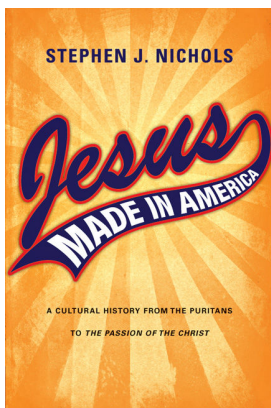


## BOOK EXCERPT



Stephen Nichols offers a fascinating and often humorous assessment of the story of Christianity in America in *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to "The Passion of the Christ."* Nichols leads readers through the various cultural epochs of American history, showing at each stage how American notions of Jesus were shaped by the cultural sensibilities of the times, often with unfortunate results.

### *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to The Passion of the Christ*

*As historian Stephen Prothero puts it in American Jesus, "Jesus has an American history." For some Americans, he is the consummate best friend and lover. For others, he is strong and mighty, ready for the defense of the weak. For others still, he's a guru, a wise and enlightened sage. For American Roman Catholics, he is first of all the savior on the cross, bloodied and suffering. For American Protestants, he is first of all, largely due to the prominence of Warner Sallman's "Head of Christ" (1941), nearly angelic, soft and beloved by children. For countercultural rebels, he's a crazed malcontent, hurling the establishment—in the form of money-changers—from the temple. For the inimitable Johnny Cash, he's "The Greatest Cowboy of Them All."*

*Jesus, like most cultural heroes, is malleable. And his given shape has much more to say about the shapers than it does of him. Christians in all cultures and ages have the tendency to impose their understandings and cultural expressions on Scripture or beliefs. The pictures in woodcuts prepared for Bibles during the Reformation era look remarkably similar to scenes prevalent in the sixteenth, not the first, century. Medieval theologians imbued their discussions of Christology with language and concepts that might surprise even the most knowledgeable and cosmopolitan of the twelve disciples. But there is something peculiar about the tendency to contemporize in American evangelicalism. American evangelicals reflexively harbor suspicions of tradition. In fact, most tend toward being (ravidly) anti-tradition. Consequently, the past is overlooked as a significant source of direction. This leaves American evangelicals more vulnerable than most when it comes to cultural pressures and influences. In the absence of tradition, one tends to make up a new one, one not tested by time and one more or less constructed by individuals or by a limited community. This anti-tradition animus arises from what Sidney Mead once labeled historylessness, and what I have elsewhere called ahistoricism. This is the tendency of Americans in general to be not only amnesiacs of the past, but to be amnesiacs who aren't necessarily looking to be cured.*

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