanation, I suspect, lies somewhere near the interstices of religious dissent, the Protestant priesthood of believers, the First Amendment, multiculturalism and consumerism. Americans’ penchant for novelty and innovation is evident everywhere from the marketplace to the megachurches, so it should not be surprising that we want to remake Jesus again and again. The real wonder is the durability of Jesus as a figure upon whom we thrust our anxieties and aspirations. Despite all the rhetoric about multiculturalism and religious pluralism, the United States is still overwhelmingly Christian, and any religion angling for a market share must, sooner or later, deal with Jesus.

These two books, however, present less a sustained argument than a kind of stringing together of anecdotes. Fox’s effort borders on encyclopedic, and it makes for some rather clumsy transitions—for example, the segue from Billy Graham to Martin Luther King Jr. to Dorothy Day or from Jim Wallis to Nicholas Kristof to T. D. Jakes.

(Although the Fox book arrives with encomiastic comments from several leading historians of American religion, *Jesus in America* contains several errors. Fox pegs the publication of Horace Bushnell’s *Christian Nurture* at 1861, rather than 1847, for instance, and he credits Robert Schuller with founding Garden Grove Community Church in the 1940s—a significant accomplishment, and all the more remarkable considering that Schuller did not leave Illinois for southern California until 1955.)

In an effort to reckon with the effects of the American obsession with Jesus, both authors repair finally to H. Richard Niebuhr. Prothero quotes *The Church Against the World*, in which Niebuhr warns that when the followers of Jesus grow too comfortable with the culture, “faith loses its force, . . . discipline is relaxed, repentance grows formal, corruption enters with idolatry, and the church, tied to the culture which it sponsored, suffers corruption with it.” “The ironic fate of Jesus in America,” Fox writes, paraphrasing Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*, “was to end up being worshiped by many Christians who thought they were solely submitting to his authority when they were actually subjecting him to the authority of their personal obsessions or their culture’s norms.”

Niebuhr’s admonitions are timely. Americans’ eclectic spirituality threatens to reduce Jesus to a kind of talisman, and politicians compete with one another to have Jesus baptize their political schemes, be it the abolition of the federal Department of

Education in the 1980s or the more recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. American culture, as both Fox and Prothero overwhelmingly demonstrate, presents Jesus in many guises. Historians and social critics will ruminate at length about this phenomenon, but for the believer, amid all the confusing and contradictory images of Jesus in contemporary America, the central question remains the one Jesus himself posed to Peter: “Who do *you* say that I am?”