About Face: Possession, Ethics, and the Neighbor in Postwar Ambon (Indonesia)

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Sometime during the war that racked the Indonesian city of Ambon from 1999 until official peace in 2002, a spate of possessions afflicted some among the city's Christian population. A brief account of these happenings, told to me by a minister of the centuries old, mainstream Protestant Church of the Moluccas or GPM (Gereja Protestan Maluku*)*, who acted as exorcist during the events, will have to suffice here. To make a long story short, the possessions began in a Christian prayer group of five persons when the protagonist of the story—a Javanese convert to Christianity and city resident—introduced to its members a small stone that had been given to her by

a Muslim woman clad solely in black. The convert obtained the stone from the Muslim following a fight between them within the context of a larger confrontation between Muslim and Christian forces in the city's Ahuru neighborhood. When the Javanese prevailed, the Muslim leader surrendered the stone to her opponent. Once it began to circulate within the Christian prayer group—like others of its size formed during the war, along with multiple extra prayer sessions convened in churches, homes, and even on Ambon's streets—strange things began to happen. Whoever held the stone fell ill. More unsettling, though, was that, whenever the group sat down to pray, they found that they could not, or felt themselves lifted out of place, or prayed as Muslims with their hands held out flat and open in front of them as if supporting the Quran.

The first to be possessed was the Javanese convert at the refugee camp where she had fled as the latest in a series of displacements; the other group members quickly followed suit. Exorcism conducted by two ministers at the GPM's head Maranatha church and backed by the congregation's alternate praying and singing disclosed the following: the possessed convert identified herself as Yanti, the Muslim war leader she had previously stood off in battle, but Yanti was merely her Ambonese name and personality. According to her own declaration, Yanti was none other than Salma, the Muslim daughter of the Sultan of the North Moluccan city of Ternate.

Fault Lines

For those in Ambon who recall it today, these were "times rich in demons." One way of understanding them, in Michel de Certeau's terms, is as a "diabolical crisis."[1] The import of such crisis, he offers, lies in its disclosure of the fault lines and imbalances permeating a culture as well as in the way it hastens this same culture's transformation. In situations like that of Ambon during the war, where uncertainty reigned supreme, the taken-for-granted social arrangements and values of everyday existence were shot through with suspicion and hollowed out, and the world shifted intolerably under one's feet, deviltries abound as both symptoms and transitional solutions. To be sure, Ambon's possession appears to lay bare the fault lines of a highly fraught, religiously mixed urban society under radical revision—it came via a Muslim convert to Christianity, turned a Christian prayer group into a Quranic reading session (I. *pengajian),* and introduced the formerly powerful, ancient North Moluccan sultanate of Ternate, and new capital in 2001 of an almost wholly Muslim province, into the core of Christian worship.

One part of this story unfolds into a larger account of this societal revision, comprising, among other things, the changing status and location of religion today, not just in Ambon, but more broadly in Indonesia and beyond. My immediate focus here, however, is dramatically foregrounded in the scene of possession itself—namely the permeable wavering fault line between Ambon's

Muslim and Christian communities. More specifically, the particular form assumed by the possession begs the following questions: what does it mean when a Muslim spirit—a force that cannot be ignored—seizes upon and usurps the place of a Christian subject? What kinds of concerns might be at stake when such Muslim agency can interrupt the space not only of an individual Christian but of the larger Ambonese Christian community by hollowing out its most intimate sites of worship? How does the status of the event's protagonist—if you recall, a Muslim convert to Christianity, and thus a split subject from the start—complicate the character of possession? What might these multiple layerings and porous co- and inhabitations tell us about the interfacings and entanglements between the city's Muslim and Christian populations as these have evolved historically, in recent years, and were shaped and aggravated in war's context? Crucially, what claim of the Muslim Other is being articulated *vis-à-vis* a Christian self? And, lastly, if most urgently, what might we take from all of this to suggest how the *inhabitation* of possession might contain or not contain possibilities for the *cohabitation* or future living together of Christians and Muslims?

At issue are religion's permeability and the subject's porosity as these have often been noted for mixed and multi-religious settings.[2] On a much larger scale, Jose Casanova points to the radical transformation of world

religions today, much as took place throughout the era of European colonial expansion by processes of modernization and globalization. Under conditions of globalization, Casanova observes,

> world religions do not only draw upon their own traditions but also increasingly upon one another. Intercivilizational encounters, cultural imitations and borrowings, diasporic diffusions, hybridity, creolization, and transcultural hyphenations are all part and parcel of the global present.[3]

But relevant, too, are religious frontiers and, specifically, what happens to these once they are no longer buttressed and ratified by centralized authority, as is largely the case in Indonesia today following the authoritarian leader Suharto's 1998 stepdown and the launching in 2001 of an ambitious national program of decentralization, among other factors. At issue, too, as René Girard once so aptly put it, is how "it is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence." Such are some of the symptoms of a world where numerous entities—not just "religion" but also the traditional distinctiveness of Ambon's Christians and Muslims—are up for grabs and undergo radical mutation. Seen in this light, all the dialectical tension between Muslims and Christians may speak more to the deep-rooted historical entanglement of the two communities than to any extreme separation. At the same time, with the breakdown of historically sedimented differences and increased porosity

between them, the mutual beholdenness of the two populations appears to have given way to a sense of threat. Especially the Christians feel embattled and, as the foregoing indicates, even haunted and possessed by the Muslim other.

This sense of embattlement is not surprising. By definition, the scene of possession entails not just a haunting but performs a displacement—here, quite disturbingly, that of the Christian by the Muslim. This displacement reverses, if it does not undo, the longstanding historical privileging in the Moluccas of Christian Ambonese and, by extension, the concomitant marginalization of Muslims, first under Dutch colonial rule and then thereafter. With all the usual qualifications, this asymmetry pretty much described the local situation well into the twentieth century. In highly unsettling terms, therefore, the possessions 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, slid violently into each other, thereby forcing the question of the very location, indeed almost the physical presence, of Christians in Ambon today. Recall specifically the invasion of Christian worship by Muslim religious practice, the severing—literally levitation—of persons from their Christian-marked places, the refugee camp where the first possession took place, and the fact that, among the five persons possessed, four were women.

Yet at the core of what at first glance might look like a clear-cut displacement of Christian by Muslim is a critical porosity: again, the protagonist of the story is herself a convert to Christianity. In many religious traditions, converts encode a risk whether such is conceived of as an inherent potential for duplicity, in terms of the dangers of "backsliding," or as an ever-present reminder that any claims to universality are always already contested. Yet during the immediate postwar situation, when converts came up now and then in conversation, they did so more as instantiations of a special category bordering on the miraculous than anything else. Commonly they were spoken of not only with a certain reverence but also singled out from their co-religionists for signs of divine attention. "Baptismal children of mine," one minister claimed,

> who have converted from Islam to Christianity [also], generally speaking, see an apparition [of the Lord's face]. I always tell them—when you pray, ask the Lord to see the Lord's face so that you will be convinced. And finally they get it. He comes and blesses them. It's extraordinary.

About-Face

Haunting by an Other can also gesture elsewhere—not only to violence and the forging of hard-edged identities, a commonplace of religiously- or ethnically-marked conflict—but to the inability to foreclose or close-out the other, to an acknowledgement, however tenuous and

oblique, of an ethical claim of an Other upon the self. This, I argue, is what Ambon's scene of possession has to offer. I am encouraged to take this route rather than one that leads only to violence by cues from Christian Ambonese themselves. Many, to be sure, insist that their own faces are illuminated as opposed to what they describe as the dark illegibility of the Muslim or what is sometimes even spoken of as the latter's inherent lack of "aura." Asserted initially with steadfast certainty, such claims tend to break down in conversation, as we will see. Converts or those occupying the fault line between the two belligerent if neighboring populations have, apparently, special access to the Lord's face—the ultimate source for Christians of their own alleged illumination. Like possession, if differently, the privileged doubled position of converts appears to underscore the inability to cancel or close out the other. In positive terms, it presents the Muslim as a constitutional, not wholly surpassed component of the Christian self. More radically perhaps, the singling out of converts in postwar discourse may even intimate that an Ambonese Christian is only Christian and bathes therefore only in divine light when s/he somehow entails or remains beholden to the Muslim Other. From this perspective, the role of the Muslim would be to bring out or enhance the Christianity of the Christian.

Famously, Levinas singled out the face of the Other as the site of a particular ethical injunction, as bearing

within it an infinite demand. The sign of a radical, inassimilable alterity, the face signals an interruption. It carries, following Judith Butler,

> a demand that I become dispossessed in a relationality that always puts the other first.[4]
> It also assumes that this other is already me, not assimilated as a "part" of me, but inassimilable as that which interrupts my own continuity and makes impossible an "autonomous" self at some distance from an "autonomous" other… I want to suggest,

Butler writes,

> that the interruption by the other, the way in which the ontology of the self is constituted on the basis of the prior eruption of the other at the heart of myself, implies a critique of the autonomous subject as well as a version of multiculturalism that assumes that cultures [or, for that matter, religions] are constituted autonomous domains whose task it is to establish dialogue between them.[5]

This disavowal of the ambition to constitute fixed and stable identitarian positions is characteristic of recent work that, while drawing on Schmittian political theology, attempts to move beyond its totalizing implications. Such work takes, among others, inspiration from Derrida, who points to the possibility of "semantic slippage and inversion" in Carl Schmitt's political theology—the enemy can be a friend, the friend is sometimes an enemy—the border between them is fragile, porous, contestable.[6] This slippage can open the way to a political theology of the neighbor, as Kenneth Reinhard argues, a third

position alongside that of friend and enemy, an exception to the exception of sovereignty to which I will return. But it can also describe a scene of terror as, for instance, that of Ambon during much of the recent war. With respect to journalistic writing on the city's violence, I have suggested elsewhere how the practice of local peace journalism risked the opposite effect from the one intended.[7] Part of this practice involved the deliberate obfuscation of the identities of the enemies to the conflict. Rather than point to either Christians or Muslims as the source of an aggression, such journalists, acting to be sure with the very best of intentions, wrote instead of "certain parties," "provocateurs," "political elite," and other non-localizable, vague founts of danger as the origin to terrifying events. If anything, a response to this production of a lack of identifiable threat would not be less terror but more, together with wild speculation to fill the gap opened up by the assertion of an unknown menace and source of violence.

On the ground in Ambon things apparently were often no less uncertain. Earlier I said that Christian Ambonese assert a clear difference between their own faces and those of Muslims, a difference most maintain is immediately recognizable. At least in a marked sense, this seems a recent development in the relations between the communities. A journalist friend who called the conflict a "monster," described how, before it, Ambonese Chris-

tians and Muslims were often invoked in one breath as *Salam-Serani* or a conjoined *Muslim-Christian* pair. As a child, he recalled, he could tell the difference between Muslim and Christian, but only during the war did such difference become something truly to be *seen* while it also spawned a slew of new terms like *red* and *white, Acang* and *Obet,* or *Islam* and *Kristen* to mark the rift of enmity between former neighbors.[8] Running through a list of distinctions of dress, religious symbols, and dialectical variation my journalist friend confided, lowering his voice, "our faces are more illuminated." Or take a young painter who, with a handful of others during the war, began to plaster the city with Christian murals and billboard Jesus faces. While speculating that God may have bestowed such signs to distinguish them, he claimed similarly that the difference between the two communities came down to illumination—Christians, literally, enjoy the presence of light rays (I. *cahaya*) while Muslims lack aura. My fieldnotes are replete with such examples.

More relevant here though, I argue, is how such certainty glosses—if barely—a radical uncertainty. While prefigured especially since the nineties in the latter years of Suharto's regime under a national program of islamization, such uncertainty became aggravated during the conflict. It pertains in particular to the identities of friend and enemy, to the positioning, more broadly, of Muslim

and Christian with respect to each other, and most poignantly for Christians, to the status, location—indeed, even physical presence and ongoing existence—of the Christian community in Ambon, specifically, and in Indonesia generally today.

Excerpts from an interview with a government bureaucrat from the city's provincial Forestry Department show how the assertion of a radical, discernible difference between Muslims and Christians gives way, again and again, to uncertainty. Quite canonically, the topic was spies who had infiltrated his majority Christian neighborhood during the war, been discovered, and brutally killed. Such talk is an instance of a larger discourse distinguished by what I call "an aesthetics of depth," since it revolves around the disguises, dissimulations, and deceptive identities held to be prevalent during the war and the counter-moves these, in turn, provoked to penetrate the treacherous appearances of persons and things. What the discourse makes clear is that while difference may be something you can see, what you see cannot necessarily be trusted—a fine line that can make all the difference—indeed, even between life and death. Of particular concern were Fake National Armed Forces Soldiers (I.*TNI Gadungan*) who turned out, the man claimed, to be Muslim spies. When I asked how he knew they were Muslims, he explained:

> Because you [just] know. There is a difference between Muslims and Christians—they are different. You can see it. We have been associating with them for a long time, so we can tell,

> "Oh, that's a Muslim." It's like that for Christians down in the city, they know, too, "Oh, that's a Christian."

"But once and awhile," he continued, "there's a Christian who looks to us like a Muslim. Like our people from Toraja. Torajans have traits like Buginese, right?"—refering to members of the Muslim diaspora from South Sulawesi with traditionally many migrants in Ambon and the surrounding Moluccan islands.

> Just like Buginese. "Wah, that's a Muslim!" If you ask him, [he'll say] "No, I'm a Christian"—but he would not be believed. And if, at some time, there is an armed crowd, a Christian crowd, and he panics because there's a really large *massa*—with machetes, all kinds of weapons, and they want to kill him—and he panics! But if someone comes along and asks him really calmly, and there is someone who knows him who can say, "Oh, yes, it's true! He's from Batugajah—he's a Christian," then it's safe, just like that. But if no one knows him, that's it, it's over right then and there.

While indigenous Ambonese Christians and Muslims would recognize each other spontaneously, he offered, these other cases had to do with

> people from elsewhere, Christians from outside, for instance, like the ones who look like Buginese that I mentioned before. That was sadistic—because we thought they were Muslim…

And he went on to enumerate other such examples.

It takes little, apparently, for confusion between Christians and Muslims to set in, for the adamant assertion of certainty to unravel, even if here such confusion is pro-

jected onto Christians from outside of Ambon. Another topic that came up in the conversation brought such uncertainty even closer to home. During the war, among the array of signals with which they communicated with each other, Christians sometimes deployed secret passwords as a means of recognizing each other and sorting out friend from foe. Although he noted it was often after nightfall when such codes were used—implying that in daylight one would know a fellow Christian by his face—this example suggests that spotting a Christian or, for that matter, a Muslim, is less straightforward than many claim. Within the series of exceptions to the immediate recognition of Christian versus Muslim, the password counts as yet another instance of uncertainty that surfaced in the conversation and repeatedly interrupted and undermined the certainty with which it began. Even as this uncertainty was displaced into the darkness of night or onto non-Ambonese, it hinted at the enormous fears and risks of slippage and reversal—how the enemy may be a friend, the friend sometimes an enemy, how the border between them—patrolled by the anticipatory practices of an aesthetics of depth, by passwords to secure identity, and by other tactics and symptoms of war, is fragile, porous, and—especially—dangerous.

Defacing the City

Against this backdrop of dread and rampant uncertainty, the scene of possession with which this paper be-

gan dramatized the conditions of a community in crisis. Against this backdrop, too, enormous faces of Jesus rose up in the city. To recall Michel de Certeau's words, we might see these pictures, cropping up spontaneously across Ambon during the war and in its wake, as symptoms and transitional solutions to such crisis. Upon my first trip back to the city in 2003, still then in the grip of emergency conditions, I was amazed to see murals of Christ surrounded by Roman soldiers stretching out on public walls, a monumental replica of his face after a Warner Salman original in front of the GPM's Maranatha church, and a billboard showing a teary Jesus overlooking a globe turned to Ambon Island at a Christian neighborhood gateway where none of these had ever been before. Later trips disclosed 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 gateways and flanked by murals with scenes from Jesus' life and Christian symbols. If especially striking in the city's postwar public space, Christ recently began rising up behind Protestant church altars, while prayer niches or even small prayer rooms are being carved out in some Christian Ambonese homes. Remarkably, these pictures fly in the face of the iconoclastic Dutch Reformed Calvinist tradition from which Ambon's mainstream Prot-

estant Church historically derives. Equally remarkable is that the paintings in the streets are precisely that, being neither supported nor encouraged by any centralized authority, including the Church. And while they differ in certain respects iconographically from the ones in churches, the diverse painted sites scattered throughout the city share a common origin in violence and fear. In an immediate sense, as I have argued elsewhere, they register the experience of a community not only under extreme duress but that also, generally speaking, sees itself at risk of annihilation.

To convey a sense of that here, one brief quote from an interview with one of Ambon's most prolific street painters will have to do. It was the violence of the war, by John's own account, 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…*

On the face of it, the billboards and their companion murals brand particular neighborhoods as Christian, gate them to outsiders, and rise up like amulets aimed at warding off the Muslim Other. Proliferating across public space, they claim the city *as* and *for* Christians.

The efforts to construct such a Christian enclave occur in the midst of what scholars increasingly describe as a burgeoning "public Islam." In the streets of Ambon and across Indonesia, Islam's growing public presence registers visibly and audibly in the many new mosques being built, in the popularity of Quranic reading sessions and typical Muslim fashions, the rise in the number of Indonesian Muslims performing the *hajj,* the resurgence of Islamic print media, the development of new forms of *da'wa* or prosthelytizing like cyber *da'wa* and cellular *da'wa,* and the spread of Islamic economic institutions. The Protestant minister who spoke of Ambon's possessions sees the city's new street paintings as a direct counter to this public Islam or, as he put it,

> 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.

Side by side, Ambon's scenes of possession and its proliferating Jesus faces seem to pull in opposite directions. If the possessions intimate the possibility of an ethical injunction, of the Christian inability to cancel or close out the Muslim, the gigantic Jesus pictures appear

to accomplish just that. Monumentalizing the communal Christian face on the ruins of recent war appears to proclaim at one and the same time the facelessness of the Muslim—and this in a city that is not only mixed but has been predominantly migrant since the late seventeenth century. From this perspective, the pictures entail not only a defacement of Muslims but even of the city and its history—including that history that has brought together in differing ways, both positive and negative, Moluccan Christians and Muslims, throughout the last centuries, along with a host of others. Considering the uncertainty that interrupts Christian assertions of a clear-cut distinction between their own faces and those of Muslims, the Jesus pictures seem to protest too much. This protest both realizes itself and dissipates in the drive to monumentalize Christian community icons, in the repaintings and "refreshenings" to which the pictures are periodically subject, and in the reiterations of Christ's image again and again. Much as their gigantic scale, the "refreshenings," literally, have the effect of enhancing the pictures—with brighter colors and clearer outlines they stand out better in public space. Yet it is as if Ambon's Christians cannot do enough to assert the pictures' presence. Precisely the pictures' huge, multiplying status hints that this is the case while it also highlights the dubious grounds on which the identitarian claims they portray are constructed. By the same token, the pictures dis-

play the inability—no matter how many are put in place or how big they might get—to foreclose the Muslim Other. Seen in this light, Christ's painted face, much like possession, if more obliquely, is haunted—by the Muslim who animates the picture and hovers at the edge of the frame.

Neighbors and Neighborhoods

I have spoken until now of literal neighbors, of peoples who for long have lived side by side, have shared with and shunned each other, have exchanged and communicated, positively and negatively, in multiple ways and in shifting political and historical circumstances. To restrict our account, however, to a pair of two, the encounter of the neighbor and the self, is to forego the possibility of conceiving of the third or "the symbolic representation and mediation on which politics is based."[9] Drawing on Levinas' formulation of the impasse between ethics and politics, Reinhard explains how, from this perspective,

> ethics is inherently apolitical, must willfully ignore what would be fair or for the general good. To shift the other as neighbor into mediation with the other in the polis is precisely to *give up* on ethics; moreover, to try to bring politics to the immediate level of the singular face of the other; to see the other as a singularity can only mean to give up on politics.

An ethics of two inevitably involves a choice—one chooses this neighbor over that potential one—and thus

ends up dividing the world once again into friends versus enemies. By contrast, politics moves beyond the face-to-face relation to open out onto an infinite series of potential encounters, "without limit and without totalization, a field without the stability of the margins."[10] Seen in this light, the neighbor would coincide with the stranger—not just the faceless one, but the faceless many otherwise left in the shadow in the privileging of the one.[11]

With this in mind, it is worth looking again at Ambon's Christian billboards and in particular their positioning in urban public space. Without exception, the billboards and murals face outwards, turning away from the community to confront whoever may pass by. Commonly they stand at Christian neighborhood entrances on curbs and on sidewalks at the edge of public streets and on land usually owned by the city. If these pictures gate and brand the community, they also then seem to extend an invitation outwards—to others and to strangers to look back. If this appears too outrageous a claim, think then of the advertisements whose location the Christian pictures often usurp or recall the gigantic suffering Jesus faces that dot the highway—about three or four in all—and greet the visitor on her way from the airport into Ambon—whether she is a fellow Moluccan or Indonesian from elsewhere, a government bureaucrat or business envoy from Jakarta, a national or international NGO activist or humanitarian aid worker, a returning mi-

grant, a journalist, a tourist, a stranger. A Muslim woman, who was active in a local NGO that worked closely in refugee camps with a partner Christian organization, took no offense at the Christian billboards, characterizing them as helpful sign-postings for the many strangers who came to the city during and following the war. Given time, I would tell you more about the city, especially about its many migrants, its densely packed neighborhoods, its recently displaced and refugee populations, its urban crowds. These conditions together with the sheer pragmatics of mixed communities and urban living together are highly relevant to any thinking about neighbors and neighborhoods. For the moment, however, my double focus has been on the scene of Ambon's possession and on its Christian paintings as two sites in the postwar city that—however strangely and obliquely—open the possibility of a political theology of the neighbor. Taken together, they offer a way of turning haunting into cohabitation, into a generosity towards one's others and towards strangers.

Notes

1 Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, trans. By Michael B. Smith, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 2.

2 See, for instance, Brian Larkin's "Ahmed Deedat and the Form of Islamic Evangelism" (unpublished ms.).

3 Jose Casanova, "Rethinking Secularization: a Global Comparative Perspective," *The Hedgehog Review*, v. 81, n. 1-2, 2006, p. 8.
4 Judith Butler, "Impossible, Necessary Task: Said, Levinas, and the Ethical Demand," unpublished manuscript, p. 28.
5 *Id*., p. 14.
6 Derrida in Reinhard. Kenneth Reinhard, "Towards a Political Theology of the Neighbor," in Slavoj Zizek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor. Three Inquiries in Political Theology* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 11-75, p. 19.
7 Patricia Spyer, "Media of Violence in an Age of Transparency: Journalistic Writing on War-Torn Maluku, Indonesia," in Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (eds.), *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, Bloomington, ID, Indiana University Press, 2006.
8 For an illuminating discussion of how race became something to be seen in 19th Peru, see Deborah Poole's *Vision, Race, and Modernity: a Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1997.
9 Reinhard, p. 49.
10 Reinhard, Introduction, p. 8.
11 Slavoj Zizek, "Smashing the Neighbor's Face" (http//www.lacan.com/zizsmash.htm).