

Book portrays Jesus as an American icon

Drive just about anywhere in rural America and get ready to see signs that announce Jesus' return or that herald his Gospel. This signage speaks volumes about the nation's encounter with Jesus. He is as iconic as the flag. So says Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University, in *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*.

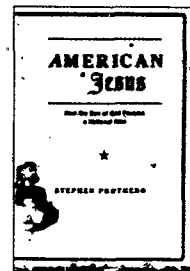
If Jesus were to return to America, how would he be known? Prothero suggests a number of ways that Jesus could be identified in a captivating, sprightly written narrative covering the last two centuries.

Americans have created their own images of Jesus, whether in portraiture, hymns, literature, film or biblical interpretation. This book is not theology; it concentrates on the medium rather than the message. Prothero admits, "I am interested in the man, not the metaphysics."

And what a man he is. The book begins with Thomas Jefferson's fascination with Jesus as a moral exemplar. Prothero dubs this Jesus the "enlightened sage." He draws us to Jefferson's work table where the president sits shearing a copy of the New Testament to fit his own personal vision of Jesus, less a deity than someone liberated from all unreasonableness.

If the matter of Jesus' divinity was considered a trifle by Jefferson, other Christians took up the doctrinal assertions attached to Jesus. Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists led the charge to configure Jesus according to the more personal interests of their members. "What a friend we have in Jesus" became a common claim.

According to Prothero, Protestant preachers of the 19th century saw in Jesus a somewhat feminized "sweet savior." But by the



BookReview

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

By Stephen Prothero.
Farrar, Straus, Giroux
(New York, 2003)
364 pp., \$25.

Reviewed by Patrick Hayes

20th century, many writers began to consider Jesus as a more masculine "manly redeemer" or, after the 1960s, a more popularized "superstar" who rocked the world with the funk of truth.

Prothero does an excellent job in charting how Jesus became divorced from the historical biblical narrative, except among so many German-trained academics, and became a figure in popular culture. Prothero's analysis extends beyond Christianity to include Jewish and Hindu perceptions of Jesus as well.

The so-called "reclamationist" Jews of the 1920s considered Jesus as a significant Jewish prophet. The American Vedanta societies that were planted by Hindu swamis saw in Jesus a kind of avatar or supreme yogi.

Mormons are also a major subject of Prothero's book. They are an important group that claims Jesus as instrumental for their religion, though their portrayal of the man is tainted by accounts of Jesus quite apart from those that most Christians know from the canonical Scriptures.

That includes Catholics, of course, but they are hardly mentioned in Prothero's work. It is to be hoped that this young scholar will examine their history of Jesus, too, for he truly is all things to all people.

Hayes teaches theology at Marymount College of Fordham University in Tarrytown, N.Y.



WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

Available in Hardcover, as a Time Warner AudioBook
and in a Large Print Edition

Time Warner Book Group

Visit our Web site at www.twbookmark.com

Luke Films/CNS

as Therese of Lisieux — in film "Therese."

Office for Film Censorship is A-II. The Motion Picture Commission of America provides moral guidance.

of the Office of the U.S. Bishops.

gest
he USA!
HILTON
Wegmans
So Young!

FREE!

Check

www.catholiccourier.com

regularly for the latest in local,
national and international church news