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Title: Judas and C.K. Stead: personal Zen in the face of God

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Example citation: Kimber, G. (2009) Judas and C.K. Stead: personal Zen in the face of God. Paper presented to: *Re-imagining Identity: New Directions in Postcolonial Studies: Inaugural Conference of the Postcolonial Studies Association (PSA), Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland, 06-08 May 2009.*

Version: Presented version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/4930/>



(1) Judas and C. K. Stead: Personal Zen in the Face of God

(2) C. K. Stead, a fifth generation New Zealander, is, by definition, a postcolonial writer, and almost everything written by him or about him relates, in one way or another, to the concepts of postcoloniality. As he himself admits: ‘I am indelibly part of the notion of postcolonial literature and don't even have to think about it or acknowledge it for that to be the case’.¹

(3) Stead's novel, *My Name Was Judas*, published in 2006, is a quasi-hermeneutical text, with its own specific fictional reinterpretation of the biblical characters of Jesus and Judas.² Discussing postcolonial biblical interpretation, Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah writes that the Bible ‘is a cultural and colonial icon [...] playing a prominent role in colonial expansion. It was more than a religious text, for its influence extended to the social, political and economic spheres’.³ He goes on to claim:

(4) The profound influence of the Bible on western art, literature and music has been well documented and celebrated. [...] Biblical images and stories have been employed creatively, and at times subversively [for example] in [...] – Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary* and Akiki K. Nyabongo's *Africa Answers Back*.⁴

(5) In his essay, ‘Comrade Jesus: Postcolonial Literature and the Story of Christ’,⁵ Norman R. Cary examines how the gospels have been appropriated by various postcolonial writers, with an analysis of such diverse books as Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Grain of Wheat*, Augusto Roa Mais's *Brother Man*, and Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of Gebelaawi*. Discussing this constant reworking of biblical texts, Sugirtharajah comments further:

(6) Different communities of interpreters [...] appropriated, reappropriated [...] their favourite texts, and [...] in the process, they themselves were shaped and moulded and their identity redefined. The colonial usage is a testimony to the notion that every era produces the Bible in its own image and responds to it differently on the basis of shifting political and cultural needs and expectations.⁶

¹ C. K. Stead to Gerri Kimber, via email, 6 November 2008.

² C. K. Stead, *My Name Was Judas* (London: Harvill Secker, 2006).

³ Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 2.

⁴ Sugirtharajah, p. 7.

⁵ Norman R. Cary, ‘Comrade Jesus: Postcolonial Literature and the Story of Christ’, in *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical Call for Justice*, ed. by Susan VanZanten Gallagher (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) pp. 169-182.

⁶ Sugirtharajah, p. 2.

(7) This concept corresponds precisely with the manner in which Stead came to write his own novel. At the outset, Stead was concerned about whether a reinterpretation of the Bible was a suitable subject for his next novel; his friend and colleague Paul Morris, Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, reassured him, saying: ‘These are our stories. They must be constantly retold’.⁷ This response gave Stead the impetus to tackle the difficult subject matter at hand. Justin D. Edwards concurs with the opinion above, stating:

(8) Whatever the relationship is between the postcolonial work and the canonical text, the newer piece helps us to read the older work in new ways. This is because the postcolonial rewriting often foregrounds voices that are silenced in the original and reveals areas of the ‘classic’ text that have been veiled in darkness. Rewriting, then, provides alternative ways of reading.⁸

(9) And Sugirtharajah in turn agrees with this premise, stating: ‘Postcolonialism is used [...] as an interventionist instrument which refuses to take the dominant reading as an uncomplicated representation of the past and introduces an alternative reading.’⁹

Stead’s initial inspiration came as an idea during the writing of his novel *Mansfield*,¹⁰ whilst considering the difficulties of portraying the messianic character of D. H. Lawrence. Stead realised:

(10) It would be like writing about Jesus. How would I do that? It would have to be through the eyes of one of the disciples – Judas, I suppose, the one perceived to be least sycophantic. So the idea was planted and it just wouldn’t go away. I decided I would want the Judas character to be like myself, a sceptic, a rational person who doesn’t believe that people walk on water or rise from the dead. The next problem was just how you would have that kind of person become a disciple? It presented itself as a narrative problem – a challenge; and the solution was to begin the story with their boyhood together, Jesus and Judas [...] I was thinking all these things out, and at the same time I was telling myself this was NOT a subject for a person of my temperament; that I was wasting mental energy.¹¹

⁷ *My Name was Judas*, acknowledgements page.

⁸ Justin D Edwards, *Postcolonial Literature: A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 53.

⁹ Sugirtharajah, p. 3.

¹⁰ C. K Stead, *Mansfield: A Novel* (London: Harvill, 2004).

¹¹ Gerri Kimber, ‘Black Sheep Rehabilitated: The World According to Judas and C. K. Stead’, *British Review of New Zealand Studies*, 16, 2006-2007, 33-58, p. 34.

(11) In his essay ‘What I Believe’, first published in 1993, Stead wrote: ‘Intellectually I see the human condition as bleak – though it is a bleakness that has a certain tragic glory’.¹² The so-called ‘great mysteries’ of life – infinite time, infinite space, the apparent uniqueness of our world - cannot, for Stead, be explained by religion. In their place, he considers man’s sense of beauty as a true mystery and his sense of comedy as a trait ‘which truly distinguishes the human animal’.¹³ Writing about religious presence in contemporary New Zealand poetry, Trevor James discusses the ‘fundamental dilemma in religious studies’, namely, ‘the tension between humanistic and social scientific approaches to thinking and writing about religion [...]. Successful writers on religion employ characteristic aesthetic strategies in communicating their visions of human truths’.¹⁴ *My Name was Judas* takes the above concepts and utilises them in a fictional and revisionist exegesis of the lives of Jesus and Judas.

(12) Witty, acerbic, and occasionally moving, Stead’s Judas does not ‘betray’ Jesus – he simply does not believe in his divinity. Now an old man revisiting past memories, and with a clear conscience, Judas shows that his charismatic childhood friend was merely deluded in believing himself to be the Son of God, and that far from having miraculous powers, he was merely carried away by his own eloquence. Jesus as radical revolutionary? Yes. Jesus as Messiah? No. Many tenets of the Christian faith are called into question: the miracles, the Last Supper, the Resurrection, the Ascension. As Stead reveals:

(13) I set out to tell a story which I, or a person of my temperament and intellectual disposition, could believe. I don’t mean to say literally, historically, ‘This is what happened’ – because how can we know? But if this *was* a ‘Gospel’, I could believe it, whereas I can’t, I’m afraid, believe the story as we have it in the Bible.¹⁵

¹² C. K. Stead, ‘What I Believe’, collected in *The Writer at Work, Essays by C. K. Stead* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2000), 200-6, p. 205.

¹³ Stead, ‘What I Believe’, p. 202.

¹⁴ Trevor James, “‘Pitched at the farthest edge’”: Religious Presence and Landscape in Contemporary New Zealand Poetry’, in *Mapping the Sacred*, ed. by Jamie S. Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), (131-154), p. 147.

¹⁵ Kimber, p. 40.

(14) Stead resists the word atheist, preferring to call himself a ‘non-theist’. For him, religions are a set of ideas acquired in childhood which he believes to be myths from a pre-scientific age, with no foundation in reality. However, he does not want to deny everything beyond the prosaic, hence the poems penned by Judas in the novel, which appear like refrains at the end of every chapter, giving the writing a lyrical, meditative quality, growing in awareness as the book progresses, and leading to the final epiphanic moment of realisation, when Judas proclaims:

(15) Our friend was
not the Messiah, nor
will there be one.

This is the truth
I write. It will not
hurt you. Grasp it! (244)

These final two stanzas in the novel encapsulate Stead’s beliefs; C. K. Stead and Judas become one – the voices become one voice. As Stead concludes: ‘There is a lot of myself in the character of Judas’.¹⁶

(16) Much of Stead’s work as a poet can be said to concern his own notion of national identity and what it means to be a New Zealander and a postcolonial citizen. His has always been a sceptical voice, with an occasional sense of disconnection and separation. Stead chooses ‘dislocation’ for Judas at the end of the novel, living out his final days in a Greek community, and for Stead, ‘dislocated’ in far-flung New Zealand, perhaps revealing his own sense of disconnectedness to the world beyond the Pacific.

For Stead, the arts – poetry and music in particular, but the arts in general – are, in his life, what religion is in other people’s lives. In 2000, he published the poem ‘Even Newer English Bible’ in his collection *The Right Thing*, an oblique defence of the beauty of the original language of the King James Version of the Bible, rewriting the 23rd Psalm:

¹⁶ Kimber, p. 42.

(17) The Lord is my caregiver so I'm OK
 He suggests I put my feet up
 or take a stroll down at the Bay.

That way, He says,
 you keep out of trouble [...] ¹⁷

In a similar vein, he returns to this theme in 'Even Newer English Bible (2), from the 2003 collection *Dog* (2002), in a tongue-in-cheek rewrite of the Lord's Prayer:

(18) Big Daddy-in-the-Sky
 your PR's good –
 we're backing you to win
 down here as you won up there.
 Please feed us
 and go easy on us
 as we go easy on
 those other bastards.
 No honey-traps –
 we want to stay out of trouble
 because you've been
 the Big Cheese always
 and likely to remain so
 for the foreseeable future
 amen. ¹⁸

Making Judas a poet and presenting his poems, which are not simply a repetition of ideas in the chapter but something more, imbues the novel with a special resonance. They are in fact syllabic poems – thirteen-syllable triplets: twelve disciples plus Jesus: thirteen. Each of the one hundred and fifty stanzas in the book has exactly thirteen syllables. Stead's Judas is a believer in art, the beauty of words, the power and rhythm of poetry.

(19) The character of Judas appears 'modern', refreshingly open-minded, not averse to going against the grain of popular opinion, a man able to stand up for what he believes, with a natural scepticism. There is also a certain hybridity in his make-up, focused on the dichotomy of his past and present: two personas in one man, as a challenge to essentialism, together with a Bakhtinian heteroglossic dichotomy present in his own voice, as it transmutes from the

¹⁷ C. K. Stead, *Collected Poems 1951-2006* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008), p. 332.

¹⁸ Stead, *Collected Poems*, p. 381.

Hebrew of his youth to the Greek of his old age and the tensions present in his voice as both narrator and character in the story which unfolds.

The beginning of the novel and the discussion of universal questions, some of which still perplex us today, launches the reader into the great unknown at the very outset:

(20) Why is life as it is – so valued, so rich, so imperfect, so full of contradiction and of pain? Why must it end in death, and why must we know that it does and yet have no cause, except in the untested words of prophets and scriptures, to believe that there is anything afterwards? What is ‘out there’ among the stars and beyond the stars? (5)

Stead is immediately indicating that his Judas is a man who has set supernatural explanations aside and is trying to proceed by observation and common sense – a ‘scientific’ approach, ontological in his philosophy. As Edward Saïd notes: ‘The intellectual’s role is to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity and mission’.¹⁹ If a recurring theme in postcolonial literature is that of justice, then here we are presented with justice of sorts for one of religious history’s most maligned characters.

(21) Yet the most fascinating – and controversial – theme in this novel is the ‘demystification’ of Jesus. Stead shows how his power and magnetism are earthly in origin, not divine (149-150). The miracles are not miracles at all (169). He represents Jesus as charismatic, an exceptional preacher, clever, but almost too successful for his own good. The idea that he might be the Messiah comes first from his followers. As in the Bible, he does not begin by asserting that he is the Son of God; but by the end he is asserting it emphatically, to the exclusion of all else. Stead considers him thus:

(22) A great man, but really on the edge of sanity [...] Jesus comes to believe he *is* the power. I see him as a tragic figure [...] He seems to set aside, or forget, his own early teachings about the needs of the poor, the hungry and the dispossessed. In those final days his message has boiled down to, ‘Believe in me or burn in Hell.’²⁰

¹⁹ Edward W. Saïd, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 141.

²⁰ Kimber, p. 40.

(23) In conclusion, C. K. Stead has used his vision as both poet and realist to recreate the character of a contemporary sceptic as close to Jesus as it is possible to get, in an elegiac, poetic story, revealing Judas' confusion, loss of faith, and grief, and love for Jesus.

Stead's agnosticism as expressed here is also postcolonial in origin in its freedom of expression. For Stead, Judas' betrayal was not a kiss to reveal the identity of Jesus to the authorities in Jerusalem, but the fact that he simply could not believe in the divinity of Jesus. Once Jesus' message becomes darker - his words more inflammatory and revolutionary, Judas rescinds his role as a follower. As Daniel Gold explains:

(24) Depth of vision in interpretive writing seems to be a product of sharp focus and wide perspective. Ultimately the religio-historical objects we construct are made up of the detailed myths, histories and human dramas that are the stuff of religious life. Wide perspectives give the human details we identify with, some space to resonate; they let the stories we tell about other worlds intimate truths about our own. A sharp focus brings suggestive truths together in what appears as a scientifically believable fact; they let our human details make a case.²¹

Postcolonial writing maps out where we have come from and where we are going. Postcolonial theory relating to the study and interpreting of texts is exemplified in this clear-sighted novel with its exegetical focus and its reworking of the tropes of inherited theological discourse.

The final word belongs to Stead:

(25) For most of my life I have seen myself, first as a New Zealand writer, and second as a teacher of English language and literature. That is how I identify myself. In those pursuits I seek my personal zen.²²

²¹ Daniel Gold, *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 54.

²² Stead, 'What I Believe', p. 205.