Tim Bryant
1 Nov. 2008
Twin Messiahs: Capitalist and Socialist Jesus in the American Popular Press, 1916-1925

When asked by a group of Pharisees whether or not it was right to pay taxes to the Roman authorities, Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). According to the Biblical account, Jesus' response immediately followed his appraisal of the coin used to pay taxes, a denarius bearing the likeness and name of Caesar Augustus Tiberius. Although interpretations differ over what is and is not truly "Caesar's," Jesus' reading of the coin provides a functional separation of church and state based on an interpretation of currency, its image and its inscription. Although the Roman state clearly controlled the means of production of such currency, the Hebrew community to whom Jesus spoke still possessed the cultural resources to reframe the relationship between political allegiance and religious belief. In the Biblical passage, retaining such a resistant perspective to the terms of that relationship centered on the interpretation of an image and its inscription.

Recent American history demonstrates the increasing centrality of capital to answering questions of citizens' religious and political allegiances. The economic and social consequences of World War One inspired popular writers of the time to take sides on the proper social function of capital. Socialist publications argued against capitalism for its influence in fomenting war abroad and fostering unfair labor practices stateside, while pro-business publications like the new *Forbes* magazine more optimistically argued for the moral management of capital as the ethical means to postwar prosperity. Like two sides of a coin, the socialist and capitalist perspectives on capital offered alternate ways of reading the balance between morality and economy, as demonstrated by their periodicals' divergent use of both secular and religious imagery and texts.

Two popular novels of the time, both originally published as magazine serials, condense these questions about capital, citizenship, and religion by invoking the figure of Jesus as a model for the morally responsible attitude toward capital. In Upton Sinclair's 1922 novel *They Call Me Carpenter*, Jesus returns to earth to preach socialist reform.[1] Bruce Barton's 1925 bestseller, *The Man Nobody Knows,* offers a pro-capitalist Jesus as a model for the era's emerging business leaders. These two books offer, respectively, a socialist Jesus and a capitalist Jesus, the image of his body and the text of his ministry serving as the figurative answers for contemporary social questions about political economy and public morality.

Sinclair's novel centers on a figurative Jesus called only Mr. Carpenter, who comes to earth for four days and meets both the richest capitalists and poorest workers of Western City, a generic metropolis representing Los Angeles-- more specifically, Hollywood. Carpenter initially meets the narrator (a wealthy socialite named Billy), a movie producer, a starlet, and various socialites, all of whom want to capitalize on his charismatic presence, but he devotes the majority of the novel

---

[1] At the time of this writing, no critical work exists on Sinclair's novel, which is mentioned only in passing by various bibliographies on adaptations of Jesus in fictional biographies and novels from the period.

visiting the poor, meeting labor leaders, and speaking to striking workers in the city streets.[2] However, neither Carpenter's rhetoric nor his charisma are able to win over the mobs sent against him by Western City's moneyed interests. Furthermore, when Carpenter attempts to martyr himself at the hands of the mob for the cause of socialist reform, influential friends intervene, against his will, to save him. The novel so denies the possibility of a wholly spiritual redemption of Hollywood and its mob-like denizens. Carpenter forsakes the people of Western City and returns to the church where he originally appeared, resuming his status as a two-dimensional icon in its stained-glass window.

Carpenter's "tale of the second coming" fails to incite socialist revolution because of his inability to exert word and image to purposeful persuasion in a town where Hollywood celebrity and big business sway the mob to action. The specific ways in which Sinclair's messiah fails to adapt his ministry to contemporary America indicate Sinclair's own ambiguous relationship as an intellectual in America, speaking ostensibly for the working class, but spending far more time critiquing Hollywood culture. Sinclair's fictional savior suffers from his author's ambivalence toward two potential ends of the Social Gospel movement: on one hand, revolution for the workers; on the other, reform of the existing social institutions.

Contemporary reviews of *They Call Me Carpenter* ranged a wide gamut of praise and scorn from both religious and secular periodicals for a variety of reasons--aesthetic, religious, and political. *Life* magazine's reviewer charged Sinclair with offenses against both the Bible and commonsense, citing the author's "utter failure to grasp the essential truths of the Gospels" and his mistaken idea "that scolding the rich will in some way ameliorate the condition of the poor"; the reviewer concluded that, "The class to which [Sinclair] appeals do not want to think."[3]

Indeed, it was action, not thought, that critics from both the mainstream and the socialist press found lacking in Sinclair's ineffectual *Carpenter*. Walter Groth declared that "Jesus was no pacifist. He was a man of action."[4] Mike Gold, editor of *The New Masses*, challenged Sinclair on the importance of action in the September and October, 1922 issues of *The Liberator*. In an entitled "The Jesus-Thinkers," Gold claimed that "Jesus suffered and died for something he believed good," and that, because of this, Jesus was "a fine type of super-being."[5] Gold objected to "Jesus-thinkers" who were unwilling to fight, even violently, for the socialist cause. Sinclair rejected Gold's call for a more militant brand of socialism and dismissed Gold as a frustrated leader whom no one wanted to follow.[6]

However, most socialist publications did not share Sinclair's anxiety about upper-class sensibilities in putting forth their own version of Jesus as a socialist messiah. The July, 1916 issue of *The Masses* featured an image captioned "The

---

[2] Sinclair included in the novel an Appendix of Biblical passages (224-225) from which he adapted Carpenter's sermons.

[3] Rev. of *They Call Me Carpenter*, by Upton Sinclair. *Life* n.d.: 20.

[4] Groth, Walter. "Christ the Socialist." Rev. of *They Call Me Carpenter*, by Upton Sinclair. n.pub.: n.d.: n.p.

[5] Gold, Mike. "The Jesus-Thinkers." *The Liberator* Sep. 1922: 11-12.

[6] Sinclair, Upton. "The Jesus-Thinkers." *The Liberator* Oct. 1922: 15.

Deserter" that illustrates Jesus standing next to a wall, blindfolded and with his hands tied behind his back, the target of a firing squad in the image's foreground.[7] A similar image in 1917 depicts a dejected man, resembling Jesus, with his head down and a thick rope around his neck. A man leading him away, identified by the caption as "Billy Sunday (Recruiting Officer)," tells another, "I got him! He's plumb dippy over going to war!"[8] The extremely popular and controversial clergyman Billy Sunday thus stands in for the pro-war sentiments of the Catholic church, whose official position was allied with the war movement. The following month a third image in *The New Masses* repeated this image of Jesus suffering for the anti-war movement. Jesus stands against a prison wall with a ball-and-chain around his ankle and halo around his head. The image bears this extended caption: "THIS man subjected himself to imprisonment and probably to being shot or hanged. THE prisoner used language tending to discourage men from enlisting in the United States Army. IT is proven and indeed admitted that among his incendiary statements were-- THOU shalt not kill and BLESSED are the peacemakers."[9]

The Liberator [10] features the image of a slouching Jesus figure sits looking toward the side, while a robust and finely dressed businessman stands behind him, arms spread in offering. The caption reads, "There is ingenious human understanding in this artist who re-persons the tempter of idealists, not sly and sinister, not itchingly demonic, but broad and strong and comfortable-- "established" as they say-- and able to be almost gruffly kind and fatherly toward the poor, beautiful crank who is throwing away his great gifts on some utopian notion about mankind. 'Come, come, my boy!' he might say."[11]

Against such scathing depictions of big business as organized religion as partners in war profiteering, American capitalists had a friend in Bruce Barton. The son of a minister, Barton was a highly successful advertising pioneer who saw no problem in presenting a Jesus that a consumer society both wanted and needed. Barton's Jesus was a model of muscular Christianity, good salesmanship, and effective leadership. By investing Jesus with both virile manhood and unsurpassed sociability, Barton bridged a problematic gap in Sinclair's novel between workers and management. As Leo Ribuffo notes, Barton's Jesus fit both roles of "industrial comrade" and "common-sense businessman" (211). The advantage of such a figuration is the appeal to both audiences through a mythic unity, however opposed their interests in the real economy. Real economic inequalities are "masked" by the most humane and most divine of visages: that of Jesus (Ferreira 78). Barton augments the traditional mix of secular and divine by associating disparate class interests in one messiah.[12]

---

[7] "The Deserter." *The Masses* Jul. 1916: 18.
[8] *The Masses* Jun. 1917: 13.
[9] Bellows, George (artist). "THIS Man." *The Masses* Jul. 1917: 4.
[10] In Sinclair's novel, a mob ransacks a bookstore selling *The Liberator* and, with the aid of the police, sets the bookseller's inventory on fire (Sinclair 166-168).
[11] Eastman, Max (author) and Boardman Robinson (artist). "The Temptation." *The Liberator* 1.3 (May 1918): 26.
[12] According to Case, the adaptability of the literary Jesus from 1900 to 1925 to "every shade of modern activity" and to suit all sorts of "immediate interests and ideals" made him an "authoritative teacher for a

The clearest example of Barton's rhetorical strategy appears in the epigraph to *The Man Nobody Knows*, "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's *business*." The use of the word "business" here is an overgenerous translation of the Biblical text, which allows Barton to equate the spiritual with the commercial. Barton proceeds to reconstruct Jesus as a prototypical American businessman, not by attempting a whole narrative of what he would do, but merely offering reinterpretations of his past actions as they demonstrate seemingly timeless business principles that Barton's readers should act upon. The success of Barton's approach largely rests upon his readers' willingness to assent to strategic reinterpretations of selected episodes in order to argue for their trans-historical significance.

Barton invests Jesus, as the ultimate "executive," with the ability to create desirable social relationships out of pure force of will. Despite Barton's valorization of action over passivity, he invests his Jesus with the ability to accomplish his will almost without acting. The qualities that Jesus possesses as the transcendent leader are consistent with such a self-contained competence: "blazing conviction," which sways men to obey instinctively; the "wonderful power to pick men" who follow without need of "argument" or "pleading" (15); and the ability to construct a plan toward effective action, rather than merely denounce the wrongs of society (18). Thus, Jesus accomplishes his goals without engaging the people with traditional rhetoric. Barton's emphasis on magnetism, instinct, and natural ability so describes the ideal executive. In this sense, Barton presents a model Jesus that is based on the affective image. The effect of this model is always the same: success. The cause is equally consistent: the personality of Jesus.

Forbes magazine advised its readers to treat themselves to "the pleasure--and the profit" of reading Barton's book for its stimulating depiction of Jesus as "the strongest, ablest organizer and executive who ever lived, full of sunshine and inspiration."[13] From its first issue, *Forbes* denied a purely capitalist motivation for business and embraced the affective potential of model leadership. Proclaiming in its masthead that it was, "Devoted to Investment Finance and the Human Side of Business," *Forbes* sought to associate capital development with the social good in the minds of its aspiring executive readership.[14] The magazine's very first editorial begins with the questionable claim that "Business was originated to produce happiness, not to pile up millions."[15] This strategy of privileging a state of affect, happiness, over material success parallels Barton's model of the executive who leads men by faith and belief without needing to resort to rhetorical persuasion.

The emphasis on optimism and moral management of capital manifested in a variety of regular features in *Forbes*: "Keys to Success," which enumerated virtues like hope and cleanliness as moral virtues necessary for success; "Thoughts on Life and Business," which combined real Biblical proverbs with contemporary

---

modern social order… even an examplary [sic] social reformer… or the model for a Y.M.C.A. worker" (566). Barton himself worked on the first ad campaigns for the Y.M.C.A.

[13] "Fact and Comment." *Forbes* 17.5 (15 Dec. 1925): 30.

[14] *Forbes* 1.1 (15 Sep. 1917): 5.

[15] "Fact and Comment." *Forbes* 1.1 (15 Sep. 1917): 7.

businessmen's so-called "proverbs" about life and work; and miniature biographies of "Men Making Their Mark," which modeled specific and secular examples of the kind of success available to readers who adopted the attitudes and strategies promoted by *Forbes*. The magazine's optimistic depiction of business as practical morality both preceded Barton's own work and carried a similar message forward with the rise of advertising throughout the twentieth century.

In contrast to the Biblical passage's elusive answer, by which Jesus tells men to give God and state their respective due, the Jesus depicted in these secular publications took far more literal sides, for and against capital, its promises and consequences. The years before and after World War One were defining decades for both socialism and capitalism, which both laid claim to the allegiance and beliefs of American citizens. Literary and imagistic reconstructions of Jesus, and "what he would do," signified the common ground of both national and religious values, from which both sides would derive rhetorical authority. The divergent constructions capitalist and socialist authors would make of a popular, iconic messiah would plot two opposing directions for the place of Christian morality in political economy after the war.

On the question of what is owed to God and Caesar, both Sinclair and Barton recall Jesus' answer and modify it to their own ends. Sinclair's Jesus says to give to the movie producer the profits due him, but his ministry fails to supply the workers with their due. The symbolic economy of Hollywood commerce is more than a match for Carpenter's revolutionary street preaching. In contrast, Barton interprets the Biblical story as a sign of Jesus' superior powers of crowd control. Without engaging in any substantial analysis of Jesus' words, Barton exalts his skill at managing the situation and frustrating others' usage of words for rhetorical effect (Barton 56). Barton adopts a similar strategy to manage his own text by diverting his reader's attention away from any potential subversion of a pro-business agenda inherent in the association of money with Caesar in the Biblical account.

The success of *Forbes* magazine and of Barton's text-- which saw multiple reprints and recently renewed critical attention of cultural historians-- and the failures of the socialist press and Sinclair's novel correspond to the competing fates of capitalism and socialism in America after the war.[16] With the rise of the Popular Front in the 1930s, American socialism reached its peak popularity. Sinclair's novel received renewed attention during this time.[17] World War Two and the subsequent Red Scare shifted the country's sympathies away from socialism toward firmer belief in capitalism as the productive framework of a free and democratic country. For a time, however, between the world wars, the country entertained two sides of an adaptable Jesus, whose twin images of socialist and capitalist potential reflected

---

[16] The evolution of literary taste may also be responsible for the decline in reputation of Sinclair and, more specifically, his religious fiction. Robert Detweiler notes the passing popularity of *imitatio* fiction (that which renders literal depictions of Jesus) from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a sign of more complex, modernist literary and moral sensibilities (11). In addition, Hart argues that the literary theme of Christian Socialism was popular until "fused with the appeal to a muscular Christianity," which shaped literary depictions of Jesus from the 1910s and thereafter (314).

[17] The EPIC Drama League performed a stage adaptation of *They Call Me Carpenter* at the Masonic Auditorium of Glendale, NY on May 3, 1935.

split allegiances between opposing paths for economic and moral management of the country's future.

Works Cited

Barton, Bruce. *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925; Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000.

Case, Shirley Jackson. "The Life of Jesus During the Last Quarter-Century." *The Journal of Religion* 5.6 (Nov. 1925): 561-575.

Detweiler, Robert. "Christ in American Religious Fiction." *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32.1 (Jan. 1964): 8-14.

Ferreira, James M. "*Only Yesterday* and the Two Christs of the Twenties." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 80.1 (1981): 77-83.

Hart, James D. "Platitudes of Piety: Religion and the Popular Modern Novel." *American Quarterly* 6.4 (Winter 1954): 311-322.

Ribuffo, Leo P. "Jesus Christ as Business Statesman: Bruce Barton and the Selling of Corporate Capitalism." *American Quarterly* 33.2 (Summer 1981): 206-231.

Sinclair, Upton. *They Call Me Carpenter: A Tale of the Second Coming*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922.