

OF GOOD REPORT

MORMONISM AND AMERICA'S
JESUS OBSESSION

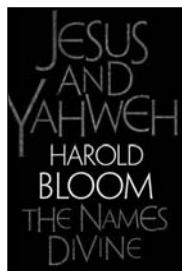
By David Barber

AS I WALKED through the subway station near my apartment in Brooklyn a few weeks ago, a bearded, middle-aged man whom I'd seen on the trains before offered me a mimeographed tract from the Christian Revolutionary Brotherhood, preaching a sort of Marxist Calvinism with "the poor" standing in for the elect, their ultimate victory assured. Boarding the train, I found a color pamphlet in Spanish asking, "¿Quién es Jesucristo?"; the answer turns out to be something about the Jehovah's Witnesses, whose headquarters are just a couple of miles away. And as I write this essay, a controversy is brewing in the national media about Christmas: liberals, it seems, are trying to destroy it, leaving television host Bill O'Reilly and a handful of other brave souls to defend the (apparently suddenly unpopular) commemoration of the birth of Jesus.

The name of Jesus has been a powerful totem in America for as long as it has been spoken here, but the meaning of that totem has been disputed from the beginning. Missionaries, prophets, saints, and hucksters have proposed countless versions of Jesus in America while groups of Americans have used Jesus for an astonishing variety of social, cultural, and political ends. It's contentious and politically motivated to describe the United States as "a Christian nation," but few would hesitate to apply Flannery O'Connor's phrase: "Christ-haunted."

This essay looks at four recent books about Jesus—one by an unbelieving, Gnostic, Jewish literary critic; two by academic historians of religion; and one by a Mormon religion professor engaged in coalition-building with evangelical Protestants. While the depth and breadth of America's Jesus obsession defy any single writer, these books provide rich opportunities for us to re-

flect on Americans' views of Jesus and what these views reflect about ourselves and about our future. Are minority views of Jesus (such as that of the Mormons) destined for assimilation, losing their distinctiveness within an increasingly evangelical Jesus culture? How will the apparent ascendancy of a right-wing, politicized Jesus play out in a nation where Christianity has served political ends as diverse as slave-owning and abolition, working-class solidarity and favors for big business? In global circumstances that some see as a "clash of civilizations," will the name of Jesus serve as a banner 'round which to rally the troops, or will the "Prince of Peace" find followers with the power to avert destruction?



JESUS AND YAHWEH:
THE NAMES DIVINE

by Harold Bloom
Riverhead Books, 2005
256 pages, \$24.95

YALE literary critic Harold Bloom is best known to Mormon audiences as the author of the 1991 *The American Religion*, which found in Mormonism an authentic strain of American religious invention, surprisingly Gnostic in content. In Bloom's latest book, *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine*, he continues a long fascination with religion, focusing on Jesus Christ (the theological figure, distinct from Yeshua or Jesus of Nazareth, the actual historical man) and Yahweh, the God of parts of the Hebrew Bible (which Bloom strenuously objects to calling the "Old Testament").

As a literary critic, Bloom deals with the divinities in question primarily as literary characters. His thesis is that Jesus/Yeshua, Jesus Christ, and Yahweh "are three totally incompatible personages." He makes this point against the Christian view that Jesus fulfills the "Old" Covenant, and against upholders of the politically convenient civic myth of "Judeo-Christianity."

Traditionalist Christians reject Bloom's distinction between the Yeshua of Nazareth who ministered in Judea and Jesus Christ, whom Bloom calls a purely theological God. (Bloom says theology "is always an effort to explain away the human aspects of God" [137]). Further, Christian tradition identifies Yahweh, the fierce God of ancient Israel, with God the Father of Christian theology, and then claims the consubstantiality of Yeshua/Jesus Christ and Yahweh/God the Father as two of the three members of the Trinity.

Mormons identify Jesus Christ and Yahweh as a *single* personage, of course, and the lack of attention to modern biblical scholarship within Mormonism allows most Latter-day Saints to live a lifetime without even hearing of, let alone grappling with, the Yeshua/Jesus Christ distinction. So Bloom's utter denial of all these identities causes equal grief for mainstream LDS Christology.

To make his case that the three personages are distinct and incompatible, Bloom pays special attention to Jesus and Yahweh, the two figures of the trio that capture his imagination. While thoroughly versed in and deeply indebted to modern Biblical scholarship and its multiple-source hypotheses, Bloom rejects most scholarly claims about the historical Jesus as reaching beyond the available (and quite untrustworthy) evidence. "There is not a sentence concerning Jesus in the entire New Testament composed by anyone who ever had met the unwilling King of the Jews," he writes (19). Moreover, among the many erudite historians who have quested for the historical Jesus, "fewer than a handful. . . come up with more than reflections of their own faith or their own skepticism" (12).

But Bloom's skepticism about historical Jesus scholarship doesn't keep him from wading in with his own views of Jesus, distinguished as much by their tentative, almost reticent, quality as by Bloom's extraordinary gifts as a reader of literature. As a reader, Bloom finds himself most fascinated by the Jesus characters in Mark and of John.

The Jesus of Mark is a reluctant Messiah, slowly revealed to his somewhat dense disciples. The defining aspect of this Jesus is his



DAVID BARBER is a writer and researcher living in Brooklyn, New York. He welcomes comments at barber.dave@gmail.com

love for—even his *need for*—his Father, Yahweh.

Yahweh is not the most ancient god worshipped by the Israelites (that distinction probably belongs to El, who was later identified with Yahweh). But he is the god of the earliest textual layers of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), the so-called Yahwist passages written by the Yahwist or J Writer and dating back to the reign of Solomon. (Elohim is the other version of God appearing in the Tanakh and is a later, more bloodless representation by the Priestly Writer.) Bloom's fascination with this ancient text is well known and has already resulted in *The Book of J*, a discussion of the Yahwist passages in which Bloom embraces a speculation that the J Writer was an aristocratic woman at the court of Judea just after the reign of Solomon.

Bloom calls Yahweh “the uncanniest personification of God ever ventured by humankind” (5), “a character so complex that unraveling it is impossible” (6), and “the West’s major literary, spiritual, and ideological character,” who in all of literature is approached only by Shakespeare’s King Lear (8). Yahweh is a human-all-too-human god, for whom the term “anthropomorphic” is insufficient; he gets hungry, he delights in walking in a garden in the cool of the evening, and he descends from his high places to lead his hosts in battle. Most terrible of all, Yahweh is a capricious and jealous god: “Yahweh, like King Lear, demands a bewildering excess of love, the frequent stigma of bad fathers” (166)—yet he seems incapable of actually *loving* in return.

This is the paradox that is capable of animating the spiritual life both of post-Second Temple Judaism and of Jesus. Bloom’s Gnostic tendencies lead him to explore the absence of Yahweh’s love in terms of the Kabbalistic doctrine of *zimzum*, a process in which God (named by Kabbalists “*Ein-Sof*,” or “without end”) inhales himself into himself, thus withdrawing from a part of the universe to create a reality—Creation—outside of himself. The act of creating is also an act of withdrawal. And it is the withdrawal of God that Judaism has had to come to terms with in the face of two millennia of catastrophes, from the destruction of the Second Temple to the Holocaust. Bloom observes, “Any sensible participant in the Covenant fears God, who at once proclaims his particular care for Jewry and pragmatically demonstrates a malign neglect of his people” (138).

The withdrawal of God is also the context of the Jesus of Mark, who “insists upon

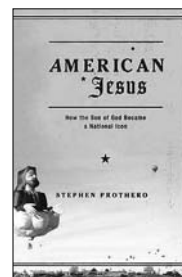
human perfection” and “wants a more perfect God than Yahweh could ever be.” Yet this Jesus loves and desires Yahweh anyway. “If there is a single principle that characterizes Jesus,” Bloom claims, “it is unswerving trust in the Covenant with Yahweh” (12). And Bloom finds in the Jesus of Mark an uncanniness not as strong as Yahweh’s but evocative of it, relying on shock and silence to unnerve his listeners. The Jesus depicted by Mark, distinguished from the Jesus Christ of Marcan Christology, is a true son of Yahweh, not of Elohim or any other abstract deity, and a true and unique prophet.

The Gospel of John presents a different Jesus—a theological, Hellenized “Jesus the Christ.” John’s Gospel is the latest of the four canonical Gospels and is characterized, in Bloom’s words, by an extreme *belatedness* in relation to the Tanakh. Bloom dislikes the Gospel of John for its anti-Semitism even as he recognizes its literary power. For Bloom, a central passage is John 8:56–58 (NRSV):

“Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.” Then the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”

Mormons use this passage as a proof text for the notion that Jesus is Yahweh, the “God of the Old Testament,” by linking it to Exodus 3:13–14, in which Yahweh tells Moses to tell anyone who asks that his name is “I AM WHO I AM.” Bloom agrees that the Exodus passage is the clear object of John’s allusion—and points out that, astonishingly, rabbinical commentators have made little of the powerful Exodus text, while Christian commentators have mostly denied the allusion. Bloom finds in John’s trope an anxious insistence on the priority of Jesus over Abraham, and of John over Moses, a subsumption of Jewish tradition by Christianity. (And a nasty, murderous Christianity at that. Just before this passage, Jesus has told the Jews that their father is the devil.)

In John, unlike in Mark, Jesus is fully aware of his Messiahship at all times. He is a fully theological being. And this theology, identifying Jesus Christ from the outset as the *logos* or Word (Bloom approvingly cites a speculation that the original reading may once have been a Gnostic *pneuma*, “breath” or “spirit”), is much more Greek than Hebrew—far removed from Yahweh, and destined to lead Christianity far from its origins in a Yahweh-haunted Jesus, who sought a God who had long ago withdrawn from his people.

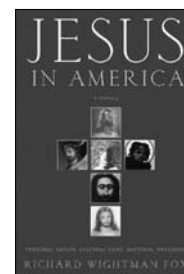


AMERICAN JESUS:
HOW THE SON OF
GOD BECAME A
NATIONAL ICON

by Stephen Prothero
Farrar, Strauss, and
Giroux, 2003
376 pages, \$25.00

JESUS IN AMERICA:
A HISTORY

by Richard
Wightman Fox
HarperSanFrancisco,
2004
488 pages, \$27.95



BLOOM observes that “there are . . . as many versions of Jesus as there are people” (177). Two recent histories for popular audiences examine the many versions of Jesus that have come to life in North America since Christianity first arrived here. In *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, Stephen Prothero, a religious historian and chair of the Religion Department at Boston University, attempts “to see how Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image . . . [and thus] to examine, through the looking glass, the kaleidoscopic character of American culture” (7). Richard Wightman Fox, a history professor at the University of Southern California, attempts roughly the same thing in *Jesus in America: A History*.

Of the two books, Fox’s offers a more linear narrative, begins earlier (with the arrival of Spanish missionaries in what is now New Mexico and Florida, and of French Jesuits and English Protestants in the Northeast), and more thoroughly treats its subject, which is more or less limited to “mainstream” American views of Jesus, mostly Protestant and sometimes Roman Catholic. Prothero, on the other hand, divides his book into two parts: “Resurrections” traces a mainstream history of Jesus in American culture from the Revolution to the current megachurch movement, while “Reincarnations” examines versions of Jesus created by groups outside the white Protestant/Catholic narrative: Mormons, African-Americans, American Jews, and adherents of Eastern religions.

Jesus arrived in North America with Spanish missionaries, who used the epidemics of new diseases they had inadver-

tently brought from Europe to teach the Indians of the healing power of Christ. Fox observes that “the hard leap for [one Native American group] was the notion of spiritual sickness as a state distinct from physical ailments” (177). Before they could be saved from sin, the Native Americans had to be taught that they—and their cultural practices—were sinful. Fox gives a sensitive discussion of how the mass conversions of Indians by Spanish missionaries served the dual purposes of evangelism and empire and of how the French Jesuits who proselytized along the St. Lawrence and the Atlantic seaboard rejected the Spanish methods of mass conversions in favor of a truer, more inner conversion. As a result of the Jesuits’ focus, they had much less success in finding converts.

The Protestant Calvinist settlers of New England also did their best to avoid “precipitous conversions,” and, as a result, made fewer converts than even the Jesuits. In fact, it was difficult enough for a “civilized” European, even one raised in a good Puritan home, to be truly converted. One of the strengths of Fox’s book is the rich and sympathetic treatment he gives to different theological views of Jesus, and his discussion of Calvinism manages the difficult task of making that stern and (to us twenty-first-century Americans) alien doctrine appealing. Calvinism’s emphasis on “limited atonement” (Christ’s sacrifice takes away the sins of only those whom God has chosen) and “irresistible grace” (the elect are saved through the will of God alone, not through any choice they themselves have made) can sound to non-Calvinist Christians like a license for pride or for sin: if one is leading a holy life, it is because one is a member of the elect (and, because of the doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints,” one cannot fall from this grace once truly justified). If one is not elect, no number of good works can lead to justification (the imputation of holiness by virtue of Christ’s atonement).

But Fox points out that this same theology supported “one of the main dynamics of Puritan piety: the relentless scouring of one’s heart for evidence of self-aggrandizement, hypocrisy, or pride,” since these sins could indicate that the believer was actually not undergoing sanctification, the process of growing increasingly free of humanity’s original, sinful nature that followed true justification. Calvinism was a barrier against self-deception. Indeed, a soul-searching “confession” of one’s inner conversion was a prerequisite for becoming a full church member. Fox writes:

Today we think of the church as a place where people get to feel they are bound for heaven. Puritans and Baptists made it the place where people were cautioned against taking their passionate embrace of Jesus as evidence that they were headed for glorious union with him. (92)

Puritans thus saw Jesus as a “personal savior” in a theological sense, but their creed raised barriers against the familiar, friendly, emotive relationship with him that evangelical Christians now claim.

The rise of the “personal relationship with Jesus” would have to wait for the spread of Arminianism, a heresy within the Reformed movement that would become the de facto American orthodoxy. Arminianism is the view that Christ’s atonement was worked for all of humanity, not just for the elect, and thus that God’s grace saves all who choose to accept it. Popularized by the Methodists, Arminianism gradually spread even to denominations like the Baptists that had originally been Calvinist, and it served as the basis for nineteenth-century American religious movements from revivalism to new sects, including Mormonism. In a young nation predicated on rewarding the fruits of individual initiative, stern Puritan doctrines could not withstand Arminianism’s exaltation of individual choice—and its image of a Jesus extending his forgiving arms to all. By comparison, the apparent arbitrariness of Calvinist election seemed downright un-American.

Along with the rise of Arminianism, another key point in the development of the American Jesus was the separation of Jesus from the church, even for the many American Christians who belonged to churches. Prothero notes how the Deist Thomas Jefferson, who greatly admired Jesus but rejected his divinity along with the rest of the supernatural content of the Gospels, was one instance of an American who tried to separate what he saw as true Christianity (represented by what he saw as the authentic sayings and acts of Jesus) from the false Christianity preached by the churches. According to Prothero, “later in U.S. history, thinkers as different as the abolitionist Frederick Douglass and the fundamentalist J. Gresham Machen would draw” the same kind of distinction, although with drastically different views of “true Christianity.”

Not that churches yielded Jesus to the unchurched; nor did Americans abandon the churches. To the contrary: Prothero points out that before the Revolution, only about

one in five Americans in New England and the mid-Atlantic belonged to a church, and even fewer in the South, while today about three in five Americans are church members.

But both Prothero and Fox trace a history in which Jesus stands apart from any institution—and is readily put to use for a panoply of causes. Revivalists found that stories of Jesus drew far larger crowds than did dry theological disquisitions. A feminized Jesus preached by Henry Ward Beecher and others helped legitimate a “separate roles” ideology of gender while attracting converts with a simple message of love. In reaction, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the preaching of what Prothero terms a “manly redeemer” (represented in Prothero’s book by the familiar Del Parson painting, *The Lord Jesus Christ*) whom ad-man Bruce Barton could tout as a model for businessmen and other go-getters. (See page 27, Figure 28.)

Perhaps no issue demonstrates the flexibility of Jesus in American culture more than does race. Antebellum southern slaveholders noted that Jesus never preached against slavery. Fox argues that white abolitionists were therefore forced to make a crucial turn in their interpretation of Jesus: he didn’t preach against slavery because, although he was divine, he also inhabited a culture that affected the history-bound, particular expression of his message. Attempting an interpretive task that has bedeviled all but the most fundamentalist Protestants ever since, the abolitionists found transcendent teachings of love, freedom, and equality within a New Testament that didn’t explicitly address their concerns. After the Civil War, according to Fox, southern whites saw “a suffering Jesus who stood for the sacrificial valor of a regional culture” while northerners continued the liberalizing trend begun by the abolitionists by extending a Jesus-based call for equality into the Social Gospel and other reform movements. Meanwhile, African-Americans fused Jesus with Moses in an Exodus narrative of movement towards freedom, and African-American leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X critiqued white American views of Jesus. The alternate versions they articulated were sometimes more universal—Marcus Garvey declared that “Jesus Christ was not white, black, or yellow”—and sometimes, as with many of the “Black Christs,” explicitly as culture-bound and particular as were white representations.

In the carnival of religious, cultural, and even commercial expression documented by Fox and Prothero, Mormonism stands out as

peculiar, although hardly the most peculiar. In an illuminating move, Fox places Joseph Smith's 1822 First Vision alongside four other American conversion narratives of the early nineteenth century. Like many others, Smith had absorbed from Methodist revivals an Arminian sense that he must take the initiative to obtain God's forgiveness of his sins. But besides forgiveness, Jesus' appearance at the First Vision marked the beginning of Smith's attempt to end the denominational confusion that beset the Burnt-Over District of New York by appealing to a renewed authority of direct revelation.

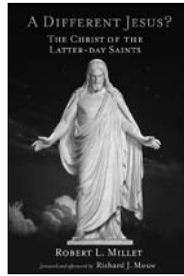
Prothero devotes an entire chapter to Mormon views of Jesus, offering a reasonable periodization. "Textual Mormonism," from the late 1820s to (roughly) the early 1840s, preached a Jesus that differed little from contemporary, Second-Great-Awakening versions. The Book of Mormon uses traditional Trinitarian language, and Mormon hymns and sermons of the period say little about Jesus that could not be found in various strains of Protestantism at the time.

"Temple Mormonism," Prothero's designation for Mormonism's second period, saw a massive departure from traditional Protestant preaching and practice. In post-King Follett theology, Jesus was but one god among many, and the salvation he offered was but one step along the way to the ultimate goal of "exaltation," or progressing to become a god in one's own right. Isolated by polygamy, secret temple rites, and the trek to Utah, Mormons came to see the Church with its authority and ordinances, as a more important mediator than was Jesus, who nevertheless retained his divine status. Beginning with the 1890 Manifesto, Mormonism sought accommodation with the rest of America.

Prothero sees a renewed emphasis on Jesus as the hallmark of a third period, "Twentieth-Century Mormonism." Mormons emphasized their claim to be the second incarnation of the original Christian Church, and apostle James Talmage made an important theological identification of Jesus with the Old Testament Jehovah that elevated Jesus from being a mere "elder brother" of humanity in the pre-existence.

Prothero notes the controversy of the early 1980s in which Elder Bruce R. McConkie criticized Professor George W. Pace of Brigham Young University for advocating a close, "personal relationship" with Jesus. The familiarity expressed by Pace and others was (and is) too close to modern evangelical practices that are culturally alien to Mormons. Such practices include referring to Jesus simply as "Jesus" (without honorifics

such as "the Lord" or "Christ") and praying directly to Jesus rather than to God the Father.



A DIFFERENT JESUS?
THE CHRIST OF THE
LATTER-DAY SAINTS

by Robert L. Millet
Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005
184 pages, \$16.00

DESPITE McConkie's rebuke of Mormons seeking a personalized Jesus, Mormonism has drawn closer to evangelicalism in the two decades since the Pace controversy. One sign of this trend is *A Different Jesus? The Christ of the Latter-day Saints*, in which BYU religion professor Robert L. Millet attempts to explain Mormonism to an evangelical audience.

Millet's book, published by Wm. B. Eerdmans, a Protestant publishing house, presents a lucid introduction to contemporary, orthodox Mormon beliefs, centered on but not limited to Mormon Christology. Most of what Millet writes will be unexceptionable to the LDS reader, and he doesn't hesitate to broach most of the doctrines that trouble evangelicals, including the Apostasy, anti-Trinitarianism, and eternal progression. Without pulling too many punches, Millet's strategy is to cast Mormon beliefs in the best possible light, giving context that makes them appear reasonable and often as close as possible to traditional Protestant understandings. Sometimes this effort crosses a line of accuracy, such as his claim that the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* (literally, "divinization," the doctrine that the believer becomes more and more holy until a union with God is achieved) is more or less the same as the Mormon belief that humans can become Gods. And viewed as a work of analytic scholarship, *A Different Jesus* contains its share of howlers—not the least of which is the statement that "nothing in the LDS doctrine of Christ has changed in the last 175 years" (139).

Millet's ahistoricism regarding Mormon beliefs is of a piece with his ahistoricism about scriptural texts and points to a cultural affinity between him and his evangelical interlocutors. Certainly not all evangelicals are fundamentalists, committed to absolute inerrancy of the Word, but most would agree with Millet's quotation of President Howard W. Hunter's declaration that "we can be modern without giving way to the influence

of the modernist." And in fact, *A Different Jesus* was written precisely to build bridges with evangelicals over cultural/political issues. The book contains a foreword and afterword by Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, who has been engaged in interreligious dialogue with Millet and other BYU professors for several years. According to Mouw and Millet, the aim of these discussions and the present book is to provide a theological underpinning for enhanced cooperation between conservative evangelicals and Mormons in pro-life efforts and, as Mouw puts it, "various other causes dealing with issues of public morality." (I read that as code mostly for opposition to same-sex marriage and other gay-rights issues, although it certainly includes everything else under the "pro-family" banner of social conservatism.)

I suspect Millet's book will be only partly successful in bridging the theological gap between Mormonism and evangelical Protestantism. Despite Millet's efforts at casting Mormon doctrine in evangelical language ("Unaided man is and will forevermore be lost, fallen, and unsaved"), Mouw probably speaks for most evangelicals when he wonders whether Mormons "have a theologically adequate understanding of the person and work of the One who alone is mighty to save" (184). At least for those who pay attention to theological issues, the divide on issues such as the plurality of Gods, eternal progression, and Mormonism's belief in a limited God is wide indeed.

Still, as Mormons continue on the path of assimilation, we can expect a continued increase in the prominence given to Jesus in Mormon preaching and practice. If this change doesn't include actual theological changes that downplay or eliminate distinctively Mormon beliefs that are incompatible with Protestantism, it may still include significant convergence in worship style. Visiting a nondenominational evangelical megachurch recently, I was struck by the similarity between much of the soft-rock-oriented music used in that service and much of the contemporary music that can be heard in the musical numbers at sacrament meeting, especially popular with younger Mormons.

MILLET'S book is another instance of a common American project: using the name of Jesus to rally support for a political or cultural cause, even though those who are drawn together may disagree about the meaning of the name. Mormons and evangelicals continue to have vastly different theological understandings of

Jesus, but they can agree that to believe in him at least means to oppose abortion and gay marriage.

This strikes me as similar to the successful efforts of liberal Rabbi Stephen Wise and others to create the idea of a “Judeo-Christian” America by praising Jesus’ wisdom without committing to his divinity. Beginning in the 1920s, these efforts contributed to the moderate liberal consensus that dominated mid-century American politics, especially to bringing Jews into the mainstream of American society and significantly reducing anti-Semitism in American life. However, it is this very concept of Judeo-Christianity that Harold Bloom finds incoherent given the irreconcilable differences between Yahweh and Jesus Christ.

According to Bloom, the American Jesus “has subsumed the national myth of the New People chosen for a future of dreamlike happiness, compounded of emancipated selfishness and an inner solitude that names itself as true freedom” (104). As I said earlier, Jesus is as potent a political totem as he has ever been—reference, among other things, the extraordinary effectiveness of George W. Bush’s declaration that his favorite political philosopher is “Christ, because He changed my heart.”

One of the most startling illustrations in Fox’s volume is a digital image from a Florida-based graphic arts company that juxtaposes a Nordic-looking Jesus’ head over patriotic symbols: a bald eagle, the American flag, the Statue of Liberty, the St. Louis Arch, the Capitol dome, and Mt. Rushmore. The text below the image quotes Psalm 33:12: “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord” —not leaving to the imagination which nation *that* might be.

Bloom observes, “The Jesus Christ of evangelical Protestantism and of Mormonism is the no-so-hidden God of the corporate world in the United States” (184). And Bloom is pessimistic about the future of a nation ruled by such a God:

Our decay and eventual collapse might be brought about by Republican triumphalism, doubtless grounded upon an amalgam of Fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, and the Mormons, who enforce a monotheistic morality while tacitly retaining Joseph Smith’s legacy of a plurality of gods. (102)

The political significance of Jesus is far from uncontested, of course, despite popular caricatures of Christians as conservative and of liberals as secular or atheist. On 6 December 2005, five major U.S. mainline Protestant denominations, including President Bush’s own United Methodists, urged the defeat of the 2006 Bush budget for social justice reasons. And a recent ad campaign by evangelical environmentalists opposed SUV ownership by asking, “What would Jesus drive?”

But if the political polarization of the United States continues to increase, and if

the suburbs, cheap gasoline, and victory on the battlefield. Hyper-Arminian Mormons are little different in this respect. The careful soul-searching and mindfulness of self-deception that were perhaps the best legacy of Calvinism find little place in a political climate where Jesus has become a wedge issue.

As the histories by Fox and Prothero make clear, there have been multiple understandings of Jesus for as long as his name has been spoken in America, and although one Jesus or another may be politically and culturally ascendant, the tremendous diversity and vitality of views are certain to continue.

The richness of the idea of Jesus allows room for hope. My own hope is that the militaristic, xenophobic versions of Jesus that seem ascendant in America today can be counteracted by peacemaking, other-respecting aspects that are equally present in America’s Jesus history. To justify this hope, I can rely only on Jesus’s followers, trusting that enough of them will find in Jesus something other than the frightening vision offered by his most vocal political supporters: a warrior-god who leads his people (America) into battle against abortionists, homosexuals, and Allah.

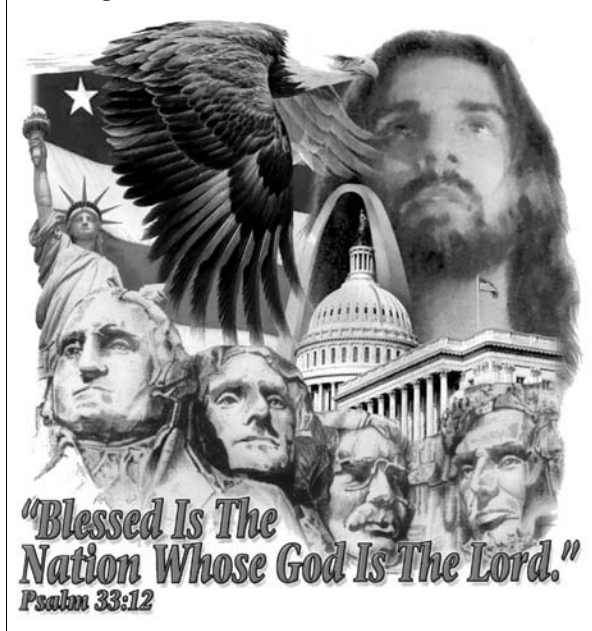
Fox is perhaps the most eloquent in describing the richness of Jesus that is available to every believer—and to non-believers as well in this Christ-haunted land:

There is no single Jesus, in America or anywhere else. He can lead crusades like a warrior, and he can turn the other cheek. . . . Americans will try their best to make him a predictable source of comfort, but he will remain unpredictable. New

prophets will rise up to remind their countrymen that Jesus delivers condemnation along with solace, and many Americans will try to follow his injunction to lose their lives so as to find them. (24)

If, as Millet’s book intimates, the Mormon Jesus is being moved closer to his evangelical counterpart for reasons of political coalition-building, especially for a cause so fraught with the perils of self-congratulation as the “defense of the family,” Mormons risk making themselves that much less disposed to hear these “new prophets.” On the other hand, Jesus is surprising. And the Mormon tradition, like America as a whole, is capable of many different responses to his call. ☪

I HOPE THAT FOLLOWERS WILL FIND IN *Jesus something other than the frightening vision offered by his most vocal political supporters: a warrior-god who leads his people (America) into battle against abortionists, homosexuals, and Allah.*



the “war on terror” continues to support an anti-Islamic subtext in national politics, the evangelical Jesus will likely prove ever more effective as a triumphalist god of war. This Jesus offers not just an assurance of personal salvation and the promise of help and comfort in the face of difficulty. He also provides an easy definition of “in” and “out” groups (families, church members, and Americans are in while pro-choicers, gays and lesbians, secularists, and Muslims are out) and a license to take part in a “war” on these outsiders in defense of family and nation. And the version of Arminianism that is casually assumed by most American evangelicals leads easily to a belief that one has *earned* the blessings of Jesus, which include a home in