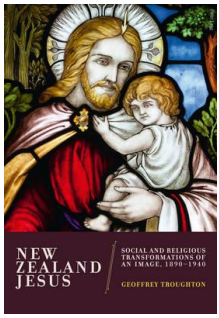
New Zealand Jesus: Social and Religious Transformations of an Image, 1890–1940, by Geoffrey Troughton



Bern: Peter Lang, 2011 | 268 pages | ISBN: 978-3-0343-1047-5 (softback) €52.10 | ISBN: 978-3-0351-0267-3 (e-book) €52.10

Books that originate in a thesis always face the issue that what makes a good, solid thesis may not necessarily translate over into the subject for a good book. This is further complicated in the field of New Zealand religious history, for the market for a book on New Zealand religious history is understandably a small one. What does a book add to a thesis now easily attainable in electronic form from a university library? Of course to be published, a thesis has to be revised and in part, rewritten. But the question needed to be asked is—and this is not a personal attack but a wider question on publishing in the age of e-information—do we seek to too often publish because of the dictatorship of output managerialism? Is it better to spread out chapters of a thesis into articles for various journals that will potentially have a wider readership—or does the book, any book, still reign supreme in managerialist reviews? I know chapters of this thesis have already been published in journals. That being so, combined with the e-thesis being easily available (I found and downloaded a copy in under a minute), the question has to be: what is the point of the time and effort spent effectively rewriting

the thesis? Is it good use of an academic's time and effort? Such are the thoughts that arose as I began to read this book.

As the author is careful to point out, this is the investigation of a particular time, place and, perhaps most importantly, culture: the Jesus-piety of colonial, primarily Protestant, Pakeha society in New Zealand, 1890–1940. Maori are largely absent, excused as being "never smaller" in population than during this period, and never more separate from Pakeha society.

So this is the history of half a century of white settler Jesus-piety, a piety seeking to avoid theology and doctrine, seeking to conform rather than critique. This is therefore a history of a particular type of colonial society: a small white settler outpost, settled largely after Darwin, after Marx, a society seeking social cohesion yet with a strong undercurrent of division; a colony not a nation. Therefore the New Zealand Jesus is really a colonial settler society Jesus, a Jesus looking "home" to Britain and "across" to North America.

The book carefully discusses the differing experiences and expressions of Jesus that occurred in Pakeha settler society. This was not a Jesus of theological study and discussion, it was not an academic Jesus and it was certainly not a theological Christ, yet could be a pietistic and ecclesial Christ. It was Jesus as sentimental friend, role model, name, idol, fetish, totem, and social glue. It was Jesus as moral guide and exemplar, a Jesus used by the church and society as part of social control. As noted in the text, central to Protestant devotion was the humanity of Jesus, a humanity stressed not against his divinity but concentrated upon as the point of accessibility and meaning. This focus on the humanity of Jesus is a sign of the increasing secularization of Protestant Christianity, a shift also however into a type of good works and good morals club. This is also a colonial Jesus in that this is not a New Zealand Jesus but rather a northern hemisphere pietistic and theological Jesus taken on board down here without local adaptations and critique. This is not a cultural nationalist Jesus, a Jesus of New Zealand. Rather it demonstrates how, in many ways, it was Pakeha religion that was—and still is—the strongest and longest-running expression of the colonial mentality and longing.

Yet at the same time Jesus could be used as a claim against the institutional church—whether from the perspective of the widespread New Age or, more politically, Jesus the proto-socialist. The tension for the churches was that their role as social cohesion and the forces of conformity were in tension with an emphasis on the human Jesus as political prophet and reformer of institutions; a tension understandably most expressed in Protestant settler society. In the labour disputes of the early twentieth century was Jesus on

the side of the workers—or the bosses? Or, as was also expressed, the Jesus of Christianity was different from the Jesus of "Churchianity."

The New Zealand Jesus was therefore increasingly used as a point of opposition to the Church. The focus on the human Jesus as opposed to the theological Christ made this much easier. A virile, manly Jesus of good works and the Golden Rule could serve as a moral everyman for a wider society still culturally Christian, if increasingly post-Christian in practice and very thin in theology. This is noted in the comment that "in many ways, New Zealand's Jesus was the children's Jesus" (151). A whole history of the problems of theology and church in New Zealand, including the continuing impact of the Geering controversy, the decline of the broad church, the self-removal of the liberals, and the rise of Pentecostalism and conservative evangelicalism can all be traced to this central insight. Not only was the New Zealand Jesus a children's Jesus, but there was and is a widespread shift to regard institutional Christianity as something for children and the child-like.

Of course a sentimental, child-friendly, pietistic Jesus was always going to struggle to attract the devotion, yet alone interest of men in a frontier society. Yet we must be careful to note that it is not just frontier society men who had little time for Jesus, it was industrialized, urban men as well—whether in the northern hemisphere or out in the colonies. However as noted, the manly Jesus of morality and purity was difficult to reconcile with the experiences or indeed the desires and wishes of soldiers, returned servicemen, and more widely the man of twentieth century modernity. In reading this book it appears, at least in the realms of popular piety and popular religion, that New Zealand Protestant Christianity really developed into a type of Jesus morality cult primarily for, and of, children and women. This is hinted at, yet the wider implications of this are never really fully developed.

Further, the absence of discussions on the Maori Jesus and the muted discussion of the Catholic Jesus also mean that this is only a cropped snapshot of New Zealand society and Christianity at this time. Was it worth a book? Well perhaps, but really a wider discussion including these missed areas and continuing into the present day would have been a much more valuable project. Therefore this should have been the first part of a much bigger book, for it is less than half the story. The author should be encouraged and supported to write a follow-up, expanded in scope, for that would be a fascinating and important addition to our wider socio-cultural history.

It would be interesting to see what happened to the New Zealand Jesus since 1940. A follow-up tracing the muted emergence of the Kiwi Jesus, Peter

Matheson's Jesus of gumboots and enculturation, the romanticized Jesus of the bush, or Nigel Brown's James K. Baxter–Jesus of suburban driveways. Indeed the rise of Baxter himself as a Kiwi-Jesus avatar is a missing part of this story. For Baxter grew up in the Protestant Jesus-morality cult of Calvinism and rejected it for Catholicism, ultimately embodying the Hemi-Jesus of a still colonizing personal expression of Maori Christianity. Similarly the Jesus of Colin McCahon, first as image then as abstraction and text, also signals the challenges of enculturating Jesus in New Zealand, and within—yet against—New Zealand modernity. Yet perhaps the most interesting Jesus to emerge was the wimpy Pasifika Jesus of *bro'Town*, a wimpy Jesus never measuring up to his chiefly, tattooed hyper-masculine God-father. Maybe little has changed after all …

Mike Grimshaw
University of Canterbury