

Cambridge University Press

0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Along with gunboats, opium, slaves and treaties, the Christian Bible became a defining symbol of European expansion. The underlying purpose of this volume is to trace how the Christian Bible, the ur text of European culture, as Stephen Prickett calls it, has been transmitted, received, appropriated and even subverted by Third World people. It narrates the arrival of the Bible in precolonial days, through to its appropriation in the postcolonial context, both by the colonizer and colonized.

Some of the organizing terms in the volume may cause uneasiness and anxiety, hence they need elaboration and explanation. Firstly, the use of 'Third World' in the title: ever since the term gained currency in the public domain, invigorating discussions have been going on regarding its value and limitation. It was introduced by the French economist and demographer, Alfred Sauvy. His intention was to bring out two aspects – the idea of exclusion, and the aspiration of Third World people. He saw in that class of commoners the Third Estate of the French Revolution, which not only suggested exclusion but also stood for the idea of revolutionary potential. However, Sauvy did not see the Third Estate as being in a numerical hierarchy, below the French aristocracy and the clergy, but as being 'excluded from its proper role in the world by two other worlds'.¹ His contention was that 'the Third World has, like the Third Estate, been ignored and despised and it too wants to be something'.²

¹ Kofi Buenor Hadjor, *Dictionary of Third World Terms* (London, Penguin Books, 1993), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*

Cambridge University Press

0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Excerpt

[More information](#)

At a time when the world is becoming increasingly globalized, with the dismantling of the socialist experiment and the apparent success of the market economy, a place for the Third World may appear redundant. However, naming of the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific has been problematic, and has gone through different processes. In the earlier days, when Europeans were carving up the continents of these peoples, words such as ‘primitive’, ‘depraved races’, ‘savages’, and ‘inferior’ were freely applied. Later, after these countries gained independence, a new vocabulary was introduced – ‘under-developed’, ‘least developed’ and ‘low income group nations’. What such descriptions suggested, at the worst, was racist and paternalist; they also hinted that these countries had to be civilized and developed in order to emulate and measure up to the expectations of the West. At the height of the cold war, Mao Zedong, the late Chinese leader, devised his own hierarchy of world order. For him, the First World included the superpowers which dominated international relations – the USA and Russia (at least until now). The Second World consisted of the industrially developed nations who were part of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The Third World consisted of economically worse-off countries. In certain circles the term ‘two-thirds’ is mooted as a possible option. The trouble with this term is that it gives the impression that these people occupy and own a vast amount of space, but it does not disclose the fact that they neither own, control nor have access to its resources. More importantly, the term does not sufficiently capture the helplessness or vulnerability of the people. Recently, without rejecting the existence of the Third World, some have gone on to postulate a Fourth World. When speaking about the indigenous people of the Americas, Gordon Brotherston revived the *Mappa Mundi*’s description of the Americas as the Fourth World, to describe the status and identity of Native Americans.³ Similarly Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner

³ See his *Book of the Fourth World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1–6. According to *Mappa Mundi*, Asia was the first world, Europe the second and Africa the third.

Cambridge University Press

0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

name the poor in the First World as the Fourth World.⁴ Any definition has its limitations. For my part, I feel the term Third World is still serviceable because it encapsulates a particular way of existence and experience. It is a suitable semantic metaphor which conveys a relationship, especially the unequal relationship that exists between the strong and the weak. It refers to a people who have been left out and do not have the power to shape their future. It defines a relationship marked by power and mediated through old colonial ties, and currently through the economic and cultural presence of neocolonialism. Such iniquitous relationships exist both globally and locally. In this sense, there is already a Third World in the First World and a First World in the Third World. Ultimately, what is important is not the nomenclature, but the idea it conveys and the analysis it provides. I believe that the redefined term, Third World, does give an accurate picture. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, ‘whether “Third World” sounds negative or positive also depends on *who* uses it’.⁵

Clearly this volume is not a systematic attempt to cover the entire Third World, nor does it offer a full history of the reception of the Bible. Instead, I envision this project as exploring particular ways in which the Bible has been received throughout the ages. This inevitably reflects my own area of interest and concern, my aim being to show how the Bible interfaces with different historical moments. I have chosen European colonization as a marker to delineate this relationship, and it requires explanation. I admit that this delineation is contestable. I am not saying that European colonization was the only intervention in the past. There were many others,⁶ but they were not characterized by the kind of aggressive ethnocentric imposition of one’s culture upon the ‘other’ as practised by European colonizers. In terms of world history, Western imperialism has been the most powerful ideological construc-

⁴ Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (London, SPCK, 1990), p. 157.

⁵ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 97.

⁶ For earlier forms of colonization see Marc Ferro, *Colonization: A Global History*, tr. K. D. Prithipaul (London, Routledge, 1997).

Cambridge University Press

0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Excerpt

[More information](#)

tion of the last four or five centuries. Osterhammel, who studied various types of colonialism, notes:

Ever since the Iberian and English colonial theorists of the sixteenth century, European expansion has been stylized grandiosely as the fulfilment of a universal mission: as a contribution to a divine plan for the salvation of the pagans, as a secular mandate to ‘civilize’ the ‘barbarians’ or ‘savages’, a ‘white man’s burden’ that he [*sic*] is privileged to carry, etc. These attitudes were always premised on a belief in European cultural superiority.⁷

The impact of Western cultural colonialism upon the Other is the chief difference between earlier and modern European expansionism. Most significantly, Western civilization has outlasted the earlier colonialisms and etched itself more indelibly than the earlier ones on the memories, discourses, lives, histories and cultures of the people. To use Western imperialism as the focusing denominator for this study is not necessarily to reinscribe centre–margin binaries or totalize a particular historical experience. Rather, it is to suggest that a dialectical discursive relationship and tension exists between and within the colonized and colonizer.

A word about the method employed here: I have been influenced by the newly emerging postcolonial theory, and I have also enlisted insights from discourse analysis. Postcolonial discourse is not monolithic, and its diverse concerns and stances have not only opened up but also provided a valuable discursive tool to detect and critique colonial intentions embedded in texts and interpretations. How I employ the insights of postcolonialism and how they enter the debate will become clear as the reader progresses from chapter to chapter.

OVERVIEW AND ARGUMENTS

The volume contains three parts which are organized around different phases of colonialism. Part I which has a single chapter, ‘Before the empire: the Bible as a marginal and a minority text’, describes the first of the three stages – pre-

⁷ Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, tr. Shelly L. Frisch (Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), p. 16.

Cambridge University Press

0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

colonial, when the Bible arrived in Asia and Africa. It particularly concentrates on India, China and Romanized North Africa. It narrates the story of how the Christian Bible remained in venerable versions such as Latin and Syriac and was inaccessible to ordinary people, and how biblical materials were indirectly written in works ranging from liturgies and catechisms to theological treatises. Without the support of colonial apparatuses, the Bible remained a minor text in the precolonial phase; it found its place, among the many religious texts of other traditions, as one of the Books of the East and it did so without threatening, surpassing or subsuming them. It strove to carve a niche at a time when, within Christian tradition, other sites such as liturgy and sacraments were seen as the prime medium of God's revelation.

Part II, 'Colonial embrace', contains four chapters. The emergence and dominant presence of European colonialism provide a natural discursive backdrop to these studies. The first chapter, 'White men bearing gifts: diffusion of the Bible and scriptural imperialism', maps out how an inaccessible book in the precolonial phase has now become the most easily available one through the expansionist efforts of the British and Foreign Bible Society. It also maps out the main characteristics and effects of colonial interpretation. The next two chapters narrate the critical counter-discourse undertaken by colonized and colonizer. The principal aim of the former chapter, 'Reading back: resistance as a discursive practice', is to reiterate that the transmission of the Bible was not one-sided, but rather the colonized themselves actively serviced the very canonical texts newly introduced to them. Furthermore, the colonized profitably capitalized on both the language of evangelical Christianity with its appeal to the Bible, and on modernist values which the missionaries themselves had introduced. The chapter provides examples of the discourse of resistance undertaken by the colonized from different continents. It contains critical materials on Olaudah Equiano, William Apess, K. M. Banerjee, Pandita Ramabai, and African indigenous Churches, whose work on the Bible has been neglected, eclipsed and given no proper recognition by mainstream biblical scholarship nor

Cambridge University Press
0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and
Postcolonial Encounters
R. S. Sugirtharajah
Excerpt
[More information](#)

by Third World theological institutions. Unfortunately, the interpretative practices of these people were not seen as sophisticated enough to be studied within the biblical disciplines and were relegated to church history, mission studies or practical theology. I hope that this chapter will serve not only as a reminder that the techniques employed by these people to read the Bible were as rich and subtle as the current ones, but also as a reminder that their very act of reading in the face of colonial oppression is worth emulating.

The chapter on John W. Colenso deals with an example of a missionary who broke ranks with his colleagues in order to side with the aspirations of the 'natives', and who complicated the missionary hermeneutics of the time by exposing its Eurocentrism. Colenso's hermeneutical activity was a controversial and a creative one for a colonizer to undertake during the colonial period. The chapter demonstrates how Colenso simultaneously disputed and dismantled the interpretative core of the missionaries, and used the very Zulu culture which they derided in order to pose new questions to the text and in turn be illuminated by them. In the controversy over his work on the Pentateuch, often his critical approach to the New Testament was overlooked – namely, his subjection of the New Testament documents to a scrutiny similar to that he meted out to the Hebrew Scriptures, and his unlocking of Paul's letter to the Romans with the help of Zulu cultural nuances. This chapter attempts to redress this omission. An important point worth reiterating is that the hermeneutical output of the colonized and a few colonizers should not be seized upon as noble examples of a radical unshackling of colonialism. Both were engaged in oppositional discourse, one employing the discourse of resistance and the other the discourse of dissidence. The discourses were laden with colonial language, and by nature and content were complicitous discourses undertaken by those who simultaneously condemned the evils of colonialism and complimented its virtues and its indispensability. The last chapter of this section ends with an important and often overlooked aspect of the reception of the Bible, namely its circulation and distribution. It looks at the role played by the cadre of

Cambridge University Press

0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

colporteurs and Biblewomen, and at the type of Bible they tried to disseminate. Their story has been brushed aside, and is now recounted and given wider visibility.

Part III, 'Postcolonial reclamations', contains three chapters, each of which is concerned with interpretation undertaken in the aftermath of colonialism. The first of these chapters seeks to address the question of native interpretation. It seeks to provide illustrations of how Asians, Africans and Latin Americans overcame the strangeness and remoteness of biblical texts by galvanising their own cultural resources to illuminate biblical narratives. It makes visible the spectacular ways in which the vernacular has been creatively incorporated into current interpretative practices. It provides a definition of vernacular hermeneutics and illustrates it with examples from different contexts in which interpreters have drawn upon varying cultural resources, such as African trickster tales to Japanese Noh drama, to throw light on biblical narratives. It also deals with exegetical reworkings which are informed by a vernacular heritage and by the indigene's own identity. The chapter connects in part with the concerns of indigenization but also stands at a certain distance from them. While celebrating the arrival of the vernacular, it draws attention to the fact that the vernacular itself can become a conservative tool when it is used to emphasize purity over against plurality and diversity. This chapter itself is an enlarged version of a piece which appeared previously in another volume.

Chapter seven, 'Engaging liberation: texts as a vehicle of emancipation', examines one of the most influential biblical interpretations to emerge in our time – liberation hermeneutics. The chapter sets out the key tenets of liberation hermeneutics and the contexts in which it emerged, and it draws attention to the vibrant internal discussions which have altered the original terrain. It brings to the fore how biblical passages have been retrieved both by mainstream interpreters, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Elsa Tamez, and by various subaltern groups, such as Indian dalits (the self-designated name for those who were once called outcastes), women and indigenous peoples, and it shows how they have opened up fresh ways of interrogating

Cambridge University Press
0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and
Postcolonial Encounters
R. S. Sugirtharajah
Excerpt
[More information](#)

and interpreting texts. The chapter demonstrates how biblical narratives have become an important means by which trained and ordinary people have been able to define and redefine their subaltern status, by choosing to situate themselves within biblical narratives in order to make sense of and attempt to control the circumstances in which they find themselves. It ends with a critique of liberation hermeneutics for its over-reliance on a modernistic agenda and underlines how such a mortgaging has effectively prevented it from facing up to new challenges.

The last chapter highlights the shift in Third World biblical scholarship, the emergence of a new critical category – post-colonial reading – and how it seeks to move beyond liberation hermeneutics, which was until now regarded as the most distinctive contribution of Third World biblical interpreters. This chapter captures the mood of postcolonial reading practice, identifies the different streams within the field, provides markers of its scriptural readings, locates the place of this new critical category among other intellectual currents of the time – namely, postmodernism, and other liberative discourses such as feminism – and demonstrates how it converges and diverges from them. The chapter seeks to understand the Bible in the postcolonial environment, but at the same time it wants to interrogate both the Bible and postcolonialism in light of each other. The chapter ends with a tentative support for the theory.

Although the volume is chronologically arranged and takes on a linear progression, each of the chapters stands on its own and can be read independently. Each chapter has its own unity, but is nonetheless connected with the Others.

Readers may be troubled by the gender-biased language in the volume. Most of this occurs in the colonial literature cited here. In these days of cleansing anything awkward, the temptation is to remove it. Instead, gender-biased language is left as it is, to indicate that language, too, provided an important tool in the imperial project of incorporating the other.

This volume does not present a complete picture. Scholars who are familiar with the landscape of Third World hermeneutics might like to challenge the choice of topics, interpretation and the over-all organization. What these chapters together

Cambridge University Press

0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

seek to demonstrate is the diversity and the complex range of interpretations which unsettle, negotiate with and, at times, resist colonial forms of interpretations. I hope this volume will contribute to the dialogue that is occurring around us with regard to texts, multiplicity of interpretations and the art of reading.

Cambridge University Press

0521773350 - The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and
Postcolonial Encounters

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Precolonial reception