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

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Stephen Prothero. *American Jesus:  
How the Son of God Became a National Icon.*

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003

Reviewed by Patrick Q. Mason

When Jesus asked his disciples, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” they answered that some rumored him to be John the Baptist, others said he was Elijah, and still others thought he was Jeremiah or another one of the prophets. Jesus then pointed the question directly at the disciples, to which Peter responded with the famous declaration, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:13–16).

In his book *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, Stephen Prothero, Professor of Religion at Boston University, asks the same question: who do people say Jesus is? The respondents to his query, however, are not the ancient apostles but rather modern Americans. While many share Peter’s testimony that Jesus is the Messiah and the divine Son of God, American Christians have also portrayed Jesus as “black and white, male and female, straight and gay, a socialist and a capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a Ku Klux Klansman and a civil rights agitator.” Americans more broadly have transformed him into “an athlete and an aesthete, a polygamist and a celibate, an advertising man and a mountaineer, a Hindu deity and a Buddha-to-be” (8–9). Jesus, it seems, has excelled Paul in becoming “all things to all men” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Prothero discovers in this kaleidoscope of opinions about Jesus the very essence, character, and vitality of American religion, which thrives in a paradoxically Christian and plural, secular and religious culture. A Christian majority has made Jesus inescapable, but over the years he has proven remarkably malleable in the hands of Americans of all stripes. The myriad ways in which he has been interpreted demonstrates his ability to serve as a kind of Rorschach test in telling us about Americans’ hopes and fears and their relationship to the broader culture. The United States is no longer (if it ever was) a Christian country, but Prothero convincingly demonstrates that it is still very much a “Jesus nation,” perhaps more now

than ever. Jesus has become as American as apple pie, and everyone has their own favorite recipe.

What explains the enduring popularity of Jesus in America even while mainline Protestant churches are hemorrhaging members and secularism shows no sign of retreat? Certainly the answer is related to the burgeoning strength of evangelical Protestantism, but Prothero argues that Americans' near-universal love of and fascination with Jesus is rooted in his amazing ability to appeal both to religious insiders (Protestants) as well as dissenters such as Mormons, African Americans, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. (Oddly, Catholics appear here in neither category and are virtually absent from the book.) America's religious outsiders not only claim Jesus as theirs, but they have the audacity to assert that they understand him better than the insiders do. Rather than simply consuming mainstream images of Jesus, they fashion their own and then declare them authentic. Indeed, according to Prothero, it is the many appropriations of Jesus by those who stand outside the religious and cultural center that has transformed him from a narrow theological figure to a national celebrity. This adoption of Jesus by virtually everyone in America shows that "the public power of Christianity, while undeniable, is not absolute, that Christians do not have a monopoly, even on the central figure of their tradition" (302).

Prothero makes the disclaimer that *American Jesus* is about "Jesus the person, not Christ the theological sign" (9). He does not entirely ignore theology, but for him the careful writings of learned Christian clerics represent only one ingredient (and a relatively small one at that) in the formulation of Jesus's many American identities. Because Prothero is respectful of each group's interpretation of Jesus, he does not declare any one to be "true," leaving that task to individual believers and churches. *American Jesus* is an unabashed cultural history that considers representations of Jesus not just in missionary tracts, sermons, and theological treatises, but also in novels, biographies, films, music, and the visual arts—created, importantly, by Christians and non-Christians alike. Indeed, if there is a flaw in Prothero's analysis, it is his overemphasis on Jesus as defined by cultural outsiders such as Black Muslims, Vedantists, and Jesus People, and his underemphasis on mainline Protestants, evangelicals, and especially Catholics. Richard Wightman Fox's *Jesus in America: A History*<sup>1</sup> is better in this regard, particularly in its greater attention to theology. Prothero's *American Jesus*, however, is a much livelier read, with page-turning prose and wonderful anecdotes, and it makes a strong case that the margins do to a substantial degree define the center.

Prothero identifies three broad phases in Jesus's American journey, stretching from his humble roots in Puritan New England to his rise to

superstardom in modern American megachurches, movies, theaters, and radio waves. First, evangelical Christians “liberated” Jesus from Calvinism and then from all creeds; second, Protestants “disentangled” Jesus from the Bible, replacing *sola scriptura* with *solus Jesus* as the essence of true Christianity; and finally, Americans of all religions (and no religion at all) lifted Jesus from Christianity itself and embraced him as their own.

In chapter 1, Thomas Jefferson, whose specter haunts virtually every page of the book, is hailed as the Founding Father of America’s Jesus nation, and the White House floor, where he performed his famous (or infamous) cut-and-paste job on the Gospels, is portrayed as a kind of manger scene where Jesus the Enlightened Sage (as opposed to Jesus the Miracle Worker) was born. The next three chapters chronologically trace a series of “reawakenings” of Jesus among white Protestants. Jesus, who was acknowledged but generally disregarded in Calvinist theology, had his coming-out party in the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century, which shed the harsh strictures of Calvinism and emphasized a more evangelical, devotional, feminine side of religion. As American religion became increasingly consumer-driven, a personal relationship with a sentimental Jesus became the most attractive commodity available in the marketplace of religious ideas. When Protestants, especially men, grew concerned that Jesus had become a little *too* sweet and sentimental by the end of the nineteenth century, they made efforts to fashion him as the epitome of manliness. And just as it seemed that God was dead (or at least dying) in the 1960s, Jesus emerged stronger than ever thanks to the efforts of Billy Graham, Jesus Freaks, and Hollywood and Broadway directors and producers. In 2005, Christianity may not have the cultural power it once did, and many Christians feel like strangers in “their” country. Jesus, however, is more popular than ever. Americans may not be sure what they think about Christ, but everybody loves Jesus.

The final four chapters drive this point home by examining Jesus’s various “reincarnations” among Latter-day Saints, blacks, Jews, and Asian Hindus and Buddhists. *BYU Studies* readers will be particularly interested in Prothero’s treatment of the “Mormon Elder Brother” in chapter 5. In a well-informed and highly sympathetic account, Prothero traces Jesus’s place in Mormonism through three stages: Jesus Celebrated, Jesus Lost, and Jesus Found. He contrasts Jesus’s prominent status in “textual Mormonism” (particularly the Book of Mormon) with his virtual absence in the covenants, rituals, and tribalism<sup>2</sup> of “temple Mormonism,” which dominated from the 1840s through the 1890s. Some Latter-day Saint readers may be irked at the suggestion that Mormons ever lost sight of Jesus, and they may quickly note the centrality of Jesus (particularly as Jehovah)

in temple ceremonies. Nonetheless, Prothero's insights are both reasonable and illuminating and are suggestive of what some have called the "post-Atonement" nature of Mormonism. Jesus was "rediscovered" by twentieth-century Mormons as they stressed their commonalities with Protestants and refocused on the more Jesus-centric Book of Mormon. Prothero smartly refuses to take a stand on the quarrelsome "Are Mormons Christian?" debate, but he perceptively notes that the discussion has forced anti-Mormons to define Christian identity in terms of particular creedal commitments, while Mormons have characterized their Christian discipleship in terms of *solus Jesus*, an ironic twist from a century earlier.

In sum, *American Jesus*, while not without its minor flaws, is among the most interesting and engaging books in American religious and cultural history to appear in recent years. Academics and the general public alike will find it both informative and entertaining. Believers and non-believers will be fascinated by the story of how the United States came to be simultaneously a secular republic and Jesus nation.

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1. Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: A History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).
2. Tribalism is used here in its anthropological sense, referring to a primary and almost exclusive identification of a group of people, often tied together by family or ethnic relationships, with members of their own group, reinforced by boundaries designed to reify the in-group and exclude outsiders.