



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

By Stephen Prothero

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Jesus the Black Messiah; Jesus the Jew; Jesus the Hindu sage; Jesus the Haight-Ashbury hippie: these Jesuses join the traditional figure of Jesus Christ in *American Jesus*, which was acclaimed upon publication in hardcover as an altogether fresh exploration of American history--and as the liveliest book about Jesus to appear in English in years.

Our nation's changing images of Jesus, Stephen Prothero contends, are a kind of looking class into the national character. Even as most Christian believers cleave to a traditional faith, other people give Jesus a leading role as folk hero, pitchman, and countercultural icon. And so it has been since the nation's founding--from Thomas Jefferson, who took scissors to his New Testament to sort out true from false Jesus material; to the Jews, Buddhists and Muslims who fit Jesus into their own traditions; to the people who adapt Jesus for stage and screen and the Holy Land theme park. *American Jesus* is "a lively, illuminating and accessible survey that takes us into unexpected corners of our shared religious heritage" (Dan Cryer, *Newsday*).

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

No religious personality has captivated so many Americans for so long as Jesus. Indeed, as Boston University historian Prothero demonstrates in this sparkling and engrossing book, Jesus is the one religious figure nearly every American, whether Christian or not, past and present, has embraced. From Thomas Jefferson's cut-and-paste Bible to Jesus Christ Superstar, from the feminized Christ of the Victorians to the "manly redeemer" of Teddy Roosevelt's era, from Buddhist bodhisattva to Black Moses, Prothero surveys the myriad ways Americans have remade Jesus in their own image. He usefully divides these American Jesuses into "resurrections"-revivals of Jesus within mainstream Christianity-and "reincarnations"-appropriations of Jesus by outsiders. This scheme allows Prothero to range widely, and if he sometimes drifts from his primary focus, the digressions are fascinating in their own right. Nearly every page offers a fresh portrait of some corner of American religious history. A work of this breadth must depend heavily on other writers, but Prothero almost always has a judicious interpretation of his own to add-most of all, his contention that Jesus' enduring appeal confirms America's essentially Christian character even as it also demonstrates America's growing religious diversity

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From [The New Yorker](#)

To the Puritans who settled the Colonies, Jesus was a marginal figure, and the Old Testament more important than the New. In the four centuries since, however, he has slipped the bonds of Christianity altogether to become icon and brand, as American as Mickey Mouse or the Coca-Cola bottle. This wide-ranging history traces a dual evolution: of American religion (not only Christianity but Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism) in terms of its relationship to Jesus; and of his multiform manifestations in response to changing cultural currents, from Thomas Jefferson's publication of a book of Jesus' life and sayings that excised all mention of the miracles and the resurrection to the Hindu Vedantists' veneration of "Christ the Yogi."

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From [Booklist](#)

On magazine covers, movie screens, and even hot-air balloons, images of Jesus abound in a modern America ever more mesmerized by the central figures of Christianity-yet ever less conscious of Christian theology and doctrine. In a wide-ranging investigation, religious historian Prothero probes the cultural dynamics that have transformed Jesus into a ubiquitous American presence while weakening the tethers of orthodoxy. The analysis begins with stern Puritan divines emphatic about the justice of the Father but nearly silent about the mercy of the Son. But the focus soon shifts to liberal nineteenth-century Protestants joyous in their celebration of a tender, even feminine Jesus. A muscular, manly Jesus came next, and eventually even non-Christian Americans were turning Jesus into everything from a Jeffersonian sage to a Hindu avatar. Prothero assembles a dizzying national collage, piquant but strangely selective: Catholic images of Jesus occupy less space in this assemblage than outre characterizations of him in rock music and science fiction. Fortunately, a rich bibliography will help readers to sort out the confusing plethora of American Jesuses. *Bryce Christensen*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Anna Snyder:

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Jack Rosa:

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