

From "American Jesus" by
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Two

SWEET SAVIOR



In the United States today, virtually all Christians are Jesus people. The connection between Jesus devotion and Christian faith is unmistakable at evangelical revivals, where new believers answer altar calls by accepting Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord. It is also clear among liberal Protestants and Catholics, who express their devotion to Jesus by caring for the poor and the needy. In fact, Jesus is so closely allied with Christianity that it is hard to imagine a form of the religion that does not revere him as the Alpha and Omega of the faith. But American Christianity has not always been a Jesus faith, and the United States has not always been a Jesus nation.

Christianity was not particularly popular in the New World colonies. Spiritual indifference was the rule in seventeenth-century Virginia, Maryland, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and North and South Carolina. In all these places, churchgoers were rare and churches scarce. Many babies went unbaptized, and children uncatechized. Quaker Pennsylvania was more pious, and Congregational New England more pious still. But even in New England towns, membership rates varied considerably—from more than two-thirds of

adults to less than a fifth. Moreover, the piety of New Englanders waxed and waned, leading late-seventeenth-century divines such as Increase and Cotton Mather to lament a declension of Christian belief and practice from the heady days of John Winthrop's vision of the New World as a spiritual "city upon a hill." The celebrated Great Awakening of the 1740s powerfully reversed that decline in many locales, but its revivals were not as widespread as many historians have claimed. As Jon Butler has observed, the revivals that burned over Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Virginia largely bypassed New Hampshire, Maryland, and Georgia, and were lukewarm at best in New York, Delaware, and the Carolinas. On the eve of the Revolution, only 17 percent of adults were church members, and spiritual lethargy was the rule.¹

Even church members were relatively uninterested in Jesus. Of course, not all Christians thought alike. Congregationalism predominated in New England and Anglicanism in Virginia, while Maryland was established by a Roman Catholic and Pennsylvania was celebrated (and despised) for its tolerance of dissenters. Nonetheless, there was a reigning theological school. According to Sydney Ahlstrom, "Puritanism provided the moral and religious background of fully 85 percent of the people who declared their independence in 1776." And for the Puritans Jesus was at best a marginal figure.²

Puritanism emerged out of the Calvinist wing of the Protestant Reformation, and its distinctive beliefs and practices were at least as Hebraic as they were Christian. For generations, New World Puritans sang nothing but a cappella versions of the Old Testament Psalms in their congregational worship. Their covenant theology took its cues from Israel more than Galilee, focusing not on the individual's relationship with God the Son but on the community's covenant with God the Father. In 1827 Ralph Waldo Emerson would famously describe his time as "the age of the first person singular."³ Puritans lived in a world of the first person plural.

During the Great Awakening, Jesus hymns by the Calvinist Isaac Watts and the Methodist Charles Wesley won acceptance in isolated congregations, and some pro-revival preachers began to focus more on Jesus. John Wesley (Charles's brother and Methodism's transatlantic powerhouse) preached a strikingly modern form of Jesus piety,

which he derived from the hymns of German Moravians about Jesus the Suffering Servant. But Wesley's heart-to-heart connection with "Christ and him crucified" was by no means popular, and George Whitefield, the "Grand Itinerant" of the age, was a staunch Calvinist. Few colonists saw Jesus as a person who could be understood or who might understand them. Few loved him and expected love in return. Most could not even conceive of imitating him. Colonial sermons referred to Christ regularly, of course, but in them he remained more an abstract principle than a concrete person. Jonathan Edwards, the theological dynamo linking Puritanism and evangelicalism, came closer than most Puritan thinkers to the sort of intimate Jesus piety that characterizes American churches today, referring on occasion to Jesus as a "friend." But as Nancy F. Cott has noted, the term *friendship* at the time often connoted, simply, kinship. And even Edwards seemed to get along quite well without a lot of Jesus talk.⁴

The Puritans, in short, were a God-fearing rather than a Jesus-loving people, obsessed not with God's mercy but with His glory, not with the Son but with the Father. The logic of Puritan theology turned on what the theologian Karl Barth, in *The Epistle to the Romans*, would later describe as an "infinite, qualitative distinction" between a righteous God and sinful humanity.⁵ In that system, there was some space for Christ, though that space was carefully circumscribed. He was the incarnate God who came to earth to suffer and die on the cross in order to reconcile the sinful elect to his angry Father. He was also technically a person—the second of three persons in the godhead, according to the doctrine of the Trinity. But naming is different from being, and in the colonial period, Christ was a person in name only.

All that began to change in the half century after the Revolution. During this defining era in American religious history, the spiritual landscape in the United States started to take the shape we see today. Following the ratification of the First Amendment in 1791, religion became a matter of individual choice rather than federal mandate. Though state establishments lingered as late as 1833, when the Congregational standing order finally came to an end in Massachusetts, they were shadows of their former selves. Disestablishment supplanted the European-style state church system with a market model

that continues to characterize American religion. This new spiritual marketplace produced unprecedented religious creativity and intense religious competition.

Historians now debate when the United States first exhibited real religious diversity. Some see it as a recent development—a consequence of the opening of immigration from Asia in 1965. Others track it to colonial times, particularly to the middle colonies, where Dutch Mennonites and German Baptists mixed with French Huguenots and black Anglicans. But American religion really confronted diversity—and took its current shape—during the first decades of the nineteenth century, a period William Hutchison has described as the “Great Diversification.” According to Hutchison, 95 percent of Europeans in the colonies were at least nominally Protestant and 90 percent traced their heritage to the Calvinist wing of the Reformation. Eighty-five percent were “*English speaking* Calvinist Protestants.” After the Revolution, and particularly after the turn of the nineteenth century, the demographics changed dramatically. As the frontier opened to the west, immigration from Europe skyrocketed, driving the U.S. population up from 3 million in 1790 to 13 million in 1850. This time the new arrivals came from the continent as well as England, and now there were Lutherans in the mix.⁶

This period also witnessed the first great influx of non-Protestant immigrants. The U.S. Jewish community remained small but expanded considerably in proportion to the overall population. Roman Catholics arrived in what appeared to worried Protestants to be a tidal wave. In 1800, there were about fifty thousand Catholics in the United States. Over the next half century, the Catholic community expanded five times faster than the general population, hitting at least a million, or roughly 5 percent of all Americans, by 1850.⁷

Along with these transplanted European religions, Americans cultivated a variety of homegrown hybrids. In the 1830s, the Transcendentalists split from the Unitarians, insisting on the sovereignty of the individual soul, the sacredness of the wild, and the truths of Asian religions. During that same decade, the Disciples of Christ formed in an attempt to restore Christianity to its pre-creedal purity, vowing to speak “where the Scriptures speak” and to remain silent “where the Scriptures are silent.” One decade later, Spiritualists began to harken

to messages from the dead. Meanwhile, utopians were establishing more than one hundred different intentional communities during the first half of the nineteenth century, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), far and away the most popular of these "American originals."⁸

Across these diverse religious communities, a new spirit of liberty took hold. After their successful revolt against England, Americans thought nothing about rebelling against traditional Christianity. For obvious reasons, they rebuffed the Anglicanism of the crown, sending what came to be known as Episcopalianism on a long downward slide. Peace churches such as the Quakers, Mennonites, and Moravians also suffered after the war. Americans did far more than reject the denominations of loyalists and pacifists, however. Inspired by republican rhetoric of liberty and equality, and by a popular revolt against deference and hierarchy, they rejected as well the authority of ministers, the veracity of creeds, and the importance of theology. The Bible remained authoritative, of course, but now Americans insisted on interpreting it for themselves. In that effort, they were assisted by a new culture hero: the populist preacher, who combined evangelicalism and egalitarianism in daring new ways. As Nathan Hatch has argued in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, these religious entrepreneurs thrilled their populist parishioners with declarations of religious independence from elitist ministers, established churches, and outmoded creeds. Not surprisingly, this new combination of individual conscience and populist preaching led to a wide variety of interpretations, and First Amendment guarantees of religious freedom saw to it that those interpretations flourished.

Not everyone embraced what disestablishment had wrought. Frances Trollope, who sojourned to the United States in the 1820s and described her misadventures in *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), was unimpressed. "The almost endless variety of religious factions," she lamented, had "the melancholy effect of exposing all religious ceremonies to contempt." This chaotic situation confirmed her already sturdy faith in the benefits of religious establishment (particularly of the Anglican variety), yet one did not have to be British to despair over the situation. Many Americans worried that their new nation seemed destined to divide into religious factions.

This concern quickened as the frontier and the market economy expanded, stimulating unprecedented geographical and social mobility and making the early republic, in Hatch's terms, "the most centrifugal epoch in American church history."⁹

THE EVANGELICAL CENTURY

What spun out of this centrifuge, however, was Christianization rather than chaos. Americans indulged their new religious freedom not by becoming freethinkers or Deists, but by embracing Christianity with a passion rarely seen in the colonies. This new spiritual vigor was most visible on the landscape, where church spires arose alongside factories and farms. The number of Baptist congregations ballooned nearly twentyfold from 497 in 1776 to 9,375 in 1850. Methodist growth was even more explosive, leaping from only 65 congregations to 13,280 over the same period. Somehow a country that was wrestling for the first time with radical religious diversity was also Christianizing its people.

Though it was difficult for early Americans to find a religious center amidst the swirl, in hindsight it is clear that during the first third of the nineteenth century a new breed of Protestants seized center stage. As the new nation embraced Christianity, a new style of Jesus-friendly Christianity emerged as the country's unofficial religious establishment, dominating American religious life into the Civil War. Tocqueville called this new style "democratic and republican religion."¹⁰ We now call it evangelicalism, and by the 1830s its unique combination of enthusiasm and egalitarianism, revivalism and republicanism, biblicism and common sense had come to dominate the private and public lives of most Americans. The Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, and the Disciples of Christ were all evangelicals. So were many African Americans, who embraced Christianity en masse for the first time during late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century revivals. Evangelicalism predominated as well among the Methodists and the Baptists, who did more than any other denomination to spread the evangelical impulse across the early republic. Their "holy 'knock-'em-down' power" appealed to a wide variety of ordinary Americans, including blacks, women, and an up-and-coming class of