

A General Semantics View of the Changing Perceptions of Christ

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"A General Semantics View of the Changing Perceptions of Christ," presented by RaeAnn Burton, Beth Maryott, and Megan O'Byrne, explores the American views of Jesus Christ perceptually and visually. It includes traditional, pictorial representations and reactions to nontraditional or New Age portrayals. The paper also addresses perceptual revolution in the minds of Americans regarding Jesus Christ. The presentation then shows the relationship of these concepts to general semantics principles.

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Modern Portrayals of Jesus in Works of Art

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"Modern Portrayals of Jesus in Works of Art" is a paper addressing modern depictions of Jesus that stray from the traditional portrayals of Christ. New images of Jesus in paintings by Stephen Sawyer and Janet McKenzie are described to show how the image of Jesus is changing in the 21st century. Examples of sculptures and humorous pieces that depict Jesus in a modern fashion are also described. Last, the relationship between these modern portrayals of Jesus and general semantics is discussed. It is noted that every depiction of Christ, whether traditional or nontraditional, is an assumption. Depictions of Jesus are changing in the 21st century. This paper describes some of the changes in works of art and relates the changes to the study of general semantics.

Introduction

For centuries the image of Jesus' physical appearance has been etched into people's minds. Children learn in Sunday school at a young age what Jesus looked like. The most typical North American representation is a tall, lean, Caucasian man with long, flowing, light brown hair. The man has fair skin and light-colored eyes, but the typical North American image of what Jesus looked like is changing (Fillon 68). This paper will look at some of the new ways in which Jesus is being portrayed in the 21st century. It will also discuss the relationship of how Jesus is portrayed to the study of general semantics.

The New Image of Jesus in Paintings in the 21st Century

The typical North American portrayal of Jesus is one that has definitely seen its share of changes. The most common image of Christ is that of a tall, lean man with long, flowing brown hair. It is the image that is instilled in most North American children and adults. Many artists are changing the image of Jesus, however, in works of art to reflect the changing culture of the 21st century. According to an article entitled, "The Computerized Jesus," found at the website www.bbc.co.uk/religion, "The past hundred years has seen a greater variety than ever before. Christ patriarchal, youthful, subversive, mystical pacifist, human, satirical - and even all singing and dancing has been portrayed in many artistic works" (BBCi). Following are several examples of the new image of Jesus in the 21st century.

Stephen Sawyer - Modern Image of Christ

Stephen Sawyer is an artist from Versailles, Kentucky who paints Jesus in a nontraditional fashion. Sawyer does not paint Christ as the typical image that North Americans are used to. His paintings rarely depict Jesus as a man in a white robe and sandals. Sawyer's "Art for God" series consists of paintings of Jesus that he hopes will appeal to the youth of today (Artist's 7C).

One of Sawyer's goals is to depict Jesus in a contemporary setting as a contemporary man. He

does just that in his work entitled, “No Appointment Necessary.” In this particular work, Jesus is portrayed as a handsome, muscular man wearing a T-shirt and jeans. Not only is Jesus wearing nontraditional dress in the painting, he is also sporting a red heart tattoo on his arm with the word, “Father,” printed across it (Artist's 7C). A picture of, “No Appointment Necessary,” can be seen in appendix A.

Stephen Sawyer's contemporary depictions of Christ are not solely limited to, “No Appointment Necessary.” Another of Sawyer's paintings entitled, “Undefeated,” portrays Christ in a boxing ring wearing boxing gloves. Jesus is also seen laughing in his painting, “Joy to the World.” It is clear that Sawyer's depictions of Jesus are far from the traditional robed, gentle portrayals of Christ, and Sawyer has a definite mission behind his paintings.

In no way is Sawyer attempting to degrade Jesus as a religious figure or trying to be sacrilegious in any way. According to an article by the Associated Press that can be found in the March 22, 2003, edition of the *Kearney Hub*, Sawyer states, “My mission is to accurately reflect the life and teachings of Jesus in the 21st century. I want to reach everyone with the message of Jesus” (Artist's 7C). Several scholars of religion are using Sawyer's works to teach classes at universities across the United States. In the same *Kearney Hub* article, John Zylka, a director at Plymouth Christian Academy in Plymouth, Michigan states, “One of Steve's goals is to really bring Jesus into the 21st century, and I think it's much easier for the youth to relate” (Artist's 7C). Many other artists are taking an approach similar to Sawyer's when portraying Jesus in their works.

Janet McKenzie - Black Image of Christ

Another example of a nontraditional portrayal of Jesus can be found in Janet McKenzie's works. Just like Stephen Sawyer attempts to reach all walks of life with his depictions of Christ, so does Janet McKenzie. The most notable of McKenzie's modern images of Jesus is seen in her painting entitled, “Jesus of the People.” The painting portrays Christ as a robed, haloed man. It is set on a pink background where a yin-yang symbol can be seen (First). According to Sister Wendy Beckett in an article entitled, “A dark-Skinned Jesus for the Millennium,” McKenzie's painting of Jesus is, “A haunting image of a peasant Jesus - dark, thick-lipped, looking out on us with dignity, with sadness but with confidence” (Carroll). A picture of “Jesus of the People” can be seen in appendix B.

Janet McKenzie agrees with viewers of her work that “Jesus of the People” is the portrayal of Jesus as an African American man, but she hopes that people will see more than just his dark skin when looking at the work. According to McKenzie, “The pink in the painting's background is both a reference to femininity as well as to the color of blood. The feather symbolizes transcendent knowledge while paying homage to Native American culture and spirituality” (Carroll). It is fitting that viewers would also see a hint of femininity in the figure of Jesus in “Jesus of the People” considering that McKenzie used an African American female model for her depiction of Christ in the work.

McKenzie's attempts to portray Jesus in the 21st century have won her some praise. “Jesus of the People” was chosen by the *National Catholic Reporter*, one of the most widely read Catholic publications in the country, as the picture of Christ that donned the cover of its millennium issue. It is clear that McKenzie's straying from the traditional depictions of Christ as a Caucasian male

appeal to the diverse 21st century population in the United States.

The New Image of Jesus in Other Art Forms in the 21st Century

Although painters Stephen Sawyer and Janet McKenzie have done an excellent job of portraying Jesus in a nontraditional way that appeals to many North Americans in the 21st century, the modern depictions of Jesus are not limited to simply paintings. Modern images of Christ can be viewed in sculptures and in humorous pieces as well.

Modern Sculptures of Jesus

An image of the modern Jesus is very evident in Mark Wallinger's sculpture in the Trafalgar Square in the center of London. The sculpture by Wallinger depicts Jesus as a political leader of an oppressed people. According to an article entitled, "The Computerized Jesus," "The sculpture depicts Christ as an Everyman - an ordinary bloke who found himself in extraordinary circumstances" (BBCi).

Another sculpture depicting a modern image of Jesus can be found in Shrewsbury Abbey in Shropshire, England. The work by Michele Coxon entitled, "Naked Christ," is made from sheep bones, rusting metal, tissue paper, and resin (Faithzone 1). The contemporary fashion of the work is not only evident from the materials used to construct the sculpture but also in the fact that the artist attempts to display the crucifixion of Jesus without using a cross. In the words of the artist, "When I started the "Naked Christ" I did intend to have a cross, but over the weeks I could not find the right piece of wood" (Faithzone). Neither Mark Wallinger nor Michele Coxon portrays Jesus in a traditional fashion. Both artists sculpted Christ as a new, modern image to appeal to the ever changing 21st century population.

Modern Images of Jesus in Humorous Pieces

Another art form that depicts Jesus in a modern way that deviates from the traditional tall, lean, Caucasian male is a humorous piece entitled, "Was Jesus a Black, Jewish, Mexican Woman?" found at the website, www.beliefnet.com/story. The piece gives "reasons" why some should question the traditional depiction of Christ. It makes statements, such as, "Three proofs that Jesus was Mexican, Black, or Californian" (Was). The piece also makes quips that Jesus was Irish or even a woman. Some of the "support" that the article provides for suggesting that Jesus was a woman is as follows:

1. He had to feed a crowd at a moment's notice when there was no food.
2. He kept trying to get the message across to a bunch of men who JUST DIDN'T GET IT.
3. Even when He was dead, He had to get up because there was more work for him to do (Was).

It is clear that the North American traditional image of Christ has changed in the 21st century from the traditional depiction of Christ as a tall, lean, long haired, Caucasian male to images more fitting of the culture of the new millennium. Not only has the depiction of Jesus changed in paintings, but it has also been modernized in sculptures and humorous works. Any depiction of Jesus, whether traditional or nontraditional, has significance in the study of general semantics.

How Depictions of Jesus Relate to General Semantics

The relationship of portraying Jesus in works of art to the study of general semantics comes in the fact that any portrayal, whether modern or traditional, is an assumption. According to *People in Quandaries* by Wendell Johnson, “The observations we make are incomplete. They are abstracted from something - from what we have represented in our diagram as the submicroscopic level of inferential data; therefore, we make assumptions” (104). From this description of how people make assumptions, it is clear that all portrayals of Jesus are merely inferences as to what He looked like. Following are several examples that provide proof of why depicting Jesus in works of art is an assumption.

Proof from the Bible

One example of the fact that depicting Jesus is an assumption can be found in the Bible. In a book entitled *Sources of Strength* by Jimmy Carter, the argument is made that the image of Christ is an assumption because his physical appearance is never described fully anywhere in the New Testament. Carter suggests that the images artists create of Jesus are a result of the culture in which they live, and nearly all of the images of Jesus that North Americans have in their minds are false (9). He proves the falsity of the typical image of Jesus as a tall, lean, handsome man by quoting Isaiah 53:2, which provides the only description of Jesus’ physical appearance in the Bible:

For he grew up before him like a tender shoot, like a root out of parched ground; he had no stately form or majesty that we should look at him, no appearance that we should be attracted to him. He was despised and forsaken of men, and man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, he was despised, and we did not esteem him (Carter 9 & 10).

This is the only passage in the New Testament that attempts to explain Jesus’ physical appearance, and it is obvious that the passage from Isaiah 53:2 does not constitute creating any of the images of Jesus that artists have generated.

Other proof that depictions of Jesus’ physical appearance are assumptions can be found in an article entitled, “The Computerized Jesus.” This article states, “The great irony, of course, is that all images of Christ are imaginary because there is no description of him in the Bible” (BBCi). Further evidence that depictions of Jesus are assumptions is evident in “The Real Face of Jesus,” an article in the December 2002 issue of *Popular Mechanics*. The article reinforces the fact that depictions of Christ are assumptions by stating, “Further clouding the question of what Jesus looked like is the simple fact that nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus described, nor have any drawings of him ever been uncovered” (Fillon 68). Because there is no description of Jesus in the Bible, artists and others have simply assumed what Jesus looks like, and they have created images of him based on their culture. The artists are creating an imaginary image of Jesus based on assumptions they have drawn. They are projecting what they feel Christ looks like to others through their art work. The Bible is not the only source of proof that creating images of Christ is an assumption.

Proof from Science

Not only does the Bible provide proof that no physical description of Jesus exists on which to base artwork, but science also provides proof that portrayals of Christ are assumptions. The already mentioned article, "The Real Face of Jesus," discusses many problems that are faced when trying to depict images of Christ. According to the article, "There is the additional problem of having neither a skeleton nor other bodily remains to probe for DNA. In the absence of evidence, our images of Jesus have been left to the imagination of artists" (Fillon 68). This statement reinforces the fact that creating images of Jesus is an assumption because there is no evidence of what Jesus looked like. Instead artists create images of Jesus by arbitrarily accepting their own interpretation of Him and creating portrayals they assume to be true. The lack of evidence of Jesus' physical appearance in science proves that depictions of Christ are merely the artists own projections. Pieces of art are not what Jesus *did* look like; they are the artist's own image as *he/she* views Christ.

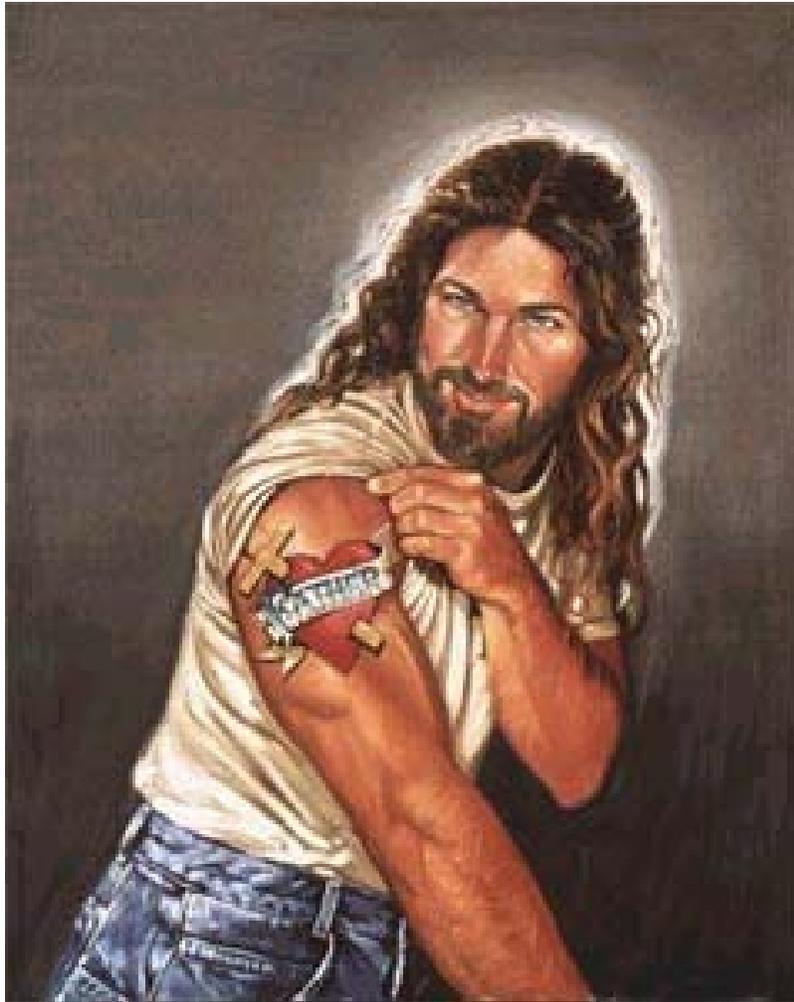
Conclusion

In conclusion, the typical North American depiction of Christ is that of a tall, slender, handsome, Caucasian male with long, light brown flowing hair. This is the image that is instilled in children in Sunday school, and it is the traditional image that most artists depict in their work. In the 21st century, many artists have attempted to depict Jesus in what they feel is more representative of the diverse North American culture. Among these artists portraying Christ in a modern fashion are Stephen Sawyer's "Art for God" series, Janet McKenzie's depiction of a Black Jesus in "Jesus of the People," Mark Wallinger and Michele Coxon's unorthodox sculptures, and a humorous literary piece found at beliefnet.com.

The significance of creating images of Christ to the study of general semantics is important in the fact that no evidence of the appearance of Jesus exists in the Bible and there is no scientific evidence of His appearance; therefore, every image of Jesus that is created is based on an assumption as to what He looked like. All depictions of Jesus are simply projections of the artist's perception of Jesus. Everyone who knows Jesus has a mental picture of what He looks like. The important aspect to remember is that how one portrays Jesus is merely an assumption because no evidence of His physical appearance exists.

Appendix A

Stephen Sawyer's "No Appointment Necessary:"



Appendix B

Janet McKenzie's "Jesus of the People:"



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Nontraditional Perceptions of Jesus Christ and Reactions

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“Nontraditional Perceptions of Jesus Christ and Reactions” is a paper regarding peoples’ reactions to nontraditional depictions of Christ. Images, which include tones of race and sexuality regarding Christ, are described. Within this paper, nontraditional views of Jesus Christ that have caused a mix of emotions among society will be discussed. Last, the overall idea of Jesus including peace and acceptance will be covered.

This paper was originally designed to present traditional views of Jesus Christ. As researched progressed, it became evident that a study of people’s reactions to nontraditional views of Jesus Christ was much more interesting. It became apparent that people can become very disturbed when you attempt to shift their perceptual paradigm of Jesus Christ.

There are interesting reactions to nontraditional portrayals of Jesus. One of these took place in Union City, New Jersey. The Park Theater Performing Arts Center was about to begin their production of “The Passion Play” and they had chosen an African American actor to play the leading role of Jesus. The theater thought that they were breaking new ground. Unfortunately there were many people who were very upset by the racial change from the former white actor portraying Jesus. The African American actor began to receive death threats, the theater received harassing phone calls, and a reported patron even called in to the theater shouting that she did not want to see “that black thing”. The theater lost an incredible amount of sales in tickets as many people and groups, including church organizations, began to cancel their ticket orders. This was the first time in the theater’s 82 year history that they had to deal with a racial issue. Interestingly, the African American actor had played other roles in religious performances in the theater in the past. Past roles included Herod, the king who tried to have Jesus killed, and Lucifer. No one seemed to be upset with an African American actor playing these roles. It seems that people can accept an African American in a negative role more easily than in a positive sacred one (“Black Jesus” 12).

A second startling reaction to a nontraditional portrayal of Jesus Christ occurred in Manhattan in a theater production. The production, “Corpus Christi”, involved a homosexual Jesus Christ. As one can imagine, this production caused a mix of emotions, hatred and anger. Heated responses evolved as rumors began spreading that it was the story of a homosexual Jesus having sex with the Apostles. This production does involve Jesus having sexual relations with Judas and officiating a homosexual wedding. After the theater began receiving death and bomb threats they had to install metal detectors and hire security guards (“Protesting” 73).

Another astounding reaction to a nontraditional depiction of Jesus Christ was in a piece of photography. The photographer, Renee Cox, is famous for her use of naked photography. The picture which produced a great deal of grief was titled “Yo Mama’s Last Supper” the picture shows a naked woman at a dinner party. This photo produced by Cox is her interpretation of the Last Supper originally painted by Leonardo da Vinci. Her interpretation includes a depiction of

her naked self portraying Jesus Christ surrounded by unclad African American ‘apostles’. The photo was regarded as anti-Catholic and indecent by former Mayor Giuliani. A major outcry resulting from this piece of photography was the chance of it being shown in a museum supported by tax dollars (Danto 31).

Evaluational rigidity is discussed in People in Quandaries and there is a section in chapter eleven that ties in beautifully with this topic:

...After all, this is a way of saying that the way in which we classify something determines in large measure the way in which we react to it. We classify largely by naming. Having named something, we tend to evaluate it and so to react to it in terms of the name we have given it. We learn in our culture to evaluate names, or labels, or words, quite independently of the actualities to which they might be applied (Johnson 261).

Johnson, in People in Quandaries, tells of a man asking why the Englishmen respond to a picture of Queen Victoria as if it were she. The bewildered other man responded that it is not a picture of Queen Victoria, it is Queen Victoria.(Johnson 262) When people look at Cox’s photograph portraying Christ they are not seeing Cox’s perception, they are seeing Cox as Jesus. When looking at her photo of the Last Supper she takes the place of Jesus in the photo.

The painting “Jesus of the People”(“Painting” 34) was selected from 1,700 entries to be on the cover of a special millennium issue of the National Catholic Reporter, one of the most well known Catholic publications in the country. The artist, Janet McKenzie, wanted to be as inclusive as possible in this work. At first one may see Jesus as black but as one looks more closely there are various genders and nationalities. The piece of art was inspired by McKenzie’s nephew who is African American; he inspired her to use more imagery in her work. The painting shows a robed and hallowed Jesus against a pink background with a yin-yang symbol representing perfect balance, and a feather symbolizing the American Indian spirituality. McKenzie’s work has received positive comments (Painting 35).

Before discovering other peoples’ perceptions and carefully reading the section on evaluational rigidity, this author admits to being very narrow-minded in regarding perceptions of Jesus Christ. Writing this paper has resulted in the author becoming more accepting of how others view Jesus.

Individuals act in violent and hurtful in response to nontraditional portrayals of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is intended to be everyone’s Jesus no matter the race or sexuality. It is somewhat contradictory for people to bring confusion, malice and scorn to others’ perceptions of Jesus when Jesus allegedly preached the doctrine of peace and acceptance.

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The American Jesus: A Paradigm Shift

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As a nation, America allows its citizens greater religious freedom than any other state. This freedom allows for the development of national religious perceptions different from those found elsewhere. These perceptions lead to the formation of paradigms. In American history there have been two significant paradigm shifts relating to Jesus Christ. The first was in the settling of the nation; and the second in the 1990s when the WWJD? craze swept the country and brought Jesus home.

In today's global community, "America" and "Jesus" are two of the most ubiquitous terms available in western culture. Everyone has personal perceptions of America and of Jesus, but it is interesting to put those terms together to see how America perceives Jesus. America has had a relatively short history as an independent nation, however, there has been plenty of time for developing paradigms relating to Jesus. A paradigm is a set way of thinking, when a topic can be categorized and viewed by a large segment of the population in the 'same' context. A paradigm shift or semantic jump occurs abruptly when an individual perceives a subject in a new and radically different way. A remarkable semantic jump occurred when European settlers founded America, a paradigm was formed over the next several hundred years, and presently Americans are attempting to break that paradigm and instigate another semantic jump.

Jesus and religion mark the very foundation of America. Early American settlers were seeking religious freedom and an escape from religious persecution. The new found political and religious independence led to a more interpretive perception of Jesus. Whereas early American settlers were used to a harsh condemning God in their old European religions, "Deism, Unitarianism, Universalism, and Arminianism all view God as a less directly controlling entity" ("Christianity in America," 2000). People were allowed their own "take" on religion and on life, "No more is it believed that fate is set and that there is no way to redeem yourself, as in [Calvinism](#)" ("Christianity in America," 2000). People began to take a more assertive role in their own lives. They started "to believe that they themselves had more control. God is still there, but if individuals choose salvation, they can achieve it" ("Christianity in America," 2000). These changes signify a paradigm shift in early America. The settlers had left behind their previous perceptions and paradigm of Jesus and religion and had adopted a new one to match their new surroundings and lifestyles.

It must be noted that the religious composition of 17th and 18th century America is very different from that of the present. "The two largest churches of the time were the Episcopal (Anglican) and Congregational (United Church of Christ) along with Reformed, Methodists, Presbyterian, Lutherans, Baptists, [Quakers](#), [Catholics](#), and a small Jewish community" ("Christianity in America," 2000). Noting the religions that were accounted for at the time, it is also important to note those that had not yet hit the scene, "Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventist churches, Pentecostals, Holiness, and Christian Scientists. The Baptist Church was small, not the largest Protestant denomination like today" ("Christianity in America," 2000). Of course, not all early American settlers belonged to one of these groups. Certainly the early Pilgrims and Puritans practiced a more strict, repressive form of religion, but overall the paradigm shift was highly

noticeable. Americans loved Jesus more personally, liberally, and closely than their European counterparts. This shift happened partially because of personal religious preference, but also because the newness of the American landscape allowed for such a drastic change.

Currently, Jesus is perceived differently by the separate sects of American religious communities, these different definitions lead to independent paradigms. Most Protestant sects see Jesus as a part of the Trinity. Many see him as God's self-manifestation in human form. Catholics also view Jesus as a part of the Trinity but they see him as being both God and man (Spray, 1992, p. 2). Some of the newer American religions see Jesus in an entirely different way. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, reject the Trinity and see Jesus as "the ransom sacrifice to redeem humanity, not God himself" (Spray, 1992, p. 2). Unitarians, by and large, see Jesus as a "great teacher and example, but fully human and God's son only in the same sense that all humans" are children of God (Spray, 1992, p. 2). While there may or may not be an overarching American Jesus paradigm, each religious sect has its own definable paradigm to follow.

In the late 1990s, a new Jesus craze hit America. Known as "What Would Jesus Do?" or "WWJD?," this idea rocked the traditional paradigms. Especially popular among teens, this phenomenon brought Jesus closer to home than ever before. Jesus was more personified in the American culture. He became someone that people could identify with, someone to query about daily life decisions. The paradigm was changing, Jesus was no longer an aloof religious persona, he was a friend. WWJD? paraphernalia began popping up everywhere, bracelets were especially popular but also included were necklaces, bookbags, t-shirts, pens, pencils, bible covers, and posters. People began consciously including Jesus in their daily lives, not only by wearing the WWJD? slogan but also by incorporating him into their thoughts and actions. (Beaudoin, 1999, p. 1)

While some people, religious and otherwise, welcomed this shift toward Jesus, others found problems with the WWJD? movement. In his article, "A Peculiar Contortion," Tom Beaudoin pointed out some flaws with the craze. Overall he noted that the image of Jesus has been rather malleable in recent pop culture, Jesus has been appearing regularly in movies, music, and literature. This leads to an over-commercialized perception of spirituality. Jesus and his image are being bought and sold on the open market. The ability to buy and sell Jesus simply debases the legitimacy of the WWJD? movement. Anything that can be so easily marketed and lead to such profits also leads to knock-offs of the product. Beaudoin noted the "What Would Journey Do?" spin linking the movement to an 80s rock band, as well as the "We Want Jack Daniels?" takeoff (Beaudoin, 1999, p. 2).

While Beaudoin noted the potential cultural harm of the WWJD? movement he also took into account the new trend toward religious narrow-mindedness. As WWJD? became the singular religious force in a person's life, it led to a reductionistic trend (Beaudoin, 1999, p. 2). Individuals would focus so much on wondering what Jesus would do about their daily questions and problems that religion was otherwise left out of their lives. Over-focusing on what exactly Jesus would want for them was potentially harmful to their overall relationship with Christ and reduced their religious life to a single question.

Beaudoin also noted that the WWJD? movement meant different things to different people and religions. While Catholics should not have had a problem with their followers developing a personal relationship with Jesus, they were not overly enthusiastic about the movement. This

was largely because a singular question could take the place of two thousand years worth of receptions, reflections, and perceptions of Jesus and try to determine a final, permanent answer to age-old questions. This, to Beaudoin, also reflected upon the American trend of self-worship, individualism (Beaudoin, 1999, p. 3).

Across the board, the WWJD? movement did spawn a semantic jump. After four hundred years of American history, Jesus became more popularized, personal, and identifiable in a few short years than ever before. People were able to think of him as a person, a friend, a counselor and confidante more easily and readily than in the past; however, the paradigm shift did not suit all Americans. There were some die-hard Jesus followers that refused to accept the new trend into their lifestyles. Their resistance, however, did not totally dissuade the movement. WWJD? is still visible today and the effects are far reaching. While some people still prefer to think of Jesus as aloof and commanding, like some early Americans, others have embraced Jesus and his image into their lives as a result of the movement.

Those most affected by the WWJD? movement, the adolescent or Generation X age group, are also the most perplexing age group for religious teachers, preachers, and experts. They “stay away from most churches in droves but love songs about God and Jesus” (Langford, 2000, p. 3). While they choose not to actively participate in organized religious activities they identify closely with Jesus on a personal level. At times they seem “almost obsessed with saints, visions, and icons in all shapes and sizes...and post thousands of religious and quasi-religious notes on bulletin boards in cyberspace” (Langford, 2000, p. 3). Perhaps this personal change is indicative of a true semantic jump in present day American society. The paradigm has shifted from one where Jesus is viewed as a religious icon to be worshipped only in a true religious setting to one where individuals can adapt Jesus into their own lifestyles and love him personally. One indicator of this is a Harris Poll conducted in August 2001 which found that Jesus Christ was most often mentioned as a personal hero among participants (Taylor, 2001). The fact that he can be identified as someone that people wish to emulate signifies that he is viewed on a personal level by the population, no longer as a far-away persona.

In reality there have been two true paradigm shifts in America relating to Jesus. The first was in the very founding of the American nation. American settlers enacted a semantic jump when they were allowed their own liberal interpretation of Jesus and religion. They were allowed to practice religion as they wanted once they had escaped the confining religious paradigm of Europe. After the foundation of America as a free nation, a new Jesus paradigm was formed. Across-the-board, Americans viewed Jesus in largely the same way that they did when then nation was founded for the greatest part of four hundred years. This paradigm began shifting in the late 1990s with the WWJD? movement and the impetus to see Jesus as more of a person than a religious icon. Jesus has also been adopted into pop culture, he has become a commercial item to be bought and sold on the open market. Making Jesus and his image available for purchase in the American consumer society has certainly helped to bring him closer to home for many people. Now Americans feel freer than ever in regard to religion and worship, they are free to worship on their own without attending formal religious services. While early Americans developed their own perceptions of a personal Jesus, they still found it necessary to worship in a formalized setting. Today’s Americans have shifted away from that norm. America’s beliefs are changing, the paradigm is shifting, with this realization one has only to wait and see how far the semantic jump will go.

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