“My Name was Christian.” C.K. Stead, Religion, Culture and National Identity

Mike Grimshaw

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/8415>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.8415
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2010
Number of pages: 61-74
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Mike Grimshaw, ““My Name was Christian.” C.K. Stead, Religion, Culture and National Identity”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 32.2 | 2010, Online since 17 December 2021, connection on 31 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/8415> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8415>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

“My Name was Christian.” C.K. Stead, religion, culture and national identity

Culminating in *My Name is Judas* (2006), New Zealand writer C.K. Stead has wrestled and argued with religious belief as both cultural legacy and cultural constraint. This paper argues that central to Stead's modernism and post-colonial nationalism is the overcoming of religion as a constantly unfinished project of modernity, with Zen positioned as an alternative. Yet Stead's cultural modernism finds him, like Judas, increasingly isolated and dislocated in society where 'many have lost their heads'.

Critical engagements with the *oeuvre* of New Zealand novelist, poet and critic C.K. Stead have lacked a 'cool appraisal' (Jensen 512)¹ because his notably complex character causes many to confuse his personal and national identities. While Stead's personal search for meaning and transcendence focuses on the transformative powers of Sex and Zen, secular critics overlook the basis of Stead's cultural criticism and national identity in his uneasy encounter with religion.

Paul Tillich stated: "As religion is the substance of culture, so culture is the form of religion". (Tillich 69-70) Examining, as a scholar of religion, Stead's modernist engagement with cultural nationalism, I argue he continually wrestles with issues of religion for cultural, national and personal identity culminating in *My Name was Judas* (2006). For Judas, as Stead noted, is in many ways Stead in fancy dress: the final boundary culminating Stead as persona, novelist and person.

Charged with relocating from figure of the left, to from the early 1980s, "a figure of the cultural right" (Newton 91) Stead admittedly found himself in opposition to many colleagues and fellow leftists. However a 'cool appraisal' of his *oeuvre*, read against both modernism and post-modernism as socio-cultural events, offers an alternative reading that requires understanding what possibilities religion is allowed to express in New Zealand society². Since colonization, religion is a voluntary act and identity; there never having been a State church or State religion. In the 2006 census almost half the total population of four million either had 'no religion' or 'declined to state' any religious identity (Hoverd 2008). Conversely, a Statement of Religious Diversity, administered by the Department of Ethnic Affairs, is concerned with the activities of non-white minorities. Such a location makes clear that in a culture of indifferent secularity, religion is regarded

1. Kai Jensen's entry on Stead in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* notes that Stead's cultural criticism "has aroused such heated feelings in the New Zealand literary and intellectual community that cool appraisal of his work has been lacking."

2. For a recent discussion on contemporary New Zealand spiritual identity see *Landfall* 215 (May 2008): *Waiting for Godzone* [ed. Paul Morris & Mike Grimshaw].

as an 'ethnic issue' and identity; a 'cultural' activity predominantly undertaken by non-European immigrants, indigenous Maori and Pacific Islanders. Stead therefore writes from a late-modern society that officially, and in its white majority's self-identity, views itself as existing *after* religion or at the very least, *after* 'Christian society' and 'Christian culture'. Yet in 2006, two million signalled a religious identity within 123 religious varieties. (Hoverd 2008) In such post-modern cultural pluralism expressed within a wider modernist 'end of religion', the widespread New Age crosses into both religious and non-religious communities. While religion is viewed as an institutional identity and activity, the New Age operates as individualistic spiritualities simultaneously contemporary and ancient. In this way New Zealand expresses Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as the return to pre-modern ways of thinking. (Lyotard 79) Stead the secular modernist therefore writes from a society that has seen marginalized religious belief and identity re-centralised into national life in the name of postmodern plurality and spirituality. However, Stead's response can also be read via a wider, European-derived modernist sensibility.

Obsessed with expressing a modern sensibility, in "Ornament and Crime" (1908)³ Adolf Loos asked, 'Who in this day and age wilfully decorates themselves or their environments with unnecessary decoration and ornamentation in the manner of the undeveloped child or the uncivilised Papuan?' His answer was only 'those with criminal tendencies and the degenerate aristocrat'. In Loos's cultural aesthetics, to be modern, progressive, cultured and civilised was living with control, order and discipline, without the excess and distraction of 'unnecessary ornamentation' that, post-Nietzsche, included God. Loos's essay, republished in *L'Esprit Nouveau* (November 15, 1920) was retitled "Ornament IS Crime", an aphorism underwriting modern architecture and life.

Stead is an unwitting Loosian modernist. All 'unnecessary ornamentation' is rejected. Stead's purist modernism is literary in his rejection of complex theory, and cultural in his strident secularity, taking for granted the secularization thesis of modernist sociology whereby the rise of modern science and technology would inevitably result in the demise of institutional religion and the secularization of western life. While prominent proponents of the thesis publicly recanted (Berger 1999), Stead continues to hold that modernity should inevitably result in the demise of religion. Yet one of the signs of the post-modern was the return of religion and spirituality. Stead now finds himself in opposition to the New Age's rise of decorated culture, whether it be bodies materially decorated with tribal identities and tattoos or minds decorated with spiritual claims. The associated post-modern nationalism includes a spiritualising of 'culture' that expresses, as in the shrill reaches of the debates on the 'London writer's flat'⁴, claims of literary volk-geist.

3. See Mike Grimshaw, "Notes Toward a Loos-ian Theory of Religion in Modernity".

4. This debate focused on the appropriate location for a residence for New Zealand writers, purchased as a gift from the Labour Government as part of the 1990 sesqui-

In Loosian terms Stead is a revolutionary, not a new modern aristocrat. Using the example of an old woman with a road-side shrine, Loos claims the revolutionary would challenge her with the words “there is no God”. Conversely, the Loosian atheist aristocrat “raises his hat on passing a church” (Loos 230) having no desire to tear down the ornament and make ‘aristocrats’ of those unable and unprepared to achieve the unornamented aristocratic position. Stead is no modern aristocrat. He is a cultural revolutionary whose attack on cultural pieties is foretold in his wariness regarding the turn to religion of poet James K. Baxter and artist Colin McCahon.

Stead’s 1973 critique of Baxter’s conversion to Catholicism is attacked a decade later in the *JNZL* (Hutchings 71-85). While the modernist Stead critiqued Baxter’s turn to Catholicism, a decade later he is in turn attacked for doing so, for being culturally post-modern incorporated a turn to the other – including a default acceptance and often fetishising of the other’s beliefs without critique. Stead the modernist therefore finds himself in conflict with an emerging post-modern nationalism.

In New Zealand the old cultural left who were modernist became the new cultural left who are postmodernist, and one spur was Baxter’s transition from the European ‘James’ into the Maori ‘Hemi’. Baxter’s retreat in the early 1970s, up the Whanganui river to found a commune amongst Ngati Hau Maori at the old mission station of Jerusalem signalled an important shift towards bi-cultural indigeneity. This retreat from urban, European existence into a ‘white Maori’ identity in the wilderness was expressed as the rejection of secular, settler European modernity. (Newton 2009) We must also remember that New Zealand had always been more romanticist, and therefore anti-modernist, than properly modernist (see Smithies 2006). Yet “antimodernism is fundamental to the creative impulse in modernity” and “modern industrial society in its very nature calls forth antimodernism in the creative individual.” (Versluis, 96) Baxter became antimodernist in his transition into the bi-cultural ‘Hemi’ and his retreat to a hippy commune, while Stead as a continuing modernist, finds himself increasingly at odds with the new creative and cultural impulse of a romanticized and spiritualized biculturalism. To invert Versluis; it was the left’s cultural shift to antimodernism, often expressed as a spiritually relativist postmodernism, that served to accentuate what can be termed Stead’s dogmatic Loosian modernism. This tension is expressed by Stead in his imaginary ‘conversation’ with the recently deceased Baxter in ‘Towards Jerusalem’, in *Islands* (3 Autumn 1973), where Stead critiques Baxter’s conversion to Pentecostal Catholicism. Stead accuses Baxter of expressing “false and possibly repugnant” (Stead, *Glass* 224) claims of belief, stating: “Jim, you know as well as I do that there’s no God.” (*Glass* 226) Stead claims Baxter, while agreeing with

centenary. While Stead supported the London location, many others opposed it, seeking a local location. See Stead *Bookself*, 322-33, 325-9.

Stead on the absence of God, needed an Authority to rebel against, (*Glass* 226) and in late modernity, God is both a transgressive authority and claim.

Having played a central role in the post-colonial move of New Zealand literature, in effect, as in Curnow's poem, learnt "the trick of standing upright here", (Curnow 89) Baxter retreats into antimodern reaction to the new orthodoxies of postcolonial modernism. Baxter's antimodernism becomes linked with McCahon's continuing engagement with 'a question of faith'⁵ as twin expressions of alternative postcolonial identity, becoming local heralds of the late twentieth century, Western, postmodern, New Age, romanticist revival. Such interlinking of cultural forces creates mythologies difficult, if not impossible to disentangle, wherein issues of God, spirituality, and antimodernism have arisen in New Zealand bi-culture. Stead, the dogmatic secular postcolonial modernist, now takes on the role of 'authority to be rebelled against'. Having personally and publicly dethroned the authority of God and his representatives, the modernist Stead enthrones rationality, reason and scepticism, situating himself as representative of the newly contested authority.

Stead's modernist revolutionary stance explains his acerbic reaction to Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* and his stated inability to read Elizabeth Knox's *The Vintner's Luck*. As both liberal humanist and modernist revolutionary, Stead rejects accepting the 'irrational' beliefs of another culture, and contests the return of 'irrational' beliefs within his own culture.

As McCutcheon noted in *The Discipline of Religion* (2003), religion and nationalism are distinctly modern ideas and inventions, with religion becoming the universal 'other' (and for romanticism, the acceptable alternative) to Christianity. Religion and nationalism became closely linked, if not intertwined. Both demand a certain self-reflexivity and self-identity; both also involve a not always explicitly stated notion of otherness. Yet New Zealand nationalism tended to be expressed and developed in opposition to religion. In fact it could be argued that nationalism and religion only finally began to reinforce each other as New Zealand was becoming a post-modern, post-colonial society in the 1980s, and it is this that so infuriates Stead. As his cultural nationalism is rational and secular in Eurocentric terms, the emergence of rituals, pieties, beliefs and religious attitudes to culture, nation and identity is seen as a reversal in modernist progress. This is expressed in Stead's 2002 essay 'Christianity and culture' (Stead, *Bookself* 156-157). In this brief riposte to Eliot's famous statement on postwar European identity in *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* that "if Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes" (Eliot 122), Stead's late-modern question is: what does this mean today? Stead views himself as writing and questioning from a particular context where, in his mind Christianity has 'gone' and yet culture continues. Christianity is deflated by the modernist Stead to just one of many "false faiths

5. The title of the McCahon retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 2002 and the resultant book of the exhibition. See Bloem and Browne (2002).

and their accompanying prejudices, discriminations, repressions, hypocrisies and ineffective rituals of appropriation.” (*Bookself* 157) As a modernist, Stead opposes rituals not for what they seek to do but because they are ineffective and therefore unnecessary. He makes this clearer in *Bookself*, which Stead self-edited, by immediately following ‘Christianity and Culture’ with ‘Letter from New Zealand’ which critiques *waka* (Maori canoe) ceremonies and their presentation of what Stead views as a contestable authenticity. Such ceremonies are what Stead dismisses as “ineffective rituals of appropriation.” For modernists in a culture of marginalised and declining Christianity, postmodern bi-cultural beliefs and rituals become the opposition, for seeking to replace the basis of culture with a new faith is as problematic as claiming the centrality of Christianity, for both undermine the modernist project of cultural nationalism. When a close reading of his *oeuvre* is undertaken, Stead emerges as increasingly emphasising an explicitly secular cultural nationalism, recoiling from the pieties, spiritualities and return of irrational beliefs so common in New Zealand post-modern post-colonialism. This culminates in Stead’s alterego (*Bookself* 352-356), the arch rationalist Judas, a new settler who relocates in search of a rational life; he is the colonial as rational man who transplants in the hope of leaving the irrational behind. Judas shifts to a new location and changes his name: in short he seeks to leave behind his old identity, beliefs and society in favour of a new secular identity by the seashore. While Stead is “the consummate version of a very late colonialism” (Newton 99), what can be termed settler nationalism, a cultural nationalism (Newton 100), this needs careful consideration; for while Stead is post-colonial he is a particular type: the last vestige of the post-colonial modernist. Stead’s international turn from the 1980s expresses his increasing disenchantment with the re-enchantment of New Zealand society: the revolutionary modernist cannot hold his tongue or his pen with the reappearance of the roadside shrine. This leaves him “blaspheming against the pieties” (Stratford 72-83) of ‘anti-racism’ and ‘anti-sexism’ (Stratford 80) that Stead believes have overturned the national culture of modernism represented by rationalist, critical, post-Christian and secular values. What is unsaid by Stead is that these values were also strongly Eurocentric as similarly represented in a very influential manifesto, Jim Traue’s *Ancestors of the Mind: A Pakeha Whakapapa*. (1990/2001) Chief Librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library (1973-1990), Traue delivered his manifesto first to the middle-aged, middleclass Pakeha businessmen of the Rotary Club of Wellington. His response to feelings of inadequacy when called upon to state his identity on a Maori *marae* (tribal meeting ground), Traue’s *whakapapa* (a personal and family history) is located in a collective Western high culture of chosen and emphasised ‘ancestors’ who, as texts and ideas, make an intellectual and cultural transition to the new land to stand against a strongly geographically located and spiritualized Maori identity. Traue’s ‘ancestors of the mind’, stretching back to ancient Greece, covering the complete gamut of Western high culture ever present in texts and kept in libraries, are positioned and championed against ancestors of tribe, myth, mountain, and

river. Traue's *whakapapa* states Pakeha are part of a wider Western culture that should assuage any feelings of inadequacy, for a textual culture is more definitive than the limitations of memory found in oral culture. Stead likewise situates his postcolonial identity as part of this wider Eurocentric Pakeha *whakapapa* with *The Singing Whakapapa*, published four years after Traue's manifesto.

For Stead, the colonial legacy is expressed and evidenced in the reaction to religion. In 'The Function of Criticism', Stead notes that as a young "literary nationalist" he wished to participate in "shaking off the last vestiges of our colonial past". (*Bookself* 9) The early Stead's nationalism is expressed by claims of a New Zealand identity. The author's blurb for *Whether The Will Is Free* (1964) proudly states that Stead is the descendent of those earliest of settlers, the missionaries. However this link soon disappears, until explicitly exorcised thirty years later in *The Singing Whakapapa*. (1994) In turn, in a *TLS* 2004 review, these ancestors of the cloth are mysteriously secularised as "settlers who arrived in the 1830s" (*Bookself* 167); the missionary link, although providing a *whakapapa* of New Zealand location and identity is, via Christianity, too colonial. Emphasizing the necessity of being both rationalist and modern, Stead locates himself as part of that secular settler identity that becomes, in part, post-colonial by being post-Christian, as in his recent essay on McCahon's "Elias" paintings which focus on Christ's cries for Elias from the cross. A close reading exposes the internal contradictions of Stead, who claims to be "relatively indifferent to the messages" in the paintings, then "hardly noticing" and finally "remaining indifferent" to "the message". (*Bookself* 87) Stead, as often, is selectively disingenuous. Part of Stead's response is a type of cultural nationalism seeking to separate the 'work of art' from the message it expresses. (*Bookself* 88) However, the stated indifference, in its multiple repetitions, is again that of the revolutionary secularist who wishes to be the atheist modern aristocrat, yet is unable to appreciate the revival of the pictorial shrine as an integral entity in itself.

Rather Stead seeks to relocate those heavily Christian-influenced cultural nationalists, Baxter and McCahon, into part of his own identity and trajectory by claiming both, like him, are cultural nationalists who turn finally to Zen to express a modern, post-colonial identity. (*Bookself* 90) Yet while Stead identifies with the Zen turns of the Baxter and McCahon, he cannot assimilate their more dominant turn to Maoridom as the basis of a new post-colonial, postmodern cultural nationalism. For such a turn to Maoridom continues the link with Christianity as an indigenising, syncretic, religious vehicle of identity wherein for both Baxter and McCahon it is Christian *whenua* (spirit) as a bicultural blend that expresses the new culture.

Zen, perhaps the quintessential romanticist modernist turn of the mid-twentieth century, offered a type of ultra-Protestant Buddhism first articulated and exported to the West in the late nineteenth century by Madam Blavatsky and the theosophists. Buddhism as a post-Christian alternative took various forms arising from Romantic counter-Enlightenment 'Oriental Renaissance' that sought

an Aryan identity originating in the ancient civilization of the Indus valley. (see Masuzawa 2005) The late twentieth century Western turn to Tibetan Buddhism is only the latest of a series of Buddhist alternatives that began with Theravada, and then, post-World War Two focused on Japanese Zen. Whitman, Thoreau and the American transcendentalists gained inspiration from early Western Buddhism originating in exported versions of Theravada. By the 1950s it was Zen the Beats turned to for inspiration. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and the collective Dharma Bums articulated a type of modern, western Zen expressed via counter-cultural critique, action and claims of inspiration. However, even as Western Zen emerged in the 1950s, critiques stated that this was not 'Zen', rather was a type of inherently anti-Christian and misogynistic (Hyun 57) mysticism similar to that previously expressed by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. William Barrett, cautioned Western intellectuals against seeing Zen as "a solution to the spiritual problem of western man" (Barrett 62-65) "dying of spiritual inanition" as expressed in Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Barrett 62). For Zen "or any other oriental form" could not solve 'the religious problem' for American intellectuals, only serving to dislocate Westerners from their "collective past" of a civilization that "has essentially been formed by the religion of Judaism..." (Barrett 64).

In the face of such critiques how should we reconsider Stead's work? Stead continually emphasizes Zen as his personal credo. Is Zen even partially responsible for the oft-stated claims of misogyny and the way Stead's cultural nationalism is not only expressively anti-Christian but also, in his alter-ego Judas, seeking to leave behind the legacy and religion of Judaism? There is no clear answer, and Stead would quickly deny any lingering romanticism. Zen is engaged with as a philosophy; an ultra-rational identity expressed via meditation and purposeful action. The accusations of misogyny arise from the sub-theme in his fiction wherein sex is pursued and presented as the act of realised transcendence for the male narrator, women being the means to the end. Western Zen focus on the ultra-individualistic pursuit of *Satori* may be partially responsible for that theme playing a central role from *All Visitors Ashore* (1984) onwards. Yet while Zen and sexual attitudes may well be linked, Stead's Zen is not anti-Semitic. To rescue Stead from false claims of anti-Semitism, we need to read *Judas* in the light of Damian Wilkins' infamous review of *The End of the Century at the End of the World*, in *New Zealand Books* (December 1992). Here, Wilkins claims correctly "the horror of the current cultural climate for Stead is that people have lost their minds." (Wilkins 27) This horror develops over subsequent years, coming to a head [pun intended] in *My Name Was Judas*. Here Stead seeks to show just what can occur when a charismatic individual loses his mind, and others follow. For if Judas represents Stead, novel becomes a metaphor for what Judas/Stead discerns has been occurring in New Zealand since the late 1980s.

Mark Williams noted Stead does not share Eliot's belief that tradition cannot be separated from religion, for Stead's approval of secular New Zealand society includes believing the old gods did not voyage to New Zealand (Williams 81).

This common theme in Pakeha cultural criticism gained widespread support via the anti-modern essayist and journalist M.H. Holcroft (1950). Yet Stead's is not a singular secularity, for constantly turning to the classical pagan world and Zen for themes and voices his secularity accommodates and approves a selective voyaging of religion, so long as such expressions are pre-Christian, non-Christian or anti-Christian. Yet since the 1980s, the return of Christianity mixed within various cultural expressions, and the syncretistic nationalism that develops, provoke the revolutionary into attack.

In a trilogy of works, Stead engages with different aspects of this cultural turn. *The Death of the Body* is Stead's reaction to the post-modern New Age: the protagonist's wife becomes a Sufi adept spending her time chanting 'I am not of this body'. *The Singing Whakapapa* is Stead's fictionalized encounter with his own missionary-based *whakapapa* and the distancing from Christianity that modernity entails. In *Talking about O'Dwyer* Maori beliefs (*tikanga*) operate as an acceptable but distinct alternative to secular modernity - but only for Maori. While Pakeha can sympathetically encounter *tikanga within* Maoridom, outside this location Pakeha must not attempt to cross the secular, modern, cultural divide. In effect, Maori are romanticized, and engaged with on romanticized terms. For in Stead's view, Pakeha can accept the validity of such beliefs for Maori, while continuing to posit that they are invalid within modern, secular Pakeha life.

Stead establishes his position in *The Death of the Body* with the comment "... we New Zealanders have, you see, lived through and left behind the anguish and the nostalgia of our colonial transplantation" (Stead, *Death* 8). For Stead, this left behind 'anguish and nostalgia' includes religion. *The Death of the Body* was published in 1986, the very early days of the Maori renaissance and the bi-cultural turn, which mark an important transition in Stead's work, for both *The Singing Whakapapa* and *Talking about O'Dwyer* focus on the spiritual battleground of a bi-cultural New Zealand confronting its history. *Death of the Body* focuses on the New Age and its confrontation with 'the body/Mind dichotomy' (*Death* 9) whereby sex is that grounding act of immediate immanence overcoming any attempt to transcend or negate the body. In opposition to his wife, "a mantra-chanting coathanger" (*Death* 68), philosopher Harry Butler exists as a 'non-theist' in a realist, linguistically-derived universe, unable to answer if he 'believes in God'. For in his mind the question lacks precision and he is not able to understand it. (*Death* 131) Critiques later to surface in *My Name was Judas* are raised here; firstly the claim that traditional religions "have removed the mystery by claiming to explain the inexplicable" (*Death* 129). Secondly, that God was invented to remove the mystery of existence because God as a word only serves to trap us by claiming, whether we respond as theist, atheist, or agnostic, that the meaning of the word God is intelligible. (*Death* 129-130) The New Age, as yet another attempt to 'remove the mystery,' is as imprecise and problematic as traditional religion, having nothing to offer the postcolonial moderns who are Stead's central

protagonists. In short, the new world and the new society that arises, does not need the return to religion and spirituality that the New Age entails.

The question of God continues to be wrestled with in *The End of the Century At the End of the World* (1992). Justin Pope, a Buddhist-Catholic in the 1960s, has become twenty years later a hippy agriculturalist who has “Zen weekends.” (Stead, *Century* 64, 207). This freedom from faith offered by Zen, is a central obsession of Maurice Scobie, who argues that if God exists then existence is banal, (*Century* 80) further stating: “A spoonful of God and you spoil the flavour, you destroy the mystery.” (*Century* 81) Yet standing against the dismissed God, in effect making existence both meaningful and mysterious, is, as Justin Pope wryly notes, the fact that “...sex had been Maurice’s mysticism, his religion.” (*Century* 81) Stead’s protagonists link a Zen state with sex as the act of transcendence within the frame of existence; sex and Zen being the materialist experience and interpretation that keep us grounded in the mystery of life. This culminates in “Sex in America”, with sex as a type of Zen moment resulting in a mystical reflection: “Pleasure: the desire not to be other than this, and here, and now. Or rather, the absence of the desire to be the other. The loss of the ego in the discovery of self: ‘Is it’ (the question comes, he thinks, from *Moby Dick*?) ‘I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?’ (Stead, *Sex* 110)

In *Century*, the mysticism of Zen sex causes Scobie to lose faith and embrace doubt to a point where doubt consumes faith and he is set free. (*Century* 211) This freedom from faith caused by the culmination of the stated necessity of doubt to become modern is what gets re-told in *My Name Was Judas* and all Stead’s fiction. What is sought is a type of secular Scandinavian clarity encompassing a rational modern outlook Stead traces via his own Scandinavian heritage. Arising from both a rational Scandinavian culture and the clarity of light in Nordic countries, Stead expresses this most fully in “Uncle Bjorn and the Saint of Light” (1998) whereby to be rational is to “find a mystery intolerable” because “there’s an explanation for everything.” (Stead, *Uncle Bjorn* 78) This Scandinavian modernity, transferred by Stead to his antipodean context, confronts the rise of Maori spirituality (*whenua*). This *whenua*, expressed in an often State-legislated bi-cultural presence of mystery in New Zealand life, via claims of recognising the undefined ‘principles’ of the Treaty of Waitangi, finds public expression from the late 1980s. The aim is to unite the bi-cultural nation, yet for Stead the modern rationalist, to have mystery and spirituality legislated serves only to further divide the postcolonial nation.

Stead’s alternate *relegare* (a binding together) is far more pragmatic and materialist. In *The Singing Whakapapa*, it is sex, the physical act of attaining transitory transcendence that really unites missionary and Maori. Physical union overcomes cultural differences. Yet the politics of this union being almost exclusively white male missionary coupling with Maori females is never dealt with. Stead’s non-engagement with feminist critique extends historically in his fiction. His point is of a different order of cultural politics, targeting religion. In opposition to the positive union Stead imagines occurs via the transcendence

of sex, the spiritual union offered by institutional Christianity serves only to imprison its believers, cause tension with Maori, and is an affront to those of “good sense or good taste.” (Stead, *Whakapapa* 192) Rather it is Zen, in the form of stories reciprocated between Hugh Grady and Lydia Lawrence, which resolve a novel concerned with the cultural and historical impact of the transition from Christianity to modern secularity in New Zealand. For in Stead’s writings, Christianity is always presented as primitive belief and dangerous faith that modern people, and those in transition to modernity, must jettison to be truly free. Life itself is the mystery, and it is the acceptance of this, signalled for Stead’s characters by Zen, that serves to set them free.

In *Talking about O’Dwyer*, Oxford Philosophy don, Mike Newell, who works on Wittgenstein and reads “Zen Books” (*O’Dwyer* 14) engages with the efficacy of a Maori curse (*makutu*) laid against his friend Donald O’Dwyer. For Newell, the claim of the efficacy of the “primitive curse”, a “primitive mumbo-jumbo,” becomes a type of faith for O’Dwyer that “...lent a bit of colour to his sense of failure.” (*O’Dwyer* 49) Yet the efficacy of *makutu* is contrasted to Newell’s recollections of his “pre-Wittgenstein recognitions” that ‘god’ as a word signified nothing at all and so could be blasphemed as ‘Dog’⁶ and provide an enlivening and cheerful inner rebellion. (*O’Dwyer* 55-56) The adult Newell repeats Stead’s common sentiment that God as a word has no meaning and therefore all associated with God in modernity is likewise meaningless. For example, the church is dismissed as being “an intellectual slum.” (*O’Dwyer* 102) This freedom from religion, and specifically from Christianity, is accompanied by Newell’s adoption of Zen as a discipline of doing and striving without effort (*O’Dwyer* 122-23). This is expressed in the championing of the final sentence of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921): “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”. (*O’Dwyer* 176)

While this may seem central to Stead’s fictionalised religious identity, the reality is that he and his narrative personae are anything but silent on what he considers ‘we cannot speak about’. This inability to keep silent means Newell can identify a cross-cultural commonality precisely because of his Wittgensteinian rationalism and enlightenment humanism. When a Maori prayer (*karakia*), is said over the grave of a Maori soldier in Crete so as to lift the *makutu*, Newell remembers lines from Catullus, making a mental connection across centuries and cultures concerning the need for ceremonies and statement appropriate to the context. (*O’Dwyer* 213) Back in Oxford, Newell makes a connection between his rationalist Zen position and *tapu*, stating: “I am my consciousness. And the head is tapu.” (219) Such sacrality of the head, in which the mind is located and so is the origin of Steadian consciousness, signals a type of agreement with Maoridom. The answer to the recurring question in Stead’s work, arising from *Moby Dick* of “is It I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?” is that embodied consciousness,

6. Stead later makes great play on this in his *Dog* poems (2002).

losing itself in the moment, expresses a particular, physical type of modernist New Zealand Zen of pure rational insight and clarity.

Perhaps most explicit in the Zen Master spider episodes of Cecelia Skyways in *All Visitors Ashore* (1984) which reduce the narrative at times to an X-rated *Charlotte's Web* in Takapuna, Stead's Zen culmination of being in the moment, the stripping away of illusions, the search for grace through copulation, positions again and again an alternative narrative of cultural identity. For Stead the modernist, there is only 'the now', that just-now of *modos*. The absence of meaning is overcome by the act of meaning; the absence of the vertical other of God is overcome by connection with the horizontal other in sex. Grace or *Satori* is not attained by mystical or transcendent connection, but by sweaty, earthy, physical connection. This is where Stead's Zen runs into tension with his pagan appetite. For his is a physical approach, as another alter-ego, Bruno of *Villa Vittoria* makes clear, first in a modernist/rationalist/ Zen statement:

The more we learn the clearer it becomes that we know nothing. The sum of our knowledge is the depth of our ignorance; and religions are pitiful inventions meant to conceal it (Stead, *Villa* 105)

Bruno follows this up with a classical-pagan prescription to combat the despair of:

"...the logic of infinity": good health, energy, the animal appetites and urges. And our tribal loyalties - war against our enemies, and the defence of our friends...and *le sport*. Sport is tribal. (Stead, *Villa* 105-6)

The struggle in Stead's cultural and literary soul is between the present moment of Zen and the classical-pagan past. If Zen is the ultimate vehicle of rational expression and experience, the classical-pagan tradition provides an alternative tradition and source to Eliot's linking of Christianity and Western culture. Stead's problem is that neither source of identity, whether Zen or the classical-pagan world, can cope with the recent expression of multiple identities for New Zealand: a post-modern, South Pacific, Aotearoan⁷ syncretic cultural nationalism.

In response to this cultural shift, Stead's reaction, as expressed in *My Name Was Judas*, is threefold: Judas becomes Idos, Christian is known as Karl, and as we read, Judas's betrayal is "my refusal to affirm what I couldn't believe". (Stead, *Judas* 171) Judas, the culmination of all of Stead's post-colonial moderns, seeks to create and articulate a change in identity and self: to be identified as post-colonial, as 'new man', as 'modern.' This, for Stead and Judas, involves the stark choice between "music and poetry in particular, but the arts in general" and "what religion is in other people's lives." (Stead, *Bookself* 350) Judas, leaving religion and seeking a new meaning, turns to poetry to express his rational faith.

7. Aotearoa (Land of the Long White Cloud) is the Maori name for New Zealand. In the past decade there has been an increasing adoption of this name for New Zealand, often as part of a hyphenated identity: Aotearoa-New Zealand.

This results, for both Judas, and Stead, in an immersion in the tradition of Greek thought, against which the Middle Eastern monotheisms seem “alien and non-rational.” (*Bookself* 351) In a wider cultural frame, for Stead the singularity of Eurocentric modernity can both include the plurality of classicism and accept the plurality of Maori *whenua* - for Maori. But it cannot accept the counter claims of an alternative singularity such as monotheism nor an enforced monolithic bi-culturalism that includes a collectivised monotheism. For Stead, as for Judas, the choice is stark and clear: one can be modern, or one can be monotheistic, but one cannot be both.

Stead’s carefully, repeatedly crafted public persona is ‘the last modern’ marooned in a culture and nation that calls on him to ‘affirm what he can’t believe’. So Stead remains post-colonial, but defiantly and publicly modern: the revolutionary constantly railing against the reappearance of roadside shrines. Yet in decorating his work with private Zen shrines and classical allusions, his is actually an alternative syncretic post-modernism: a literature that is in the nation, but no longer of it.

Mike GRIMSHAW

University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Works Cited

- BARRETT, William, “The Great Bow”, *Encounter* 2.4 (April) 1954, 62-65.
- BERGER, Peter (ed.) *The desecularization of the world: resurgent religion and world politics*. Washington, D.C. Ethics and Public Policy Center ; Grand Rapids, Mich. : W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999.
- BLOEM, Marja & BROWNE, Martin, *Colin McCahon: a question of faith*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum; Nelson, NZ: Craig Potton, 2002.
- CURNOW, Allen, “The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch” in Curnow, Allen, *Selected Poems 1940-1989*. Auckland: Penguin Books, 1990, 89.
- ELIOT, T.S., *Notes towards a Definition of Culture*. London: Faber & Faber, 1948.
- HOVERD, William, “No Longer a Christian Country? - Religious Demographic Change in New Zealand 1966-2006,” *New Zealand Sociology* 23.1 (2008), 41-65.
- HUTCHINGS, Patrick, “Analogies of Feelings: Imagination’s Scope”, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, no.1 1983, 71-85.
- GRIMSHAW, Mike, “Notes Toward a Loos-ian Theory of Religion in Modernity”, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 17.4 (2005), 382-392.
- HOLCROFT, M.H., *Discovered Isles, a trilogy: The Deepening Stream, The Waiting Hills, Encircling Seas*. Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1950.
- HYUN, Peter “Beat Zen, Square Zen: An Eastern Dissent”, *Encounter* 13.1 (July), 1959, 56-57.

- JENSEN, Kai. "Stead, C.K.", ed. Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie, *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1999, 512-514.
- LOOS, Adolf, "Ornament and Crime" (orig.1908) in L. Munz and G. Kunstler, *Adolf Loos: Pioneer of modern architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1966, 226-231.
- LYOTARD, J-F, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- MASUZAWA, Tomoko, *The Invention of world religions, or How European Universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- MCCUTCHEON, Russell, *The Discipline of Religion*. London & New York: Routledge, 2003.
- MORRIS, P, & GRIMSHAW, M, ed. *Landfall 215* (May 2008): *Waiting for Godzone*.
- NEWTON, John, "The Death-Throes of Nationalism", *Landfall* 205 (May 2003), 90-102.
- . *The double rainbow: James K. Baxter, Ngati Hau and the Jerusalem Commune*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009.
- SMITHIES, James, "An Antimodern Manque: Monte Holcroft and *The Deepening Stream*", *New Zealand Journal of History*, 40, 2 (2006) 171-193.
- STEAD, C.K., *All Visitors Ashore*. London: Harvill Press/Auckland & Sydney: Collins, 1984.
- . *Bookself. The Reader as Writer and the Writer as Critic*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008.
- . *The Death of the Body*. London: Collins, 1986.
- . *Dog. Poems*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002.
- . *The End of the Century at the End of the World*. London: Harvill, 1992.
- . *In the Glass Case. Essays on New Zealand Literature*, Auckland: Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1981.
- . *Villa Vittoria*. Auckland: Penguin, 1997.
- . *Whether The Will Is Free. Poems 1954-62*. Auckland & Hamilton: Paul's Book Arcade, 1964.
- . *My Name was Judas*. London: Vintage, 2006.
- . "Sex in America" in Stead, C.K. *The Blind Blonde With Candles In Her Hair. Stories*. Auckland: Penguin Books, 1998. 107-125.
- . *The Singing Whakapapa*. Auckland: Penguin Books, 1994.
- . *Talking about O'Dwyer*. Auckland: Penguin, 1999.
- . "Uncle Bjorn and the Saint of Light" in Stead, C.K. *The Blind Blonde With Candles In Her Hair. Stories*. Auckland: Penguin Books, 1998.73-90.
- STRATFORD, Stephen, "Blaspheming against the pieties. Why the Literati hate C.K. Stead", *Metro* April 1990,72-83.
- TILlich, Paul, *On The Boundary*. London: Collins, 1967, 69-70.
- TRAUE, J.E., *Ancestors of the Mind: A Pakeha Whakapapa*. Wellington: Gondwanaland Press, 1990/2001.

VERSLUIS, Arthur "Antimodernism", *TELOS* 137, (Winter) 2006, 96-130.

WILKINS, Damian, "The self-loathing of a Stead novel", *New Zealand books* December 1992, Vol. 2, no.3, 6, 27.

WILLIAMS, Mark, *Leaving the Highway*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990.