

Celebrity, Politics & Public Life

Richard Fox's "Jesus as Celebrity"

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Meeting notes by Johanna Blakley

Description of the paper

In the United States Jesus Christ became a cultural icon of a distinctive sort because secular as well as religious Americans found him indispensable as ethical model and spiritual resource. Yet even as they praised him, many Americans have been troubled by the prospect that Jesus might, through the broad cultural embrace of him, be converted into a domesticated idol. History Professor Richard Fox's paper examines a few exemplary instances of such concern – from philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson to singer Glen Campbell – and argues that they reiterate a preoccupation already spelled out in the gospels: Jesus saves, but must himself be saved from popular adulation.

Introduction, Professor Richard Fox

In his opening comments, Fox pointed out that most Christians think of the incarnation of the Son of God as a biological event, not a cultural event. Fox's forthcoming book will focus on how Jesus is constantly reincarnated culturally, and the way in which each incarnation leads to a new interpretation of Christ.

Fox found it deeply unsettling when he heard John Lennon say that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. Although Lennon's 1966 comment is the first reference that Fox can find to Jesus' celebrity, Gospel writers were very concerned about how to deal with the "problem" of Jesus' tremendous popularity.

Jesus Christ Superstar, which was first released as an album in 1970, portrayed Jesus as a celebrity who was being consumed by his fans. Fox argued that this rock opera, which became a Broadway show in 1973, marked a pivotal moment in the history of Christianity. Protestants, who generally veered away from visual representations of Christ, accepted the secular portrait of Christ that the opera represented.

Fox described his project as an attempt to make sense out of the deep religiosity of many U.S. citizens – A fact that became more salient to Fox during his stay in France. French academics were appalled by the way that Americans sentimentalize Jesus Christ. A recent survey indicated that 75% of American adults believe that Jesus Christ is divine, and 60-70% believe that the resurrection actually occurred. In fact, a recent sociological study indicated that the only other nation in the world that is as religious as the U.S. is India.

Response, Jack Miles

Jack Miles began by mentioning that Richard Fox's work has helped him better understand his own country and American culture. Miles was intrigued by his analysis of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, partly because he had dated an actress who appeared in *Godspell*, a knock-off of the Webber/Rice mega-hit. Miles attended many, many performances of the play, which made a fortune from church-going Christians, who would show up by the busload. While the representations in the play were by no means orthodox, it was designed to be inoffensive. The play brought together church youth groups, and the worlds of Broadway and rock and roll – a combination that created a new audience for God and Christ. The religiosity of the subject was by

no means played down (the audience could take the Eucharist at intermission), but the adventurous sexual spirit of the theatre wasn't banished either (one "puckish" actor in the troupe would cruise audience members after the show).

Miles indicated how distasteful he finds this very powerful conjunction of traditional subject matter with the "glow" of celebrity. Making reference to Emersonian self-reliance, Miles argued that those truly committed to spiritual development and responsibility found the "Christizing" of religion inauthentic and offensive. Being a "fan" of Jesus actually relieves people of the responsibility to develop and define their own souls. Miles referred as well to an interview with Saul Bellow, in which Bellow called America's obsession with celebrity an act of psychological suicide. People who cannot accept themselves as they are attempt to align or identify themselves with a celebrity they admire. While religion can contain the "beast" of celebrity, Miles fears that it is in danger of being the tamed, not the tamer.

The celebrity enterprise has been an issue in Christianity ever since its founding. Miles suggested that New Testament writers portrayed Jesus as modest about his miracles (he often asks witnesses not to talk about them) because skeptics later suggested that Jesus Christ surely would have been more famous if he'd really performed all those miracles. Christ was successful at recruiting disciples, in part because of his act of identification with God, who could be considered celebrity number one (some people told Miles – after the publication of his book, *God: A Biography* – that he had written the ultimate celebrity biography.)

Open Discussion

English Professor Leo Braudy asked what it is about Jesus that people find so seductive. Why do they lose themselves to him? And why does this seem to be so salient in America? Superstars, particularly popular athletes, often credit their performance to God, who has acted through them. These sentiments seem to be offered as a means of excusing themselves for being caught in the celebrity limelight.

English Professor Emeritus David Eggenschwiler pointed out that this powerful cocktail of religion and celebrity is far more pervasive in India. There, Gods are superstars, and religiosity is acted out in all forms of popular culture, culminating in glitzy Bollywood productions. While Americans struggle with the separation of church and state, Indians blur together the secular and the sacred. Braudy suggested that the dynamic in India is very different from the one here, in part because of the difference between dealing with a multiplicity of gods and focusing on one divine figure.

History Professor Phil Ethington challenged Miles' reading of Emerson. Ethington argued that Emerson would have agreed with the "celebrification" of Christ because he would have viewed it as a celebration of a great and unique man. Adulation, he claimed, has positive aspects. Fox suggested that Emerson would want Jesus Christ to be a *model* to us, because he exercised his soul to the greatest possible degree, but Emerson would not call on us to *imitate* him.

History Professor Steven Ross asked about how the celebrification of Jesus affected the political sphere in America. Does Jesus lend the ultimate form of legitimation to a political cause or figure? Fox pointed out that Christ has gone through many different political incarnations in the U.S., sometimes being perceived as a tool of the conservative right and, at other times, an icon of pacifists, who would dress and act like him. During the 60s and 70s he was often considered "anti-political," and the pacifism he inspired was viewed by some as the ultimate form of political disengagement. However, Fox argued that Christ will no doubt be resurrected again as a major political instigator. Right now, his role in U.S. politics is undergoing a profound change: he is becoming more an icon than one who is actively emulated, and Christianity is becoming more a vehicle for political agendas than the voice of religious commitment.

Professor Martin Krieger from Policy, Planning & Development asked how important incarnation is to the celebrification of Christ. Krieger mentioned Leo Steinberg's *The Sexuality of Christ*, which argues that depicting holy genitals was theologically necessary, to demonstrate that Jesus was man as well as the incarnation of divinity. Neal Gabler argued that tangibility is essential to celebrity, but it is not necessary to become famous. While many fictional characters and disembodied voices have achieved fame and "name recognition," celebrities require visualization: fans need to feel as if their icon really exists. Gabler believes that this is one reason that Jesus is the celebrity and God is not: there's no decent visual for God.

Fox mentioned the range of representations of Christ's body that we see over the last century: while Catholics often focus on the suffering body, Protestants do not. Jesus' celebrity body is most likely the suffering one, a body that deteriorates before his fans, who inadvertently make a martyr of their object of worship (Elvis, for example). Journalism Professor Bryce Nelson brought up the example of Janis Joplin, who was constantly apprehended by fans who wanted her to use her influence to do things for them. The movie *The Rose*, which is loosely based on Joplin, is about a rock star who sacrifices her life for her fans.

Norman Lear Center Director Marty Kaplan asked why it took the entertainment world so long to exploit the similarities between religious experience and the entertainment experience. It seems a natural fit since both create the feeling of losing yourself and your sense of time and place. So isn't it a little bizarre that it took so long for the secular realm to come up with something like *Jesus Christ Superstar*?

Fox admitted that theatricality and spectacle have been key to the development of some forms of Christianity, but images of Christ were often viewed with suspicion. Protestant Calvinists were keen on experiencing Jesus as a sensation, not as a picture or an icon. They felt that spirituality should be experienced internally, not through a visual connection.

Jack Miles argued that we need a critical apparatus in order to see the proximity of religious experience to entertainment experience – we need programs like the Lear Center, which ask us to view the world through the lens of entertainment. Miles suggested that the vitality of the religious experience needs its special province; religious institutions work hard to maintain these boundaries so that worshippers will feel that their transcendent experience is distinct from all other spheres of life. However, he provided an example of a chapel in West Hollywood (<http://www.sanctuaryonline.org/>) that borrows directly from secular entertainment experiences to create a very distinctive religious atmosphere. Because of its profound difference from most other church services (a rock musician performs for most of the service and then delivers a short sermon at the end), the experience is made to seem "special" despite its proximity to a "rock concert."

Professor Krieger asked about the pervasiveness of Jesus Christ in our culture. He wondered whether it was possible to grow up as he had, not really knowing much about Jesus. He argued that Jesus has emerged from the religious sector and exploded on the public stage. Jesus Christ is political and social now, as well as religious. Jack Miles agreed, pointing out that religion in all forms has become more prominent on the public stage. Fox pointed out that Jesus is impossible to avoid now because he's all over cable. In fact, Fox argued, the visual of Jesus Christ is just beginning to have the power of the words "Jesus Christ."

Professor Braudy asked about the difference between referring to him as "Jesus" as opposed to "Christ." Fox agreed that there is a big difference, with Quakers and evangelical Southern Baptists calling him Jesus, the intimate friend, while Puritans referred to him as Christ. Gabler suggested that Jesus is the celebrity because he is more familiar and tangible than "Christ," who is too transcendent and disembodied to qualify. Miles pointed out that contemporary Christianity is a confluence of friend and lord, and contemporary celebrities are less iconic than "normal."

Suggestions for the paper

- Examine how the rise of new visual media forms has contributed to changes in imagery of Jesus.
- Examine the history of representations of Christ in film, including the earliest experiments in 1912, DeMille's epic extravaganzas, and Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*.
- Explain the timing of *Jesus Christ Superstar*? What prepared the ground?
- Examine representations of Christ in American literature.
- Compare Jesus' celebrity to the Virgin Mary's. Explain why Mary does not have a role in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.
- Compare Warner Sallman's "Head of Christ" (<http://www.sillyprillygifts.com/unique/wall-art/ud-80-1620-1.jpg>) to George Hurrell's backlit photos of celebrities from the 30s and 40s.
- Discuss the popularity of Jesus Holograms.
- Consider whether Christianity is becoming more political than religious.
- Describe the role of "Public Christians," such as athletes and hip-hop artists, and how they contribute to the celebrification of Jesus.
- Compare celebrity gods in India to Jesus as a celebrity in the U.S.

Participants

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