

Jesus as a Celebrity*

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I don't know who first thought of calling Jesus a celebrity. I don't know who first thought of using an image of Jesus to sell a non-religious product. I do know that someone at Apple Computers had both thoughts at once in 1998. Look at the forty "Apple Celebrities" on the Appleweb-site <<http://www.theapplecollection.com/various/Celebrity/index.shtml>>. Jesus is perched in the top row, along with Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and Bruce Lee. Click on the image of Jesus to get a closeup. At the end of this article I'll have more to say about this Apple Jesus, but I want to prepare the way by looking historically at Jesus and celebrity in America. Apple's choice of Jesus for its "collection" raises intriguing questions about contemporary celebrity and about the place of Jesus in American cultural history.

No one labeled Jesus a "celebrity" in seventeenth-, eighteenth-, or nineteenth-century America. But in the nineteenth century Americans (along with Protestants in Germany and England) said a great deal about Jesus as a "personality," and about the danger of turning Jesus into an icon. Nineteenth-century Americans surpassed everyone else in the industrialized world in their devotion to Jesus as both divine Lord and luminous personality. Nowhere else did such a large proportion of secularizing intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reaffirm their devotion to Jesus even as they left the churches behind (Emerson is the classic case, but there were many others, starting with Paine, Franklin, and Jefferson). Nowhere else in the industrialized world has popular-cultural and political discourse been so suffused with talk about who Jesus is and how people should worship him and follow him.

So many Americans are so preoccupied with the identity and power of Jesus

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Christ that they habitually grasp emergent social and cultural phenomena in relation to him. The process works in two ways at once. People invoke the name of Jesus as a means of lending authority to their responses to new social situations. But some individuals argue that new realities demand a new view of Jesus, or a return to an old one that has been forgotten. They reconfigure his identity to renew or restore his authority.

Labor-capital conflict in the late nineteenth century produced a Social Gospel that viewed Jesus as a scientific reformer (Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* [1907] gives the classic portrait of the Social Gospel's Jesus). Mind-cure advocates, distressed by the spread of "American nervousness," the title of George Beard's famous 1881 book, countered by seeing Jesus as a soul reformer (Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite* [1897]). American Socialists at the turn of the twentieth century presented Jesus as a revolutionary workingman (Bouck White's *The Call of the Carpenter* [1912]). Advertising man Bruce Barton, aghast at the passive, "feminized" Jesus he had encountered as a boy in Sunday School, struck back in 1925 with a best-selling portrait of a virile, muscular Jesus in *The Man Nobody Knows*. Christians and non-Christians alike use Jesus to understand, advance, or reverse social trends, and they invoke promising or disturbing social trends to promote particular views of Jesus. In addition, they appeal to Jesus for help in remaking themselves. For the last century millions of them have been asking "what would Jesus do?"—the now common phrase coined by the Reverend Charles Sheldon in his immensely popular 1897 novel *In His Steps*.

When "celebrity" became such a widely discussed social issue in the twentieth century, it was inevitable that Jesus would sooner or later be pressed into service. John Lennon's remark in 1966 that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus" may have been the event that first brought the idea of Jesus as a celebrity to wide public attention. Conservative Christians took Lennon's comment as an attack upon their faith. Even much of the mainstream press was shocked, along with being entertained. Commentators were unable to decide which was worse, illiberal Christians burning Beatle records or a megalomaniac Lennon putting Jesus and celebrities like himself on the same scale. He was made to look as ridiculous as the record-burners. Lennon made an abject public apology at a press conference in Chicago. "I'm not anti-God, anti-Christ, or anti-religion," he said in response to the withering criticism. "I was not saying we're greater or better." But he was saying that attachment to Jesus was like attachment to any cult hero.

The applause meter could measure both preferences.

Four years later, the libretto of the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* made the notion of Jesus as a celebrity explicit. The Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice album was an instant and massive hit when Decca released it in the fall of 1970. In 1971 it became a Broadway show, and in 1973 a movie directed by Norman Jewison. The show was framed as a Passion Play within a play. The actors arrive on a bus, put on the Passion Play, then (except for the actor playing Jesus, who is unaccounted for) depart again on the bus. One of the principal themes is the fame of Jesus and its costs. Among Christians the flap over *Superstar* was intense. But my initial research suggests that the Christian opponents of the play/film did not mind its depiction of Jesus as a celebrity. They minded only that this celebrity did not get resurrected at the end of the story. In the last scene, after the departure of the bus, a shepherd is seen leading sheep across a hillside, with the crucifix in the distance. Is that shepherd Jesus, making a post-Resurrection appearance? There is no telling. *Superstar* delivered a Jesus who, in his status as a celebrity, seemed humanly persuasive to conservatives as well as liberals. Conservatives just wanted divinity to redeem humanity at the finale.

At least some conservative Protestants did object to the celebrity version of the man Jesus. Billy Graham's brother-in-law, revivalist Leighton Ford, reminded an audience of 5,000 evangelical Christian youth in Philadelphia that Jesus was the "Son of God," not a "superstar." But the fact that he had to issue such a reminder suggests how deep a chord the opera had struck in all young Christians, conservative and liberal. Graham himself was quoted in *Christianity Today*, which he founded in 1956, with what sounded like a blanket dismissal of the show, and therefore of its characterization of the man Jesus: the play "bordered on blasphemy and sacrilege." The articles about the opera in *Christianity Today* actually disclose, however, that evangelicals had come a long way toward accepting celebrity as a fact of life in modern America, and even toward finding spiritual power in it. The national and international celebrity of Graham himself and other evangelical preachers may have helped them reach that conclusion.

Jesus Christ Superstar, wrote Concordia (Lutheran) Seminary student Gilbert Meilaender, was to be praised for moving beyond "secularism." The problem was not its depiction of Jesus as a celebrity, but its nullifying of his transcendence. For Meilaender *Superstar* erred not in portraying Jesus as a man hailed for his charisma and healing power, but in leaving it at that. *Superstar* remained "pagan" rather than Christian, making divinity familiar, in the Greek fashion, by

giving it a human face. Churches could profitably use *Jesus Christ Superstar* to raise good questions, said Meilaender, but they should beware that it was short on answers. There was nothing wrong with linking Jesus to human desire and human limitation, only with failing to see him simultaneously as the transcendent Lord who brought ultimate victory out of apparent defeat.

By comparing *Superstar* to Greek notions of divinity, in which gods embody a range of fully human characteristics, Meilaender went a long way toward grasping why *Superstar* prompted such a flurry of enthusiasm among young people in and out of the churches. (*Jesus Christ Superstar* lyrics are available at <<http://www.stlyrics.com/j/jesuschristsuperstar.htm>>.) The Jesus it portrayed exuded contemporaneity. He was young and he was hip, spokesman for a generation as well as for humankind. ("One thing I'll say for him," sings his enemy Caiaphas in *Superstar*, "Jesus is cool.") But he stood for something deeper in the culture, and helped expose it to view. Lyricist Tim Rice's Jesus was above all exhausted and beaten. In part he was beaten by the "system"—the utterly evil Jewish and Roman authorities (the play/film was widely criticized for anti-Semitism because its Pilate was subservient to the priest Caiaphas and to the frenzied Jewish crowd that screams for Jesus's death). Many young Americans in 1970 were going to lavish praise on any story that featured an evil system destroying a young hero. But even more important than the system in bringing Jesus to his end was his own fame. It devoured him, made him yearn for his own death.

Superstar sees politics and celebrity as dual causes of the crucifixion. Caiaphas considers Jesus a threat to the nation. The priest believes that the Jesus movement will unleash a Roman attack. Better that one man should die than an entire people. Caiaphas needs Jesus to die for political reasons. Jesus needs to die for psychological reasons. He has suffered too much from all the adulation. Tim Rice's Caiaphas has a politics, but his Jesus has none. Jesus listens to Simon the Zealot's plea that Jesus seek the power and glory of political leadership, and rejects it vehemently. In 1971 *Superstar* delivered a crushing judgment on the political Sixties: cease and desist, seek your salvation in another world, resign yourself to the fate God has in store for you. In *Superstar* the counter-culture in effect turned its back on SDS, the anti-war movement, and the black-power movement (which had already subsumed the civil-rights movement), not to mention abandoning the entire Social Gospel tradition that stretched from Washington Gladden in the 1880s to Martin Luther King in the 1960s. No wonder a conservative Christian magazine like *Christianity Today* could look upon *Superstar* with

relative equanimity. It delivered a non-political Jesus even if it kept him unduly chained to his humanity. Tim Rice's Jesus taught no doctrine of revolution or reform. He did scarcely any teaching at all: the "end" he preached was his own end, his own death, not the end of the world or the end of the reign of death. Granted, *Superstar* was a Passion Play rather than a full life of Christ. But Rice worked scenes from the healing ministry of the Jesus into his story, and he could have included parables or wisdom sayings had he wished to.

What *Superstar* did have, and what I suspect helped make it such a potent cultural force in 1971, was its wrenching depiction of Jesus's degeneration as he cultivates and is destroyed by celebrity. Judas, who in Rice's transgressive gesture becomes the beloved disciple who sees what is happening to Jesus and tries unsuccessfully to stop it, degenerates too. He alone grasps what celebrity is doing to the Jesus movement and its leader. *Superstar* appealed to what everyone already knew about the cost of modern celebrity in the lives of Marilyn, who died in 1962, and many others. (Elvis, who died in 1977, would join Marilyn in the upper pantheon of celebrity's victims.) In the celebrity as victim trope, audiences eat stars alive, then cast them aside. Stars are defined by their suffering, a theme that might be expected to tie modern celebrity to the sacrificial vocation of Christ. The evident anguish of Jesus in *Superstar* may in fact have endeared the character to some theological conservatives, who bewailed the enforced good cheer of much 1970s worship. But the pain of Jesus in *Superstar* only superficially resembles the pain of the gospel Jesus. In *Superstar* the suffering of Jesus is no more redemptive than that of Judas. Like the suffering of modern celebrities, it's a waste of precious psychic resources. In Tim Rice's remarkable Gethsemane scene, Jesus does come finally to accept whatever God has in store for him, but he has no sense of what good might come of it. It only fills him with terror. "Show me there's a reason for you wanting me to die," he wails to the Father, "you're far too keen on where and how, and not so hot on why."

The power of this celebrity-victim trope was magnified in *Superstar* when Rice linked it to the gospel story of the Last Supper. The night before his crucifixion, Jesus taught his followers to consume bread and wine in remembrance of him (in the Catholic rite, worshippers affirm that they are actually consuming his body and blood). In Rice's brilliant re-imagining of the gospel account, Jesus says to his disciples, "For all you care, this wine could be my blood, for all you care, this bread could be my body." *Jesus* is not the one claiming it's his body and blood; he's accusing *them* of wishing it were his body and blood so they could

completely cannibalize him. The celebrity strikes back and accuses his audience of being all appetite. They, his devoted fans, are as much the cause of his bodily destruction as the Jewish and Roman officials or the Jewish crowd. Rice's Jesus does snap out of it and proceed to the orthodox Christian version of the Supper command: "This is my blood you drink. This is my body you eat. If you would remember me when you eat and drink." But he concludes by tossing out that pious hope: "I must be mad thinking I'll be remembered."

Of course we viewers know he will be remembered. What is so shrewd about the portrayal of celebrity in *Superstar* is that it combined what everyone knew about modern celebrity with what everyone knew about Jesus. Celebrity means sacrifice and defeat as much as it means fame and success. But celebrity is not always fleeting. At its core celebrity is not so much transitory as corrosive. Immortality—as Jesus, Marilyn, and (a few years later) Elvis demonstrated—was possible but its price was unbearable physical and psychic suffering. *Superstar* drew on cultural convictions about celebrity to revivify popular attachment to Jesus, and suggested that the Jesus of the gospels had long ago laid out the true trajectory of celebrity. "Then, I was inspired," *Jesus Christ Superstar* reflects in the Garden of Gethsemane, "now, I'm sad and tired." (One wants to know if the old phrase "the imitation of Christ" ever came to Marilyn's or Elvis's lips.)

I have found one response to *Superstar* that shows some conservative critics of the play/film found fault not just with the absence of a resurrection, but with the premise of Jesus as a celebrity and even, by implication, with the premise of a visualized Jesus. It is Glen Campbell's 1973 song *I Knew Jesus (Before He Was a Star)* (lyrics available at <http://www.geocities.com/maree_armstrong/I_Knew_Jesus.html>; audio clip available at the Amazon.com order page for "The Glen Campbell Collection"; click on "Listen to Samples"). Campbell is a Southern Baptist who made a celebrated return to his gospel roots after a string of major secular hits such as *Rhinestone Cowboy*. In *I Knew Jesus* he doesn't mention *Jesus Christ Superstar* explicitly, but it's clear he's referring to it and to its explosive impact. (I have no idea whether Campbell wrote these lyrics or believed what they say. For rhetorical and argumentative simplicity I will assume them to be an expression of his standpoint on *Superstar* and on celebrity.)

Campbell implies that there is deep authenticity in southern-country renditions of Jesus. He sings of an experience of Jesus that predates the (northern, urban, rock, British-invasion) celebrity of Christ. The true Christian is the one whose faith has been shaped by old-time "stories I've read of him" and "things

that were said of him.” This formulation assigns priority to verbalizing over visualizing as the proper route to faith. There is a pull-up-the-ladder attitude lurking in this appeal to verbal origins, a hint that originally America was Christian and pure. Latter-day migrants to the faith, seduced by images, should be greeted with skepticism rather than open arms—despite the fact that they are figured rhetorically in the song as prodigal sons, as former believers coming “back to the fold.” These recent arrivals on the Jesus bandwagon are endangering Christ. They’re menacing him with celebrity. The song nevertheless takes heart from the prediction that Jesus will suffer only minimal harm from such malefactors. “Fame will not change him much” since “big people” like him “stay the way they are.”

I Knew Jesus (Before He Was a Star) is playing on an old trope—the vulnerability of heroes to the fame they carve out. There is a moral risk in renown: it can “change” you, says Campbell, put you “out of touch” with your roots, make you too big for your britches. This trope differs from the suffering-victim version developed in *Superstar*, according to which audiences consume their heroes. Campbell’s version has stronger gospel roots than Tim Rice’s. The gospel writers, as Leo Braudy shows in *The Frenzy of Renown*, made repeated use of the idea that Jesus was threatened by fame. Of course in his case renown was menacing in part because it could provoke his arrest or death before his “time was at hand.” But the gospel writers also implied that fame was spiritually dangerous to him as it was to everyone else. They never have Jesus accuse himself of spiritual vanity, but it’s impossible to read his fiery denunciations of the scribes and Pharisees without concluding that self-love is universal and that it craves publicity. Renown depends upon self-advertisement as much as it depends upon creative achievement. Jesus told people to stifle self-promotion by entering a closet when they prayed to their Father. The Father could see them perfectly in the dark.

The love Jesus preached (*agape* not *eros*) was not just self-denying, therefore, but self-concealing. As Hannah Arendt noted in *The Human Condition*, Christian opposition to virtuous display has bedeviled classical republicans and modern Nietzscheans alike. What she didn’t note was how confusing it has been to Christians themselves. For Jesus in fact tacks back and forth between silence and exposure, privacy and publicity. As Braudy notes, he usually tells those he has healed to say nothing about their good fortune, but sometimes he urges them to talk about it. He harps on the importance of praying secretly, but he also warns against hiding one’s light under a bushel. Publicity, it turns out, is necessary and even fruitful despite its practical and moral dangers. The gospel writers suggest

that when Jesus instructed crowds to say nothing about his mighty deeds he knew his admonitions would backfire and only increase his celebrity. Jesus, we are led to conclude, actively pursued celebrity even as he preached against it. Christians have wondered ever since how to accomplish the paradoxical if not impossible task Jesus commanded: to find one's life by losing it.

In its allusion to the gospel teaching on the danger of pride and arrogance, Campbell's *I Knew Jesus* preserves traces of the formerly dominant American Protestant formulation of celebrity. Protestants appear to have moved from a distaste for celebrity toward an acceptance of it as a normal condition of life for those who happen to be in the public eye. Protestants know it's a condition that presents obvious risks, including the temptation to abuse one's power, as the Reverend Jim Bakker demonstrated so abundantly in the 1980s. But celebrity status seems no longer morally suspect in itself. One wonders how this transformation came about. Certainly the rise of the evangelical ministry itself to celebrity status helped normalize celebrity. And the highly publicized moral flaws of famous ministers, from Henry Ward Beecher in the late nineteenth century to Jimmie Swaggart in the late twentieth, permitted a more modest critique of celebrity to persist. Thus American Protestants could try to have it both ways: get used to and justify celebrity in general by denouncing particular abuses of it.

There may be another reason for the growing acceptance of celebrity on the part of American Protestants during the twentieth century. This is the same era in which Calvinist and Calvinist-descended American Protestants came to accept visual representations of Christ. That adjustment was part of a much broader reorientation, in which evangelicals increasingly adapted to the secular "world" rather than standing aloof from and claiming moral superiority to it. They moved closer to liberals by humanizing Jesus, while still stressing his divinity as savior and miracle-worker. They came to cherish as well as tolerate visual representations of the human Jesus.

Early Jesus films, like Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927), helped establish the propriety of visualizing Jesus, in part through their explicit piety and in part through their heavy emphasis on the Word. Naturally a silent film like *King of Kings* relied heavily on verbal text—the captions are often direct citations of gospel verses—but the 1961 remake by Nicholas Ray also highlighted Jesus's preaching, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Still, it seems plausible that putting the man Jesus on screen, however much he might talk about the Pharisees' sin of publicizing their virtue, contributed to what we might call the de-moraliza-

tion of celebrity. On film Jesus as image tended to crowd out Jesus as Word, no matter how much he preached. He became more familiar, predictable, unmysterious. (In *Ben-Hur* in 1959, director William Wyler preserved some of the mystery by showing Jesus only from the back—although that didn't prevent Jesus's perfectly shampooed hair from betraying him as a very Fifties-style icon.)

The recent work of art historian David Morgan is very suggestive about the social basis for this shift. In his books *Visual Piety* and *Protestants and Pictures*, Morgan argues that American Protestants have come close to the Catholic sensibility in their love of visual imagery as a feature of their worship. (Today one-fourth of American adults say they are church-going Catholics and one-half say they are members of Protestant congregations. At least half of the Protestants belong to churches with strongly anti-iconic traditions.) Catholics and Protestants generally agree that Jesus is divine and human—"true God and true man" as the early church put it officially. But Catholics have long cherished images of Christ while Calvinist Protestants (the "Puritans" and their Congregationalist descendants, along with the Presbyterians, and the Baptists) have not—partly because the Catholics, in the Calvinist view, turned them into magical icons. Calvinists have tended to think that the Word cannot be represented visually without putting it at risk.

Catholics have venerated images of Mary and the saints as well as those of Jesus, a spiritually eclectic practice that made Calvinists (here joined by Lutherans, Methodists, and other non-Calvinist Protestants) all the more wary of images. For the Calvinists especially, reliance on images of the holy lulls the believer into passivity and complacency. It is the Word, dynamically preached and actively read, that "convicts" (note the etymological proximity to "convinces"). Conviction for a Calvinist is about being convicted of sin, then saved; it's not about being convinced, i.e., rationally choosing a belief or assenting to a proposition. Visualizing Jesus puts the utter sovereignty of God in peril, tempting worshippers to manipulate God for their own small-minded purposes. They're liable to give up serving God and make him serve them. They make God in their image, rather than grasping him as the creator who made them in his image. To Catholics, by contrast, Christ is always so mysteriously transcendent and immanent that images of him, his mother, or his saints can do nothing to compromise him. Images, medallions, crucifixes, and statues are all reminders of Christ's mystical presence, a presence always bodily as well as spiritual.

In his books David Morgan shows that by the late nineteenth century Ameri-

can evangelical Protestants (including by that time many Arminians, especially Methodists, alongside the Calvinist Presbyterians and Baptists) had begun to put pictures of Jesus in their homes. By the mid-twentieth century they had started to put them in their churches too, although for the most part in Sunday school rooms or church office buildings rather than in the main worship area. Still, he shows that by mid-century large numbers of Protestant lay people, mainly women, were following the Catholic example and venerating images of Jesus. They loved to put them in their living rooms and bedrooms as signs of their piety and of the sacredness of home. They loved to pass them on to their children as signs of the sanctity and permanence of family. They loved to look at them as they prayed, even though they knew the Protestant drill and kept repeating it to themselves: the images aren't holy, only Jesus is holy.

Their favorite picture by a long shot is the *Head of Christ* painted by Warner Sallman in 1941 and distributed in millions of copies since then throughout Catholic as well as Protestant America (the painting can be viewed at [http://www.sillyprillygifts.com/unique/wall-art/u ud-80-1620-1.html](http://www.sillyprillygifts.com/unique/wall-art/u%20ud-80-1620-1.html)) and other web-sites). Morgan reports that many Protestants continue to be apologetic about their craving for such imagery, but they justify it in much the same way that Catholics have always justified iconography. Bringing Jesus close through visual representation is perfectly compatible with the knowledge that he transcends any representation of him. The interesting possibility suggested by Morgan's data, however, is that many Protestants, especially women, have made Jesus into a virtual saint, a holy man who intercedes with God or who permits a person to make personal contact with an otherwise distant God. Jesus, in other words, may be for them the human intercessor as well as the divine object of worship. Making images of him does not compromise his transcendence because he has in effect been split in two: the transcendent Word cannot be represented, only preached or read about, but the visualized mediator can provide succor and help people gain access to the Lord. "When I begin my meditation and prayers," wrote one of Morgan's respondents about the Sallman portrait, "I always like to picture Him holding His hands out to me, I can feel closer to Him in my Heart, and this is the face I always imagine." (Note how the Sallman painting avoids the torso and hands of Jesus, centerpieces of Catholic iconography since they disclose his wounds.)

The spread of the Sallman *Head of Christ* and other images in the mid-twentieth century may have contributed to the tolerance many conservative Protestants

exhibited for the celebrity status of the Jesus depicted in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. This kind of celebrity was not menaced by the gospel temptations of pride or hypocrisy, but by the threat of psychic disarray. The Broadway run of *Superstar* in 1971 offers us a convenient marker for the end of an era in American Christian experience. It signals the decline among Protestants of the old formulation of the problem of Jesus and celebrity. It can also stand for the end of the hegemony among many Protestants of verbal over visual representation of Jesus. And in the play's pointed rejection of a political or even ethical Jesus, it can mark the decline among liberal Protestants of the Social Gospel interpretation of Jesus. (In *Superstar* Jesus never utters the words "love" or "justice"; only Mary Magdalene speaks of love, and she's not thinking about *agape*.)

The year 1971 offers a second marker of the end of the Social Gospel: the death of Reinhold Niebuhr, last of the great liberal Protestant public heroes of social justice. Like the Southern Baptist Glen Campbell in *I Knew Jesus*, Niebuhr was wedded to the idea of Jesus as unchanging Word. Their conceptions of that Word were of course entirely different. Niebuhr's Word was the transcendent Judge of human sins, especially the social sin of injustice. Campbell's Word was the personal savior always available to those "with no hope in view." The congruence between them lies in their joint skepticism about or aversion to visualizing Jesus. They imply that making images of Jesus detracts from the preaching and reception of his Word. My hunch is that by about 1970 conservative Christians were leaving Campbell's sensibility behind just as liberal Christians were leaving Niebuhr's behind. Liberals and conservatives could acquiesce in or praise *Superstar* because they had come to a new and welcoming position on celebrity, on image-making, and on secular culture in general.

Niebuhr stressed the judgment delivered by Jesus, and Campbell the comfort supplied by him. But they resembled one another in adopting the posture of defending Jesus from his pious opponents: the conservative churches for Niebuhr (he vilified Billy Graham's evangelicalism), the prodigal celebrity-worshippers for Campbell. In that posture of protecting Jesus they stood in a line of descent from the most original of all American Jesus interpreters, Ralph Waldo Emerson. A product of the Puritan anti-iconic tradition, Emerson turned that tradition against itself. He did so in two steps. First, as a young Unitarian preacher, he harped, like other Unitarians, on the perfect "personality" of Jesus. Jesus could not be God for these anti-Trinitarian Congregationalist dissenters, but they wished to preserve some aspect of divinity about him. Personality was their conceptual

and emotional solution. Personality was human, but it was like divinity in its spontaneity and vitality. A few years later Emerson took the second step. He sensed that the Unitarians had fallen into the same trap as the Trinitarians. Both groups elevated Jesus to a pedestal of perfection, a place inaccessible to other human strivers. "They dwelt with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus," he said in his *Divinity School Address* of 1838. "The soul knows no persons." Calling Jesus a perfect person was one more way of reducing him to an icon. It was verbal idolatry. Veneration of a personified Word was no better than worship of an image. The Word had to be defended against personification.

Human beings had an inveterate tendency to turn their heroes into divinities, rather than bearing the cross of finding the spark of divinity in themselves. Jesus had tried to cure them of that sin of blindness about their own vital powers. "The Kingdom of God cometh without observation," he told them. "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). The remarkable thing about Emerson's embrace of Jesus, in light of our common assumption today that celebrity is fleeting, is that Emerson hoped the celebrity of Jesus *would* be fleeting. In the *Divinity School Address* and his major essays of the early 1840s, he called the churches idolators, icon-worshippers. American culture had become so "Christized," as he put it in his journal, that the "Jesus" name blocked access to the truths of Jesus. To resurrect his life-transforming truths would require an "algebraic" exchange. Let the celebrity Jesus die and let another celebrity speaker of truth—Confucius, or Mencius, for example—pick up his mantle. Any one celebrity spokesman for eternal truth was bound to become exhausted, banal. Let another runner carry the torch before the flame goes out.

Like Campbell and Niebuhr, Emerson thought Jesus had preached an unchanging Word, an eternal truth. That, for Emerson, was the sole reason to pay Jesus any mind. He was not a divine savior, but a fully realized human-divine soul who had spoken the truth. Jesus had uttered many unchanging truths, "orphic words" such as "God is no respecter of persons," and "His kingdom is a little child." Cognate formulations could be found in Confucius, Mencius, and others. Algebraic substitution of one thinker for another was possible because the deepest truths were permanent. Substitution was necessary because cultures made saints or divinities out of their wise men. Paradoxically, the immutable truths perennially revitalized in algebraic exchange were immutable only because they entailed change for anyone interested in living up to them. They were eternal principles because they mandated self-substitution, an open-ended, always incomplete striv-

ing for a new birth of virtue as well as knowledge.

For Emerson Jesus remained the indispensable authority on the “impersonal” embrace of God. Jesus established the basic form for all subsequent moral and spiritual aspiration. He was like a great writer who “established the conventions of composition” that even “the most original” of later authors “feels in every sentence.” Self-reliant individuals followed Jesus in looking within, not without, and discovering there new and unexplored terrain. They imitated Jesus by refusing to imitate any person, human or divine. They made no icons of persons, and no icons of their own past ideas or experiences. “Life only avails,” Emerson wrote in *Self-Reliance* (1841), “not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*; for that for ever degrades the past, turns all riches to poverty, all reputation to a shame, confounds the saint with the rogue, shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside.”

To write of “shoving Jesus and Judas equally aside” in America in 1841 was a radical act. In a culture as Christianized as Emerson’s, it was a double horror: first pushing Jesus away, then equating Jesus and Judas. Of course Emerson was being ironic. To shove the conventional Jesus icon out of the way was to honor the actual Jesus all the more. To attack Jesus the perfect personality was to defend Jesus the visionary. There is a side of Emerson that imagined a pagan society would do better than a Christianized one at hearing and imitating Jesus. In a pagan society Jesus and his message would stand out in bold relief. He would be perceived as the revolutionary thinker he was, the one who first understood there was no need for icons or personalities because of the impersonal divine spark that lay within each person.

We return to the Apple Celebrity Collection of 1998, where Jesus shares the celebrity grid with icons of popular culture, icons of high culture, inventive entrepreneurs, academic thinkers, and two other spiritual leaders, Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. All of the images convey intense individuality through distinctive body language. We know these people “think different” because they sit, stand, gaze, or gesture different. They don’t need words. Jesus is kneeling in a garden, leaning forward against a small boulder that supports one elbow, looking up into a ray of heavenly light. The fingers of his two hands are loosely interlocked, angling down toward his knees. He’s tired, questioning, a bit disconsolate. Christians know that at this moment he’s in the Garden of Gethsemane not just

thinking, but whispering a set of words. "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." The important point for Apple is not *what* he's thinking, but *that* he's thinking something with passion and originality. As it happens, Jesus is slightly off-key compared to the rest of the pool, since he's the only Apple Celebrity whose passion is shown to include weariness, to say nothing of dread. He's the only one undergoing a Passion.

Each of us will react differently to the provocation of Apple's Jesus, assuming we feel provoked at all. Some of us will react differently today than we would have reacted if we'd seen the image years ago. I know that thirty years ago I would have been shocked by the appearance of Jesus in an advertisement for a non-religious product. Today I'm enticed by the image's indeterminacy. I try to imagine what Emerson would have made of it. My guess is he would have smiled at the "think different," and countered with "think different, but think true." For him neither difference nor passion were virtues in themselves. Only truth made them virtuous. Genius was a function of truth, not inspiration alone. Emerson would still have tacked the ad to his ice box. He'd have taken it as an anti-iconic icon, the *reductio ad absurdum* of his fellow Americans' futile campaign to personify divinity and distance it from their own best selves.