

“The Jesus Experience: Christianity Around the World”

“The Jesus Experience” is more than a collection of how cultures have painted Jesus, though it is certainly that. It’s also a look at how humans, claiming Jesus as their own, have acted. These stories inspire and insult, impress and embarrass.

So says Harvard Divinity School Professor Harvey Cox in a new documentary called “The Jesus Experience,” which does two things simultaneously: It presents other cultures’ experience of Jesus, and in so doing gives the viewer a new experience of the figure who transformed the world.

This aptly named documentary series from Paulist Productions, a ministry of the Paulist Fathers, begins airing on the Hallmark Channel Sunday, March 9 at noon ET. The eight-part series is also available on DVD and VHS (only six parts will air on Hallmark).

The documentary examines Jesus in the Roman Empire, early Europe, modern Europe, Latin America, North America, Asia, Africa and among the Slavs. It crafts a mosaic of how people across the globe have embraced and rejected Jesus Christ individually and collectively as savior.

The project, over two years in production, features hundreds of photographs, paintings and etchings, as well as re-enactments and archival film footage. Segments are narrated by familiar showbiz personalities, including Jane Seymour

and Mike Farrell, and are punctuated by interviews with leading scholars and spiritual leaders.

They include: Karen Armstrong, author of *A History of God*; John Stackhouse of Regent College; George Marsden of Notre Dame; and Deepak Chopra, a pioneer in mind-body medicine.

The documentary sparkles not because it presents straightforward facts like Constantine's conversion at the Milvian Bridge, but because it cuts to the heart of their meanings.

Thus, when Constantine's conversion changed Christianity from a persecuted to a persecuting religion, "Christianity also lost something," Karen Armstrong interjects. "It became powerful." The global perspective and broad thinking of this documentary shine through, as it doesn't swallow the notion that being "powerful" is ipso facto preferred.

Christianity's assumption of institutional behavior meant a loss of its subversive edge and minority status. The dynamics of institutionalization and subversion will, as the documentary subtly conveys, animate the Christian religion.

By now, most western Christians have at least heard that not all Christians picture Christ the way we do. But it's one thing to acknowledge that fact and another thing to let global images—culturally defined, unique, personal images—of Jesus wash across your screen for an extended period of time.

Jesus is painted, sculpted, engraved, discussed, considered and written about as a shepherd, conqueror, king, guru, holy man, thinker, doer, punisher, mystic, radical, rebel, martyr, patron, healer, protector.

The unique conditions of each time and space helped shape “the Jesus experience” for individuals and groups all over the planet, creating a far richer Christianity than most of us have dared suppose.

Viewers encounter dozens of important historical figures, though not all names are part of the American Christian lexicon. For every Gandhi, there’s a Pandita Ramabai, and for each Billy Graham, a John Sung.

“The Jesus Experience” is more than a collection of how cultures have painted Jesus, though it is certainly that. It’s also a look at how humans, claiming Jesus as their own, have acted. These stories inspire and insult, impress and embarrass.

The documentary never turns heavy-handed or preachy. Instead, it allows scholars and leaders to comment on trends and tendencies in the religion that now claims 2 billion adherents.

Interesting tidbits are strewn throughout: Bonhoeffer promoting a “religionless Christianity”; Tolstoy writing to Gandhi; the Cherokee translation of Jesus as “friend” in Psalm 23; and the incredible life story of John Sung.

Viewers will be struck by various accounts of Christians sticking to the faith, even to the point of death or physical persecution—as opposed to the type that some American Christians want to claim for themselves.

This documentary series has earned its minutes. It’s appealing because it tucks Christianity’s specific expressions inside the expanse of God’s kingdom.

Because “The Jesus Experience” takes on the world’s largest religion, it does no more than paint broad strokes. But because that religion stemmed from a man who simply said “Follow me,” even these broad strokes betray amazingly fine lines.

Cliff Vaughn is associate director for EthicsDaily.com.