

Book Reviews

American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon. By Stephen Prothero. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003. 364pp. \$41.50 (cloth).

Stephen Prothero's cultural-historical study of the icon of Jesus in American history argues convincingly that the historian has to reckon with Jesus if he or she is to fully appreciate American culture (p. 287). Although the author has done extensive research and presented a multifaceted christological image in well-written form, his study omits critical aspects of Christian historical theology and ecclesiology. As a result, its reconstruction of the development of Jesus iconography fails to give due attention to phenomena such as Fundamentalism and biblicism, and to subtle but relevant distinctions in Reformed church history; it also lacks awareness of issues concerning biblical texts and hermeneutics. Yet all these issues are very relevant to the author's subject.

American Jesus is an exploration of how America has viewed the ubiquitous figure of Jesus from the days of Puritan New England to the present. Researching biographies, musicals, novels, popular hymns, spirituals, film, and visual arts, Prothero argues that Jesus became a national icon in three overlapping stages (p. 13f). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century, evangelical Christians began to conceptualize Jesus apart from the Calvinist creeds of Puritanism; the image of God as a wrathful Father figure receded to be replaced by a more endearing Jesus figure. The second stage commenced in the decades immediately following the Civil War (1861-1865), when the influence of Darwinism, higher biblical criticism, and comparative religious studies prompted liberal Protestants to "disentangle" Jesus from the Bible: *solus Jesus* replaced the Reformation emphasis on *sola scriptura*. The third and final stage of this American religious revolution "liberated" Jesus from Christianity itself through the influence of Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist immigrant communities.

Prothero traces this development in more detail in two cultural-religious spheres (p. 15). The first is the White Protestant community in which Jesus is 'resurrected' in various forms as an Enlightened Sage, a Sweet Savior, a Manly Redeemer, and a Superstar. Although each image was analogous to cultural events or trends (e.g. the feminization of Enlightenment America in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced the domestic portrayal of a gentle Jesus), each was similar in that it affirmed American culture. The second sphere consisted of communities outside the White Protestant mainstream, such as the Mormon, Black, Jewish, and Oriental cultures. The icon of Jesus "reincarnated" in each of these communities had his own unique characteristics: however, they all reflected a Jesus that suited their respective religious paradigms and existential agendas. In contrast to the resurrected christologies of the first category, Jesus was imaged as counter-cultural.

So what exactly did Americans do with the figure of Jesus? In a regression of creedal, biblical, and Christian influences, they fashioned a Jesus that accommodated and projected their own cultural ideals. Through a reciprocal process in which the historical Jesus of the Bible and the Christ of faith in American consciousness mutually influenced each other, the American Jesus eventually emerged as a malleable entity, congruent with the ideals of any cultural group that embraced him (p. 297). Although the iconic Jesus that evolved among mainstream Protestantism retained the major Christological doctrines of the Bible—such as the virgin birth, divine nature, atoning death, and bodily resurrection—emphasis on these were replaced by a fixation on the humanity of an approachable, friendly Jesus (p. 83). The Jewish community did not adhere to biblical Christological orthodoxy, and viewed Jesus only as an outstanding teacher and moral example. The Oriental community viewed Jesus as a special type of conduit through which an individual could access a higher Being. The evolution of this iconic Jesus produced a figure more intimate and personal than the emotionally distant Father figure, more human than divine, and not divine at all in many cases (p. 55). Thus, the author argues that different cultural agendas determined the popular image(s) of Jesus far more than biblical concepts did.

Stephen Prothero has done commendable work in consulting a wide variety of sources in his quest to find the Jesus of popular America. His book makes a valuable contribution to recent developments in historiography, such as the study of popular culture and the increasing interest in interdisciplinary approaches. His discussion of a Jesus figure that has multiple representations reflects the influence of post-modernism. The text is well written, and though apparently geared towards the amateur historian, is still an informative read for the professional. The content could be improved in terms of visual representations: some images hardly discussed in the text were included, while others discussed extensively were not, such as the *Head of Christ* portraits created by Heinrich Hofmann, Warner Sallman, and Richard Hook.

Prothero's scheme of Jesus' gradual "liberation" from creeds, the Bible, and eventually Christianity itself is difficult to reconcile with the empirical evidence. In particular, his claim that American religious culture "disentangled" Jesus from the Bible is questionable (p. 250). Historical—ecclesiastical evidence can be found to support the contention that all main branches of American Christianity—Puritanism, Evangelicalism, Liberal Protestantism, and Fundamentalism—considered the Bible as the primary referent in their understanding of Jesus. Of course, biblical hermeneutics determined a wide variety of interpretations, including both Orthodox and non-Orthodox portrayals, but the Gospel narrative figured in virtually all their respective depictions; even the recent *Jesus Seminar* has taken the Gospel accounts as its primary referent in attempting to reconstruct the figure of Jesus. The author's contention that Warner Sallman's image of Jesus shown only from neck up, unconnected with any

biblical narrative context, demonstrates the artist's intent to disentangle Jesus from the Bible strikes this reader as somewhat simplistic (p. 227). Ironically, Prothero seems to undermine his own argument by constantly noting the biblicism operative in both the Christian and the non-Christian movements (pp. 113, 144, 207, 296). The author has underestimated the influence *sola scriptura* has retained in American cultural history.

Prothero's Durkheimian thesis posits a Jesus who is no more than a projection of the collective ideal (p. 101). However, if the cultural Jesus remains attached to the Gospel account, as is arguably evident throughout American religious history, Prothero's argument becomes difficult to sustain. Of course the image of Jesus is always changing: an inherent aspect of Incarnation is accommodation. In order for Jesus to be relevant to any culture or individual bound in historical circumstances, a degree of adaptation is required. However, theoretically, an accommodating or changing Jesus does not necessitate a completely relativistic Jesus. The empirical historian may argue that the evidence of popular religious culture in America supports a relevant Jesus whose image remains closely connected to the portrayal found in the Bible.

The interdisciplinary approach adopted by *American Jesus* is an emerging trend in historiography, one that is welcome but comes with potential pitfalls. Prothero's book inadvertently illustrates a number of these hazards. A study of religious history demands a more exact and nuanced understanding of ecclesiastical entities, theological distinctions, and biblical expertise than the author has offered. For example, he apparently considers New England Puritanism and Calvinism to be synonymous, and his unilinear concept of Calvinism is not representative of the tradition's multifaceted theological development (p. 57). Phrases such as "Jesus trumps the Father" may sound catchy, but betray ignorance of the complexity of inter-Trinitarian relations (p. 13). And the casual statement that Paul is not interested in the historical Jesus is inaccurate in light of such texts as Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15 (p. 278). An historically credible reconstruction of the popular perception of Jesus requires more attention to the details of disciplines pertinent to the main subject. Neglect of these elements gives the impression that Prothero has constructed an argument more of his own making than derived from comprehensive analysis of historical evidence. Increased familiarity with these areas would not only have augmented his thesis substantially, but also made it more compelling.

American Jesus covers an extensive amount of material, is informative, and is indispensable for anyone interested in cultural-historical studies of Jesus and America. Although the author's apparent inattention to some theological-historical factors makes his interpretations susceptible to challenge, he has produced a work that underscores the increasing interest in religion as a motivating factor in American as well as global society.

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