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0521824931 - The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Excerpt

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One of the celebrated colonial clichés is that the Bible and the gun go together and that they are almost inextricably linked. One story goes even further, in which the Bible and the gun are literally conjoined. William Colenso (1826–99), who worked as a printer in New Zealand and was a cousin of John Colenso, of whom we will hear later in this volume, picked up a cartridge fashioned out of pages from a Bible. The rolled-up paper came from 2 Samuel and bore the words ‘How long have I to live?’ (19.34).¹ The cartridge of rolled-up biblical verses gives a slightly different meaning to the phrase ‘militant reading’, an idea later to be popularized in liberation hermeneutics.

This volume is about what happens to colonial artefacts such as the Bible, beer, a gun and a printing press, and especially, in our case, the Bible, when it is imposed forcefully on the ‘natives’, or offered to them for their benefit. It is about the Bible and its readers and their troubled journey through colonialism. It assembles essays which demonstrate how the Bible has been used in a variety of ways by both the colonizer and the colonized. It brings to the fore personalities and issues which are seldom dealt with within the parameters of mainstream biblical scholarship. It is an attempt to retrieve hermeneutical and cultural memories in both western and nationalist discourses.

Briefly, I offer some explanation of the three themes which hold this volume together – empire, the Bible and postcolonialism. The empire itself has come in different forms, and the word has gathered many meanings. Before it became a term of abuse and acquired its current meaning of one nation-state coercively ruling another, it meant simply ‘state’, ‘domain’ or ‘realm’. There were many ancient and modern

¹ I owe this citation to D. F. McKenzie. See his *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 108. Other books which were used for this militant purpose included works of Voltaire and Milner’s *Church History*.

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empires in the former sense, their aim to conquer other people and bring them under their control. Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Mongols and Mughals had extensive empires. When the term empire is used today, or at least in this volume, it does not refer to these empires. It is used in the modern sense, as a specific term for a system that grew out of European colonial expansion between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries. These European empires – Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, Belgian and British – were an outgrowth of industrial capitalism and were marked by distinct cultural domination and penetration which have created the myth of the West as the superior ‘other’, a myth which is continually evoked in international disputes, and in political, cultural and theological discourses. The empire that this volume deals with mostly is the British empire; the Portuguese and the Spanish empires make only a brief appearance.

The Bible referred to here is largely the King James Version, which came to the colonies as the Englishman’s book – a landmark text in the history of the English people. Before the First World War, this translation reigned supreme. This provincial and vernacular text of the English people became a cultural and colonial icon and eventually emerged as a key text of the empire, playing a prominent role in colonial expansion. It was more than a religious text, for its influence extended to the social, political and economic spheres. The King James Version became not only the arbiter of other peoples’ texts and cultures but also set the pattern for vernacular translations and even acted as a role model for the printing and dissemination of other sacred texts. It functioned sometimes as a rigid instrument and sometimes as a flexible one but was always evolving as a medium for cultural and political expression. The focus here is not on the extraordinary story of the making and marketing of the King James Version but on some of the hermeneutical debates surrounding it, especially in the colonial world. It is about how different communities of interpreters, among both the colonized and the colonizers, appropriated, reappropriated and at times emasculated their favourite texts and how, in the process, they themselves were shaped and moulded and their identity redefined. The colonial usage is a testimony to the notion that every era produces the Bible in its own image and responds to it differently on the basis of shifting political and cultural needs and expectations.

Finally, postcolonialism: it is not easy to define postcolonialism, and those in the business of doing so are well aware that the task is fraught with enormous difficulties. These difficulties are largely caused by the theory’s association with many institutions. A theory which started its

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career in commonwealth literature has now crossed disciplines as disparate as medieval studies and sports, and each discipline has fixed the theory's meaning to suit its own needs. Even such an elementary question as 'what is postcolonialism?' elicits a plural answer. My intention here is not to provide an elaborate introduction to the work of the most eminent postcolonial critics and theorists. There are two reasons for this reluctance: firstly, as I have just said, each subject area has worked out its own theoretical clarifications, and not all of these are useful or transferable to biblical studies; secondly, I have already mapped out in other volumes the merits of postcolonialism for biblical studies and given my own critique of it.² Postcolonialism is used here as an interventionist instrument which refuses to take the dominant reading as an uncomplicated representation of the past and introduces an alternative reading. Postcolonialism allows silenced and often marginalized people to find their own voices when they are at loggerheads with the dominant readings. My method is to work with specific hermeneutical examples and to introduce to them critical practices which are assembled around the label 'postcolonialism', rather than apply an already worked-out complex theory which imposes artificial structures and obscures and obfuscates the material at hand. The way in which I have employed postcolonialism in this volume resonates with Robert Young's approach: 'Much of postcolonial theory is not so much about static ideas or practices, as about the relations between ideas and practices: relations of harmony, relations of conflict, generative relations between different peoples and their cultures. Postcolonialism is about a changing world, a world that has been changed by struggle and which its practitioners intend to change further'.³

ABOUT THIS VOLUME

The volume has five chapters, and the two poles around which they revolve are the Bible and the British empire. The first chapter, 'Textually conjoined twins: Rammohun Roy and Thomas Jefferson and their Bibles', is the first-ever contrapuntal and critical study of the gospel compilations undertaken in the nineteenth century by an American and

2 R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 244–75; and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002) pp. 11–123.

3 Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 7.

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an Indian, and the hermeneutical and Christological questions they posed. During the colonial era, independently of each other and responding to different hermeneutical needs, a high-caste wealthy Indian, Rammohun Roy, and an American, Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States of America, produced their own versions of and selections from the gospel narratives. What Roy did in his *Precepts of Jesus* and Jefferson in his *The Philosophy of Jesus* and *The Life and Morals of Jesus* was to expunge the gospel records of their historical incidents, miracle stories and doctrinal references, herd together the moral teachings of Jesus and portray him as a great ethical teacher. This chapter investigates their textual productions and scrutinizes their narrative content, their hermeneutical presuppositions and the colonial background to their choice of extracts. It also situates their work and measures their construals of Jesus against the nineteenth-century European 'lives' of Jesus. The chapter also investigates how far Roy's and Jefferson's hermeneutical endeavours fitted into the colonial project of modernity, and it explores whether these two lay readers of the Bible set the tone for the later demythologization project which held great sway in twentieth-century biblical scholarship.

At a time when presidents and prime ministers adorn their speeches with biblical allusions to bolster the new imperium, the second chapter looks at an earlier example of how biblical texts were conscripted in the nineteenth century against a group of Indian soldiers who threatened western power and interest. This chapter, entitled 'Salvos from the Victorian pulpit: conscription of texts by Victorian preachers during the Indian rebellion of 1857', explores the reactions to this event by the clergy in England. The chapter makes use of more than a hundred sermons reported in the *Times* that were preached in London the day after the nation observed a day of humiliation and prayer. Besides these sermons, the chapter also draws on two other homiletical sources – sermons by F. D. Maurice, an important theologian of the time, and two sermons preached by the Bishop of Calcutta. The latter helps to ascertain the mood in India and how this event was viewed by the British in India. The chapter investigates, among other things, how the Bible was commandeered for colonial service, the massive over-presence of Old Testament texts, the hermeneutical practices of these preachers, the theological content, (mis)construals of India, and how these Victorian homilies became a site for articulating British national identity in terms of God's people waging war against God's adversaries. The sermons were supreme examples of how, in the formation of meanings, texts and contexts, readers obtain their identity in interaction with each of these. The chapter

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is a study of the extraordinary collaboration of biblical texts with pulpiti-
eering, Christian piety and messianic vocation, whilst at the same time
revealing racial prejudices, and the skewed scholarship of Victorian Chris-
tianity. It also discusses what kinds of meaning are embedded in the texts
and how readers situated within a particular historical place and time
produce meanings from particular kinds of text. The Victorian clergy's
appropriation of biblical narratives is also a warning to Christians that
they ought to be aware of the terrors and the terrifying potential of
biblical narratives, especially in emotionally charged situations.

In popular perception postcolonialism is erroneously seen as anti-
western and missionary-bashing. The third chapter, 'Thorns in the
crown: the subversive and complicit hermeneutics of John Colenso of
Natal and James Long of Bengal', rectifies this popular negative image
that all missionaries are 'evil'. It looks at the hermeneutical endeavours of
two colonial missionaries who broke ranks with their fellow missionaries
and used the Bible simultaneously to confront their own colonial and
missionary administration, and to empower the invaded. John Colenso
and James Long were two unusual missionaries of the empire days. John
Colenso was supported by the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel
and worked in Natal, South Africa, whereas James Long was a Church
Missionary Society missionary who worked in Bengal, India. There are
certain parallels between these two missionary savants. Both were moral
critics of imperialism but nonetheless supported and lauded its civilizing
project. What made them different was that both dissociated themselves
from their own colleagues and were deeply involved in the political
struggles of the day. In the case of Colenso, it was the Zulu cause, and
in Long's case, it was the cause of Bengali indigo workers. This chapter
focuses on their appropriation of the Bible in their struggle against the
missionary homiletics and colonial presuppositions of the time. One
perceived the Bible as an icon of western culture, and the other as an
oriental book. Whereas Colenso rigorously pursued the then emerging
historical-critical method as a way of seeing parallels between the Jews of
old and the Zulus of the present, Long demonstrated the earlier marks of
narrative criticism in his engagement with Indians. This chapter scruti-
nizes Colenso's under-investigated and puzzlingly neglected *Natal Sermons*
(four volumes), and Long's unheard-of and almost invariably overlooked
Scripture Truth in Oriental Dress. In doing so, it brings out how, in their
exegetical practices, Colenso and Long challenged the racialism, prejudice
and bigotry of the time and offered an alternative form of Christian faith
that was courteous, considerate and cordial, as a way of appealing to the

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natives. The chapter also examines the controversy caused by their hermeneutical endeavours, and the contemporary relevance of these colonial skirmishes.

Though there is a vigorous debate among Christian and Jewish scholars vis-à-vis the Old Testament, little attention has been paid to the function of the Christian Old Testament in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. Many from these regions have been perplexed about the place they ought to give to this larger part of the Bible. The fourth chapter, 'Texts and testament: the Hebrew scriptures in colonial context', investigates the complex role of the Old Testament during the colonial period and how it was profitably mined by orientalist, missionaries and indigenous Christians and Hindus. While orientalist used it as an exact indicator of the chronology of the peoples of the world in order to prove the veracity of Genesis and to date the origins of the Hebrews, the missionaries used it as a bulwark against any cultural assimilation. The major part of the chapter, however, is devoted to the story of how the Hebrew scriptures were used as a serviceable weapon against the missionaries by the colonized in order to challenge their cultural and religious defamation, to strengthen indigenous religious customs and traditions and to redefine their identity. The two leading figures were Arumuka Navalar and Arumainayagam Suttampillai, one a high-caste Jaffna Saivite Tamil and the other a low-caste Nadar Christian. Both failed to live up to the preferred role of supine and submissive natives and went beyond their allotted and confined space. In doing so, they gained great hermeneutical purchase out of the Old Testament and found it an amiable ally. While Navalar continued to be a Saivite and read the Old Testament contrapuntally with his Saiva texts, demonstrating that the religion and rites of Israel were essentially the same as Saivism, Suttampillai remained a Christian but became more Jewish by adapting the liturgical and ritual practices of the Jews and by situating Moses and Jesus in their Jewish milieu. Both Navalar's and Suttampillai's elevation of the Old Testament did not mean that they did not value, or discounted, the New. In their particular struggles against missionary arrogance, the Hebrew scriptures provided them with powerful ammunition. Theirs is an early example of how that other gift of colonialism – the printing press – was employed in order to strengthen indigenous cultures, disseminate indigenous voices and, more tellingly, to dispute with the missionaries. The study of Navalar and Suttampillai also offers a corrective to colonial discourse analysis which is over-obsessed with the Bengali response to the western impact and forgets how other Indian communities such as the Tamils, Marathas,

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Kanadigas and Malayalees responded. What was unique about Navalar was that while Bengali reformers like Rammohun Roy were defensive about the popular forms of Hinduism, he was unapologetic, even proud of them. The chapter ends with what the Bible and especially the Hebrew scriptures have to say about empires – offering their own warning to those who are tempted to establish new empires.

The profound influence of the Bible on western art, literature and music has been well documented and celebrated. The fifth chapter, 'Imperial fictions and biblical narratives: entertainment and exegesis in colonial novels', explores how biblical images and stories have been employed creatively, and at times subversively, in two novels – Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary* and Akiki K. Nyabongo's *Africa Answers Back*. True, these novels came out of different cultural and political contexts. Both, however, were written from the receiving end of imperialism, one trying to unsettle its smugness and arrogance, the other seeking to renegotiate the effects on local customs, practices and history that imperialism and the Bible have imposed. In *The Missionary* Luxima, one of the leading protagonists of the novel, time and again rejects the pre-eminence of the Bible and its teachings and tries to maintain the superior status of her own Vedas, whereas in *Africa Talks Back* one of its main characters, Mujungu, wrests it from his missionary opponent and reads it in a much broader spirit than that encouraged by the missionary. This second novel also celebrates the merits of reading aloud as opposed to silent and private reading, a habit encouraged by modernity and Protestantism. It was the vocalization of the text which enabled the 'illiterate' father of Mujungu and his wives to get biblical ratification for a controversial cultural practice – polygamy – a practice which the missionary claimed was proscribed by the Bible. Thus, the Bible as a printed text became a serviceable tool for those raised in an oral culture. The chapter also explores the serious attention paid by these two narratives to the troubled question of the religions of the empire and the umpiring role of Christianity. The novels also negotiate an uneasy tension that lies between conversion as an individual spiritual illumination and the individual's allegiance to a community. The chapter also analyses how these two novels try to map out new forms of self, family and community.

A brief word about citations from colonial writings: when quotations from colonial writings are used, the original grammar, spelling, syntax style and capitalization have been left unchanged so as to retain their integrity. For the names of people and cities, the Raj spelling is retained as an example of colonial mutilation of names. In registering what they

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thought they heard, colonial administrators and clerks failed to record the aural beauty of the names of peoples and cities, and instead made them look crude, even grotesque, and ridiculous. The racist and religious bigotry disclosed in their use of language is also left untouched. The easiest thing would have been to launder out these blemishes, which rightly offend us now. Such an act would have cleansed the record of the degrading and embarrassing history of prejudice and discrimination. I have left them as they are as a reminder of how things used to be, and of how, even quite recently, racist language was still widespread and deemed acceptable. Biblical citations come from a number of versions determined mainly by whose references I use. Replacing them with one version would look neat but would lose the flavour of the context in which these various versions were used.

This volume does not claim to be comprehensive. As mentioned earlier, there are other former European empires which deserve attention and other hermeneutical issues which merit careful consideration. My study deals only with the British empire and even here is limited to a specific century and circumscribed by a few selected hermeneutical issues. In the face of revisionist histories and cleaning up of the past, all that I aim to do is to offer a hermeneutical sanctuary to these marginalized and maligned discourses and to prevent their total banishment from the interpretative radar. One of the last writings of Edward Said aptly sums up the tenor, scope and execution of this volume and my hopes for it: 'The intellectual's role is to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity and mission'.⁴

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 141.

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CHAPTER I

Textually conjoined twins: Rammohun Roy and Thomas Jefferson and their Bibles

[T]he chief thing is not to interpret the Gospels, but to understand them as they are written.

Leo Tolstoy

Before the Victorian search for the life of Jesus started in earnest in the late nineteenth century, there were two ‘lives’ of Jesus compiled from the four gospels; they preceded these scholarly endeavours and have gone unnoticed by historians of biblical studies. One was *The Precepts of Jesus*¹ by an Indian, Raja Rammohun Roy (1774–1833), and the other was *The Life and Morals of Jesus* by the second President of the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson (1734–1826). Significantly, both publications came out in the same year, 1820. Motivated by practical needs, and scarcely interested in defending the authenticity of the scriptures, the Indian and the American attempted to retell the story of Jesus in a way that would reconfigure him as simply an expounder of moral precepts – a retelling that would trouble the received notions of Jesus and prove to be unpalatable to the religious establishment of the time.

Rammohun Roy and Thomas Jefferson were men of exceptional calibre. One was part of a new ‘native’ elite emerging as a result of colonialism, and the other was a member of the founding generation of a newly independent colony. Significantly, both paid attention to religion. They were in varying degrees tantalized, inflamed, tormented and stimulated by it. The religious landscape in Jefferson’s case was largely mono-religious, and it was Christianity with all its complexities and variety that formed the background to his enterprise. In Rammohun’s case, his religious ideas were shaped by the Indian religious cauldron of Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and, obviously, Hinduism, the dominant religious tradition in the subcontinent. Roy’s Islamic learning in Patna and his encounter with

¹ To give its full title, *The Precepts of Jesus. The Guide to Peace and Happiness; Extracted from the Books of the New Testament, Ascribed to the Four Evangelists* (Calcutta, The Baptist Press, 1820).

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Buddhism in Tibet are fairly documented. What is often overlooked is his contact with the Jains. He lived in Rangpur from 1809 to 1814, as an assistant to the revenue officer, John Digby. Rangpur at the time was a thriving mercantile centre frequented by Muslims and Jains for commercial reasons. Roy came into contact with Jains and made an extensive study of their many texts, including the *Kalpasutra*.² In a way, he typified and set the tone for the new spirit which was to emerge as a result of the colonial mixing of faiths and civilizations.

The reception history of the text produced by the Raja was totally different from that of the President's text. One went unnoticed and the other made an instant impact and created a storm. Jefferson had an ambivalent attitude towards making his religious views known to a wider public. Initially he was very reluctant to make his *Life and Morals* available to the public. It was produced to satisfy his own spiritual thirst. It was only later that he decided to reveal his views on Christian religion to a small circle of relatives and friends. He wrote to Benjamin Rush, a physician and social reformer, that he was 'averse to the communication of my religious tenets to the public'.³ As he put it, he did not want to 'trouble the world' with his views: 'It is then a matter of principle with me to avoid disturbing the tranquillity of others by the expression of any opinion on the innocent questions on which we schismatise'.⁴ He wanted his beliefs known only by his close friends, whom he urged to be discreet. When there was the possibility of publishing his 'Syllabus' and 'Philosophy', the little tracts which preceded his *Life and Morals of Jesus*, his request was that his name should not be 'even intimated with the publication'.⁵ At least at that time, for Jefferson, religion was a private matter; he shared his feelings with only a few close friends, and, as he put it, it is a 'matter between every man and his maker in which no other, and far less the public had the right to intermeddle'.⁶ Later, however, after the bitter election, in which some of the clergy called into question his status as a Christian, Jefferson wanted to clear his name and prove that he was a better Christian than his opponents, by showing them that it was he who

2 Saumyendranath Tagore, *Raja Rammohun Roy* (New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1966), p. 13.

3 Letter dated 21 April 1803 in Dickinson W. Adams, (ed.), *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels: 'The Philosophy of Jesus' and 'The Life and Morals of Jesus'* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 331. Unless otherwise stated, all citations of Jefferson's letters are from Adams's *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels*.

4 Letter to James Fishback, 27 September 1809, p. 343.

5 Letter to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, 25 April 1816, p. 369.

6 Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1989), p. 22.