Blind Faith

Painting Christianity in Postconflict Ambon

Patricia Spyser

Not only Christ but the whole universe disappears if neither circumscribability nor image exist.
— Patriarch Nikephoros, Antirrhetics

This essay explores the rise of billboards and murals of Jesus Christ that sprang up and proliferated across Ambon during the religiously inflected conflict that engulfed the Indonesian provincial capital and the neighboring Moluccan islands in rampant violence from early 1999 until 2002. During the war and since, popular Christian painters have been plastering the city’s main thoroughfares and Christian neighborhood gateways with gigantic portraits of Jesus and scenes from his life, Christian symbols, martyrdom, and resurrection. Monumental and assertive in urban public space, these artifacts perform in several capacities: as visible emblems of Christian territory, as a way of making manifest and presencing God, as a pedagogical mode of intervention in everyday Christian behavior, as a material counter to the public visibility of Islam and the political and televisual prominence of Muslims nationwide, as a way of branding Ambonese Christian community identity, and—one suspects—as a kind of huge amulet meant to ward off the Muslim other. “Captions of an unstable cityscape,” the Christ pictures do not stand alone on the ruins of the recent war. In the postwar city they are part of a dynamic “interocular” field where apparitions, print media, and the painted versions and spin-offs of print examples cycle seamlessly into each other. Additionally, the murals themselves and the images of community they aim to install refract different scales and modes of visuality ranging from the
evidentiary and the bureaucratic eye of state-seeing to the hypervisibility of media “spotlights” that single out “hot spots” around the globe. All of this, in turn, takes place within the play of visibility and invisibility that is one important legacy of the recent war. Homing in on the powers and hazards of public images in contemporary Indonesia, this essay aims to expand our understanding of what the visual might be.

**Ambon in Flames/God on Clouds**

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, which, on the eve of the Malino Peace Agreement in early 2002, following three years of intermittent violence, left a city divided into “Christian” and “Muslim” territories, up to 10,000 persons killed, and close to 700,000 displaced, equaling one-third of a total Moluccan population of 2.1 million, comprising also those fleeing violence on neighboring islands.³

Elsewhere I have written about the kinds of “anticipatory practices” and “hyperhermeneutics” that 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.⁴ Through the deployment of an exacerbated sensibility, these practices aimed at anticipating 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 hyperhermeneutics comprised, for instance, the 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 that was itself 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, these insert themselves in novel ways in its contested, territorialized spaces. In 2003, upon my first trip back to the city since the mid-nineties, I was amazed
to see murals of Christ surrounded by Roman soldiers stretching out on public walls, a monumental replica of a Warner Sallman original of Christ’s face in front of the city’s Maranatha Church, and a billboard at a Christian neighborhood gateway showing a teary Jesus overlooking a globe turned to Ambon Island—none of which had been in these spaces before (see fig. 1). Later trips revealed more such productions. They range from the billboard of Christ under a crown of thorns that greets the visitor on the highway running from the island airport into Ambon, to others dispersed throughout the city, commonly marking Christian neighborhood entrances and flanked by murals with scenes from Jesus’ life and Christian symbols (see fig. 2). If especially striking in the city’s postwar public space, painted Christs also recently began rising up in private spaces, including Protestant church altars—and not just those of the colonial-derived Protestant Church of the Moluccas, or GPM (in Indonesian, Gereja Protestan Maluku)—and also, for instance, the Salvation Army. Another postwar development is the creation of prayer niches or even small prayer rooms as a feature of some Christian Ambonese homes. Remarkably, the pictures fly in the face of the radically iconoclastic Dutch reformed Calvinist tradition from which Ambon’s mainstream Protestant church, the GPM, historically derives. Equally remarkable is that the paintings in the streets are neither supported nor encouraged by any centralized authority, including the
church. And while they differ in certain respects iconographically from the ones in churches, in the specifics of Christ’s depiction, the diverse painted sites scattered across the city share a common origin in violence and fear. They register the sense of a community not only under extreme duress but one that also, generally speaking, sees itself at risk of annihilation.

To convey this sense, I will quote here from several interviews that I conducted: one with a young man named John, who was one of Ambon’s

Figure 2. Jesus billboard. Ambon, 2005; courtesy of the author
most prolific street painters; one with a GPM church council member; and one with some young men who had sponsored one of John’s pictures.

According to John, it was the violence of the war that drove him to paint spontaneously in Ambon’s streets:

The moment was actually during the violence when the faith of us believers, us Christians, was shaking—many people fled from Ambon. . . . So we thought even if it is only a picture, a painting, we were always convinced that he was here. . . . Back then the situation was really hot, so we imagined this spontaneously. We wanted to ensure that God would really and truly be present in the conflict, we wanted to do this even though the city was burning on all sides, but we were convinced that God was here. So I painted while Ambon was in flames, God on clouds. And this is truly what we think: if you figure it, Christians in Ambon should already have been done with. Just imagine what we had here—what kind of weapons did we have? We had nothing. We only had bombs that we made out of bottles. When they went off they sounded like firecrackers.7

Deep in a Christian neighborhood climbing the hills above the city, the church council member explained how his church had commissioned the Christ reaching with outspread arms from behind the altar in 1999, during the war’s first year:

There was a general atmosphere of panic and fear, so this was done to strengthen the faith so that people would know that God was always here. People had the feeling that God was not here. Violence was all around. Fires were everywhere. The picture was [intended] to provide the assurance that God is with us, that he lifts us up. Faith was still shaky. . . . Where could one go? It was impossible to seek refuge, it was impossible to flee. The violence was everywhere. So they made the picture.

The paintings that emerged in Ambon’s streets were there to show, he added, that “Jesus is always here, he is here. He gives strength to all Christians—not just Protestants but also Catholics, Adventists, Pentecostals, Assembly of God.”8

Painted on a hijacked billboard over a former Sempurna cigarette advertisement is a picture of Christ’s mournful face looking down on a map of Ambon. Allegedly the first of its kind in the city, the picture is by John, who was quoted above. The young men who sponsored him explained their impulse as follows:

During the conflict in Ambon, Christians were slaughtered by Muslims. We took the decision to do this picture even as the Muslims were attacking us. We took the decision with John, who is a youth from here. John said, “Why don’t we paint Jesus blessing Ambon here?” The guys liked that idea
because Jesus blesses Ambon so that we feel close to God. Lord Jesus cries as he looks down on Ambon city, he cries to see the suffering of the community of Ambon city. Long ago we lived happily but now we kill each other.\textsuperscript{9}

I quote at some length here in order to convey the tenor of the conversations I had with Christians about the paintings and to highlight a few themes. Noteworthy are the desperation and terror that inform the impulse to create the pictures: statements that their “faith was . . . shaking,” that “people had the feeling that God was not here,” that “Christians were [being] slaughtered by Muslims,” and that “Christians in Ambon should already have been done with,” for example. Noteworthy also is the sense of God’s estrangement, the wavering of faith in a burning city, and the lack of any defensive mechanism to fall back on: “What kind of weapons did we have? We had nothing.” In the face of what appears to be a rampant uncertainty, the insistence on God’s presence—he is \textit{here}, he is truly \textit{here}—is especially striking. Jesus’ novel manifestation via public pictures, or what we might call Ambon’s iconographic turn, intimates how such reiterated insistence on God’s presence did not suffice, in and of itself, to assure the city’s Christians that he was, indeed, among them within the dreadful circumstances of the war.

\textbf{Blindness}

Visual culture entails, among other things, a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked.\textsuperscript{10} Against the backdrop of multiple visibilities, blindness, invisibility, and the unseen figure here in a number of ways. First, as already intimated, there was the sense among Ambonese of not being able to trust appearances, of not seeing or foreseeing what might come, of a radical refiguration of not simply subjectivity but, more precisely, sensory subjectivity during the war. Second, there was the sense, also pervasive among ordinary Ambonese, that they themselves were unseen, that their massive suffering went unnoticed by the Indonesian government, their fellow countrymen, the larger world. Among minority Christians, this sense of being unseen was especially strong, given the official “Islamization” of Indonesia during the late Suharto era, the current heightened public visibility of Islam nationally and transnationally, and the recent war that drastically diminished their long-standing privileged social, political, and economic position.\textsuperscript{11} Furthermore, Muslims were reinforced by the influx of jihad fighters from around the archipelago, from May 2000 on, or a good year after the conflict began;\textsuperscript{12} Christians, by contrast, felt abandoned by the United Nations, the European Union, and the Netherlands, on which many had set serious hopes.\textsuperscript{13}
For Christians, there are compelling historical reasons that underwrite this dramatic sense of displacement. Historians of the Moluccas conventionally refer to Ambon’s Muslim population as the city’s “other half.” They also document the extreme irrelevance of Central Moluccan Muslims to the colonial government in the wake of the Dutch East India Company’s (in Dutch, Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie, or VOC) 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 already well ensconced within the ranks of the colonial army and bureaucracy. From the time of Indonesian independence in 1945, through the early 1990s, the general privileging of Christians, both locally in the Moluccas and also nationally under the secularist, nationalist politics of presidents Sukarno and Suharto, kept this asymmetry largely in place.

As late as 1980 a well-known historian of the region could write, with respect to the physical appearance of the Moluccan capital, that “Ambon town, as a bureaucratic center, has a Christian impression about it and many of its most evident Moslems, traders for example, are non-Ambonese.” Since then, however, in the streets of Ambon as elsewhere in Indonesia, Islam’s growing public presence registers visibly in the many mosques being built (often in Middle Eastern style), in the popularity of Quranic reading sessions, in typical Muslim fashions like jilbab for women and baju koko for men, in the advertisements for Muslim clothing fashion shows on big banners overhanging the city’s streets, in television programs featuring Islamic scholars or the increasingly popular charismatic Muslim preachers, and in many other similar manifestations—developments that have not been lost on the country’s Christians. A GPM minister who spoke to me about Ambon’s war and its aftermath characterized the city’s new street paintings as a direct parallel of this public Islam: “It’s the same. They don’t make pictures much but they wear headscarves as their own kind of special characteristic. To show that ‘We are Muslims.’ Yes, that’s what stands out.”

Much more could obviously be said about the complicated, skewed, and in part—but only in part—bifurcated longue durée and more recent history of Ambon’s peoples. Here I merely invoke it as one among other factors contributing to the current prevalent shock among Ambon’s Christians at finding themselves beyond 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 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, a position
in which Ambon’s Christians until recently predominated—and still do,
to a considerable extent. The deceptively casual observation that “Chris-
tians are now 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.20 Both
the longue durée and the postwar redeployments of the performative loci of
subjectivity inform the widespread perception among Christians of being
forgotten and overlooked. Yet, perhaps most radically, within the general
blindness of the war and the sense that Christian suffering was going unno-
ticed by Jakarta and other places and the shock of postwar predicaments,
there was also the doubt, animating, in part, the emergence of Ambon’s
pictures, that the city’s Christians and their dire circumstances may have
been invisible even to God himself.

The Absence of God

A theological impossibility, the absence of God is almost never explicitly
proclaimed. More commonly, it compels statements about other Christians
who “doubted” his omniscience during the war; it also partially explains
the rising numbers of Ambonese converting from the mainstream Moluc-
can Protestantism of the GPM to “purer,” “born-again” forms like Pente-
costalism as well as the occasional iconoclastic outburst. Yet more directly
relevant here 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 especially fre-
quently in discussions I had with the handful of Christian painters, popular
and largely untrained, who had, during the war and since, been cover-
ing the city with megaportraits of Jesus and the murals depicting scenes
from his life, Christian symbols, martyrdom, and resurrection.

That painters—and these are indeed, importantly, painters or 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 seemed
to think and talk about their work was precisely as a kind of presencing of
God. Again, this insistence on God’s presence registers, I believe, a terrify-
ing and inexpressible doubt—namely, its opposite, the possible absence of
God—whose trace is only felt in the vehemence with which this possibil-
ity 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 for many their faith seems to have been pushed to the limit. Whatever its more existential aspects, for the painters I work with in Ambon, this limit also 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, while yet another suffered the assault of iconoclast Christians who destroyed 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 here the notion of limit in several ways—to invoke the uncertainty that hovers at the edge of faith and to characterize the overwhelming impulse to picture and make manifest 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 what it is made of, 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. 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. As I intimated at the outset of this essay, the postwar explosion of Christ pictures is a manifestation of deep uncertainty, blindness, crisis, fear, and pain. “Captions of an unstable cityscape,” the paintings emerge out of and partake of this uncertainty. Seen in this light, the city’s new billboards and murals bear witness and give material form to Christian anxieties about invisibility while also aiming to alleviate the very condition of being unseen.

Undoubtedly, 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, the illumination held widely by Ambonese Christians to enhance their own faces in contrast to the dark illegibility of the Muslim—all shed light on a crucial dimension operative here. However, I argue that these Christian pictures are shot through with multiple other visualities and thus suggest a much broader thematiza-
tion of the visual than the purely theological or one or another mode of mystical seeing or being seen. In Ambon, specifically, some of the city’s Protestants seem to be overcoming their own history of iconoclasm. Still, in the current iconophilic moment, many Christian Ambonese emphasize, when speaking of the pictures, how these are, indeed, “just pictures” — as in the excerpts from the interviews that I drew on earlier in this essay. In this respect, Ambon’s Christians remain, in theory at least, loyal to their church’s iconoclastic ideology. Yet the image’s inevitable excess, as it enters circulation and is subject to myriad encounters with unpredictable and varying effects, means that this ideology is at risk of being stretched, altered, or even undermined. Indeed, as we will see, the city’s Christ pictures not only repeat themselves but are promiscuous, being caught up within an interocular play of fluid passage between more formal canonical depictions that remain relatively faithful to their print examples and more visionary or apocalyptic ones.

It is also important to point out that in the Moluccas, Calvinist Protestants were never as adamantly iconoclastic as their former colonial masters. Throughout the region, other traditions of materiality and ritual performance always remained operative. National practices such as the requisite display of photographic portraits of Indonesia’s president and vice president in all government offices and public buildings (which in Ambon were populated, as noted earlier, predominantly by Christians) perhaps had an impact as well. In today’s visually saturated world, all sorts of image flows, visual modalities, and discourses — the density and diversity of which were only augmented in Ambon during the war — converge upon, are taken up or discarded, and fragment in different ways within the city’s postwar landscape.

To simply enumerate some of these visualities and perspectives (a few receive here more attention than others): the evidentiary eye of news broadcasts, human rights, and truth commissions; the legitimizing bureaucratic eye of state-seeing; 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 Karen Strassler, of Reformasi); the promotional commodification of places as images for tourism and other commercial ends; and the “spotlight” that singles out and multiply mediates successive “hot spots” around the globe — along with the reality effects thereof.

Such visualities, I suggest, are variously refracted in the city’s Jesus billboards and murals. Thus, if the influence of the media’s evidentiary eye is intimated in one painter’s concern to depict the cracks in war-ravaged buildings and the debris of battle in city streets, that of human rights organizations and reconciliation initiatives speaks through the absolute symmetry of Ambonese children’s drawings in which mosque and church, Protestant minister and Muslim imam, figure stiffly side by side. Murals
that portray Christ hovering over a globe turned to display the logolike outlines of Maluku province or that show him overlooking the city from the spot that, following local tourist brochures, offers Ambon’s best view, home in cameralike on their object and, in so doing, spotlight the city and its inhabitants (see fig. 3). If, in the former, Christ’s gaze locates Ambon solidly within a larger world order as in television news broadcasts, the latter frames the city photogenically from a tourist’s perspective. 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 on T-shirts, posters sold on the streets and in local stores, the jacket covers of Christian music CDs (lagu-lagu rohani), or popular films like Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. More covertly, the violent murals that, set in local topography, documented the destruction of key sacred sites like Ambon’s Silo church but are now overpainted with what one painter called “comforting” (sejuk) scenes (for example, crucifixion) undoubtedly refracted the graphic “martyrdom” depicted in the videos produced by both Christians and Muslims during the war.28 Like the homemade videos, commonly comprising a series of violent scenes filmed during the war and “cut and pasted” together, the murals would single out one such scene for closer scrutiny. With clearly visible city markers and an identifiable Christian monument under siege, the murals featured all the main actors to the conflict—from tiny white jihadis standing off Christians crouched behind barricades to a scattering of fatigue-green National Army soldiers lurking in the wings (see fig. 4). Yet unlike the videos, the murals portrayed, suspended on clouds above the city in flames, the somewhat Oz-like gigantic face of Jesus. Graffiti is another genre relevant here if less for its formal qualities than its performative punch—as the expression locally of powerful emosi (sentiment) and for the larger defacement of Muslims contained in the communicative force of a (Christian) God is/was here.

Concerning the pictures, I would like to highlight a few things. First, I would note 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, I would note the prominence of the face of Jesus, which manifests itself in different ways. A portrait of Jesus is commonly set apart from other pictures, standing next to or floating on a billboard above the mural it flanks or offset as a “cameo” within an otherwise chronological series leading from birth through martyrdom to resurrection or appearing as part of a freestanding Jesus on the billboards that rise along the highway leading from the airport into Ambon. Third, I would note the way in which Christ’s face is either figured alone or overlooks scenes of suffering, moral decay, and apocalyptic destruction, or actual warfare and the demolition of Christian sites (see figs. 5 and 6). The final aspect I want to point out is the new publicity of these
pictures, with the migration of the standard Christian iconography from local church interiors and the walls of Christian homes to public urban space. Previously such pictures in Ambon were more limited and largely, I believe, overlooked—conventional and taken for granted, they figured on calendars or as the occasional embroidered or glossy poster of the Last Supper in a Christian home, store, or church.

It should come as no surprise that the practice of painting—things like its location, scale, import, inspiration—was, as so much else in the war, not immune to the radical transformations taking place in the city. Prior to the war, several of Ambon’s current painters found occasional employment decorating the interiors of the city’s newly built churches, or those of neighboring islands like Saparua, with Christian scenes and symbols—angels with trumpets, Christ on clouds, and so on—or embellishing their exteriors with statues and reliefs. Yet the move out of churches of such pictures and their revised, scaled-up size are part of the wider fissuring and rearrangement of public space during and since the war by highly visible, publicized, and competing forms of religion. Ambon’s Christians and Muslims both took to the streets during the conflict: Christians, with Bibles in hand, pictures of Christ floating above the crowd, ambulatory public prayer sessions, and red head-ties; Muslims with white head-ties,

Figure 4. Painting of the destruction of the Silo Church. Ambon, 2005; courtesy of the author
carrying banners with Arabic inscriptions, displaying green and white flags, and countering Christian cries of hallelujah with their own *allahu akbar*. Traditionally segregated since colonial times by both ethnicity and religion, city neighborhoods were purged of any inconsistent “others” and barricades rose up demarcating Christian from Muslim zones.$^{29}$

**Christ at Large**

Asking, as W. J. T. Mitchell does, “what do [these] pictures want?” is a good place to start.$^{30}$ One indication that they want something is the departure of some of the pictures 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. In such moments of intensified desire and frustration, pictures
may come out: bursting from their frames, becoming assertive and monumental, they demand new forms to satisfy their needs. Under such conditions, the tenuous connection that pertains between canonical images and the world for which they were made can become strained. Different possibilities may arise. Under duress, the canon may be abandoned or the images that comprise it may assume new forms as these are extended and exploded in entirely new directions. The profound materiality of such images comes then to the fore—as evidenced in Ambon, for instance, in the aggressive intrusion of Christ images into public urban space and in their exaggerated, blown-up proportions.

My argument here exposes 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 need to attend to the particular constellations and transformative possibilities of such provisional life- and image-world affinities follows from this insight. In Ambon, one consequence of the war was the coming of Christ up close. Stepping out of conventional Christian iconography, he witnesses directly the devastation of the GPM’s historic 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, that privileged high place in Ambon that, featured in tourist brochures, is held to offer the
best view. In only a few, although nonetheless telling, cases, Christ comes close as a native of the place, assuming the countenance of an indigenous Ambonese with the characteristically brown skin, dark eyes, and curly dark hair of the local population. In all of these varying manifestations, Christ up close 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 the struggles as a way of “promoting” Ambon—unlike Bali, unknown to most outsiders—for business and other profitable aims.

The exacerbated condition of Christ at large, comprising both the coming of Christ up close and the 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) driven out of Ambon during the conflict’s first days; Ambonese, virtually overnight, turned into refugees in their own city; an influx of people fleeing outbreaks of violence on neighboring Moluccan islands; the arrival of jihadists from Java a year into the conflict; and 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, nongovernmental 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 also fled the city, retreating to villages on the island or on surrounding ones, while store owners 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 more transitory sightings of Christ, apocalyptic apparitions, and violent disturbances inflecting banal objects and locations—pineapple jelly coagulating into blood, for example, or blood coursing from faucets.32

There is, importantly, a much wider traffic between the apparitional and the more conventionally portrayed—not only today but especially during the war. Christ’s common depiction as a European derives, Ambonese would 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.33 Time and again, during the conflict, rumors circulated of Christians or even Muslims having spotted Christ rising as a great white commander with flowing golden hair upon the city’s battlefields. In a more direct translation of the apparitional into the pictorial, an Ambonese with the gift of prophecy has even engaged painters to commit his visions
to canvas, as in one picture, dated carefully just days before the conflict began, that forecasts the city’s apocalyptic ruin (see fig. 5).

Generally speaking, however, apart from such spectacular examples, what most characterizes the traffic in Christ images is enormous repetition—repetition that involves interchanges, substitutions, and replicas within a repertoire of images and variations thereof. No strict divide, in other words, walls off the apparitional from print media or from the painted replicas based on print models. Indeed, all of these seem to cycle seamlessly into each other—making any strict adherence to an iconoclastic ideology that asserts pictures are “just pictures” hard to sustain. A short example will suffice. Following a minister’s injunction to his son one morning before church to imagine Christ’s face while praying, this face arrived repeatedly to haunt the family throughout the rest of the day. During a nap following church, the minister’s wife had a vision in which Christ appeared to her—first as identical to a framed print of Jesus’ head hanging in her home before us as she told the story and, subsequently, in the guise of another print she recalled in which he appeared with a bare torso and emanating light. These mediated apparitions, in turn, were themselves reiterated the same day in two additional appearances—each an exact replica of the other—in the form of framed prints of Jesus in the homes of two families of the minister’s congregation. What is more, a widow in the second home owned two prints of the first apparition—which had appeared to this woman in the exact form as it had to the minister’s wife. One of these prints, a gift by the widow to the minister’s wife, also hung before us at the time of the interview.

What stands out in this account is not only the reproducibility but also the sheer force of mass print culture, as well as the emphasis on its dominant mediating role. One wonders if the Calvinist insistence that pictures are “just pictures” does not also intervene in this particular case—given that what the minister’s wife claims she saw was not or at least not conclusively Lord Jesus but a proliferating series of print renditions of him.

**Installing a Face**

With Ambon’s largely unmoored urban landscape as backdrop, I look now on the face as a privileged feature of these pictures, singled out not only in the revamped Christian iconography but often in conversation by the painters themselves. If asking what pictures want is a good place to start, following this with the questions of what the face wants and whose face it is can give more precision to the specific desires at work here by interrogating the form used to picture and represent. I understand representation, following Louis Marin in his *Portrait of the King* (*Le Portrait du Roi*), in essentially two ways: to represent aims to make the absent—what
Marin calls the “dead man”—come back, as if he were present and living, a kind of second coming, if you like; it also intensifies presence with the aim of instituting and valorizing it as a subject of representation, much as a birth certificate, a national ID card, or a passport flashed at a border does.34

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 or this, I argue, is at least 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 all state tokens throws the community into disarray. Following the authoritarian Indonesian president Suharto’s 1998 step-down, the launching in 2000 of an ambitious national program of decentralization and, in Ambon specifically, its religiously inflected conflict left a prevailing sense among many Indonesians that religious identities, among other social categories, were no longer buttressed and ratified by a centralized authority. As political scientist John Sidel observes, regarding the crisis in a former governmentality based on the state’s strict apportioning and vigilance over citizens’ identities, “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 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 has to be affirmed from without and below.”35

Along with the other factors mentioned above, it is out of such a distressful void that the Christ pictures also 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 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. Such representation also assumed a whole kingly apparatus in place around the sovereign and his signs to reiterate and reinforce the work carried out by his portrait—for instance, and foremost, historiography construed as the chronicle of the king’s heroic exploits. Much more poignantly, Ambon’s Christians, faced with their abandonment by authority, themselves generate authority’s monumentalized iconic signs. In so doing, they give not only material form to anxieties about invisibility but also emblematize 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.” Ideally, through this theologizing move,
the emblems that Christians erect around the city acquire the community-making force that makes their reproduction as Christian Ambonese not only possible but endows such reproduction, at the very same time, with its sanctioned authoritative foundation. At stake, in other words, is representation in Marin’s double sense: both de facto (presencing) and de jure—the authorization and valorization of such presence. Yet, unlike the process of representation described by Marin, the Ambonese aim to accomplish all of this without any authorizing stately apparatus to guarantee such productions, or to ensure, in other words, the transformation of simulacrum into substance.

Conversations with painters allude to both senses of representation—the assertion that 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 that authorizes and valorizes the subject as a subject of representation manifests itself in different painters’ common focus on the face. The painter John, mentioned above, said he prays fervently before painting the face of God and that he portrays Christ as an adult so that people will know what he looked like as a grown man—or, more precisely, that 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 wall-size Jesus cameos introduced into his street murals, John invoked the worn edges of old parchment: in the movies, he explained, the Romans presented their legal degrees and pronouncements to the people on pieces of parchment; unrolled in public, these were read aloud and hung in prominent places for the populace to see.

Different from the sweaty, fringed characters of Roland Barthes’s essay “The Romans in Films,” these Romans in films are the exemplars of the Republican tradition of law and state authority. John related how, in his earlier murals, he had portrayed Christ surrounded by Roman soldiers—indeed, in 2003, I took photos of one such mural that even then was beginning to fade into a city wall. In subsequent murals, however, he cut the Romans out of the frame, in order—he explained—to bring Christ, and especially the suffering on his face, closer to the viewer. Similarly, John’s paintings of crucifixions over the last few years depict Christ from the knees up rather than head to toe—an alteration introduced, again, with the aim of drawing God’s pain close to the image’s consumer. Yet, whether the Romans are actually part of the picture or implicit to its framing, they are crucial to understanding the kind of authorizing gesture that, among other things, is aimed at via Christ’s monumental face. Thus, Roman-framed and performing therein an authorizing statelike gesture, Jesus’
giant mug shot circulates, I suggest, among the beleaguered Christian Ambonese as an appropriately oversized community ID.

But how does this work? In another conversation, John supported his statements about the face by quoting from the Bible: we are created, he said, “alike 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 alike 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 alike and in our image. This is the essence for me, this in itself is what makes me paint. So sometimes people say “Hey, 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 a glossy surface, the aim here appears to be that of installing a face, a face that faces and illuminates the Christian beholder, a face that is your face, that is our face, the generalized face of the Ambonese Christian community. As Christ comes close, he also becomes visible; as many Christian Ambonese over and again proclaimed, he is really and truly here. His image, blown up and replicated across the city, serves as an insistent testimony to this presence. Crucially, as well, as Christ comes close, Christian Ambonese themselves become visible—as individuals, as a community, as a chosen people, or as one or another variation thereof. My point here is that such desire for visibility, and the recognition held to ensue from it, with all that that potentially entails today in Indonesia, is what animates the novel production and proliferation of Christ pictures in Ambon.

John often compared 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 equal and 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. 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 the Ambonese as a uniquely Christian community. But what is at risk is not exclusively the narrow production of Christians, with a capital C—in other words, in conditions either reducible to theology or religion so much as the production of Ambonese Christians, in conditions that include a historically sedimented sense of entitlement with corresponding assumptions of superiority and privilege along with the fears and phantasms unleashed during the recent war. Much as with the larger landscape of the city, what authorized, legitimized, and kept Ambon’s Christians more or less in place 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 violently unsettle the conventional claims and wisdoms of everyday Moluccan urban lifeworlds.

Prior to the war, God presumably gazed upon Ambon from afar; looking down upon the city and its inhabitants, he saw that it was good. And 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. 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 cover over when they depict Christ coming up close. This pictorial form of protesting too much animates the proliferation of Jesus billboards and murals across the city; it also motivates the painter John’s desire to persuade a score of imaginary others of the perfect fit between their own faces as interchangeable Christians and that of Christ.

In this essay, the visual has served as a figure for some of the most profound transformations taking place in the postwar city, as well as a gloss for the shape that many of these transformations have come to assume. I
have written of the rampant interocularity that is distinguished by a largely indiscriminate traffic and cycling of forms across a range of visual registers—from the visionary and apocalyptic to mass print and painted take-offs of print examples, from interior spaces to external urban conditions, from the domestic and discrete to the public and monumental. And I have suggested how all of this traffic potentially threatens or risks hollowing out the insistent Protestant claim that pictures are “just pictures.” To be sure, as I have argued, there is an attempt to install and monumentalize a source of recognition for the Ambonese Christian community. One aim of some of those who produce and support the pictures appears to be that of endowing their public presence with an authorizing power vis-à-vis the Christian community or at least of installing some token of authority as a kind of substitute or protostate formation in the place vacated by the Indonesian state and other statelike instances’ perceived withdrawal. But the pictures are also marked by the impulse to reproduce the Christian iconographic canon qua canon or to reiterate, in other words, the familiar and stereotypical. Yet, in doing so within the city’s radically revised postwar context, the canon has undergone considerable change—change that is subsumed in the coming of Christ up close or the attempts to insert him visibly, publicly, on a grand scale, yet intimately engaged with the community for which he stands, throughout the city. There is the place, too, of these pictures within the larger media world made up of multiple scales and registers of visibility and the more immediate media ecology of which they form a part: the latter is an Indonesian urban landscape where the Jesus 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. This, in turn, raises questions about the billboards’ and murals’ consumption—a topic that I have only touched on in passing in this essay. What I hope to have shown, nonetheless, is how postwar Ambon, for the variety of reasons discussed here, provides an especially pregnant site for reflecting on the place and diversified manifestations of the “visual” today. Quite urgently, the city’s postwar situation foregrounds those forces and processes that elsewhere perhaps remain more implicit—to wit, the multiplication of visual modalities and discourses along with the perspectival fragmentation that, much more widely than in Ambon or Indonesia, are a critical feature of our own times.
Notes

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1. This phrase originates with David M. Henkin, cited in Nancy Munn, “Places in Motion: Spacetime and Memory in Antebellum New York” (unpublished manuscript), 29.


5. Quite a number of Ambon’s billboards and murals draw upon calendars and illustrated books that feature the work of Warner Sallman, whose paintings of Christ were a crucial component of popular religiosity and Christian visual culture from the mid-twentieth century, especially in the United States. In Ambon, for instance, I have seen such Sallman classics as *Head of Christ* (1940), *Christ at Heart’s Door* (1940), *The Lord Is My Shepherd* (1943), and *Christ in Gethsemane* (1941), both precisely and more approximately reproduced. See David Morgan’s *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press,
2005) for analyses of Christian popular visual culture and religiosity and, relatedly, religious acts of seeing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.

6. This is the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church, or Nederlands Hervormde Kerk, not to be confused with its later, nineteenth-century orthodox offshoot, the Reformed Church, or De Gereformeerde Kerken.


13. Regarding, specifically, the unwillingness of the United Nations to intervene in the Moluccan conflict, the anthropologist Dieter Bartels reports that Ambonese, being generally well-informed about world affairs, questioned him repeatedly about why the UN had been willing to intervene to save Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo but seemed not to want to do the same on behalf of Ambon’s Christians. Nor did they believe the Western response that the Indonesian government had denied the UN permission to do so: “They didn’t ask Milosovic, did they?” is the usual response. Dieter Bartels, “Your God Is No Longer Mine: Moslem-Christian Fratricide in the Central Moluccas (Indonesia) after a Half-Millennium of Peaceful Co-existence and Ethnic Unity,” in *A State of Emergency: Violence, Society, and the State in Eastern Indonesia*, ed. Sandra Pannell (Darwin: Northern Territory University Press, 2003), 128–53, esp. 147n8.


15. With respect to visibility in particular, Hulsbosch observes: “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% of the population. On the main island of Ambon, the Muslim population even topped 38%. This ignorance says much about colonial regard for the Muslim [as opposed to Christian] population.” Marianne Hulsbosch, “Pointy Shoes and Pith Helmets: Dress and Identity Construction in Ambon from 1850 to 1942” (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2004), 46.


20. On the sundering of subjects in other circumstances, see Munn, “Places in Motion,” chaps. 5, 9.


23. My thanks to Karen Strassler for pointing this out.


29. On the tensions in an old Christian area of Ambon, a kind of shantytown inhabited prior to the conflict largely illegally by predominantly migrant Muslims, see David Mearns, “Dangerous Spaces Reconsidered: The Limits of Certainty in Ambon, Indonesia,” in Pannell, State of Emergency, 37–48. Noteworthy, as Mearns points out, are the amulets that hang above the doorways of the migrants, who clearly did not take for granted their presence in the city. Unfortunately, their fears were born out; the initial outbreak of violence in the city was first directed at so-called BBMers—the Buginese, Butonese, and Makassarese migrants.

30. See Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want? See also Christopher Pinney, who writes regarding Mitchell: “Addressing the ‘wants’ of pictures is a strategy advanced by W. J. T. Mitchell as part of an attempt to refine and complicate our estimate of their power. Mitchell advocates that we invite pictures to speak to us, and in so doing discover that they present ‘not just a surface, but a face that faces the beholder.’”

31. Christopher Pinney, “Introduction: ‘How the Other Half . . . ,’” in Photography’s Other Histories, ed. Nicholas Peterson and Christopher Pinney (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1–14. See also Kajri Jain’s compelling analysis of the expansion of the iconographic canon of mass-produced Sivakasi calendar prints, the violence that accompanied it, and the complicated articulations involved with changing political currents. As Jain demonstrates, such images, in particular historical and political circumstances, can become “both indices of and vehicles for political change”—much as, I would argue, Ambon’s new pictures function with respect to the city’s traditional Christian community and, to some extent, also religion. Kajri Jain, Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 316, 322. At the same time, Jain follows Pinney, and I would agree, in underscoring how the history of print images has its own dynamic and temporality, while the images themselves are diverse in their possibilities. In Pinney’s words, we need to consider how it might be possible to conceive of “a history of images that treats pictures as more than simply a reflection of something else, something more important happening elsewhere” (“Photos of the Gods,” 8).


33. For an analysis of the apocalyptic in the violence of both Maluku, the province in which Ambon is located, and that of North Maluku, see Nils Bubandt, “Malukan Apocalypse: Themes in the Dynamics of Violence in Eastern Indonesia,” in Violence in Indonesia, ed. Ingrid Wessel and Georgia Wimhöfer (Hamburg: Abera, 2001), 228–53.

34. Louis Marin, Portrait of the King, trans. Martha M. Houle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).


38. As an example of the historical exclusivity of Ambonese Christians, Dieter Bartels writes: “In pre-WWII times, Chinese Christians were, at times, refused entry into the Ambonese main church in Ambon city because Ambonese then conceived Christianity parochially not as a universal brotherhood but rather as an ethnic brotherhood they were willing to share only with their Dutch masters.” Bartels, “Your God Is No Longer Mine,” 149n29.

39. See James T. Siegel, Naming the Witch (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), on the outbreaks of witchcraft accusations and witch killings in Banyuwangi, east Java, toward the end of the Suharto regime, which he explains as follows: “The feeling of being possessed—if not the posing of the question ‘Am I a witch?’—seems to me a condition for the unprecedented outbreaks of witchcraft in Java at the end of the New Order. It indicates that at a certain moment there was
not merely uncertainty about identity, which means that one doubts who one is, as though one had a range of known identities. To be a witch, at least in Java, is to be invested with a power heterogeneous to all social identity. Thus, there is also the possibility that one could be someone completely different from anything or anyone one knows. The impossibility of relying on social opinion opens up infinite possibilities within the person . . . under the conditions that prevailed during the witchhunt, self-image disappeared, as multiple possibilities of identity thrust themselves forward. ‘Witch’ under that condition is the name of the incapacity to figure oneself” (124).

Although both the circumstances and the effects of the withdrawal of authority and, with it, the recognition and “placing” of persons and collectivities that is authority’s prerogative are distinct from those in Ambon, both situations—the witchcraft outbreaks in east Java and the plight of Christian Ambonese—might be described as what I call “orphaned landscapes,” or those new terrains of rampant uncertainty about the conditions and terms of locatedness and recognition that were either emergent or made manifest in the context of Suharto’s dramatic step-down following some thirty-two years of authoritarian rule.
