

The Jesus Fish: Evolution of a Cultural Icon

In the early third century, C.E., the North African lawyer and Christian apologist Tertullian published his work *On Baptism*, which included the following lines: “But we, little fishes, after the example of our ΙΧΘΥΣ Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water”(Tertullian 3). Tertullian’s observation is quite possibly the first Christian pop culture reference. At the very least, it likely marks the first time the street-level graffiti of a persecuted religious movement made its way into a theological treatise. The image of the ΙΧΘΥΣ carried rhetorical weight for Tertullian and his readers due to its familiarity within Christian circles. For modern-day evangelists, humorists, social theorists, and road-trippers, the prevalence of this icon has not abated, but merely assumed new forms. In the two millennia since the image first appeared, this crude likeness of an ancient Mediterranean dietary staple has undergone a cultural evolution, provoking myriad responses along the way. It has inspired everything from pious devotion to irreverent parody to a utilitarian appropriation for a bizarre but deafening ideological discourse carried out, to a large extent, on the bumpers of cars and trucks on America’s highways.

The ΙΧΘΥΣ, hereafter referred to as “the Jesus fish,” was an important sign in the apostolic age, when Christians were a minority sect in the midst of the Roman Empire. The sign consisted of two elements, which did not always appear together. The first was a picture, a simple representation of a fish formed by joining two arcs, often traced in the sand of a village

street or carved into the walls of an underground meeting place. The second element was the acrostic, ΙΧΘΥΣ. This word, translated as “fish” in Greek, can also be designated to stand for “Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτὴρ: Jesus Christ, son of God, Savior.” The fish had long been perceived as a sacred image within pagan religious systems. Franz Cumont, among others, sees the adoption of the fish image as evidence of the influence of other religious cultures on Christianity, particularly that of the Syrians, who considered eating fish taboo because of its associations with divinity (Stroumsa 200). As a largely Jewish movement in its earliest years, Christianity would have also drawn on the Jonah narrative in the Hebrew scriptures as a parallel to their own stories about Jesus’ death and resurrection (Stroumsa 201). Finally, the fact that those in the early Church encountered an abundance of fishing narratives in the gospels, including Christ’s invitation to become “fishers of men,” (Chadwick 56) would have further motivated them to make this image their own.

Believers in the nascent Church employed the icon in a variety of ways. For some the fish was possibly a secret code, used to identify themselves quietly to fellow Christians in a world hostile to their convictions. For others, it was simply a quick, formulaic way to express one of their core beliefs, the high Christology that separated Christianity from other religious movements in the Empire. For still others, tracing or drawing the fish made a political statement, leveling a subversive jab at the Roman emperors’ claims to divinity. If a Jewish carpenter’s son and friend of fishermen was the divine offspring of God, as this graffito declared he was, then Caesar, the enemy of the Church, wouldn’t be likely to share in the heavenly throne, and divine justice would one day be visited upon those in power. Thus we find, in the earliest displays of this icon, an anticipation of the motives embodied in its usage in a contemporary context—as a badge of identification, a method of evangelism, and a tool for polemic against the prevailing culture.

During the first four centuries of the Church’s existence, even as Christianity moved up from the catacombs and into the public square, the image of the fish continued to flourish, appearing on family seals and funerary monuments, in sacred works of art, and in treatises on the Eucharist and the heavenly banquet that awaits the faithful (Hassett). Gradually, however, the fish waned in popularity and yielded its place in the iconographic vocabulary

to such images as the cross, the dove, and the sheep. In the 1909 edition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Maurice M. Hassett remarked that “After the fourth century, the symbolism of the fish gradually disappeared,” and that any occurrence of the fish in Christian art or iconography following this period was purely ornamental in nature (Hassett).

Hassett was likely not alone in assuming that the fish sign had become little more than an interesting encyclopedia entry, a memory of an ancient past when Caesar sat on the throne and persecution was an everyday threat. Few historians would have predicted the resurrection of this image as a Christian icon in the late 20th century. Fewer still would have ventured to predict the various transformations this image would undergo on its way to becoming a cultural phenomenon, proudly displayed not just on t-shirts and car bumpers, but also on public property and in television comedies, internet videos, and other popular and viral forms of media.

The search for a missing link in this story of transformation, a piece that might help us to connect a first-century drawing with its twentieth century offspring, takes us to Sydney, Australia, in the 1960’s. The Vietnam War was raging, student unrest was rising, and groups of Evangelical Christian students were growing in their awareness of anti-Church sentiment on their campuses. The Evangelical Union at Sydney University, in an attempt to stem this tide, eagerly sought a new sign that might identify them as Christians. They wanted to use an image that was distinctly Christian but unfamiliar to the general public, in order to prompt curious questions and to deepen the conversation. Like their first century forebears, the group chose to identify themselves with the fish and began displaying the image in various places on campus. In a guerilla-style promotional campaign, students drew fish outlines on the pavement with chalk, pasted multicolored prints of the fish in stairways, and managed to pique the curiosity of other students unaccustomed to seeing the image in a religious setting.

Because of the success of the Sydney campaign, other groups of Evangelical Christian students throughout Australia adopted and disseminated the image on their own campuses. A group from the University of Queensland became the first to take the image on the road. Attending the Aquarius music festival in May of 1973, they used the image of the fish to identify themselves, displaying it in the rear windows of their vans. Shortly thereafter, other groups

of Christians began to display the fish in the rear windows of their vehicles as well, and the image was soon affixed to automobiles not just in Australia, but around the world (Rives).

The proliferation of the Jesus fish image in the United States took off in the 1980's (Yoon, "Unexpected"). Ronald Reagan was in the White House, the Religious Right was an ascending power on the national political scene, and the "culture wars" were heating up. Far from being persecuted as a renegade sect, as in the first century, Evangelical Christians in America were enjoying a time of influence and relative prosperity. Paradoxically, even as they were gaining a place at the table and making more extensive forays into the corridors of power, many adopted a worldview that divided culture into categories of "us" and "them." Rehearsing the stories of the past, segments of the Church began to rediscover a history of persecution and to perceive themselves as an oppressed minority, one whose constitutional rights were eroding with every decision of the high court or every act of Congress. When this martyr mentality was joined with a desire to spread the message of the faith and to bring salvation to the masses, the resulting religious environment was one marked by intensity and urgency.

That members of the Church would begin applying the fish icon to their cars is not surprising. In car-crazy America, bumper stickers are one of the most available and most popular forums for the exchange of ideas. In a culture in which people are generally too busy or distracted to engage in real conversation, such stickers are sometimes the most effective form of discourse—bite-sized wisdom, with just a touch of humor or gravitas, which can be read in the time spent waiting for a traffic light to change. The Jesus fish takes this method one step further. Because it is a purely visual icon, it dispenses with the need for words. Its sleek appearance allows it to blend into the metallic design of any car seamlessly, so that at first glance it might appear to be a part of the car itself or an insignia applied by the designer. This makes the image less ostentatious and therefore more subversive than a bumper sticker espousing the virtues of a presidential ticket or an activist position would be. And so the fish, once used to identify early Christians to one another and to protect them from persecution as they passed through a busy marketplace, became for late twentieth-century Evangelicals a badge of faith as well as a tool that allowed them to spread their message of salvation

in Christ without having to leave their minivans or hatchbacks.

The back of a car, however, is not the only context in which one might find the Jesus fish. In keeping with a growing trend toward the marketing and merchandising of Christian paraphernalia for pious consumers, the image has also appeared on T-shirts, jewelry, and coffee mugs. In at least one case, the ΙΧΘΥΣ has even appeared on a municipal seal. In July of 1999, an observer of the Wiccan faith brought a lawsuit against the town of Republic, Missouri, which had exhibited the image of an ΙΧΘΥΣ on public buildings, structures, and property, such as water towers and official letterhead. The suit maintained that the city's use of the image made citizens who were not Christians feel like outsiders (Goodstein). The Missouri lawsuit was not the only indication that those outside the Church might respond in negative ways to the ubiquity of the sacred fish. Much like their spiritual ancestors, those members of the Church who proudly sport the Jesus fish on their vehicles have faced a fair amount of persecution, although not of the sort one reads about in Church history books. While drivers displaying Jesus fish will no longer face death in the coliseum or crucifixion outside the city gates, they have managed to provoke a sharp and often witty response from those who perceive this type of evangelism as so much self-righteous grandstanding. As with most cultural phenomena, especially those marked with the deadly quality of earnestness, it didn't take long for the Jesus fish to become fodder for humorists looking for an edgy but effective way to ridicule a group of people sometimes accused of taking itself too seriously.

Over the course of the next two decades, the Jesus fish began to crop up as a cultural footnote in a variety of media. Because of its connection to Evangelical Christianity, the faith of Tammy Faye Bakker and Ned Flanders, comedic references to the Jesus fish found a home among the irreverent humor of television series and comic strips like *Futurama*, *My Name is Earl*, and *The Far Side* (McKenna). In these contexts, the Jesus fish signified, in the service of comedy, the type of eager religious devotee with whom nearly every American shares a cubicle or a cul-de-sac. In modern America, a land of religious and ideological pluralism, the Jesus fish had been employed by the Evangelical subculture to denote membership in a kind of club. Ironically referencing or otherwise ridiculing the image provided a mode of expression for those left out. In the summer of 2006, the Jesus fish was even awarded

a starring role in its own show—albeit on the internet. An animated short appeared on SpikeTV.com entitled “The Adventures of Jesus Fish.” The inaugural episode introduced viewers to Jesus Fish, an ΙΧΘΥΣ sign with father issues called upon by his slacker friends, who are also fish, to turn water into wine. Fed up with having his powers exploited whenever his friends need a buzz, Jesus Fish transforms the ocean they call home into something resembling animated pinot noir, and then watches in passive delight as his friends drink themselves to death (*Adventures of Jesus Fish*). The narrative in this short film might not have presented the most accurate portrayal of the Jesus ethos, but it certainly resonated with those who think that his followers should lighten up.

A starring role in an internet cartoon might be a sign that an image is popular, but the most widely viewed reference to a Jesus fish sign had occurred several years earlier, when the image appeared as a central plot point on the most watched television show in America. When a 1998 episode of *Seinfeld* entitled “The Burning” referenced the Jesus fish as part of a story line, it became evident that this image was no longer from the esoteric provenance of a minority group, but had instead assumed the status of a cultural icon. In the episode, Elaine’s suspicions that her boyfriend, David Puddy, has converted to Christianity are confirmed when she finds a Jesus fish attached to the back of his car. Elaine responds by doing what many have desired but few have dared: she steals the fish as an act of protest. When Puddy informs Elaine that she is going to hell for her theft, his response exemplifies the narrow-mindedness that many observers already believe to be true about those who would advertise their faith by means of a silver fish on their bumper (Crittenden).

Elaine, it seems, is not alone in her seemingly rash impulse to pilfer Puddy’s fish emblem. The practice of “Jesus fishing,” which involves clandestinely removing the images from the bumpers of cars, has gained something of a following and has the potential to become the urban equivalent of cow tipping, a guilty pleasure that will certainly not remain underground for long (Forumer). But brazen theft is just one of the many aggressive responses that the Jesus fish has provoked from the irritated masses. Parody has proven to be a far more prevalent and effective way of answering the Jesus fish gospel. Although most information surrounding the birth of the Jesus fish parody

tends to be controversial and apocryphal, it seems likely that the first parodies began appearing shortly after the first Jesus fish showed up on American cars. In the mid-1980's, as one creation story goes, designer Chris Gilman, determined to find a secularist or naturalist equivalent to the Jesus fish he saw on the road, crafted a Jesus fish with feet to evoke Darwin's theory of evolution. Gilman's friends loved the representation, and within a few years the germ of an idea had evolved into a cottage industry. Today, through companies like Ring of Fire Designs and Evolvefish, the Darwin fish sign sells at the rate of 75,000 each year and generates an annual revenue of half a million dollars (Yoon, "Swimming").

In addition to its own success, the Darwin fish has spawned an ever-increasing number of offspring. A quick inventory of different variations on the Jesus fish theme reveals that there are more than fifty alternative fish emblems available for purchase, each of them managing to convey a unique idea and at the same time reference the original. Several cultures and subcultures have designed their own emblems, revealing that Christianity's claim to be a universal truth within a pluralistic society is subject to as many different responses as there are groups who feel excluded by such a claim.

Consumers who want to make a statement about their beliefs might purchase any one of the numerous Jesus fish parodies that serve to express sympathies with other religious faiths. The "Gefilte" fish, complete with a Star of David sign and Hebrew lettering, gives Jews an emblem they can call their own. The husky "Buddha" fish and the Hindu version with cow udders speak to those with inclinations toward the East. The "Pagan" variety is shown giving birth to a woman, reminiscent of ancient creation myths. Some variations choose to represent Christianity's antithesis, such as the "Satan" and "Sinner" models, both of which sport devil horns.

Not all of the parodies are religious in nature. There are several science fiction and fantasy-themed versions as well. In addition to the "Robot" fish depicted on *Futurama*, the highways also teem with pointy-eared "Yoda" fish, "Alien" fish, and "Flying Saucer" fish. The "Vampire" fish sports bloody fangs, and the "Gothic" fish proudly displays a number of body piercings. The most adventurous fish image is likely the "Freud" fish, a swimming phallic sign that only the boldest drivers would attach to their family sedans. Those who yearn for the days when a fish was just a fish can purchase the

“Sushi” model, the “Lutefisk” model, or the “Fish ‘n’ Chips” model, all of which remind us that before being appropriated by religious or philosophical ideologues, the fish was simply Jesus’ favorite meal (McKenna).

Despite the seemingly endless array of Jesus fish parodies, the Darwin fish still reigns as the king of highway humor. The clearest indicator of its supremacy among the imitators is the fact that the Darwin fish is the only model that has provoked a series of impassioned responses from the Jesus fish faithful. What began as a joke has in time escalated into a war of religious ideas. Theologians of the past employed public debates and polemical treatises as vehicles for advancing their claims, so that the historical controversies between Christian theologians and heretics or non-believers have led to the publication of some of the most stirring documents that the faith has ever produced. The works of Tertullian and his fellow defenders of the faith are still studied, almost two thousand years after they were written, for their polemical power, their rhetorical heft, and their doctrinal formulations. One wonders if the debates of today will have the same staying power. The modern arguments between faith and rationalism, religion and secularism, and even Creationism and Darwinism are being waged, in true 21st century style, on the bumpers of America’s cars, trucks, and SUV’s, with no end in sight. The creation of the Darwin fish was the first strike in this conflict. It was followed in short order by the “Truth” fish, the response by the Jesus fish people to what they perceived as an attack on their religious beliefs. The Truth fish is a much larger ΙΧΘΥΣ inscribed with the word “truth” and depicted in the process of devouring a Darwin fish. The initial appearance of the Truth fish prompted questions from Christians and non-Christians alike, who wondered whether this sort of puerile one-upmanship was really the best means of spreading the gospel, or the best demonstration of Christian love. Adapting to the new rules of engagement, the Darwin crowd was not silent for long, creating the “Reality Bites” fish, which was merely a bigger Darwin fish devouring the Truth fish. Not content to rest on this triumph, they soon followed the Reality Bites fish with a Tyrannosaurus Rex emblem, too big even to fit on smaller cars, which is shown taking a huge bite out of the Truth fish. It is unclear whether the next step, a giant asteroid labeled “God” or “Divine Justice” might one day send the T-Rex back into extinction.

In an attempt to understand the so-called “fish wars,” Tom Lessl, a

communications professor at University of Georgia, spent several months in the late 1990's interviewing and researching the motives of those who would display Darwin fish on their automobiles. Some of the responses intimated that Darwin fish enthusiasts simply wanted to annoy conservative Christians. In some cases, the intent was to advance the cause of evolutionary biology in the face of a growing interest in Creationism or Intelligent Design theory. Whatever the reason for purchasing and displaying a Darwin fish, Lessl concluded that the designation of "war" to this seemingly benign conflict was indeed appropriate. He describes affixing the Darwin fish to a car as "an act of ritual aggression," and likens it to the wartime practice of desecrating an enemy flag, reminding us that even a war that employs sarcastic pictography as its primary weapon is still a war (Williams). That the Jesus fish would be capable of starting such a war is simply one more testament to this icon's standing in our cultural consciousness.

From the first century to the twenty-first, the icon of the Jesus fish has evolved and adapted to the ever-changing currents of the times; so have the responses to this icon by the larger culture. In the earliest days of the Church's existence, those who used the symbol might have expected beating, imprisonment, or even execution. In a modern context, those who embrace the icon might expect to be ridiculed on a prime-time television series or an internet cartoon. But whatever the stakes may be, the Jesus fish icon still manages to serve the faithful as a badge of identification, a sign that distills their core beliefs into a simple formula, and a polemical weapon in the cultural battle for the highways, the parking lots, and the hearts of America.

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