

Jesus in North America (1)

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The central question in North America is the same as when Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" The author of Hebrews wrote "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings" (Heb. 13:8-9). With these words he admonished his readers to remain loyal to the deposit of the authentic and authoritative tradition of Christ, as this had come down to them through the apostles of the first generation of Christians, some of whom were still living. But are there not twenty centuries between His coming to earth and our time? How then can He be the same yesterday, today, and forever?

Who is Jesus? Is He no more real than the Wizard of Oz? Some claim that there never was a historical Jesus who walked the dusty roads in Palestine. For example, in his latest book, *Water Into Wine: An Empowering Vision of the Gospels*, former Anglican priest, seminary professor, and columnist Tom Harpur argues that Jesus is a figment of the Church's imagination. But only few liberal scholars agree with him. It is not that easy to dismiss Jesus from our modern world. We can't get away from Him. Jesus Christ has influenced human history far more deeply than any other human being of whom we have a record. It shows He must have been a figure of more than Napoleonic power and originality. Most of the human race dates its calendars from His birth. Millions curse in His name and millions pray in His name. In his book, *Jesus Through Many Eyes*, the Anglican Bishop Stephen Neill, a New Testament scholar, observes that Jesus "is still hated, reviled, and despised by those to whom his gospel is a gall and wormwood; yet he is respected and indeed revered beyond the limits of the fellowship [the church] to which his name has been given."

What do North Americans say about Jesus? The answers given show a seismic shift in North America's religious scene. More than a century ago, no one could have imagined either the rapid rise of Islam or the rapid decline of active membership in mainline churches, or the appearance of hundreds of new cults. But the changing beliefs about Jesus did not come overnight. Already in the 19th century multiple views were in vogue. Upon his arrival in the United States in 1844, the German Reformed church historian, Philip Schaff (1819-1893) worried that Christianity in America was destined for a career of disorder and splintering. "Tendencies, which had found no political room to unfold themselves in other lands [are] wrought here without restraint," he wrote. "Every theological vagabond and peddler may drive here his bungling trade....What is to come of such confusion is not now to be seen."

How do we account for the great variety and confusing views on Jesus today? Jesus is a fixture on the American landscape - on highway billboards, bumper stickers, and tattooed bodies. And Jesus is no longer the exclusive property of Christians. Polls reveal that Americans of all faiths view Jesus "overwhelmingly in a favourable light" and that he has "a strong hold even on those with no religious training."

Although North American culture remains fascinated by Jesus, many feel lost and on their own. Early in the 1960s Bob Dylan, the folk singer, sang joyfully "The times they are a'changing." But a few years later, his tone had become uncertain and nostalgic: "How does it feel /To be on your own/With no direction home?"

Why do so many feel religiously adrift while looking for the answer that brings life and

salvation? Liberal church leaders and theologians are no longer able to direct the way to the Jesus of the Scriptures. They argue that the exclusive claims of salvation made by Jesus and His apostles, and reaffirmed by the church for centuries, are unjust. In fact, the issue of exclusivism and pluralism has never been more in the forefront of thought and discussion than at the present time. Even Christian leaders worldwide are rethinking, and in many quarters abandoning the New Testament claims to the uniqueness of Jesus and Jesus' own self-image to be the only way to salvation. They believe His claim as the only way to God the Father is flatly wrong. And to speak of being right or wrong on certain matters on the basis of Biblical teaching, upholding rigorous standards of personal and public morality, are dismissed as "intolerant." Yet these same people vigorously support the right of all religions to defend their own patch and seek new converts.

When studying Western culture, Christianity, which stood at its centre, is almost entirely omitted in public education . And many have taken note of the rising biblical illiteracy. If a child has not been raised in a Christian home and only attends a public school, he/she would not learn about the Christian roots of our culture. What has happened, in only two generations, is the substantial alienation of our society from the once biblically influenced culture. Consequently, the most important development is the wholesale loss of the concept of absolute truth. Many undergraduates at secular universities are influenced by personable postmodern thinkers and are extremely uncomfortable when it comes to talking about truth. Furthermore, they have trouble reading classical English literature, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In other words, the lack of shared religious culture, public schools hands-off attitude toward religion, has left many people stranded with a very fuzzy sense of what Christianity is, what it used to be like and how we came to where we are.

Our society is full of contradictions. People want to stand out as individuals. Children don't want school uniforms. They say, "we want to be different". But most of them wear jeans to schools. Throughout North America, there are thousands of identical fast-food outlets and mall stores and our common popular culture of music and TV shows, but we are deeply fragmented in matters of religion. There are so many Christian denominations from which to pick and choose. Instead of the Church influencing society, a consumer-oriented individualistic approach to viewing reality is now having its negative impact. Many choose their own religion in their search for self-improvement. The independent "self-made" individual has become front and centre. In 1978 a George Gallup poll reported that 80 percent of Americans agreed with the statement, "An individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues." In *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, Stephen Prothero observes that Jesus "became a national icon because outsiders have always felt free to interpret him in their own fashion. ..no one group has an interpretive monopoly. ..Everyone is free to understand Jesus in his or her own way. And Americans have exercised that freedom with wild abandon." Marketing surveys are used to determine what non-Christians think of the church and what the church should do to draw them in. Megachurch pastors have been told that their target market was tired of hearing about depravity, death, and hell, so they stopped preaching about the wages of sin, and banished the cross from their churches. The evangelical theologian D.A. Carson comments that nowadays we are so fond of the novel that even our children's Christmas pageants manage to incorporate space visitors and rocket ships, while fewer and fewer people know what actually happened on that first Christmas two thousand years ago.

Liberal mainline denominations have also joined the marketing approach to evangelism. In a

desperate attempt to be relevant, the United Church of Canada – with its rapidly declining membership – launched a controversial advertising campaign. It's supposed to give its members a chance to connect with their neighbours in new ways, and invite them to explore the life in Christ. One of its ads featured a bobble-headed Jesus with a check-off box asking: "Funny, or Ticket to Hell. What you think?" But evangelicals should not pat themselves on the back and say, "We are different." They too have been influenced by their consumer's approach to evangelism. Though the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) craze of the 1990s has passed, Americans continue to read books such as *What Would Jesus Eat?* (2002) and question the propriety of gas-guzzling SUVs by asking, "What Would Jesus Drive?"

To show that Jesus is still widely discussed and written about by Christians and non-Christians alike, I give a few examples. A newspaper carried a story about a Florida State University scientist who speculated that Jesus didn't really walk on water; he walked on ice. The scientist theorized there must have been an unusual cold snap 2,000 years ago that froze the Sea of Galilee. During Easter 2007, an exhibit in New York featured a 6-foot chocolate sculpture of Jesus Christ with his arms outstretched. This so-called "work of art" was the brainchild of Cosimo Cavallaro, who used more than 200 pounds of milk chocolate. Who is Jesus? In a series of articles, I intend to explore the many views of Jesus in North America. The concluding article will focus on "Who is Jesus of the Scriptures?"

(To be continued.)
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