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Tackett

is both genuine and progressive, and encourages a new perspective of
social agency and political praxis. Those who hear and are attentive to
Soelle's 'silent cry,' in this book will indeed be awakened.

Steve Buttes

Book Review

R.S. Sugirtharajah, Postcolonial Criticism
and Biblical Interpretation
New York: Oxford UP, 2002

The Bible: It is a source of faith and an icon, a problem and a
solution, a sacred text and a literary text. It seems appropriate in an
issue on religion and identity to have a review of a book which has the
Bible as its central focus. R.S, Sugirtharajah’s book, Postcolonial Criticism
and Biblical Interpretation, is an excellent example of the value a social
theoretic approach can bring to biblical studies.

The study is divided into two parts. Part I details a brief history of
postcolonial theory, citing literary precursors, such as C.R.L. James and
Akiki Nyabongo, as well as theoretical precursors such as Edward
Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. The overview of postcolonial
studies is useful to scholars approaching the field for the first time, and
this discussion leads him smoothly into just how postcolonial theory
can apply to biblical studies, a field which has been reluctant to
embrace this particular theoretical approach.

What is important to note here, and throughout the book, is
Sugirtharajah’s interdisciplinarity and his social theoretic approach to
his chosen field of study. While he provides detailed “self-help
exercises” which allow biblical interpreters to begin their postcolonial
approach to the Bible, his theoretical discussions stretch beyond his
narrow field of study to include Latin American, Asian and African
studies, philosophy, and literary criticism. As he clearly states,
“Postcolonial criticism opens up potential areas for biblical studies to
work in tandem with other disciplines” (p. 25). He designs his
approach to biblical interpretation “to see links between life and work,
and to facilitate a dialogue with the world whilst discouraging an insular
and universal mode of reading, writing, and theorizing” (p. 201). He
deals with the sticky question of just who is “postcolonial” (i.e. is the
African Diaspora in the United States, or is the United States itself
postcolonial?), and as a good social theorist might do, he attempts to
locate the critic in the play between colonizer, colony and the in-betweeness of both categories: “The critic is now [with the advent of postcolonial theory] invested with power and knowledge and acts as a broker between literature and the lay reader” (p. 39).

In chapter 2, Sugirtharajah reviews the different approaches to biblical interpretation which led to his postcolonial approach. Some of his most scathing remarks subject “liberationist readings” or “liberation hermeneutics” to critique. In acknowledging oversights made by this approach, he also makes one of his most zealous endorsements for a postcolonial approach to the Bible. He defines liberationist readings as those readings of the Bible produced by people such as Latin American theologians Gustavo Gutiérrez and Elsa Tamez. These readings were often created in the context of a failed consolidation of power which might have brought about social change immediately following the independence of a colony. Sugirtharajah begins his critique by observing that, “liberation hermeneutics ends up reproducing a microcosmic version of the very hegemonic interpretation which it tried to dislodge” (p. 103) through its base in the modern/Enlightenment tradition. He faults liberation theologians for romanticizing and homogenizing the poor and for reading indigenous traditions as another historical manifestation of the Christian God’s presence in the world. In his critiques, he notes that “Gutiérrez and Tamez replicate the classical liberal view which advocates that the Bible must be related to the context wherein God’s presence is already evident” (p. 112). According to Sugirtharajah, there is little tolerance for a non-Christian approach in liberation hermeneutics since the “problem is not the Bible itself, but the way it has been interpreted” (Richard in Sugirtharajah, p. 117). Essentially, “In its overzealousness to represent the poor, liberation hermeneutics has ended up as a liberation theology of the poor rather than a theology of liberation by the poor” (emphasis mine, p. 115).

Sugirtharajah proposes that liberation hermeneutics work in conjunction with postcolonial theory since the latter avoids the “errors and unsavoury aspects” of the modernist tradition to which liberation hermeneutics so closely allies itself. However, one of the weaknesses of his study is that he does not always critique his own epistemological approach. One of the few times he does so is when he notes that highlighting colonial allusions in each text a critic encounters “can become an esoteric and an escapist activity. It might encourage the notion that deconstructing a narrative is the ultimate form of liberation, and lead to complacency and overlook structural inequalities that are staring at us” (p. 39).

There also exists in the study an interesting double-bind which Sugirtharajah does not quite resolve by the end of the book. While he calls on liberation hermeneutics to “eschew its homogenization of the poor, incessant Biblicalism, and hostility to religious pluralism that plague its interpretative focus [so that it will] be able to join forces with postcolonial thinking to fathom and fashion a different world from the one we live in” (p. 122). This contrasts with his conclusion in the “Afterword” that the whole point of postcolonial criticism is that it does not claim to represent anyone. The function of the postcolonial critic is to enable academia and disciplines to which we belong to understand the implications of the content of the knowledge and the type of the curriculum [sic] we impart, as well as draw attention to the absent, distorted, and suppressed voices in the courses we teach and the reading lists we produce (p. 201).

It is not clear whether the academic is a part of the revolutionary process or not. When he lists those engaged in a praxis for change, he cites “expert scientists, officials of international agencies, activists of non-governmental organizations, environmentalists, farmers and consumers, and members of people movements. It is they who agitate for fair trade and fight to protect ecological balance and conserve the forests” (p. 32). While he makes a strong case for postcolonial theory, it is not clear to what extent an academic’s engagement with it will indeed “fashion a different world from the one we live in” (p. 122).

While he generally attends to the specifics of his field by analyzing various translations of specific portions of the Bible, but there are two aspects of this which might interest social theorists: postcolonial translation theory and the publication industry. As postcolonial theory has also come to play a part in translation, Sugirtharajah highlights how translation is perceived in non-Western areas of the world. In India, “translation is considered as an independent creative act ... as an act of
intertextuality allowing plenty of fluidity and diversity” (p. 173). Thus a postcolonial idea of translation would “subvert meanings, grammatical arrangements, and linguistic practices” (p. 177) so as to reify silenced voices and other epistemological approaches to the text.

Regarding the publication industry, Sugirtharajah focuses his attention on the recent initiative by the Edinburgh publisher Canongate, which began printing the King James Version (KJV) as a work of literature with prefaces by well-known, non-religious authors such as P.D. James, the mystery novelist, who wrote the preface to the 1998 edition of the series. Sugirtharajah finds this new fascination with the KJV extremely odd as other translations with more precise and modern lexicon and syntax have been published in recent years. He postulates that “at a time when Britain and most of the Western world are becoming more multicultural, and a new configuration of belonging to a nation is emerging due to immigration and unprecedented social and geographical mobility, the reintroduction of the King James Version may encourage nostalgia for an imaginary single culture and for an old homogeneous glory” (144) since the KJV was indeed, during the nineteenth century, “the only version [of the Bible] in existence on which the sun never set” (Anderson in Sugirtharajah, p. 127). He continues to postulate that just as the natives of the nineteenth century needed “civilizing” so too in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries “the West is seen as needing salvation” (p. 145). Sugirtharajah's hypothesis is quite interesting as one begins to analyze just how the English Bible became a part of religious and national identity for the British Empire's inhabitants.

This text is multi-faceted and very approachable. Sugirtharajah has produced a study which, while problematic in its project for socio-political change, engages in a scholarly discussion of the iconic English Bible and its relation to identity. It can be an invaluable tool to the beginning postcolonial critic, the biblical scholar, and to scholars from a multiplicity of disciplines who are interested in recovering the heterogeneous voices which the colonial religious discourse may have silenced.

Notes
1. This author has often been ignored for his contributions to the development of postcolonial theory. Sugirtharajah compiles a list of native resistant authors who have largely been written out of critical discourse due to the popularity of liberation hermeneutics.