

Celebrity Culture

Celebrity culture influenced religious life long before such twentieth-century icons as Billy Graham, Elvis Presley, and the Dalai Lama. Most religions and spiritual movements start around the lives of celebrated individuals. Two thousand years later, the Christian calendar is based on the major events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Roman Catholic Church, the person performing the central act of worship is referred to as the “celebrant.” Long before modern mass media placed entertainers on the national pedestal, Christians looked to the lives of the saints for their celebrity needs. Muslims may not revere the image of their founder, but they certainly seek to emulate the life story of the prophet Muhammad. In the East, the life journey of Siddhartha Gautama, a man born in the sixth century BCE in modern-day Nepal, defines the foundation of the practice of Buddhism. In more recent times, however, the line between religious celebrity and pop stardom has become increasingly blurred. One noteworthy example of this occurred at an event in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1990s when actress Sharon Stone took the stage to introduce the fourteenth Dalai Lama, His Holiness Tezin Gyatso, as “the hardest-working man in spirituality.”

History: Religious Figures as Celebrities

In the United States a long tradition of religious individualism and a consumerist approach to personal spirituality has only exaggerated the ancient tendency to personalize the mysterious power of the divine in celebrated individuals. During the colonial period the Boston Congregational Church minister Cotton Mather (1663–1728) was the first American preacher to gain international fame. He went down in history as the best-known American Puritan, in part because of his role in the Salem witchcraft prosecution of 1692, which stimulated widespread public excitement. While Mather was famous, he did little to foster the spirit of individualism and spiritual diversity that would come to characterize American religion and help create its celebrity culture. The colonial preacher best known for the cause of religious liberty was Roger Williams (1603–1683), the founder of the Rhode Island colony.

The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The most renowned preacher of the First Great Awakening, the Calvinist clergyman George Whitefield, established the model for modern mass evangelism. Whitefield (1714–1770) drew thousands of people to hear him preach during his seven pilgrimages to the United States. His call for a “new birth” in Jesus, his ability to ignore denominational differences, and his strategy of taking his message outside church buildings and directly to the people were to become the hallmarks of the American evangelical movement. Whitefield, an Englishman whose anti-Anglican stance made him popular in the American colonies, advertised his revivals in newspapers and advised his disciples that “the object of our measures is to gain attention.” Another celebrated preacher during this period of American religious fervor was Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), who delivered the “sermon New England would never forget,” titled “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God,” and wrote several famous treatises such as *The Nature of True Virtue*.

The next great wave of religious celebrities would come in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, as Protestant revivalists sought to counter the ideas of the Enlightenment and resist the deism of Thomas Jefferson and other leaders of the American Revolution. The best-known preacher of this Second Great Awakening was Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875), who began his career as a lawyer but wound up testifying to a soul-shaking conversion that convinced him he had “a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause.” He led revivals in the major cities of the East and in the fast-growing towns of the West. Finney developed such a personal popularity that he was forced to defend the whole idea of a religious revival led by man—rather than by God himself. “More than five thousand million have gone down to hell, while the church has been dreaming, and waiting for God to save them without the use of means,” Finney wrote.

This period of American religious history also saw the rise of religious reformers, who were reviled as much as celebrated. Chief among them was Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The story of Smith (1805–1844) is a textbook example of how starting a modern-day religion around

the life of a single person can be a mixed blessing. Smith wrote, and many Mormons believe, that God was once a man and that he and his wife, the Heavenly Mother, live near the star Kolob. Smith also preached that Jesus Christ was married. In the 1890s, the church was finally forced to renounce the most well-known of Smith's doctrines—the practice of plural marriage, or polygamy. According to historians, Smith had taken thirty-three wives by the time he was murdered by an angry mob in Carthage, Illinois, in 1844. In recent decades, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has sought to emphasize what it has in common with mainstream Christian thought, such as its belief that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin resurrected from the dead, and that humanity can be eternally saved through Christ's sacrificial death.

Mary Baker Eddy provides another example of how life struggles of a spiritual celebrity can shape the doctrines of a religious movement. Eddy (1821–1910) was often ill as young woman and found little help in the remedies of the time. She turned to Phineas P. Quimby, who used magnets and hypnotism in his healing treatments, but later developed her own ideas about faith healing, doctrines that were laid down in the Christian Science movement she founded. Another celebrated nineteenth-century woman who would influence the Spiritualist and New Age movements of the twentieth century was Elena Petrovna Gan, better known Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891), who founded the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875. During the final years of her life, Blavatsky told some of her students that the real purpose of the Theosophists was to pave the way for the return of the ultimate religious leader, a new world teacher. In 1909, her successors claimed to have found that teacher in India in the form of Jiddu Krishnamurti, a fourteen-year old boy. Krishnamurti would be raised as the new “World Teacher,” only to denounce that messianic role at age thirty-four.

Christian revivalism didn't stop at the end of the Second Great Awakening. The premier celebrity preacher of the second half of the nineteenth century was a shoe salesman from Chicago named Dwight L. Moody. In 1860, Moody (1837–1899) dedicated himself to Christian evangelism working in army camps during the Civil War and offering words of hope to families displaced and otherwise devastated by the fighting.

Moody had no theological training and only a seventh-grade education, but his simple gospel message found an eager audience in the decades following the Civil War. Newspapers devoted significant coverage to his revivals, which filled auditoriums in New York City, Chicago, and other American cities. Encouraged by wealthy contributors and powerful patrons, he founded the Moody Bible Institute and began to train a new generation of Christian revivalists who would continue the message into the twentieth century. Moody is the link between two of America's greatest Protestant religious celebrities, George Whitefield and Billy Graham.

Another Protestant minister of this period, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher of Brooklyn, New York, exemplified the growing national obsession with religious scandal and celebrity culture. Beecher (1813–1887) was a brother to writer Harriet Beecher Stowe and a preacher of enormous popularity in nineteenth-century America. In the 1840s thousands of people boarded ferries from Manhattan known as “Beecher Boats” to hear his Sunday sermons. Newspaper Stories of his alleged sexual affair with the wife of a close friend culminated in 1875 with an adultery trial that received unprecedented saturation coverage in American newspapers. The trial unleashed a media frenzy perhaps not surpassed until the 1995 murder trial of celebrity athlete and actor O.J. Simpson.

The Late Nineteenth and the Early Twentieth Century

Professional athletes were a major component of celebrity culture in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. The first man to make the crossover from the major leagues to the mission field was William Ashley Sunday, better known as Billy Sunday (1862–1935) was a popular outfielder in the National League in the 1880s and one of the league leaders in stolen bases. Following his evangelical conversion in the late 1880s, Sunday stopped drinking and partying with his teammates and started speaking before congregations and young people at local chapters of the YMCA. When his audience got too large for church halls, Sunday began erecting huge canvas tents in which to hold his revival meetings. He later erected an eighteen thousand-seat church hall, known as Billy Sunday's Tabernacle, on the corner of Broadway and

168th Street in New York City. Sunday was the nation's leading Christian celebrity in the first two decades of the twentieth century, but his popularity began to decline after World War I. Movie theaters and movie stars were offering new competition for the revival tent and the celebrity preacher. They were the first in a series of technological revolutions that changed the nature of celebrity culture in America.

Movies, radio, television, and, finally, the Internet each brought about profound changes in twentieth-century America. And those changes began with a woman named Aimee Semple McPherson. Decades before such televangelists as Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, and Jim and Tammy Bakker started mixing show business and conservative Christianity, this pioneering Pentecostal preacher and radio evangelist presided over the lavish opening of her 5,300-seat Angelus Temple in southern California. Just as with other celebrities then and now, her reputation was built up and torn down by a news media hungry for scandal and sensation. Born to a farmer father and mother who worked for the Salvation Army, McPherson (1890–1944) was raised in the desolate countryside of Ontario, Canada. As a young girl, she found her salvation in an Irish immigrant and fiery preacher named Robert Semple. The couple was swept up in a revival that was just gathering steam in towns and cities across North America. The revival sparked the modern Pentecostal movement, a lively style of Christian worship that stresses faith healing, prophecy, speaking in tongues, and a literalist approach to the Bible. They married in 1908 and two years later took off on a mission to China, but within months of their arrival Robert contracted malaria and died. Looking for security, Aimee married businessman Harold McPherson. She gave birth to a son, but it was not a happy marriage.

During World War I, McPherson crisscrossed America in a “Gospel Car” painted with the slogan, “Where will you spend eternity?” By the 1920s she was a famous faith healer filling auditoriums in Denver, San Diego, and other cities. Her giant Angelus Temple soon rose at Sunset and Glendale boulevards, just down the road from Hollywood. The huge church, described by one visitor as “half like a Roman Coliseum, half like a Parisian Opera House,” became one of the city's premier tourist attractions. It was topped with a giant radio

tower—that sent McPherson's sermons and speeches across southern California. The evangelist's most notorious exploit came in the spring of 1926 when she suddenly vanished while swimming at Venice Beach. Her disappearance and feared death by drowning set off media speculation that only continued to build after she mysteriously reappeared five weeks later in Mexico, amid rumors that she had escaped to have an amorous affair. But by the end of the twentieth century, the religious denomination McPherson founded, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, had more than 1,850 U.S. congregations and more than 238,000 members.

McPherson was at her peak in the summer of 1925, when the nation was gripped by one of the watersheds of American cultural history. In Dayton, Tennessee, celebrity attorneys Clarence Darrow (1857–1938) and William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925) faced off in the landmark “monkey trial,” in which high school teacher John Scopes was prosecuted for violating a state law that prohibited teaching the theory of evolution. Reporters from across the country descended on Dayton for an event that would define a cultural split between the secular forces of modernism and the waves of religious revivalism that periodically sweep across the United States. This same religious and political divide would persist into the next century, separating the country into a nation of “red states” and “blue states.”

Radio and television were also the media that turned two Roman Catholic priests into national celebrities in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Father Charles Coughlin (1891–1979) was one of the first North American clergymen to use radio to preach a political message, including commentary that was widely viewed as anti-Semitic. Bishop Fulton Sheen (1895–1979) was a television pioneer with his *Life Is Worth Living* show in the early 1950s, which continued in various forms well into the 1960s. Coughlin and Sheen paved the way for an American-born nun Rita Antoinette Rizzo, later known as Mother Angelica (1923–), to viewers of her Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN).

“Living” Saints: Billy Graham, John Paul II, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Perhaps no religious celebrity in twentieth-century America has had as much fame and impact as William

Franklin Graham. During that century, Billy Graham probably preached to more people than anyone in the history of the world. Graham's television broadcasts have been viewed by hundreds of millions of people around the world, and millions more have personally witnessed his Christian crusades at massive revival meetings, from Aarhus, Denmark, to Azagorsk, Russia. Graham (1918–) was born on a dairy farm in North Carolina to Scottish Irish parents but was “born again” at a revival meeting sixteen years later. His evangelical career took off in 1944, when Graham, then a young suburban pastor and budding radio evangelist, was invited to speak at the 3,400-seat Orchestra Hall in Chicago before young servicemen from the adjacent USO.

Graham got his first big boost from newspaper czar William Randolph Hearst. Impressed by Graham's anticommunism and strong moral values, Hearst reportedly told his editors to “puff Graham.” And they did, running glowing full-page stories about the young preacher in all twenty-two papers of the Hearst chain. During the 1950s Graham was an early supporter of the civil rights movement and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. That cost him some southern support but improved his reputation among African Americans and the mainstream media. Graham was famous as the pastor to American presidents, and his closest and most controversial political tie was to Richard Nixon. While officially neutral, Graham was a behind-the-scenes force in Nixon's 1960 campaign against John Kennedy, whose Catholicism worried many American evangelicals, and he also dropped clear hints in his support of Nixon's successful 1968 presidential run. Graham stuck by Nixon during much of the Watergate scandal, only to be embarrassed later by the expletive-filled audiotapes secretly recorded in the Oval Office.

In the 1980s Graham remained untouched by the sex-and-money scandals that disgraced a series of major TV evangelists, and he was a strong voice for greater financial accountability in evangelical ministry. His unparalleled popularity landed him on the Gallup Poll's list of “10 Most Admired Men in the World” more than forty times in the last half of the twentieth century. Graham often shared that list with another religious leader who was not born in the United States but whose American pilgrimages drew millions of Roman Catholic spectators and communicants.

Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) presided over a twenty-six-year papacy, in which he played a critical role in the downfall of communism and promoted traditional moral values as an alternative to the materialism of the West. Born as Karol Jozef Wojtyla in Wadowice, Poland, John Paul II had Eastern European roots that would define his pontificate, the second longest after Pope Pius IX, who served from 1846 to 1878. Wojtyla was elected pope in 1978, survived a would-be assassin's bullet in the early years of his pontification and pushed onward to become the most-traveled pontiff ever, beginning with his first trip to Mexico in January 1979. Like former president Ronald Reagan, John Paul II was a former actor and charismatic speaker, someone who understood the power of television. His foreign tours including five highly publicized visits to the United States featured parades in his bulletproof “pope-mobile” and out door masses attended by millions of worshipers. The pope and his tour managers were masters of the photo opportunity, and images of the pope holding a koala bear in Australia, hugging a young AIDS patient in San Francisco, and kissing airport tarmacs around the world were deeply etched in the public mind.

One of the few religious celebrities who could compete with the pope for public renown and respect was another Catholic personality, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. During the last two decades of her life, the diminutive Catholic nun appeared nineteen times on the Gallup Poll of women most admired by the American public. Mother Teresa (1910–1997) was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in the summer of 1910 in Skopje, Macedonia. At age eighteen, she joined the Loreto Sisters, a Catholic religious order, and traveled to Ireland and Darjeeling, India. The journey to India began a second conversion in the young nun, who started her own religious order there, the Missionaries of Charity, and devoted herself to compassionate aid for the “poorest of the poor.” Unlike many celebrities, religious or otherwise Mother Teresa did not seek the spotlight. The tireless nun first gained international attention in the 1960s, when she was discovered by the British author and filmmaker Malcolm Muggeridge.

In 1979 she achieved worldwide fame when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her decades of work with ill and dying people in India and around the world. Even after those accolades, Mother Teresa shunned

publicity and down played her accomplishments. To avoid the media spotlight, she would often slip unnoticed into San Francisco to visit her main U.S. convent, where between eighty and one hundred sisters quietly prepared for religious life. Yet it was Mother Teresa's renown that made her Missionaries of Charity the most successful Roman Catholic religious order of the late twentieth century. At a time when many Catholic orders were in rapid decline, the Missionaries of Charity grew swiftly around the world, attracting thousands of idealistic young converts. In the process the wrinkled face and soulful eyes of Mother Teresa became synonymous with religious devotion and selfless charity.

Decades before her death, Catholics and non-Catholics alike began calling Mother Teresa "a living saint." The wheels of the official Roman Catholic process towards sainthood began to turn on September 5, 1997, the day of her death. Long before the days of television, People magazine, and celebrity Web sites, religious leaders were selected by a painstaking process undertaken in Rome at the offices of the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints. But in the case of Mother Teresa, the process of sainthood had already begun. Over his long papacy, Pope John Paul II canonized more than 470 saints and beatified 1,280 candidates as "blessed," more than the combined totals of all his predecessors over the past four hundred years. Saints had almost gone out of style in the 1960s. Pope John XXIII, the pontiff who inaugurated the great liberal reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), canonized only 10 of them and beatified 4 candidates during his five years in office. Many church leaders at the time saw Catholic saints—and the miracles performed in their name—as outdated or superstitious remnants from another era. John Paul II and Mother Teresa pushed sainthood back to the center of church life, but not all Catholics saw this as a sign of healthy faith. They complained that the number of canonizations by Rome lacked proper skepticism and represented a resurgent form of personal piety in the Catholic Church. Perhaps the same can be said for the larger rise of celebrity culture in American religion. There is a downside to focusing on individual personalities and choosing religious leaders because they are photogenic or "great communicators." Both the mystical piety of the Polish pope and the good deeds of the late Calcutta

nun were a move towards seeing the church as an agent of social transformation. Celebrity religion can rise at the expense of more complex questions of systematic poverty and social injustice.

Televangelism and Celebrity: Oral Roberts and the Bakkers

Most of Pope John Paul II's televised images were in the form of news coverage provided at no charge by the mainstream media. Television, in the form of paid programming and dedicated cable networks, was the key force in the rise of the major Protestant media celebrities in the last half of the twentieth century. One pioneer in that field was Oral Roberts (1918- 2009), an Oklahoma faith healer who built his *Expect a Miracle* show into the top-rated religious television program of the 1970s. But another religious broadcaster would soon eclipse Roberts. Robert Schuller (1927–) came to southern California with his wife in 1955, right out of his seminary education in Chicago, and began preaching sermons atop the snack bar at the Orange drive-in theater in Garden Grove, as members of the congregation remained in their cars. Schuller was an ordained minister in the Dutch Reform Church, but his message was a hopeful "You can do it" proclamation, heavily influenced by the Positive Thinking ideas of Norman Vincent Peale.

It was a message that thousands of other displaced Midwesterners who had broken ties with churches back home were ready to hear. Two decades later, Schuller began building the Crystal Cathedral, a star-shaped, reflective glass church, television studio, and performance hall designed by architect Philip Johnson. Celebrity religion is all about glitz, and the Crystal Cathedral was certainly glitzy. But television, with its enormous power to provide an audience and financial base, creates a kind of church without walls. Schuller's cathedral is not unlike the modern stadium in a sports world dominated by television. Schuller's church provided the set for his Hour of Power television show, which began in 1970 and grew to become the most watched one-hour church service in the United States, with some twenty million viewers.

Schuller's show was seen in many parts of the country on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), which was founded in 1973 by two couples, Paul and Jan Crouch

and Jim and Tammy Bakker, and grew to be the largest Christian television network in the world. Crouch and his wife, famous for her towering bouffant hairdo, presided over an eclectic three-ring circus of Christian pop music, soap operas, aerobics classes, and other programming that unapologetically mixed celebrity glitz and gospel message. More traditional evangelicals have condemned the network for its promotion of the “prosperity gospel,” the idea that living a Christian life (and contributing financially) will inspire material success. Two of the network’s biggest stars, Jim and Tammy Bakker, split off to form their own operation, the Praise the Lord (PTN) network, which would collapse in 1987 in a scandal over embezzlement and sexual harassment. Their downfall—part of a series of televangelism scandals in the 1980s that also brought down the fiery TV preacher Jimmy Swaggart—revealed the shadowy side of celebrity Christianity and the fact that fame and fortune can be a double-edged sword. It also generated a firestorm of media attention in the 1980s, a journalistic free-for-all reminiscent of the newspaper coverage of the Scopes monkey trial back in the steamy summer of 1925.

Jim and Tammy were unapologetic in preaching a prosperity gospel, and they had their own rags-to-riches lives to offer up as testimony. They liked to say, “God wants his people to go first-class,” which is exactly what they did with their purchase of luxury cars and lavish homes. On a 2,300-acre pasture in the heart of the Bible Belt, in Fort Mill, South Carolina, the Bakkers built Heritage Village USA, a condo development and Christian theme park. It was also the site for the state-of-the-art television studio from which they broadcast their evangelical variety show, *The PTL Club*, which was seen by millions of viewers. Many of those viewers were “prayer partners” who sent in contributions, and during a two-year period in the 1980s, some \$200 million poured in.

It all collapsed after Jim Bakker’s March 1987 confession to a 1980 sexual encounter with church secretary Jessica Hahn, who went on to appear topless in the November 1987 edition of *Playboy* magazine. The Bakkers’ fall from grace was the perfect storm of consumerism, politics, Christianity, and celebrity culture. Before their downfall, President Ronald Reagan,

himself a former show business celebrity, invited the couple to his first inaugural and praised their television network for “carrying out a master plan for people that love.”

Jim and Tammy Bakker also partnered with another powerful televangelist, Pat Robertson (1930–), and with his Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). In fact, the couple began their Christian show business career in 1966 by staging a children’s puppet show on Robertson’s fledgling network. Robertson’s Christian talk show, *The 700 Club* was to Christian celebrities what the *Tonight Show* was to secular stars. Robertson was long active in Republican Party politics and made an unsuccessful run for that party’s presidential nomination in 1988. But it was another televangelist who first mobilized evangelical voters into a force powerful enough to sway presidential elections, the Reverend Jerry Falwell (1933–2007) and his Moral Majority. Founded in 1979 and credited with helping to bring Ronald Reagan into the White House, the Moral Majority mobilized a new political base with cable television, sophisticated direct-mail techniques, and emotional attacks on his *Old Time Gospel Hour* television show against legalized abortion, gay rights and other causes. Robertson and Falwell illustrate another side of celebrity Christianity: their fame focused national media attention on them, which inspired the mainstream media to promulgate a series of controversial statements that eventually soured their reputations with many voters.

In the 1990s, Robertson and Falwell were overshadowed by James Dobson, another Christian celebrity and political power broker. Dobson (1936–), a conservative Christian psychologist and radio talk show host, had already been spreading his views on abortion, marriage, and child rearing for more than two decades. His views were broadcast from 2,500 radio stations across North America and 3,000 other outlets around the world. Most of those who contacted his Colorado City-based ministry were not seeking advice on how to vote in the presidential primary. The majority who called in to his *Focus on the Family* show were filing prayer requests or ordering merchandise from Dobson’s extensive catalog of books, magazines, videotapes, and audiocassettes on how to save marriages, stay off drugs, avoid fornication, and find Jesus. By the middle of the

1990s his sophisticated telephone marketing system handled nearly four thousand calls and eleven thousand letters a day.

Complementing the radio ministry of Dobson has been the rise of “Christian radio” and its own brand of celebrities: Christian music artists. Christian rock dates back to the 1960s, but it became more popular in the 1990s. That was the decade when Billy Graham—who once condemned rock and roll as Satan’s music—started asking Christian rock bands to warm up the crowds at his youth crusades. Graham drew tens of thousands of Christian rock fans to his crusades by booking Jars of Clay and DC-Talk, two of the most popular Christian rock bands at that time. These and other evangelical rock bands helped propel “Contemporary Christian” music to sell more than forty-four million albums in 2000, making it the sixth-best-selling genre in the “United States, ahead of jazz, classical, and new age combined.

Celebrities as Religious Promoters: The Beatles, Richard Gere, and Scientologists

Christians were not the only religionists to tap into the power of celebrity culture in the 1960s. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917- 2008) began teaching transcendental meditation in India in 1955 and brought the technique to the United States in 1959. But his big break came in 1967, when the Beatles rock band—at the height of their popularity—attended one of his lectures in Wales in 1967 and visited his ashram in India in 1968, along with Donovan, another rock Star. The Beatles soon lost interest. There was a falling out between the Maharishi and the rock band amid rumors that the bearded guru had made inappropriate advances on actress Mia Farrow. John Lennon even wrote a song about the affair, “Sexy Sadie,” in which he promised that the Maharishi would “get yours yet.” But the image of the meditation teacher dressed in white and surrounded by four smiling young Beatles stuck in the public mind and helped inspire hundreds of thousands of young American spiritual seekers to explore the mysteries of Eastern religion.

Another Beatle, George Harrison, was the real “spiritual” Beatle. Not coincidentally, he was also the first member of the band to take the psychedelic drug LSD in 1964, when he was just twenty-one years old. He later credited that experience with giving him a

powerful glimpse into another realm of consciousness, an awareness he would cultivate for the rest of his life through chanting and meditation. Harrison went on to study with another Indian guru, the late Swami Srila Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, better known as the Hare Krishna movement. Both the Maharishi and Prabhupada popularized specific types of Hindu religious practice. Maharishi stressed a simple form of silent meditation, while Krishna devotees were known for their shaved heads and chanting. Harrison remained devoted to Krishna, one of the central gods in the Hindu pantheon. Krishna is seen as the incarnation of divine love and beauty, and he is known for his quality of playfulness. “My life belongs to the Lord Krishna,” Harrison said in 1974. His 1970 No. 1 hit, “My Sweet Lord,” started out chanting the more familiar prayer of “Hallelujah,” then subtly switched to “Hare Krishna.”

The Beatles’ endorsement of Maharishi was short-lived, but it had a huge effect on the West’s new openness to the religious practices of India and the Far East. Of course, many other factors contributed to this East-meets-West religious syncretism, most notably a loosening of immigration restrictions that allowed a steady stream of Indian gurus, Tibetan monks, and Japanese Zen masters to come to the United States. But the massive popularity of the Beatles among the baby boom generation greatly amplified the impact of the Beatles’ journey. The rock band’s spiritual search was also reflected in the writings and drug-induced revelations of John Lennon. His reading of a seminal book of the sixties drug culture, *The Psychedelic Experience*, first inspired the band’s mystical shift with the song “Tomorrow Never Knows.” Like the book, coauthored in 1964 by Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and Ralph Metzner, the song was inspired by the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a classic Buddhist text. The song appeared on the 1966 album *Revolver*, prefiguring the release of the band’s landmark tribute to the psychedelic sixties, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which included the group’s tribute to LSD, the song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” Leary, known as the “high priest of LSD,” and Alpert, who took his own journey to India and returned as Baba Ram Dass, achieved celebrity status themselves in the 1960s and 1970s. Alpert’s religious conversion to a devotional Hindu practice, chronicled

in his seminal book *Be Here Now*, furthered the pop culture shift to the exotic mysticism of the East.

Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, celebrities played a large role in helping popularize another ancient Indian religion, Buddhism. The best-known “celebrity Buddhist” to emerge during this period was actor Richard Gere, who was best remembered for his role opposite Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, and his 1999 selection by that bible of celebrity gossip, *People* magazine, as the sexiest man alive. Gere may have been a “celebrity Buddhist,” but he is also a serious, longtime practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. Gere first became interested in Buddhism during an existential crisis in his twenties. He studied under Zen teacher Sasaki Roshi before becoming a student in the 1980s of Tenzin Gyatso (1935–), the 14th Dalai Lama. Since then Gere has devoted much of his energies to the campaign to preserve the Buddhist culture of Tibet and oppose Chinese efforts to weaken the faith of that ancient seat of Buddhist learning. At the same time, the Dalai Lama hardly needed Hollywood stars to promote the Tibetan cause, especially since winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. For the next twenty years, the Dalai Lama’s infectious giggles, self-deprecating humor, and spiritual addresses turned him into one of the world’s premier religious celebrities, right beside Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Pope John Paul II. Tickets for the Dalai Lama’s appearances were sold on the same Web sites used to promote rock concerts and sporting events.

Better-known new religious movements also have benefited from celebrity endorsement, most notably the Church of Scientology International. Founded in the 1950s by L. Ron Hubbard (1911-1986), a prolific science fiction writer and freelance philosopher, Scientology describes itself as “the only major new religion established in the 20th century” as a bridge to increased awareness and spiritual freedom. Scientology is based on the precepts of Hubbard 1950 book, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*. Practitioners at Scientology centers around the world hook themselves up to a simple electric device, an “e-meter,” for “auditing” sessions that purport to measure thoughts and emotional reactions, known in Scientology parlance as “engrams.” Their goal is to attain a psychological and spiritual state called “clear,” where they are said to overcome compulsions, repressions, and other self-generated

diseases and psychoses. “Clears” are then sold advanced training sessions to become “operating thetans,” spiritual beings said to possess such supernatural powers as the ability to leave their bodies. Scientologists purchasing 12.5 hours of advanced auditing, for example, were asked (in February 2001) to make a “donation” of between \$12,100 and \$15,125. Graduates purportedly achieve “a new viewpoint of sanity and rationality.” From the beginning Hubbard encouraged his followers to actively recruit show business celebrities. In a directive issued in early 1955, Hubbard started “Project Celebrity” with a long list of movie stars to be courted, including Groucho Marx, Liberace, and Orson Wells. The church had little initial success in celebrity recruitment but decades later brought into its ranks two of Hollywood’s most bankable actors, John Travolta and Tom Cruise. In 2004, Scientology leader David Miscavige expressed his appreciation of Cruise’s work to promote the movement by awarding the actor the organization’s 20th Anniversary Freedom Medal of Valor.

In the early 1970s the church purchased one of Hollywood’s most distinctive buildings, a turreted castle on three acres of formal gardens originally built as the Chateau Elysee, a long-term residential hotel for movie stars. The church turned the building into its Celebrity Centre. It includes an exclusive hotel and restaurant described as “a safe environment for Celebrities and Scientologists.” Travolta has personally endorsed the food and service and has appeared on the cover of a Scientology magazine titled *Celebrity*. In 2000, Travolta released the film *Battliefeld Earth*, which was a screen homage, with a \$90 million budget, to one of L. Ron Hubbard’s science fiction stories. To promote the film, Travolta appeared in bookstores signing copies of Hubbard’s book, but the film failed at the box office.

Celebrities as Religious Figures

While some religious figures became celebrities and others endorsed a religion or spiritual movement, devotion to some celebrities, such as Elvis Presley, took on quasi-religious dimensions. Even in life, Presley (1935–1977) was known as “The King,” and he continued to defy death through countless “Elvis sightings” and celebrity impersonations. Numerous shrines have arisen, including the 24 Hour Church of Elvis, which began as an art project in Portland, Oregon,

less than a decade after Presley's death. Churches and new religious movements have arisen around the lives of other famous musicians, as well; included among them are the Saint John Coltrane Church in San Francisco and the short-lived Church of Unlimited Devotion, a hippie cult that saw Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia as an avatar of God.

Future Prospects

In the twenty-first century American religion and celebrity culture continues an exchange that began in the eighteenth century with George Whitefield taking out newspaper advertisements for his Christian revivals and continued into the new millennium with such Hollywood stars as Sharon Stone and Richard Gere promoting the Dalai Lama. Celebrity culture has no single effect on American religion. In some cases celebrity endorsements allow the promotion of minority faiths and exotic spiritualities—for example, the Beatles' pilgrimage to India or the decision by pop icon Madonna to embrace Jewish mysticism. In others the rise of religious celebrities such as Mother Teresa can inspire a return to more traditional forms of Christian piety. Celebrity fame is by its very nature, ephemeral, while religious belief to be long-lasting. Cable television can raise up religious celebrities—for instance, Jim and Tammy Bakker—and then destroy them with saturation coverage of the latest sex-and-money scandal. Over the past three centuries, technological innovations in mass communication (newspapers, film, and television) have offered new ways to bring celebrity culture into religious life. That trend will no doubt continue as computers and the Internet reshape the way Americans view themselves, society, and perhaps even their religious beliefs, practices, and communities.

See also *Buddhism in North America; Canada: Protestants and the United Church of Canada; Devotionalism; Electronic Church; Film; Great Awakening(s); Internet; Krishna Consciousness; Music: Christian; Popular Religion and Popular Culture* entries; *Radio; Revivalism* entries; *Scientology; Television*.

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