Mark Gonnerman: Good evening. We are gathered here at Kresge Auditorium for a public conversation exploring democratic ideals. Tonight we will discuss America’s Jesus, a topic that allows us to consider the role of religious imagery and symbolism in American history and culture and to think about the relation of religion and the public sphere. This is a topic of much current interest as the Supreme Court is now hearing arguments challenging government-sponsored displays of the Ten Commandments. Do such displays violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment?

The issue in today’s headlines has become a perennial American problem. Indeed, one of our presenters tonight, Stephen Prothero, begins his book, American Jesus, by reminding us, and I quote: “Every Christmas, in towns and cities across the United States, Jesus is reborn in nativity scenes erected on public property. Almost as regularly, civil libertarians challenge the constitutionality of these public displays of religion, forcing the courts to consider yet again how to interpret the First Amendment. Underlying this question of constitutional jurisprudence is the equally vexing matter of the religious character of the nation. Is the United States a religious country or a secular state?”

In Jesus in America, our other presenter, Richard Fox, observes, quoting again: “At the start of the twenty-first century the United States was by far the most religious of advanced industrial societies. In 2003 eight in ten adult Americans said they were Christians….Four in ten Americans said they were ‘born again’ or evangelical, Christians. Four in ten also said they attended religious services every week—a figure roughly double that of most of the industrialized West. Surveys in the 1970s and 1980s showed that the colossal 70 percent of adult Americans said they believed Jesus was God or the Son of God, not just the founder of a great religion like Muhammad or the Buddha.”

So who is America’s Jesus and where did he come from? That’s what we are interested in discussing here tonight.

Before I introduce our moderator, I will remind you of our program format. For the first forty-five minutes, we will listen in to the conversation that takes place up here on stage. Then we will open up the mikes for audience conversation for another forty-five minutes. There is one mike in each aisle, and if you have a question or a brief comment, I invite you to line up at one of the mikes and the moderator will recognize you.
Our moderator tonight is Stanford religious studies professor Thomas Sheehan. Tom came to Stanford in 1999 after teaching philosophy for thirty years in Italy and the United States. His interests embrace classical Greek and medieval philosophy, twentieth-century German philosophy and its related religious questions, and Central American liberation movements. He is the author of several books, including *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God became Christianity*, a widely acclaimed and controversial account of Easter. He is a fellow in the Westar Institute which sponsors the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars on a new quest for the historical Jesus. He is, in fact, just back from speaking about the Jesus Seminar to a group in Washington, D.C.

So please join me in welcoming to the Aurora Forum Professor Thomas Sheehan and our guests from Boston University and the University of Southern California.

**Thomas Sheehan:** Thank you very much, Mark Gonnerman, and welcome to all of you. This should be a stimulating evening with two top-flight scholars who have written must-read books that I hope you will all have a chance to look at soon if you haven’t already.

It was someone, perhaps Voltaire, who said that if God created humankind in His image, we have certainly returned the favor. The same might be said of Jesus. Have we created Jesus in our own image? That might be the topic that we could say we’re about this evening. I’m reminded of a story—I don’t think apocryphal—about Governor “Farmer Jim” Ferguson, who was governor of Texas for two terms, and who in 1917 vetoed a bill that would have allowed the teaching of kindergarten in Spanish in the state of Texas. And the reason he gave was, “If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it’s good enough for Texas schoolchildren.” There are many Jesuses: the Jesus of history, for example; the Jesus of faith and Christologies; and the Jesus of the American imagination in this case—American culture, American ideology, even American politics.

My job tonight is to simply get out of the way and become a glorified timekeeper for our two distinguished guests. The one is an historian interested in religion; the other is a profession of religious studies interested in history. They are both friends and colleagues. They have taught together. They found out by accident that they were writing books on roughly the same topic. To my immediate right is Professor Richard Wightman Fox, who comes to us from the University of Southern California, who returned to that university in his own native southern California in the year 2000 where he is a professor of history, having also taught at Reed College, Boston University, and Yale, and who has his undergraduate and graduate degrees from no less an institution than Stanford University. If you like his *Jesus in America*, and I know that you will if you haven’t read it, you will no doubt be fascinated by another book of his, *Trials of Intimacy*, which deals with the torrid affair between Henry Ward Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton. It’s a marvelous read. I’ve had a chance not to finish, but to look through it, and I highly recommend it to you. It will give you a taste of the kind of history that Richard does along with the brilliant book that we’re looking at tonight, *Jesus in America*. 
Stephen Prothero is the chairman of the Department of Religion and he is the director of the Graduate Division of Religious and Theological Studies at Boston University. His B.A. is from Yale College in American studies and his graduate degree is from Harvard University in the study of religion. He is an historian of American religion but with a special interest in Asian religions. He’s written five books ranging from the history of cremation in the United States to American Buddhism. You’ve heard him on NPR, I’m sure. You may have read him in the *Wall Street Journal* on topics in religion. You will also find him in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Slate*, *Salon*, and any number of other publications. After reading through his *American Jesus*, you will no doubt be tempted to pick up his fine volume, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott*.

Again, as I say, my job is to be a glorified, or unglorified, timekeeper, and I think I would like to start our discussion by asking first Steve and then Richard to tell us how they got into writing these books. So Stephen, could I start with you; what brought you to this topic? How did you see your way through it?

**Stephen Prothero:** Let me say first, Tom, thank you for moderating for us and thanks to Mark Gonnerman and the Aurora Forum for having us here. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to talk about what we like to talk about. Jesus didn’t speak English, though, is that right? [Laughter] As Tom said, the area that I’ve really worked in most of my career is Asian religions in the United States, so I’ve done most of my work on Buddhism and Hinduism in the United States and a little bit on Confucianism and Daoism. What really struck me as I was doing this work was how difficult it was to segregate out the stories of, say, Buddhists and Hindus in America from the story of Christianity in the United States. I had naively thought when I began my scholarly career that you could do that: that you could just trudge off and study American Buddhists doing meditation or Hindus going into their local temples. And what I found out very quickly was that the kind of assumptions and norms and even forms of organization that you find in American Christianity pop up over and over again in American Buddhism and Hinduism. So, for example, I would go into the Buddhist Churches of America, which is the name of the oldest and most venerable Buddhist group in the United States, and they would have hymnals there and in the hymnals they would have songs like “Buddha Loves Me, This I Know, For the Sutras Tell Me So.” And then I would go into the Hindu temple in San Francisco, the oldest Hindu temple in the United States, built in 1906—a beautiful building in Pacific Heights, I think that’s the area—and in there they have a wonderful oil painting that depicts Jesus in the half lotus position as a meditator out in the woods in a St. Francis-style communion with the animals and with nature, but also clearly a meditator and, in the language of Hindus, an avatar or a descent of divinity onto the earth.

As I was running away from the Christian story in America to discover these hipper, cooler religions, I just kept finding that Christianity was there over and over. One way that this kept popping up was with this person of Jesus. I would find Buddhists saying, “Well, Jesus was a bodhisattva,” and I would read two books by the Dalai Lama on Jesus and on the Sermon on the Mount. I would see these images of Jesus among Hindus. And
I would go to Christmas Eve services at Hindu temples where they were worshiping Jesus as the Son of God. That was one way: doing Asian religions and just seeing Jesus showing up and starting to collect these images in books and pamphlets and accounts of various rituals, and then extending that into other non-Christian groups such as American Jews, who have been preoccupied with Jesus since about the 1850s, writing books about Jesus as a great rabbi or as a great prophet.

That was one way in for me. And the other way in was coincidence, I suppose. There was a period in my career when I was writing about the beat generation, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, and I was interested in the spirituality of these folks, with particular interest in Buddhism. And right at the same time I was doing that just for fun, I was reading books in the historical Jesus research, where people would write about who Jesus really, really, really was, not the pretend, phantasmagorical, and imaginative Jesus that is the subject of my book and Richard’s book, but the real Jesus. And it just struck me as I was reading these how located they were historically—which they were products of a particular historical circumstance, namely the historical circumstance of the 1980s and 1990s when I was reading them. And more particularly, it struck me how they were products of the beat generation and the hippie generation of the late 50s and the early 60s; they would have Jesus running away from his mom and then going out on the road with his buddies and just hanging out with a bunch of guys and quitting his job. And he was a rebel—a social and political rebel—according to these books. It just seemed to me that these books were not talking about 2,000 years ago; they were talking about the 1960s. They were talking about the particular time when these folks had come of age intellectually.

So that was my light bulb that came on and said, maybe you can historicize this; maybe you can tell a story about how Americans have understood Jesus that wouldn’t be about the real Jesus; it wouldn’t be about the Jesus of faith, the Christ of faith, per se, but it would be about this Jesus in the American imagination. That was my way in.

Sheehan: And you, Richard, how did you get into this topic?

Richard Fox: Well, to start with, Steve already thanked Tom and Mark. I’d also like to thank Dianna Watt and Kevin Kuo, who put together that phenomenal slide show [of Jesus images] that a lot of you saw as we came in. Steve and I contributed some of the images to that slide show, but we discovered a whole plethora of other great images thanks to Kevin.

Steve and I taught together at Boston University for several years, and we were always struck, once we found out we were both working on a cultural history of Jesus in America—we were both struck by how it hadn’t been done before. The moment had been ripe for doing this for a long time, but I think the people who were doing straight history, and I’m a historian, weren’t really interested enough in religion as a topic to move in this direction of a cultural history of Jesus. And likewise, the people in religious studies tended to be more confessional or more denominationally oriented regarding Jesus as Christ and therefore not really wanting to approach Jesus in this somewhat
anthropological way as a cultural figure. Maybe it’s a sign of some kind that in the
1990s, two guys simultaneously, without any conspiracy, came up with the same idea of
a cultural history of Jesus.

The ancient roots of my project I know are personal and familial. I grew up Catholic but
with a Protestant mother, and all of my historical work, I can see now a lot of it in
retrospect, is motivated by this desire to make sense of this dual formation and in some
sense this controversial dual formation. My mother and father never saw eye to eye on
religion, and growing up Catholic, I was always struck by how differently Protestants
worshiped Jesus. I was always struck as a little child by Billy Graham. I remember
watching him on TV and thinking, “What is he talking about?” It didn’t make sense to
have him talking about the Holy Spirit the way he did or the way he spoke of the new
birth. These were not things that I ever heard about from my priests. Likewise the whole
concept of the real presence. I found out very quickly from Protestant and Jewish friends
they had no idea what that was about. So I was always very intrigued, I think, from an
eyearly age by what I now see as a kind of anthropological interest in how it is that
Americans look so differently on this very single figure of Jesus.

Then simply to add one more point, it’s that the persistence of this figure throughout
American history—the statistics that Mark gave you at the outset about 80 percent of
Americans calling themselves Christian today, and 70 percent saying that Jesus is divine.
And then given a chance by the pollster to come back from that position and say, “Well,
do you really mean divine or do you mean he just founded a great religion like Buddha
and Muhammad? They say, “No, we mean he’s divine.” So of course one has to
interpret what they mean by that and does it really affect their everyday life, and all that.
One wants to know what it really means, and yet those figures are easily double of what
comparable responses would be in Europe or in Canada. Canada is right there, and yet all
the figures are half as great—the proportion of Canadians who believe in Jesus, the
proportion who go to church every week—all of those statistics are half as much in
Canada. So there’s something about America that really makes people gravitate to Jesus.
And a lot of my book—and I hope to be able to tell you more about that tonight—is
trying to explain that really startling fact that Americans continue to care so deeply about
Jesus. And it’s not just religious Americans. Here’s where Steve and I really see eye to
eye. We’ve written two very different books in some ways, but we both believe, and
both make clear we believe, that secular Americans and non-Christian Americans care a
lot about Jesus, as do Christians.

Sheehan: In fact, I read in the New York Times that something like 80 percent of
Americans believe in the virgin birth where only about 27 percent think that evolution is
an acceptable theory of how we got here. And yet both of your books are really eye-
openers. They are very different. You start from different historical points, you have
different trips through America. That’s what I’d like to ask you about now. There’s so
much new information for me. I’ve learned that Abraham Lincoln, who is sometimes
considered the most religious of our presidents—his second inaugural address is virtually
a sermon—was never baptized; he never even joined a church. Then Thomas Jefferson,
who is also considered to be someone who invoked the name of Jesus as a great
philosopher at least, said that someday the virgin birth would be classed with the myths of the birth of Minerva, etcetera. These were people who are sometimes lauded as religious figures, but we’ve learned now, and you have such a wealth of information in your books, about how they don’t fit our preconceived notions.

Could I ask—since I started with Stephen first, I’ll start now with you—if you could briefly summarize for those in the audience who haven’t had an opportunity to read your book, and then, Stephen, yours—what exactly it is that you do.

**Fox:** My book tries to do two basic things. It tries to document the range of American Jesuses over four centuries. So I start with the early contact between Indians and Europeans, and given what I just told you about my own Catholic-Protestant origins, I very much wanted in this book to start with the beginning of European Jesuses in the United States, which is a Catholic Jesus. The Catholics—the Jesuits—came to New France and the Franciscans came to New Mexico before the Pilgrims came to Plymouth. We often—at least those of us of my generation—start our learning about the United States with the arrival of the Pilgrims. But in the 1620s and the 1630s, when there were probably no more than 200 Pilgrims in Plymouth, there were tens of thousands of Indians taking communion in New Mexico. So we have to really rethink our sense of origins of Jesus in America. And when of course the New England Protestants—the Puritans—became so prominent in American understandings of Jesus, they were very aware of the Catholics in New France—in Quebec. And the Protestant Puritans of New England regarded their task—this errand in the wilderness — as taking Jesus back from the Catholics, and decontaminating the American atmosphere of this Catholic, superstitious, medieval way of looking at Jesus. So I tried throughout my book to document the full range of Jesuses since that time, and to me the central split—the central pivot point of Jesus in America—is that Catholic-Protestant split.

I also am very interested in trying to explain the persistence of Jesus into the twenty-first century, and I go into a great deal of length trying to account for this persistence. Just to give you a nutshell, brief, schematic version of what I argue, it’s to say that the revolutionary period was critical. There had already been in the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century a kind of critical mass of belief in Jesus as personal savior. That’s a term from the eighteenth century. The subtitle of my book is *Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession,* and the personal savior part of it is very much an eighteenth-century development. So by the time of the Revolution at the late eighteenth century, there was this critical mass, and had we developed the way that France developed, for example, we would have dumped Jesus along with the established church. That’s pretty much what happened in France. We dumped the established church at the federal level first and then later at the state level, but kept Jesus. One reason is there was the critical mass already in the population of believers in the personal savior, but our revolutionary leaders like Jefferson—in some ways the most secular since he thought of Jesus as merely human, not divine, like Benjamin Franklin also—Jefferson nevertheless thought Jesus was crucial for America, and as a moral philosopher and as indeed a social philosopher, he thought of Jesus as the greatest of all time, as our forty-third president told us he did also in the year 2000.
So we have with Jefferson and other revolutionaries this decision that Jesus was important to them, and despite their attack on establishments, they maintained a commitment to having Jesus in the future of American society. So the revolutionary period gave Jesus a critical success in the United States. What I say is that he cleared the hurdle of the revolutionary period and then with the massive expansion of the nineteenth century with the Methodists and the Baptists, Jesus became, in effect, a community builder. As new settlements were established as American Europeans went West, Jesus was often the central symbol. The community gravitated around the church and often that has been an important difference between us and other parts of Europe as well; England, for example. N. T. Wright, the great British student of Jesus, argues that in Britain, the church never became the community center that it became in the United States, and that’s the nineteenth century—Jesus as the symbol of a local community.

A third point I would make is that Jesus corresponds in this almost magically perfect way with certain American republican ideals. If we’re going to be Americans, let’s wipe away the past, let’s start off new, let’s have a novis ordum seclorum—a new order of the ages—let’s leave the past behind, let’s bury tradition. Become what you want to be. This is the place where you can actually be born again as a secular American. That sense of new birth is republican as well as evangelical as well as Christian. So the fact that Jesus preaches the new birth in John, chapter three—it’s almost eerily perfect for an American conception of breaking with tradition, making all things new, and it’s not anything that’s ever stopped. We’ve been this way culturally now for easily 200 years and I don’t see any change in the future. So those are a few elements of the curious persistence of Jesus in America.

Sheehan: That’s very helpful. And Stephen, I have the impression that for you, the second Great Awakening, the period from 1800 to 1830, also called, I think, the Great Diversification, was the more critical period. But in any case, how would you pull this together for us?

Prothero: I’ll say something about that in a second, but before I talk about the arguments in the book, I just want to say a little bit about the subject, because the subject of my book is narrower than the subject of Richard’s book. In trying to figure out how to do this project, I made a decision early on that I was going to distinguish across three ways of thinking about this person. The first is the notion of Christ, which is a faith affirmation. Sometimes people think, Jesus Christ: Jesus is his first name and Christ is his last name—Mr. Christ. But Christ is of course a theological affirmation. So, at any rate, I distinguish across these three types. One is the Christ of faith, which is a theological affirmation. It’s something that you need to be a Christian or at least a religious person of some sort to affirm. And the second is the historical Jesus, which is the problem that Tom works on—this actual person who lived at a certain time, and we can write books and have arguments about what type of person he was. Then the third, which is not the same as the Christ of faith and is not the same as the historical Jesus, is the cultural Jesus, which is the Jesus that runs around in our imagination and may or may not have any correspondence whatsoever to the historical Jesus and may or may not have
a correspondence with the Christ of faith. It’s a separable kind of entity. This is the focus of my book. It’s the cultural Jesus in a particular place, namely the United States, and that considerably narrows the field. I’ll explain how that narrows the field in just a second. The arguments I make in the book are about that—about the cultural Jesus, not about the historical Jesus.

And then the arguments that I make—I start with one that I’ve already hinted at which is that Jesus isn’t just for Christians in the United States—that one of the most intriguing facts about American religion is the fact that we have this huge preponderance of Christians—80 to 85 percent or so—and yet the non-Christians in the country also have a kind of Jesus piety. So if you look at polling data on, say, Was Jesus born from a virgin? Was Jesus raised from the dead? and you ask non-Christians (you confine the polling data to non-Christians), it turns out that slightly over half of American non-Christians believe that Jesus was born from a virgin and that he was raised from the dead. So you can then go to look at American Jews or American Buddhists or American Hindus and you ask them, “What do you think of Jesus?” and you can imagine that they would tell you that he was a bad guy—that he was fraudulent, that he was a fool, that he was a liar. But they never tell you that. What they tell you is, Jesus was a great Hindu, Jesus was a great Buddhist, Jesus was a great Jew.

When I was researching my book, I went back into reform rabbis from the nineteenth century in America—from right around 1850 through World War I—and I looked at that period and I found that virtually every major reform rabbi in the United States wrote either a book or a pamphlet on Jesus, and every one of them said Jesus was a great Jew. And the debate was, how great of a Jew was he? What kind of a Jew was he? Was he better than Amos and a little below Moses or was he above Moses? That was the only issue. It wasn’t, Was he Jewish? Was he a bad Jew? It was how great of a Jew was Jesus?

So this is one argument of the book, that if you think that the American preoccupation with Jesus is confined to Christianity, if you think when someone in the public sphere says “Jesus” that they must necessarily be speaking as a Christian—that they must be pushing Christianity into public space—that isn’t necessarily the case. And if you look at what these non-Christians do with Jesus, it’s actually quite remarkable and quite audacious because you could imagine that they might feel a kind of deference: Christians produced this symbol, have sustained it over the centuries and over millennia, so we need to defer to them. If Christians say Jesus is the Messiah, then we need to either say, Jesus is the Messiah, yes or no. We need to vote thumbs up or thumbs down. It turns out that nobody does this. In America, you have the freedom to first define who Jesus is and then say whether you agree or not with who he is, and that turns out to be very, very important because without that, non-Christians would feel that they would need to bow to the Christians in the audience and say, OK, you told me who he is; he’s the Son of God, he’s divine, he’s whatever, and then they would have to say no. But they don’t feel they have to do that. So that’s one argument.
The second major argument is an obvious point to any historian, which is that when you look at the cultural Jesuses, there are a lot of them; there isn’t just one. You can get from the Bible maybe that there’s supposed to be one Jesus, although you can also get from the Bible that there are hundreds of them. But there is the notion that Jesus doesn’t change, that Jesus is one person, that Jesus is God and God doesn’t change, and yet when you look at the cultural Jesus, all you see is change. All you see is multiplication. So given that, there is a historian’s task, which is to tell the story, to make sense of all these multiple manifestations, and that’s a large part of what the book tries to do—to try to get in there, to get the story line going about how this person—this Jesus, the human being—develops in America.

And there are two ways that I run that. One is a development from an abstract, theological divinity into a human being and then from a human being into a celebrity, and then from a celebrity into an icon. So I try to charge from the colonial period to the 1920s and beyond—how is it that Jesus becomes a celebrity and then becomes a national icon? One of the main observations there is that Jesus was not important in the colonial period, and this is where I think Richard and I probably disagree. But if you look at colonial sermons, if you look at classic figures like Jonathan Edwards who is arguably the most important theologian in American history, and you look for Jesus there—the Jesus I’m talking about—the cultural Jesus, you really don’t find him.

The preoccupation in the colonial period among both Protestants and Catholics is with a more abstract, theological Jesus who has a mission to accomplish on earth, namely to die on the cross and save us from our sins. But he doesn’t have a relationship with us; he doesn’t have a personality that we engage with. If you go to New England in the colonial period, the colonists are engaging with God the Father. There’s very little discussion of Jesus. It’s a kind of a Jesus-less Christianity. It’s a Christianity that focuses on fearing God rather than on loving Jesus, and that’s why, as Tom asked, I really start my story more in the early nineteenth century when this Jesus emerges as a person with whom we can be in a relationship—a person about whom we can say, “What’s this guy like?” And we can get up a conversation about what this guy is like, kind of like when you meet a new friend and you come home and you’re asked, “What’s this person like?” And you can start saying, “Well, you know, he’s tall, or he’s funny, or he’s smart, or he’s a hard-working carpenter,” or something like that. You could get going in a conversation. It’s only in the early nineteenth century in my argument that that happens—that he’s liberated from this divine status doing work for God the Father and becomes independent, and Christianity turns from being a God the Father, more Old Testament faith, to being a God the Son, more New Testament faith.

Then it’s in the twentieth century that celebrity emerges, particularly in the twenties. I was really just struck as I was doing my research how the twenties kept coming back at me. My editor would say, “Steve, many of your chapters are stuck in the twenties.” And I would say, “They’re stuck in the twenties because something was happening in the twenties.” What happened in the twenties is Jesus became a celebrity: the emergence of radio, the emergence of films, best-selling books and best-selling movies about Jesus—it kind of sounds like now, basically, but this was happening in the twenties. If you looked
at the best-seller list, if you looked at popular movies—Cecil B. DeMille’s *King of Kings*…. So it’s in the twenties that this happens, and then Jesus becomes a national icon, I argue, more in the ‘60s and ‘70s when religious outsiders—non-Christians—are able to claim him as their own in part because of the civil rights movement, the black power movement, and the rise of Asian religions after 1965 when immigration was opened up. Jesus really starts to become a kind of common cultural coin that all of us, whether Christians or not, can talk about and can think about. So that’s one way through.

I’ll just quickly run another way through, which is a story line that goes with a series of liberations of Jesus, where I have this image of Jesus who is sort of trapped in this role of doing this job for God the Father in the colonial period where he’s supposed to die on the cross and save us from our sins, but then he’s supposed to rise and go up to heaven and go away. Over time, Jesus is progressively liberated so that he can become the more important figure—so that he can overthrow his father, if you want to do a kind of Freudian version of this—and become the dominant personality in American religious culture, which he was not in the colonial period. I would argue that God the Father is the dominant religious personality in the colonial period.

And so he’s liberated first from this Calvinist-Puritan theology that really focuses on this high God—God the Father; he’s liberated secondly by born-again Christians in the early nineteenth century from the creeds. There’s a whole movement that says, “We need Jesus, the real Jesus from the Bible; we don’t want the Jesus from the creeds. Human beings wrote the creeds, but God wrote the Bible, so when we want to get our Jesus, we need to separate him from the creeds.” So he’s liberated from Calvinism, he’s liberated from the creeds.

And then, as the Bible starts to become problematic, especially among liberals around the time of the Civil War with biblical criticism and Darwinism and new geology, etcetera, Jesus is freed from the Bible, as well. Liberal Protestants say, “We don’t want to base our tradition purely on scripture. In fact, we don’t want to base it on scripture. We want to base it on Jesus.” And so there’s a shift from this ideal of *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone—Christianity should be based on the Bible alone—to *solus Jesus*, Christianity should be based on Jesus alone. Jesus is what we worship; we don’t worship the Bible; that’s Bibleolatry. We worship Jesus. So he’s liberated from Calvinism and the creeds and then he’s liberated from the Bible. And then, most intriguingly to me, he’s liberated from Christianity itself so that we can approach Jesus not through the theology of Calvinism, not through the creeds, not through the Bible, and not even through Christianity. Isn’t that cool? We can have this guy, like Thomas Jefferson did, and say, There’s the religion *about* Jesus over here; that’s Christianity. There’s the religion of Jesus over here; that’s what we care about. After all, shouldn’t that be more important than this human product that was created by this bad person named Paul instead of the real religion of Jesus? And this is what Jefferson does, this is what Hindus do, this is what Jews do, this is what Buddhists do, this is what agnostics who love Jesus do. By the way, Robert Ingersoll, the great nineteenth-century agnostic, loved Jesus. Who was Jesus? He was a great agnostic, according to Ingersoll. And the reason you’re able to do this is because, again, you separate the religion *about* Jesus—Christianity—the secondary
thing that we shouldn’t really care that much about, from the religion of Jesus, the primary thing that we really should focus on.

**Sheehan:** I’m reminded of the phrase that I think I attribute to Loisy. Albert Loisy was a scripture scholar in the early twentieth century who said that basically searching for the meaning of Jesus is like looking down a well. You see your own reflection coming back at you. We bring a certain hermeneutical circle—interpretive circle—to….

I was very struck by the work that you did with films in the 1920s. I can remember growing up, and perhaps, Richard, you’ll recall this—there were religious films out there that were unifying across denominational lines. There were also those that were just for us Catholics. There was the *Miracle of Fatima*, there was a movie, *The Song of Bernadette*, I think. And then there was *Ben Hur* and *The Robe*, which anyone could go to. But nowadays, it seems that in the culture wars, Jesus at the cinema is also becoming a divisive factor. I know that you have a lot to say about the Jesus whom we see in cinema today.

**Fox:** Yes, I’ve just been rather overwhelmed, as I’m sure a lot of you have, by *The Passion of the Christ* phenomenon of last year. I think we’re now getting enough distance from the high emotions of those months of last spring and summer when it was really all a lot of people were talking about, and I’m convinced that we’ve just lived through and maybe we’re continuing to live through a major reorientation in the cultural presence of Jesus in America.

It’s not just that *The Passion of the Christ* is divisive; it’s that it’s unifying in a new way. That is, *The Passion of the Christ* and Mel Gibson himself is a way in which Catholics and Protestants of a conservative persuasion are coming together. And this film and Gibson’s iconography in this film are becoming a unifying image for conservatives. Liberals don’t have the same kind of artistic innovation with Jesus right now that conservatives have, thanks to Gibson.

To me, the whole *Passion of the Christ* phenomenon is a marvelous instance of how Jesus operates culturally in American history. A social debate takes place, and one can trace exactly this happening with, let’s say, the slavery/anti-slavery debate in the early nineteenth century, labor-capital debates in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, debates about war and peace in the early and mid-twentieth century, a debate over celebrity—with that exact word being used—in the 1960s when John Lennon said, “The Beatles are more popular than Jesus,” and this caused quite a stir. Is he really?

Is Jesus really just a celebrity? This, I think, is at the source of the great film of the 1970s, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, where Tim Rice, the great librettist of that score of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, gave us a depiction of Jesus as a celebrity that has never been surpassed. Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar* is being destroyed by his own celebrity. He’s being eaten alive by his followers, and in this marvelous phrase that Tim Rice comes up with, he has his Jesus saying to his disciples, “For all you care…(this is the moment of the transubstantiation, where he’s changing wine into the blood of Jesus, he’s changing
bread into the body of Jesus) and he has Jesus say to his disciples, ‘For all you care, this wine could be my blood. For all you care, this bread could be my body.’” In other words, You’d eat me alive if you could. You’d consume me. What Tim Rice does there so magically, I think, is he gives us a new understanding of celebrity and he lets the debate over celebrity in the culture of the time give us a new understanding of Jesus.

That’s exactly what happens again and again in American history at critical moments of social debate. And with Gibson, I think it’s happened again. Here we get in the middle of our contemporary culture wars, and here we get to be really present when history has happened. This is what is so exciting about it. Whatever we may think of Gibson’s movie, that’s not the issue. We’re being privileged enough to witness a reorientation taking place in our culture.

So Gibson gives us this old Catholic iconography—the suffering, limp body of Jesus. This Jesus is not a fully developed adult human being; he doesn’t have sexual desires like the Jesus of Scorsese in The Last Temptation of Christ. He doesn’t have psychic turmoil like the Jesus of Scorsese in The Last Temptation or the Jesus of Last Temptation of Christ in the 1970s. The Jesus of Mel Gibson is a human shell. He’s a human body available for beating and strapping and whipping and for sacrifice. It’s the old sacrificial lamb, and miraculously Gibson has brought back to life the seventeenth-century Jesus that I start my book with in the French Jesuits in Quebec, the Jesus of Jean de Brebeuf, the tortured, battered Jesus. The Jesuits of New France hoped maybe they would be privileged enough to get the grace from God to have to suffer the way Jesus had. That was the mentality of seventeenth-century Catholicism; that’s the mentality of Mel Gibson today. He’s a seventeenth-century Jesuit—in Malibu—and he starts his own church. And he actually dislikes the present-day Catholic church as much as Dan Brown does in The DaVinci Code. So we’ve got The DaVinci Code and Gibson collaborating in 2004 to give us this new cultural moment. And this Catholic iconography—the idea—even the mere notion that any Protestants would have bit at this iconography—then the fact as we’ve now discovered that thousands filled theaters for weeks, and they’re about to start again tomorrow with The Passion Recut, which is being released in 750 theaters with less violence for those who didn’t want to go to see it the first time. But the fact that that Catholic iconography would be available to and desirable to evangelical Protestants…. Fifty years ago, no one would have believed that that would ever happen, but it’s happened before our very eyes.

Sheehan: From culture to politics, maybe, Stephen. Those of you who don’t know the name of David Barton will certainly come to know it in the coming days because he will be an expert witness, I understand, at the Supreme Court hearings about whether or not the Ten Commandments should be displayed in public federal buildings. David Barton appeared in Washington, D.C. a week ago saying the following, again about the political wars that Jesus gets involved in, not just the cultural wars we’ve just heard about:

“We’ve all been trained to recognize only two of the founding fathers, the least religious ones: Jefferson and Franklin,” he says. “But even Jefferson signed his letters ‘In the year of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ What would happen if George W. Bush did that? They’d rip his head off,” was his statement. Jesus seems to get involved in the political cultural wars
sometimes under the rubric of, “This is a Christian nation; it was founded that way by the founding mothers and fathers,” although that’s historically somewhat debatable. What would you make of that, Steve, of its use today—the use of Jesus as icon today in the political arena?

Prothero: One thing that really struck me after September 11 was how there was a reorientation, as I saw it, in American culture around this issue of the religious character of the country. We’ve had a debate forever about this—that this is a secular nation, that God does not appear in the Constitution—and yet we have this population that is so Christian and, beyond just being Christian, so religious. We’re one of the most religious countries in the history of the world, and there are more Christians in American now than in any other country in the history of the world. So it’s tricky to figure that out. What is it? So there have been these ongoing reorientations: it’s a secular country, or a multi-religious country, a Protestant country, or a Christian country. And then after World War II, it’s a Judeo-Christian country. It intrigued me to see after 9/11 how there emerged this new alternative that maybe it’s a Judeo-Christian-Islamic country; maybe it’s an Abrahamic country. Western religions: one God—we pray to God, God acts in history, God can favor a particular nation or damn a particular nation. And it was in the midst of all this that I was thinking about this book, and it concerned me to think that finding Jesus everywhere in American culture and American history would sort of feed right into a kind of conservative interpretation of America’s religious character. In other words, there would be people who would say, “See, there you go—this is a Christian country, because after all, Thomas Jefferson wrote his own New Testament, and Thomas Jefferson said, like Bush said, that Jesus was the greatest political philosopher of all time.” And what I concluded after considering that is that there are some false assumptions there and one of the most important ones is that when people evoke Jesus, they’re evoking Christianity. In other words, to speak the name of Jesus is to assert the cultural authority of Christianity, and that just doesn’t turn out to be the case. If all the Jesus-lovers in America were Christians, then finding Jesus-loving everywhere would give you a better argument for America as a Christian nation.

But what I decided, and what I tell my students, is that what is most intriguing about the United States religiously is the following paradox, which is that it’s one of the most Christian nations in the history of the world and it’s also one of the most multi-religious. So the First Amendment gives us the freedom to choose our religion, and Americans have used that freedom to choose to become Christians, for the most part—80 to 85 percent—depending on how you count. But it’s also a place where people feel free to be religious dissenters, and not only to be religious dissenters but to muck around in the central symbol of the dominant religious culture, which to me is quite amazing.

So the argument I make in the book is that the United States is a Jesus nation, and Jesus does function as a kind of common cultural coin in a society where we are divided on racial lines and on ethnic lines and on gender lines and on regional lines in a lot of different ways, and it’s hard to have common cultural conversations, but Jesus is a way that we as Americans can, through films like Mel Gibson’s movie, have this conversation. It’s not just Christians who are arguing about this movie; it’s not just
Judeo-Christians or even Jews, Christians, and Muslims; all of us can engage in this conversation. And to me, just to finish a little bit of Richard’s thought, the Gibson movie is the moment of post-9/11. It’s a movie about terrorism, in my view, and the reason that Gibson came up with it may go back to seventeenth-century Spain and to his own particular piety, but to me, the more intriguing question is why Americans have spent so much money on this film and gone to this film and why this film has grossed $600 million, and I think it’s because we identify with Jesus as the victim. We have the same concern that the terrorists are after us. We’re being victimized bodily, and for some reason that story resonates in a new way for us in a way that it wouldn’t have if it had been released on September 10 of 2001.

Sheehan: I’m noticing that there are about ten minutes until we’ll take up questions, so I’ll ask this last question and then invite you to pose your questions to our scholars here.

The question is this: the word “post” shows up so often in our academic and in our political discourse. We’re “post-9/11,” we’re “post-modern,” and a new phrase that I’ve just begun to discover from my students is “post-evangelical.” I’m thinking of your colleague in philosophy at the University of Southern California, Dallas Willard, who is also an evangelical speaker, but now describes himself as post-evangelical, referring to a certain evangelical culture that’s too restraining and too church-oriented. It’s another one of the liberations that Stephen is talking about—liberating Jesus even from evangelical culture. David Tomlinson in the United Kingdom is the spokesperson for this post-evangelical movement. It raises the question of how you find your own students. Here we are in an academic environment with many students present here and we know that the mantra is “I’m spiritual, not religious.” How do you find your own students, may I ask? We’ll start with you, Richard. Those who declare themselves to be related to Jesus or Christianity—how do they find themselves? How do they locate themselves in this arena?

Fox: Steve may have more to say about this than I since I teach history classes where religion as such is not the draw, but I did teach a seminar on Jesus in America for several years, and students in that seminar came from every conceivable background—secular, religious, Christian, non-Christian, Jewish—it was a little microcosm of melting pot religion in America. It was a fascinating discussion across all of those lines, and I think it’s a good occasion for me to simply extend something Steve has been saying.

We both are interested in our books in secular as well as religious Americans, and in my book I argue that Christians have often become secular over American history, and this is especially true in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries precisely because of Jesus. So that Jesus can be identified as, in effect, an instrument that leads many religious Americans to become secular, and I’m sure many of you can see already how this would happen. Christians would be the ones who would take so seriously Matthew 5:48: “Be ye therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” That perfectionist impulse—to leave sin behind completely—to leave corruption behind—has led many Christians to leave their churches because the churches are too corrupt and in some cases they’ve found other sects or denominations to try be more pure. But I think it’s also led—and
there are many documented instances of this—where people are actually led beyond the church to a kind of secular perfectionism because of Jesus’s own words, and that interplay—that interconnection between secular and religious—to me is one of the most fascinating things about American history overall. It’s that we are, as Steve nicely put it, multi-religious and Christian. But I would say—and completely compatible with it, I think, is another way to put it—that we are fully secular as a modern industrial society while being fully religious. If we can just get our heads around that, and not necessarily understand it, because it’s going to remain a mystery, I’m convinced, but it is a key to the American experience, I think, to see that secular-religious, not just juxtaposition, but interpenetration. That is truly something exceptional about the United States.

Sheehan: And you, Stephen? How about your students?

Prothero: I teach at Boston University so I’d be speaking about the East Coasters and the West Coasters, so I’m going to divert the question and just talk about America more broadly, because I do think, especially after the election, that we have this awareness that California and Massachusetts are kind of strange places, in a way. So the notion that we live in a post-evangelical culture to me is hysterically strange. It is strange that anyone would even ever—no offense, but—pose such a question. In the light of the elections, it seems to me that if you look back at Time magazine in 1965, it says on a big black cover—it looks like a funeral card—“Is God Dead?” That was a question that was a reasonable question in 1965. I think the question now is, “Is secularism dead?” I mean, the secular as a kind of ideology in America has very little resonance hardly anywhere except for—I don’t know where—in San Francisco and in Boston, maybe—in certain neighborhoods in Boston—I don’t know. I understand there are people who talk about themselves as post-evangelicals to describe their own theological journey, but in terms of students and in terms of the culture, I think that there’s a really, really powerful sense that more conservative forms of Christianity are ascending and those are particularly becoming more resonant in the public space.

Sheehan: And not having time now to define the term, they define it as “evangelical plus.” It’s a culture change rather than a theology change. That’s their own self-description. There isn’t a lot of literature on that, but it is indeed…it sounds counter-intuitive.

The nice thing about the Aurora Forum is that it’s dedicated to democratic discussion. You know the story of the professor who fell asleep and dreamt he was giving a lecture and woke up and found out he was. This forum is dedicated to making sure that doesn’t happen by including your questions. This is a hot-button topic in many ways and there will be the temptation to lecture our guests rather than to ask the question. Now my role will become not just simply timekeeper but also the person who says, “Please get to the question.” So if you’d like to approach the microphones, I’ll just go from one mike to the other, and feel free to line up. I hope the questions will all get treated. We’ll probably close around nine o’clock, a half hour from now, but I’m sure that you’ll have an opportunity to chat among yourselves or with our guests afterwards.
**Question from the Audience:** My first question is for Professor Fox. He discussed the importance of Mel Gibson’s film, but I would like to hear any comments about another important film, *Life of Brian*.

**Fox:** I hope a lot of you have seen the *Life of Brian* because if you have, you know what a brilliant reinterpretation of Jesus it is. If you haven’t seen it, you have something to look forward to because this group has put together some of the funniest material about Jesus ever conceived, including, I think it’s John Cleese who is trying to hear what is being said at the Sermon on the Mount, and he can’t quite make it out because he’s at the back of the crowd, and he thinks he hears, “Blessed be the cheese-makers.” And what’s so remarkable about that firm is that it appears to be bitingly satirical, but then the longer you watch it, you realize this is absolutely pious—this is defending Jesus against idolatry. That’s the remarkable achievement, I think, of the *Life of Brian*. So get it at the video store. It’s well worth your while.

**Question from the Audience:** My question is for either or both of you. In the United States, there is certainly a culture of violence, and yet my understanding of Jesus, both from Catholicism as well as from “spiritual and not religious” is that Jesus’s primary rule was to love thy neighbor as thyself and the turn-the-other-cheek kind of stuff. How is it that we deny that concept and yet still call ourselves Christians?

**Prothero:** Well, he also said, “I came not to bring peace but a sword.” And there’s an ongoing debate in American culture, as Richard intimated. Whenever we get to wartime, we get the pacifist Jesus and we get the militarist Jesus. Around the beginning of the twentieth century in the Teddy Roosevelt period, there was a real resurgence of this macho, crusading, marching up San Juan Hill kind of Rough Rider Jesus who probably played football in college and went on to become a leader in the army. So you’re right about the fact that we have that Jesus emerging which, I would add, is also ascendant today. I think that’s part of what’s going on in the Mel Gibson movie as well. We have a revival of the macho Jesus. I would just say that there is a tradition of this in Christianity and there are texts in the Bible that you can find. Jesus is not unambiguously a pacifist and I would agree with you that there are more resources in the New Testament for that kind of interpretation, but the Bible is not without resources for the other, most especially from the Book of Revelation where, when Jesus comes back, he is not a particularly friendly, turn the other cheek, kind of guy. And religions that care about justice need to have divinities that are going to make things happen—divinities that are going to go to war for the good.

**Fox:** I disagree with Steve’s remark about *The Passion of the Christ*. I don’t see the Jesus of Mel Gibson as a warrior Jesus; I see him as just this submissive Jesus who is beaten to a pulp. The actor is a muscular guy, but I don’t think he’s depicted as a muscular Christ. I feel that the question really puts its finger on one of the great debates over the last hundred years about whether Jesus is of use to us if we are Christian in thinking about social justice. In my book, I do talk about Reinhold Niebuhr, whom I had talked about at greater length in an earlier book, and he is really a crucial force in the
twentieth century for making many mainstream Protestants give up the idea that the pacifist Jesus is going to be of use to us in politics, in social debates. According to Niebuhr, we’ve got to get that Jesus back out into the desert—get him out of the debates about whether we should go to war to defend the Allies. We’ve got to have a Christianity that responds with force when necessary to defend justice. And as Steve says, back in the World War I period lots of Christians came forward who said, “We’ve got to fight in World War I” and Jesus didn’t just call for peace. This was the common story told: he went to the temple and he whipped the money changers and got them out of the temple, so he used force. And this was the key story in getting the argument forward that Jesus was an interventionist as well as a pacifist. I think the Niebuhr position is so interesting because it accepts the idea that Jesus himself is fully a pacifist, but it then says for that very reason, we can’t use him anymore; we’ve got to find other authorities to give us the justification we need to fight a Hitler.

**Question from the Audience:** With the greatly expanding understanding of our environment and ourselves, do you foresee a reconciliation or some kind of integration between the Jesus as you understand him today and scientific understanding of our environment?

**Sheehan:** I presume that’s to both our guests.

**Fox:** I would say that what I foresee or not is hard for me to decide. I’m trained as an historian so I’m very bad at looking forward. But I think the spirit of the question, or at least the part of the question that I really want to grab onto, is that we seem to have a split between religion and science and it seems to be growing. My prediction, if anything, I’m afraid, would be that we would have more of a split between religion and science. That awful statistic that Tom mentioned about evolution versus virgin birth, is an indication. I think that’s where we really have to worry right now—that the religious right is going to have an effect on our schools and our kids’ educations. That really troubles me. And I think if liberals can find themselves mobilized by anything, it will be that. It will be that we have to return to Thomas Jefferson. Don’t let conservatives have Jefferson. And if you’re a liberal, as I am on these issues, don’t hand Jefferson over. Sure, he liked God, he liked Jesus, but he liked science and he liked reason and he was a man of the Enlightenment, and therefore any Jesus or God that got in the way of science and reason had to go. It’s just that for Jefferson, you didn’t have to choose; you could have them both. And so I just hope that liberalism can somehow revive itself, like the professor: get out of this slumber and start talking about religion and science again instead of religion or science.

**Sheehan:** I’m reminding myself that the *New York Times* said within the last month that the National Society of Teachers of Biology in High School breathed a sigh of relief when they found out that now 51 percent of teachers of biology hold to evolution.

**Question from the Audience:** I wanted to ask because it has always puzzled me that as we look at our own creation story, you can’t get an argument. And you look at it and it
says, “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” You ought to be able to get up an argument on any street corner. And then it says that we’re “endowed by our creator.” Again, how can people so completely have accepted that? It seems to me that for some it’s poetry, for some it’s religion, for some it’s inspiration, but I wonder if this foundation in our creation story that somehow is not controversial gives us a freedom to swing all over the place in the rest of it because somehow there is a foundation there that is both religious and non-controversial, and I’ve just never been able to understand it.

Sheehan: So is the question, given that premise that you lay out, how is it that we controvert that issue now?

Question from the Audience: Well, why isn’t it controversial? And if it isn’t, does it give us a freedom in the rest of our exploration as a country?

Prothero: I’m not quite sure exactly what you’re driving at, but let me do my best. There is from the beginning a tension here in the country between secularity and religion. So if you’re a church-state separationist who thinks we should keep these things separate and it makes you nervous when the word “Jesus” comes up at the Bush inaugurations, which it does come up, then you need to reckon with the fact that God has been present in America from the very beginning. The image of George Washington standing there swearing to uphold the Constitution—one hand was up in the air and the other hand was on a Bible. Isn’t this a contradiction in terms for a strict church-state separationist? His hand should not be on a Bible. How can you uphold the Constitution with your hand on the Bible? You can’t do it, except, of course, you can because he did. Why do we have prayers that open sessions of Congress? Why do we have military chaplains? We’ve never had pure separation of church and state in the United States. No one contemplated that early on except for maybe Thomas Jefferson and maybe Madison, but even Jefferson had a sense that a society without God was going to go under. So I think there’s a dance. With the Ten Commandments now, it looks like this is going to be decided on the facts rather than on some grand theory. And I think that makes sense. I think that church-state separation is...where’s the line? It’s not a simple matter. If you compare the Bush inaugurations that a lot of ACLU types got exercised over—compare those to Clinton. In the Clinton inaugurations, there was more religion. There were three gospel choirs in one of the Clinton inaugurations, and secular liberal types weren’t that mad at Bill Clinton because they liked his politics. So I think it’s very tricky.

Question from the Audience: Professor Prothero, this is for you. You talked about a differentiation process between the religion of Christianity and the religion of Jesus. Can there be a systematic process? Can you systematically differentiate between the two or is it totally subjective and therefore individualistic?

Prothero: That’s a good question. I think from the historical perspective, it’s fairly easy to distinguish them because we do know that Jesus was Jewish, at least Jesus was raised Jewish and did Jewish stuff and thought Jewish things. And it’s clear, as some of Tom’s work and historical scholarship on the emergence of Christianity has demonstrated, that Christianity emerges historically after the death of Jesus, so it’s just sort of odd in a way,
just thinking historically, to think about him as being a Christian. So as soon as you do that, you do have these two categories: there’s the religion that he had and then there’s the religion that emerges after him, and then the question becomes, How much of the intentions of Jesus are inside Christianity? And that’s a historical question; it’s also a theological one. If you believe that Jesus is God and you believe in the Incarnation and you believe in the idea that God is somehow active in the church, then you might be able to bridge those two and say, “Well, we can have some confidence that there’s an important connection between the religion about Jesus and the religion of Jesus.” But thinking purely as I do as an historian, it becomes much, much trickier to do that in terms of where does one start and where does the other end.

The subjectivism part of your question is a wonderful one, because one conclusion you can draw from listening to Richard and me speak today is that we just had this blooming buzzing confusion and all of a sudden we just should be relativists. One guy says Jesus is a member of the KKK handing out KKK paraphernalia; one says Jesus is an abolitionist—Jesus is a civil rights activist. I think that’s a problem. But how to solve the problem? I think you just have to dig in a little bit more into the history of early Christianity and into the Bible itself probably to get some traction.

Sheehan: It was on a Bible borrowed from a Masonic lodge that George Washington swore the first oath.

Prothero: That’s right. That’s even better.

Sheehan: It’s not clear that he opened it up very much. Joseph Ellis wrote the most recent wonderful biography of Washington and calls him a lukewarm Episcopalian and basically a Deist—not a Christian, per se.

Fox: If I could just piggyback an answer to something no one asked but I’ve wanted to say this back to Steve for a while. It’s just that we haven’t had an occasion yet to identify one of the major differences between our two books. It’s just simply that I in my book feel that in order to explain historically the power of the Jesus symbol in American history, you have to pass through the actual religious experiences that Christians have had of all sorts across the whole Christian spectrum and the related intense personal experiences secular Americans have had around and through Jesus, so that people like Eugene Debs and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Jane Adams and many others who were not church-going Christians felt that Jesus mattered to them ultimately. And what I try to do in my book is to go through their experiences and therefore I think establish that there is a foundation for a persistent Jesus symbol in American culture. I just want to stress that fact that experience is the key, and American experiences are diverse, they are exceptional, and they are forever evolving. The evolution is not just that new ones appear but that old ones are revived. That’s back to the Mel Gibson point.

Question from the Audience: I recall the statement that you made early on that the rift in Christianity in the U.S. is mainly between Catholics and Protestants, but I think as I
further listened to you that you’re saying that now it is between conservatives and liberals, I suppose.

**Prothero:** That’s definitely what I think. I think that we have seen a reorientation politically and culturally so that conservatives across the Catholic-Protestant divide make common cause and find a common symbol miraculously in this Catholic Jesus of Mel Gibson, and similarly, liberal Protestants and liberal Catholics come together. I would add, however, that there remains a fundamental difference in the way that all Catholics, conservative or liberal, experience Jesus, and the way that many evangelical Protestants experience Jesus, so that Catholics seriously have no idea what Protestants mean when they say, “What would Jesus do?” They just don’t get it. A Catholic wouldn’t say it that way. A Catholic would say, “What does Jesus do?” And similarly with the real presence or the new birth, as I said at the start … things like that—the Eucharistic taking-in of Jesus physically—the corporeal Jesus—is such a Catholic experience and so not an evangelical Protestant experience.

**Question from the Audience:** But do you think it’s political or both religious and political?

**Prothero:** Both. Certainly Vatican II, and we know this very intimately from Mel Gibson’s own lips, Vatican II was a crucial break for him and many other Catholic traditionalists, so there is a religious break among Catholics and certainly Protestants are so diverse that there are all sorts of religious breaks among them. But if I can just generalize overly about evangelical Protestants, their experience of Jesus is quite different from Catholic experiences with Jesus.

**Fox:** I would just add that I think part of why we’ve had this shift that scholars talk about as the “eclipse of denominationalism” is that politics resonates with us now more than the distinctions between Catholics and Protestants or between Methodists and Baptists or even, for that matter, between Jews and Christians. That the kinds of debates we used to be able to get up about, say, the nature of the Eucharist, or about the polity of the church—whether it should be Congregationalist or Presbyterian—we just don’t care about anymore. What do we care about? We care about politics and so the political resonance is much more powerful, and so there are greater connections between orthodox Jews, conservative Catholics, and evangelical Protestants than there are arguably between reform Jews and orthodox Jews or liberal Catholics and conservative Catholics.

**Question from the Audience:** Thanks for some very thoughtful insights. My question is, I wonder if the religious approach Americans profess isn’t to many an attempt to feel good about ourselves when our capitalism is quite predatory on many occasions and our leader has peremptorily attacked both Afghanistan and Iraq?

**Fox:** You’ve got a lot in there. I’m sure you could put more into that question if you tried. I think both Steve and I—and if I’m wrong, he’ll correct me—but I think we both certainly agree with the first part of that statement, namely that one of the reasons Jesus and Christianity—or any religion—appeals to people is that much religious experience
does make people feel better and therefore there’s a therapeutic—there’s a healing—component of religion which is definitely one of the reasons people do it. But I think, and I do stress a great deal in my book, the way in which I think Christianity appeals to many people, and I believe this is one reason why it continues to have such power in America to this day: it appeals to people both because it makes them feel better about themselves and because it makes them feel worse. People actually believe they are sinners to a surprising degree, and I’ve noticed especially the tremendous power of the preaching of T. D. Jakes at his Potter’s House Church in Dallas. He nails people. He says, “You think that Christianity is going to make you feel better; in fact, it’s going to make you feel worse.”

Prothero: And it makes you feel so good to hear that.

Fox: I know. People then applaud uproariously. People start crying, and he’ll say things like, “Save your tears; you’re going to need them.” But I think this is a sharp insight into the appeal of Christianity. It forces you to embrace that critical enterprise about yourself. And I think people are so sick really of just being told everything can be happy and good; it’s got a realism to it that is surely appealing. As for the political parts of your question: sure.

Prothero: The one piece of your question that I would disagree with: I sense the notion that people are religious for hypocritical reasons, and I just don’t think that’s true for the most part in America. I think there’s a really deep, heartfelt piety. I think that we use that in various ways for various political purposes, but I don’t believe even George Bush gets up in the morning to say, “Gosh, I’ve got to put on the Methodist face today because it’s going to help me invade Iraq.” I think the guy genuinely was an alcoholic who found Jesus, and I’ve heard that story before and it sounds right when I hear him say it. And the fact that he uses religion politically—well, what’s new? Look at the 1800 campaign and look at the Federalists attacking Jefferson because he wasn’t a Christian. So this is as old as American history.

Sheehan: There are only a few minutes left, and I hope we can get to all four remaining questions. So if you make the questions pointed and brief, and we can get right to that point, we should be able to satisfy the four who are still standing at the mikes.

Question from the Audience: Dr. Prothero, you said that we really care about politics, so I’m curious. What makes the loudest voice in a political conversation about what the cultural conception of Jesus should be? What makes an idea of how Jesus operates as a cultural icon more politically persuasive, more politically powerful?

Prothero: That’s a great question. Do you have an answer? [Laughter] Notice he’s pulled the mike down. He’s getting ready.

Questioner: I’ll be very, very brief. But I don’t think it has much to do with what’s contained inside of that conception of Jesus, but what political power of those who have come up with that conception of Jesus hold in the first place.
Fox: Good. That’s a kind of a semi-Marxist analysis we’re going with, right, which is fine because I think there’s some real truth to that. What makes a particular notion of Jesus resonate? I think it has to do a lot with the moment. You can have a notion of Jesus, but if it’s in the wrong moment…. For example, September 12, 2001—the pacifist Jesus. Where’s that going to go? It’s not going anywhere. So you need a particular moment. I think charismatic appeal plays a role in American religion; this is a free market, a spiritual marketplace, and a guy like T. D. Jakes is tremendously charismatic. You watch him on TV or you see him in person—you know, you practically don’t have to hear the words. You can just look at the guy and you say, “Oh, my gosh, he’s right.” So the charisma is important, and then yes, you’re absolutely right. There are questions about power and access to media and all these things that make a particular image resonate—make it win.

Fox: Just a quick footnote. It’s simply that I think the Jesus figure or the Jesus symbol can have a political importance just in sustaining certain kinds of political faith even though they can’t have power for a certain period of time, and I’m especially interested in how that applies in the case of freedom of sexuality and freedom for women in various ways in American society. It’s very difficult to see any early resolution of these dilemmas in a liberal sort of way. However, just keeping them—sustaining them—Jesus is very helpful. In American culture, a politics that turns away from religion is going to have a very difficult time. This is a big debate in the Democratic Party right now, obviously, but I think the idea of a Jesus or a religious figure helping to sustain a vision or a point of view for those years or decades that are necessary before power can actually be attached to them—that’s just as important.

Question from the Audience: The sexuality part refers to my question. For Buddhists, there is the bodhisattva, and for Hindus, there’s Devi. What is Jesus to American women, particularly independent women?

Prothero: Well, it’s another great question. I’ve been chasing a little bit on this because one way that I contain…. My book could have been about the size of this room because there’s too much to do, so you have to narrow. One way that I really narrowed was I decided I wasn’t going to do what I call “metaphorical Jesuses.” I’ve taught Jesus in America and I’ve had students do papers on Cool Hand Luke or Robocop and they find Jesus there, and Jesus is in those movies; I have no doubt about that. But he’s not called Jesus. He’s called something else. And so I said, “When I’m doing my book, I’m only going to do when they call the guy Jesus. I’m not going to do, ‘He’s a carpenter, and his mom was Mary and his dad was Joseph,’ because that’s not good enough for me. I want them to call him Jesus.” And this feminist who heard me talk said to me, “You know, that’s not fair because you can’t do the literal female Jesus,” which isn’t quite true. There have been some sculptures; there’s a famous one called Christa that was commissioned in the early 70s. When I was writing my book, I tried to find her. I couldn’t find her. It turned out she was in the basement of an Episcopal church in New Haven gathering dust with nobody looking at her. She’s now at the Yale Divinity School so she’s a little more public. But basically, it’s really hard to get Jesus was a woman going because there’s just
too much force behind Jesus was a man. And so when you want to find Jesus as a woman, you do have to go into subtler things. You do have to go into novels and into the imagination where women and men have a sense that Jesus has a certain kind of power and authority and speaks through women, and you need to go into the Incarnation and the idea that Jesus is in us and Jesus is in the women that we meet who interact with us and who do…. Mother Teresa is Jesus or maybe Hillary Clinton is Jesus.

Question from the Audience: Your comment about Matthew 5 and the quote, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” that has caused people to even leave the church points up, I think, how important it is for us to read up-to-date translations and not take things literally because my understanding of that is that perfect means to become a fully developed human being. And in that sense it shouldn’t drive anyone out of the church. Another interpretation I’ve heard is “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” I believe compassion is our highest capacity, so I just want to comment on that.

Prothero: That was the proof text of American Hindus. That particular passage, “Be perfect,” and they say, when Jesus says that, he’s saying “Be divine; just like I’m divine, you can be divine.” Really interesting. For the Vedanta Society, Hinduism was my study—that was their favorite passage—the one they record the most in the New Testament.

Audience: My question has to do more with the influence of media and scholarly pursuits on this cultural Jesus. I think we draw statistics. I’ve heard that only one in ten persons in the media actually go to church, so that sort of shows that they may be out of touch with what the major cultural tenor of America is. Yet they’re feeding us a lot of our news, culture, and trends. And I was curious what you all thought, particularly being from the academic side, about the influence on Jesus of academics as well as the media.

Fox: Well, that’s a very big question and I guess my first observation would just be that I think there’s a lot more knowledge of religion among journalists today than there was in some recent past. And there are examples of important centrally located journalists like E. J. Dionne of the Washington Post and Peter Steinfels of the New York Times and others at the New York Times like this David Kirkpatrick who wrote the piece on Jesus or God in American history, so I think things may be changing actually, not to mention the fact that now on TV there’s a whole lot of attention to religion from the conservative side. I do agree with you, though, that over many, many decades of American history, there has been insufficient attention to or understanding of religion in general and Jesus in particular among journalists. And wow, look at the film reviewers who missed the boat so completely on Passion of the Christ—that is, missed how that film was going to play in the rest of the country. There were obviously persisting differences in taste among art critics or film critics and the mass public, but a sign of how cut off they were and A. O. Scott—Tony Scott in the New York Times—was very forthcoming about this. He said, “We missed so badly on this we ought to be ashamed of ourselves.” So I think he’s a good example of somebody who shares your perspective. But I do think that things are actually changing.
Gonnerman: Our time has come to end, and I hope everyone will take this conversation home and share it with your friends and your neighbors. Special thanks to Stephen Prothero, Richard Fox, and Thomas Sheehan, and thanks also to the staff of Stanford Continuing Studies, especially Christine Soldahl, Dianna Watt, and the Dean of Continuing Studies, Charles Junkerman. We’ll see you again here on April 14 for a discussion on “Restorative Justice: Reducing Crime by Reforming Prisoner Experience.” Good night.

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Comments?
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