

Christ at Large

Iconography and Territoriality in Postwar Ambon

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Not only Christ but the whole universe disappears if neither circumscribability nor image exists.

—Patriarch Nikephoros, *Antirrhetics*

Picture a situation of blindness, invisibility, and uncertainty, where the sense of unseen and faceless danger prevails, where what was once familiar becomes unfamiliar, where everyday appearances hide unknown horrors. This is one way of describing the recent war in Ambon, the capital of the Moluccas in eastern Indonesia. The Malino Peace Agreement in early 2002, following three years of intermittent violence, left a city divided into “Christian” and “Muslim” territories, with up to ten thousand persons killed and close to seven hundred thousand displaced, equaling one-third of a total Moluccan population of 2.1 million, including those fleeing violence on neighboring islands.¹ Elsewhere I have written about the kinds of “anticipatory practices” and “hyper-hermeneutics” ordinary Ambonese developed during the brutal conflict that, from early 1999 to the official peace in 2002, with outbreaks thereafter, pitted Muslims and Christians against each other in vicious, destructive battle.² Deploying an exacerbated sensibility, these practices aimed to anticipate the unforeseen by mining sensory signs for what might lie beneath their surface manifestations in order to head off pervasive uncertainty and perceptions of imminent danger. An aesthetics of hidden depth, such anticipatory practices and hyper-hermeneutics comprised a discourse of disguise and revelation following armed confrontation in which enemy corpses and garments were said to yield further signs of pernicious identity and design—an army uniform concealed under a *jihadist’s* robe, *ilmu* or black magic amulets hidden

on bodies, incendiary pamphlets, and so on. As responses, such practices were both adaptive and productive of the radical transformation of Ambon City—of its social and material arrangements, of common bodily rhythms, of patterns and assumptions underlying interactions as well as appearances—friendship, contact, animosity, avoidance, trust, cohabitation—of tacit understandings of time, space, density, distance, proximity, and of the gradual sedimentation of violence as productive of a context congenial to more violence.

In Ambon today, new anxieties as well as phantasms of the past animate the city; radicalized and invigorated during the war, they insert themselves in novel ways into its contested, territorialized spaces. Thus, one current residue of the aesthetics of hidden depth in the postconflict situation is an increasingly consolidated discourse concerning the face of the other, according to which many Muslims and Christians claim to discern under an ordinary Ambonese face its respective Christian or Muslim contours.³ Taking the fraught unseeing and a concomitant exacerbation of the sensorium as simply one among several points of departure, I will focus on the postwar proliferation of billboard portraits of Jesus and gigantic murals rising out of war's ruins along the city's main thoroughfares and at Christian neighborhood gateways. These paintings bear witness and give material form to Christian anxieties about invisibility, while aiming to alleviate the condition of being unseen. They also speak, more generally, to the hypervisibility that is part and parcel of the transient production of places as media "hot spots," wounded, traumatized cities, and war zones within current globalized conditions. Although I cannot develop this here, at issue is how the stability of the nation, once assumed, is increasingly shot through, undermined, and eroded by transnational processes—specifically, here, the wider humanitarian apparatus and the national and international media organizations that descend en masse upon a given place, only to move on, frequently following a dynamic internal to themselves—when another "hot spot" flares up. Of interest in this respect are less tired metropolitan reactions to the numbing seriality of such hot spots than the erratic rhythms and effects in places beyond the metropole of such momentary, if intensive, mediations.⁴

W. J. T. Mitchell argues that "visual culture" entails, among other things, a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked.⁵ Against the backdrop of multiple visibilities, blindness, invisibility, and the unseen figure in a number of ways. First, as I have already intimated, the Ambonese sense that they cannot trust appearances, cannot see or foresee what might come. The war radically refigured not simply subjectivity but, more precisely, sensory subjectivity. Second, there is a pervasive sense, among ordinary Ambonese, that they themselves were unseen, that their massive suffering went unnoticed by the Indonesian government, their fellow countrymen, and the larger world. Among minority Christians—who as a result of the official "Islamicization" of Indonesia during the late Suharto era,⁶ the current heightened public visibility of Islam nationally and transnationally, and the recent war saw their longstanding privileged social, political, and economic position drastically diminished, this sense of being

unseen was especially strong. And if Muslims from May 2000 on, or a good year after the conflict began, had their own side reinforced by the influx of *jihad* fighters from around the archipelago,⁷ Christians, by contrast, felt abandoned by the United Nations, the European Union, and the Netherlands, on which many had set serious hopes.⁸

For Christians, compelling historical reasons underwrite this dramatic sense of displacement. Thus, historians of the Moluccas conventionally refer to Ambon's Muslim population as the city's "Other Half."⁹ They also document the irrelevance of Central Moluccan Muslims to the colonial government in the wake of the Dutch East India Company's imposition of a trade monopoly on spices from the seventeenth century on. Marianne Hulsbosch, for instance, in her dissertation on the history of Moluccan dress, notes how "successful [the Dutch colonial government was] in isolating the Ambonese Muslims from the rest of the Muslim population in Indonesia until well into the twentieth century"—when, by contrast, Christian Ambonese, or the colony's "Black Dutchmen," were well ensconced within the ranks of the colonial army and bureaucracy. With respect to visibility, in particular, Hulsbosch observes how "this virtual isolation from other Muslim communities in the Indonesian archipelago and their insignificance in the eyes of the colonial government is reflected in the amount of visual information available. Few, if any, early-twentieth-century images of Ambonese Muslim women [or, by extension, men] have been captured . . . [while] it is remarkable that [colonial officers] like Riedel (1886) and Sachse (1907)," writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "did not even consider Muslim dress, although both wrote descriptive notes on Christian and native appearances. For them the Muslims were invisible—a sad statement considering at the end of the nineteenth century they made up 28.3 percent of the population. On the main island of Ambon, the Muslim population even topped 38 percent. This ignorance says much about colonial regard for the Muslim [as opposed to Christian] population."¹⁰ From Indonesian independence in 1945 through the early 1990s, the general privileging of Christians, especially locally in the Moluccas, but also nationally under the quasi-secularist, nationalist politics of Presidents Sukarno and Suharto, kept this asymmetry largely in place.

Much more could be said about the complicated, skewed, and in part, but *only in part* bifurcated history of Ambon's peoples. Here, I invoke it merely as one among other factors contributing to the current shock prevalent among Ambon's Christians at finding themselves outside the national spotlight. In everyday discourse, this shock congeals in the statement, uttered by Muslims and Christians alike when commenting on the many twisted outcomes of the recent war, that "Christians are now *becak*—that is, pedicab—drivers." Before the war and their forced evacuation from Ambon during the conflict's very first days, migrant Muslims from South Sulawesi predominated in this menial occupation. As a profession, it stands in sharp contrast to the high social status and privileges of the *pegawai*, or government bureaucrat, in which Ambon's Christians until recently prevailed—and still do, to a considerable extent. The deceptively casual observation about

Christians being *becak* drivers registers the extent to which the fortunes of Ambon's Christians are understood locally to have plummeted. At issue is nothing less than a "sundering" of these subjects from their former place in social, political, economic—indeed, even metaphysical—terms.¹¹ Both the *longue durée* and the postconflict redeployments of the performative loci of subjectivity inform the widespread perception among Christians of being forgotten and overlooked. And within the general blindness of the war, more radical even than the sense that their suffering went unnoticed by Jakarta and elsewhere or the shock at postwar predicaments is the doubt, implicit in some current practices and discourse, that Christian Ambonese and their desperate circumstances may have been invisible even to God himself.

The Absence of God

A theological impossibility, the absence of God is never explicitly proclaimed. Instead, it compels statements about *other* Christians who "doubted" his omniscience during the war; it also partially explains the rising numbers of Ambonese who convert from the mainstream Moluccan Protestantism of the GPM (*Gereja Protestan Maluku*), or Protestant Church of the Moluccas, to "purer," "born again" forms like Pentecostalism, as well as the occasional iconoclastic outburst. More directly relevant, though, are the insistent, repetitive statements—a kind of protesting too much—that during the war God was *here*, present and truly here, watching over Ambon. This kind of statement cropped up frequently in my discussions with a handful of Christian painters. Popular and largely untrained, during the war and since they have been plastering their city with mega-portraits of Jesus and murals depicting scenes from his life, Christian symbols, martyrdom, and resurrection. Among these painters, no more than a dozen in all, there are considerable individual differences in style, personal conviction, and artistic, religious, and commercial understanding of their work. They also differ in biography, current occupation, and so on. To give a sense of the range, among the painters I worked with most closely there is the former director of Ambon's *Siwailima* museum, devoted to traditional Moluccan culture. He is the only one among the local Christian painters with any formal art-academy training. Another learned to paint and notably airbrush in the streets of Jakarta, near the market area of Blok M, during a brief sojourn in the Indonesian capital. Yet another has some technical training as a draftsman. Employed at Ambon's Telecommunications Office, he maps the city's underground infrastructure of cables and teleconnections. Finally, another is a self-taught, formidable archivist who, through multiple media—paintings, statuary, a music and dance group, historiographic writings, and his own museum—documents Central Moluccan Seramese culture. Such impressive diversity among these Moluccan Christian painters should not, however, obscure their fundamental similarity

as pivotal figures in the postconflict reinvention of Christianity and Christian Ambonese subjectivity from the sidelines and often quite literally sidewalks of the city.

That painters—and these are, importantly, people who love to paint, besides being Christians—should insist so much on the presence of God is hardly surprising, since one recurrent way they seem to think and talk about their work is as a kind of presencing of God. Again, this insistence on God’s presence registers, I believe, a terrifying and inexpressible doubt—namely, its opposite, the possible absence of God—whose trace is felt only in the vehemence with which this possibility is repeatedly foreclosed, in part by the pictures themselves and their assertive spread across Ambon. Certainly, during the war the production of these paintings, or the more violent portrayals that preceded them, may have entailed an important leap of faith—an act of blind faith, as it were, in circumstances where the faith of many seems to have been pushed to the limit. Whatever its more existential aspects, for the painters I work with in Ambon, this limit assumed concrete forms: one man described painting fearlessly with bombs exploding close by and bullets flying around him (but magically diverted in other directions); another, who lost much of his life’s work and almost his life when forced to flee his burning home, now draws on surrealism to translate his own and others’ apocalyptic visions; yet another suffered assault by iconoclast Christians, who destroyed some of the cement statues of pagan warriors and headhunter portraits that crowd this eighty-five-year-old former prison director’s tiny museum. This man recently resumed painting, following what his son, a Protestant minister, called a “crisis of doubt.” Christian themes and scenes of war’s devastation now flank the modest miniature—as opposed to former life-size—faces of Seram Island’s most renowned ancient “warlords.” I use the notion of limit in several ways here—to invoke the uncertainty that hovers at the edge of faith and to characterize the overwhelming impulse to *picture* or *represent* in the midst of crisis.

Yet above all it is the paintings themselves that most clearly describe a limit. In their performative presencing, their channeling of a host of forces and phantasms through God’s eye, and their monumentalization of the horizons shaping Christian Ambonese existence, the paintings telescope a theory of community: a theory of how it is made, how it is produced, out of what, in relation to what, against what, in opposition to what, in spite of, and by the grace of what.¹² While their explicit aim is to reproduce the canon of standard Christian iconography—itself tailored, crucially, to a world in place—the paintings assume this reproductive work during war and its aftermath—with, as we will see, important consequences. For the moment, suffice it to say that in their own fashion they might be seen as “captions of an unstable cityscape.”¹³ But before turning to the pictures and asking ourselves, following Mitchell, what they might *want*, a few orienting remarks are in place.

On the face of it, the Christian topos of God’s visual appraisal of his creation, the foundational separation of lightness from dark, the preeminence of vision as “the sovereign sense,” and the illumination widely held by Ambonese Christians to enhance their

own faces, by contrast to the dark illegibility of the Muslim, undoubtedly shed light on a crucial dimension here. These Christian pictures, however, are shot through with multiple other visualities and thus suggest a much broader thematization of the visual than the purely theological or one or another mode of mystical seeing or being seen. To enumerate, these include: the imperfect human eye; the evidentiary eye of news broadcasts, human rights, and Truth commissions; the legitimizing bureaucratic eye of state seeing;¹⁴ the eye of the international community, felt by many Indonesians to be upon them after Suharto's fall—*di mata internasional*, a common trope, following Strassler, of *Reformasi*¹⁵—the “spotlight” that singles out and multi-mediate successive “hot spots” around the globe and the reality effects thereof; and the promotional commodification of places as “images” for tourism and other commercial ends. To be sure, as a globalizing religion, Christianity is always already at large. Yet perhaps here such overreach is singularly salient, with Christ standing in for and subsuming a host of powerful forces and authorizing instances realized as an array of visualities.

Condensing so much into so little, the paintings also draw explicitly and implicitly upon different visual genres—most obviously, as suggested, those of Christian iconography. A number of Ambon's painters use standard books featuring color-saturated Christian scenes as models for their murals; others find inspiration from T-shirts, posters sold on the streets and in local stores, the jacket covers of Christian music CDs (*lagu-lagu rohani*), or popular films, such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.¹⁶ More covertly, the violent murals that, set in local topography, documented the destruction of key sacred sites, such as Ambon's Silo Church, but are now overpainted with “comforting” (*sejuk*) scenes—in one painter's words, like crucifixion—undoubtedly refracted the graphic “martyrdom” of video CDs produced by both Christians and Muslims during the war.¹⁷ Graffiti comprised another relevant genre here, less for their formal qualities than for their performative punch—as the local expression of powerful *emosi* (“passion,” commonly suggesting the potential for violence) and for the larger defacement of Muslims contained in the communicative force of a (Christian) *God is/was here*.

I would like to highlight a few things in the accompanying pictures. First is the prevalent reproduction of the Christian canon; pictures are often copied straight from books, so that one sees the same scene reproduced by different painters. Second is the prominence of the face of Jesus, manifest in different ways. The portrait of Jesus is commonly set apart from other pictures: it stands next to or floats on a billboard above the mural it flanks or is offset as a “cameo” within an otherwise chronological series leading from birth through martyrdom to resurrection. Free-standing Jesus billboards rise along the highway leading from the airport into Ambon. Third is the way in which Christ's face is either figured alone or overlooks scenes of suffering, moral decay, apocalyptic destruction, actual warfare, or the demolition of Christian sites. The final aspect I want to point out is the new publicity of these pictures, with the migration of standard Christian iconography from local church interiors and the walls of Christian homes to public urban space.

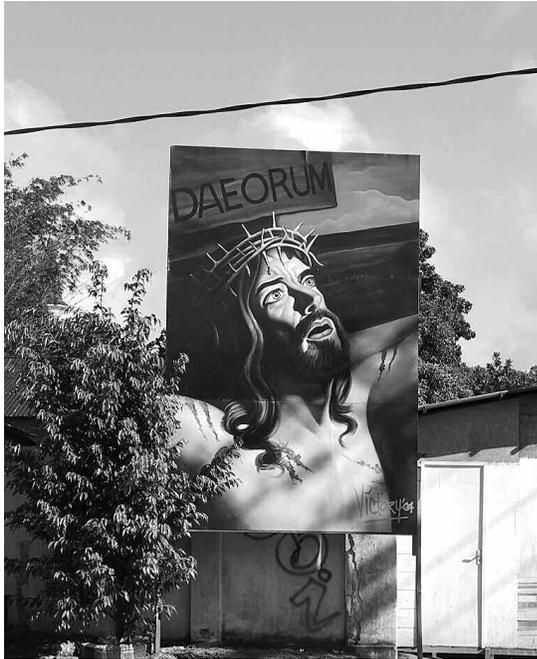


FIGURE 1
Jesus billboard.
Ambon, 2006.



FIGURE 2
Jesus billboard.
Ambon, 2006.



FIGURE 3 Jesus mural with cameo portrait. Ambon, 2006.



FIGURE 4 Jesus mural with cameo portrait. Ambon, 2003.



FIGURE 5
Jesus billboard.
Ambon, 2003.



FIGURE 6 Painting based on a prophetic vision of Ambon's destruction. Ambon, 2006.

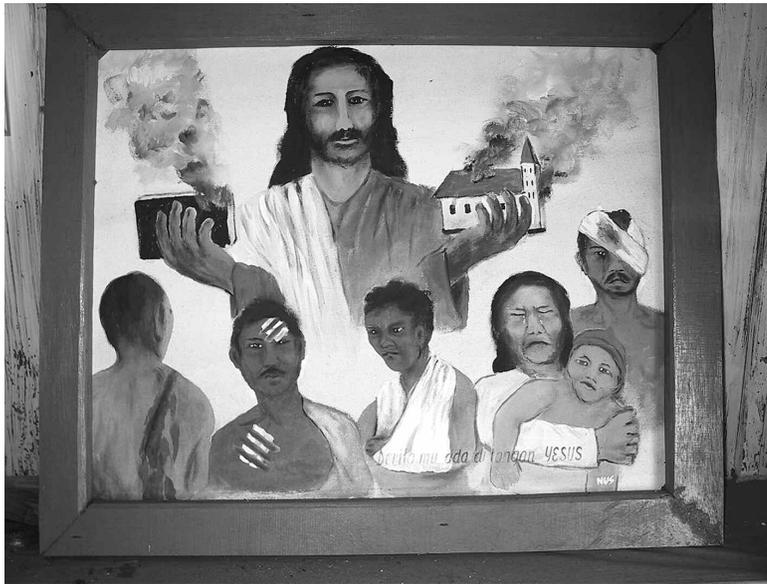


FIGURE 7 Painting of an indigenous Christ. Inscription reads, "Your suffering is in the hands of Jesus." Seram, 2005.



FIGURE 8 Painting of Jesus overlooking the destruction of Silo Church. Ambon, 2005.



FIGURE 9 Prayer niche in a private home. Note the book that serves as the model for the mural. Ambon, 2005.

It should come as no surprise that the practice of painting—its location, scale, import, inspiration—was, like so much else in the war, not immune to the radical transformations taking place in the city. Before the war, several of Ambon’s present painters found occasional employment decorating the interiors of the city’s newly built churches or those on neighboring islands, such as Saparua, with Christian scenes and symbols—angels with trumpets, Christ on clouds, and so on—or embellishing their exteriors with statues and reliefs. The move of such pictures out of churches and the revisions they have undergone are part of the wider fissuring of public space during and after the war by highly visible, publicized, and competing forms of religion. Ambon’s Christians took to the streets during the conflict with Bibles in hand, pictures of Christ floating above the crowd, ambulatory public prayer sessions, and red headties. Muslims wore white headties, carried banners with Arabic inscriptions and green and white flags, and met Christian cries of *halleluyah* with their own *allahu akbar*. The aggressive mutual engagement and mirroring has left its legacy in the city: for instance, in the Christian convention, dating

from the war, of using *syalom* as a greeting “since the Muslims have *wassalamu alaikum*,” or in the current need, when addressing a young Ambonese, to determine quickly whether he is a Muslim *bang* (from *abang*) or a Christian *bung*, or she a Muslim *cece* or Christian *usi*.¹⁸

Christ at Large

Asking, as Mitchell does, *What [do] these pictures want?* is a good place to start.¹⁹ One indication that they want something is a departure, in *some* of them, from conventional Christian iconography. A canon presumes a delimited, knowable, and, in the Christian case at least, somewhat orderly visible world. When the world is more or less in place, the appearance of things and the actions of one’s fellows correspond to common expectations. Subjects and objects moor each other in predictable ways, enabling the canon to unfold its conventional images in a world where family, churches, community, and the like are more or less in place to receive them. When, by contrast, the world falls apart, the canon may succumb to unprecedented pressures. What images want becomes frustrated, since their correspondence to the world no longer applies. As a result, they may burst from their frames, like the mouth in Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, moved by its desire to devour the world around it. In such moments of intensified desire and frustration, pictures come out—becoming assertive and monumental, like the gigantic lips thrusting forward from the TV, they demand new forms to satisfy their needs.

Here I am seeking to expose the inherently delicate, transitory nature of the associations that pertain between any given setting and the image world to which it is provisionally conjoined. The necessity of attending to the particular constellations and transformative possibilities of such provisional life- and image-world affinities follows from this insight.²⁰ In Ambon, one consequence of the war has been that Christ comes up close. Stepping out of conventional Christian iconography, he witnesses *directly* the devastation of Silo Church, looks down sorrowfully upon the suffering of Seramese Christians in Soahuku, sheds bloody tears on a map of the island, and oversees the city from Karpan, the privileged high place, featured in tourist brochures, that is held to offer the best view of Ambon. In so doing, he confirms the insistent claim of the painters that God *is/was here*, present and truly here, watching over Ambon. He also underwrites the view of some who, wondering why God inflicted the war upon them, see it as a way of “promoting” Ambon (I. *dipromosikan*)²¹—unlike Bali, unknown to most outsiders—for business and other profitable aims.

The exacerbated condition of Christ at large, comprising both Christ’s coming up close and the assertive spread of Christian pictures in the city, took place due to a radical unmooring of the urban landscape, along with the conventional modes of apprehending it. Let me recall briefly some of the dramatic dislocations of the war. BBMers—Buginese,

Butonese, and Makassarese migrants—were driven out of Ambon during the conflict's first days. The Ambonese, virtually overnight, were turned into refugees in their own city. An influx of people came in, fleeing outbreaks of violence on neighboring Moluccan islands. *Jihadists* arrived from Java a good year into the conflict. There was the ongoing, largely disruptive presence of National Army troops, Special Forces, police reinforcements, local militias, and youth gangs, and, last but not least, the flood of representatives from diverse religious and humanitarian organizations, NGOs of varying provenance and scale, and media practitioners from a range of national and international electronic and print media institutions. As the war dragged on, many Ambonese fled the city, retreating to villages on the island or surrounding ones, while storeowners and some civil servants fled, if possible, even further afield, occasionally as far as Manado, the predominantly Christian capital of North Sulawesi Province or, in the case of Muslims, to Makassar in South Sulawesi. In Ambon City itself, other signs of the many dislocations affecting the urban landscape included transitory sightings of Christ, apocalyptic apparitions, and violent disturbances inflecting banal objects and locations, such as pineapple jelly coagulating into blood or blood coursing from faucets.²²

During the war, there came to be a brisk traffic between the apparitional and the more conventionally portrayed, which persists today. Christ's common depiction as a European derives, Ambonese often insist, not only from the pictorial examples provided in church and schools but from his own occasional appearance to them in visions and dreams.²³ Time and again, during the conflict, rumors circulated of Christians having spotted Christ rising as a great white commander with flowing golden hair upon the city's battlefields. One of the few Ambonese with the gift of prophecy even engaged painters to commit his visions to canvas, as in one picture dated carefully just days before the conflict, forecasting Ambon's apocalyptic ruin.

Times Rich in Demons

If Christ is at large, so, too, these "times [are] rich in demons."²⁴ The import of what Michel de Certeau calls a "diabolical crisis" lies both in its disclosure of the fault lines and imbalances permeating a culture and the way it hastens this culture's transformation. In a situation where uncertainty reigns, the taken-for-granted social arrangements and values of everyday existence are shot through with suspicion and hollowed out, and the world shifts intolerably under one's feet. Deviltries then abound as both symptoms and transitional solutions.²⁵ Ambon at war was no exception, and religion became a privileged language through which much uncertainty found expression. There are good reasons for this in Ambon, as well as in the larger context of post-Suharto Indonesia, to which I will soon turn. First, however, I will offer a brief sense of the devil at work in Ambon and, relatedly, the enhanced publicity of religion, together with its newfound mobility.

A Protestant minister with whom I spoke on several occasions attributed much of Ambon's turmoil and the long-term ferocity of the conflict to the widespread use of magic or *occultisme* on both sides. The GPM's head of Pastoral Counseling recalled the vast collection of protective cloth cords (*I. tali kain*) that he and others had amassed during extra afternoon prayer sessions, held at 3:00 P.M. for four consecutive years beginning in 1999, at the GPM's head Maranatha Church. In the first four months alone, four large boxes were filled with the talismanic cords, voluntarily surrendered by Ambonese at the conclusion of these daily prayer sessions and subsequently burned. Symptomatic of a much larger problem, the tenacious hold of pagan or tribal religion (*I. agama suku*) at the core of Ambonese existence aggravated and amplified the conflict. For the minister, this presence was exemplified in the deployment of magic by Christians and Muslims alike during the war, whether to protectively "seal" their villages against enemy assaults, call upon the spirits of former warlords from around the Moluccas (*A.M. kapitan-kapitan*), or invoke the martial prowess of ancient times, for which Moluccans are renowned throughout Indonesia. Initially I took him to mean that beneath the successive waves of world religions that had washed over the Moluccas—Islam, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism—and been "received" by the local population, what he called the tribal "nucleus" might actually be understood as unifying Muslims and Christians. Seen in this light, they would be equally Ambonese if, at the same time, equally troubled by a persistent paganism. On another occasion, however, when the minister described for me the diabolical possession and exorcism of a Javanese convert to Protestantism, a woman who had been possessed by the (Muslim) daughter of the Sultan of North Moluccan Ternate, it became clear that no unity could in fact be assumed.

To make a long story short, the possessions began in a Christian prayer group of five persons when the woman in question introduced to its members a small stone that had been given to her by a woman clad solely in black. Strange things began to happen. Whoever held the stone fell ill, while the entire group started to pray as Muslims—with their hands held out flat and open in front of them as if supporting the Qur'an. Possession here appeared to lay bare the fault lines of a highly fraught, religiously mixed urban society—it came via a Muslim convert to Christianity, turned a Christian prayer group into a Muslim *pengajian* (a Qur'anic reading session) and introduced the formerly powerful, ancient North Moluccan sultanate of Ternate into the core of Christian worship.²⁶ Rather than a pure if problematic tribal core around which successive competing world religions wrapped over the centuries, or even the realities of a city barricaded and blocked off into distinctive Muslim and Christian quarters, possession disclosed and unleashed a devilish mix, where what was once Muslim and once Christian—or where these, respectively, had been held to begin and end—collapsed violently into one another. As René Girard once so aptly put it, "It is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence."²⁷ Such, indeed, are the symptoms of a world where numerous entities—here

“religion,” or *agama*, foremost among them—are in turmoil and undergo radical mutation. Seen in this light, all the dialectical tension between Muslims and Christians in Ambon betrays the historically deep-rooted entanglement of the two communities more than any separation. With the breakdown of important differences and increased porosity between them, the mutual beholdenness of the two communities has given way to a sense of threat. The Christians especially feel embattled, even haunted and possessed by the Muslim other.

Previously, the relations between Muslims and Christians had, by and large, been kept in place through a variety of factors, including the Suharto regime’s policies toward religion, a colonial and postcolonial history in Ambon of Christian privilege and Muslim marginality, the intervillage *pela* alliances that conjoin some Ambonese Muslim and Christian communities,²⁸ and the tacit understanding that living together meant living not only with difference but even with occasional violence. Under the Dutch, relations among the proponents of different faiths had been ordered and their places of residence commonly segregated, whether by village or in cities by religiously and ethnically defined quarters. In the Moluccas, for example, not only did a segregated settlement pattern separate Muslims and Christians but to this day Protestants and Catholics tend to reside separately as well. This has a clear colonial legacy: in the late nineteenth century, when Catholic missionaries aimed to establish a station in the area, they were instructed to avoid Ambon, where Protestants had long prevailed, and were offered the southeastern Moluccas for their proselytizing instead.²⁹

More generally, in the immediate postindependence period, Indonesian public life could be described by the presence of diverse *aliran* or “educational and associational currents.”³⁰ At the time, these became reconfigured as political parties, which, in turn, were identified with clusters of nationalist organizations based on shared experiences, institutional affiliations, and religious or secular persuasions. As scholars of Indonesia have often remarked, this kind of public ordering recalls the system of *verzuiling*, or pillarization, prevalent in the Netherlands from the late nineteenth century through the mid-1960s. Following this form of governmentality, social and political life was organized around religious difference, with society comprising a series of religiously marked pillars, each with its own political party, media institutions, and universities—an ordering so extensive that at the village level bakeries, butchers, greengrocers, and the like were all informally pillarized as well. The Dutch colloquial expression “two religions on one pillow, the Devil lies in between” captures the logic of this sociopolitical arrangement.

As political scientist John Sidel observes of the Moluccas, the pattern of strict spatial segregation between Muslims and Christians characteristic both of villages scattered across the region and of urban neighborhoods (I. *kampung*) in Ambon “was reinforced by government policies [under Suharto] prohibiting interfaith marriages, expanding religious instruction in schools, and promoting a pattern of recruitment into the bureaucracy through networks based on religious affiliation.”³¹ In the wake of the 1965–66 massacres

of communists and alleged communists that brought Suharto to power, having—as opposed to “not yet having” (I. *belum beragama*)—one of the five officially recognized religions was one way many Indonesians tried to avoid being cast as communists. Under Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno, religion had already been enshrined within the state ideology of Pancasila as a crucial criterion of national membership. There it figures as the first of Pancasila’s five principles, namely, the belief in a Supreme Being (I. *Sila Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*).³² Much as the public crafting of religion as a privileged tool of government became extended under Suharto—with the equation of “the having of a religion” and citizenship drawn increasingly tight—so, too, did Pancasila itself undergo transformation. In 1985, for instance, it was declared the “sole basis [*azas tunggal*]” of the state—styled a *Negara Pancasila* or “Pancasila State.”³³ For ordinary Indonesians the close link between citizenship and religion was codified on the KTP (I. *Kartu Tanda Penduduk*), or citizen’s identity card, which demanded allegiance to one of the alleged monotheistic religions recognized by the state: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism.³⁴

The Indonesian state’s partial withdrawal in the wake of Suharto’s May 1998 step-down and the launching in 2000 of a national program of decentralization introduced crisis into this form of governmentality based on the state’s strict apportioning and vigilance over the identities of the country’s citizens.³⁵ Religion was foremost among these state-enjoined identities. Following Sidel, “the boundaries of identities and interests in Indonesian society, long determined by a fixed, hierarchical source of recognition firmly anchored in the state and centered in Jakarta, were left in flux. . . . If under a centralized, closed authoritarian regime, claims of representation had been imposed and enforced from above, now under conditions of political openness and competition the boundaries of religious authority have to be affirmed from without and from below.”³⁶ Generally speaking, this situation accounts in part for the outbreak in many parts of Indonesia of what sociologists conventionally call “horizontal” violence. In Ambon, specifically, it forms an important backdrop to the proliferation of Jesus portraits that proclaim the powers of Protestant religion and, with these, the installation, as I argue below, upon the ruins of recent warfare of a source of authorized recognition for the Ambonese Christian community as well.

Often in Ambon and occasionally elsewhere in Indonesia, journalists, NGO activists, or even some religious leaders would object to me that, appearances notwithstanding, religion was not in fact what lay at the heart of the city’s conflict. By way of explanation, they commonly sought refuge in conspiracy theories, allusions to military connivings, or to the rotten politics of the state, identified simply as “Jakarta” or *Pusat*, the Center. Take, for instance, Sammy Titaley, the renowned Ambonese minister and GPM Synode head during the first part of the conflict: “I told the President, Gus Dur—I said how is it that you don’t have the means to stop this. We met the American Ambassador and he said

‘your government has no willing [sic] to stop the conflict in Ambon.’” Invoking a common Ambonese expression for the province’s alleged manipulation by Jakarta politicians, he summarized the situation: “Other folk beat drums [in Jakarta], we dance to them [in Ambon] [A.M. *orang lain pukul tifa, kami yang nari*].” He continued:

Everyone went to Jakarta to ask for help in 2001 during the Megawati era. They went to General this, General that, and they asked them, right? And then these Generals would reply “What, you mean Ambon isn’t destroyed yet?” “No way!” Then when the fighting was still going on, a Commander was sent to Ambon who was in charge of all the soldiers from Java who were based in the Moluccas. A Balinese, he was called the Territorial Commander. In Ambon he went to the Maranatha Church, to visit it, right. So we talked there and all kinds of people gathered around, [he said], “Boy, I’m from Java, right, and as far as I knew Ambon had already been leveled.” So just imagine how confused this one Commander was. Amazing. This means that as far as they were concerned [in Jakarta] Ambon had already been destroyed. So this means that we can know right away what kind of plot (I. *scenario*) was going on here, right?³⁷

During such conversations, especially journalists and NGO activists would, each in their own fashion, often go on to explain how religion had been instrumentalized under Suharto or, in a somewhat different sense, made what anthropologists call “good to think with.” In either case, whether following Sidel’s argument concerning a nationwide crisis afflicting the constitution of religious authority in Indonesia today or the former New Order regime’s codification of religion as a privileged instrument of governmentality amenable to a range of different objectives—including the production of violence—the absolute centrality of religion is underscored.

To designate those forms of societal difference that were banned as either topics of discussion or sources of conflict, the Suharto regime coined the acronym SARA—comprising the first letters of the Indonesian words for tribe-religion-race-class (I. *Suku–Agama–Ras–Antar-golongan*). With the fall of the authoritarian regime, SARA has been lifted and we find, along with violence conducted in the name of religion, a new openness toward and about the subject. Religion is a privileged topic of discussion on television, the radio, and the Internet, as well as in offices, houses, markets, and the streets; it is the recurrent focus of a wide variety of public fora, call-in programs on television and the radio, and interfaith dialogues and initiatives; and it is often at the center of the ubiquitous *semiloka*, or seminars, held all over the country since the New Order’s demise. The Suharto state was the arbiter that allotted religious identity and also guaranteed that religion remained in its proper place; with the reconfiguration of the state post-Suharto and its retreat on some fronts, religion appears to be obeying a logic of its own—albeit one that was enabled and energized by the New Order’s particular mode of governmentality.

Kept under tight wrap during the long Suharto era, religion is out in the open in Indonesia today, with religions bursting from their allotted places in public search of audiences, bodies, and spaces.

If religion enjoys a newfound openness, it is also very much on the move. The assertive portraits and murals erected by Ambon's Protestant Christians emerge within a highly mobile religious terrain. One clear indication of this mobility is the move out of Christian homes of religious iconography—an iconography that, until recently, was decidedly small-scale and confined to calendars and the like. Another is what for lack of a better term might be called a larger “iconographic turn,” of which both the Christian pictures' mobility and their monumentalization are crucial components. The particular Protestant tradition that since the seventeenth century has historically been present in Ambon is, even among Protestants, a radically iconoclastic one, deriving from the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church, of which Ambon's GPM is a direct descendant.³⁸

Besides the other factors previously named, an additional factor probably at work in this “iconographic turn” is the unprecedented rapprochement of Ambon's Protestants and the city's Catholic population, both during and since the war. This rapprochement between what in the Moluccas had always been religious rivals is evident in the use by Protestants, during the war, of Catholic rosaries and pocket-size prayer books produced by nuns as protective amulets.³⁹ It also informs the practice of “pulpit exchange” (I. *tukar mimbar*), according to which a Protestant minister will lead a service in a Catholic church and vice versa, the ecumenical processions of Protestant and Catholic clergy to protest, for instance, the forced conversions of some Moluccans to Islam, and the postwar participation of Protestants in the Catholic Easter Passion parade performed in Ambon's streets. Last but not least, the rapprochement of the Protestants and the Catholics is evident in the iconography itself—not only the very fact of the turn to the iconographic but also the conscious pilfering by Protestant popular painters of some obvious Catholic imagery, such as the Sacred Heart.⁴⁰

Part of this rapprochement has to do with how initially Ambonese Protestants and then the city's Catholics found a common enemy in Islam. Yet beyond the context of the city's war, many Indonesian Christians are both cognizant of and concerned about the increasing presence of Islam in everyday settings across their country. With respect to Islam's current striking visibility and publicity in Indonesia, scholars speak of a public Islam manifest, for instance, in the many new mosques erected around the country (often in Middle Eastern style) and in the popularity of Qur'anic reading sessions and typical Muslim fashions like *jilbab* for women and *baju koko* for men, of Muslim clothing fashion shows, and of makeup and skin products stamped with the label *halal*, “permissible.”⁴¹ Add to this the rise in the number of Indonesian Muslims performing the *hajj*—some on fancy package tours with five-star services—the resurgence of Islamic print media, the development of new forms of *da'wa*, or proselytizing, such as cyber *da'wa* and cellular *da'wa*, and the burgeoning of Islamic economic institutions, such as banks, insurance

houses, credit unions, and so on. All of these developments are, not surprisingly, not lost on Indonesia's Christians.

This general religious outreach is also evident in the self-conscious emphasis by both Muslim and Christian practitioners on the most universalizing dimensions of religion. If Muslims can appeal to the *ummah* as the all-encompassing framework from which their religious identity derives its significance, so, too, Christians seem to be driven by ever more ecumenical aspirations toward what one might call a Christian *ummah*, of sorts. Just as Indonesian Muslims should, if they are in physical and financial condition to do so, perform the *hajj*, so, too, do increasing numbers of Catholics perform their own religious pilgrimages to, for instance, Lourdes. By the same token, the popularity of package tours to the Holy Land is on the rise among Indonesian Protestants. If, then, in an immediate sense the rapprochement between Ambon's Protestants and Catholics has its roots in the city's recent war, in a larger sense it can be seen as part of developments that are not specific to Indonesia but evident elsewhere: the more universal dimensions of religion become elaborated in the context of powerful deterritorializing and globalizing forces. Seen in this light, the proliferation and monumentalization of Jesus portraits in Ambon are compelled by conditions that are simultaneously local, somewhat more than local, and somewhat less than global—they are a consequence, in other words, of anxieties afflicting Ambon's Protestant Christians in the immediate wake of the war and the refiguration of their country post-Suharto. At the same time, they partake of more momentous transformations worldwide in the status and public location of religion.

Like and in the Image of God

With the largely unmoored landscape of Ambon City as backdrop, I will hone in now on the face as a privileged feature of the pictures, singled out not only in the revamped Christian iconography but often in conversation with the painters themselves. If asking *what pictures want* is a good place to start, following this with the question *What does this face want?* and *Whose face is it?* adds precision to the specific desires at work by interrogating the forms used to picture and represent. I understand representation, following Louis Marin in his *Portrait of the King*, in essentially two ways: to represent is to make the absent—the dead man, Marin says—come back, as if he were present and living (a kind of second coming, if you like); it is also to intensify presence with the aim of instituting and valorizing it as a subject of representation, like a birth certificate, a national ID card, or a passport flashed at a border.⁴²

Yet if in Marin the portrait constitutes the king as absolute subject with implications and consequences that I will not address here, in Ambon the portraits of Christ constitute the people or the community. This, at any rate, is the general idea. And if, in modern times, a community is commonly constituted in reciprocity with the figure of the state

through its many representatives, then the withdrawal of important state tokens throws the community into disarray. It is out of such a distressful void that the Christ pictures emerge—both mirroring and summoning an absent yet desired community for each and every Christian Ambonese. In the case of the absolutist king, a belief in both the effectiveness and the operation of his iconic signs was obligatory, since failing this the monarch would be emptied of all substance (through lack of transubstantiation), leaving only simulacrum. More poignantly, Ambon's Christians, faced with their abandonment by authority, themselves generate authority's monumentalized iconic signs. In so doing, they not only give material form to anxieties about invisibility but also emblemize authority as a numinous source of recognition, in the desire that it might protect, valorize, illuminate, and constitute the Christian Ambonese as a particular community, as a "chosen people." Thus, ideally, through this theologizing move the emblems that Christians erect around the city acquire the community-making force that not only makes possible their reproduction as Christian Ambonese but endows such reproduction with its sanctioned, authoritative foundation. At stake, in other words, is representation in Marin's double sense: both *de facto*, as presencing, and *de jure*, as the authorization and valorization of such presence.

Conversations with painters allude to both senses of representation—the assertion *God is/was here* is underscored by the depiction of Christ witnessing his creation in crisis up close, by the claim that Christ is a living God in contrast to the gods of other religions, and by the belief of some in an imminent Second Coming. The intensifying, legitimizing dimension of representation, or that which authorizes and valorizes the subject as a subject of representation, manifests itself in different painters' common focus on the face. One painter said he prays fervently before painting the face of God and insists that he portrays Christ as an adult so that people will know what he looked like as a grown man—more precisely, the grown man of thirty-three who was sentenced to death and subsequently martyred by the Roman Imperial authorities. When I remarked upon the carefully traced frayed edges of the Jesus cameos introduced by this painter into his murals, he invoked the worn edges of old parchment. As in the movies, he explained, the Romans presented their legal decrees and pronouncements to the people on pieces of parchment; unrolled in public, these would be read aloud and hung in prominent places for the populace to see. Unlike the sweaty, fringed characters of Roland Barthes' famous essay, these Romans in films are the exemplars of the republican tradition of law and state authority.⁴³ Thus, Romanly framed, Jesus' giant mug shot circulates, I suggest, among the beleaguered Christian Ambonese as an appropriately oversized, monumentalized, community ID.

But how does this work? In another conversation, this particular painter—let's call him John—supported his statements about the face by quoting from the Bible. We are created, he said, "like and in the image of God (*serupa dan segambar Tuhan*)"—a claim I

often heard echoed in the city, whether from church pulpits or citizens' mouths. Anticipating objections, the painter enacted for me an imaginary conversation:

There are many versions, no? In Europe they say his face looks like this, in America they say it looks like that—maybe different. There are many, many [different] appearances, right? . . . earlier I said that us humans are created like and in the image of God. This means that his nose, his mouth, his eyes are like ours. It doesn't matter then what kind of appearance [it is], maybe it's not like mine, but the important thing is that it is *like and in our image*. This is the essence for me, this in itself is what makes me paint. So sometimes people say, "He, here Jesus has a different face, this Jesus face is different," [but I answer] "No, that's not true, that face is also like your face, right? It also has a nose, it also has a mouth, it also has eyes, the point being: the face of Jesus is like your face.

More than merely creating a glossy surface, the aim here appears to be to install a face that faces and illuminates the Christian beholder, a face that is your face, that is *our* face, the generalized face of the Christian Ambonese community. John often compares his paintings to a Protestant minister's sermon. Whereas the minister relies on words, he produces images to subtly sway people to conduct themselves as better Christians. Indeed, according to John, this is also the best and perhaps only way to proceed with tough Ambonese—through quiet influence rather than direct admonition. John understands his work as dialogic, yet he also clearly doubts whether his imaginary interlocutor is as firmly in place as he would like—hence the imaginary conversation he enacted for me in which he tries to persuade a spectator—who for him is interchangeable with all other Christian Ambonese—of the intimate identity between the spectator's own face and that of Jesus. Uncertainty animates this entire imaginary exchange, as it also fuels the desire to find a face for Christian Ambonese. Recall how John insists that the face of Jesus is like and *in our image*. This for him is "the essence," and it is, he claims, what makes him paint. He paints, in other words, over and over again, a monumentalized face infused with the desire that it will reflect back to us *our image*. By implication, *our face*, as Christian Ambonese, has become obscured; in the city's postwar context, *our image*, its status and very existence, is elusive and up for grabs.

At stake and at risk here are the very conditions for the production of the identity of Ambonese as a uniquely Christian community. This is less the narrow production of *Christians* with a capital C—under conditions reducible either to theology or to religion—than the production of *Ambonese* Christians, that is, in terms of a historically sedimented sense of entitlement, first under the Dutch colonizers and subsequently within the Indonesian Republic, with corresponding assumptions of superiority and privilege, then the fears and phantasms unleashed during the war.⁴⁴ As in the larger landscape of the city, what authorized, legitimized, and kept Ambon's Christians more or less in place, offering

an image to them of who and what they are and locating them within the Indonesian nation-state, no longer applies. Like blood coursing from faucets or uncanny shadows flitting across church walls, these eruptions of strangeness and uncertainties about the sources of identity have violently unsettled the conventional claims and wisdoms of what was once an everyday more or less religiously mixed urban lifeworld.⁴⁵

Before the war, God presumably gazed upon Ambon from afar; looking down upon the city and its inhabitants, he saw that it was good. There was then no strangeness to the Christian images in the city—the innocuous angels, Jesus majestically poised on clouds—none of this was out of the local Christian ordinary; all of it assumed an orderly Christian community devoutly in place. Strikingly, the essential foreignness of this God or the many other forces and phantasms fed through him only became apparent within the desperate, radical dislocations of the war. Only in such circumstances did a gap open between Ambonese and the authorizing foreign gaze—itself refracting, once again, a host of multiply mediated and signifying capacities. Beyond ordinary everyday uncertainties, only then did such a gap intolerably loom. Only then did Ambonese feel abandoned and forlorn, and only then, too, did Christian pictures migrate from church interiors and set themselves up in public as monuments to community. It is this gap that local painters and those who support them aim to bridge and cover over when they depict Christ coming up close.⁴⁶ This pictorial form of protesting too much animates the proliferation of Jesus billboards and murals across the city; it also moves the painter John to persuade a score of imaginary others of the perfect fit between their own faces as interchangeable Christians and that of Christ.

This Face Wants YOU

This face wants YOU—this is what the Christian murals say to the pedestrians, motorcycles, cars, and minibuses that pass them by. It is also what they say to the young, often un- or underemployed men who in many Christian neighborhoods hang out on raised platforms facing the mega-pictures—passing their time, chatting, smoking cigarettes, and awaiting the odd motorbike-taxi customer. Grouped into neighborhood associations with their own names and emblems, these young men, by and large, are those who sponsor the pictures, supplying the painters with paint, cigarettes, and snacks while they work, assisting them, offering occasional upkeep when the murals are done, and decorating them with lanterns on the eve of important Christian holidays. They are also those who, in the wake of war, are, with the exception of refugees, in many respects the most adrift, with their past clouded and often violent, their present precarious, and their future up for grabs.⁴⁷ Perhaps most interestingly, due to their age and gender they inhabit a place at authority's edge: their creative activities are not sanctioned by the local churches, and they are the object of recurrent state suspicion and surveillance.⁴⁸ It is these young men

whom the painter John has in mind when he describes his murals as pictorial *khotbah*, or sermons, and he claims some success—sitting across from Christ’s face, these men are less inclined to drink and fool around with women, or so John says.

Much like gang emblems, the pictures erected at the gateways of Christian neighborhoods and strategic sites in the city throw up strict boundary markers in an already radically territorialized urban situation. Commonly they stand on the same site or are next to the very same structure as the command and communication posts (*posko*) set up during the war—places where prayers were said and trumpets sounded before battle, the neighborhood watch was based, and multiple other strategic and social needs were addressed as, indeed, they continue to be today. Gigantic glossy surfaces, like the billboard advertisements whose location they often usurp, the Jesus pictures simultaneously “gate” the community and brand it as decidedly Christian. A border phenomenon through and through, the pictures extend an invitation outward—this face wants You, stranger—to look back, authorize, legitimize, and thereby bestow on us, Christian Ambonese, a face. At the same time, the billboard face that is God’s face and *your* face also faces inward, isolating Christians among their own “comforting” images and thereby intensifying, in Marin’s terms, the subject’s representation, something that in this case implicitly stakes out a source of legitimization—tenuous as it may be—that is like, in the image of, yet also different from the seeing of a state.⁴⁹

Comforting as they may seem to Christians, these pictures intimate many risks—marking a blind spot, they reenact the hyper-visibility of Christians against the deep shadow of Muslim invisibility that, more aggressively than elsewhere in the archipelago, distinguishes Ambon’s history. Today they do so in circumstances that are radically at odds with those productive of that particular phantasm. Potentially the paintings claim a source of validation for the community beyond the state, even if, or, more likely, because the Jesus portraits refract the Citizen’s Identity Card so crucial to the state-seeing legitimacy and the fiction of state protection propagated by Suharto.⁵⁰ Implicitly, at least, and without the Ambonese themselves or the Indonesian authorities noticing it, Ambon’s sidewalk painters and their young male supporters have hijacked the crucial state prerogative of assigning identity and belonging and have bent it to their own designs. Inhabiting a place at authority’s edge, they replicate and reinstate the former patriarchal authority of the New Order state, claiming it for themselves.

A more immediate risk is the inherent violence at the core of these Christian pictures, though this, too, leads potentially in different directions. Born out of conflict and installed as an intimate part of the scene of war, Christ at large is an emblem of violence, in which the difference between self-love and other-directed aggression is hard to discern. Lamenting their situation during the war, Christians frequently claim “Christ was our only weapon” as they go on to describe the flimsy bows and arrows, makeshift rifles, homemade poisons, and occasional black magic (*ilmu*) with which they aimed to protect themselves. One picture of Jesus of the Sacred Heart—a clear instance, as mentioned



FIGURE 10 Motorbike-taxi driver and mural. Ambon, 2006.



FIGURE 11 Mural across from motorbike-taxi stand. Ambon, 2006.



FIGURE 12 Motorbike-taxi stand. Ambon, 2006.

earlier, of Catholic iconography's influence and therein the rapprochement of Ambon's Protestants and Catholics during the war—looks to some like an exploding bomb encased in barbwire. Seen in this light, it vividly intimates the easy collapse between Christ and violence. Bullet holes with bloody skin bent back to frame motorbike-association emblems or pistols in the place of heads on torsos, inscribed with local insignia, are also popular.

Such signs are a common part of a wider masculine Moluccan youth culture. This culture undoubtedly draws energy and identity from both the recent war and religion, but it is also, crucially, based on consumption. The young motorbike-taxi drivers I hung out with in Ambon during the summers of 2005 and 2006, and those I interviewed in April of 2006 in the North Moluccan city of Ternate (where the population is predominantly Muslim), draw inspiration and emblems from loud musical groups like the Sex Pistols, Guns and Roses (both allegedly with DVD covers boasting bullet holes reminiscent of heraldic shields), Limp Biskit, Linkin Park, or the Indonesian *Reformasi* cult singer Iwan Fals. Beyond the consumerism of youth, the Christian billboards often stand on the same kind of location, along the city's main thoroughfares, as commercial advertisements—if, indeed, they have not actually been painted over billboards, as was the first Christ portrait in the city, which overlay a former cigarette advertisement. A study of the stratigraphy of the Christian billboards and murals would reveal other group markers as well, such as those of political parties and soccer teams.

Given all of this, and notwithstanding attempts by the painter John and others to foster a face to face identification between Ambon's Christians and Jesus Christ, the ways in which the paintings have arisen in the orphaned postwar landscape of the city may invite such a focused form of looking less than the more distracted kind commonly identified with the urban passerby. Yet both Christians and Muslims can often recall from memory certain Jesus pictures or details thereof, and at certain times of the year the pictures do invite more specific forms of engagement. On the eve of holidays, for instance, the pictures are repainted and illuminated, and Christians of the neighborhood have their photos taken before them, much as, during the war, young men similarly posed for their portraits holding weapons and framed by Christ's face behind them.⁵¹

In short, the billboards beg the question of what the limits of the face are: When is the Jesus face a face, of sorts, and for whom—a face that looks back at the observer, that recognizes and legitimizes the Christian community? When is it a brand, an emblem, a boundary marker, or simply another advertisement? And when is it no longer a face but a stereotype instead? All of these possibilities are undoubtedly at work in the Jesus pictures, depending upon who “consumes” them, under what conditions, at what locations, and at what times. To be sure, as I have argued, there is an attempt to install and monumentalize a source of recognition for the Ambonese Christian community. There is also the impulse to reproduce the Christian iconographic canon qua canon or, in other words, to reiterate the familiar and stereotypical. And there is the place of these pictures within both the larger media world and the more immediate media ecology of which they form a part—an Indonesian urban landscape where the portraits and murals stand side by side, compete with, blend and fade into cigarette and cell phone ads, army- and police-sponsored banners mimicking—usually poorly—Ambonese Malay language and calling for anything from postwar reconciliation and peace to proper garbage disposal, and myriad announcements of public events: Islamic fashion shows, calls from universities for student registration, Christian pop music performances, motorbike rallies, and so on.

Given these different possibilities, it is difficult really to gauge the import of the violence entailed in the Christian pictures. As with most things, only circumstances can tell or influence the kinds of inflections these may take. A final risk intimated by Ambon's Christian billboards and murals, perhaps the biggest of all, is that these “comforting” pictures represent—inevitably—no more than a passing consolation for Ambon's Christians, especially for the young men who day after day sit before them, facing or not facing a recent history of violence, the bleak conditions of the present, and a future holding little promise. Staking out territory in so many different ways, these paintings offer little possibility of moving beyond it.