

BYRON RANGIWAI

Karaititanga: Some Reflections on my Christology

If God had a face, what would it look like?
And would you want to see?
If seeing meant that you would have to believe
In things like heaven and in Jesus and the
saints and all the prophets?

Joan Osborne (1995)

Christology in images

Osborne's (1995) song calls to mind a profound and poignant question: what does the face of God look like? Furthermore: what does the face of Jesus, as God incarnate, look like? Does he look like me? Is he Māori? I recall images of Jesus in the homes of whānau and friends. One such image was of a 1950s-style Jesus, with a European profile and baby blue eyes. He looked quite content in this image; this Jesus had not anticipated what was to come. This Jesus was white. In another illustration of Jesus, he is suffering, crowned with thorns, with a look of anguish and annihilation in his eyes - the weight of the world's sins, past, present, and future, crushing him. This Jesus was also white. Another such image is the iconic Sacred Heart of Jesus. In this image, the heart of Jesus is understood, by some, as a representation of Christ's love for humanity. The heart, pierced and bleeding, surrounded by thorns and crowned with the cross, radiates divine light. Again, this Jesus was white.

In the wharenui at my marae in Waiohau, there was a brass cross inside a wood and glass case which sat upon a small, high, shelf affixed to the central poupou at the back of the whare. The

cross was old and tarnished. Below it was a very old, weathered, framed, picture of Jesus knocking on a door illustrating Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (KJV). Jesus stands dressed in a light-coloured alb-like tunic, with an elaborate cope, a gold crown, and a garland of greenery illuminated by a halo. Besides the crown, Jesus appears to be wearing liturgical garb. He holds in one hand an elegant lamp, and with the other hand knocks on a door, covered with overgrowth, suggesting that this door has been closed for a long time.

Interestingly the door does not have a doorknob. This old image was a battered print of William Holman-Hunt's 1853 painting (there were three versions painted), *Light of the World*. Concerning the absence of a doorknob Holman-Hunt (1905) declares that this represents "...the obstinately shut mind" (p. 350). Jesus knocks, but the individual must open the door from the inside. However, this Jesus is, again, white.

Image 1: Holman-Hunt's, *Light of the World*, 1900-1904 version, Middlesex Chapel, St Paul's Cathedral, London



(Holman-Hunt, 1904-1905, n.p.).

None of the images of Jesus that I have seen look middle-Eastern. It seems that Christological iconography reflects the culture of the artist: European artist = European Jesus.

Christology in words

If Jesus comes to us in a way that we can recognise, what of a Māori Jesus? James K. Baxter's poem causes me to reflect on what a Māori Jesus might look like.

I saw the Maori Jesus
 Walking on Wellington Harbour.
 He wore blue dungarees,
 His beard and hair were long.
 His breath smelled of mussels and paraoa.
 When he smiled it looked like the dawn.
 When he broke wind the little fishes trembled.
 When he frowned the ground shook.
 When he laughed everybody got drunk.

The Maori Jesus came on shore
 And picked out his twelve disciples.
 One cleaned toilets in the railway station;
 His hands were scrubbed red to get the shit out of the pores.
 One was a call-girl who turned it up for nothing.
 One was a housewife who had forgotten the Pill
 And stuck her TV set in the rubbish can.
 One was a little office clerk
 Who'd tried to set fire to the Government Buildings.
 Yes, and there were several others;
 One was a sad old quean;
 One was an alcoholic priest
 Going slowly mad in a respectable parish (Baxter,
 1988, p. 347).

Brown's poem is a response to Baxter.

i AM the Māori Jesus
 And i don't like
 mussels and parāoa
 Give me fish 'n' chips
 with tomato sauce
 Fresh white bread

and loads of butter
Butter makes this country great
So feed my whenua
to the cows
for all i care (Brown, 2014, p. 48).

Contextualising my Christology into a Patuheuheu hapū (one of my hapū) milieu, this is my response to both Baxter and Brown.

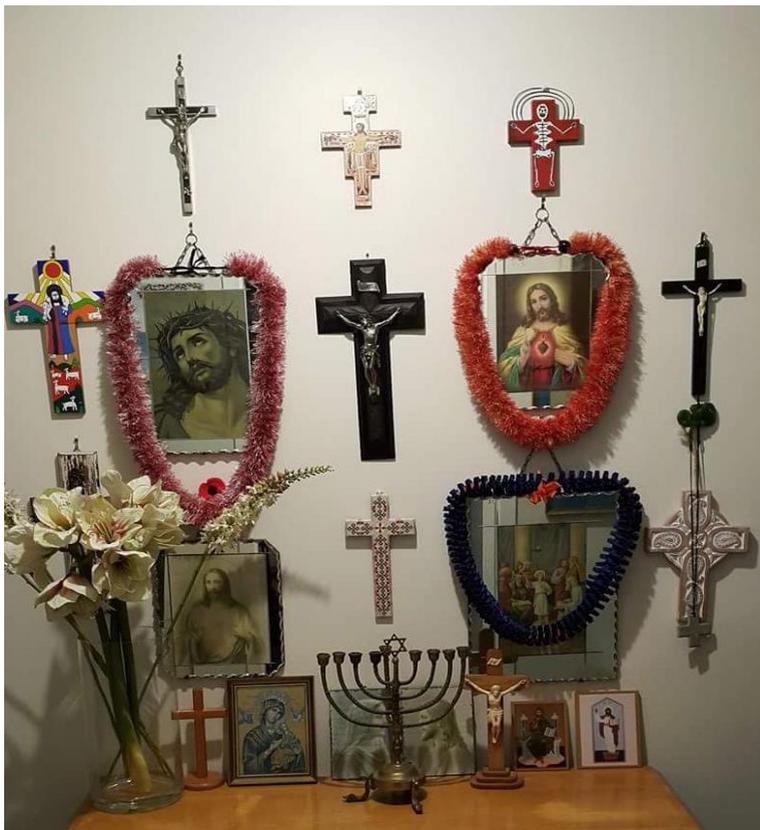
Patuheuheu Jesus

I am the Patuheuheu Jesus
I go eeling and hunting
My knife is always sharp
My hīnaki is always bursting
I don't eat wild pork, cos I'm a Jew
But I give it away to the old people
They make boil up and
pāpākiri thick with butter

At Easter time I walk
through the Horomanga
looking for a big fat kererū
In the pot it goes for Aunty
She's sick - even I can't heal her
It's her last supper, no wine
Just waikōhua and kūmara
Too sick to chew flesh

I salt and dry the eels in the sun
I don't eat eels, cos I'm a Jew
Koro and Nan eat it with rīwai and pūhā
I'm all about that manaaki life

Sometimes I scrub the shit
out of the toilets and unblock
the drains
Working at the marae
is hard work at times

Image 2: Some of my collection of religious iconography, Murupara

(B. Rangiwai, 2016, private collection)

I have referred to Jesus, very irreverently, on some occasions as a 'Jewish zombie'. This piece is a reflection on the idea that Jesus reminds me of the 'un-dead' in the zombie and vampire movies that I grew up watching in the 1980s. Here I use some forms of social media language and slang.

Jewish Zombie

You challenged the status quo
Advocated for the poor and oppressed
You broke the rules
and hung out and partied
with all the hoodlums and rejects

You fought for the people
sorted them out with jobs,
free doctor's visits, fresh fruit and veges,
bread and fish, warm dry homes,
and heatpumps
You pissed off the power brokers
You f_cked with the establishment
one too many times

You protested hard out
You're a radical, a revolutionary
Now you're behind bars
That warden is nasty AF
He wants your head, real bad
Make an example
#CrucifyHim!
Haters gon' hate
+
Rest in love, bro
#FlyHigh
Sad that you died
feeling heartbroken @ golgotha
You were just too
good for this world
#Cross #Nails #TombLife

On the cross you hung
For our sins you died
In GLORY you rose again
(that was freaky but neat)
In our hearts you live
forever
At the right hand
of your Father you sit

Heaven looks awesome
on your #SnapChat

Thanks for being dead
 But #NotDead #ZombieJesus
www.zombiejesus.com

Christology in my prayer life

My grandmother taught me that karakia day and night was essential to life. We pray in the morning to ensure that we have a good day; and we pray at night to protect our wairua from harm as we sleep. That's the prayer life.

Image 3: Crucifix, Rosary beads, incense stick – a small prayer space in my bedroom, Grey Lynn, Auckland



Morning prayers

Morning prayers begin with the burning of incense from an Indian shop

A tiny image of Lord Ganesh remover of obstacles decorates my incense stick holder

This is intentional
 My room reeks of Patchouli
 He hōnora, he korōria
 Ki te Atua

Lord Jesus, watch over us this day and bless the whānau

In nomine Patris et Filii
 et Spiritus Sancti

Āmine

(B. Rangiwai, 2017, private collection).

Christology in my social life

I am friends with people from literally ALL walks of life. I see Jesus almost everywhere. In film. On the streets. In the reflection of my glass of whiskey. Even in the face and presence of a drag queen on Ponsonby Road, posing as a warped version of the Virgin Mary.

Image 4: Lady Trenyce Bhone, SPQR Café and Bar, Ponsonby Road, Auckland



(B. Rangiwai, 2017, private collection)

SPQR Jesus

SPQR Jesus is caaamp!
 She claps her hands
 She does couture poses
 and vogues while waiting
 tables
 She fills the wine glasses
 to the brim
 and loves to see people
 getting loved-up and
 boozy
 SPQR Jesus serves-up
 Crayfish linguini
 made by Polynesian chefs
 who moved out of Ponsonby
 'cos the rates were too high

Lady Trenyce Bhone:

“My performance is about the appropriation, by gay culture, of Christian, and in this case, Mariological iconography. This work evokes a feeling of gross imitation and defamation, underpinned, quite ironically, by a deep sense of admiration. In many ways, the blatant blasphemy of my replication defeats the iconic image of the Blessed Virgin, almost shaming her, suggesting that I am of a higher power than Mary. I am the embodiment of the “Virgin in a condom” (personal communication, June 22, 2018).

Christology in my devotion

I always nod in the direction of a cross. I solemnly bow toward an altar. And I genuflect with both sincerity and drama when in the presence of a tabernacle. I attribute this respect toward crosses, crucifixes, altars and tabernacles or aumbries to both my Katorika and Mihingare whakapapa. My theology of the Eucharist is that it is the spiritual body and blood of Jesus and that I should venerate it.

Image 5: Altar, tabernacle and reredos/retable,¹ St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney



(B. Rangiwai, 2018, private collection)

Jesus is home

When Jesus is home
he'll leave the light on
But when the light is off
Jesus is out shopping

Jesus is like a genie in a lamp
he can fit into small spaces
like a tabernacle
or a chalice
or on a shiny paten

The priest holds his fingers
Together
After handling the wafer
For fear of dropping
Jesus particles on the floor
Feed the people with the
BLOOD and FLESH
of the un-dead Son

Rinse those pinchy
Pincer-like fingertips
with water and swish
it round the blood-stained
chalice

His portly face goes bright red
when he swallows deeply
the remainder of Christ's blood
floaty bits 'n' all

¹ At the time that I took this photograph I did not take notice as to whether there was a reredos or retable behind the altar.

References

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