

## Book Review

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**Geoffrey Troughton**, *New Zealand Jesus: Social and Religious Transformations of an Image, 1890–1940*. Peter Lang, Bern, 2011, pp. 268, ISBN 978-3-0343-1047-5 (Pbk).

The central thesis of this book is that religion in New Zealand in the period 1890–1940 was defined by a ‘Jesus-centred religiosity’ and an interest in Jesus as a human being, and, more especially, a ‘Personality’. In developing this thesis, Troughton first outlines, in the first couple of chapters, some of the sources of this turn to Jesus and its manifestations in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century New Zealand Church life (with some reference to aspects of wider society), before embarking on a survey of different images of Jesus under such headings as ‘Anti-Church Prophet’, ‘Social Campaigner’, ‘Children’s Jesus’, and ‘Manly Jesus’.

In the first chapters, Troughton lays out the sources of the transformation of the image of Jesus and the rise of interest in Jesus. Major cultural influences were the rise of Romanticism and the development of a ‘modernist’ form as a ‘culture of personality’. But another driver through the period was concern about the place of religion in society, and a desire to find ways to connect with contemporary humanity. Manifestations of this were a focus upon the personal relationship that one could have with Jesus, sustained by a sentimental piety within Protestantism, or devotion to the ‘Sacred Heart’, and to Passion imagery in Catholicism. In the world of art a tour of Holman Hunt’s ‘Light of the World’ made a great impact, spurring a number of depictions in stained glass windows.

In Chapter 3, ‘Anti-Church Prophet’, the theme of Jesus as a prophetic opponent of organised religion is reviewed. This took various forms: for many involved in the labour movement, Jesus represented the true ideals of socialism while the Church degraded and opposed it. Church leaders were aligned with Judas and the Pharisees. Within the Church, this image took two forms: that of a reformer of Christianity, albeit as a stranger to ‘Churchianity’; and that of a return to primitive Christianity, and especially, under the influence of Pentecostalism, a recovery of Jesus’ healing ministry.

Chapter 4, ‘Social Campaigner’, explores how Jesus was invoked both as a support for ‘social Christianity’—that is, a Christianity that was involved both in conservative issues (e.g. prohibition) and the promotion of individual social improvement—and progressive ideas that linked socialism with more Hegelian concepts. This period, especially between the wars, was taken up with a tussle between ideas of socialism as a ‘class issue’—and concern for workers—and more general ideas, such as service and practical Christianity. Religious opposition to socialism also imaged Jesus as neither an agitator nor a revolutionary.

In many ways, Troughton maintains, ‘New Zealand’s Jesus was the children’s Jesus’ (p. 151). And so the fifth chapter, ‘Children’s Jesus’, presents the image of Jesus as one who loved children, especially represented as ‘the Good Shepherd’ and ‘Friend’. That children could love Jesus in return was also emphasised. The religious life of children was cultivated in various venues, from family devotions and bedtime prayers, to presentations of Jesus in the school journal and the Bible in Schools curriculum, and Sunday School.

Emphasis was placed on the philosophy of educating children religiously, and there were debates about how much attention should focus on the Old Testament as opposed to the gospels and narratives of Jesus. Troughton includes an interesting section on the way developmental theory was used to determine at what stage in a child's life different elements of Jesus' character or image should be applied.

The sixth chapter, 'Manly Jesus', begins by surveying the 'man problem' in New Zealand religion, that is, the fact that fewer men than women were involved in church attendance. Various things were done to address this, mostly with the view to present a more 'manly' Jesus and to appeal in particular to the working man. One way was to present a more militant, 'soldierly' Jesus, who upheld the qualities of heroism, leadership, and comradeship. Organisations for men such as the Church of England Men's Society and the Methodist Men's Fellowship sprang up, as well as youth movements (such as the YMCA or Boys' Brigade) to cater for the needs of boys and young men.

Troughton's discussion is somewhat disjointed in places, and some rearrangement of material would maintain the flow of a theme better. In places one wonders whether consideration of a broader range of material might provide a different picture. He succeeds in getting across his thesis of a Jesus whose personality is a central focus in the period. The image of Jesus, as he says, is somewhat 'malleable', and often fits the conception of those who wish to promote a particular image. The New Zealand Jesus of the period is one with whom people today would feel little affinity. This book would be of help to those interested in the social history of New Zealand in the period under consideration.

**Derek Tovey**

The University of Auckland