

# Anti-Churchianity, Discursive Christianity, and Religious Change in the Twentieth-Century

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## Abstract

This article identifies an important contour of “discursive Christianity” in early-twentieth-century New Zealand. It examines the widespread appeal of an image of Jesus as a “stranger” and prophetic critic of the churches—an image that was utilized by reformists of both church and society, in ecclesiastical contexts and beyond. The discourse is interpreted as a language of piety. Recognizing the shape of the discourse and the extent of its appeal, sheds light on important processes of religious change during the twentieth-century.

The idea of secularization has come under intense scrutiny in recent decades. The subject has been furiously debated by sociologists, scholars of religion and others for some time. Since the 1970s, social historians of religion have been deeply involved in these debates, sometimes as notable critics. Older accounts of the secularization thesis typically asserted a close causal link between increasing modernization and religious decline, albeit through a set of disparate though interlocking processes. This classical schema still has champions.<sup>1</sup> Under close scrutiny, however, many aspects of the older paradigm have been challenged, and found to be highly questionable. In the field of British religious history, secularization is now increasingly regarded as a “grand narrative” in need of revision.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the challenge to secularization as a theory, and its reputed causes, significant religious changes clearly did take place during the twentieth-century. Notably, the historic “mainline” churches suffered what Jeremy Morris calls “institutional attenuation” and “institutional marginalisation”; that is, they shrunk and their influence waned.<sup>3</sup> To a significant extent, Christianity was also culturally displaced, in New Zealand as in Britain and elsewhere. In an influential reappraisal of secularization in Britain, Callum Brown emphasized the speed with which this displacement occurred following a profound rupture in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Brown’s analysis focused on the character of piety in framing individual identities and a Christian national identity. His interpretation utilized a notion of “discursive Christianity,” which Brown contrasted with Christianity in its institutional, intellectual, functional and diffusive forms. Brown defined discursive Christianity as “people’s subscription to protocols of personal identity which they derive from Christian expectations or discourses”.<sup>5</sup> It represented the shape of Christian faith in popular culture and public discourse, expressed in (and reinforced through) various patterns of speech, behaviour and self-understanding. Brown accepted that secularization had taken place, but challenged the premise that this was an inevitable, long-term process, and one fundamentally tied to modernization. The sudden “death of Christian Britain” could be traced through patterns of adherence to Christianity in its discursive form.

Drawing upon Brown’s notion of discursive Christianity, this article identifies one pervasive strand in early-twentieth-century New Zealand.<sup>6</sup> It examines the image of Jesus as a prophetic critic of religion. This discourse had various contours. One dimension presented Jesus as a “stranger” who had been widely misunderstood, especially by the churches. Another related dimension emphasized that Jesus was essentially a reformist, and a prophetic challenger of the status quo. In its various expressions, the discourse of Jesus as a prophetic critic was characterized by a propensity to catalogue the churches’ supposed errors. Prophetic “anti-

church” rhetoric went further, invoking “the real Jesus” to critique religious teaching and behaviour. It asserted that the churches were out of step with Jesus, adding that if he were alive today, he would likely oppose them. In these ways, the discourse drew a sharp line between Christ and Church, carefully distinguishing Jesus from contemporary religion. The “religion of Jesus,” or the “Christianity of Christ,” became the benchmark for true religion. Such discourse had a range of antecedents, particularly in older anti-Catholic and anti-clerical traditions. Nevertheless, its burgeoning use and widespread appeal in the early-twentieth-century was notable, and represented a significant development.

The following analysis highlights the ubiquity of this image, and the range of purposes for which it was deployed. It argues that dis-ease with organized Christianity was so common as to be a form of piety during the early-twentieth-century—a constituent of identity shaped by “Christian expectations and discourses”. This particular dimension of discursive Christianity sheds light on the place of religion in New Zealand society during the first half of the twentieth-century, but also on crucial dynamics of religious change. The discourse illuminates the crumbling of respect for “the church” within New Zealand culture, which was an important dimension in weakening attachment to organized Christianity over time. Paying attention to the discourse of Jesus as a prophetic critic of religion therefore provides an insight into changing patterns of Christian identity during the twentieth-century.

### **Jesus as Stranger**

The claim that Jesus was a stranger to the churches was a serious charge. On the one hand, it was an accusation of institutional weakness, and on the other, of a failure of spiritual insight. The idea appeared in various guises. As a literary device, it was particularly evident in at least three distinct forms. One form was apparent in a genre of quasi-biographical literature that became popular in the early-twentieth-century, and which circulated quite widely in New Zealand. Mike Highton calls these “sensational lives” of Jesus, because many purported to reveal the untold story of the “hidden” years between Jesus’ infancy and ministry that the churches were said to have suppressed.<sup>7</sup> Sensational biographies often associated the “real Jesus” with Eastern religions, commonly suggesting that Jesus’ hidden years were spent in India. Perhaps the most famous example of the genre was Levi Dowling’s *Aquarian Life of Jesus*, which placed Jesus in a Himalayan monastery during this period of his life.<sup>8</sup> This Jesus was invoked to bolster the credibility of newly fashionable esoteric religious claims, but sometimes also political ones. For example, in 1931, one New Zealander reproduced selections of a text known as *Philochristus: Memoirs of a Disciple of the Lord*. Believing it was “the only true Gospel of the life and teaching of the Man of Nazareth”, the author considered that *Philochristus* had been written on Jesus’ authority by a biographer of his choosing. The text apparently made plain the mystery of “Joshua of Nazareth,” but the writer also argued that it portended a day when “Jesus’ socialism” would rule the world. As it happened, the original “biography” was less antique than it seemed, having been written in 1878 by the English schoolmaster and mathematician Edwin A. Abbott.<sup>9</sup>

A second version of the stranger motif emphasized more clearly that Jesus exemplified an authentic spirituality that was quite distinct from ecclesiastical religion—a spiritual Jesus unknown within the churches. Arthur H. Adams was widely regarded as one of New Zealand’s more promising poets in the late-nineteenth-century.<sup>10</sup> Born at Lawrence in 1872, his first volume of poems, *Maoriland, and Other Verses*, was published to critical acclaim in 1899. In 1902, having recently departed for England, he published *The Nazarene: A Study of A Man*. This was a book-length meditation in verse on the life of Jesus as seen through the eyes of his contemporaries—characters from the New Testament gospels such as Mary, Judas, John the Baptist and Pilate. In this text, Adams argued that the “real Jesus” was too often “shadowed

over by his divinity”; his humanity was shrouded by the “waving of fine priestly hands,” incense-smoke, and the throb of sonorous organs.<sup>11</sup> Though claiming originality, much of Adams’ portrait was actually quite conventional. Idealistic images of the “sweet Nazarene” as a hero, dreamer, and lover of children were fairly conventional Romantic tropes.

Adams’ Romantic vision of Jesus exploring the wild, in tune with the divine spirit, was a particularly pertinent aspect. Traces of this idea could be found even in the devout poetry of Ursula Bethell, whose nature poems were deeply informed by her Anglican faith.<sup>12</sup> The natural world was alive with signs, “vibrant with words” that were made sensible by her theological vocabulary. At times, as in “Appel,” she imagined biblical characters in the natural world, exemplifying the idea that spiritual encounter and sustenance could be derived from the created order:

So, long ago, I think, the Syrian Shepherd  
Inhaled the sweet airs of his hills and valleys,  
Drew in his breath and sang: Yahweh sustains me:  
Lifted his head, and went his way rejoicing.<sup>13</sup>

In such literature, God could be experienced independently in harmonious relation with nature, thus exemplifying and confirming the authenticity of this kind of spirituality. Though Bethell was a churchgoer, such images, when applied to him, could also effectively dissociate Jesus from ecclesiastical life.

A third literary version of the stranger motif focused on Jesus as a marginalized, misunderstood and ultimately victimized figure. R.A.K. Mason’s career has often been held to epitomize the bleak condition writers faced in the reputed literary wasteland of early-twentieth-century New Zealand.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, then, it is not entirely surprising that Mason’s work contained some of the most sustained reflection on Jesus of any local literature from this period. In “On the Swag,” Mason’s Jesus is ostracized because he is not recognized.<sup>15</sup> As Rachel Barrowman suggests, he is a victim of society—the man persecuted by men and betrayed by God.<sup>16</sup> Crucially, the poet suggests that failure to recognize Jesus’ true identity extends even—or perhaps especially—to the churches. Mason’s Jesus was linked with a type of practical and experiential spirituality. He exemplified the lonely, the misunderstood, and the victimized in society, but he also provided a model of authentic religiosity that was independent of religious organization.

### **Jesus as an Anti-Church Prophet**

The idea that Jesus was an unrecognized stranger sometimes shaded into more confrontational claims of outright hostility between Jesus and the churches. In this approach, Jesus was enlisted in more direct complaints against institutional religion. Critics accused the churches of misrepresenting Jesus, and cultivating religious systems that conflicted with Jesus’ actual teaching. Religious leaders were cast as the contemporary counterparts of his historical persecutors, the Pharisees. He, in turn, would rebuke them. Such argumentative language was particularly evident in discourses of socialism, which had become the leading ideological framework for the labour movement’s attempts to ameliorate social conditions since the 1890s. Obviously, there were sharp differences between radical and revolutionary socialism and the milder, though arguably more influential, Fabian and state socialist forms.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, kinds of anti-church rhetoric were evident within each.

In 1890, Arthur Desmond produced one of the earliest New Zealand studies of Jesus as a social reformer. Desmond had been a rural worker in Hawke’s Bay before becoming a semi-itinerant political agitator and then journalist in Auckland.<sup>18</sup> His pamphlet on Jesus focused especially the “heroic nobility of His thought and the grandeur of His deeds”. It argued

that those who opposed Jesus did so out of vested interests: the “heads of the Church, the owners of land, the owners of slaves, and the owners of capital”. In more recent times, Jesus’ opponents included theologians who had suppressed the social element of Jesus’ teaching, and clergy who betrayed him through their “theology, gold-greed, and personal aggrandisement”. Desmond preached the Christianity of Christ, which consisted of social equality and duty towards one’s fellow man. The churches had degraded this message through “Dogma and denominationalism – bigotry and creed – belief and ceremony”.<sup>19</sup>

Desmond’s work was actually largely plagiarized. Nevertheless, the pamphlet introduced motifs that became constantly reiterated. Most notably, these motifs included the idea that a fundamental gulf existed between the Christianity of Christ and the religion of the churches, and the charge that contemporary Christianity had become enslaved to wealth, and neglectful of Jesus’ ethical teaching. In the international labour press, the “real Jesus” was frequently held up as a contrast with anti-socialists, or those deemed unsympathetic to working-class aspirations.<sup>20</sup> The churches featured prominently among the groups classed this way. They were accused of hypocrisy, self-interest and protecting their own privileged position in society.

In fact, complaints were often directed primarily at religious leaders, who were characterized as deceivers, and accused of being out of touch with ordinary workers’ lives. Wealth and power led them to conservatism. Ministers’ support for the capitalist system was chided, even if it was only tacit.<sup>21</sup> Such leaders were characterized as Jesus’ opponents, and likened to Judas and the Pharisees. Moreover, critics enjoyed using Jesus’ words to shame their opponents.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Margaret Thorn, atheist wife of the Presbyterian Labour leader Jim Thorn, gleefully described the labour leader Robert Semple’s attack on the Rev. Howard Elliott and the Protestant Political Association as an “ear-splitting post-mortem dissection of a parson professing faith in the gentle saviour of mankind”.<sup>23</sup>

One longstanding method of attacking institutional forms of Christianity focused on a distinction between real Christianity and “priestcraft” or “Churchianity”. There was a post-Reformation, anti-Catholic aspect to the discourse, but also a radical one. One letter to the *Maoriland Worker* claimed that “priestcraft” was one of labour’s deadliest foes because of the influence priests had over women.<sup>24</sup> Others considered anticlerical rhetoric to be a potentially useful recruitment tool. Thus, J. Smith of Waimate contended that socialism was “purely a Christian ideal and doctrine,” but that it needed to stand against the “colossal ignorance” of the modern churches. Smith argued that “denunciation of the false teaching of the clergy” could be a “powerful lever for agitation, and an incomparable means for recruiting our ranks for propaganda purposes. In doing this we remain faithful to our Christian watchword, yet by this rule of revolutionary action we will disarm the enemy and arm Socialism”.<sup>25</sup>

The supposed distinction between the religion of Jesus and Churchianity generally carried confrontational overtones. Pejorative terms like these referred to perversions. They suggested that pure religion had no rituals, but implied that pure forms of Christianity could still perhaps be found. Blaming religious leaders also meant that criticism was directed at one particular class. Clerical influence was a blight on society, comparable to “King-craft,” “deacon-craft,” “diplomatist-craft” and “merchant-craft”.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, religious ills were similar to all other social evils imposed by the powerful. By returning to the religion of Jesus, organized Christianity could become a religion of the people expressing socialist ideals. It could become a force for life rather than death.<sup>27</sup> As one labour critic anxiously noted, however, “lest we be misunderstood, we have not one word to say against true Christianity”.<sup>28</sup>

Constructing religion, and religious leaders, as Jesus’ opponents was therefore a discourse of power, favoured especially by those who felt, however subjectively, on the margins. In this context, churches and religious leaders were conflated with the wider forces of “society” that opposed Jesus and socialism equally. Thus, “Religion provided him with a cross,

Society with a tomb". In its complicity with the powerbrokers of society, religion had lost ethical power as well as its "nutritive and reproductive functions".<sup>29</sup> It had essentially become Jesus' leading adversary. This language intensified during the years of heightened conflict around World War One. Socialist opponents of the war applauded pacifist sects like the Quakers, but the churches as a whole were often heavily criticized. Despite two thousand years of Christianity, a supposedly Christian civilization had turned its back on Jesus and unleashed hell with their endorsement: "The collective Church – that has for twice a thousand years rendered a lip service of Peace on Earth – spits in the face of its Christ of Peace, and in all lands shrieks in demoniacal frenzy for the crucifixion of the Christ idea and the Christ idealist".<sup>30</sup>

Labour and socialist appeals to Jesus in these terms constituted one part of a wider argument concerning the failure of social institutions. The language also legitimized resistance. In this way, the whip of cords and Jesus' action in the Temple became favoured symbols of opposition to established authority. Religion was part of the established order that Jesus himself had revolted against. Consequently, contemporary churches were challenged to account for their behaviour in the light of "the action of the Divine Teacher, who whip in hand, scourged the money-changers from the temple".<sup>31</sup>

Characterizations of Jesus as a critic of the churches fastened on the idea that he spurned conventional religious practices and the leaders who oversaw them. The *Maoriland Worker* claimed that Jesus "confounded the self-righteous, and made light of formal religion, and mocked the orthodox of his day, whose religion consisted in observing set times, and laws, and commandments ... To him creeds, churches, systems, sacraments and ceremonies were nothing".<sup>32</sup> Modern Christianity was charged with inventing a superstructure of faith and doctrine out of its own "vain imaginings". These were not only alien to the religion of Jesus, they were ideas he would actually repudiate: "Hardly a claim made in the name of Christ to-day by the churches that take his name in vain but can be refuted out of his own mouth". Simple, practical, ethical but non-institutional Christianity appeared suspect to the conventionally religious, but was the expression Jesus would have approved. Thus, R.S. Mackay could claim:

Many Socialists deny Christ with their lips, but accept Him by their lives, ideals, and the sacrifice they are prepared to make for the sake of their ideals. Many church-goers accept Him with their lips, but deny Him by their lives, and the objects they devote their energies to, principally their own material welfare. I think that if Christ himself were here to-day he would undoubtedly cast in his lot with the former, as being those who are carrying on His work.<sup>33</sup>

Similar criticisms circulated in freethinking and rationalist discourses—partly because the constituencies for socialism and these groups overlapped.<sup>34</sup> Many leading Rationalists had intensely religious backgrounds, and also possessed a thorough knowledge of the Bible. Ettie Rout, who is particularly remembered in New Zealand as an early safe sex campaigner, was one of these. She claimed to have experienced "conversion" to Rationalism as part of a broader transition to radical politics and progressive social morality.<sup>35</sup> In her tract from 1926, *Sexual Health and Birth Control*, she explicitly invoked Jesus' teaching as a tool for attacking "fat-headed" contemporary Christians. In order to "slay a few modern Christians intellectually" Rout claimed that she would:

turn up the references to what Jesus had to say nearly 2000 years ago about the Scribes and Pharisees and hypocrites and Sadducees and Lawyers; and I find that his sayings fit the Modern Churches absolutely. I am therefore enormously grateful to my Bible and *Concordance* and to Jesus himself for having supplied such permanently valuable weapons ... because Jesus is one of the world's greatest philosophers and geniuses whereas I am only a humble writer.<sup>36</sup>

According to Rout, Jesus was a freethinker: “he thought freely and he spoke freely, and he attacked the Church, which is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Religious Reform Movements**

It is possible to make this kind of critique sound like an attack on organized Christianity by the forces of irreligion. Certainly, some use of these motifs deliberately aimed to undermine the churches. They were, however, widely employed to frame more explicitly pro-religious agendas as well, in order to reform and renew the churches from within. Recovery of the true spirit, teaching and personality of Jesus was the route to pristine, undefiled forms of faith that could reinvigorate contemporary church life. This required recovery of the Christianity that Jesus practised, and the faith that was exercised in the early Church—“Christianity”, not “Churchianity” or “religion”.<sup>38</sup> Different versions of this language appeared, advancing a host of often quite contradictory agendas.

For example, Bower Black was a prominent evangelical Presbyterian minister and writer of devotional literature. He took up the issue of the Stranger image when lamenting the popularity of Leila N. Morris’s 1893 hymn, “The Stranger of Galilee”. According to Black, the sentiments of the song were commonly held and could be found in many places. This merely illustrated the sad truth that Jesus was indeed a stranger to the greater part of humanity. This was the Church’s fault, since Christians had failed to adequately represent him:

In some tragic way we have misrepresented our Master, so that many of those round about us have never really seen Him as he is. Neither our preaching nor our living as Church people have set forth Christ in all His strength and fulness [sic] of manhood. Men have not got the impression of the real Jesus, the Man Christ Jesus, when they have considered *us*.<sup>39</sup>

Like Morris’s hymn, Black’s discussion of Jesus the Stranger ultimately challenged readers to encounter him as Saviour, Friend and Lord.<sup>40</sup> Black argued that the familiar Jesus was a tepid fiction. If people saw him as he really was, rather than as Christians represented him, they would gladly accept Jesus. The real Jesus was not “gloomy,” but was rather,

possessed of a marvellous attractiveness for the ordinary man of His day. He mingled in all companies, and He did not criticise these men, though on the other hand He never condoned their sin. He was never demonstrative or gushing. He had the dignity of a strong man. His life was not narrow, but free, spontaneous and glad. He had in Him the constraining force of a great personality.<sup>41</sup>

According to Black’s interpretation, Christians’ own insipid character obfuscated Jesus and impeded commitment to him. This limited support for the churches, which further diminished their influence.

Leaders in the Keswick-influenced interwar revival movement in New Zealand similarly emphasized that Christian influence was undermined by poor representation of Jesus, and the Christianity of Christ. To this end, A.S. Wilson, a well-known Baptist minister, quoted the leading missionary apologist E. Stanley Jones’ contention that “Our greatest difficulty is not *anti-christianity* but this sub-christianity. It takes the facts of Christ’s life, His death, His resurrection, but not the living fact of Christ”.<sup>42</sup> Hence, correct theology did not necessarily produce “true Christianity”. The Congregationalist, Lionel Fletcher, held that common disgust within the community at “double-faced Christians” was a positive thing, since it showed that “men of the world” understood that such people were not true followers of Jesus.<sup>43</sup>

The 1920s and 30s were high points in relation to the ideal of “practical Christianity”.<sup>44</sup> This form of the faith favoured social engagement and works of service over doctrinal clarity,

and minimized the role of institutions and denominational traditions. It was clearly exemplified in the populist Auckland city missionaries Colin Scrimgeour and Jasper Calder, both of whom regularly differentiated Jesus from conventional religiosity. Scrimgeour, also known as Uncle Scrim of the extraordinarily popular non-denominational Friendly Roads radio church on 1ZR, sought to promote a simple, heartfelt but non-creedal form of Christianity based on friendliness and goodwill. The church he hoped for was one “without creed, something that was built in the human heart, something that required of its members no doctrine other than that of love and kindness”.<sup>45</sup> For Scrim, the only test for any creed, idea or philosophy was that urged “by the Stranger of Galilee many long years ago,” who said “By their fruits ye shall know them’ ... One man’s meat is often another’s poison, and so these differences are called creeds”.<sup>46</sup>

Scrimgeour claimed to have developed a profound dislike for the Bible early in life. He later suggested that he once opened his mother’s Bible but found it an “entirely useless piece of literature, tinted by superstition with a tone of reverence”.<sup>47</sup> According to A.J.S. Reid, Scrimgeour’s references to the Stranger of Galilee cohered with his strategy of avoiding the Bible for contemporary effect.<sup>48</sup> It fitted his folksy and vaguely-defined style of religion, which may have appealed to the semi-transient, workingman figure that he himself represented. Yet it also served to distance Jesus and true religion from conventional understandings. Scrimgeour constantly reiterated the idea that churches had veiled the real Jesus. This “strong, healthy, happy, friendly Jesus” had been hidden for nearly two thousand years “beneath the dark Cloak of Orthodoxy and almost buried in the tomb of man-made creeds”.<sup>49</sup> The churches and their theology had obscured personality.

Pentecostal Christianity emerged as a distinct tradition in New Zealand during the interwar years. Though innovative in some respects, it was also shaped by a primitivist impulse. Pentecostals were inspired by the New Testament, and interpreted their experiences as a new manifestation of earlier authentic Christianity. Early Pentecostalism also gained support, and validity, by criticizing other forms of organized Christianity. Claims that “dry rot” had infected many churches and leaders were axiomatic among pioneering leaders.<sup>50</sup> Some of the movement’s greatest influence came through reshaping the experience and commitments of existing church-goers—including evangelicals. With the benefit of hindsight “converts” from these quarters, such as Gilbert and Alice White, often dismissed their former experience as mere “churchianity and religiosity”.<sup>51</sup>

A.H. Dallimore was one of the most colourful and controversial of the figures associated with early Pentecostalism in New Zealand.<sup>52</sup> Having spent time in New Zealand in the 1890s, Dallimore was converted in Vancouver by Charles Price, a protégé of the well-known American Pentecostal leader Aimee Semple McPherson. Persuaded to enter the ministry in 1920, he returned to Auckland in 1927 and founded the Revival Fire Mission. Dallimore’s mission placed considerable emphasis on healing, and became outstandingly popular. By 1931, his meetings had transferred to the Town Hall. The Mission faltered, however, following public denouncements of his healing activity after investigations led by a committee of ministers, academics and medical representatives late in 1932.

Dallimore’s religiosity made Jesus central and his activities were framed as imitating Jesus’ historical ministry. Healing was effected by the “power of Jesus,” in fulfilment of Jesus’ promises, and attributed to Jesus’ direct working. Radical commitment to Jesus was juxtaposed with the faith of “the church”. Arguing against the medical establishment, he called for simple Christocentric faith in contrast with prevailing religious patterns:

If the whole of New Zealand would renounce the entire medical system and turn to Jesus Christ and put a childlike, sincere and simple faith in him, NEW ZEALAND WOULD SEE AN ASTONISHING TRANSFORMATION IN ITS CONDITION

OF APPALLING SICKNESS AND MISERY. BUT NOT EVEN THE CHURCH BELIEVES THAT FAR IN JESUS.<sup>53</sup>

The Church's claim that God had raised up doctors, nurses and hospitals was a lie. God had provided Jesus.<sup>54</sup>

Critics argued that Dallimore's use of biblical texts were "so outrageous as to amount to sacrilege," and described his ministry as a "vaudeville show under the cloak of religion".<sup>55</sup> Theologically, his approach to Jesus aroused some controversy, since Dallimore espoused anti-trinitarian and adoptionist views. This led to increasing conflict with church leaders.<sup>56</sup> His presentation of Jesus as a controversialist and sectarian exacerbated the conflict, and put some church leaders on the defensive. In 1932, at the height of the debate over his ministry, the *New Zealand Baptist* noted Dallimore's love of calling loudly on the "wonderful Jesus" to heal people. Yet, it claimed,

The Dallimore cult are heretics. They deny the central dogma of our faith. They deny the deity of Jesus. It is only by denying his deity and making Him a rebel against the world order, which is of God's appointment, that they can wage war against the use of medical means.<sup>57</sup>

Tellingly, the article argued that "His Jesus is a rebel against the world that God made ... We do not wonder for a moment that he does not believe in the real deity of Jesus. A man with such a creed could not believe".

Modernist theology was poles apart from these forms of evangelical and revivalist Christianity. Characteristically, Modernists were uncomfortable with "other-worldliness" and the miraculous, and emphasized the historical Jesus. Nevertheless, even Modernist Christianity embraced the discourse that cast Jesus as a prophetic critic of the churches and advocated for the Christianity of Christ. H.D.A. Major one of the leading figures in the Modernist movement in England. While Modernism never gained a particularly strong following in New Zealand, Major's books were read and his career followed by at least some Anglicans and leading Rationalists.<sup>58</sup> Major had grown up in New Zealand. Partly because of this, and also due to his reputation, his visit to New Zealand in 1929 generated considerable attention. In one of his many books, *The Gospel of Freedom*, Major contended that there was a conflict in Christianity between those who regarded "the Spirit of Christ as the supreme authority, and those who wish to elevate traditional dogmas, practices, and organisations to an equality with it".<sup>59</sup> Modernists were the former, and felt duty bound to bring the churches up-to-date. Doing so required rethinking the dogmatic and institutional foundations of the faith, and more emphasis on personality and ethics. Major claimed that church leaders were impediments to progress. Likening them to Pharisees, he called for a return to the Christianity of Christ:

not the Christianity of the great Church Councils. Not the Christianity of the mediaeval scholastics, not the Christianity of the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation, but the Christianity of Christ ... it would seem to be our duty and our wisdom to try to teach our people the Christianity of Christ.<sup>60</sup>

### **Implications: Dynamics of Religious Identity and Religious Change**

The kinds of examples cited above could be replicated almost *ad nauseum*, and extended to include the language of social Christians and Christian socialists, ecumenists, and liturgically-oriented healing ministry advocates among others.<sup>61</sup> But what did it all mean? Three dimensions seem particularly salient, and will be explored in the discussion that follows. These dimensions relate to the character of the discourse itself, the place of religion in New Zealand society, and the nature of religious change.



On the character of the discourse, it is worth emphasizing that the idea of Jesus as a prophetic critic of religion was fundamentally reformist language. The mooted programmes of reform were wide ranging, and the discourse deployed in diverse contexts for sometimes radically contrasting ends. However, this malleability merely underscored the significance of reformist aspirations in application of the language. This reformist discourse was ostensibly directed at the churches. While Jesus was mentioned a great deal—what he was like, and what he would do—the primary subjects, and targets, were actually religion and religious institutions. Criticism focused on their weaknesses. Yet the language often also aimed to establish the character of true religion, and to promote reflection on how contemporary religious forms might be adapted to cohere with pristine faith and thus meet the practical and spiritual challenges of modernity. Sometimes, as in the case of certain forms of socialist critique, “religion” was merely one indicative dimension of wider problems and concerns. Complaints against the churches as bulwarks of the capitalist status quo, for example, could be replicated in relation to other social institutions. The language was applicable to institutions generally, and did not always only relate to criticism of the churches. In short, the discourse provided a critique of power; in this sense, Jesus the critic of religion was essentially a mode of argumentation.

Arguably, insofar as the critique was in fact directed at the churches, the discourse was actually an extension of older Christian repertoires of self-criticism that promoted constant revitalization in the face of impending decline.<sup>62</sup> There is a venerable tradition of Christian proclamation that the faith is in imminent danger. This disposition is an especially characteristic feature of evangelical and revivalist Christianity. The flourishing of these forms of Christianity in the nineteenth-century was no doubt one factor in the broad dissemination and appeal of the language in the first place.

With respect to the place of religion in society, Jesus’ centrality to Christian identity and belief makes the widespread appeals to him in reformist arguments significant. At the very least, it indicates that religious language and frames of reference carried weight. If the discourse was a form of piety, it was also a distinctly Protestant one, for there was simply less space and call for this kind of ecclesiastical criticism within early twentieth-century Catholicism. We may take this as a reminder of the importance of broadly Protestant values within New Zealand society. On the other hand, the apparent elevation of Jesus over the Bible, doctrine, and institutional loyalties represented a significant reorientation of Protestant values. Whatever else was at stake, prophetic discourse made the teaching and example of the “real Jesus” the normative standard by which authentic religion or spirituality should be judged.<sup>63</sup>

There were some strikingly anti-religious expressions of the prophetic Jesus discourse. But the language was typically less concerned with the abandonment of religion than its transformation. Despite the confrontational tone, hostility was a less significant theme than renewal. In a curious way, this interpretation supports Tobias Harper’s recent contention that New Zealand was still “at heart, A Christian nation” in the 1920s. As Harper explains, the churches were assumed to be integral to society, and part of the nation’s future. There was debate about how Christianity might be applied to solving the problems of modernity, but Christianity itself remained “at the centre of New Zealand culture” and part of most people’s visions of a “liberal, progressive society”.<sup>64</sup> Harper’s argument that practical, or applied, Christianity was perhaps the dominant image of Christianity after the Great War, is also significant in this regard. Practical Christianity held lightly to institutional forms, and was often sharply critical of church doctrine and dogma, but it was nevertheless seriously touted as authentic Christianity. Anti-church, prophetic discourse could be an important ingredient of Christian identity.

In any case, the very popularity of the anti-church prophet motif belies simple insider-outsider oppositions and sharp contrasts between believers and unbelievers, the religious and

irreligious. As the example of socialist usage indicates, many outspoken public critics of the churches were also committed Christians. Thus, when the Methodist trades unionist and social reformer J.T. Paul chastised the churches from a socialist perspective, he did so as a committed Christian seeking reform of both church and society. By invoking the religion of Jesus, in contrast to Churchianity, Paul utilized a discourse that might connect constituencies that were otherwise divided in their social and political outlooks. He also aimed to provide a moral flavour to reform, appealing to Christian values and conscience.<sup>65</sup> John Stenhouse has highlighted that similar language appeared, among other places, in the *Otago Workman* from the late-nineteenth-century, where Sam Lister invoked the religion of Jesus as part his colourful polemic against the churches. According to Stenhouse, Lister was not an atheist or radical secularist, as has sometimes been suggested, but rather an occasional church-goer and “in many ways a radical Presbyterian”.<sup>66</sup> Jesus could be invoked with particular rhetorical force against the church, but hostility to certain ideas and practices did not necessarily entail wholesale repudiation of Christianity, or even the church itself.

On the other hand, there were hostile voices, and the discourse did indicate pressure on institutional religion. Church leaders were particularly conscious that their shaping influence in society was under threat, and concern about this was clearly part of what motivated criticism by the devout. The perception of limited and weakening religious influence within society was one of the greatest motivating factors behind the discourse. Church-going was but one obvious index of connection to organized Christianity. Though there are still puzzles concerning its actual extent and the meaning of attendance, it evidently reached a peak around the beginning of the twentieth-century as a proportion of the population.<sup>67</sup> Even if Victorian-era church attendance had been quite high in historical terms, some fall-off in church-going was apparent. Attendance at Sunday school also waned from this time, and church leaders became increasingly conscious that they were competing for loyalty in the face of other leisure and associational options.

Small decreases in church attendance prior to World War Two were no more evidence of secularization, as such, than “anti-church” discourse itself. In the longer term, part of the significance of the latter lay in its fostering of a sense of religious identity divorced from traditional religious community and ritual. As a form of piety, the Jesus as critic discourse effectively countenanced lower attachment to the key institution charged with nurturing and sustaining Christian faith and identity. In an age of voluntarism, that institutional role was particularly important. Weakening of respect for the church was therefore deeply significant. Wholesale criticism had a corrosive effect on the standing of the churches, which had implications for the cultural position of Christianity and transmission of the faith.

Christian identity was largely maintained in the first half of the twentieth-century, however, and the “modest religious boom” that David Hilliard identified in Australia in the decade or so after World War Two was also evident in New Zealand, as it was in other parts of the world.<sup>68</sup> Despite this, Christian socialization was increasingly attenuated. From the 1960s and 70s onwards, it became increasingly acceptable, and common, for New Zealanders—many of whom had previously been nominally Christian—to disavow any particular religious allegiance. The demise, and eclipse, of Christianity can be overstated even in more recent decades when self-declared rates of census “no religion” have risen sharply. Despite secularism, Paul Morris has noted that the influence of Christianity in the developed world, including New Zealand, remains “massive and central to our thinking.”<sup>69</sup> Spiritual beliefs have also persisted locally, with many of these beliefs evidently derived from popular Christian views.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, spiritual beliefs have become increasingly individualized and eclectic.

Individualized, eclectic belief is often interpreted as one of the hallmarks of postmodern spirituality. Yet this was also one of the issues at stake in earlier debates about

Churchianity versus Christianity. Writing in the *New Zealand Methodist Bible Class Link* in the 1920s, one contributor reacted somewhat defensively against this erroneous distinction, arguing that the popular saying, “I believe in Christianity, but not in Churchianity” was as fallacious as believing in healing but not hospitals, or education but not colleges.<sup>71</sup> Christianity needed its institutional form. Evidently, other “Christians” imagined different possibilities, believing that true Christianity could be expressed apart from conventional structures. In fact, this sentiment was essential to the spirit of the applied, practical Christianity that shaped so much of popular Christian culture during this period. The difficulty, as Steve Bruce has noted in relation to the British context, is that shorn from institutional life, popular Christianity inevitably becomes increasingly unrecognizable as Christian: “Without an institutional core, a popular religious culture cannot be sustained.”<sup>72</sup>

In Callum Brown’s terms, discursive Christianity was alive and well through the first half of the twentieth-century. It was, however, a complex phenomenon. Brown argues of Britain that “from the 1960s a suspicion of creeds arose that quickly took the form of a rejection of Christian tradition and all formulaic constructions of the individual.”<sup>73</sup> My argument is that that this suspicion had been evident considerably earlier, and had been an important constituent of New Zealand discursive Christianity since at least the beginning of the twentieth-century. If cultural displacement of Christianity occurred, it therefore occurred as a consequence of both longer and shorter-term processes. Even at the level of discursive Christianity alone, developments in the second half of the twentieth-century did not only indicate the “sudden collapse” of adherence to a moralistic set of protocols, but also the outworking of older and more self-critical ones.

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<sup>1</sup> A notable example is the sociologist Steve Bruce. See Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Thesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Steve Bruce “Secularisation, Church and Popular Religion,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62, no. 3 (2011): 543–61.

<sup>2</sup> For example, J.C.D. Clark, “Secularization and Modernization: The Failure of a ‘Grand Narrative,’” *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (2012): 161–94; David Nash, “Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History: Secularization’s Failure as a Master Narrative,” *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 3 (2004): 302–25.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Morris, “The Strange Death of Christian Britain: Another Look at the Secularization Debate,” *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 4 (2004): 963–76; Jeremy Morris, “Secularization and Religious Experience: Arguments in the Historiography of Modern British Religion,” *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (2012): 195–219.

<sup>4</sup> Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> “Intellectual Christianity” is also implied, insofar as Brown’s definition of it as “the influence of religious ideas within society” is accepted. Brown, *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Higton, “English Popular Culture, Modern.” in *Jesus in History, Culture and Thought: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, ed. Leslie Houlden (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 241.

<sup>8</sup> Levi H. Dowling, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (London: L.N. Fowler, 1908).

<sup>9</sup> *Found at Last! The Lost Gospel: The Book That Nobody Knows* (Wellington: Evening Post Print, 1931), 3, 33–5; [Edwin Abbott Abbott], *Philochristus: Memoirs of a Disciple of the Lord* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1878). Abbot is better known for writing the mathematical satire *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, which was first published in 1884.

<sup>10</sup> John Thomson, “Bibliography.” in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, ed. Terry Sturm (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1991), 636.

<sup>11</sup> A.H. Adams, *The Nazarene: A Study of A Man* (London: Philip Welby, 1902), 9–10.

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<sup>12</sup> On these themes, see Marit Flinn, “Seeing God and the Poetry of Ursula Bethell” (master’s thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Ursula Bethell, *Collected Poems*, ed. Vincent O’Sullivan (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1997), 22–23. See also “Sabbath” and “The Crucifix” in Bethell, *Collected Poems*, 23, 60–1.

<sup>14</sup> See P.J. Gibbons, “The Climate of Opinion.” in *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, 2nd ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Rice (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992), 308–36; cf. James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: Allen Lane, 2001), 327ff.

<sup>15</sup> R.A.K. Mason, *Collected Poems*, ed. Allen Curnow (Christchurch: Pegasus, 1962), 56.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Rachel Barrowman, *Mason: The Life of R.A.K. Mason* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004), 63.

<sup>17</sup> Erik Olssen, *Building the New World: Work, Politics and Society in Caversham 1880s–1920s* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995), 188, 193; cf. Margaret J. McArthur, “Collectivist Tracts and Altruistic Sermons: A Study of ‘Socialism’ in Late Nineteenth Century New Zealand” (master’s thesis, University of Canterbury, 1981); Erik Olssen, *The Red Feds: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908–1913* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Desmond, *Christ as a Social Reformer* (Auckland: Arthur Cleave, 1890). On Desmond, see *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 8 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1981), 291–2; Rachel Barrowman, “Desmond, Arthur fl. 1884–1894,” *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara—The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, accessed June 20 2013, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/2d9/desmond-arthur>.

<sup>19</sup> See Desmond, preface, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Donald M. Winters, *The Soul of the Wobblies: The I.W.W., Religion, and American Culture in the Progressive Era, 1905–1917* (Westport: Greenwood, 1985), 61–81.

<sup>21</sup> *Maoriland Worker* (MW), July 21 1911, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Thorn, *Stick Out, Keep Left*, eds. Elsie Locke and Jacquie Matthews (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1997), 49.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>24</sup> MW, July 21 1911, 15.

<sup>25</sup> MW, July 1 1914, 6.

<sup>26</sup> MW, May 5 1915, 1.

<sup>27</sup> MW, July 11 1913, 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Otago Liberal*, September 9 1905, 8.

<sup>29</sup> MW, July 11 1913, 3.

<sup>30</sup> MW, December 22 1915, 4.

<sup>31</sup> MW, September 26 1913, 7; also, MW, January 19 1912, 16; MW, March 14 1913, 1; Tony Simpson, *The Sugarbag Years* (Auckland: Penguin, 1984), 201.

<sup>32</sup> MW, April 7 1920, 4.

<sup>33</sup> MW, January 27 1915, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Bill Cooke, *Heathen in Godzone: Seventy Years of Rationalism in New Zealand* (Auckland: NZ Association of Rationalists and Humanists, 1998), 22.

<sup>35</sup> Jane Tolerton, *Ettie: A Life of Ettie Rout* (Auckland: Penguin, 1992), 32.

<sup>36</sup> E. Rout, *Sexual Health and Birth Control* (London: Pioneer Press, 1925), 11.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> On the popularity of the contrast between Churchianity and Christianity, *New Zealand Methodist Bible Class Link*, August 24 1924, 1.

<sup>39</sup> W. Bower Black, *The House of Quietness* (Christchurch: Presbyterian Bookroom, 1945), 58, 59.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> A.S. Wilson, *Definite Experience: Convention Aids and Deterrents* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1937), 53, quoting from E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of Every Road: A Study in Pentecost* (New York: Abingdon, 1930).

<sup>43</sup> Lionel B. Fletcher, *The Pathway to the Stars* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1933), 51.

- <sup>44</sup> Tobias Harper, “‘Amen, Amen!’ Christianity, Society and Visions of the Future in 1920s New Zealand,” *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH) 42, no. 2 (2008): 149.
- <sup>45</sup> *Hello Everybody* 4 (1935): 8.
- <sup>46</sup> *Hello Everybody* 2 (1935): 26.
- <sup>47</sup> *Hello Everybody* 2 (1935): 4.
- <sup>48</sup> A.J.S. Reid, “Church and State in New Zealand, 1930–35: A Study of the Social Thought and Influence of the Christian Church in a Period of Economic Crisis” (master’s thesis, Victoria University, 1961), 144.
- <sup>49</sup> *Hello Everybody* 2 (1935): 5.
- <sup>50</sup> See the report of Aimee Semple McPherson’s revival meetings, *Dominion*, August 28 1922, 6.
- <sup>51</sup> James E. Worsfold, *The Reverend Gilbert and Mrs Alice White* (Wellington: Julian Literature Trust, 1995), 25.
- <sup>52</sup> Dallimore has generally been regarded as a Pentecostal, though he insisted that his ministry was independent. See Laurie Guy, ‘One of a Kind? The Auckland Ministry of A.H. Dallimore,’ *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 8 (2004): 125–45.
- <sup>53</sup> *Revival Fire Monthly*, July 1937, 3, cited in *Ibid.*, 131 (original emphasis).
- <sup>54</sup> *New Zealand Baptist*, December 1932, 370.
- <sup>55</sup> *Press*, December 13 1932, 7.
- <sup>56</sup> See Laurie Guy, “Miracles, Messiahs and the Media: the Ministry of A.H. Dallimore in Auckland in the 1930s.” in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church*, eds. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge: Ecclesiastical History Society, 2005), 453–63.
- <sup>57</sup> *New Zealand Baptist*, December 1932, 370.
- <sup>58</sup> Robert Stout, letter to the editor, *Otago Daily Times*, September 5 1927; also Clive Pearson, Allan Davidson and Peter Lineham, *Scholarship and Fierce Sincerity: Henry D.A. Major, The Face of Anglican Modernism* (Auckland: Polygraphia, 2005).
- <sup>59</sup> H.D.A. Major, *The Gospel of Freedom* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912), viii.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>61</sup> On social Christians, Ron Howell, *Christian Pacifism and Social Change* (Auckland: Christian Pacifist Society of New Zealand, Auckland Branch, 1945), 22–4. On ecumenists, *New Zealand Herald*, March 9 1928; A.L. Haddon, *The Coming of the World Church: A Brief Introduction to the Ecumenical Movement* (Wellington: Youth Committee of the New Zealand Council of Religious Education, 1942), 5. On liturgically-oriented faith healing, see *New Zealand Herald*, October 8 1923, 9; *Dominion*, November 6 1923, 9; *Parish Magazine* (All Saints’ Anglican Church, Palmerston North), October 4 1923, 19; *Proceedings of the Diocesan Synod of the Diocese of Wellington*, 1923, 56.
- <sup>62</sup> Morris, “Secularization and Religious Experience,” 207; Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 16.
- <sup>63</sup> This idea is developed extensively in Geoffrey Troughton, *New Zealand Jesus: Social and Religious Transformations of an Image, 1890–1940* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).
- <sup>64</sup> Harper, “Amen, Amen!,” 148–9.
- <sup>65</sup> See the interchange between J.T. Paul and correspondents in the *Methodist Outlook*; Newspaper Clippings Book, 1903–6, J.T. Paul Papers, MS-982/707, Hocken Library, Dunedin.
- <sup>66</sup> John Stenhouse, “The Controversy of the Recognition of Religious Factors in New Zealand History: some Reflections.” in *The Spirit of the Past: Essays on Christianity in New Zealand History*, eds. Geoffrey Troughton and Hugh Morrison (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011), 52–3.
- <sup>67</sup> Until recently, the standard analysis of church attendance has been Hugh Jackson, “Church Going in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand,” NZJH 17, no. 1 (1983): 43–59. For intimations of the limitations of Jackson’s interpretation, and the likelihood of a higher rate of church-going see Alison Clarke, “Churchgoing in New Zealand, 1874–1926: How ‘Mediocre’ Was It?” NZJH 47, no. 2 (2013): 106–35; also Stenhouse, “The Controversy of the Recognition of Religious Factors,” 51–2.
- <sup>68</sup> David Hilliard, “The Religious Crisis of the 1960s: The Experience of the Australian Churches,” *Journal of Religious History* 21, no. 2 (1997): 211; cf. Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 5; Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- <sup>69</sup> Paul Morris, “Fragments of Faith: Religion in Contemporary New Zealand,” *New Zealand Studies* 9, no. 1 (1999): 17.

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<sup>70</sup> For the most recent discussion of demographic change in relation to census religion, see William James Hoverd, “No Longer a Christian Country? Religious Demographic Change in New Zealand, 1966–2006,” *New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 23, no. 1 (2008): 41–65; on religious attitudes and values, see Franco Vaccarino, Heather Kavan and Philip Gendall, “Spirituality and Religion in the Lives of New Zealanders,” *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 1, no. 2 (2011); *What Do New Zealanders Believe? Part I: December 2011* (Wellington: UMR Research, 2011). Also, Stenhouse, “The Controversy of the Recognition of Religious Factors,” 53–4.

<sup>71</sup> *New Zealand Methodist Bible Class Link*, August 24 1924, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Bruce, “Secularisation, Church and Popular Religion.”

<sup>73</sup> Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 193.