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Review of R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Troublesome Texts: The Bible in Colonial and Contemporary Culture*. The Bible in the Modern World 17. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008.

**Christopher B. Zeichmann, Emmanuel College, University of Toronto**

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R. S. Sugirtharajah, one of the leading voices in minority biblical criticism, has added another fine, if unfocused, work to his shelf with *Troublesome Texts*. This volume collects nine essays – some previously made public and others entirely new – on the Bible and its various cultural functions, particularly with an eye to its role in the perpetuation of colonial hegemony. While he repeatedly claims ambivalence toward postcolonial criticism (pp. 3, 33, 107), this collection is most readily understood as a contribution to that discourse. The individual essays lack the tightly-argued style for which he is known, but Sugirtharajah compensates with a remarkable diversity of topics and a comparably accessible writing style. Analyses vary between theological, historical, and theoretical, but they nonetheless maintain a detectable uniformity in the sort criticisms proffered against institutions and interpreters.

Sugirtharajah divides the book into four sections on a thematic basis. The first, “Colonial Subjects/Postcolonial Strategies”, contains the most classically postcolonial analyses of the book, in which he works at both the exegetical and meta-scholarly levels. He begins with a compelling discussion of the overlooked ideological motivations behind Victorian reconstructions of the historical Jesus and the historical Buddha. Unlike contemporaneous German scholarship, British scholars were less concerned with nationalising Jesus than reconstructing figures profitable for their colonisation efforts. Scholars accomplished this through wildly divergent Jesuses and Buddhas that served to assert the superiority of Christianity over “heathen” Buddhism, provide apolitical – and consequently submissive – models for Indian religious life or to validate class-based Protestant elitism within England. Similar themes of empire, European proselytising and native autonomy in light of colonial ascendancy emerge in a subsequent chapter on Raja Rammohun Roy’s and Mohandas Gandhi’s subversive renderings of the Sermon on the Mount. The thematic concerns of these late Indian scholars are not particularly surprising, but Sugirtharajah convincingly argues that the Sermon was an effective locus for contesting the dominant vision of Christianity. In effect, the Sermon on the Mount’s emphases on praxis and moral exhortation destabilized the evangelising discourses of orthodoxy (by de-emphasising the salvific effect of Jesus’ death) and its monologic (in its inability to sate the thirst for Hindu religious life), both unavoidably present in the package-deal of colonial Christianity. This chapter echoes Homi Bhabha’s seminal essay, “Signs Taken for Wonders”, in both content and purpose.

Perhaps the strongest essay of the volume, “Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation”, contains an insightful discussion of the intersections of empire and resistance in the actions of early Christian martyrs and contemporary suicide bombers. Far from being enactments of “religious” radicalism, these suicidal impulses are acts of witness to visions of dominions that exist apart from unfavourable – and inescapable – social conditions of political occupation. Adherents enact these “suicide missions” to both target the withdrawal of troops from specific regions and personally attain membership in this alternate, divine kingdom. This link has been made elsewhere, but Sugirtharajah provides it with additional depth, though this chapter would benefit from an even wider selection of comparative sources. Related work on the impulses behind asceticism, modern-day “natural” childbirthing and Buddhist monks’ self-immolation could add further nuance to his findings.

Less persuasive is his chapter on the Johannine epistles. He first argues that they appropriate the rhetoric of empire. Sugirtharajah certainly demonstrates the presence of power-oriented claims within the epistles, but he does not provide evidence that these are specifically “imperial” forms of authorisation; Bruce Lincoln, Jonathan Z. Smith, and others have argued that similar strategies of domination through literature are present in nearly all instances of mythmaking. More troublesome is the second half of the chapter, which contends that a Buddhist influence on these epistles explains previously unresolved exegetical issues. The parallels he espies might offer comparative utility, but his case for a genetic relationship between the two never gets past the level of improbability.

The second section, “Contemporary Issues, Incompatible Texts”, contains two manifestations of Sugirtharajah’s vision of socially-engaged biblical scholarship. In the first, he argues that the U.S. government’s reaction to the tsunami of 2004 was ultimately opportunistic and self-serving, reflecting a frequent tendency for “neo-colonization” in the wake of disaster. Some responses therefore treated the disaster as an opportunity to restructure the area’s political and economic situations to the advantage of the United States, failed to show sensitivity to indigenous technologies of reconstruction, or used the situation to convert the populations. However, such re-colonisation is not a foregone conclusion. Sugirtharajah contrasts this with the anti-colonial uprisings against the Dutch elites after Krakatoa. The other chapter in this section is more theological in orientation, concerning the problem of violent biblical narratives in war-ravaged societies. He spends inexplicably little space interacting with the abundant literature on this topic from all sectors of minority scholarship, since he proposes solutions to the problem that he must be aware are familiar: 1) contesting the bible’s “degree of authority that defies human discussion and dissension and limits reading options” (p. 89); 2) deeming the biblical text irrelevant to modern issues; and 3) “expos[ing] the militant orthodoxy of some interpreters” (p. 90). He ultimately opts for a fourth approach centring on the insights one might glean from secular literature.

The final two sections address the role of postcolonial and Asian scholars in the academy. Sugirtharajah identifies four recent changes in Asian biblical studies: 1) liberation theology’s move to the mainstream, effectively depoliticising its message and accommodating it to less productive ends; 2) the shift away from a singular “Asian” theology to a much greater number of more localised manifestations; 3) the emergence of diasporic theologies that compete with native theologies over issues of authenticity; 4) the exchange of the modernist worldview of liberation theology for the postmodern orientation of postcolonial studies, which entails major adjustments in foundational assumptions and goals. The final chapter, “Catching the Post or How I Became an Accidental Theorist”, is autobiographical. He recounts the inalterably hegemonic role of Western historical criticism in his theological education with open resentment. The major figures of this approach often reduced biblical cultures to tribal primitivity, with negative implications for Indian self-worth. The lack of any sort of “Indian” theology at the time precluded intellectual sanctuary, though this changed with the rise of postcolonial criticism. The works of José Miguez-Bonino and Edward Said illuminated the tainted legacy of Biblical Studies, compelling Sugirtharajah to his present variety of theory-driven scholarship.

While much is to be commended about this volume, there are also three conspicuous problems throughout. First, few essays contain thesis-driven arguments. Most tend towards the exploration of selected themes. Topics of discussion range from the possible insincerity of the Society of Biblical Literature’s response to the tsunami (p. 67) to the religious responses on Krakatoa (p. 69) to the U.S. government’s condescending imperial rhetoric in its response to various natural disasters (p. 73) to the potential of secular literature in theologies of disaster (p. 77) in a single chapter. This is uncharacteristic of Sugirtharajah’s writing style in his previous output, but perhaps attributable to a stylistic application of postcolonial values of improvisation, plurality, and non-totalisation. Readers may nonetheless find his abrupt shifts in topic disorienting. Second, footnotes are occasionally incomplete (pp. 63 n. 19, 74 n. 20), formatted confusingly (p. 75 n. 21) or entirely absent (pp. 35, 56,

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76, 87, 107). As a result, he periodically works in generalities when specific examples would not only strengthen his arguments, but also help identify individual dialogue partners and further elucidate the point of an argument. Large bodies of relevant literature are also regularly missing from his discussions, severely limiting its ability to spur additional research on a given topic. Third, the essays sometimes seem myopic in their intended audience of Asian and Christian biblical scholars. The examination of diaspora, indigeneity, and “authenticity”, for example, comes off as unproductive and needlessly divisive (pp. 121–122). To be sure, theological discourse is almost necessarily emic in nature. But this might not prevent non-Asian and non-Christian readers from occasionally pondering the “so what?” question. Whatever criticisms one might put forth, all readers will learn much from this book, so long as they do not find its eclecticism too distracting. Most importantly, Sugirtharajah’s call to socially-engaged biblical scholarship is erudite, inspiring, and achievable.