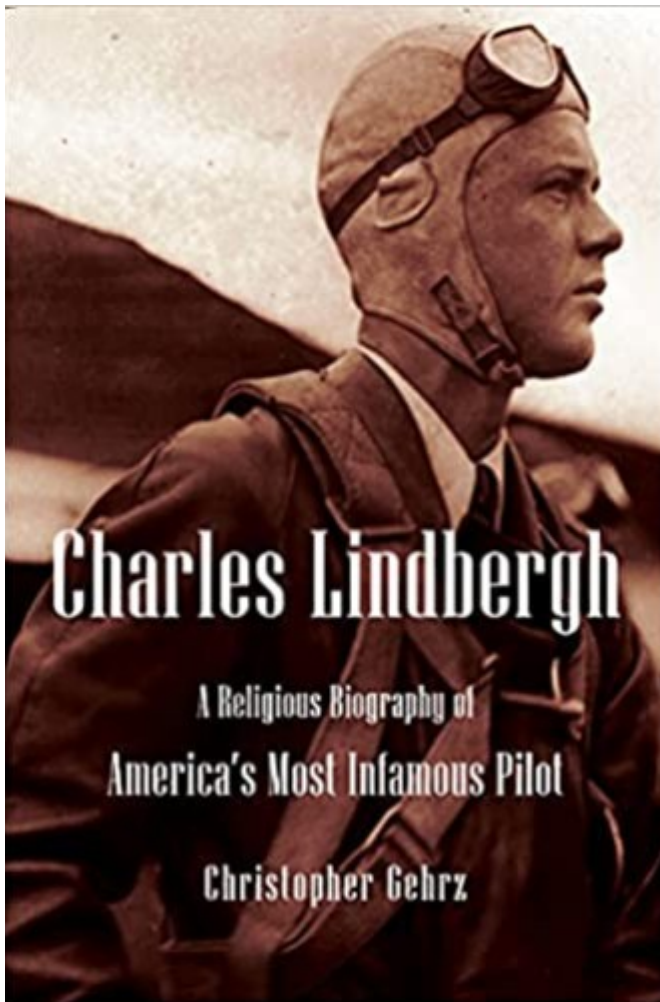


The complicated Lindbergh

It's hard to strike the right balance in a biography of the heroic aviator and antisemitic activist. Christopher Gehrz succeeds brilliantly.

by [Grant Wacker](#) in the [December 15, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Charles Lindbergh

A Religious Biography of America's Most Infamous Pilot

By Christopher Gehrz
Eerdmans

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On Sunday morning, May 22, 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh, not yet 26 years old, awoke to find himself “the most famous man in the world.” In the previous two days he had flown the *Spirit of St. Louis*, a single-engine monoplane, nonstop from New York to Paris. During the 33.5-hour trip, the young pilot battled rain, icicles, and fatigue. At one point the plane dipped to ten feet above the waves. By universal assent it was a feat of extraordinary bravery.

Though Lindbergh was not the first person to soar across the Atlantic, he was the first to do it alone. When he touched down just before midnight, 150,000 fans were lining the runway. Back home, President Calvin Coolidge bestowed the Congressional Medal of Honor on him, and New York City feted him with a ticker-tape parade. One journalist said that the crowds behaved as if the “Lone Eagle” had walked, not flown, across the ocean.

Lindbergh may well rank as the brightest star in the galaxy of 1920s celebrities, a group that included Louis Armstrong, Jack Dempsey, Greta Garbo, Aimee McPherson, Babe Ruth, and Billy Sunday. But while the other celebrities remain in Americans' collective memory basically for one thing—jazz, boxing, acting, healing, baseball, and preaching, respectively—Lindbergh lingers for a host of reasons.

Some were personal and some were public. The most personal was Lindbergh's self-presentation: tall, handsome, laconic, unassuming—and Nordic White. He is also remembered for the resilience that he and his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, displayed after the kidnapping and brutal murder of their infant son in 1932.

Then there was Lindbergh's public opposition to American entry into World War II, his service to his country, flying 50 combat missions after the war started, and his postwar work as an explorer, environmentalist, pioneer of aviation technology, critic of American militarism, inventor of a lifesaving medical device, and international goodwill ambassador, right up until his death in 1974 at age 72.

That said, many Americans remember Lindbergh for traits of another sort, not heroic but toxic. In the 1920s and 1930s, he was unapologetically racist and anti-Jewish. Those attitudes subsided, at least in public, as he grew older, but they never disappeared. In 2003, evidence of serial adultery and multiple secret families emerged, further tarnishing his reputation.

Any Lindbergh biographer faces a challenge: to tell the truth about the past, both the good and the bad, with both empathy and unflinching honesty. Christopher Gehrz, a history professor at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, succeeds brilliantly. His biography is crisply written, deeply researched, and cogently argued. Jacket blurbs are not always a good index of what lies ahead, but in this case they are. One rarely sees so many, so glowing, and from so many distinguished reviewers.

The focus of the book is on Lindbergh's religious views. Born in 1902, he grew up in Little Falls, Minnesota, a small farming community in the center of the state. His parents were members of the local Congregational church, but nominal at best. Lindbergh's religious formation was thin. He entered adulthood untethered by the disciplines of church or creed.

That scant preparation did not mean that Lindbergh lacked faith entirely, however. An early love of hiking fostered an almost Emersonian sense of the divinity of nature. This orientation coexisted with an equally strong love for the miracles of technology. He was never easy with a purely spiritual or a purely material understanding of the world. It was both at once, and the line between them was porous. To the end of his life, the pilot insisted, without qualification, that "ghostly presences" had accompanied him on his signature flight across the sea.

More a pantheist than a theist, Lindbergh held unconventional views of Jesus and of the Bible. Jesus was a good moral philosopher but hardly the Son of God. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, rewarded close reading. In 1944, when Lindbergh was secretly deployed to the South Pacific, space limitations permitted only one book. He took a New Testament.

Organized Christianity was not in the cards either. He rarely attended church, despised dogma, disliked missionaries, and sympathized with non-Christian religions, especially those he regarded as "primitive." For a time, he flirted with Frank N. D. Buchman's amorphously Christian Moral Re-Armament movement, but

he never grew serious about it. Historic Christian notions of sin, redemption, personal morality, and social justice never made the cut.

Even so, Lindbergh proved to be an apostle of the growing coalescence of aviation technology and a quasi-Christian myth of the air. In the 1920s and 1930s, many Americans (and others) saw aviation not only as one of the great advances of technology—comparable to the printing revolution of the 16th century—but also as a divine gift to humans. In some ways the shift was both christological and eschatological, for it signaled a fundamentally new era of human possibility and destiny.

Why do Lindbergh's religious views merit serious scrutiny? Gehrz suggests that they prefigure the current rush from religion to spirituality. I see two additional reasons. Lindbergh was a celebrity, perhaps uniquely famous, and his ideas about pretty much anything likely influenced millions. They also represent one person's honest effort to find sure footing when the old certitudes were no longer available.

Yet one thing is certain. Karl Barth he wasn't.

Until 1941, when the evil of Hitler's intentions became indisputably clear, Lindbergh stridently opposed President Franklin Roosevelt's inclination to align the nation with the Allies. Like many public intellectuals and a majority of ordinary folk, Lindbergh felt that the Great War, which took millions of lives and ended in a pointless truce, proved that the United States had nothing to gain by entangling itself in another one of Europe's bloody conflicts. Additional factors influenced his thinking. He admired Germany's aviation prowess, believed that the chances of winning a war against the Axis powers were slim, and feared Communists more than Nazis. Still, when Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, he changed his mind without hesitation.

Lindbergh held grave reservations about whether Black people and Jews could be assimilated into mainstream American life. His racism and antisemitism grew from an underlying conviction that civilization requires Americans to enhance the "quality of life." That ideal summons people selectively to nourish the survival of those who will do the most to advance Western civilization. He unapologetically argued that the White race bore that burden by virtue of innate traits and inherited talents. He did not call for forced sterilization (as jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes did), but he did urge other forms of eugenics, measures to disenfranchise Black people, and quotas to

curb Jewish immigration.

In short, in Lindbergh's mind, a democracy that rests on a premise of equality, rather than quality, is destined for failure. Neither Christianity nor the great streams of Western history support it. The only sensible posture is to accept the inherent stratification of society and forthrightly favor the most favored.

How then should we evaluate Lindbergh? Can we ever make sense of a person who contains such terrible contradictions? Surely, he was an authentic American hero and, just as surely, an authentic American tragedy.