TROUBLESOME TEXTS

The Bible in the Modern World, 17

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THE BIBLE IN COLONIAL AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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R.S. Sugirtharajah
Birmingham

Introduction

The idiosyncratic and narrow nature of current biblical scholarship, the reputation and reliability of the Bible, the concerns implicit in marginal readings, and colonial representations and postcolonial reclamations, are some of the issues that pin together this volume. The collection comes at a time when there is unease on three fronts: at the image of the Bible as tattered and tainted by its association with oppressive and fundamentalist causes; the increasingly esoteric character of research-driven mainstream biblical scholarship, ever more isolated in its hermeneutical pursuits; and the tiered over-use of theory to mine meaning in texts. Hector Avalos has likened the current impact of biblical studies as an enterprise to the happiness that comes with solving sudoku puzzles, an exercise which generates no tangible profit to anyone. The purpose of this volume is not to rescue the Bible and uphold its majesty, or spin the attractiveness and advantages of biblical scholarship, or to sing praises for the boons that theory brings, but to make all these three more complicated, complex and ambiguous. In a modest way, what these essays strive to do is wean biblical studies from its excessive textual preoccupations; to re-direct the energies of the discipline from its current ineffectual and useless pursuits in the direction of a wider utility; and to free theory from its excessive preoccupation with the abstruse. This is a tough task and the volume does not pretend to achieve all these. All that it does is to set markers and provide some points towards these goals.

Chapters, Contents

The first part, 'Colonial Sub-Texts, Postcolonial Strategies', engages with colonial/postcolonial concerns. The nineteenth century saw a surfeit of literature on the lives of Jesus and the Buddha. The first chapter, 'Gautama and the Galilean: Victorian Lives of Two Masters', explores how Victorians were attracted by these two major religious leaders—the Buddha and Jesus—and the kind of biographies produced by biblical scholars and Orientalists. It demonstrates how these biographers were trying to produce an authentic

Buddhism and an authentic Christianity by tracing and locating them in the teachings of their founders. It scrutinizes how the biographers used historical criticism to interrogate both Christian and Buddhist documents in order to distinguish between mythic and historical elements in the two traditions. It examines the theological presuppositions underpinning both scholarly and popular accounts of the Buddha and Jesus The chapter also discusses how Victorian discourses on the Buddha and Jesus were largely determined by the cultural idea of Europe at that time, and how Orientalism, colonialism, ethnicity, race and national identity influenced them. In other words, the chapter demonstrates how these construals reflected western agendas, concerns and interests, and how these two religious masters were implicated in the vagaries of the political and religious concerns of European nations. This chapter was presented at the 'Ways of Reading' conference held in July 2007 at the British Library as part of their major exhibition 'Sacred: Discover What We Share'.

The second Chapter, 'Subjecting the Johannine Letters to Postcolonial Criticism', has three aims. One is to draw attention to colonial tendencies embedded in the text, which could well play into the hands of the present day empire-builders. Among the colonial characteristics of the text are: castigation of those who are not with us as being the enemies of God; resentment at any plural thinking; and employment of the trope of the child as a means of control and domestication. The second aim is to unmask the hermeneutics of denial at work among some Western biblical interpreters, who refuse to accept any influence from beyond the Hebraic and Hellenistic milieux, and to illuminate some of the ideas in the epistles for which there are no Jewish or Greek parallels. Re-invoking the now-marginalized hypothesis that Buddhist ideas could have influenced early Christianity, the chapter will demonstrate that some of the Johannine theological categories such as indwelling could well have benefited from Eastern thinking. The third aim is to show how postcolonial criticism readily aligns itself with the insistence of the letters on seeking and finding truth, justice, and love, not in doctrinal or spiritual categories but in the tensions and conflicts of life. Here postcolonialism will concur with the writer of the epistles that ethical involvement, not theoretical or doctrinal fine-tuning, is paramount.

The third chapter, 'The Sermon on the Mount and Colonial India: The Transgressive Readings of Raja Rammohun Roy and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi', is about how, in the hands of the modern builders of India, the narrative that came with the Englishman's book became a site for scrupulous ethical enquiry in regard to both Christianity and colonialism. Addressing different audiences, the social elite in the case of Rammohun

Roy, and the crowds of ordinary people in the case Karamchand Gandhi, both these men subverted the appeal of the very text which the missionary intended to use to expose the moral inferiority of the 'natives'. Their hermeneutical practice was another illustrious case of the colonized talking back to the colonizer, and the margins marshalling arguments against the centre. The chapter ends with a surmise on the unlikelihood of the Sermon on the Mount acquiring the same noticeable purchase in postcolonial India as it did during colonial times.

The last chapter in this section, 'Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation: The Next Phase', is, as the title indicates, about the future prospects of postcolonial criticism. Those practitioners who work in the area of postcolonial studies agree that the methods and ideas which motivated the initial critical and theoretical work—a theoretical work which was once both innovative and illuminative—has now become fusty and outworn, and the time has come to move beyond these old debates and chart a new course of action. At a time when there are disturbing political developments and the emergence of new empires, postcolonial theory and its application is in need of continual re-examination and re-definition in order to meet not only new challenges but also to retain its fluidity, vitality and serviceability. This chapter explores some of the areas where future energies of postcolonial biblical interpretation should be spent—religious fundamentalism, suicide bombings and asylum-seeking, all of which have a great impact on our lives.

Part II, 'Contemporary Issues, Incompatible Texts', contains a couple of chapters dealing with present-day concerns and draws attention to the difficulty of using biblical texts in such cases. 'Tsunami, Trauma and Text: Hermeneutics after the Asian Deluge' is about the political and hermeneutical ramifications of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami which had such a devastating effect upon millions of people. The first section deals with how a national disaster like a tsunami can become a vehicle for either decolonization or recolonization. In Dutch colonial Indonesia, an earlier tsunami became in the hands of nationalists an ideal gift to whip up anti-colonial sentiments. The current humanitarian reconstruction, with all its good intentions, lends itself to economic, cultural and spiritual neo-colonialism. The second section looks at how the biblical story of the flood was utilized to justify colonial projects such as the invasion of South America and also used as a benchmark to evaluate and judge other peoples' history and chronology. It also looks at how, in the process, the authenticity of the biblical account was established. The third section addresses the theological reactions of different faith communities, which tend either to blame an angry God for the misfortune, or to attribute the disaster to the

misbehaviour of the people. The last section advances the idea that a possible place to look for an answer to the theological conundrum produced by the tsunami is in secular stories which, in contemporary society, act as surrogate sacred texts. The section analyses two novels—José Saramago's *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, and Vicente Leñero's *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán* which shed new light on old stories and offer a complex picture of God. This study was first presented at the a special session held at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, Philadelphia, November 2005 and was subsequently published in *Biblical Interpretation*.

The next chapter, 'Texts and Terrorism: Communal Strife, Sacred Scriptures and Secular Stories,' highlights the complications of using the Bible in a situation like Sri Lanka where there is communal strife, when the Bible itself is rife with vengeance and punishment. In a situation where both communities—the Singhalese and the Tamils—are prisoners of their textual traditions, which perpetuate the notions of 'chosen' and 'damned', 'us' and 'them', this chapter proposes secular fiction as an alternative hermeneutical source. By way of illustration, the chapter provides examples from Sri Lankan fiction which do not offer any grand theories but rather provide a counter-intuitive way of addressing a reality palpable with tension, suspicion and hopelessness. This was first presented at the Sri Lankan consultation, 'Sri Lankan Theology: Retrospect and Prospect' held at Kandy, June 2006.

Part III, 'Mainstream Agendas, Marginal Uneasiness', contains text versions of inaugural addresses. The first one, 'Scripture, Scholarship, Empire: Putting the Discipline in its Place', was delivered on November 2004 in connection with conferment of a personal chair in Biblical Hermeneutics at the University of Birmingham. It maps the present status of the biblical discipline. Among the issues it deals with are the fate of the English Bible as it struggles to regain credibility, the increased esoteric agenda of mainstream biblical scholarship, the predicament of marginal interpreters, and the link between empire and the production and marketing of the Bible.

The second address, 'Future Imperfect: Asia, the Bible and Biblical Interpretation', was delivered as the inaugural address of The Society of Asian Biblical Studies in Hong Kong in August 2006. This chapter investigates changes that are currently taking place with regard to the Bible and biblical interpretation First, it looks at the West, especially at the implications for the Bible and its interpretation of novels such as Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, which has not only made the Bible a part of the entertainment industry but also has caused readers to view it under a new identity, as literature which has the potential to thrill. Also in the West, it looks at a new readability of the Bible provided by the recent emergence of interpreters

from outside the discipline who are bringing new questions and also providing a new lease of life for the Bible. They are the interpreters 'from the side', namely from other academic disciplines, 'from outside' of the discipline, namely from the world of art, literature, film etc, and thirdly 'from below', namely the voices in cyberspace—the non-specialists who use blogging as way of commenting on issues varying from tsunamis to suicide bombers. In the light of these new readers, the chapter raises the question of who provides the better interpretation—professionally trained insiders, or outsiders. Moving on to the Asian scene, the chapter identifies three important changes that have taken place over the years—the stalemate of liberation hermeneutics, the miniaturization of Asian theology, and the arrival of diasporic interpreters. It ends with a plea for Asian hermeneutics to (a) move beyond fetishizing culture and spirituality and into a recovery of Asia's much neglected intellectual tradition, (b) turn its attention from its traditional constituency namely, the church and her needs, and instead interact with the academy and global ideas, and intervene in international debates. This was the inaugural address given at the formation of the Society of Asian Biblical Studies.

The fourth and final part, 'Theories, Re-tracings', has one chapter, 'Catching the Post or How I Became an Accidental Theorist'. This chapter recalls some of the important moments I have faced as an interpreter and how I survived and tried to stay sane in the field of biblical studies. Partly historical and partly hermeneutical, it tells the story of different hermeneutical loops, circles and dances I went through before I embraced postcolonialism, especially the awkward encounters with the reigning critical methods, and it outlines the factors which led me to metamorphose into a theorist. This chapter is a broad reflection on the ongoing debate on method in biblical scholarship.

These essays are informed by postcolonial analysis, concerns and sensibilities, but, as they reveal, there is no overt indebtedness to a particular theorist or theoretical category. In keeping with the postcolonial mood, the essays adopt an eclectic approach and summon those aspects of the theory which have utility value for the task at hand and shun those features which are dogmatic, hegemonic and a hindrance. One of the proposals here is that, for the future survival and usefulness of postcolonial theory, the classic analysis which served well in the past has to change direction. This change of direction is necessitated by new forms of empire and new phases of colonialism which cause concern and anxiety.

This volume contains essays that are new and others that have already been published singly elsewhere. In such an assemblage, the chances of an idea or argument getting repeated are inevitable and unavoidable. On such

occasions, which I hasten to add are very few, the recurrences are not mere mechanical repetition but are attempts each time to stress a different point or to more clearly nuance an idea.

Finally, all interpretative strategies and interventions, even those which take a critical stance toward the Bible, such as feminist, liberationist, queer, and ecological, eventually end up in reinforcing the potency of the text. Those interpreters engaged in their emancipatory exegesis, while often exposing offensive and unprogressive features of the Bible, have the function of salvaging its supportive and transformative aspects, and thus end up creating an impression of dependence on the text and underlining its importance. This volume tries to steer away from being dependent solely on this collection of ancient books, and to look for alternative hermeneutical sources in secular fiction. These secular novels and stories may not have all the right answers but at least they often pose the right questions. Linked to this is the volume's other concern, that mainstream biblical interpretation should re-think its traditional pursuits. Rather than being simply inward and backward-looking, investigating ancient parchments and scrolls and pretending that these documents are made modern and significant through their appearance in digital editions, which have in fact no use but to a small, exclusive club of die-hard biblical scholars, it should look to the future and move outwards and address the needs and concerns of the people. In Alan Bennett's play, *The History Boys*, about English grammar school boys being prepared for Oxbridge entrance examinations against the background of the Thatcherian educational league tables and performance charts of the 1980s, Hector, the upholder of traditional teaching methods, comes up with this line, which I have used as a cautionary epigram to the seventh chapter: 'All knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use'. Most current biblical scholarship largely accords with this Hectorian axiom. It has become a leisurely pursuit of 'gentlemen' scholars with little concern for the needs of humanity. This plea for a redeployment of the resources and efforts of the discipline is not totally new. Liberation theologians have repeatedly called for such a change of course. If biblical scholars continue to ignore this and concentrate exclusively on things which keep them and their closed circle amused, then I am afraid that sooner or later somebody is going to wave at them a fatwa in the spirit of V.S. Naipaul. He was at his cantankerous best or worst when he said recently that English Literature Departments should be closed down and those employed in them should go and work on the buses. This, he said would 'release a lot of manpower'. The earnest aspiration behind this volume, and my fervent hope is that mainstream biblical scholars will not be forced to clock-in at that dreaded bus depot.

Part I

Colonial Sub-Texts, Postcolonial Strategies

1

GAUTAMA AND THE GALILEAN: VICTORIAN LIVES OF TWO MASTERS

> Just as people test the purity of gold by burning it in fire, by cutting it and examining it on a touchstone, so exactly should you, O ye monks, accept my words after subjecting them to a critical test, not out of reverence for me.
>
> *Siddhartha*[1]

> Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly, I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.
>
> *Jesus*[2]

Searching for the earthly Buddha or the historical Jesus is a modern phenomenon that started with the European Enlightenment and colonialism. If the Reformation cry was to go back to the Bible, nineteenth-century liberal theology's mission was to recover a Jesus of history, while others painted portraits of other founders of religions. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of lives of Jesus and of the Buddha were produced in Britain. These re-tellings of the careers of these two masters went on concurrently. Surprisingly, there was hardly any interaction between the two enterprises.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the hermeneutical presuppositions which underpinned these accounts of the Buddha and Jesus. There are three principal aims: first, to show how these Lives were alike in certain respects but different in others; second, to scrutinize how these biographers employed the then emerging historical criticism to interrogate both Christian and Buddhist documents, in one case to enhance their authenticity and in the other to discredit them; and third, to show how these Victorian discourses on the Buddha and Jesus were largely determined by the cultural ideas of Europe at that time, and how orientalism, colonialism, ethnicity,

1. This saying of the Buddha is from a Tibetan text. Unfortunately, I am unable to provide the exact source.
2. Mk 8.12.

race and national identity influenced the portrayals. In other words, I hope to demonstrate how these construals reflected Western and Christian agendas, concerns and interests, and how these two spiritual masters were implicated in the vagaries of the political and religious concerns of European nations.

Lives and Hermeneutical Landscapes

The biographers of the Buddha and Jesus were motivated by different hermeneutical needs. The impetus for the quest for the historical Jesus did not come from the institutional church nor was the search for the historical Buddha prompted by the Buddhist Sangha. On the continent, the Jesus quest was an enterprise mainly done at the fringes of the Church or almost outside it by those who mistrusted the prevailing literal interpretation of the Bible, and those discontented with the church's proclamation of a Christ of faith which tested their perception and intelligence. The interest in the historical Jesus proved to be, as Albert Schweitzer put it, 'an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma'.[3] In Britain, the search was not so ponderous and tirelessly over-analytical as that done in Germany. The British Lives were undertaken mainly by prominent church leaders in order to assure the faithful that modern criticism was not destructive of the sacred documents and the faith resting on them, and that a prudent use of it could enhance and illuminate the figure of Jesus. It was the Enlightenment idea of marrying reason and faith which prompted the English search for the historical Jesus.

The search for the Buddha was played out in a different hermeneutical theatre. It was undertaken mainly by Orientalists and Christians, not all of them clergy or apologists, but with motives that were a mixture of theological curiosity and an intention to establish the superiority of Christianity. This was the time when the British empire was expanding in the Indian sub-continent, and for both administrative and evangelical purposes there was a need to have access to the natives. This resulted in documents being translated, inscriptions decoded and monuments explored and excavated. It resulted also in scholars turning their attention to a comparative study of Eastern religions. In Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, the missionaries played an important role in the search for the historical Buddha. Their aim was unequivocal—to discredit the Buddha and his message. Spence Hardy, a Methodist minister, who laboured in Ceylon, noted with a tinge of arrogance: 'We can place no confidence in [the Buddha] himself, or in the system that bears his name, as his life is a myth, his teaching a mass of error, his

3. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: A. & C. Black, 1910), p. 4.

code of morals imperfect, and his religion founded on principles that have no substantiality'.[4] His *The Sacred Books of the Buddhists* ended on an evangelizing note calling for the conversion of Ceylon, a call pre-dating John R. Mott's at the Edinburgh 1910 conference for the conversion of the world.

The Buddha biographers ran into a number of problems. To begin with, for a reputable Indian religious leader to be anything but a Brahmin by birth, and to be a layman revolting against Vedic practices, was unthinkable. Both his ksatriya caste and his royal upbringing proved to be obstacles to these early biographers' acceptance of him as an authentic religious teacher. That the Buddha should offer a counter-discourse and initiate a school of thinking in opposition to the Brahmanical hegemony was beyond their grasp. Secondly, in contrast to other founders of religion, the Buddha had no divine revelation. Thirdly, unlike other sages of old such as Vyasa, Kumaila, and Sankara, the Buddha did not employ Sanskrit to communicate his message. Instead, he relied on the vernacular and used Pali and made his message accessible to all. Fourthly, linked to the above, the earlier Buddhist scriptures were not in Sanskrit, the sacred language of India but in Pali, the language of everyday life, for Buddhism intended to transcend caste restrictions and appeal to all. Fifthly, the Pali canon was too extensive to cope with whereas the New Testament was taut and slender, a manageable set of texts. Sixthly, there was the matter of life-span. The Buddha lived into his eighties and his religious work lasted nearly forty-five years, whereas Jesus died in his thirties after a ministry lasting perhaps three years. Moreover, the Buddhist scriptures are not like the New Testament gospels. They do not contain passages related to Buddha's career in the same way as do the gospels. The biography apparently produced in the second century BCE—*Buddhacarita*—by a Sanskrit poet called Avaghosha was dismissed as historically unreliable and as mere hagiography. It was also around that time that stories about the Buddha's previous incarnations were compiled in verse in the Pali canon of the Jataka collection. It was the teaching and not the historical details about the earthly Buddha that the early Buddhist scriptures were concerned with. There are few details of his life in them. Finally, the eventual rehabilitation and incorporation of the Buddha into the Hindu pantheon increased the biographers' difficulties. Linked to this, the near extinction of the religion that the Buddha was supposed to have started in the country of its origin, India, compounded the problem.

The Lives of Buddha followed a particular pattern. The biographers constantly ridiculed the confusion of dates for the Buddha's birth and death. The ethical and moral teachings of the Buddha were underplayed, whereas

4. Spence R. Hardy, *Christianity and Buddhism Compared* (Colombo: The Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1908), p. 82.

lengthy and detailed expositions were accorded to the legendary elements in his life. Buddhist ideas concerning cosmogony were highlighted to demonstrate the absurdity of the Buddha. The idea was to show how, in Spence Hardy's words, 'the mind of heathendom'[5] worked.

Ironically, the missionaries' writings, which were intended to expose Buddhism as a dark and superstitious faith, made little impact on the Singhalese, but attracted a great deal of attention in the West. Two celebrated Westerners who were enthused and championed the cause of Buddhism were Arthur Schopenhauer who drew on Buddhist thinking and went on to argue that Jesus was influenced by the Buddha, and the American Henry Olcott who played a significant role in the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Methods and Machinations

The methodology of both Jesus and Buddha questers was the same. The then emerging new modern criticism provided for both an effective tool. But the motive and the application were different. In one, the usage of the tool had a malevolent and abusive intent, and in the other it was put to use to add value. At a time when the English churches were trying to deal with the controversy created by Bishop Colenso as a result of his application of higher criticism to the Pentateuch, Spence Hardy urged that the same methods should be applied to Buddhist texts with a view to discrediting them: 'The method that bishop Colenso employs unsuccessfully, in his attack upon the Pentateuch of Moses, we may employ, successfully, in exposing the unhistorical character of the Pitaka of Buddha'.[6] The intention was to 'expose the more prominent errors of Buddhism'.[7] But the approach and attitude were different when employing the same tools to the gospel narratives. Writing in the *Hibbert Journal*, Arthur Harington set out to relieve his readers of anxiety by assuring them that the adoption of scientific criticism was to 'show that the Gospel [had] lost nothing of its ancient power'.[8] Bernard Lucas, an LMS missionary in India, hoped that modern criticism, rather than 'disregarding the halo' would 'account for the appearance of the halo in the portraits' of Jesus.[9] The hermeneutical aim

5. Spence R. Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1860), p. 360.

6. Spence R. Hardy, *The Sacred Books of the Buddhists Compared with History and Modern Science* (Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1863), p. 3.

7. Hardy, *The Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, p. 157.

8. Arthur H. Harington, 'The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Experience', *Hibbert Journal* 3.1 (1905), p. 801.

9. Bernard Lucas, *Christ for India* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1910), p. 168.

here was not to destroy the sanctity of the text as Hardy wanted to do in the case of the Buddhist texts, but to search for 'calm, thinkable truth' in the gospels with the help of modern criticism.

Source Criticism proved a particularly handy instrument in identifying the tradition history behind the written documents, allowing the biographers to cut through the myths and legends that had grown around their religious founders and get behind these accretions in order to recover the 'original figure'. The emergence of the quest for the historical Jesus occurred simultaneously with a renewed interest in the literary relationships between the four gospels. The fourth gospel was increasingly seen as irrelevant for the search, and the synoptic gospels became the focus of investigation and attention. The hermeneutical aim of those involved in the Jesus quest, whether liberal, pietist, or conservative, was the same—to portray Jesus as he was. If the Synoptic gospels provided considerable data for the Jesus quest, in the case of Buddha, the scholars turned their attention to Theravada Buddhism and its canonical works—the Three Pitakas—as the original Buddhism, and discarded the Mahayana as a later accrual. Reginald Copleston, the Bishop of Colombo, declared with the authority that comes with his office that the 'historical Gautama must be sought in the Pitakas'.[10] Spence Hardy claimed that the Three Pitakas were 'a pure record of pure unmixed truth, without any deposit of error, possibility of mistake', and dismissed the Mahayana texts as 'legends' unable to reveal the 'full form of original Buddhism'.[11] T.W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922), a civil servant who worked in Sri Lanka and later turned academic, and who adopted a Zen-like detachment to the whole enterprise, played a significant role in privileging the Theravada text. He cared less for the Mahayana Buddhism that was found in Nepal and Tibet, which he reckoned was corrupt and in 'many points different from, but actually antagonistic to, the primitive system of Buddhism'.[12]

Davids advocated the idea of using historical criticism to study the Buddhist texts with a view to finding the historical Buddha. His methods resonated with those of the Jesus biographers engaged in their similar undertaking, namely to get behind the later textual traditions to reach the

10. Reginald Copleston, 'Buddhism', *The Nineteenth Century* 24 (1888), p. 125.

11. Hardy, *Christianity and Buddhism Compared*, p. 3.

12. Rhys T.W. Davids, *Buddhism: Being a Sketch of the Life and Teachings of Gautama, the Buddha* (London: Society for the Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1910), p. 199. For Davids, it was the Pali texts which 'have preserved for us a record, quite uncontaminated by any outside influence… They are our best authorities for the early history of that interesting system of religion…which we now call Buddhism'. See *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion, as Illustrated by Some Points in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Hibbert Lectures 1881* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1891), pp. 232-33.

actual historical person. While the preferred option of the biographers of Jesus was the Synoptic gospels, Davids settled for the Three Pitakas. His aim was to 'collect there whatever is said incidentally about the life, family, and personal surroundings of the Buddha, and piece them together into a connected whole'. He explained the general rule of criticism: 'A complete work on the life of Gautama would thus compare the different versions of each episode so as to arrive at its earliest form'.[13] This way, Davids believed that one could ascertain how much of the stories and myths were 'religious hero-worship, mere poetical imagery, misapprehension'.[14]The task was to search through the biographical parts of the Buddhist canon and 'ascertain which parts of them [were] older than the rest and whether they contain an older system hidden under the late one'.[15] The work of modern criticism, Davids acknowledged, was far from being a beacon of objectivity, and depended on 'personal impressions'.[16]

Textual Manners and Management

Orientalists and missionaries were not known for their hermeneutical correctness. In dealing with the scriptures of both traditions we see clear cases of orientalism at work. The Christian scriptures were perceived as true and authentic whereas the Buddhist texts were treated with extreme caution. The gospel narratives about Jesus were seen as 'simple and dignified'. They were praised for their 'brevity, perspicuity, vigour, sublimity', and for their 'trueness to nature and inimitable pathos', whereas the Buddhist scriptures were dismissed as 'feeble utterances, tedious diffuseness…inane twaddle and childish repetitions'.[17] Monnier-Williams, the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, declared that it would be 'in vain' to look for the life of the Buddha in the Buddhist scriptures as one would look for the life of the Christ in the gospels. His contention was that 'Buddha's biography is mixed up with such monstrous legends, absurd figments, and extravagant fables, that to attempt the sifting out of any really historical element worthy of being compared with the pregnant simplicity—the dignified brevity—of the biography of Christ, would be an idle task'.[18]

The case for the historical accuracy and genuineness of the accounts of Jesus' life were fostered by the following three assumptions. First, they came

13. Davids, *Buddhism*, p. 17.
14. Davids, *Buddhism*, p. 17.
15. Davids, *Buddhism*, p. 87.
16. Davids, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, p.36.
17. Monier Monnier-Williams, *Buddhism, in its Connexion with Brahmanism and Hinduism and in its Contrast with Christianity* (London: John Murray, 1890), p. 558.
18. Monnier-Williams, *Buddhism*, p. 553.

from 'the very lips of His contemporary companions',[19] whereas, for 'the life of the Buddha, not a single contemporary voice has come down to us, whether of friend or enemy, which should directly and incontrovertibly assure us of a single fact'.[20] This was S.H. Kellogg, an American missionary in nineteenth-century India. He claimed that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written 'in substantially their present form by the men whose name they bear',[21] or by people who were personally close to Jesus: Matthew's Gospel 'proven to have come in substantially its present form from a personal companion and intimate friend of Jesus'.[22] He was fond of quoting Renan's phrase that the gospels were 'tender remembrances'. The second assumption was that, since their 'first publication', the gospels have come down to us 'without a single corruption' whereas the Buddhist texts were 'corrupted and divergent at an early day'.[23] In Kellogg's view the Buddhist texts 'lacked two important lines of evidence': (a) the New Testament texts go back to 'within three or four hundred years of the time of the apostles', whereas the written form of the Buddha's life is found in various books written 'four hundred to a thousand years after the death of the Buddha',[24] and (b) the Christian scriptures were 'compressed in the canon'. There was no evidence of a Buddhist council approving an agreed list of books.

The third assumption was that the gospel accounts are accorded revelatory significance. The vast difference between the accounts in the gospel and the Buddhist texts, according to Monnier-Williams was that the Bible claims to be 'a supernatural revelation' and does not attach 'mystical talismanic virtue to the mere sound of its words', whereas the Buddhist Bible 'utterly repudiates all claims to be a supernatural revelation'.[25]

The biographers' attitude to Christian and Buddhist scriptures was visceral rather than rational. The discrepancies in the gospel accounts were accorded a sensitive reception. At the same time, the inconsistencies in the Buddhist texts were treated unsympathetically and with a contempt which bordered on racism. The Victorian biographers of Jesus like Dean Farrar stressed the 'minute circumstantial accuracy' and the 'prefect truthfulness' of the evangelists.[26] He did not see the various inconsistencies in the gospel

19. S.H. Kellogg, *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World: A Comparison of the Legend, the Doctrine, & the Ethics of the Buddha with the Story, the Doctrine, & the Ethics of Christ* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1885), p. 52.
20. Kellogg, *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World*, p. 53.
21. Kellogg, *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World*, p. 52.
22. Kellogg, *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World*, p. 54.
23. Kellogg, *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World,* p. 53.
24. Kellogg, *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World*, p. 53.
25. Monnier-Williams, *Buddhism*, p. 557.
26. Frederick W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ in Two Volumes* (London: Casell Peter & Galpin, n.d.), II, p. 432.

accounts as contradictions but as complementary. He attributed the variations to 'differences of purpose in the narratives of the four evangelists'. The argument seemed to be that when one gospel failed to record, another filled the gap. For instance, in dealing with the resurrection, Matthew 'dwells chiefly on the majesty and glory', Mark on the 'fact' of the event, Luke on its 'spiritual' aspect, and John sees it as a 'touchstone of character'.[27] By contrast, the Buddhist variations are dismissed—for example by Sterling Berry, a Church of Ireland clergyman—on the grounds that the 'Eastern mind' is 'averse to history and inclined to speculation',[28] and is prone to exaggeration rather than 'simple statement of actual facts'.[29]

When it suited their hermeneutical purposes, the Buddha biographers were all too enthusiastic to accord authentic status to unlikely stories. For instance, Monnier-Williams took the story that the Gautama died because he ate too much pork as historical, its authenticity being established by the argument that a derogatory story like this which undermined the 'dignity' of the Buddha was 'not likely to have been fabricated'.[30] Similar extravagant stories about the infant Jesus in the non-canonical gospels were dismissed by Farrar as stories which 'dwarf, and dishonour, and misrepresent Him'.[31]

To bring this section to a close, a few thoughts. There was a selective concentration on the gospels for the lives of Jesus, and on the Pali texts for those of the Buddha. Both these selections were fostered by clear theological agendas.

The reasoning that the events related to Jesus were true because they were written by those who were around at that time—especially the gospel writers —is untenable. No gospel writer claimed that the events they described were based on their own eye-witness account. These accounts grew gradually over the years and were the result of a mixture of memory, tradition, theological guess-work and spiritual conjecture.

The argument of the Buddha biographers that the Buddhist sacred texts were untrustworthy was based on the flawed nineteenth-century understanding of history which dismissed the value of oral tradition, ignored other ways of preserving the record, and disregarded textual tamperings that went on in the final formation of the narratives. In spite of the condescending attitude towards the Buddhist texts, the essence of Buddhism came to be expressed through the West's careful management of Buddhism's textual past. These commentators were not interested in how ordinary Buddhists

27. Farrar, *The Life of Christ in Two Volumes*, II, pp. 432-33.

28. Sterling R. Berry, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Comparison and a Contrast* (London: Society for the Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1890), p. 30.

29. Berry, *Christianity and Buddhism*, p. 29.

30. Monnier-Williams, *Buddhism*, p. 49.

31. Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, I, p. 58.

experienced their faith. The related claim that it was not easy to sketch a chronologically straightforward life of the Buddha was, of course, equally true of that of Jesus. Except for a cluster of events which form the Passion narrative, it is not easy to arrange in historical sequence the incidents related to Jesus' life. Even a cursory glance at St John's gospel reveals how the fourth gospel differs from the first three gospels in presenting details of Jesus' life.

As a way of devaluing the teachings of the Buddha, Monnier-Williams claimed that ' in all probability' the Buddha, ' never wrote down any of his own precepts', and 'never composed a single book of his own'.[32] Monnier-Williams failed to acknowledge that Jesus wrote nothing down other than an indecipherable writing in the dust which nobody took any notice of.

Hindu Luther, Christian Hillel

In the nineteenth-century lives, Jesus and the Buddha are presented as respectively anti-Judaistic and anti-brahminical figures who were looking for simpler and purer forms of faith. Both are seen as denouncers of oppressive religion and opponents of the fossilized religious establishment of their time—Judaism in the case of Jesus and brahminism in the case of the Buddha. In Judaism, the tyranny of the temple and the slavery of the Sabbath were presented as classical examples of the institutional domination of the people. For Jesus, the 'sole beauty of a Temple was the sincerity of its worshippers'.[33] Farrar claimed that 'again and again was our Lord thus obliged to redeem this great primeval institution of God's love from these narrow, formal, pernicious restrictions of an otiose and unintelligent tradition'.[34] Jesus was portrayed as a person who dismantled these institutions although they were held to have had divine endorsement. A later commentator encapsulates the approach: 'Jesus revealed the unsettling truth that man is more important than institutions which may bear sanction divine. A worshipper is greater than the altar; a soul is more valuable than the Temple.[35]

Buddha's stance against ritual propitiation of the gods, which had become complicated in his time, and his disputes with the officiating Brahmins who had become more difficult and conceited, endeared him to his Christian biographers. Alexander Cunningham, a military engineer in Bengal, saw the Buddha as 'the champion of religious liberty and social equality. Sakya Muni attacked the Brahmans in their weakest and most vulnerable points;

32. Monnier-Williams, *Buddhism*, p. 54.
33. Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, II, p. 255.
34. Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, II, p. 117.
35. J.H. Howard, *Jesus: The Agitator* (Wrexem: The Principality Press, 1934), p. 9.

in their impious assumption of all mediation between man and his Maker, and in their arrogant claims to hereditary priesthood'.[36] The Buddha was singled out for praise because he was able to achieve what the earlier conquerors of India had failed to do—'dislodge the Brahmin'.[37] A mid-century article in the *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* claimed that

> his merit lay in this, that he levelled a blow at the root of the Brahamanical system, as a system—that he protested against confining the priesthood to a particular class, whose sole title to the office rested on the accident of birth, while he opened the ranks of the order to all who were willing to qualify themselves to discharge its duties; further, he swept away the idols and rejected the entire mass of ceremonies, which as it were obscured the Deity, and rendered access to him almost impossible for the simple-minded worshipper.[38]

Like Jesus, the Buddha was seen as a person who saw that rituals, priestly ceremonies, and inherent birth rights would not in themselves save people. Estlin Carpenter, principal of Manchester College, Oxford, found the Buddha to be more radical in relation to sacrificial rites than Jesus. In Carpenter's view, apart from predicting the fall of the Temple, Jesus was not 'credited with any protest against the sacrificial element of the cultus, save indirectly by driving out the money-changers, and the disciples were in daily attendance in the precincts after his death',[39] whereas 'Gotama would have none of the Brahamanical sacrifices within the Order. The slaughter of animals for offering was in the highest degree offensive to him'.[40]

The Buddha's popularity gained a new momentum when Edwin Arnold, who had the distinction of producing hugely popular biographies of the Buddha and Jesus in poetical verse form, played on the Victorian love of animals. He made use of the Buddha's opposition to animal sacrifice to woo and allure his readers at a time when there was a keen interest in animal welfare. Arnold concocted a narrative which did not appear in the Buddhist scriptures where the Buddha was made to carry a bleeding lamb as a sign of his sympathy towards animals. In another scene which was reminiscent of Jesus' anger with the merchants at the temple, the Buddha was depicted as

36. Alexander Cunningham, *The Bhilsa Topes or Buddhist Monuments of Central India: Comprising a Brief Historical Sketch of the Rise, Progress and Decline of Buddhism with an Account of the Opening and Examination of the Various Groups of Topes Around Bhilsa* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1854), p. 52.

37. J.M.M., 'Buddhism', *The Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* 7.14 (July 1865), p. 284.

38. J.M.M., 'Buddhism', p. 286.

39. J. Estlin Carpenter, *Buddhism and Christianity: A Contrast and a Parallel* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1923), p. 19.

40. Carpenter, *Buddhism and Christianity*, p. 92.

being angry at a sacrificial ceremony presided over by the Brahmins. Arnold's Buddha is made to say: 'Of life which all can take but none can give, life, all creatures love and strive to keep'.[41] The Victorians, raised on the King James Version and familiar with such biblical passages as 'thine ox and thine ass may rest' on the seventh day (Exod. 23.12), 'if thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden,…thou shalt surely help him with it' (Exod. 23.5), 'thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn' (Deut. 25.4), and 'a righteous man regardeth the life of his beast' (Prov. 12.10), would have seen in the Buddha a kindred soul who had a deep compassion for animals.

The status of the Buddha went up several notches for his challenge to one of the greatest evils of brahminical religion, the caste system. The Buddha not only objected to the system but admitted people of low caste such as Upali the barber and Sumita the sweeper into his community. Both Spence Hardy and George Gogerly, who worked in Sri Lanka, made use of the equality preached and practised by the Buddha to shame the contemporary Buddhist community which was riven by caste loyalties; at the same time, they used this to advance their Christian agenda. Spence Hardy remarked that there 'is caste among the Buddhists of Ceylon, but this is contrary to the tenets of the founder of their religion'.[42] He went on to praise the Buddha for his steady opposition to it: 'Indeed, the custom of caste is so contrary to right reason, and its establishment seems to be impossible without calling in the aid of some supernatural power to assist in its confirmation. In this respect there is consistency in the teachings of Gotama as he rejects caste'.[43] Spence Hardy wanted to 'institute rules for the guidance of native converts in relation to caste' and he was unequivocal about the role of Christianity: 'The entire spirit of Christianity is opposed to the system of caste. The revelations that are made in the sacred scriptures relative to the oneness of mankind are most emphatic'.[44] The Buddha became an effective ally of the missionaries in their wanting to break the hegemony of brahmanical faith.

The reforming tendencies of the Buddha inevitably led to his being compared to Martin Luther. G.M. Grant, a Canadian theologian, called the Buddha the 'Hindu Luther'.[45] J.M.M. (who used only his initials) recognized parallels between what the German cleric and the reformers did for Christianity and what the Indian sage did for Brahmanism and Vedism.

41. Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia or the Great Renunciation* (London: Trubner & Co., 1887), p. 134.
42. Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism*, p. 78.
43. Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism*, pp. 77-78.
44. Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism*, p. 84.
45. G.M Grant, *Religions of the World* (London: A. & C. Black, 1896), p. 109.

Both masters found contemporary religion 'in the hands of a class of men', both protested that religion 'was not an affair of the priest alone but is the care and concern of everyman who has a reasonable soul'; both endeavoured to 'communicate to all' the knowledge which had been an exclusive privilege of the few; and both made it clear that it was not the religious institutions but each individual who was 'responsible for the faith'.[46] It was not only common among the interpreters to point out the parallels between the revolt and reform that shaped Buddhism and Christianity, but also to draw attention to the success of these religions in branching off from their original root: 'Buddhism is related to Brahmanism, somewhat as Christianity is to Judaism or Protestantism to Romanism. In all three cases the branch has become mightier, if not more populous, than the parent stock'.[47]

In essence, what the Buddha did with the Upanishads, Jesus did with the Torah—retaining their central teachings while altering their emphases to democratize and humanize them. But there is a reluctance to accord full credit to the Buddha. The gloss is taken off by reference to earlier thinkers such as Yaska, the first commentator on the Rig Veda, and Panini, the ancient grammarian who questioned the authority of the Vedas. Like them, the Buddha was seen as a radical re-reader rather than making a clean break with tradition. Such a grudging attitude is encapsulated by Rhys Davids:

> [such] originality as Gautama possessed lay in the way in which he adopted, enlarged, ennobled, and systematized that which already had been well said by others; in the way in which he carried out to their logical conclusion principles of equity and justice already acknowledged by some of the most prominent earlier thinkers.

The only difference between Gautama and these earlier reformers was in his 'deep earnestness' and 'broad public spirit of philanthropy'.[48] Max Müller took a similar line. He was in no doubt that doctrines similar to those that the Buddha preached existed before his time—the only difference he made was by 'changing a philosophical system into a practical doctrine'.[49] There were, of course, similar re-interpretations of the Torah before the time of Jesus, but the biographers of Jesus were always quick to point out that Jesus was essentially different from the earlier reformers. When claims were made that 'Jesus was a Pharisee who walked in the path of Hillel', 'uttered no new thought' and that 'Hillel was his real Master', Farrar dismissed any such allegations by saying that any resemblance between Hillel and Jesus was like

46. J.M.M., 'Buddhism', p. 287.
47. Grant, *Religions of the World*, p. 108.
48. Davids, *Buddhism*, p. 84.
49. Max F. Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, I (London: Longman's, Green & Co, 1868), p. 238.

that between a 'glow-worm' and 'the sun'. In Farrar's perception Hillel relied on 'precedent', Jesus on innate 'authority'. 'The originality of Jesus', Farrar wrote, 'even to those who regard him as a mere human teacher, consists in this—that his words have touched the hearts of all men in all ages and have regenerated the moral life of the world'.[50] The view of Buddha and Jesus as reformers was based on narrow definitions of Judaism and Brahmanical religion, and the biographers failed to grasp the complexity and variety of the Hinduism and Judaism present at the time.

Missing Buddha, Mythic Jesus

There was a certain phase in the literary production of the lives of these masters when both sets of biographers expressed doubts over the existence of, respectively, the earthly Jesus and the historical Buddha. In the initial stages, there were attempts to deny the existence of the Buddha. Early oriental scholars were baffled by the discovery of a religion named after the Buddha. William Jones, H.H. Wilson, and Henry Colebroke were embarrassed at being unable to identify him. Jones tried to resolve the mystery by claiming that the Buddha was none other than the Scandinavian Woden. Similarly, John Marshman, one of the Serampore Baptist missionaries, said in 1824 that the Buddha was the Egyptian Apis. In 1856, Wilson, faced with contradictory dates for the Buddha's birth, and exasperated by his failure to find his birthplace, Kapila Vastu 'in the geography of the Hindus',[51] and further confused by the non-Brahmanical background of his caste, came to question 'whether any such person as Sakya Sinha, or Sakya Muni or Sramana Gautama, ever actually existed'.[52] He went on to say that it 'seems not impossible, after all, that Sakya Muni is an unreal being, and that all that is related of him is as much a fiction as is that of his preceding migrations, and the miracles that attended his birth, his life and his departure'.[53] Hardy claimed that 'in many cases where his history is partially known, he is regarded as a mere abstraction or as the subject of a myth'.[54] Müller, for whom anything worthwhile had to be textually pukka in order to be authentic, found the Buddhist canonical works unhelpful for locating the historical Buddha. Their information was 'strongly tinged with a legendary character', and therefore 'the very existence of such a being as

50. Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, II, p. 454.
51. H.H. Wilson, 'On Buddha and Buddhism', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 16 (1856), p. 247.
52. Wilson, 'On Buddha and Buddhism', p. 247.
53. Wilson, 'On Buddha and Buddhism', p. 248.
54. Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism*, p. 358.

Buddha, the son of Suddhodana, king of Kapilavastu, has been doubted'.[55] Later Max Muller changed his views and went on to admit the possible influence of Buddhism on the nascent Christian movement.

There also emerged within scholarly circles somewhat later, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, a school of thought which expressed a doubt over the historical existence of Jesus and re-framed him as a mythical figure. There were two 'camps' at work here. The first one was motivated by the paucity of information available on the life of Jesus. Henry Latimer Jackson of Christ's College, Cambridge and the vicar of St Mary with St Benedict's in Huntington was of the view that the 'reports which have come down to us' of Jesus' earthly ministry were 'singularly meagre'.[56] Similarly, someone under the pen-name 'Romanus', writing in the *Hibbert Journal*, expressed his apprehension thus': St Mark, whose Gospel represents the earliest narrative, written or unwritten, gives us the scantiest and most fragmentary accounts of the surroundings of Jesus, His home, His parents, His Time. The Logia are, as they stand, the creation of the Christian community'.[57] Under these circumstances, Jackson's conclusion was that the biography of Jesus was 'impossible but not so the portrait'.[58] Notwithstanding these declarations, biographies of Jesus continued to be written.

The second 'camp' was triggered by the findings of the then emerging new discipline, the comparative study of religions. This forced some scholars to rethink their understanding of Christianity and its development in relation to the Hellenistic mystic religions. Influenced by such new disciplines as anthropology and the History of Religion school, they postulated the idea that the Christ-figure was a re-working by the early church based on mythological and religious themes of the Graeco-Roman and Pagan world and the Krishna myth of the Indic religions. Comparative religious hermeneutics highlighted in various primitive religions the prevalence of rituals such as blood sacrifices, myths regarding redeemer-figures, the death and divine visitation of saviour-gods. This led some to propose that the Christ-figure was a mythological reflection paralleling the ideas of numerous primitive religions in the Roman world. The principal exponents in England were J.M. Robertson (*Christianity and Mythology*, 1900; *Pagan Christs*, 1903; and *The Historical Jesus*, 1916) and Thomas Whittaker (*Origins of Christianity*, 1904), in America, W.B. Smith, and in Germany, Arthur Drews (*The*

55. Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, I, p. 237.

56. Henry Latimer Jackson, 'The Present State of the Synoptic Problem', in Henry Barclay Swete (ed.), *Essays on Some Biblical Questions of the Day* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1909), p. 459.

57. Romanus, 'The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Experience', *Hibbert Journal* 3 (April 1905), p. 577.

58. Jackson, 'The Present State of the Synoptic Problem', p. 459.

Christ Myth, 1910). Although the arguments among these scholars vary, Robertson's words encapsulate their notion that early Christianity did not originate from the gospel but was 'wholly manufactured from the pre-existent material within historic times'.[59] Christianity was a cult that originated in various sacrificial or sacramental rites of the time: 'In the end we have neither history nor biography, but an absolutely enigmatic evangel, set in a miscellany of miracles and of discourses which are but devices to disguise the fact that there had been no original evangel to preach. If the early church had any creed, it was not this. It originated in a *rite* not in an evangel'.[60] The sacramental rite produced the cult, and the movement evolved 'a quasi-biography when the God of the rite' was turned into a Messiah, and this 'old messianic idea' of Judaism 'had to be transmuted into a universalism when the cult came to a Gentile growth'.[61]

This scepticism about the historicity of the Buddha and Jesus was driven and directed by different interpretative motives. The former was based on an anti-Buddhist position, but the latter was not necessarily propelled by anti-Christian sentiments or rationalistic thinking, but was largely determined by an over-zealous wish to place Jesus within the history of religious ideas, accompanied by inherent doubts about the sacred books' ability to hold historical truths. The Buddha-deniers were basically spurred on by an evangelical eagerness bent on removing any potential threat to the existence and spread of Christianity. Spence Hardy made clear the purpose of his study of the Buddha:

> The cross must triumph… Where are the old idols of Europe, Jupiter and Mars, Woden and Thor, and all other lords many, and gods many, whom my own forefathers worshipped?… Thus it shall be with Buddha, and all the myriads of deities in the east. The time will come when the wihára will be deserted, the dágoba. unhonoured, and the bana unread. I can suppose no lovelier spot in this wide world than Ceylon will be, when in every household there shall be an altar erected to the Lord God of heaven and earth.[62]

As for the Jesus-Myth theorists, Robertson dismissed the claim that they were motivated by antipathy towards Christianity as the work of 'small-minded conservatives' and their allegation as 'childishly false'. Robertson explained that his hermeneutical development 'began by way of writing a sociological history of the rise of Christianity on the foundation of a historical Jesus with twelve disciples—this long after coming to a completely

59. John M. Robertson, *Christianity and Mythology* (London: Watts & Co., 1910), p. 276.

60. John M. Robertson, *The Historical Jesus: A Survey of Positions* (London: Watts & Co., 1916), pp. 55-56.

61. Robertson, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 119.

62. Hardy, *The Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, pp. 162-63.

naturalistic view of religion'.[63] The Jesus mythicists soon petered out due to robust rebuttals by both conservatives and liberals. The flurry of biographies that followed soon after this debate strongly refuted their claim and went to assert the existence of the historical Jesus. T.R. Glover's *The History of Jesus* was a clear case in point.

White Jesus, Semitic Buddha

The biographers of Jesus and the Buddha tend to frame these religious figures within a Christianized vision. This is done in the case of Jesus by simply removing him from his Jewish as well as his Hellenistic context. There is a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of Jesus as a Jew. While acknowledging that Jesus was a Jew, in the same breath, Bernard Lucas went on to deny him his own ethnic identity:

> Jesus was a born Jew, but He was least like what we call a born Jew as can be conceived. It would be impossible to conceive of Confucius as other than a Chinaman, or of Buddha as other than an Indian, or Mohammed as other than an Arab. Of Jesus, however, it is impossible to conceive of Him as other than a Son of Man.[64]

The Jews, as a race, shared cultural limitations, but Jesus showed none of these 'congenital defects'. Lucas writes: 'No one has ever shown less of racial peculiarities or national characteristics than Jesus. Born in the midst of a people more distinct and separate than any other nation, known throughout their history as a peculiar people, as distinct and separate today as in any period of their history, Jesus stands out isolated and alone, the Man and not the Jew'.[65] Lucas' removal of Jesus from his racial and cultural environment has to be seen in the light of the colonial context. Writing at the height of the empire, he saw national traits as a barrier to the progress of the empire and even went on to condemn them as treachery. At a time when Indian national feelings were running high, Lucas warned: 'swadeshism, or patriotism…is the greatest hindrance to true progress… In the universal empire of Truth,…swadeshism…is rank treason'.[66] Arthur Harington, on the other hand, went on to airbrush the historical Jesus to eliminate the Hellenistic features. He offered two versions of Jesus to choose from– one entrapped in Hellenistic 'metaphysical speculations', and the other propounding the 'pure, natural morality of the Sermon on the Mount taught lovingly and tenderly'.[67] Farrar, in his turn, wanted to make Jesus' appearance more

63. Robertson, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 213.
64. Lucas, *Christ for India*, pp. 179-80.
65. Lucas, *Christ for India*, p. 180.
66. Lucas, *Christ for India*, p. 19.
67. Harington, 'The Historical Jesus and the Christ of Experience', p. 802

Caucasian. He differentiated between the lighter-skinned Englishman-type Jesus and darker, swarthier Semitic disciples: 'His features are paler and of a more Hellenic type than the weather-bronzed and olive-tinted faces of the hardy fishermen who are His Apostles'.[68]

The biographers projected a Jesus whose deeds resonated with Victorian ideals. Edwin Arnold, who was urged by Henry Stanley, the African explorer of 'Dr Livingstone, I presume' fame, to come up with a similar poem on Jesus after the stupendous success of *The Light of Asia*, turned Jesus into an exemplary Victorian reformer. In the opening section of his *The Light of the World*, Arnold painted Jesus as an upholder and accomplisher of the Victorian standard of acceptable behaviour. He was portrayed as endorsing supposedly Victorian causes such as the abolition of slavery ('break the chain from slave's neck'), women's rights ('lifting our sister from the dust, to take in homes her equal place, the household's queen'), social welfare ('charities large and wide'), characteristics such as slow pragmatic changes ('teach right to kings and patience to the poor'), fair mindedness ('of golden equities and brotherhood'), and virtues such as chivalry ('knightly honour'), and amateurism ('of arts adorning life').[69] Arnold reconceived Jesus as a consummate Victorian gentleman embracing and embodying Victorian mix of moralism, personal striving and concern for social welfare.

Unlike the German lives of Jesus, marked by nationalism and racialism (see Shawn Kelley's *Racializing Jesus*), the epitome of which was Walter Grundmann's portrayal of Jesus as a racially pure Aryan to meet the Nazis' agenda, the English lives of Jesus were largely driven by Victorian class values and the needs of the empire. Stripping Jesus of any national and racial traits should be seen in the light of imperial intentions, prevailing notions of British identity, and evangelical needs. Krishna Kumar, who has done detailed work on British identity, found that there is an 'English inhibition in the matter of national self-assertiveness'. He writes: 'English rulers and writers, and the political culture they created, saw it as impolitic to beat the nationalist drum in the face of rule over different peoples and different lands. Hence we do not, in English political writing, find tub-thumbing statements of English nationalism'.[70] The British did not much celebrate their nationalism but were identified by their involvement in certain projects—'the mission, they were, as it were, providentially, called upon to carry out in the world'.[71] Any undue emphasis on nationalism

68. Farrar, *The Life of Christ in Two Volumes*, I, p. 313.

69. Edwin Arnold, *The Light of the World or the Great Consummation* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1896), pp. 9-10.

70. Krishna Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. x.

71. Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, p. x.

would have 'threatened the unity and integrity of the very structures that the English had so painfully constructed'.[72] To fulfil this political mission, a non-national, and non-political Jesus would be required. Hence, Bernard Lucas' construction of Jesus in non-nationalistic terms. Nathaniel Micklem, tutor and chaplain of Mansfield College, Oxford, writing soon after the Boer war, advocated a Jesus who 'refused to look at the problems of his day in terms of "frontiers" or "political ideals"'.[73] What was paramount in Micklem's view was that Jesus was interested in building up personal relationships, and through such individual relationships bringing about social and political changes, rather than in changing political systems or social practices such as slavery. An illustrative case cited by Micklem was that of Zacchaeus. Micklem claimed that Jesus 'never said a word against' the imperial revenue system, nor did Jesus 'appeal to the Emperor to change it'. Rather, he 'appealed direct to Zacchaeus' and his personal convictions.[74] Such a non-political Jesus suited the colonial designs of the British.

Similarly, for Britain's other role, its Christianizing mission, the British wanted a Jesus bereft of any ritual and ceremonial trappings. A Jesus who is intricately identified with the chief religious motifs of Judaism—the institutionalized Temple, Torah, priestly heritage, circumcision—would prove to be a hindrance to the type of Christianity the British empire was trying to introduce in the colonies. Hinduism, one of the religions which the Christian missionaries were trying displace, had all these characteristics associated with Judaism—temples, priests and rituals. In contrast to these external paraphernalia, the spirituality of the subject peoples would be strengthened if Jesus could be presented as an ordinary person with a deep sense of morality unencumbered with ceremonies and observances. Seen in relation to today's religious sensitivities, denationalizing of Jesus, without his racial, religious and cultural roots would be dubbed anti-Semitic. What was important for these biographers was a Jesus who was a simple man who taught the love of God and love of neighbour, who transcended ceremonial and priestly religion and knew little of Greek metaphysical speculations. In other words, what they envisaged was a Jesus who was a 'decent chap' doing the right things embodied in their interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. Implicit in these portrayals of Jesus was the message that those who served the empire embodied these values.

While Jesus was being turned into a White Protestant, the Buddha was being made into a Christian and a Victorian gentleman. This was achieved in a number of ways. One was by interjecting biblical phrases into the

72. Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, p. 179.

73. Nathaniel Micklem, *The Galilean: The Permanent Element in Religion* (London: James Clark & Co., 1920), p. 106.

74. Micklem, *The Galilean*, p. 87.

sayings of the Buddha. Edwin Arnold made Siddhartha repeat the words of Jesus which his Victorian readers would have easily recognized: 'That which ye sow ye reap', 'Bear no false witness' and 'It is finished'. A second was by re-working biblical incidents to fit in with the Buddha's career. Thus, the biblical birth narratives provide the pattern for Sakyamuni's arrival on earth. Arnold's description of the birth of Siddharatha has all the ingredients associated with the Nativity: royal pedigree, miraculous conception, prophetical predictions 'that the Queen shall bear a boy, a holy child of wondrous wisdom, profiting all flesh, who shall deliver men from ignorance',[75] the birth occurring during a journey, merchants bringing 'rich gifts in golden trays'[76] and 'the Devas singing songs at Buddha's birth'.[77] On another occasion, Arnold constructs a scene where the Indian sage is depicted as carrying a 'limping lamb upon his neck', an image suggestive of the Buddha as a Good Shepherd, although such a portrayal had no textual support from the Buddhist scriptures.

A third way was similar to that which we have seen in the case of Jesus—to minimize the role of his own culture. Reginald Copleston, who marvelled at the Buddha's 'charm, tact and tenderness', claimed that none of these, his 'personal gifts', owed their origins to the indigenous tradition. Other virtues include 'gentleness and calm'. 'These were', in Copleston's perception, the 'ideal virtues' which seemed to have reached their 'highest perfection in the person of Gautama'.[78] Similarly, Sir William Rattigan admires the Gautama for his 'gentleness' and 'sereneness' and adds two that could have been ascribed to a Victorian gentleman, 'profoundly humanitarian spirit' and 'manly endeavour'.[79] Arnold on his part adds another of the Victorian virtues: personal endeavour. He sees the Buddha as advocating a religion which does not rely on liturgical rites and sacrifice for personal salvation, but on self-striving and self-reliance. In the imagination of these biographers of the Buddha, Siddhartha became a humanistic and non-dogmatic Christian figure whom the Victorians could admire and easily identify with.

Having surgically removed the Buddha from his environment and characterized him as a gentleman with perfect manners, the next move was to make him a Christian. Rattigan saw the Buddha as embodying the Protestant ideal when he told his people, who were 'prone to lean for support' on temples and texts, that their 'ultimate salvation was in their hands'.[80] Timothy Richard, who worked as a missionary in China, also took

75. Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, pp. 3-4.
76. Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, p. 7.
77. Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, p. 7.
78. Copleston, 'Buddhism', p. 127.
79. W.H. Rattigan, 'The Three Great Asiatic Reformers: A Study and a Contrast', *London Quarterly Review* 92 (1899), p. 296.
80. Rattigan, 'The Three Great Asiatic Reformers', p. 296.

this further step when he declared that the Lotus Sutra, which had provided fifteen hundred years of hope and substance to countless millions of Buddhists, was the fifth gospel. He went on to claim that its contents resembled those of St John's gospel: 'It will be abundantly clear to Western students, that the wonderful truths taught therein have precisely the same ring as those taught in the Fourth Gospel, about the *life*, the *light* and the *love*'.[81]

The fact that some of these commentators saw the Buddhist texts as expressing gospel truths, and suggested that Buddhist morals were as good as those of Christianity, did not satisfy all. For some commentators, Buddhism's saving power was limited. Kellogg acknowledged that what was best about Buddhism was its morality—its 'humility, kindness, charity, purity, and peace'. But these had only a pedagogical function, 'to bring men to Christ'.[82]

Textual Remixings

The parallels between Buddhist texts and the Gospels take us to a further point.

Inaugurating the Pali Text Society in 1881, Rhys Davids remarked, 'The sacred books of the early Buddhists have preserved to us the sole record of the only religious movement in the world's history which bears any close resemblance to early Christianity'.[83] The common textual affinities—birth stories, miracles, teachings and sayings found in both textual traditions—have fascinated and exasperated the interpreters. G.M. Grant noted that there was 'a strong Christian colouring found in the sacred books of Buddhism which at first puzzled scholars'.[84] The convoluted and often acrimonious debate about who depended on whom, had three possible outcomes. There were, first, the 'affirmers' who attributed comparable materials in both traditions to Buddhist thinking (Edmunds, Carus); there were also the more cautious who acknowledged the possibility of Buddhist influence, especially in obscure parts of the New Testament where Hebraic or Hellenistic parallels could not be found (O. Pfleider, Carpenter); and there were the 'sceptics' who denied wholesale any trace of Buddhist influence in the New Testament writings (Rhys Davids, Berry).

The question, who borrowed from whom, was to be re-visited in the twentieth century in the light of new developments in both Buddhist and biblical studies. The earlier debate was marked by three factors. The rejection of Buddhist influence was based on the nineteenth-century belief that

81. Timothy Richard, *The New Testament of Higher Buddhism* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910), p. 134.

82. Kellogg, *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World*, p. 376.

83. Davids, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religio*, p. 233.

84. Grant, *Religions of the World*, p. 110.

God was the prime author of the Christian scriptures, in consequence of which they were both error-free and uninfluenced by outside sources. From this point of view, it would have been preposterous to admit that they could be indebted to any other source, especially to heathen literature. Both the Jesus and the Buddha-searchers were avid proponents of cultural progress and believed that the Christian faith was the high point in religion. For both groups, Buddhism marked an earlier stage, so that there was no possibility that the superior faith expressed in the New Testament could have borrowed from an imperfect religion like Buddhism.

A further factor was a literary bias among biblical scholars, fuelled further by the Protestant preoccupation with the printed word, that undervalued the possibility of ideas circulating through oral transmission. These scholars failed to realize that humankind throughout most of its collective history has depended almost exclusively upon orally transmitted knowledge.

Finally, the thought that the Buddhist writers were the borrowers was based on the orientalist notion that Indians were incapable of thinking theologically and lacked any sense of history. 'The inhabitants of India', wrote Monnier-Williams, 'in truth are wholly innocent of any theological opinions at all'.[85] G.M. Grant put it in more essentialized terms: 'their literary ideas and their defective historical sense made borrowing appear to them perfectly legitimate'.[86]

Sahibs and their Masters: Some Hermeneutical Observations

T.W. Manson once wrote of the Jesus-searchers that 'By their Lives of Jesus ye shall know them'. This could be said of the biographers of the Buddha also. These biographers not only created Jesus and the Buddha in their own image but also went on to fabricate a Judaism and a Buddhism according to their own liking. Their view of the two religions has been routinely gloomy and has always been conveyed in differentiation from their own ideal view of the gospel. Both these religions are projected as problematic, ritualistic and legalistic, to which, in the case of Buddhism, the biographers add another vice, caste.

The spirited efforts of Enlightenment-driven mission to unearth the historical Jesus and the Buddha suffered from three misguided notions. First was an overconfident belief that it was possible to construct a single, master-picture of the real Jesus or Gautama. The 27 books of the New Testament have more than 27 pictures, and similarly Mahayana and Hinayana scriptures have a variety of representations of the Buddha. The construals of Buddha and Jesus in these texts are sometimes complementary

85. Monnier-Williams, *Buddhism*, p. 4.
86. Grant, *Religions of the World*, p. 110.

and sometimes contradictory. There are discrepancies in the New Testament writings as well as in the Buddhist texts. Such a large number of textual variations and portrayals indicates that the early Christians and the Buddhist writers did not strive for textual consistency from the beginning. What the stories celebrate is not the historical Siddhartha or the historical Jesus, but the Buddha of faith and the Christ of faith.

Second, the searchers laboured under the modernistic illusion that they had the intellectual and methodological capacity to cut through the mythical aspects of the Gospel and Buddhist accounts of the lives of Jesus and Gautama and establish a core of historically verifiable facts and episodes around which a true biography of Jesus and the Buddha could be reconstructed. Once the original, raw figure of Jesus or the Buddha was recovered, then these historical figures would serve as a yardstick to evaluate and differentiate between subsequently accruing and invented images of Jesus and Buddha. The ambitious and sometimes hubristic claim that somehow we can pierce through various traditions and unearth the real, historical Jesus or the Buddha is a misguided enterprise. It was based on the now discredited idea that through source-criticism we could distinguish between historical facts and interpreted tradition. Encouraged by source-criticism, the biographers of Jesus and the Buddha worked on a tripartite process involving the original figures and their sayings and preaching, the oral traditions that accrued about them, and the later textualization of their sayings, work and life. These biographers saw their task as a reading backwards through the latter two and reaching the original Jesus or the Buddha. The difficulty is that it is not easy to distinguish these three layers. Modesty and self-doubt were clearly not virtues possessed by these biographers. What is unmistakeably clear after nearly one hundred fifty years of the search is that the original Siddharatha and the original Jesus are not recoverable. What we have are interpreted and mediated figures, the early tradition about Christianity and Buddhism, and not necessarily significant information concerning Jesus' or the Buddha's life. There is no essential Jesus or essential Buddha. The Gospels and Three Pitakas and the *Lotus Sutra* were not sources for information about Jesus or the Buddha. They were interpreted versions of these religious founders.

Third, if the revered founder of the Christians—Jesus Christ—could be subjected to severe searching at the hands of Christian interpreters, it is hardly likely that the Buddha would get off lightly from his interpreters, whose motive was not always noble. What is evidently clear is that nearly two hundred years of relentless application of superior and sophisticated textual techniques—techniques worked out in secular academies— does not pose any threat to the appeal and the hold these two religious masters have upon the faithful. Believers will continue to take for granted that their sacred scriptures enshrine the life, words and work of their revered leaders.

In spite of the prejudices and disagreements among scholars, the quest will nevertheless go on. Like Hollywood follow-ups, the Jesus search has now reached its third sequel. The question is: does the historical Buddha or Jesus matter? For much of the long period of their history, the Christian Church and Buddhism thrived, nourished by the interpreted constructions of the Buddha and Jesus, and the historical figures did not count substantially in keeping the faith alive. What was paramount was that both provided spiritual sustenance. The Buddhist believers knew about a man called Siddhartha who attained Buddhahood, and Christians were aware of a man called Jesus who was acknowledged by his followers as Christ. What was critical to adherents of both faiths was that these religious leaders provided the path to salvation, each in his own distinctive way. Just as crucially, these two leaders agreed on one thing—the dismantling of institutional and clerical barriers between the divine and human beings. It has become increasingly clear that their importance lies not in their historicity but in the values and ideals these spiritual leaders represented.

What purpose this first-century historical Galilean or this Indian from the fifth century before the common era can serve to meet our current needs is not clear. What is probable is that they would have found this exercise tiresome and irritating. Let these two masters, who were eloquent in their careers but whose voices have been totally absent from this presentation, have the last word. In these Dan Brown 'anti-Bible Bible' days, let me quote a saying of Jesus from a discarded gospel—The Gospel of Philip—which the earlier biographers would have dismissed with scorn: 'The truth did not come naked into the world, but came in types and images' (v. 67). These were the words of the Galilean peasant who drew attention not to himself but to God's rule, pointing to it through images and parables. As for Gautama, he would see little benefit in unearthing the original Siddhartha and modernizing him. Such an exercise in his view, would certainly go against very tenet of his message—all created things must come to an end. So strive on. When the end was near, Sakyamuni told his beloved disciple Ananda:

> It may be, Ananda, that in some of you this thought may arise: 'Think not that you have no teacher after my death. Regard the Dhamma and Vinaya I have taught you as your teacher. He who practises my teaching best serves me most. He who sees the Dhamma sees me' (*Mahaparinibbana-Sutta* VI. 1).

2

SUBJECTING THE JOHANNINE LETTERS TO POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

> The New Testament, on the other hand, must be in some way traceable to an Indian source: its ethical system, its acetic view of morality, its pessimism, and its Avatar, are all thoroughly Indian.
>
> *Arthur Schopenhauer*[1]

> …rather we are discovering more and more new Eastern subtexts in the gospels.
>
> *Zacharias P. Thundy*[2]

Questions relating to date, authorship and the original readers of biblical writings are mostly a matter of surmise, or, as C.H. Dodd put it, of piling 'conjecture upon conjecture'[3] and the Johannine epistles are no exception. My primary purpose here is to use the inner rhetorical logic of the narrative content of the epistles to recontextualize the situation the first recipients were faced with, and utilize the data as a discursive sample to engage with postcolonial concerns. Unlike historical criticism, postcolonialism is concerned with issues surrounding interpretative history rather than the compositional history of the biblical books. Its interest is in investigating the ideological and cultural meanings generated in the process of interpretation. Postcolonialism holds that it is in these reading encounters that meanings are revealed or concealed, negotiated or negated, amplified or abandoned. Postcolonialism is hesitant about identifying the original author or assigning authorial intentions. It subscribes to the view that the author as a readily recognizable figure who approves and supervises the exact or intended meaning of a text is no longer tenable. It also discounts the notion that

1. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Essential Schopenhauer* (London: Unwin Books, 1962), p. 24.
2. Zacharias P. Thundy, *Buddha and Christ: Nativity Stories & Indian Traditions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), p. 276.
3. C.H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), p. lxx.

texts themselves have a single and steady meaning. This chapter will adopt some of the productive features of the postcolonial approach, treat interpretation as a complex exercise between the text and the reader, and search for traces of alternative meanings in the text.

Features of Colonial Discourse

It is noticeable that from a postcolonial perspective there are several hallmarks of colonial discourse in the epistles.

One of the characteristics of colonial discourse is the rejection of diversity. Colonial discourse is staunchly wedded to unvarying and exclusive truth, and tolerates no dissent or debate. To the regret of the author of these epistles/letters, the majority seem to have gone over to the opposite camp: 'They are of the world, and therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them' (1 Jn 4.5). The epistles exhibit intolerance of this sort of situation, and detest any theological contradiction. The author's hermeneutical device for dealing with theological dissidence is to come up with his own definition of Christianity on the basis of his understanding of the person of Christ. The incarnation and the atoning power of the sacrificed Christ become normative, and are used as a way of excluding those with divergent views or who hold a different interpretation from his. When one reads the epistles, especially the first two, one is struck by their harsh tone and intolerant language. Those of opposed views are branded as the sons of Satan, and those who deny that Jesus is the Christ are labelled 'antichrist', a new coinage hitherto unheard of. The New Testament writings speak about false messiahs (Mk 13.22), and false prophets (Mt. 24.24) but not antichrist. The term 'antichrist' is found only in these epistles (1 Jn 2.18, 22; 4.3; 2 Jn 7), and it is clearly the author's own invention. It is the first-century equivalent of the current term 'axis of evil', employed by President Bush to denounce any unruly state which disrupts the American messianic vision. Like 'axis of evil', which is constantly applied to those who question American values and way of life, 'antichrist' is relentlessly applied to those who question the orthodox the received teachings about the Christ. What irks the author is the different and incompatible theology advocated by his opponents. Anyone who accepts and welcomes those with alternative theological ideas is deemed guilty by association and 'has a share in the evil deeds' (2 Jn 11). In the face of such dissent, the author resorts to a number of hermeneutical strategies which betray colonial intentions.

The first is to appeal to his own credentials as an interpreter. His authority is derived from his having been an eyewitness to the Christ event. He makes his unequivocal claim to this authority at the very beginning of the epistle: 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have

heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands' (1 Jn 1.1). The appeal to the claims of the preacher seems to have been the recommended position in the New Testament. When confronted with conflicting messages, the advice seems to be trust your instructor and know from whom you receive the teaching (1 Cor. 15.1-3; 2 Tim. 3.14; 4.3-4). By investing himself with authority, the writer becomes not only the conduit of the message but also a reliable guide. Colonial hegemony is maintained through asserting the master's credibility.

The second strategy is an expansion of the first—to insist on the authenticity of the message. This is achieved by asserting that what is proclaimed is what has been heard from the inception of the community. Going back to 'the beginning' is the author's way of seeking sanctuary and validation in the face of competing theological ideas. His claim is that what he preaches is consistent with the original message. Anyone who deviates from and does not adhere to what he claims as the original teaching is regarded as not 'having' God (2 Jn 9–11). What he is trying to do is to secure certain meanings as valid for all eternity and to stick strictly to his script. By claiming his message as the 'original' word of God, the writer is able to get others to take him seriously. In doing this, the writer exhibits the classic colonial fear of unscripted inventions and improvizations.

The third way of handling dissent is to confer an elected role as God's people on those who are on his side and supportive of his theological position: 'We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, whoever is not of God does not listen to us' (1 Jn 4.6a). Moreover, this sense of the divine elected status of their discourse is reinforced by the assertion that only they can 'discern the spirit of truth and spirit of error' (1 Jn 4.6b), such a status conferring the role of ultimate umpire of disputed meanings. This recruitment of divine elected status simultaneously legitimizes their tenure of power and at the same time inhibits any agitation for a counter narrative.

The fourth strategy is to project an imperial Christ. On the surface, it appears that the epistles do not project an aggressive Christology. The Jesus of the 'I am' sayings that one encounters in the fourth gospel is absent from the epistles. However, the author employs a revealing title which is found only in the fourth gospel and in I John. Here, Jesus is called 'the Saviour of the world' (Jn 4.42; 1 Jn 4.14). This title, as Craig R. Koester has demonstrated, has imperial connotations.[4] The term, in his view, was exclusively used in the first century of the Roman emperor. Now there is a new emperor, Jesus, who replaces the Roman emperor as the new sovereign, whom everyone should obey. The opponents, who may have come from a Hellenistic background, do not deny that Jesus was a man, but dispute that

4. Craig R. Koester, '"The Savior of the World" (John 4.42)', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990), pp. 665-80.

he was the promised Messiah and the exalted claims made on his behalf (1 Jn 2.22). The message to them is that Jesus was more than a Jewish Messiah, was in fact the Saviour of the World, and they must decide whether they owe allegiance to him or to their own misconceived and narrow understanding of Jesus. Given the history of colonialism, this image of an imperial Christ is a troubling one. In the name of the imperial Christ a number of cultures have been annihilated and countries conquered. It is, moreover, a disturbing title in the context of religious plurality.

The fifth strategy against dissent is to restrict hospitality. Free food and lodging, customarily available to all travelling preachers, with their varied theological ideas, but especially to those less wealthy, is to be offered only to those who teach in line with the author's approved theological position: 'Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching' (2 Jn 10). The author limits his generosity to those Christians who side with his understanding of Christian faith. The dissidents within the Christian faith are a menace and a nuisance and deserve no hospitality. The author has constructed his own understanding of the emerging Christian faith, and is clearly opposed to any alternative theological opinions. He has misused theological rhetoric and manipulated traditional hospitality in order to bring his opponents to his way of thinking. Recent studies on famine have shown how ruling elites have used food as a weapon to eliminate political opponents. Ukraine, Somalia and Ethiopia are notable examples.

Finally, the author uses the colonial rhetoric of flattery and threat to divide the community. He cosies up to his supports by pointing out that 'you are from God' and that 'the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world' (1 Jn 4.4), and at the same time he alarms his opponents by saying that 'murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them' (1 Jn 3.15). By asserting his particular dogmatic theological proposals as benchmark to test the presence of the spirit, he effectively de-privileges other theological views. At a time when political and religious people try to divide the world into us and them and those with us and against us, Johannine epistles provide fresh ammunition.

Silenced Subalterns

The letters are an example of a colonial scenario where the natives are hardly given a chance to speak. The narrative employs the colonial rhetoric of the mute 'other', where the 'other' remains nameless and silent, or when named, as in the case of Diotrephes, still remains silent. The readers don't get to hear why Diotrephes disputed the author's authority. He might, quite reasonably, have thought that the local leaders were the best people to

interpret the tradition, seeing this as a practical way of meeting the local difficulty, namely different and conflicting interpretations. The author, who is so eloquent in putting forward his views, rarely gives his opponents an opportunity to make their case. There is no way of ascertaining what they thought except through the prism of the author's jaundiced view of their theological stance. As in the Pauline epistles, the opponents are scripted into the discourse with non-speaking parts. As in so much colonial literature, the epistles are narratives where the natives are either spoken to, or spoken on behalf of, but rarely where they speak.

Fostering Imperial Ideology through Binarism

The epistles work with a binary thinking which postcolonialism tries to overcome. Colonial discourse sets up contrasting categories to discredit and trap the dissidents—savage/noble, primitive/civilized, advanced/retarded, sane/insane, rational/irrational. From the colonial perspective this polarizing way of imagining the world is a valuable ally in maintaining the imperial ideology and reinforcing power relations between the ruler and the ruled. It is a way of shaming and excluding the dissidents. More importantly, such dichotomous thinking paves the way to introducing the benefits of modernity to subject peoples. The impulse behind this agenda is to civilize and bring into line the unruly people. This kind of binary framework abounds in the epistles. While the Judaism of the time was unaware of dualism of a metaphysical sort, the writer is fond of a kind of ethical dualism light/darkness, blindness/ sight. He speaks of two kinds of reality—darkness and light (1 Jn 2.7-11), two kinds of humanity—children of god and children of the devil (2 Jn 8ff.), two kinds of spirit—the spirit of God and the spirit of antichrist (1 Jn 2.18-28), and two kinds of theological propositions, true and false. This binary distinction helps the writer to justify his theological imperial mission of dominance and enlightenment. In the colonial rhetoric, the unruly, erratic and stubborn have to be made stable, pliable and complaisant. In the logic of Johannine thinking, the dissidents become like the wild tribes of the colonies who need supervision and control. In other words, like the depraved natives, the theological dissidents have to be uplifted by a thorough dose of true gospel, and by light brought into darkness. These dualisms can be and are easily used and abused in the contemporary world.

The Colonial Allegory of the Child

Another mark of colonial discourse is the use of the metaphorical language of the child. The writer of the epistles employs this trope, though in more

than one way. Terms such as children (*teknon*), little children (*teknion*) and boy/son (*paidion*) occur nearly 16 times in the three short epistles. It is quite apparent, however, that the concept of child is not a fixed one in the Johannine writings. In the Gospel and 1 John the children of God are part of the family of God, while in 2 John, the family of God (1, 4, 13) includes the whole of body of Christians, or, as W.G. Kümmel claimed, in 'My beloved Children' the 'entirety of Christendom is addressed'.[5] The image of the child conjures up the impression of a caring loving and tender relationship between the writer, the aged John, affectionately addressing his audience. Biblical commentators make much of the fact that the new family of God is based not on birth or heritage but on a combination of God's benevolence and the meritorious capabilities of humanity. It is easy to be enticed by the warm and affectionate pastoral tone that runs through the epistles, but postcolonialism reads it differently. The concept of father–child is central to Johannine control and domination and is used as a tool to enforce discipline and conformity. In the colonial rhetoric, the child is susceptible to instruction, correction and improvement. For the writer of the letters, those who disagree with his theological position are ignorant and misinformed children, who, through threat, shame, flattery and reason, can be turned into civilized adults, or, in the case of the dissidents, made into orthodox believers. In using the phrase 'children of the devil' (1 Jn 3.10), what the writer implies is that these deranged children are in need of a master with a hand of firmness to control and instruct them. Like the colonial savage, the children of the devil are redeemable if they believe what the master believes and submit themselves to obedience and instruction. Those who have been led astray should be brought back. In the imperial rhetoric, a child must be corrected, otherwise he or she may persist in bad habits, or, as the writer of the epistles would have put it, in bad doctrines. The possibility of adulthood arises only when the dissidents are brought out of the darkness of their childhood. In addition, the metaphor of the child tends to conceal the inequality of power which exists within a family. The child is made to depend on the father for everything. In the Johannine epistles, innocence is not seen as an innate quality of human beings but is conferred by the Father who has the power to forgive sins 'your sins are forgiven for his sake' (1 Jn 2.12). This innocence is dependent on the heavenly father. While the image of children conveys a cosy image of a family, in the Johannine reckoning not all have their place in the family. The awkward members are kept at length and denied hospitality and generosity until they learn the colonial virtues of conformity and obedience.

5. Werner G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 307.

Buddhized Christianity

When one looks at the interpretation of the epistles, it is noticeable from a postcolonial point of view that the hermeneutics of denial is at work, particularly among some Western biblical scholars. Biblical scholars raised up with the Eurocentric habit of placing the Johannine writings within a Hebraic or Hellenistic background are reluctant to acknowledge any possible influence of other philosophical or religious traditions. When faced with awkward passages, mainstream biblical scholars rarely look for theological influences beyond the Jewish and Greek milieux. Orientalists and Indologists of the past and present have been offering evidence of continuous contact between India and the Mediterranean world, and it is being increasingly acknowledged that Buddhist and Christian ideas were exposed to one another. Traces of Buddhism in some of the apocalyptic literature, and in the Gnostic writings, especially in Basilides, have long been recognized. Edward Conze, among others, has identified similarities between Gnosticism and Mahayana Buddhism.[6] Egypt seems to have provided a suitable environment for one form of Gnosticism, while a colony of Indians existed in Memphis as early as 200 BCE. Alexandria was ideally placed to receive both spiritual and material wares from India and it was in this atmosphere that Gnosticism took shape. One is not looking for verbal correspondences, which are highly unlikely because of the nature of the texts we are dealing with. Both Buddhist and Christian writings were translated texts and neither carry the exact words of their founder but rather an interpretation or exposition of those words. Biblical scholars are inclined to rely excessively on textual resemblances and philological correspondences as ways of establishing proof borrowing, and undervalue especially foreign religious concepts transmitted orally through the constant travelling and exchange that marked the period. This literary bias among biblical scholars tends to devalue orally transmitted knowledge. To ask for verbal similarity is too much, but what one looks for are conceptual similarities.

J. Edgar Bruns is one of those who identified the possibility of Buddhist influences in the Johannine writings. His hypothesis was that in a city like Alexandria, it is likely that the writer of the epistles would have heard Buddhized teaching of the Gnostics. He wrote: 'On the basis of his own writings (i.e. the writer of the epistles), especially of certain passages in the first epistle, it seems clear to me that the *key to Johannine thought* lies in an understanding of Buddhist concepts'.[7] Bruns identifies at least three

6. Edward Conze, 'Buddhism and Gnosis', in Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Origins of Gnosticism Colloquium of Messina 13–18 April 1966: Texts and Discussions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), pp. 651-67.

7. Edgar J. Bruns, *The Christian Buddhism of St. John: New Insights into the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1971), p. 28 (italics original).

theological categories in the Johannine epistles which are closer to Mahayana Buddhism than to Judaic or Hellenistic categories of thought.[8] One of these is the idea of God. The concept of God in the letters of John, in Bruns' view, could have been the result of Buddhist influence. In the epistles, God does not do anything but is called light (1 Jn 1.5), love (1 Jn 4.8, 16) and, in the gospel, spirit (Jn 4.24) as a result of the actions of human beings. The light is nothing but love (1 Jn 2.10-11) and truth is nothing but walking in it. What humans do reveals who God is. God does not exist beyond the empirical world. Hence God does not generate love in human beings; rather it is the loving that human beings do that generates God, fulfills, extends, perfects Godly love (1 Jn 4.12). There is a refusal to objectify and to imagine God as a fully existent being unconnected to and divorced from human history. It is the love which human beings enact in their ordinary lives which makes God dwell in their midst. It is not a prior awareness of the divine which engenders love. It is this notion of 'making God's presence through loving on the one hand, and loving through the presence of God on the other' which prompts Burns to claim Buddhist influence in the Johannine epistles. The love for a person expressed in action is seen as the sole proof of the unseen and unknown God. In the first epistle, the writer claims that 'no one has ever seen God' but goes on to say that 'if we love one another God abides in us' (1 Jn 4.12). It is the act of love which makes the presence of God real. This act of loving precedes any pre-mediated knowledge of a divine presence or indwelling. Such a notion, according to Burns, parallels *Prajnaparamitta* (The Wisdom that has gone beyond), one of the nine sacred works of Mahayana Buddhism: 'The Lord has not fully known the realm of Dharma; for the realm of Dharma is just the Lord'.[9] When the writer of the epistles says that 'God abides' in whoever does love, this means that the act of love makes the presence of God. Similarly the Johannine understanding of 'born of God' resonates with the Buddhist understanding. Just as in John one who loves is born of God and realizes God, so in Mahayana Buddhism the one who exercises perfect wisdom realizes Enlightenment or Buddhahood. A second Buddhist correspondence found in the epistles is the Johannine doctrine of indwelling (1 Jn 4.4, 15-16), which is comparable to the Buddhist concept of the Buddha nature—a form of knowing within human beings. A third, the writer's idea that Christians have passed from death to life (1 Jn 3.14), is nearer to the Mahayana notion of 'the exercise of wisdom as identical with the state of Nirvana'.

8. Bruns, *The Christian Buddhism of St. John*, p. vii.
9. Bruns, *The Christian Buddhism of St. John*, p. 31.

Textual Juxtapositions

Postcolonial contrapuntal reading finds the Johannine notion of love a restricted one. One of the important messages of the epistle is love—'love one another'. This love does not go beyond the simple love of the neighbour. Jewish thinking did not prescribe love for all people. For instance, one should note Jesus' reluctance to deal with the request of the Syrophoenican woman, or the Samaritan's surprise at Jesus' request for a drink, and the authorial observation of John: 'Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans' (Jn 4.9). Another notable case in point is the words of Jesus himself, which make love a comradely affair, a matter of solidarity among the Jews: 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (Jn 15.13). In one of the Gnostic gospels, Jesus tells his disciples: 'Care not, therefore, for the many, and them that are outside the mystery despise'. True, the Synoptics have a reference to loving your enemies. But the enemy referred to here is not foreign or a political foe outside the community, such as the Roman imperialists. Richard Horsley has demonstrated that the Matthean and Lukan contexts in which the saying is located indicate local, personal enemies rather than Gentile or political adversaries. The sort of enemy intended is one who spoils crops by sowing weeds among the grain. On the other hand, the Buddhist concept of *maitri*, loving kindness, is extended to those who are not normally liked. *Maitri* makes no ethnic, caste or religious distinction. *Sutta-Nipata*, for instance, says 'Cultivate an unlimited loving kindness towards the whole world—to those above, below and on all sides of you. Free from hatred, enmity and rivalry' (vv. 149-50). Whereas the Johannine, or for that matter, Christian love is restricted to human beings, Buddhist love is all-encompassing, including both human beings and the whole created order, and in this sense it is unbounded. Such resonances and references from other textual traditions introduce other possibilities of meaning. Unlike the comparative reading which is colonial, aggressive and judgmental, contrapuntal reading is about seeing connections and being complementary. One neutralizes and destroys, the other connects and fulfills. Such an intertextual reading will enable us to arrive at a fuller understanding of love.

Fusion of Theory and Practice

In spite of the excessive colonial tone of the letters, postcolonial criticism will readily align itself with their insistence on seeking and finding truth, justice and love, not in doctrinal or spiritual categories but in the tensions and conflicts of life. Here postcolonialism will concur with the writer of the epistles that ethical involvement, not theoretical or doctrinal fine-tuning, is paramount. The value of postcolonialism lies not only in its simultaneous

repairing of colonial misrepresentation and defamation, but also in engaging in the struggle for a better world. The letters eschew speculation for practical ethical hermeneutics. Whereas in the Johannine Gospel, 'born again' has an individual and spiritual sense, the epistles make it clear that such an esoteric and mystical experience is not about resignation and retreat, but about religious activism, and that it has communitarian and ethical implications: 'Everyone who does justice is born again' (1 Jn 2.29). The word 'liar' occurs five times in 1 John and each time it refers to persons who may in some sense be true to their vocation as Christians, but who fail to live justly (1.10; 2.4, 22; 4.20; 5.10). The writer is unambiguously clear about those who are born of God and those who are not: 'Anyone who does not do justice is not born of God, nor is anyone does not love his brother' (3.10).

Another Johannine proposition is that 'Everyone who loves in born of God' (1 Jn 4.7). The meaning of love is quite apparent. It is not sentimental love but a transformative love which manifests itself in concrete acts: 'But anyone who has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him. Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and truth' (3.17, 18).

For the Johannine writer, status of salvation does not mean an inactive life. On the contrary, those who are saved are expected to 'walk in love' (2 Jn 4–6); 'walk in the truth' (3 Jn 4). Such a praxis-driven Johannine prescription for Christians resonates with the edicts of Asoka which, nearly three hundred years before the emergence of Johannine Christianity, expected the followers of the Buddha to live a life of commitment and compassion: 'A man must walk by *dhamma* if he would become moral. In the immoral there is no walking by *dhamma*'.

For the writer of the epistles, the real and deep meaning of 'truth', 'justice' and 'love' emerges out of the tension in the midst of life, and they are at no stage separated from action. In John's view, there is no need for these great concepts to be translated into action because deeds and words are indivisible and seen as an integrated whole. The writer recognizes the fact that in order to appreciate the words of the Scripture one must weave them into the fabric of one's life. In this the writer of the epistle is at one with the postcolonial notion of praxis which puts praxis in its proper place, not as a blind obedience to the word or a pretext for authoritarianism, but as a valuable way of integrating words and deeds, and more importantly placing these at the service of the disadvantaged and the unjustly treated.

Finally, from the postcolonial perspective, the epistles have an element of ambivalence about them. This epistolary discourse contains both imperial intentions and praxiological impulses. These letters are about self-appointed chosen people determined to reshape the nature of the gospel message on the basis of their own vested perspectives, with a view to extending their own imperial ambition. They are about claiming to advance God's kingdom

through the hegemony of one's own theological truth. The epistles are about hermeneutical clashes and conflicting interpretations where both the protagonist and the antagonist believe that they are correct. They are about the manipulation and wielding of power under the cloak of divine authority. They are about restricting God's generosity to a chosen few.

But the epistles are not without redeeming features. At least on two accounts the epistles absolve themselves and embody marks of postcoloniality. One is the thinly veiled presence of Buddhist concepts which disrupt the alleged purity of Christian tradition and make it clear that sacred texts are textual coalitions, and that they do not exist in unpolluted isolation. The intermixture of cultural ideas resists privileging one single culture. At a time when religious fundamentalists claim textual purity, such a conceptual mobility makes all texts alloyed and unchaste. When the idea of interchange between Buddhism and Christian faith was first mooted in the middle of the nineteenth century, Max Müller, who himself was involved in such comparative studies, posed the question: 'Would it make Christianity less true, if Buddhism contained many things which are taught in the Bible also?' Müller himself went on to answer his own question: Truth does not cease to be truth because it is held by others besides ourselves'.[10]

The second redeeming element in the epistles is the emphasis on exhortation and engagement being mutually constitutive, which resonates with postcolonialism's urge that ethical involvement is of equal importance to theorizing. It would be attractive to end on this upbeat note. But my fear is that these commendable ideas will be forgotten and the letters will be read and remembered only for the tough signal they send. At a time when international affairs are decided by men who think that the Bible at their bedside provides them with a blueprint for dealing with the current political problems of the world, it is alarming to think that the grim vision of the epistles, which neatly bifurcates the world into good and evil, might play into their hands and be used and abused by them. My anxiety is chillingly captured in Arthur Miller's contentious play, *The Crucible*—a play about those who refuse to obey and conform. In it, the haunting words of the witch hunter, Judge Danforth, echo the uncompromising tone of the writer of the epistle, an uncompromising tone which is being put to use by the current leader of the free world: 'You must understand, sir, a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between. This is a sharp time, now, a precise time—we live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world. Now, by God's grace, the shining sun is up, and them that fear not light will surely praise it. I hope you will be one of those'.[11]

10. Max Müller, 'Christianity and Buddhism', *The New Review* 4 (1891), p. 67.
11. Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 85.

3

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND COLONIAL INDIA: THE TRANSGRESSIVE READINGS OF RAJA RAMMOHUN ROY AND MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI

> My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the Gita, The Light of Asia and the Sermon on the Mount.
>
> *M.K. Gandhi*[1]

Among biblical texts, the Sermon on the Mount played a critical role in colonial India. It became an important narrative in the hands of the colonized in silencing any critique of 'native' behaviour. Two crucial figures—both Hindus—were engaged in an inventive and transgressive reading of the Sermon on the Mount, Raja Rammohun Roy (1774–1833) and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), better known as Mahatma Gandhi. Both played a crucial role in shaping modern India. Roy and Gandhi, in their time, dominated missionary and national discourse, appealing to different audiences—Roy addressing metropolitan society and Gandhi the masses. They appropriated the narrative which came with the Englishman's Bible and directed that same narrative against the colonialists and missionaries. Thus, intention of the missionaries to persuade and convince the natives of their moral inferiority and depravity was scuppered by Roy and Gandhi. In their hands, the Sermon on the Mount became a site for rigorous ethical scrutiny of both Christianity and colonial enterprise and behaviour. The persuasion and conviction on this occasion flowed from the margin to the centre and from the colonized to the colonizer.

One Sermon, Two Postillers

Roy and Gandhi came to the Sermon on the Mount by different routes. For Roy, any religion which was dogmatic and mysterious and not rational and

1. M.K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions: Their Place in India* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1941), p. 17.

monotheistic and which did not espouse the well being of people, was not worth following. Roy had been engaged with his own brahminical tradition trying to weed out elements which thwarted true worship, distorted the image of the Supreme Being and hindered social welfare. The Sermon on the Mount, in Roy's view, contained the necessary ingredients which accorded with such expectations he had of religion. Roy produced a booklet, *The Precepts of Jesus* (1820),[2] which was a collection of the moral teachings of Jesus minus any of the historical or doctrinal components contained in the New Testament. Just as he had done with his own brahminical texts, the *Precepts* was his attempt to produce a purer form of Christianity which the Raja felt that missionaries were incapable of achieving because of their obsession with doctrines and miracles. Naturally the *Precepts* starts straightaway with Matthew's account of Jesus preaching on the Mount: 'And seeing the multitudes, he went up to a mountain'. Roy practically retains the Sermon on the Mount as it is presented in chs. 5–7 of Matthew except for some minor deletions. In his view, the sayings 'contained in the 5th, 6th and 7th chapters of Matthew' are 'the blessed and benign moral doctrines', and they include 'every duty of man, and all that is necessary for salvation'. More importantly, for Roy, the Sermon expressly excluded 'any of the mysterious or historical' accounts.[3]

Gandhi was first attracted to the Sermon on the Mount by an accidental reading of the Bible. Perturbed by meat eating and alcohol-drinking among Christians, he was persuaded by 'a good Christian from Manchester' to read the Bible in order to see for himself that these practices were not endorsed by the Bible. As he narrated in his *Autobiography*, Gandhi plodded through the Christian Old Testament without the 'least interest or understanding'. On the other hand, 'the New Testament produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart. I compared it with the *Gita*. The verses, 'But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man take away thy coat let him have thy cloak too' in particular caught his attention.[4] It was the Sermon on the Mount which changed Gandhi's perception of Christianity. In a talk that he gave on the Christmas Day in 1931 on board the SS Pilsna, he told his audience that 'for all I had then been given to understand was that to be a Christian was

2. The full title was *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness; Extracted from the Books of the New Testament, Ascribed to the Four Evangelists with Translations into Sungscrit and Bengalee* (Calcutta: The Baptist Mission Press, 1820).

3. R. Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy* (ed. Jogendra Chunder Ghose; New Delhi: Cosmo Print, 1906), p. 555.

4. M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1927), p. 51.

to have a brandy bottle in one hand and beef in the other. The Sermon on the Mount, however, falsified the impression'.[5] On another occasion, he remarked: 'Today supposing I was deprived of the Gita and forgot all its contents but had a copy of the Sermon, I should derive the same joy from it as I do from the Gita'.[6] For Gandhi, 'Sermon on the Mount was the whole of Christianity'[7] and it was that Sermon which endeared him to Jesus. In his view, Jesus had given the 'definition of the perfect *dharma* in those verses'.[8]

The strength of Roy and Gandhi was not in their detailed exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount but in their eclectic piecing together of the moral precepts scattered across it. They picked and discarded verses according to what suited their immediate hermeneutical concerns. A narrative portion within the Sermon which attracted the attention of both Roy and Gandhi was the Lord's Prayer. The absence of idol worship and unnecessary ritual in the Lord's Prayer was alluring to Roy. He thought that there was nothing comparable to it and that it was 'full of all good things, and spirit, and yet so short'.[9] Gandhi likened the Lord's Prayer to the Gayatri Mantra which has been recited by millions of Hindus for centuries and 'yet their power has not diminished'.[10] Jesus' teaching on wealth and anxiety in the Sermon did not elicit their enthusiasm. What attracted Roy was the Sermon's praxilogical intention and its insistence on orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy. At a time when Roy was seeking to reformulate some of the traditional ritual practices of Hinduism and channel them into service for community, he saw particular possibilities in the Sermon on the Mount. In his controversy with Joshua Marshman, the Baptist missionary, Roy pointed out that

> apparently to counteract by anticipation the erroneous idea that such conduct might be dispensed with, and reliance placed on a mere dogmatical knowledge of God, the following declaration seems to have been uttered: Not everyone that saith unto me Lord! Lord! shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven.[11]

5. M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 48 (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971), p. 438.

6. Gandhi, *Christian Missions*, p. 187.

7. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 48, p. 438.

8. Quoted in Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 51.

9. Quoted in A.B. Shah, *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai* (Bombay: Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1977), p. 23.

10. M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 50 (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1972), p. 202.

11. Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 554. For a detailed account of the controversy, see R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), pp. 29-53.

By prioritizing praxis over dogmatic allegiances, Roy dealt a severe blow to the undue emphasis the missionary seemed to be placing on traditional tenets such as the Trinity and Atonement. Roy taunted his missionary opponent to 'shew a commandment of Jesus directing refuge in the doctrine of the cross, in the same explicit way as he has enjoined love to God and to neighbours and obedience to his precepts as sufficient means for attaining eternal happiness'.[12] What was crucial for Roy was Jesus' words: 'Therefore, whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man who built his house upon a rock' (Mt. 7.24).

Gandhi used the Sermon on the Mount as a benchmark to test not only Christian behaviour but also Christianity's belief system: 'But negatively I can tell you that in my humble opinion, much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount. And please mark my words. I am not at the present moment speaking of Christian conduct. I am speaking of Christianity as it is understood in the West'.[13] In a speech given at the Colombo YMCA, Gandhi recalled that when he started to study Christian literature earnestly, he had to ask himself the question whether this was Christianity and had 'always got the Vedic answer *neti neti* (not this not this)'.[14]

There were two aspects of the Sermon on the Mount which attracted Gandhi. First, its message of 'non-retaliation or non-resistance to evil'.[15] Such a message appealed greatly to Gandhi. He told J.J. Doke, a Baptist minister in Johannesburg:

> When I read in the Sermon on the Mount such passages as 'Resist not him that is evil; but whoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also', and 'Love your enemies, pray for them that persecute you, that ye may be sons of your Father in heaven', I was simply overjoyed, found my own opinion confirmed where I least expected it. The Bhagavad Gita deepened the impression, and Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* gave it a permanent form.[16]

The second aspect which appealed to Gandhi was its mundane practicality: 'I think the Sermon the Mount has no meaning if it is not of vital use in everyday life to everyone'.[17] If for Gandhi, non-violence was central to

12. Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 693.
13. M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 35 (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1969), p. 248.
14. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 35, p. 249.
15. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 48, p. 438.
16. C.F. Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas Including Selections from his Writings* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1929), p. 192.
17. Gandhi, *Christian Missions*, p. 278.

Jesus' Sermon, for Roy, the grand and comprehensive moral principle which encapsulated the Sermon was the Matthean Golden Rule—do not do to others (Mt. 7.12). Roy ended the preface to his translation of the Isa Upanishad with the words, '*Do unto others as ye would be done by*'.[18]

Jesus: Not an Accidental Hero

Roy and Gandhi rely largely on the Sermon on the Mount to support their case for Jesus as a moral teacher. The fact that the Sermon did not contain any article of faith about Jesus was an added bonus to them. For Roy and Gandhi, Jesus was not irrelevant but they saw him as part of the eternal ethical lineage. They did not accept the traditional Christian claims for Christ. Neither saw Jesus as the Son of God nor believed in his sacrificial and vicarious death. Interestingly, both believed in Incarnation but not in the traditional Christian sense, as the final revelation of God but in the Indian sense of multiple appearances of God. For Gandhi, Jesus was 'one among the most illustrious teachers and prophets the world has seen'.[19] Neither Roy nor Gandhi was interested in the historical Jesus. Gandhi said that he would not care if someone were to prove that Jesus had never lived and what was narrated in the gospels was the 'writer's imagination. For the Sermon the Mount would still be true for me'.[20] What hermeneutically enthused Gandhi was the 'mystical Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount'.[21] Roy, similarly, paid little attention to the historical Jesus. The fact that he deleted any historical reference to Jesus' life in his *Precepts* is an indication of where he stood in relation to the historical Jesus. For Roy, Jesus completed the circle which started with Moses—a long line of faithful messengers through whom God had revealed his law: 'It is true that Moses began to erect the everlasting edifice of true religion, consisting of a knowledge of the unity of God, and obedience to his will and commandments; but Jesus of Nazareth has completed the structure, and rendered his law perfect'.[22] For Roy, Jesus was more than a teacher. He was a 'Redeemer, Mediator and Intercessor with God in behalf of his followers'.[23] Neither of

18. Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 74 (italics original).
19. M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 25 (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1967), p. 85.
20. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 48, p. 438.
21. M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 36 (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1970), p. 40.
22. Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 606.
23. Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 608.

them was interested in who Jesus was nor where he was located—a question which was to plague Indian Christians later. Specifically, they were interested in what Jesus said.

Scriptures as One Continuum

For Roy and Gandhi, the value of sacred texts lay not in their literal meaning but in the ethical impetus they provided. If the ancient texts did not uphold the twin hermeneutical keys—truth and non-violence—Gandhi found them to be repugnant. He recalled: 'My very first reading of the Bible showed me that I would be repelled by many things in it if I gave their literal meaning to many texts or even took every passage in it as the word of God'.[24] Neither did he regard everything said in the Bible as exhaustive or even acceptable from the moral standpoint. One of the verses which Gandhi found morally objectionable was the saying of Jesus, 'Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of judgement' (Mt. 5.22). Such an inconsiderate saying in his view was inconsistent 'with the *ahimsa* of Jesus'. He treated many passages in the Bible as mystical: 'For me "the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life"'.[25] For Gandhi, in spite of his admiration for the Sermon, it was the Bhagavadgita which provided the key to the scriptures. As a Hindu, Gandhi found the Hindu Scriptures meeting the needs of his soul. His study of other religions did not abate his reverence for or faith in Hinduism. In an address to missionaries in Calcutta, he said:

> I must tell you in all humility that Hinduism, as I know it entirely satisfies my soul, fills my whole being, and I find a solace in the Bhagavadgita and Upanishads that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount. Not that I do not prize the ideal presented therein, not that some of the precious teachings in the Sermon on the Mount have not left a deep impression upon me, but I must confess to you that when doubts haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon I turn to the Bhagavadgita and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow'.[26]

Likewise for Roy, it was the Vedas created by the Supreme Being which contain the law of God—'revealed and introduced for our rule and guidance' and 'Puranas and Agamas without distinction, can impart divine

24. M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1975), p. 333.

25. M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1968), p. 46.

26. Gandhi, *Christian Missions*, pp. 51-52.

knowledge to mankind at large'.[27] The ultimate necessity was to recover '*the true meaning of our sacred books*'.[28] To put it differently, for them the sources for moral renewal are to be found within one own sacred narrative. In other words, for Roy and Gandhi no narrative was inherently better or purer than any other.

Some Reflections

Roy and Gandhi perceived the Sermon on the Mount as central not only to Jesus' teaching but also as a rallying point for all Christians. For them it was not about rules, obligations and prohibitions. It was more about the quality of human behaviour. When a Christian student asked Gandhi about his views on Christian organizations, worship and ministry, he told him:

> If Indian Christians will simply cling to the *Sermon on the Mount,* which was delivered not merely to the peaceful disciples but a groaning world, they would not go wrong, and they would find that no religion is false, and that if they act according to their lights and in the fear of God, they would not need to worry about organizations, forms of worship and ministry.[29]

For Roy and Gandhi, the Sermon represented an ethical ideal which is attainable by individuals and society. Gandhi stressed the potential of the individual to be transformed from within and believed that the transformed individual will in turn transform the community. For Gandhi the enemy was within oneself and the inner demons had to be destroyed before society could be redeemed. This, he reckoned, was the message of the Bhagavadgita, the Sermon on the Mount and the Koran.[30] Roy, on the other hand, envisaged a transformed community creating transformed individuals. For both Roy and Gandhi truth was a matter of vigorous and conscientious performance and not a pious endorsement of a predetermined dogma. 'Truth is the exclusive property of no single Scripture', wrote Gandhi.[31]

The Raja and the Mahatma thought that Christianity could offer much to India but both felt that Christianity as it was professed, practised and promulgated in colonial India by colonialists, missionaries and converted Indians did not offer much hope. This Christianity was interested in the salvation of souls, obsessed with doctrinal orthodoxy and denounced anyone who did not believe in the atoning power of Jesus' death. Roy and Gandhi were simply interested in Jesus as a moral teacher. What they did was to

27. Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 130.
28. Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 90 (italics original).
29. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 31, p. 169.
30. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 35, p. 139.
31. Gandhi, *Christian Missions*, p. 34.

de-familiarize the Sermon on the Mount in its Christian context. A celebrated narrative of a Semitic tradition was made to lose its textual valency and was placed in a totally radical textual and cultural milieu. What this defamiliarization did was to drain its Christian meaning and expose it merely as one among a myriad contingent textual possibilities. For Gandhi and Roy no culture or textual tradition had a monopoly of good or right ethics. They conformed to the received notion of what the Sermon on the Mount should be but complicated it by rendering it as a concrete manifestation of eternal truth already embedded in their sacred texts. For Gandhi, non-violence was not something distinctive to the New Testament. It was common to all religions and had found the 'highest expression and application in Hinduism'.[32] Gandhi did not find anything new in the Sermon on the Mount. It vividly told what he had learnt in his childhood:

> There is nothing much in giving a cup of water to one who gave you a cup of water, or saluting one who salutes you, but there is some virtue in doing a good turn to one who has done you a bad turn. I have not been able to see any difference between the Sermon the Mount and the Bhagavadgita. What the sermon describes in a graphic manner, the Bhagavadgita reduces to a scientific formula.[33]

Roy found the sum total of the Sermon on the Mount the same as that set forth in the Vedas—faith in the Supreme Being when translated into ethical practices should lead the human race to social comfort and eternal happiness. Hence he incorporated the precepts of Jesus into his own canon as a basis for teaching morality, but continued to champion the validity of Vedic texts, acknowledging errors that have accrued over the years blurring their moral force. For Roy and Gandhi, truths could be constructed from a panorama of perspectives simply because truth is a matter of sound and scrupulous ethical practice.

In postcolonial India the Sermon on the Mount did not have the same hermeneutical purchase as it had during the colonial period. It fell out of favour for four reasons. Firstly, in the wake of independence when nation building was the prime concern, Indian interpreters turned to passages like Leviticus 19–25 where they found a roadmap for a well-ordered society or elucidated the passages from Acts where the early church shared everything in common. Secondly, during the time of indigenization, St John's gospel came to prominence, with its mystical teaching which resonated with Indian philosophy. The fourth gospel had the added advantage of invoking the Orientalist image of India as spiritual and mystical. Thirdly, during the liberation theology phase, narratives like the Nazareth Manifesto (Lk. 4.17-18) became the focus of hermeneutical attention. Fourthly, with the

32. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 35, p. 167.
33. Gandhi, *Christian Missions*, p. 187.

emergence of identity hermeneutics, those most concerned, dalits, women and tribals, seem not to have seen any potential in the Sermon. At a time when texts are being employed to advocate virulent fundamentalism, the likelihood is that the Sermon with its tolerance and reverence for life will recede still further. Gandhi's words, 'become worthy of the message that is imbedded in the Sermon on the Mount, and join the spinning brigade'[34] are unlikely to be heard in the immediate future.

34. Gandhi, *Christian Missions*, p. 292.

4

Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation: The Next Phase

> A good theory, even one that has affected us deeply and convinced us, will remain someone else's theory and not our own. But a good story that has affected us deeply, and convinced us, becomes our own.
>
> *Orhan Pamuk*[1]

> The role of the Resistance is not only to fight the military occupation and its collaborators, but also to deal with many social ills.
>
> *Maher*[2]

One of the lessons of history is that empires rarely disappear completely. They rise and fall but often resurface in different forms. The current military interventions and territorial occupations in the name of democracy, humanitarianism and liberation are signs of a new form of imperialism. As long as there are empires, dominations, tyrannies and exploitations—either rising or resurfacing—postcolonial criticism will continue to have its vigilant role to play. What this end-piece will do is draw attention to some of the issues with which postcolonialism now needs to engage. It falls into two parts. In the first, I will highlight some of the unfinished or unstarted textual work postcolonial criticism has to undertake within the discipline of biblical studies. The second part will focus on a new vocation for postcolonialism which will take it beyond its traditional territory—ritualized theoretical negotiations and niceties—and recover practical projects and recommit itself to addressing crises that affect the contemporary world—the crucial public issues of today which are attracting wide attention and anxiety in the media—terrorist suicide and asylum-seeking.

1. Orhan Pamuk, *Other Colours: Essays and a Story* (London: Faber & Faber 2007), p. 283.
2. A character in Samir El-Youssef, *The Illusion of Return* (London: Halban, 2007), p. 28.

Widening the Hermeneutical Horizons

All along, biblical studies have been confined to the canonical scriptures—the eventual winners in the doctrinal battles of the early church. Postcolonial biblical criticism needs to expand the biblical canon and incorporate those diverse texts which were suppressed or excluded in the ecclesiastical power-game of selection and rejection. Some of these texts did not make it into the canon because they contain risqué passages involving, for example, excessive kissing of Jesus and Mary, include parables populated with dodgy characters, and more significantly, portray strong women who defy gender typecasting. The discovery of a wealth of early Christian literature at Nag Hammadi, in Egypt, means that we are no longer dependent solely on the scriptures accepted by the clerical hierarchy to understand the first four hundred years of the church's existence. This range of diverse Christian writings, which are often described as Gnostic and a target of ecclesiastical suspicion and scorn, should be a prime object of postcolonial studies. These excluded or suppressed scriptures are often interdicted and demonized, but they are the alternative narratives of the nascent Christian movement.

Hitherto, postcolonial criticism has largely confined its attention to the canonical writings which were selected by the Church. The selection of the books that went into the canon was largely determined by the political and religious interests of the conservative West. Incidentally, the canon which was first introduced to Asia was the Eastern Canon, which came with the Nestorians in the fourth century, and not the Western one, which was launched much later, during the colonial period, by European missionaries from the end of the fifteenth century. A postcolonial inclination would be to support and recover those writings which lost out in the canonical process and treat them as part of the broader textual continuum. There are three reasons for this. One, in spite of being dismissed as esoteric writings conveying sacred mystical knowledge, and scorned for their 'weird' theologies, some of them express an anti-imperial stance. For instance, there is an incident narrated in the Acts of Peter where a marble statue of Caesar is kicked to pieces by a demon exorcized by Peter (ch. 11). Secondly, some of these writings have hermeneutical value, especially for churches outside Western Christendom. The earliest gospel to reach India was one of the excluded—the Aramaic version of *Gospel of Matthew*—brought by Bartholomew in the second century, a fact recorded by Eusebius. More important than its arrival, however, are the references to India recorded in some of the other writings which did not make it into the canon. For instance, the *Acts of Thomas* contains a reference to Thomas coming to India. It records a reluctant Thomas who was forcibly sold by Jesus as a slave to work as a

carpenter to a wealthy merchant called Aban, the same Jesus being silent about slavery in the canonical gospels. The selling of Thomas suggests that collusion between Christianity and the corporate world has been present since its inception. Thirdly, there are the hermeneutical implications of these texts. The *Gospel of Thomas* provides an interesting starting point for Asian hermeneutics. It offers a Christology which portrays Jesus as an exemplary moral teacher, a Jesus which nineteenth-century interpreters like Ram Mohun Roy and Keshub Chunder Sen were trying to fashion in contrast to the overly divinized Jesus introduced to India by the missionaries. It is not the death and resurrection of Jesus which readers encounter in the *Gospel of Thomas* but his wisdom sayings, which have resonance with the Asian wisdom tradition.

From a postcolonial perspective, canonical scriptures are not the sole conveyors of truth. The suppressed scriptures make it clear that competing claims and counter-claims were characteristic features of early Christianity. It is important to establish that the early Christian community was not unified but composed of a whole spectrum of different and rival schools of thought. Postcolonial biblical studies should reflect this unsettled character of the early Church and question the motives which reject the alternative forms. All sources—canonical as well as non canonical, and oral as well as written—have played a decisive role in the historical formation of the early Church and enlarge our understanding of it

Linked to the study of the suppressed gospels is the widening understanding of the milieu of early Christianity. Postcolonial studies need to look beyond the limitations of the Jewish–Hellenistic context and pay attention also to the Jewish-Aramaic. The New Testament writings play into and confirm the notion that they were aimed at and tethered to Hellenistic Christianity. They and their interpretation were largely concerned with Hellenistic Christianity and the movement westwards, at the expense of Aramaic Christianity which was closer to Judaism and moved eastwards. Except for three letters, Romans, Corinthians and Thessalonians, the rest were written against those who supported the Jewish form of Christianity envisioned by Peter, James, John and the sons of Zebedee. They were labelled variously, sometimes mockingly, 'pillars' (Gal. 2.9) or 'super apostles' (2 Cor. 11.5; 12.11) derisively as 'false brethren' (Gal. 2.1) and even derogatively as 'dogs' (Phil. 3.2). The only document to record the growth of early Christianity—the Acts of the Apostles—not only neglects Judeo-Christianity but at times shows an outright antagonism towards it. It duly records the conversion of Western pagans such as Cornelius the Italian, the high standing Greek women and men at Beroea (Acts 17.12), Dionysius the Areopagite, and the woman called Damaris (17.34), and ignores the conversion of non-Western pagans, the exception being the

Ethiopian eunuch. The way the author of Luke–Acts handled the disputes between the Hellenists and the Hebrews is an indication of where his sympathy lay.

There are compelling reasons for us to revisit the often neglected cultural milieu in which Christianity emerged. One is that recent research has shown that both African and Asian Christianity grew out of the Jewish-Aramaic background rather than the Jewish-Hellenistic, thus posing a different set of theological questions. Biblical scholarship tends to focus on the Jewish-Hellenistic background and to under-play the Jewish-Aramaic in the formation of early Christianity. The former is seen as progressive, adaptable, tolerant and universal, whereas the latter is portrayed as rigid, backward, bigoted and insular. To survive and to gain status in a strange, imperial environment, Christian faith in its formative years may have mimicked the dominant Hellenistic culture, but the historical necessity and theological need which led to such hermeneutical manoeuvres were of that time. In a changed, democratic and pluralistic theological context, Jewish Christianity presents and poses a different agenda for Christianity outside the West. The Jewish Christians were the original hybridizers who wished to remain within the Jewish religious parameters and re-configured their faith in the light of the teachings of Jesus. Paul's universal gospel, which flattened significant ethnic or cultural differences, has become less tenable in a postcolonial context when vernacular identities and values have a renewed lease of life. The culture-specific expressions of Christianity which use the language of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism or traditional African religion have become a significant resistant force against a universal form Christianity which had its origins in Paul and was later perfected by Western Christianity. The question which Paul faced then was how to make a particularistic and sectarian faith a universal one. His answer was to extricate it from the particularity of its Jewish observances and ceremonies and transfer it into a cosmopolitan setting. Now, in our changed context, the question is how viable is this universal form of Christianity, which is not only tainted by its association with colonialism but also undermines and undercuts local aspirations and orientations. The theological vision Paul forged for a single humanity incorporated under the Lordship of the cosmic Christ now smacks of Christian triumphalism in a context where many gods and goddesses are vying for attention. In the face of rapid globalization, culture-specific Christianity acts as an antidote and provides resources to survive. The task is how to construct a hermeneutics based on specific identities without at the same time wallowing in nativistic pride. In this changed theological context, the recovery of denied and misrepresented Jewish Christianity has important implications and supports the postcolonial concern for denied knowledges and agency.

The Post-mission Context and the Rebirth of Gods and Goddesses

We need to revisit the colonizing monotheistic tendencies present in the biblical narratives, and see them against the many-layered polytheistic context out of which they emerged. Monotheism introduced notions of true and false religions and the chosen and the damned. The biblical monotheistic vision which undergirded one faith and one Church has to be viewed against the many gods, many faiths and many churches which crowd our religious landscape. Whereas the old cosmic gods were interculturally translatable and nobody questioned their reality or the legitimacy of their worship, monotheism introduced the notion of false gods, idolatry, and estranged people. Biblical monotheism itself has to be problematized. As recent Jewish studies have shown, monotheism is much more ambiguous as a reality than one is usually led to believe. Angelology and the doctrine of the Trinity raise awkward questions for the supposed biblical monotheism. The classical two-nature theory about Christ sits uncomfortably within the single-God framework. What is increasingly clear is that there is no such thing as absolute monotheism. In Rodney Stark's view, the great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are all 'dualistic monotheisms—each teaches that, in addition to the existence of a supreme divine being, there also exists at least one evil, if less powerful supernatural being'.[3] Besides its theological incongruity, the political implications of the monotheistic ideal have been disastrous. What monotheism detests is a variety of empires competing with each other. Monotheism provides a vital instrument in strengthening and maintaining a single empire and it presents unlimited prospects for transmitting the message which the dominant wants to spread. Origen hailed the pax Romana established by Augustus which paved an uninterrupted way for the propagation the gospel: 'Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus, the one who reduced to uniformity, so to speak, the many kingdoms on earth so that he had a single empire. It would have hindered Jesus' teaching from being spread through the whole world if there had been many kingdoms'.[4] It is this monotheistic vision of a single empire which has provided the vision and impetus to the current American imperium in its task of creating a single world order with a view to spreading its own ideology and economy based on market values.

The polytheistic situation which the early Christians encountered and which shaped the Christian understanding of a single god, is different from the current one. Whereas the old Greek and Hellenistic gods and goddesses

3. Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 25.

4. Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 89.

are dead and gone, we see the thriving of gods and goddesses in our midst. What we are witnessing is a plural monotheism. There is a rejuvenation and rebirth of gods in the plural—the Christian God, the Islamic God, the Hindu God—all competing in the market place of religious discourse. This is articulated at the popular level by the heroine of the Indian film, *Bombay*. When she, the Muslim wife of a Hindu husband, becomes pregnant and is worried about the financial strain the new addition is going to cause to their already precarious monetary situation, her instinctive reaction is to tell her husband that Allah will look after the child, but she corrects herself with the words: 'Our child has two Gods. They will care for it'.

There is no longer a monotheistic centre which holds everything together. What we are discovering are multiple centres. Monotheism is managed by a rigid thinking which requires stark choices between right and wrong, truth and falsehood. This kind of stark choice is unhelpful to people whose lives are inherently untidy and their experiences marked by messy and mixed-up realities. We live in a culture which does not believe in one morality, or in one set of principles. Our identities are multiple and we are simultaneously energized and exasperated by this condition. The diverse nature of our modern living and the diverse nature of our experiences of the divine, forces us to recognize that monotheism and polytheism are two human apprehensions of reality and are not be seen as alternative claims upon our attention. The biblical notion of monotheism superseding polytheism is no longer hermeneutically tenable. What Regina Schwartz says in the closing words of her book, *The Curse of Cain*, could be a new guiding principle for postcolonial biblical studies: 'It would be a Bible embracing multiplicity instead of monotheism. The old 'monotheistic' book must be closed so that new books may be fruitful and multiply. After all that was the first commandment'.[5]

Making Ritual Invisible

Mainstream biblical scholarship has paid undue attention to doctrinal aspects of biblical texts and has been very successful in mining them. But there is an inexplicable scarcity of study of ritual practices in the lives of the biblical Jews or in the formative years of early Christianity. Both testaments record a variety of cultic and liturgical practices which enabled biblical communities to define, clarify and practice their faith. Mainstream biblical interpretation, partly prompted by Protestant influence, is so doctrine-based that it tends to treat rituals and activities related to the temple as a contaminating influence and a primitive form of faith. Analysing some of the

5. Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 176.

literature published after 1988 on the social and religious world during the formative years of Christianity, Jonathan Schwiebert, in a recent article, has been critical of New Testament scholars and the way they have handled early Christian rituals. He has shown that when the Lord's supper is studied, the term is employed throughout without any suggestion that it refers to a 'ritual' or a 'ritual meal'. Similarly, when baptism is investigated the term is 'maintained with monotonous insistence' without exploring its ritual import. Schwiebert's indictment is that New Testament scholars 'create an important *silence*, a kind of tacit and vague assumption that early Christians did not really practice rituals; or, if they did, these were not as important as what early Christians *believed*; or if they were truly important to some early Christians, this represents a later *corruption* from the earliest period; or, if rituals do not signal corruption, at least they were never to be taken as *real* in their own right—they were token symbols of interior realties'.[6] There is an underlying assumption within mainstream biblical scholarship which is spurred on and sourced with impeccable Enlightenment values that theory is superior to praxis. Therefore, the tendency is to treat rituals as aberrant, inferior and second rate in comparison to the doctrinal elements, and more significantly, incapable of enriching the faith. There is an undeclared assumption that the biblical books contain only diverse beliefs, teachings, and messages. The acceptance or non-acceptance of these beliefs, teachings and messages are seen as more important than the participation or non-participation in the rituals. For the majority of Asian and African communities, rituals are at least equally important for they are the outward manifestation of their faith.

Solicited Martyrdom and Spectacular Demonstration of Faith

The survival and the continued usefulness of postcolonialism depends on generating new knowledge about specific ethical and moral issues which have attracted media attention, Two such cases are suicide missions (Diego Gambetta's term, not ideal since it fails to acknowledge the fact of indiscriminate killing), and asylum seeking.

First, suicide missions. Since the 7 July 2005 bombing in the London underground, questions have been raised as to what motivates people to venture on undertakings which have such devastating effects. What postcolonialism has to reiterate is that spreading terror and the capacity to annihilate life is not a monopoly of one religion. Likewise, martyrs as ideal exemplars, are not confined to Christianity and Islam. Other leading world

6. Jonathan Schwiebert, 'Evading Rituals in New Testament Studies', *The Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* 33.1 (2004), p. 12 (italics original).

religions such as Buddhism and Sikhism have given some form of scriptural legitimacy to such acts. Christianity, too, has its share of those who have killed for noble causes. The mass killing of innocent people is not new either. It has a biblical precedent. The closest we get is recorded in the Book of Judges, where Samson acts as an instrument of God, killing both the high and mighty among the Philistines and three thousand ordinary sports-loving people, for the humiliation meted out to him (Judg. 16). In the New Testament, the only mass killing goes some way towards exemplifying the Christian understanding of martyrdom, in the Massacre of the Innocents. The Iraqi, Palestinian, and London suicide bombers see martyrdom as a way of fulfilling a sacred duty which itself is tied up with the notion of struggle against injustice. *The Acts of Christian Martyrs*[7] is particularly significant for the present time for it gives a fascinating description of early Christian martyrdom. Granted that much of the literature is hagiographical, and contains celebratory sermons eulogizing the achievement of martyrs, these writings offer patterns of martyrdom which have certain limited resonances with current events. For the ancient Christian martyrs, the heavenly kingdom of God was superior to the earthly kingdom of Caesar. For the current Islamic martyr it is Allah's heavenly paradise which is inherently better than the current secular and materialist world. Both have an antagonistic attitude to empires, which are viewed in dualistic terms and in apocalyptic images. For the ancient Christian martyrs, the enemy was Caesar, and for the Islamic radicals, the hegemony of the United States exemplified in President Bush, and the conduct of the Israeli government. Compromise with the enemy/empire is unthinkable for one cannot serve two masters. Both present a threat to and judgement on empire—the Roman empire for the ancient Christians and the American for radical Islamists. Both see their mission as bearing witness—one to Christ and the other to Allah, and refuse to obey orders from earthly powers. Both have an unshakeable belief that their cause will not fail because it is God's, and treat their acts as missionary ventures. Both have their aspirations fuelled by a monotheistic vision. Both see death not as a defeat but as a final triumph and a flawless way to enter the next life. Both emphasize that their decision to die was a conscious choice and of their own free will. Both see martyrdom as a valuable means of motivating and attracting potential converts to the cause. Here the comparison ends. Whereas the martyrs die with the hope of a better life for others, the suicide missioners, in promising to improve life for their fellow believers in the process destroy innocent human lives, including those of believers. As Terry Eagleton put it: 'Suicide

7. Hebert Musurillo (ed.), *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

bombers also die in the name of a better life for others; it is just that, unlike martyrs, they take others with them in the process'.[8]

Interestingly, ancient and contemporary reactions to such acts are somewhat similar. The suicidal recklessness of early Christian martyrs not only provoked astonishment and disbelief but also prompted exactly the same sort of reaction among pagan Romans as today's Islamic militants have done in the West. The castigation of Christian martyrs as 'simply out of their minds—insane' by Marcus Aurelius and Celsus[9] resonates with the current widespread assumption that volunteer suicide bombers must be mentally deranged. Just as the Christian martyrs were investigated for their vague criminal activities, the current bombers are accused of having links with the criminal underworld.

The prevailing popular perception that terrorist suicides are the creation of religious fundamentalism is not always correct. The motivation of the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers is derived not from Hindu values, but is based on language discrimination. Those who blew themselves up in Lebanon in the 1980s were inspired by socialist or communist ideals. The acts of violence are not espoused by some Muslims alone, but are the result of complex social religious and political pressures. One of the motivating factors which incites martyrdom is empire. Postcolonialism can draw attention to the fact that empires play their part in fomenting martyrdom. In the popular perception, martyrdom is perceived essentially as a religious act sanctioned by ancient texts and undertaken by noble devotees. Such a view insulates these acts from issues of power and imperial geopolitics. The incentive for martyrdom is provided not by sacred texts alone. The presence of empire—the occupation of other peoples' territory, the power and cultural politics of dominating peoples' lives—plays an important part. This is true of both modern and ancient empires. Bowersock has shown that 'Christianity owed its martyrs to the *mores* and structure of the Roman empire, not to the indigenous character of the Semitic Near East where Christianity was born. The written record suggests that, like the very word 'martyr' itself, martyrdom had nothing to do with Judaism or Palestine. It had everything to do with the Greco-Roman world, its traditions, its language, and its cultural tastes'.[10] Robert A Pape, in his study of the grievances that prompt suicide bombers to undertake these acts—a study initiated by the Pentagon—has reached conclusions which will not please the US Defense Department. Studying nearly 315 suicide bombings carried out by Muslims, Tamils, Sikhs

8. Terry Eagleton, 'A Way of Different Death', *The Guardian* (26 January 2005), p. 23.

9. G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 3.

10. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, p. 28 (italics original).

and Kurds between 1980–2003, Pape concludes that the 'data shows that there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world religions'.[11] Rather, suicide attacks by each of the groups studied were 'mainly a response to foreign occupation rather than the product of Islamic fundamentalism'.[12] Pape's study has demonstrated that 'religion is rarely the root cause, although it is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and in other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective'.[13] The broader objective of such a spectacular act, 'or its central objective' is to coerce 'a foreign state that has military forces in what the terrorists see as their homeland to take those forces out'.[14] Pape has identified two causes which trigger and provide motivation for suicide missions—the presence of foreign combat troops which threaten the way of life of the occupied, and the foreign occupier who happens to be of a different religion. Suicide missions happen when foreign troops occupy territories believed to be the homeland of peoples such as Palestinians, Kurds, Chechens, or, in the case of al Queda, Saudi Arabia where American troops are stationed. In each of these cases, suicide campaigns were 'driven by essentially nationalist goals to compel target democracies to withdraw military forces from their *particular* homeland'.[15] Suicide groups are active when another state occupies a region whose inhabitants follow a different religion. The contemporary case in point is the supposedly Christian US forces occupying Islamic Iraq. Pape acknowledges that 'religious difference matters in that it enables terrorist leaders to paint foreign forces as being driven by religious goals'. Pape has drawn attention to the speeches of Osama which depict the US occupation of the Arabian peninsula as driven by religious goals, so that it is an Islamic duty to resist this invasion. 'That argument' in Pape's view 'is incredibly powerful, not only to religious Muslims but also secular Muslims'.[16]

What postcolonialism has to do is to complicate the idea of suicide missions as the creation of the extreme teachings of religions by shifting and directing discussion from religious orthodoxy and single reading of texts to a highly specific political circumstance—imperialism. It is becoming increasingly clear that we cannot understand the phenomenon of suicide missions unless we understand the power and presence of empire.

11. Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 4.
12. Pape, *Dying to Win*, p. 237.
13. Pape, *Dying to Win*, p. 4.
14. Pape, *Dying to Win*, p. 21.
15. Pape, *Dying to Win*, p. 243 (italics original).
16. See *The Guardian* (30 September 2005), p. 32.

Asylum Seekers at the Rich Man's Gate

Besides suicide missions, the other messy affair which has preoccupied the European media is asylum-seeking. Postcolonial diaspora studies have chiefly focussed on middle-class migrants and captured their in-between status through such terms as hybridity, liminality and multiculturalism and have paid less attention to the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. Nor have they much considered the case of the South and East Asian migrants in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century indenture system. In a world made unstable by political uncertainties, natural disasters and human rights violations, there is an unprecedented movement of people from the developing world to the developed. In Western discourse over the years, the terminology surrounding refugees and asylum-seekers has changed. During the Cold War, those who were seeking shelter from communist persecution—a dissident writer or scientist or a ballet dancer—were regarded as ideologically convenient and 'good' refugees.[17] Those who sought safe haven were few in number and not seen as threatening. But today, those who want to escape political harassment and come to the West are seen as 'bad' refugees endangering the Western way of life. The current heavy movement of people has altered the charitable definition of refugee, which has given way to a narrower and less benevolent one. Now refugees are those displaced peoples who live in camps in their own or in neighbouring countries, while the term asylum seeker is gaining currency to focus on the place to which those seeking sanctuary want to come. Refugees are those who are 'out' there, whereas the asylum seeker is the one who is 'here' wanting a share of Western prosperity or freedom.

Interrogating biblical material for the current asylum-seeking may not be very profitable. Passages in the Hebrew Scriptures deal with strangers and aliens, and biblical characters like Ruth and Esther highlight how outsiders adjust to a foreign environment. But these narratives do not speak to or represent the anxieties faced by the current asylum seekers, whose existence and sheer large numbers are the result of a different political and cultural situation. Among the New Testament writings which talk about exiles, strangers and resident aliens is 1 Peter. These terms refer to minority Christians in Asia Minor who were under pressure and were being maligned by the dominant community. There is no scholarly consensus as to the definite usage of these terms in 1 Peter—exiles, aliens, strangers. Whether they are metaphors, or express an actual situation in which these Christians literally and physically found themselves homeless, is unsettled. Despite the contentious nature of the definition, there are certain parallels between ancient

17. Caroline Moorehead, *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees* (London: Chatto &Windus, 2005), p. 28.

Christians as resident aliens and the current asylum seekers. Both feel under pressure. Some, though not all, are seen as professing a strange religion. Christianity, in the case of the Petrine community, and Islam, Hinduism, etc., usually in the case of some asylum seekers. Both face aggressive hostility and are viewed with suspicion (2.12; 4.14-16). The British tabloids are full of stories demonizing the asylum seekers as exploiting the social security system and the national health service.[18] But the parallels end there. 1 Peter describes a situation in which the early Christians were a minority and living in a predominately pagan world. Today the 'pagans' are the asylum seekers, many from Islamic, Hindu and Sikh communities, trying to find a home in Europe which has strong roots in Christian values. The Christian basis of Europe was recently reiterated by the late John Paul II. On the occasion of welcoming the ten new countries from the old Soviet bloc, the late pope said: 'Only a Europe that does not remove, but rediscovers its Christian roots will reach the stature needed for the great challenges of the third millennium: peace, dialogue between cultures and religions, the safeguarding of creation'.[19] Like the Petrine Christians who reduced the 'other' to undifferentiated Gentiles (2.12; 4.3) their 'adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some to devour' (5.8), the Western press labels every one seeking asylum as economic migrants. More alarmingly, 1 Peter offers a dangerous potential to the host countries. The Christians in Asia minor saw themselves as a 'chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's own people' (2.9). Such a claim to a nominated status as God's elect must have provided the marginalized Christian community in Asia Minor with an alternative hermeneutical strategy to affirm their distinctive collective identity In the changed circumstances when Western countries have become the dominant power, such claims could be seen as exclusionary and imperialistic. There is another dangerous aspect to the text that could become malign in the hands of the West. The Petrine Christians fostered the dream of the final conversion of the Gentiles (2.12; 3.1-2). In the current situation, Western countries are not talking in terms of conversion in a religious sense but use secular ideals like integration and assimilation. What assimilation or integration means is that if the strangers want to be part of the Western countries, they must embrace Western values and abandon their own rich cultural heritage. Such a reading presents no comfort to the current asylum seekers. Today's asylum seeker is not *paroikos* in the Petrine sense—a resident alien—but *xenos*—a complete stranger with little legal security and economic restrictions.

18. Roy Greenslade, *Seeking Scapegoats: The Coverage of Asylum in the UK Press* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2005).

19. http.//www.pluralism.org/news/intl/index.php?xref.

What is becoming progressively clearer is that sacred texts may not be the right place to look for the rights and treatment of present-day asylum seekers. These texts were produced before the current nation states were formed and international understanding on human rights were devised. Asylum in the end is not about what sacred texts sanction, but, as Caroline Moorehead, who studied the plight of refugee and asylum seekers, says, is about 'morality'. Warning that the question of asylum seeking is not going to go away, Moorehead pleads that the Western governments should find humane ways of tackling the problem: 'In an age of globalization, it is simply not possible to ignore the world's dispossessed. How a state deals with its refugees should be a measure of its social and political health'.[20] The righteousness of a people will be measured by the welcome they extend to strangers, and their capacity to revise their enclosed history, identity and culture through an encounter with the 'other'.

To sum up, then: The interpreter has not only a discursive function but also an interventionist one which is ethically and ideologically committed. Inevitably, interpreter, text and ethical issues are locked in a dialectical relationship. The creative and productive future of postcolonial biblical criticism depends on its ability to reinvent itself and enlarge its scope. It should continue to expose the power-knowledge axis but at the same time move beyond abstract theorization and get involved in the day-to-day messy activities which affect people's lives.

20. Moorehead, *Human Cargo*, p. 291.

Part II

Contemporary Issues, Incompatible Texts

5

TSUNAMI, TRAUMA AND TEXT: HERMENEUTICS AFTER THE ASIAN DELUGE

> Now ask yourself: how long can this frail fence last against … the tides, the winds, and the storms? And if it falls, who shall we turn to then, comrade?
>
> *Nirmal*[1]

> We have come with a hammer and nails and a stethoscope in one hand, and a Bible in the other.
>
> *Ricky Sanchez*[2]

The tsunami which hit Asia on Boxing Day 2004 attracted much media attention and there was an amazing response from all over the world. For a moment, the storm seemed to have not only brought closer the different continents but also generated a sense of solidarity among people. It was refreshing to see biblical scholars, who often resort to silent-mode when there is a crisis, suddenly becoming active and rallying to reflect on the disaster. The Society of Biblical Literature made a special effort and put on sessions on the tsunami both at the International meeting at Singapore and the Annual Meeting in Philadelphia. They were billed as one of the highlights of the programme. While, on the one hand, it is cheering to witness the Society's engagement with human miseries, on the other, one is forced ask how come that the same the guild has not made any fuss about the other and much more sustained human tragedy—the Iraq war—where the human cost is at least comparable to that of the tsunami. It appears that fatalities caused by bombs and gunfire are less worthy of our compassion than deaths caused by killer waves. The lives of Iraqis seem to be less precious than the lives of Indonesians, Sri Lankans, Thais, and European tourists. Why are we not talking about the Iraqis whose lives have been destroyed by invasion? Why are we not discussing the American-created Middle Eastern tsunami?

1. Nirmal is a character in Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), p. 206.

2. Ricky Sanchez is a missionary from California working in the devastated Thai island of Koh Khao, in *Observer Magazine* (27 February 2005), p. 25.

Why is the Society keen on this particular disaster when there are so many others which it conveniently ignores—asylum seekers in the West and refugees in central Africa, the famine in Niger, or the frequent flooding of Bangladesh. It has paid little attention to the 2 million people who die of malaria every year or the 2.3 million claimed by Aids, mainly in the developing countries.

The tsunami, as Naomi Klein, has pointed out was a public relations 'gift for the US'. How Hurricane Katrina shamed the US is another story. The tsunami enabled the media, at least for a while, to replace the familiar TV pictures of American troops under attack in various cities of Iraq with a compassionate picture of the USS carrier 'Abraham Lincoln' running helicopter services to inaccessible parts of Bande Ache delivering food and medical supplies and clothes. In Klein's words, 'here were the super power's ground troops showing their human side. It showed Muslims around the world, that the US can be nice as well as nasty'.[3] Behind this heart-warming scene there emerged a deeper political agenda, exemplified in the words of Condoleezza Rice who dismayed many by describing the tsunami as 'a wonderful opportunity' that 'has paid great dividends for us'.[4] Just as the US government saw the tsunami as an opportunity to show an America with a kindly face, the tsunami discussions in the Society's meetings enable the Society to project itself as a socially committed forum and not all its work was about where to place the comma in Rom. 9.5 or whether Mark really ended at 16.8.

Postcolonial Considerations

Natural disasters such as a tsunami tend to produce diametrically opposite political consequences—of decolonization and re-colonization.

The last time when there was a tsunami in Indonesia, it had serious political repercussions. When the 1883 tsunami blew away the entire Dutch East Indian island of Krakatoa, the Muslim clergy of Java made a deliberate connection between the natural disaster and God's judgement and colonial rule. The 1888 Banten Peasants' Revolt was a crucial moment in Indonesia's colonial history in that it initiated political unrest which paved the way for the eventual departure of the Dutch. Simon Winchester, who has studied the geographical and political ramifications of the destruction of Krakatoa, is of the view that while this natural explosion generated the

3. I am unable to provide references to two of the quotations attributed to Naomi Klein. I presume they were by her and, if not, my apologies. If they were by someone else, then my apologies to him or her for my not identifying the source correctly.

4. Naomi Klein, 'Allure of the Blank State', *The Guardian* (18 April 2005), p. 17.

'political mood of the movement',[5] it was the teachings of Haji Abdul Karim, a Javanese Sufi mystic, which provided the spiritual sustenance. Haji Abdul Karim predicted that a mahdi, a messiah-like figure, was coming to liberate the people from the infidels and that there would be a series of portents: '*There would be diseases of cattle. There would be floods. There would be blood-coloured rains. And volcanoes would erupt, and people would die*'.[6] True to Abdul Karim's prediction, every one of these events unfolded exactly in the order he foresaw them. The tragedy of Krakatoa was the final omen. The mullahs immediately pounced upon these events as God's sign, and used them not only to strengthen their hold on the people but also to whip-up anti-colonial sentiments:

> Was it not, they said, the revenge of Allah, not only against the unbelieving dogs, but also against those Bantenese people who were serving these kafirs, these infidels?… Had he (i.e. Abdul Karim) not predicted heavy earthquakes, and the end of the world? And see, the sun was darkened for hours, and now after the eruption it shone as a red or sometimes a grey or a blue ball in a grey firmament… Did not God create the tidal waves that rose 30 meters above the sea-level?…has not the bottom of the sea been raised by a God?… Be humble for the Almighty! Pay for your sins.[7]

The message of the mullahs was simplistic and straightforward: Allah was deeply angry because they were not only letting themselves be ruled by foreign infidels, but also strengthening that rule by collaborating with them. The solution was that the Dutch had to be expelled and their influence wiped out. Rise up and resist, the mullahs urged, and so the people took up arms. The rebellion, though carried out in a haphazard manner, eventually led to the withdrawal of the Dutch, and the formation of a 'free' modern Indonesia.

The recent discovery of letters and documents shows that the rebellion was initially inspired and prompted by outside sources. It was from that part of Arabia that is the present Yemen that Islamic fundamentalists preachers pointed to Allah's 'displeasure with the Dutch infidels and their local stooges'.[8] The recent 2003 and 2005 Bali bombings seem to be a continuation of the cynical manipulation of the mullahs who had sown the seeds of dissension way back in the last century with their condemnation of the foreign infidels as enemies and Western imperialism as the cause of the miserable condition of the Muslims.

5. Simon Winchester, *Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 326.
6. Winchester, *Krakatoa*, p. 336 (italics in original).
7. Winchester, *Krakatoa*, p. 338.
8. Winchester, *Krakatoa*, p. 339.

Reconstruction as Neo-colonialism

While the tsunami provides fodder for anti-imperialistic impulses in the disaster-stricken areas, it also presents an unlimited opportunity to re-colonize them. True, it is heart warming to witness voluntary agencies such as the NGOs, church organizations, government-aid planners and multi-national building corporations getting involved in the reconstruction work after the disaster. Such good actions, however, invariably bring their own cultural and technocratic preconceptions, and these, at times, sit uneasily with local values and skills, and go against the local environmental protocols. Lands wiped out of people and buildings are, in President Bush' s words, 'opportunity zones'[9] where the rules can be rewritten from scratch. This neo-colonial form of reconstruction functions in three ways. First, it offers a chance to introduce a market economy in place of state-owned public economies. It provides a free rein to free-marketeers and global corporations to preach the gospel of privatization, thus enabling the replacement of public institutions with amenities geared to the tourist industry. As the Thailand Tsunami Survivors and Supporters Group put it, for 'businessmen-politicians, the tsunami was the answer to their prayers, since it wiped these coastal areas clean of the communities that had stood in the way of resorts, hotels, casinos and shrimp farms'.[10] In Sri Lanka the government has sanctioned five-star type luxury resorts for the tourists in the coastal areas affected during the tsunami while the locals are housed in temporary accommodation. What is worse is that the local people are made aliens in their own country and barred from these coastal development zones.

The second form of neo-colonialism under the guise of reconstruction is the replacement of indigenous with alien techniques. The reconstruction work undertaken by multinational firms has forced local people to use unfamiliar technologies and materials. This has resulted in people being deskilled and their vernacular expertise devalued. There are numerous cases of outside agencies imposing external methods and over-ruling local expertise and knowledge. Marc Gosse provides examples from previous earthquakes in Yemen and Mexico City, where, to meet targets and get media attention, ancestral and indigenous knowledge which provided protection against earthquakes was ignored and unfamiliar techniques and building materials were introduced. Indigenous methods were overruled in order to meet the international models worked out to suit the donor's ideologies and planning patterns.[11]

9. Naomi Klein, 'Now the Real Looting Begins: Purging the Poor', *The Nation* (10 October 2005), p. 16.

10. Klein, 'Allure of the Blank State', p. 17.

11. For more examples, see Marc Gossé, 'The Wrong Way to rebuild', *Le Monde diplomatique* (February 2005), p. 9.

An Indian researcher, Shalmali Guttal, differentiates between two kinds of colonialism—'vulgar' and 'sophisticated'.[12] Vulgar colonialism was the earlier form which we used to have in the past. What we have now is a sophisticated form which, according to him, is more than reconstruction: 'It is not reconstruction at all—it is about reshaping everything'. What is happening now in the view of Herman Kumara of the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement in Negombo, is 'a second tsunami of corporate globalization and militarization. We see this as a plan to hand over the sea and the coast to foreign corporations with military assistance from the US marines'.[13]

The third form is scriptural recolonization. The human tragedy offered a God-sent opportunity to Christian agencies like the Bible Society to engage aggressively in the distribution of Bibles and biblical tracts to the distraught victims. While various relief agencies were involved in the 'first wave of assistance', meeting the temporal and physical needs of the survivors by distributing food, clothes and medicines and building shelters, the Bible Society saw its task as fulfilling a long term spiritual need that 'will linger for a life time' Just as, at the height of colonialism, the British and Foreign Bible Society created an impression in the UK that there was a deep thirst for the Bible in the colonies by publishing in their literature letters and requests from the natives, the American Bible Society did not hesitate to take advantage of letters from the tsunami devastated areas. One such letter was from Lakshani Fernando of the Sri Lankan Bible Society:

> We feel so helpless in the face of the magnitude of the destruction to life, property and facilities. The need is now for Bibles as many Christians have lost all their household articles. Some of these Bibles have been in the families for many years and have been very precious to them. In our culture a Christian home is centred round the family Bible. In one family all members would possess a Bible.[14]

The American Bible Society hurriedly brought out an edition of the Bible under the title *The Message*, and its web pages listed scriptural verses on anxiety, stress, depression, sadness, fear, and frustration. Neocolonial intentions were evident in the announcements of the Bible Society of India. In one of its press releases, the Society claimed that it would like to help the distraught families with bibles and fishing nets. The allusion to fishing nets is very clear. One does not have be a code breaker to understand the proselytizing intentions and missiological implications of fishing nets.

12. Klein, 'Allure of the Blank State', p. 17.
13. Klein, 'Allure of the Blank State', p. 17.
14. Bible Society Press release 7 January 2005.

Flooding Colonial Myths

The Genesis Flood story has been employed in a number of contexts to strengthen colonial projects. While the actual flood of 1883 was used as a way of whipping up an anti-imperial movement in nineteenth-century Indonesia, the mythical flood narrative in the Bible was employed to justify colonization. Four centuries prior to the call of Indonesian Muslim clerics for resistance, the biblical account of the flood was put to use for a diametrically opposite purpose—to conquer the Americas. The biblical account provided a theological rationalization for the invasion of what the Spanish invaders called the new world. Juan Gine Sepulveda, a formidable theologian of the period and an arch-colonialist, noted that God had sent the universal flood on 'blasphemous barbarians'[15] because Noah's contemporaries were cannibals, incestuous and abortionists—language which must be music to the ears of today's evangelicals. To Juan Gine Sepulveda's way of thinking, the Spanish were instruments of the wrath of God, embarked on a moral mission to compel the 'barbarians' they were encountering to submit to the Christian empire and subject themselves to Christian civilization.

The Flood story was also used as a marker for human history and to validate the Mosaic chronology and the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures. One of those engaged in the study of various texts to establish the authenticity and historicity of the Mosaic chronology was the eighteenth-century Orientalist, Sir William Jones. The Genesis flood, as part of the first eleven chapters of the first book of the Bible, was, in Jones' view, 'the preface to the oldest civil history now extant' and he therefore treated it as a literal event. Since it had attained a privileged position in the history of Western civilization, there was a conspicuous reluctance to interpret it symbolically. Jones' hermeneutical enterprise was undertaken before the advent of higher criticism and biblical archaeology, but was marked by a vigorous search for a secure past enshrined in a literal reading of the Bible. This was a time when there was a heightened reliance on and reverence for scripture as a source of literal truths. For Jones, 'either the first eleven chapters of Genesis' are 'true or the whole fabric of our national religion is false'. With this view in mind, Jones surveyed the various records and came to realize that all ancient cultures—Indian, Iranian, Egyptian and Grecian—were awash with flood myths. Jones did not see this large number of flood myths as a challenge to the authenticity of the biblical account. Instead, he greeted them as corroborating the biblical story. Thus, he found a convincing ally in the

15. Elsa Tamez, 'The Bible and the Five Hundred Years of Conquest', in Ross Kinsler and Gloria Kinsler (eds.), *God's Economy: Biblical Studies from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), p. 5.

Bhagavata Purana which contains probably the oldest recorded flood myth, and, more importantly for Jones' purpose, recounts a flood narrative which resembles that of the biblical account. His argument was that the flood myth found in the Puranas of the 'primitive' Hindus was solid evidence for a universal flood. Jones claimed that the narrative of a deluge which 'destroyed the whole race of men, except four pairs' was 'an historical fact admitted by the ancient Hindus, who have allotted entire Purana to the detail of the event, which they relate, as usual in symbols or allegories'.[16] This comparative data, in Jones' view compels 'us to think of the Hebrew narrative' as 'more than human in origin, and consequently true in every substantial part of it'.[17] In other words, the truth and sanctity of the Mosaic history is not damaged by parallel accounts found in the older idolatrous nations such as Egypt, India, Greece and Italy, but becomes a convenient marker for the beginning of all history. The Puranic flood narrative provided an independent verification of the biblical flood, thus reinforcing the image of the Bible as an authentic document. In order to fit the Hindu chronology within his biblical time-frame, he compressed the complicated Hindu cosmology before the flood to blend with the time-table worked out by the seventeenth-century Archbishop of Armagh, James Ussher, describing the earlier Hindu aeons as metaphorical and with little historical value. In fixing the biblical flood story as an indicator of human history, Jones was engaged in the colonial pursuit of reconfiguring other peoples history and tampering with their chronology to suit his Christian agenda.

Theological Responses

At a time when communities lack common hermeneutical tools to make sense of tragedies such as the tsunami or Hurricane Katrina or the Asian earthquake, there is no consensus as to how to react and act responsibly. Disasters are perceived as signifiers of messages, both from God to humanity and from human beings to God. The tsunami has produced two types of theological response. One is to attribute the disaster to an angry deity who is seen as mean and vengeful, and the other is to blame the disaster on arrogant, frail, sinful and irresponsible humanity. In their attempt to understand the tsunami, what various religious communities have done is to reopen unwittingly the debate between monotheistic and polytheistic beliefs. What we have witnessed has been the fragmentation of the modernist, singular, monotheistic god and the emergence of many deities in Hindu, Christian,

16. William Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones in Six Volumes* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1799), p. 134.

17. Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, p. 136.

Muslim and Buddhist forms. These gods and goddesses were vying with each other not only to get attention but also to demonstrate which was the angriest of them all. More worryingly, all these gods and goddesses seem to be malevolent, vindictive and vengeful.

The media reported stories of how different religions were responding to the human tragedy by blaming various deities. According to the Westboro Baptist Church news release, the death of nearly 2000 Swedes on Thailand beaches was attributed to the Christian god being angry at the jailing of a Pentecostal pastor for preaching against homosexuality. The dead Swedes were seen as a reminder of God's 'irresistible and irreversible curse'.[18] Muslim clerics, too, found homosexuality and fornication igniting Allah's wrath. A Saudi Professor, Sheik Fawzan Al-Fawzan, said in a television interview that 'these great tragedies and collective punishments that are wiping out villages, towns, cities and even entire countries, are Allah's punishments of the people of these countries, even if they are Muslims. Some of our forefathers said if there is usury and fornication in a certain village, Allah permits its destruction'. Two Sri Lankan Muslims scholars saw God signing his name in the waves, and agreed that it was a punishment for Muslims as well as for those straying from God's ways. One of them, Muhammed Fawmey, said 'The Koran says people can be punished through water or fire'.[19] The Hindu deities who normally see the world as a site for their divine lila—playfulness—are now seen to be replicating the sterner characteristics of semitic gods. One of the gurus in South India blamed the destruction on the authorities in Tamilnadu for arresting one of the most revered of Hindu figures, Jeyandra Saraswathi, for the alleged murder of a temple official. Buddhists, who are proud of their compassionate deity, found that their God too can rise up the Richter scale of anger. This time the blame was attributed not to ethical lapses on the part of the people but to irreverent acts such as making a cake in the form of the Buddha and slicing it with a knife, manufacturing and wearing underwear with the image of the Lord Buddha, and killing and consuming animal flesh on Christmas day. The fact that the tsunami hit Sri Lanka the very next day, which was the poya or full moon day, an auspicious day for Buddhists, prompted one of its adherents to say: 'God was angry that so many people had eaten meat, and consumed alcohol'.[20] Normally genial goddesses, too, were seen as capable of getting angry. In a South Indian village near Vishakapatnam, the people offered prayers to the sea goddess called Gangamma, believed to be their protector, who needed to be appeased. In Chennai, the protector was of a Christian variety and her name was Velankani Ammah, the same

18. Westboro Baptist Church website.
19. http://www.new24.com/World/Tsunami_Disaster/.
20. http://globalsecurity.org.

goddess for whom the Christians had commemorated at mass on the eve of the disaster, and who failed to protect them. Every deity seemed to be wrathful, stern and bent on vengeance.

Two brief comments before I go to the next section. The liberal's impersonal, inanimate and ahistorical God, seen as logos, Sophia, ground of being, and mystery, is being replaced by God as a person with human attributes and who reveals Godhead in historical acts. It was modernity which prettified the image of God as a well-behaved and loving figure. The earlier images of a wrathful God were excised by the liberals in order to project an unambiguous God of love. What we see in the postmodern context is the re-emergence of God as a terrifying figure who gets personally involved in historical events. It is not the God who opts for the poor, in whom liberation theology invited us to believe, but a God who is co-opted by and speaks to both terrorists and those who oppose the terrorists. What President Bush said in a private conversation reveals the new phase of God:

> I am driven with a mission from God. He told me, 'George go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan'. And I did…then, 'George, go and end tyranny in Iraq'. And I did. And again I feel God's words coming to me, 'Go get the Palestinians their state, and the Israelites their security'. And by God I'm gonna do it.[21]

What is evident here is that God is being increasingly marshalled by regressive forces to serve their imperial purposes.

What is commendable about religious fundamentalists, whether Christian or Muslim, is their impeccable hermeneutical consistency. When it comes to apportioning blame, they are models of consistency. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the evangelical Christians were right on schedule in seeing it as a sign of God's punishment. They found a scapegoat in homosexuals, and blamed the hurricane on the 'Southern Decadence'—an annual homosexual celebration which attracts tens of thousands of people to the city. When the earthquake hit the northern part of Pakistan, one of the imams said God was upset because Muslims were 'not praying on time, or praying infrequently'.[22]

The second theological response was to blame themselves for the tragedy. There is a notion of fatalism and unworthiness among individuals and even among entire communities which regard their sufferings as somehow a deserved consequence of their own actions. A song written by an Indonesian Christian who became a hit in Bande Aceh, makes this point vividly:

21. BBC documentary elusive peace. Reported in the *Media Guardian* (24 October 2005), p. 1.

22. *Eastern Eye* (14 October 2005), p. 3.

God, are You angry with me,
Really, Your fury poured swiftly
You threw Your finger on the tip of Banda (Aceh)
Thus, all the world amazed
God, I may have neglected You
I have ignored Your admonition
I hurt You to the bottom of the earth
Forgive us oh our Lord
You are the Powerful
Do not be angry anymore
Let us welcome the coming of the sun
You are the Merciful
Forgive all the sins
It is truly all our shortcomings
Oh God, forgive us
Oh God, help us
God, forgive us
God, help us

The underlying presupposition of this sort of theological position is that such a tragedy should be perceived not as the act of a vengeful God, but as the result of human fallenness. It is the sinful nature of humanity which causes such calamities. This issue is alluded to by the Lucan Jesus. When asked about mass deaths—one, an evil human act, the murder of some Galileans, and the other, a natural disaster, the case of the eighteen Jerusalemites—Jesus' response that all are sinners and in need of repentance, was confusing and unhelpful: 'I tell you…unless you repent you will all likewise perish' (Lk. 13.1-9). Jesus declines to make a correlation between specific experiences of suffering and sin, and instead all are branded as sinners. The victims were not singled out because they suffered most and lost their lives but everyone was scripted into their death because all were held to be guilty. In secular discourse the blame is removed from the individual and explained as a matter of collective failure. It is directed against the greedy exploitation of the environment by multinational corporations and unplanned and irresponsible development encouraged by political leaders.

In these experiences of suffering, neither of the two understandings of the biblical God—traditional and liberal—is without its problems. In the one, suffering is in order that God's purpose for humanity can be revealed, in the other, less traditional one, a powerless god suffers with the people. Neither necessarily satisfies the victims. One projects an all powerful being who determines the destiny of the world and the other perceives of God as a hapless fellow sufferer. The orthodox view that divine testing shapes, refines and toughens one's character is not entirely true. Job was left without answers. In other instances, the divine-testing proved not to work. When

Philistines, Hittites and Canaanites, the inhabitants of the conquered land, were left behind as a means to test Israel, the Israelites went astray and were ensnared by local deities, and the whole purpose of the divine-testing was defeated (Judg. 2). Similarly, people were confused when God sent false prophets to test their loyalty. They did not know whom to believe and who was genuine or not (Deut. 13). The other claim, that God's suffering puts an end to all suffering, looks particularly hollow and does not alter anything. As José Saramago's novel, *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* (to which I will get back in the second part of the paper) put it, Jesus' sacrificial death was followed by an 'endless tale of iron and blood, of fire and ashes, an infinite sea of sorrow and tears'.[23]

Liberation in Literature

While weather experts were trying to find out why their communication systems were too slow to alert the victims, oceanographers were contemplating how to avoid a disaster next time around, ecologists were studying the effect on the environment, and medical personnel were trying to alleviate the suffering, theologians and biblical interpreters were looking back to ancient narratives and seeking textual assurances in them.

When humanity is hit by major calamities, the natural tendency of interpreters is to turn to ancient texts for understanding and to God for comfort. There are a number of passages that one can cite to say that God has not abandoned people and that people should take courage and face the situation bravely (Ps. 145–46). We can allegorize awkward passages or cite the example of the Son of Man as the supreme case of corporate suffering. That would mean misusing the past and, in many cases, merely repeating textual clichés. Religion seems to be the only area of knowledge in which it is still acceptable to turn to ancient texts to look for answers to modern problems. As a culture we have become grave-robbers, raiding the past for ethical meanings—guides to good and evil—as if the present were not able to supply us with meanings.

The way to understand and improve our present is not to take sanctuary in the ancient texts as if they referred to us, but to explore and liberate them. A possible complementary site to look at is creative literature, which has an engaging way of re-telling ancient sacred stories and myths, not only to meet contemporary demands but also to save the stories and myths from extinction and irrelevance. Although often mistrustful of each other, theology and literature have enjoyed a bond which can be fruitful and profound. Just as some of the biblical writings have explained theological truths

23. José Saramago, *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* (trans. Giovanni Pontiero; London: Harvill, 1993), p. 291.

through narratives, now it is the turn of the novelists to use narratives to explicate weighty theological issues. Indeed, in postmodern times, novels have become a substitute for sacred texts. Recently, a J.K. Rowling fan from Delhi claimed that she read the Harry Potter novels 'like a Bible'. In a documentary recalling the school siege at Beslan, Southern Russia, one of the children taken hostage, Carat, did not expect a divine figure to rescue the beleaguered children but a hero from contemporary literature: 'I hoping that Harry Potter would come. I was thinking he had a cloak that made him invisible, and he would come and wrap me in it, and we'd be invisible and we'd escape'.[24] In times like ours, when people are in distress they do not necessarily look for celestial figures but for heroes of novels to get them out of difficulty. Novels do not have a more privileged access than religion or science to explain human tragedy, but they can help to clarify and illuminate it.

Two novels which I have come across can help us to make sense of natural disasters and the enigma of God. Neither of these novels was written with reference to the present dilemma, but the allusions they make to natural disasters and the enigma of God resonate with our current struggle. One is *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilián,* written by the Mexican proponent of liberation theology, Vincente Leñero, and the other is *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, by the Portuguese Nobel prize winning and Marxist-leaning author, José Saramago. Both follow closely the gospel narrative of Jesus, Luke's gospel in the case of Leñero, and at the same time they deviate from it and add characters and introduce events which resonate with Latin American and European experience. Both authors see the novel as a convenient medium to offer a critique of the institutionalized church and the dominant theological orthodoxy. Both novels fall within the category of 're-written gospels' whereby the sanctified veracity and the sheltered distinctiveness of the original is tampered with and the canonical gospels are injected with a new lease of life which is not identical with the original. The canonical narratives go through a renovation and the accepted roles of characters are reversed. For instance, in Saramago's case, God is demonized and the Devil is humanized. Both these novels deserve a close reading and greater exposure

Leñero's novel deals with natural disaster in a human way. Lenero's version of the calming of the storm (Lk. 8.22-25) is altered radically in two ways. First, the supernatural elements in the narrative are written out and no possible abnormal, dark explanations are attached to the storm. Second, the situation is brought under control through people taking charge of the situation rather than through seeking supernatural help. No solution is

24. 'Children of Beslan', Channel 4 programme.

sought in prayer no divine help solicited. The disciples are seen as a bunch of bumbling fools who cannot manipulate the rudder rather than as people who whose faith is deficient. It is Jesucristo Gomez (Leñero's Jesus) who adjusts the boat to the wind. Luke's rebuking of the wind and the sea are edited out. Neither is seen as a demon to be conquered. The disaster is averted by steadying the ship and bringing it in line with the wind. Unlike in Luke's version, the disciples in their amazement do not ask the question 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?' When the disciples try to imply that it was a miracle which saved them, Jesucrito Gomez, has a 'reproachful' look on his face and tells them: 'You're a bunch of worthless cowards'.[25] Vincente Leñero's novel offers a timeless and universal message: even when your world seems to be falling apart, individual actions can produce small miracles.

José Saramago's novel, *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ*, appears at first to be a re-telling of Christ's life but it turns out be the author's vision of God and the symbiotic relationship between God and the devil, and of Jesus caught between the two. The novel deals with the question of who is God and why does he allow misery, suffering and evil. In the narrative world of Saramago, God emerges as a dubious figure bent on having absolute power even at the expense of causing endless suffering to people. Not satisfied with being the God of the Jews, 'a tiny population which occupies a minute part of this world'[26] for four thousand and four years, now God wants to become 'god of more people'.[27] Jesus, on the other hand, comes across as an attractively human figure who admits that 'I'm not even convinced I am the son of God'.[28] To his surprise, Jesus discovers that he is much more than the promised Messiah and that his sacrificial death has a sinister agenda to accomplish, namely, to enable God to use his death to become the God of all people and erase all other religions and create super religion. When the hour comes, what Saramago's Jesus does is to die as the king of the Jews, thus thwarting God's grandiose plan to become the God of all peoples of the world and thus also avoiding the ghastly suffering and misery such an ambition was going to cause.

For our purpose what is interesting about this second novel is that it addresses the issue we are currently faced with—the mystery of a God who allows suffering, the obscure ways with which God treats people and creation. God in the novel turns out be a detached and unpleasant character whose moral stature does not accord with his omnipotency. The high point

25. Vicente Leñero, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán* (trans. Robert Mowry; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), p. 86.
26. Saramago, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán*, p. 282.
27. Saramago, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán*, p. 282.
28. Saramago, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán*, p. 272.

of the novel is the lengthy and often serious, sometimes superficial, conversation that takes place between God, Satan and Jesus. It is in these conversations that the darker side of God becomes clear. The novel lists in alphabetical order and running to roughly three pages, the names of people who will have to be killed for God to become a greater God. The narrative mentions the martyrs, the Crusades and the Inquisition, and the amount of blood that has to be shed for the sole purpose of enabling God's power to 'spread to the ends of the earth'.[29] As the narrative puts it: 'Thousands will die, Hundreds of thousands, Hundreds of thousands of men and women will die and on earth; there will be much sighing and weeping and cries of anguish, the smoke from charred corpses will blot out the sun, human flesh will sizzle over live coals, the stench will be nauseating, and all this will be my fault'.[30] This prompts Satan to say that 'one has to be God to enjoy so much blood'.[31] Horrified by the suffering to be caused by God's plan, Satan tries to make a deal, promising not to rebel and to obey God, and in exchange pleads for pardon so that evil will 'cease at once, your son will not have to die, and your kingdom will extend beyond the land of the Hebrews to embrace the entire world, whether known or yet to be discovered, good will prevail everywhere'.[32] But God rejects the proposal and refuses to pardon the Devil and gives the game away when he says 'the Good I represent cannot exist without the Evil you represent, it is inconceivable that any Good might exist without you, so much so it defies imagination, and in short, if you were to come to an end, so would I, for Me to be Goodness, it is essential that you should continue to be Evil, unless the Devil lives like the Devil, God cannot live like God, the death of the one would mean, the death of the other'.[33]

There are four things which become clear in the conversation that goes on between God, Satan and Jesus. First, Saramago's God comes across as an incredible manipulator rather than as a lovable figure. This is a god who, as the angel puts it to Mary, says 'no' more easily than 'yes'. Second, the critical question, why does God collude with the devil and cause such misery and abuse his own son, remains unanswered. Neither Jesus nor his disciples can resolve it. Third, the mutual dependency of God and the Devil and the difficulty in distinguishing between the work of God and work of the Devil. Fourth, God's inability to understand and empathize with those who suffer as a result of his plans. It is God's lack of human experience and inability to understand terror and suffering which makes Jesus end his life

29. Saramago, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán*, p. 299.
30. Saramago, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán*, p. 298.
31. Saramago, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán*, p. 298.
32. Saramago, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán*, p. 299.
33. Saramago, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán*, p. 300.

on the cross with the ironical words: 'Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done'.[34]

Let me end with two comments. Earlier I referred to God's testing people. In the biblical tradition there are also records of people checking up on God. In the wilderness, the Israelites test God, demanding food and water (Exod. 16; 17; Ps. 78.8), and Gideon, hesitant about his mission, tests God twice (Judg. 6.33-40). Tsunamis, terrorists attacks, flu pandemics constantly force us to rethink the perceptions in which we have framed God—faithfulness, compassion and omnipotence.

Secondly, the hermeneutical enterprise seems to be an easier exercise in calmer and more comfortable times. When, however, a tsunami or a hurricane destroys life, when people are distressed and prayers go unanswered, it is harder to explain these indiscriminate acts in theological terms. What the tsunami has done is to invert the roles of God and human beings. It has made God a human being, and human beings, through their acts of solidarity and generosity, gods. These are uneasy days. When there are tsunamis, hurricanes, famines and terror attacks, it is not easy to be human beings. Our idea of God is largely determined by and a reflection of how we perceive ourselves. What is becoming increasingly clear is that it is impossible to have a tidy image of God. As the God in *Jerry Springer: The Opera* puts it 'It's hard being me'.

34. Saramago, *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán*, p. 341.

6

TEXTS AND TERRORISM: COMMUNAL STRIFE, SACRED SCRIPTURES AND SECULAR STORIES

> For every page of *Hamlet* that we might enjoy innocently, there is a page of the Bible that prompted some one to kill another human being.
>
> *Hector Avalos*[1]

> There is indeed a great deal of violence in the Bible—far more than there is in the Qur'an.
>
> *Karen Armstrong*[2]

> All stories are contaminated with violence.
>
> *Tomás Eloy Martinez*[3]

Let me begin with two secular narratives, both from Sri Lanka. The first is from Jean Arasanayagam's short story, 'In the Garden Secretly'. Firmly gripping a T-56 rifle, a Christian Sinhalese soldier who is carrying a copy of Psalm 93 in a leather case given him by his mother, enters a ransacked house in an unnamed village in Jaffna. As he wanders around the house, the soldier begins to have ambivalent feelings about the armed struggle that is going on in the island, and particularly about his role as part of the government army. Sent to fight the insurrection, the soldier thinks about the war, its futility, the devastation it has brought to the people. As he is looking around, he tries to imagine what kind of people might have lived in the house, and what might have become of them after the army attack. To his astonishment, he discovers that the Tamil occupiers of the house were, like him, Christians. All of a sudden he senses a close affinity with them, and says to himself: 'we worship the same God, pray to the same saints, chant the same litanies, though the language of the votaries would be different.

1. Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007), p. 242.
2. Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: The Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 223-24.
3. Tomás Eloy Martinez, 'A life in Writings: Tango lessons', *The Guardian Review* (3 February 2007), p. 11.

But our prayers would still be the same', and then finds himself reciting the words of the Lord's Prayer which the two communities share and continue to repeat Sunday by Sunday.[4] Then he comes across a broken figure of Christ from the bomb-devastated house. Gazing at the broken statue, he remembers the sufferings of Jesus and how, as a subversive resisting the Roman power, he was scourged, whipped and ridiculed. The soldier cannot bear to leave the icon behind in the ruined house. He knows the rules. A soldier is not supposed to remove any possessions. Overwhelmed with emotion, he wonders whether he is trying to transpose the compassion he feels for the people to the broken icon. He tells himself that if it were an 'another deity', 'another icon' or 'another image', he would leave it behind, but he decides to take the broken statute of Christ with him as an act of solidarity with both those who were forced to leave the house and the comrades who were wounded in fighting the war. He holds the T-56 in one hand, and carefully removes the icon, momentarily holding it close to his chest, and places it in his kit bag. Looking around carefully, he walks out of the house. The narrative ends with a frightening prospect which will have devastating consequences: 'both hands [are] now free to hold the gun'.[5] Now, the Christian deity, pity and solidarity out of the way, the Christian Sinhalese soldier is free to use the gun without hindrance, hesitation or regret.

The second narrative comes from A. Sivanandan's epic novel, *When Memory Dies*. This is a story of three generations of a Sri Lankan Tamil family whose lives were traumatized by social and political upheavals caused, first by colonialism, then by the effects of modernity, and recently by the communal warfare. The novel is told in three parts. Each begins with monsoon rains and ends with a death. The message of the novel is clear: how ordinary people were let down by the self-interest and incompetence of their own political leaders and how the socialist hope was sacrificed for narrow national interests. It is the third part of the book which concerns us. The hero, Vijay, of mixed Tamil and Sinhalese parentage, and, more crucially, a grassroots activist who works tirelessly to fashion a society 'unblemished by greed or hunger or exploitation or injustice',[6] is caught up in the internal struggle of various Tamil resistance groups and is gunned down by one of them in the closing scene of the novel. Meena, his lover, tells his slayer, the Tamil leader: 'You have killed the only decent thing left in this land. We will never be whole again'.[7] His killing is a symptom of the time.

4. Jean Arasanayagam, *In the Garden Secretly and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 12-13.
5. Arasanayagam, *In the Garden Secretly and Other Stories*, p. 18.
6. A. Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies* (London: Arcadia Books, 1998), p. 270.
7. Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies*, p. 411.

The early euphoria of the resistance of the Tamil freedom fighters has given way to internal fighting, greed and ambition. Sarath, a Singhalese human rights activist sympathetic to the Tamil cause, explains to his own people the motive behind the Tamil armed resistance:

> They are not fighting out of theory, but of necessity. They have nothing and grown up having nothing, a whole generation of them. And they see even the little they have to make something of their lives with, like education, being taken away from them. They go to college to find the language taken away from them, they sit exams to find the pass mark's higher for them, they go for jobs and finally get the message: sorry, no Tamils. That is when they pick up the gun.[8]

Since the arrival of guns, as grand-uncle Para feels, 'everything had changed… It was as though history had taken a quantum leap, backwards'. The familiar things 'seemed to arrange themselves differently, present themselves in configurations' which uncle Para cannot grasp: 'Homes were caves, cowsheds arsenals, and the land sprouted guerrillas from underground bunkers'.[9] The consequence of taking a gun in a struggle to reconstruct a history has its problems. As the novel puts it: 'And then, they had began to fight each other over who could serve the people better, which faction, which dogma, till the people mattered no more'.[10] In the closing stages of the novel, Nadesan, a bank clerk and member of the Rights and Justice Movement, who himself has been tortured by the army, is resigned to the fact that trust now resides in the gun and the cyanide capsule. He comes out with a statement which has frightening implications: 'The gun had taken over; the means had become the end'.[11]

God and People Behaving Badly: Sacred Narratives as Inflammable Sources

In a conflict-ridden situation, when gun culture has become part of Sri Lanka, the question is: how do we read the Bible? In such a precarious situation, like the levees at the ninth ward in Louisiana the Bible is neither safe nor secure. It contains two combustible elements which can ignite communal tension. First, the Bible is heavily loaded with images of a war-thirsty God who is wrathful, full of vengeance and who metes out brutal punishment to one's enemies. Secondly, it carries a rhetoric of hate and supplies plenty of ammunition for dealing with enemies—the narratives abound with stories of individual killings, nations annihilating nations, and lands

8. Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies*, p. 305.
9. Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies*, p. 390.
10. Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies*, p. 394.
11. Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies*, p. 403.

and cities being destroyed, and provides unsavoury examples of rivalries among peoples and gods. Those familiar with the Christian scriptures know that they begin and end with violence. In the first book of the Bible, God drives Adam and Eve away from the Garden and has the entrance guarded by a flaming sword. In the last book, there is an image of the divine warrior 'clothed in a robe dipped in blood', waiting to 'strike down the nations'. These are not isolated images. A close reading will show that in between these macabre incidents, the pages of the Bible are littered with numerous incidents of people punishing their enemies, and gods and human beings behaving aggressively. Violence is real and rife and is ingrained in the texts. Raymund Schwager, in his study of violence, has shown that in the Hebrew Bible there are roughly '*one thousand passages* [that] speak of Yahweh's blazing anger, of his punishments by death and destruction'.[12] Where God's own violent actions of punishment are described, there are 'over *six hundred passages* that explicitly talk about nations, kings, or individuals, attacking, destroying and killing others',[13] and there are 'over one hundred other passages', where 'Yahweh expressly gives the command to kill people'. In these passages God does not do the killing but 'gives order to destroy human life…delivers his people like sheep to the slaughter, and…incites human beings against one another'.[14] God is portrayed as an equal-opportunity killer. He makes use of one nation as a brutal instrument to destroy another, and yet reprimands the very instrument for displaying insensitivity while carrying out his mission. Babylon is a case in point.

The New Testament, famous for its 'love your enemy' message, has its own quota of passages inciting violence. There are aggressive and detestable sayings attributed to Jesus such as: 'I have not come to bring peace but a sword' (Mt. 10.34), and 'The Kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and men of violence take it by force' (Mt. 11.12; Lk. 16.16). In the parables of Jesus, a King or Master or Landowner often sentences the wicked or the unrepentant to torture and punishment. In the Apocryphal gospels, Jesus resembles a clone of the vengeful Old Testament God. Those who direct minor insults at Jesus end up dead. Jesus has brought so much grief that Joseph was forced to tell Mary: 'Do not let him out of the door; for those who anger him die'.[15] The New Testament approves of imperial troops, and

12. Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (trans. Maria L. Assad and Robert J. Daly; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 55.

13. Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?*, p. 47.

14. Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?*, p. 60.

15. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas 14. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did not Make it into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 61.

endows its message with battle themes such as struggling and fighting and 'waging a good warfare'. The epistles contain military metaphors such as 'armour of God', 'shield of faith', 'breastplate of righteousness', 'helmet of salvation', 'sword of the spirit'. Paul calls his co-workers, 'my fellow-soldiers', those who were in prison with him 'prisoners of war' (Rom. 16.7; Col. 4.10; Phil. 23), and he portrays his campaign for the gospel as an embattled warfare. The Pastoral epistles liken the life of a Christian leader to that of a soldier on active service and the one who gets the crown is the one who fights according to the regulations. In the Book of Revelation, one who conquers is given power over nations (2.26), and granted a seat on the throne (3.12). Against these lethal passages, one can cite plenty of texts which yield God's mercy and human kindness, but just as clemency and compassion are part of the biblical tradition, so also are retaliation and revenge—hospitality and hostility go side by side. The Bible carries not only both perspectives in combustible perfection, it is also clear as to the source of both. Isaiah's God is unequivocal about it: 'I make peace and create evil: I the Lord do all these things' (45.7, KJV). What is apparent is violence is not marginal but integral to the biblical tradition. It is a tradition with which many are familiar through the idealization of the Christian as a warrior marching off to conquer the savages in the colonies, immortalized in the hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers'.

Before we go to the next section, a minor digression, but a necessary one. This strand of aggression and killing in religion is, in fact, to use Martin Marty's phrase, an 'inter faith phenomenon'.[16] Nor is militancy a monopoly of the monotheistic religions. It is prevalent even among the so called peaceful Eastern faiths. Every religion legitimizes violence.

Untangling Mixed Messages

The gun-lobby argument that there is nothing menacing about the text and the fault lies with the use to which we put it, is not entirely convincing. The texts themselves are neither innocent nor free from blemish. Violence is part of the text. As we saw earlier, there are passages that are intrinsically war-mongering and enemy-bashing. They are examples of what precisely the texts set out to do—pummel those enemies and provide a literal hell for those on the wrong side. As Schwager has observed in his study, when the Hebrew scriptures use words like 'violence' and 'bloodshed', they 'mean physical bloodshed as well as a whole series of injuries inspired by the spirit of vengeance'.[17] What is so chilling about these texts is that in the hands of extremists, they become God's commandment to be followed. Whether

16. Martin Marty, 'Is Religion the Problem?', *Tikkun* 17.2 (2002), p. 19.
17. Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?*, p. 96.

these texts lionize the brutalities of the rulers of Judah and Israel like Manasseh and Josiah, or recall the harsh reality of the colonialist intentions of Joshua ('he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed', Josh. 10.40), they offer a model of how Israel should treat those who fail to measure up to the standards set by Israel. The counter-argument that this kind of simple, straightforward literal reading should be replaced with allegorical, typological and symbolic readings does not hold water. These allegorical, typological, and symbolic readings themselves are not blameless. They, too, have often exhibited a sinister side and signified a slew of images and designs which could be described as sexist, anti-Semitic and ethnocentric as well as legitimizing violence.

Those who have wished to rehabilitate the Bible from its problematic and disconcerting material, have come up with different devices. One has been to demilitarize God by rereading the narratives, placing them in their historical and cultural contexts and so relativizing their potential damage. The underlying hermeneutical argument is that the passages referring to divine violence and human atrocities are not free-floating ideas but spring from particular social and political situations and as such should be seen as cases of Israel making sense in a troubled and uncertain world. The dreadful distortion of God and the inhuman behaviour of human beings were part of that agonizing process. A second has been to apply a kind of cultural Darwinian thesis—that in those times of less sophisticated diplomacy, warfare was an acceptable way of resolving disputes. A third has been to treat these vengeful passages as the language of the victims projected onto God, the resentment and jealousies of the aggrieved. A fourth has been to couch the defence of violence in theological terms. Either characterize the militancy as part of God's holiness and righteousness, or perceive it as an eschatological possibility, an end-time judgement, and a redemptive act, reserved only for God. Thus, the purpose of God's violence is to expose violence for what it is and to reveal the genuine divine nature which is essentially serene and peaceful. A fifth device has been to blame the neighbours as the corrupting influence who passed on their blood-thirsty image of God to Israel. Those who advocate this exercise argue that the way to rectify the damaging and derogatory narratives about God is to engage in an intra-textual reading and retrieve and then reacquaint with texts which nullify the defamatory passages. For instance, the Lord as a Warrior (Exod. 15.3) should be juxtaposed with God as a compassionate one who takes care of the poor, women and children, and the story of Cain and Abel should be read with that of the Good Samaritan. Construction of this prettifying device was a fairly recent entrant, cooked up by the biblical theology movement after the ravages of the First World War and reheated after the horror of Auschwitz. This was part of the modernistic agenda to sanitize the tattered image and turn God

into a compassionate being and restore faith in humanity after the Nazi atrocities. It was this modern and moralistic reading which supplanted the belligerent God with a benevolent one. In this hermeneutical makeover, God and the enemy are internalized. God is not perceived as a person acting in history, but is shorn of personified qualities, and is now portrayed in depersonalized terms, as logos, Sophia or ground of being, dwelling in individuals. Similarly, the enemy is seen as one who resides within a person. In such an interiorized scenario, God acts in private lives rather than in the public and political domain, and it is this internal enemy one has to overcome with the help of an impersonal God.

The other temptation is to make the Bible a comfortable and a modern text by cleansing the troubling passages and producing a purified and convenient text. This has been tried a number of times before. During the colonial period, missionaries who were not comfortable with the references to polytheism and excessive descriptions of rituals in the Hebrew scriptures, mooted the idea of bringing out a theologically correct and a compressed version of the first Testament. Elisabeth Candy Stanton's *Woman's Bible*, scrupulously removed all oppressive patriarchal elements and brought together passages which reinforced women's agency. Ruth Bottigheimer, in her *The Bible for Children*, has shown how the children's Bibles produced in America and Europe over the last four centuries have not only altered and rewritten the morally repugnant biblical stories, but also have reframed the character of God to fit in with the changing cultural, moral and political climate of the time.[18] The trouble with such purified and prettified versions is that those with any particular vested interest can create their own sacred text to suit their agenda, needs and concerns. Similarly, those driven by a strident militancy can generate a text herding together the verses which refer to defeat of enemies and of annihilation of other peoples lands and cultures. There is a precedent for this in Oliver Cromwell's Soldier's Pocket Bible produced in 1643 during the English Civil War which started the trend for condensed scriptures. This military Bible contains mostly verses from the Hebrew scriptures such as 'For the Lord your God goeth with you to fight for you against your enemies to save you' (Deut. 20.4), and 'The Lord shall fight for you' (Exod. 14.14), in order to pep up the morale of his troops. The title page has the words: 'Trust in the Lord and keep the powder dry'. It was subsequently used as a manual during the American civil war and the First World War. In these unsafe times, Holman Bible Publishers have come out with the Soldier's Military Bible to meet the troubled political situation. Their version was designed, as their website blurb put it,

18. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children: From the Age of Gutenberg to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

'to meet the needs of those who serve in the most difficult situations'. Along with the canonical texts, the Holman version contains the 'Star-spangled Banner', 'America the Beautiful', the Battle Hymn of the Republic, 'Onward, Christian Soldiers', and prayers for General Patton, President Roosevelt, and President Bush. The subtle sub-text is that these civil materials merit canonical status, and that these American Presidents stand in the line of militant biblical figures and deserve respect, reverence—and canonization perhaps in the future.

Such attempts at harmonious resolution are possible, but, commendable as they are, they do not cancel out the fact that violence is a widespread activity in the Bible. It is found even in the innocuous Wisdom literature though stated less sharply. It is endemic, entrenched, and active. Whether we like it or not, violence is not a secondary or marginal matter, but one of the choices on offer in the Bible.

Interpreters as Interveners

Faced with a tense situation and communities which are distrustful of one another, and committed to a book which is complicated, what can biblical critics do? Let me propose three profitable exercises—although none are strikingly original—which biblical interpreters can employ in such circumstances. One is to call into question and demystify the certainty and finality attributed to the Bible. What we are witnessing in these uncertain times is 'the raw hunger for certainty'. In the prevailing paranoia, the search is for absolutes, especially in revealed texts, and to treat them as true, complete and final, and to control their meaning. The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been imbued with a degree of authority that defies human discussion and dissension and limits reading options. Implicitly trusting every word of the scripture as an oracle of God, or according divine authority to it, leaves little leeway for alternative and competing versions embedded in the scriptures themselves, for claiming the historical limitations of such texts, and for interpretations which go against the grain. The most useful thing that biblical critics can do towards defusing the Bible's part in perpetuating the violence in the world is to show that the divine surety accorded to the texts is a trap—a trap which seals off fresh readings and prevents possible potential creativity and dissidence. Such a demonstration does not strip biblical stories of their sacred splendour nor does it erode the authority of God, but recognizes the fact that the Bible contains contradictory and complicated messages.

The second is to act as a warning voice against any attempt to contemporize the past. Biblical critics can alert people not to be overly absorbed in biblical antiquity or to invoke it to endorse current concerns. At a time like

this, when there is tension, despair and suspicion, the easy solution is to delve into the past and draw ready parallels between them and us. The temptation is to read our lives into theirs and make them more or less resemble us. Biblical characters and events are icons for our modern-day aspirations and anxieties. Biblical narratives have the knack of making us believe that our world looks uncannily similar to theirs. Thus, Jesus becomes the exact contemporary of Che Guevara and speaks of the language of Marxian class warfare, the rivalry and resentment of Cain and Abel, or Jacob and Esau are turned into a modern day saga of two siblings—Tamils and Sinhalese. What George Orwell said of books in general is true of the Bible in particular—they 'create in one's mind a sort of false map of the world, a series of fabulous countries into which one can retreat at odd moments'.[19] What this uncomplicated re-attachment does is to make these biblical characters talk and behave like twenty-first-century figures. Such a hermeneutical habit not only modernizes these ancient characters, but also tricks us into believing that their experiences are undifferentiated and universal. Sacred narratives are particularly good at luring us into simple identifications, suggesting that the Exodus or the Exile is our story too. But more upsetting is that such smooth associations validate a pre-emptive typecasting which determines who are our friends and who are our enemies, as if such things have been preordained and stipulated by the Bible. Instead of glibly parroting the biblical precedents, it is important for us to realize that their life and work addressed different cultural and political issues. Thus, they do not resemble us, nor drive our conduct and behaviour. The ancient texts are about another people who lived in another era. We need to acknowledge unequivocally that these texts were not about us. Direct intertextual reconnections with biblical narratives prevent any attempt to understand and develop new models of behaviour for our modern complicated lives. This is possible only if we learn to detach ourselves from the Book, acknowledging that it is itself provisional, diverse and riven with contradictions. It is a sign of hermeneutical laziness and an abnegation of our to duty to go back simply to the ancient texts as if they contain truths which are directly applicable for all time.

The third is to expose the militant orthodoxy of some interpreters, and their political intentions. The quest for the meaning of a text should go in hand with the hunt for the aspirations and intentions of the interpreters—which political master they obey? What ideological purpose do they serve? Why are certain interpretations dominant in the history of exegesis. We need to move from the traditional examination of the intricacies of textual forms to a sustained investigation of the interpreters, and uncover the ideological impulses that lie behind their hermeneutical enterprise and

19. See Anne Fadiman (ed.), *Rereadings* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005).

reveal their intentions. What is needed is an alliance of critics who are willing to give their allegiance to this critical tradition rather than be merely guardians and curators of texts.

Secular Stories, Sacred Entertainment

The search for meaning will have to go on with or without the Sacred Scriptures. If sacred texts are suspect, one possible place to look for hermeneutical direction is in secular fiction. Faced with a similar situation marked by hostility and aggression, and well aware of the seduction of religion, Edward Said, a Palestinian Christian himself, advocated secular, humanistic discourse as an alternative. In one of his interviews, he said: 'I think the main task now is identifying possible sites of secular, rational—rather than messianic—resistance'.[20] Successful fiction comments upon the human plight and can contribute significantly to an alternative vision at a time when religious imagination is twisted, stymied and hijacked by extremists in all religions. Novelists and story-tellers continually reinvent an alternative understanding of our world which is constantly changing. Turning to secular fiction for a supply of meanings is a curious inversion of what is happening in current biblical interpretation. While narrative criticism is making a case for reading the gospels as if they were novels, Jesus as a hero and the disciples as characters, another case is being made for an engagement with secular fiction as if it were a trusted repository of authority. What the best fiction does is to provide new meanings and bring order when neither is apparent.

One such novel which has a pertinent message for Sri Lanka is Nihal de Silva's *The Road from Elephant Pass*. The story revolves around an LTTE informant, Kamala Veliathan, and an army captain, Wasantha Ratnayake, who is assigned to take her to Colombo. Their adventures as they journey through the forests provide a riveting plot. The fleeing couple realize that their survival depends on mutual support and trust. Their dilemma, in a sense, encapsulates the predicament faced by the communities in the beleaguered island. Inevitably, in their early conversations, questions such as to whom the island belonged or who occupied it first come up, and both come to realize that the ancient texts, whether historical or theological, are pointless in settling issues surrounding the contemporary situation. When the army captain tries to use Mahavansa as proof of the Sinhalese claim for the island, Kamala tells him with cool confidence, 'Your Mahavansa may provide an accurate history of the country. Surely you will realize that the chronicle is heavily biased and unreliable when dealing with secular

20. Stephen Howe, 'An Interview with Edward W Said', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 8.1 (2006), p. 66.

matters'.[21] The sub-text is clear: keep religion out of the current situation. What eventually brings them together is their common interest in and passion for wildlife, especially birds. Both are enthusiastic and have an encyclopaedic knowledge of birds informed by the books of colonial ornithologists such as W.A. Philips, G.M. Henry, W.E. Wait. Sadly, copies of these books which Kamala's father had were all destroyed in the 1983 communal riots. When they are running for their lives across the bird-rich Wilpattu forest, the informant and the army enforcer are enthralled by what they see. At the crucial turn of their journey, at the risk of slowing down the flow of the narrative, they stop, observe, comment and argue about birds, their habits, customs and characteristics. As the narrative puts it, their conversation about birds generates more heat than when they 'talked about the issues of ethnic divide'.[22] What unifies and animates them is their mutual interest in birds. It is the natural environment which provided signs and manifestations and helps these two desperate opponents to forget their ancient misconceptions and to forge a relationship in an uncertain and terrifying time. Nihal de Silva, the author, in an interview, provided the thinking behind this narrative ploy: 'When we talk of the conflict, we always seem to focus on the differences between the Sinhalese and Tamils, which is mainly the language. But we also have a lot of things in common. In my case, I know birds, so I chose birds'.[23]

There is a hermeneutical significance in choosing birds—a significance that Nihal de Silva may not be aware of. Biblical texts routinely use animals to signify and describe enemies. Compared with birds, animals are seen as less attractive and possessing undesirable characteristics. Biblical authors see adversaries as wild beasts, wild boars, and dogs, and the most common negative image is the lion. It is not the noble lion, the king of the forest, but the lion of preying, stalking and hunting, and which mercilessly mauls its victims, which is seen as the most vicious of all animals. The Psalmist requests protection from his enemies who are 'like a lion eager to tear, as a young lion lurking in ambush (Ps. 17.12; see also 7.2; 57.4; 91.13). Contrast this with what Jesus has to say about birds as examples of trusting God and being less anxious about material goods: 'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly father feeds them' (Mt. 6.26). In another incident, Jesus uses the symbol of the mother hen as protector against the rapacious and predatory fox (Lk. 13.31-36).

Before the latest conflict, literature already provided a space for engagement in the complicated situation in Sri-Lanka. There was a youth revolt in

21. Nihal de Silva, *The Road from Elephant Pass* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2003), p. 125.
22. de Silva, *The Road from Elephant Pass*, p. 167.
23. *The Hindu* online edition 3 April 2005.

the early '70s in the south which raised its ugly head again in the '80s and '90s. This was initiated by radical youths with a view to destabilizing the capitalist government through violence. In Jean Arasanayagam's story, 'Search My Mind', set against the turbulent times in the Sri Lankan universities, the narrative which makes sense to the insurgents and their English teacher is not a sacred text or the ancient historical record of the island, but a textual legacy of colonial education—Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. It is the trial scene from this play which is able to forge a link and supply the much needed human value and bind together both the student radicals and their teacher. The story ends with a chilling scene when the English teacher gets a knock on her door. These were troubled times. Doors were closed and lights were switched off. Retaliatory killings were on. At first, the teacher, her husband, Raj, and their teenage daughter Rima, are too frightened to open the door. But after persistent knocking the teacher's family relent and find Suman, one of the students, now an insurgent, badly wounded and wanting shelter. It is not easy and the family hesitates. The student pleads: 'Madam, you taught us, remember? *The Merchant of Venice*. There is that bit in it: "The quality of mercy…is not strained".' He was too worn out to say the rest of those words. Rima, the daughter, who was reluctant to have anything to do with Suman, continues Portia's speech which Suman was too weak to recite:

> It droppeth as the gentle dew from heaven.
> Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed…

Suman is let in. The story ends with the thoughts of the English teacher: 'In this time of darkness, we need all the blessings which we can get. Tomorrow I will read the trial scene, act iv, scene i of the *Merchant of Venice* with my students. I will refresh their memories of all that has gone before. And what will happen again, and yet again'.[24] Incidentally, in the same play, Shylock comes out with a remarkable statement which is a hallmark of a good literature. His words of appeal for a common humanity sharing similar feelings and passion, could well have been about the current Sri Lankan situation:

> I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases…if you prick us do we not bleed? (Act III. Scene I)

24. Arasanayagam, *In the Garden Secretly and Other Stories*, p. 31.

To sum up this section: What novelists do is not to offer grand theories but rather a counter-intuitive way of addressing reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion. I began with a frightful prospect of how the gun has become a convenient tool for settling the ethnic question. What is more frightening is that even in an innocuous-seeming activity like biblical interpretation, the gun seems to have the last word. During the abolition debate in the USA, the Bible became the battle ground for both pro- and anti-slavery lobbies. The country and the church were torn apart over the matter of biblical interpretation. Mark Noll, who studied the debate, observes that the country was faced with a problem because 'its most trusted religious authority, the Bible was sounding an uncertain note'. Similarly, the protestant evangelical churches discovered that mere blind faith in the Bible 'was not solving disagreements about what the Bible taught concerning slavery'. Both the country and the church were in trouble, and Noll concludes that the 'remedy that finally solved the question of how to interpret the Bible was recourse to arms'.[25] Recently, Andrew Lofton, a minister from Ohio, was shot dead by one of his parishioners who disagreed with Lofton's interpretation of the Book of Revelation. If interpretative disputes are resolved by resort to killing, what chance has the Book in settling such a highly charged and emotive issue as communalism?

Diversity and pluralism are as much vital features of the Sri Lankan landscape as they are of the rest of Asia. The time has come to distance ourselves from the narrow, monotheistic-centred discourse of the chosen and the damned, the minority and the majority, us and them, and to uphold the idea of a common heritage where everything belongs to everyone. Such a pluralistic heritage permits us to borrow, exchange and celebrate, relive and recreate each other's Gods, rituals, and stories. The words of grand-uncle Para whom we met earlier encapsulates this mood of mutual flow: 'We were one people. We sang each other's songs as our own, ate each other's food, talked each other's talk, worshipped each other's Gods. Even when we lived our particular lives, they always touched on those around us, and theirs on ours'.[26] We must build up, strengthen and rejoice in this mutual accessibility and circulation. This is our formidable strength and a safeguard against one community, one tradition dominating the other.

The question that still persists is—can we do theology amidst conflict and tension? What would be the nature of Christology when communities

25. Mark Noll, 'The Impasse Over Slavery: Battle for the Bible', *Christian Century* (2 May 2006), p. 25.

26. Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies*, p. 283.

are at war with each other. Theological discourse is a luxury which happens after the event. It is a reflective process which does not necessarily take place immediately. It takes a while to assess the theological sense of an experience or an event. When the Exodus happened, or for that matter, any foundational event occurred, nobody tried to articulate a systematically refined theological reflection. There was a collective and often contradictory memory of the Exodus. It was only later that the Jewish historians tried to evaluate its impact and sought to make theological purchase out of its significance. Similarly, it took nearly two decades before Paul could make a theological interpretation of Jesus' death. For Mark, it took another decade. When tragedy, disaster or violence, or joyous and euphoric events take place, one does not normally respond theologically. The initial response is to keep silent and remain speechless. Job and his friends sat with him for seven days and seven nights and no one spoke a word because they were unable to fathom the loss. Gutiérrez, whose redefinition of theological method which became a mantra for a generation of theologians—that the first act in theology is engagement, and critical reflection upon it a second act—now offers a revised scheme in his introduction to *On Job:* 'Silence, the time of quiet is first act and the necessary mediation for the time of speaking about the Lord or doing theo-logy, which is second act'.[27] To a large extent, we maintain silence when we go about our daily work, 'we do not talk about God all the time; we do indeed live in God, but not by discoursing on God'.[28] In a similar conflict-ridden situation, when asked 'when will the grand Palestinian epic be written?', the national poet, Mahmud Darwish answered: 'Perhaps after the victory. Perhaps after the independence, when the story is finished, when we have known the beginning and the end'.[29] So what do we do in the meantime ? We do what the unnamed narrator in Jean Arasanayagam's short story, 'Quail's Nest', did during the ethnic conflict—do the regular things—'shop, cook, clean'[30] and occasionally run a consultation like this.

27. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), p. xiv.

28. Gutierrez, *On Job*, pp. xiii-xiv.

29. *Times Literary Supplement* (17 March 2006), p. 20.

30. Arasanayagam, *In the Garden Secretly and Other Stories*, p. 50.

Part III

Mainstream Agendas, Marginal Uneasiness

7

SCRIPTURE, SCHOLARSHIP, EMPIRE: PUTTING THE DISCIPLINE IN ITS PLACE

How is the empire?

King George V[1]

All knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use.

Hector[2]

Let me begin with Malcolm Bradbury's entertaining novel, *Rates of Exchange*. In it one of the characters, Katya Princip, says: 'Here we have a saying. A good friend is someone who visits you when you are in prison. But a *really* a good friend is someone who comes to hear your lectures'.[3] If I may add, a really genuine friend is someone who comes to hear your inaugural lecture.

What I should like to do this evening is to look at three issues which I think are crucial to the biblical discipline.

The Bible: Eclipsing of the National Epic

The English Bible, and especially the King James Version, emerged as part of modernity. How a book to which no English person had made a single contribution, or for that matter how a version which carried the name of a person who had not translated a single sentence, became the national epic of the English, is another story. Like most things to do with modernity, the Bible is currently undergoing a reappraisal. What we are witnessing in the West is a marked marginalization of the King James Bible as a totem of Western culture. The kind of claim that Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch used to make, about the King James Bible being 'in everything we see, hear, feel,

1. The alleged last words of King George V. See David Makie, 'On the Matter of Final Words', *The Guardian* (4 October 2007), p. 32.
2. A character in Alan Bennett's play, *History Boys* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), p. 5.
3. Malcolm Bradbury, *Rates of Exchange* (London: Secker & Warburg 1983), p. 128.

because it is in us, in our blood',[4] now seems to belong to a bygone era. This apparent loss was due to causes more radical and serious than challenges from historical criticism. The real cultural forces instrumental in weakening the authority and appeal of the Bible were, first, the process of secularization and, second, the accessibility of the sacred texts of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Sikhs, which has made the Christian text one among many.

It is interesting, nevertheless, how a new lease of life is currently being offered to the Bible by those outside biblical departments. The credibility of the Bible has been given a new impetus not by biblical scholars but by people not belonging to the discipline, such as Frank Kermode, Robert Alter, Gabriel Josipovich, Regina Schwartz, Laura Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan. Paul is being reinterpreted by Alain Badiou and Jacob Taubes—both come from the field of philosophy. Canongate—the Edinburgh publishers—enlisted the services of novelists, pop stars, and scientists, such as P.D. James, Bono, Steven Rose, and even people of other faiths such as the Dalai Lama, to introduce the various books of the Bible. Recently, the New Testament attracted public attention through the publication of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Leaving aside the cynicism of the publishers in taking commercial advantage of these media-savvy personalities, what it indicates is the esteem still available to biblical study, if only biblical scholars were willing and able to address a wider public.

If we want to do the same, if we want the Bible and biblical interpretation to be an important and integral part of the academic curriculum, then I suggest that we need to a take a new programmatic commitment to study the Bible in a global framework—a commitment that recognizes not only the multicultural context in which the Bible emerged but in which also it will have to be appropriated and expounded. The success of such a project would depend not only on fresh attempts to increase our students' knowledge of the Bible, but also, and largely, on how biblical courses prepare students for responsible citizenship in an increasingly globalized world, where populations now have their roots in an array of cultures and histories. In future, the usefulness of the Bible, its nature and content, will to a great extent depend on helping students to read it along with other religious texts. Up until now, courses on biblical studies have been carried on with no reference to other religious texts. One of the discoveries of the colonial era was that the Bible cannot be studied in isolation. It has be studied in conjunction with other texts. What Monnier-Williams, the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, said at the height of the colonial enterprise is even more true now: 'It may indeed shock Christians in this Christian country of

4. Quoted in *Like unto Leaven: A Popular Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society for the Year 1923–24* (London: Bible House, 1924), p. 31.

ours to think of our missionaries placing the Bible on the same platform with the Koran and the Veda; there is no alternative'.[5]

Sacred texts are simultaneously self-contained entities and open systems. They are inevitably full of quotations from, and references and allusions to other texts. Hebrew Scriptures are reconfigured in the Christian testament. Islam incorporates Jesus, *Dasaratha Jataka* tells the story of the Buddha taking the form of the Hindu God Rama. Our biblical courses should reflect the interconnectedness of these texts and interpretative practices. The Sermon on the Mount should be analysed with the *Dhammapada,* the sayings of the Buddha, the Song of Solomon should be studied in conjunction with one of its supposed sources of influence Tamil love poetry. The agonies and inner struggles of the biblical Job should be contrasted and compared with the puranic Harichandra who went through a similar process of questioning and doubt. Alopen, the Persian Nestorian missionary carrying the Eastern canon, the *Peshitta*, to China in the seventh century has to be juxtaposed with the travel of the Chinese monk, Xianquang, to India in the same century in order to collect Buddhist texts and carry them back to China. The purpose of such a reading would not be to look only for the origin or the uniqueness of one religious text, but also to look for shared interests and insights. Most importantly, we need to emphasize that religious ideas do not run in a linear form but occur and recur across the spectrum. By linking such texts we can draw attention to the convergences, imbalances and absences in one or other. More importantly, such an undertaking will moderate any authoritative claim for one religious tradition or the attribution of exclusive meaning to one text.

But this type of comparative hermeneutics takes time. As Edward Said wrote in a later introduction to *Orientalism*, for 'this kind of wider perception we need time and patience and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation, that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction'.[6] Such a hermeneutics may not be possible at a time when university staff are encouraged to produce what an academic recently called 'a crazy Soviet style set of production targets for goods that nobody wants'.[7] Or as a character in Posy Simmonds cartoon colourfully put it: 'We have to produce research on demand. We are treated like machines—bloody academic sausage machines'.[8]

In unfavourable and troubled times like these, it is customary to rescue the Bible and make it safe. The task, though, must not be simply to revamp

5. M. Monnier-Williams, *Modern India and Indians* (London: Trübner & Co., 1889), p. 233.
6. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. xxii.
7. See *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (9 January 2004), p. 14.
8. *The Guardian Review* (23 October 2004), p. 3.

the potency of the Bible, but to unsettle its centuries' old Christian superiority and self-importance. Its colonizing monotheistic tendencies have to be seen against the many-layered polytheistic context out of which it emerged. Monotheism introduced the notion of true and false religions and the chosen and the damned. The biblical monotheistic vision which undergirded one faith and one Church has to be viewed against the many gods, many faiths and many churches which crowd our religious landscape. Whereas the old cosmic gods were interculturally translatable and nobody questioned the reality of these Gods or the legitimacy of their worship, monotheism introduced the notion of false gods, idolatry, and estranged people. In the closing words of her book, *The Curse of Cain*, Regina Schwartz's offers her own revisioning of the Bible: 'It would be a Bible embracing multiplicity instead of monotheism. The old 'monotheistic' book must be closed so that new books may be fruitful and multiply. After all that was the first commandment'.[9]

Each era produces its own Bible, and it is time for the postcolonial world to produce its own text free from missionary and dogmatic content and purpose. If we do not engage in such a revisioning, we are likely to see the discipline of biblical studies become even more marginal.

Mainstream Scholarship: Maintaining Modernity, Managing Discipline

When one looks at contemporary biblical studies as practised in Western academies, one is reminded of the heckler's remark at a lecture in the new Budapest, in Joydeep Roy Bhattacharya's novel, *The Gabriel Club*: 'It's just like in the old days! Nothing has changed. Just younger faces'. Historical criticism, which emerged with the Enlightenment and acted as a liberative tool for some biblical scholars, is still a dominant force. A casual flip through such flagship journals of the guild as the *Journal of Biblical Literature* and *New Testament Studies* will confirm this. Whatever the new approaches—literary, social scientific or structural analytic, the discipline is still tethered to historical criticism. If those venerable Victorian Churchmen scholars, Wescott, Lightfoot and Hort were to return today they would be disappointed with their hermeneutical heirs, as how little has changed beyond a narrowing of horizons from the broad social and intellectual vision that characterized their work. What one easily overlooks is that the heyday of historical criticism was brief, and that what ensued was merely repetitive and derivative. The creative period of historical criticism was between 1861 and 1917. At least in the popular imagination it began with Colenso's

9. Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 176.

Pentateuch, and with a question posed by the Zulu, William Ngidi, a question which anyone brought up in the Enlightenment tradition would be proud of. When translating the biblical flood story, he asked—'Is all that true?' The halcyon days of historical criticism came to an end with Barth's commentary on Romans, which was prompted by the First World War and the failure of the then dominant liberal theology with its optimistic faith in the human mind and in progress in history: 'The historical-critical method of biblical investigation has its rightful place. But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, and more important justification'.[10]

For the most part, the studies which have emerged out of historical criticism have been large-scale literature surveys, or incestuous appraisal and sometimes unacknowledged appropriation of other people's work. In a recent survey of theological and religious departments in the UK, J.L. Houlden has pointed out that there are nearly 70 New Testament posts, which is 17% of all posts, a higher proportion than any of the other disciplines within departments of theology and religious studies.[11] Does this mean that the literary output of this 70, a biblically significant number, has become diversified and original? Are the hermeneutical insights offered by these interpretations varied and unique? Does this mean that biblical studies has been enriched with a wealth of interesting individual voices? The truth is, the opposite is the case. The individual voice is increasingly rare. Almost every voice and every interpretation is slotted into the methodological and theoretical market niche of the time.

The so-called debates within the academic journals are depressingly inconsequential. Biblical studies has turned itself into an increasingly specialized and esoteric activity. This was brought home recently by Robert Orsi in his presidential address outlining the reasons for the split between the two organizations—the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature. Orsi explained that the AAR is a 'scholarly and professional organization' whose task is not only enhancing the excellence of teaching but also enhancing the public understanding of religion among journalists, politicians and public, and, as an organization active in promoting egalitarian causes such as anti-harassment laws, whereas the SBL was a 'scholarly organization purely concerned with research and publishing endeavours'.[12] Such a gravitation towards extreme specialization has, on the

10. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London, Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 1.

11. J.L. Houlden, 'Enlightenment, Establishment and the Word', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 78 (2000), pp. 67-82.

12. Robert A. Orsi, '"A New Beginning, Again": 2003 Presidential Address'. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72.3 (2004), p. 596.

one hand, facilitated a scrupulous engagement with texts, theories and hermeneutical concerns, and in the process has attracted research money, and earned star-rating for departments. But, on the other hand, this endless dividing of knowledge and over-professionalization of the field has prevented wider access and the sort of cross-fertilization that might have revitalized the field. The trouble with writings of such extreme specialization is that they make sense only to a small group of specialists with similar interests. Scholarly writing has become exclusively self-referential, replete with its own complicated and complex vocabulary. Such writing has created academic conventions that place a high premium on structure, technique and method, at the expense of readable prose, clarity and relevance. It is probably the only discipline which has fellow biblical scholars as its sole audience, and its literary output restricted to the peer group with a view to impressing them.

The irrelevance of current biblical scholarship is seen sharply in the construals of Jesus. At a time when, to use a biblical illustration, the money-changers have entered the temples of learning, there is no Jesus who can chase them away. For the Jesus that mainstream scholarship, and especially the Jesus Research seminar, has come up with is a New Labour, Third-Way creation, an ambiguous figure who can simultaneously accommodate corporate interest and empathize with the needs of the poor.

This mainstream scholarship is insular and obsessed with its own fixed and rigid Eurocentric questions. This is not something peculiar to biblical scholarship but a mere reflection of the wider British society. In a recent article in the *Guardian*, Caryl Phillips has pointed out that the leading English novelists and playwrights, with rare exception have paid little attention to black and race issues. This inward-looking habit has a long history in the field of biblical studies. The nineteenth century may have been a time of scepticism and secularism in Europe, but this was the time when Orientalists were studying and codifying the sacred books of Asian peoples, seeing in them both discursive linkages, textual allusions, and theological correspondences, and, most significantly, according them a status of sacredness. Max Müller's publication of the monumental fifty volume *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910) virtually coincided with the practice of historical criticism in the West. There were significant exceptions among both missionaries and theologians, Maurice and Westcott among them, but the only biblical scholar of any repute to interact significantly with these texts was John Colenso, who quoted passages from *Asiatic Researches* in his Pentateuch to reiterate his theological position that God's word is found 'both in the Bible and out of the Bible'.

Orientalists have long drawn attention to the presence of a Buddhist colony in Alexandria from before early Christianity, and to striking textual similarities between Buddhist texts and the New Testament, Buddhist

references in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, and similarities between Mahayana teachings and the writings of Origen. 'The Buddhist canon', in Albert Edmunds' view 'in the first Christian century was the most widespread of all sacred codes—covering even a vaster field than its great rivals, the Septuagint and the Zend Avesta',[13] the Zoroastrian text. Arthur Lillie, Albert J. Edmunds, Paul Carus, Richard Garbe were some of the earlier scholars, and more recently we have had R.C. Amore, Henri de Lubac, R.J. Bruns, Z.P. Thundy and J. Duncan Derrett arguing for Buddhist influence in John's and Luke's gospels. The search for the historical Jesus paralleled that for the historical Buddha. Biblical scholars who work within the narrow cultural markers provided by Hebraic and Hellenistic thought patterns have shown little interest in such matters. One exception was B.H. Streeter, who in his 1932 Bampton Lectures showed some interest in the Buddha and Jesus, but he, like Marcus Borg who wrote a similar comparative work in 2002, failed to raise the question of influences and borrowings. Borg, admitting that he was not a Buddhist scholar, went on to claim that such influences and borrowings were 'unnecessary and unlikely'.[14]

One interesting aspect of this question is that articles related to the links between Buddhism and Christianity are published not in the academic journals of biblical studies but in the journals of religion, an indication how mainstream biblical scholarship views this research and debate.

At a time when other disciplines are raising the question whether intellectuals have a public role to play, the biblical discipline is faced with the question of whether it has a public to interact with. What we are witnessing is not the death of the author but the death of the reader.

To paraphrase Marx, every person is an interpreter because everyone reads, but only some have the job of being interpreters. Those of us who have the job of being interpreters should write as though there were a discerning public capable of not only understanding what we are saying but also of engaging with us in a fruitful conversation. Every time a biblical scholar writes, he or she should remember Fanon's words: 'Everything can be explained to the people, on the single condition that you really want them to understand'.[15]

On the whole, current biblical scholarship has generated artificial needs and convoluted the biblical histories, complicated textual reconstruction and led its readers astray from the true needs and wants of people. To recover its credibility, it needs to connect with the people. What the

13. Albert J. Edmunds, *Buddhist Texts Quoted as Scripture by the Gospel of John: A Discovery in the Lower Criticism* (Philadelphia: Maurice Brix, 1906), p. 40.

14. Marcus Borg (ed.) *Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings* (Berkeley: Ulysses Press, 1997), p. xiii.

15. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 152.

historian Simon Schama said in another context is equally applicable to biblical studies. Biblical studies must stop being a profession and become once again a community, and a community with a global reach.

Marginal Dilemmas

Literary narratives more than ever before are being subjected to colonial, caste, class, national, ethnic, cultural, gender and political scrutiny. In an increasingly diversified interpretative market, there is something for every hermeneutical taste. The interpreter today is, inescapably stamped with an identity sticker and these stickers allot his or her place in the market. Everyone has his or her audience. Hermeneutics is no more about a group of people with mutual concerns but about people of different concerns who have to negotiate with each other's concerns and interest in order to achieve social harmony and textual parity.

Those who are engaged with minority hermeneutics are faced with the double task of both producing something new within Enlightenment parameters and also of challenging, transcending and redefining our cultural heritage. This hermeneutical dilemma is captured in three novels. First, as ethnic we are supposed to write only about ethnic issues. This was the fate of the hero in Percival Everett's *Erasure*. When the African American, Mark Ellison wanted to retell and parody Greek myths, he was discouraged because it would make his novels 'not black enough'.[16] Secondly, there is the perception that whatever the West produces has universal validity, whereas what the Third World interpreters produce has only local interest. This is vividly captured in Pamuk Orhan's novel, *Snow*. One of his feisty characters remarks: 'When they write poems or sing songs in the west, they speak for all humanity. They're human beings—but we're just Muslims. When *we* write something, it's just ethnic poetry'.[17] Thirdly, when we try to produce something, we are scorned for being ourselves. Elizabeth Costello, in J.M. Coetzee's novel named after her, castigates the African writer for being an African writer:

> The English novel is written in the first place by English people for English people. That is what it makes the English novel. The Russian novel is written for Russians. But the African novel is not written for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigners who read them. Whether they like it or not, they have accepted the role of the interpreter, interpreting Africa to their readers.[18]

16. Percival Everett, *Erasure* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), p. 49.
17. Orhan Pamuk, *Snow* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), p. 286.
18. J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003), p. 51.

It is important for us to periodically question the quest for the authentic Indian or Sri Lankan. Underlying this quest is another form of colonialism, based on the premise that there is a core Indianness or Sri Lankanness that can and should be exposed, classified, labelled, itemized. In reality, what this achieves is to consign us to a hermeneutical ghetto.

What is becoming increasingly clear for Asian, African, and Latin American biblical interpreters is that it is futile to follow hermeneutical trends emerging from the West when the West itself is unsure of its interpretative needs and is undergoing a series of cultural and political changes.

When we produce our own authors, the West says the author is dead. When we begin to write our own history, we are told that history is finished and everything is narrative. When we forge our own theory, then we are told that we are in a post-theory period. Minority hermeneutics has gone through different phases such as imitative, nativist and liberative. Building on and at times deviating from these approaches, we have reached postcolonialism. Many don't like postcolonialism. I myself have expressed my own reservations about the theory. But I still see it as a useful tool. Postcolonialism's enduring value lies, as Stuart Hall has reminded us, in directing our attention to the imperial metropolis, where 'colonisation was never simply external' but 'always inscribed deeply' within it. An interventionist instrument, it refuses to take the dominant reading as an uncomplicated representation of peoples' histories and cultures, and introduces an alternative reading. Postcolonialism, more than allowing silenced and often marginalized people to find their own voices, is directed at the dominant readings which set rigid boundaries and undervalue other peoples' experience and textual production. It tries to go beyond the simple-minded binarism that not only sings the praises of the immaculate virtue of the indigenous and chastizes the rapaciousness of the foreign, but also guards against the essentialization of complex indigenous forms and caricaturing the West. It brings to the fore the multidirectional nature of cultural flow, and stresses simultaneous translation in both directions, laying the grounds for appropriation and a transcreation of both global and local cultural forms.

Empires and the Bible: Past and Present

Both the Bible and empire are trying to stage comebacks and are undergoing vigorous makeovers to meet the changing context. Both are being refurbished and reinvented. The old territorial empire has now given way to an informal one which is as menacing as the one which it is trying to replace. The earlier empire's biggest export, the English Bible, on which, it was said

at the time, 'the sun never set',[19] is assuming new forms in the new situation. It is no coincidence that the current boom in books on empire and in versions and interpretations of the Bible is taking place at a time when America is trying to assume the role of a new imperialist.

The old empire was engaged in a civilizing project of bringing light to dark places. The new imperium is about righting wrongs. The old empire spoke in terms of eradicating ignorance and enlightening the benighted natives with Christian values. The new empire is also on a mission, but sees its task as removing erring rulers who undermine corporate authority, violate human rights and threaten American financial interests. Tony Blair spoke of the new empire in missiological terms. In his speech, the British Prime Minister told the US congress: 'I feel a most urgent sense of mission today'.[20] The new missionary command is to preach the gospel of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the market economy, distinctly as defined by its Western interests. The new missionaries who effect these changes are the coalition soldiers; they are seen not as military personnel but as evangelizing emancipators who bring liberty and luxury to those who are under 'shadow and darkness'.[21] Unlike the traditional missionaries who targeted erring individuals, the new missionaries target erring nation-states. Their weapons, according to Blair, are not 'guns but our beliefs'. Like the disciples of old, they, too, cast out demons in such forms as that of Saddam Hussein. Those who question this project are seen as anti-Christ, those who are not with us. The old evangelizers assured those who accepted the Christian gospel that they were on the side of the saved. The new evangelizers tell those who accept the Western gospel that they are on the side of civilization. In an earlier era, those who did not practise the Christian way of life were called 'savages'. Now those movements which question the imposition of Western ways of living are demonized as terrorists. The new conquest is presented as liberation and the new economic enslavement is interpreted as setting free hapless natives. These military missionaries who die in their mission efforts are the new martyrs. Echoing the vocabulary of the Victorian Church and of the Authorized Version, Prime Minister Blair reassured his listeners in the US congress that these soldiers 'did not strive or die in vain, but through their sacrifice future generations can live in greater peace, prosperity and hope'.[22]

19. John Eadie, 'Preface by Dr. Eadie', in John Eadie (ed.), *The National Comprehensive Family Bible: The Holy Bible with the Commentaries of Scott and Henry, and Containing Also Many Thousand Critical and Explanatory Notes, Selected from the Great Standard Authors of Europe and America* (Glasgow: W.R. M'Phun, 1860), p. vi.

20. British Prime Minister Tony Blair's phrase. See his speech to the US congress. For the full text of the speech, see *Sydney Morning Herald* (18 July 2003).

21. *Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 2.

22. *Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 2.

This new imperium is accompanied by a rash of books, articles, documentaries and films on empire. These books are produced by historians, bureaucrats and cultural critics from different social and ideological backgrounds, among them, Niall Ferguson,[23] David Cannadine,[24] deal with the old empire, and Robert Cooper,[25] and Michael Ignatieff with the new.[26] This re-invasion is called variously 'liberal', 'humanitarian', 'altruistic' and 'moral' intervention. This may not be the right place to evaluate their work, nor am I the right person to do so, but let me venture a few comments.

These books are postmodern restatements of a traditional, conservative and highly romantic history of empire. What they often forget is that empires almost always act in their own interests, and are almost invariably insensitive to indigenous cultures, and their best intentions are likely to end up being unhelpful. Even well-run empires are brutal and murderous. 'Let's not forget' as the historian, Maria Misra has reminded us, 'that Leopold's central African empire was originally called the International Association for Philanthropy in Congo'.[27] One of the enduring lessons of postcolonialism is that no one intervenes in other peoples' affairs unless there is something to gain from it materially, politically or ideologically. As Aimé Césaire put it long ago: 'no one colonizes innocently'.[28] The message of these books is that the West has the power to recast the rest of the world in its own image. Asians, Africans and Arabs are depicted as incapable of effecting changes that would lead to peace and prosperity. In short, what these books on empire try to convey is that it is time for Westerners to don their khaki shorts and topees again and remove the burden from the natives and place it on their own shoulders of the white man.

Textual Abundance

Like the new crop of empire books, there is also a crop of books on the English Bible as well as new versions. Like the empire books, these emerge

23. Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

24. David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw the Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2001).

25. Robert Cooper, 'The Post-Modern State', in Mark Leonard (ed.), *Re-Ordering the World: The Long-Term Implications of 11 September* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2002), pp. 11-20; and Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003).

26. Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (London: Vintage, 2003).

27. Maria Misra, 'Heart of Smugness', *The Guardian* (23 July 2002), p. 15.

28. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 39.

from a variety of stables and are written by a disparate group of theologians and historians.[29] The impression these books give is that the English Bible, like English laws and constitution, grew through a slow process of absorption and conservation and did not irrupt suddenly on the scene. Out of this gradual process emerged a monument which was nobler than the original, has earned the affection of countless admirers, and has become the 'paradigm of how mankind should deploy words'.[30] In other words, God's last word.

So far this is fine. But what is intriguing is not what these wide-eyed enthusiasts say about the finer qualities of the English Bible but what it is overlooked. The biggest absentee in these books is the Bible's role in the colonial project. All vernacular versions were forced to follow the word position, sentence arrangements and punctuation of the Authorized Version. It also acted as a superintendent in adjudicating the moral and theological worth of other sacred texts in the colonies. In comparison to the Bible, Monnier-Williams declared confidently that other religious texts were full of 'corruptions and lamentable impurities'.[31] There is also, of course, the question of how it was interpreted. The English Bible, which had been seen as a 'symbol of opposition to authority'[32] by the Lollards, was presented in the colonies as promoting order, obedience and respect for those in power and authority. A perfect example of this was the way the Tribute Money incident in the Synoptic gospels was exegeted during the colonial period. 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's' was interpreted as denouncing the revolutionary leanings of modern Zealots, and advocating the payment of tax as a sign of obedience, respect and gratitude to the British in return for the security and protection of a stable government. The implication of such a reading not only legitimized British colonial rule, but also encouraged the 'natives' to show loyalty and deference to

29. Benson Bobrick, *The Making of the English Bible* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001); Christopher De Hamel, *The Book: A History of the Bible* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001); Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Version and How It Changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001); David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Adam Nicolson, *Power and Glory: Jacobean England and the Making of the King James Bible* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003); David S. Katz, *God's Last Words: Reading the English Bible from the Reformation to Fundamentalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

30. Katz, *God's Last Words*, p. 214.

31. Monier Monnier-Williams, *The Holy Bible and the Sacred Books of the East* (Seeley & Co [1887]), p. 35.

32. Gillian Brennan, 'Patriotism, Language and Power: English Translations of the Bible, 1520–1580', *History Workshop: A Journal of Scientist and Feminist Historians* 27 (Spring 1989), p. 27.

authority.[33] Writing soon after the Indian uprising of 1857, William Arnot, in his *The Parables of our Lord*, alluding to the parable of vineyard, subtly implied that the Indian rebels were the 'usurping tenants' from whom the vineyard, meaning India would be taken way and restored to its rightful lord, the British.[34]

The striking number of new books on the King James Bible, in a way reverses the current trend in biblical scholarship. Whereas the present focus has moved from the text to the reader, these new tomes redirect the attention of the reader back to the book. The focus is on the book and its materiality, and raises questions about the social, class and economic functions of its production.

Along with a spate of books on the Bible there is a flood of Bibles as well. The King James Version, once an undisputed universal script, has given way to a number of Bibles designated to lure specific audiences. Now there is a *Green Bible*, a *Gay and Lesbian Bible*, an *African Bible*, *An Amplified Bible*, a *New American Bible*, a *Youth Bible*, *The Bible in Cockney* and a *People's Bible*. The Scripture Union has produced bibles in an easily digestible form. Two examples are *What does the Bible Say about James Bond 007: Threats and Thrills, Guns and Girls*, in which Esther is presented as the 'original Bond girl' who had the 'clothes, the guts and a mentor called "M"', and the other is *What does the Bible Say About Sven on Football*, which enables readers to discover what the Bible says about scoring goals, about losing and about being aggressive. Appropriate biblical texts are cited to support these claims, detached from their social and political context—for instance, how Esther, like James Bond, is implicated in empire, in her case the Persian, is completely overlooked.

A book that was in every sense, an 'establishment Bible', with 'impeccable social and intellectual credentials'[35] is now fragmented into several splinter Bibles, and, far worse, it has become part of the entertainment industry. Endless endeavours to bring the Bible to target-specific audiences have resulted in what David Clines calls the 'marketization of the Bible'. Holy Writ is now seen as a commodity to be packaged as 'infotainment'.[36] Supreme examples of niche-market Bibles are: the Canongate, *The Scroll: The Tabloid Bible*, *The Street Bible*, and *Revolve*, the teenage Bible. While the

33. R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 255-57.

34. I owe this point to John S. Kloppenborg.

35. Harry S. Stout, 'Word and Order in Colonial New England', in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (eds.), *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 25.

36. David Clines, 'Biblical Studies at the Millennium', *Religious Studies News* 14.4 (November 1999), p. 9.

first three aim at a secularized post-Christian British clientele, the last one targets a narrowly defined Christian readership in America.[37]

Nick Page's *The Scroll: The Tabloid Bible* recasts the biblical material in a racy, sensational and easy-to-read sound-bite style. This introduces the sexual adventures of David with the words: 'David—The Adultery, Rape, and Incest Years, will be published next week, with a 10-page pull out supplement on Ten Great Slappers of Israel. As ever—dignity is our key word'.[38]

The Street Bible is the work of Rob Lacey, a media personality, and is aimed at urban audiences.[39] It is structured as a web-site format and the epistles are in the form of e-mails. For instance, Paul's First letter to the Corinthians begins:

> (Email No.2.—No.1 got wiped)
> From: paulbenson@teammail.org
> To: jlm@corinth.org.gr
> Date: AD 54-ish
> Subject: your letter re hassles and questions, and some…[40]

The language is a combination of modern day media and management-speak. The disciples are now called the 'team', the crowd that follows Jesus are the 'troupe of groupies', and the proclamation of good news is now 'breaking the news'. Jesus' words to Nicodemus are an example of 'pure' management speak which would make Tyndale turn in his grave: 'No one in this world gets to see God's world unless he is reconceived, redeveloped, redelivered, and then reborn'.[41]

Revolve is the Bible for teenage girls, where the entire New Testament writings are presented in a fashion magazine format. The volume is full of colour spreads of smiling smart young women and has all the ingredients of a teenage glamour magazine—question and answer, boxed items which provide pithy biographical details of leading personalities, not pop stars in this case but biblical figures. One of few things from the regular teenage magazine format that is really missing is the horoscope. *Revolve* offers beauty tips with biblical texts. Here is an example of how to keep the skin fresh

37. For the Bibles produced and marketed mainly for Christian audiences in America, see Mark Fackler, 'The Second Coming of Holy Writ: Niche Bibles and the Manufacture of Market Segments', in Robert Fowler, Edith Blumhofer and Fernando F. Segovia (eds.), *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium* (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), pp. 71-88.

38. Nick Page, *The Scroll: The Tabloid Bible* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), p. 76.

39. Rob Lacey, *The Street Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

40. Lacey, *The Street Bible*, p. 402.

41. Lacey, *The Street Bible*, p. 290.

and glowing: 'Do you want to look happy, healthy and glowing? Remember that because Christ lives in you, his light is to shine through you for the entire world to see (read Mt. 5.14-16). Your face should have a glow that comes from the joy of the Lord, a glow that is beyond compare!'[42] Here is a sample of the question-and-answer format:

> Q. Is it wrong to wear a bra that fills out your shirt a little more?
> A. 1. How old are you? 2. Why do you want to do it? If you are still young, just be patient. Your body is still in the process of filling out. In fact, it will continue to do this all through college. So don't give up hope and think that you will be forever flat-chested. If you're trying to get guys to like you more, it may work. But do you really want to date a guy who wouldn't go out with you if you were one cup-size smaller? I mean, seriously, what are his priorities? And check your priorities. Read Proverbs 31 to see what God says an attractive woman looks like.[43]

The publishers of these versions have their own rationale. They cite biblical precedents for their ventures. If Jesus spoke in the every-day language of Aramaic, why not make the Bible available in the language of the ordinary people of today. They see their versions as modern day Targums—'an effort to make text accessible to everyone'.[44] They draw attention to examples from mission fields where undecipherable Middle Eastern images are substituted with local images: 'African translations have changed "snake" to "scorpion" in cultures where snakes are a luxury'.[45]

These bibles are the publishing equivalent of digital TV channels which allow us to choose the programme we want to watch. The choice is either to watch the hard news or go straight to the football results. These market-driven Bibles ignore and marginalize the serious message. A detailed study of them has to wait for a later date. There are two things immediately noticeable. One is that these versions have given a new lease of life to the Bible which was otherwise in danger of being dismissed as antiquated and written in difficult English. The other, more worryingly is the hijacking of the language of liberation hermeneutics. They have adapted the language of the class struggle at a time the left and liberation movements are trying to reconfigure it. *Revolve* presents Jesus as the 'truest revolutionary of all time', and *The Street Bible* portrays him the 'liberator'. This Jesus is more recognizable to the class which frequents shopping malls and is familiar with investment trusts than to the urban or rural poor. Thus, the Parable of the Talents is retold in the language of the stock market—shares, profits and

42. *Revolve: The Complete New Testament* (Thomas Nelson Bibles, 2003), p. 248.
43. *Revolve*, p. 361.
44. Lacey, *The Street Bible*, p. 1.
45. Lacey, *The Street Bible*, p. 1.

inflation.[46] The radical message of the Nazareth Manifesto, Jesus' sermon about social re-ordering, is sanitized and presented as offering consolation to the emotional needs of the poor. 'Top news for the poor' is that Jesus was sent 'to mend broken hearts', and 'to announce the news—that this is the era of God going gentle on his people'.[47] The liberation agenda is recast in an apolitical terminology which eviscerates the biblical texts and soothes the sentiments of the urban middle-class. The urban middle class is seen as the victim. Their victimhood provides cover for affirming and augmenting the dominance of the powerful.

Protestants once abolished indulgences and made the Bible a best-seller. Now the best-seller is turned into a form of indulgence and sold in attractive formats to select audiences. Not for the first time, the Bible has been accommodated to imperial interests, and becomes part of the new empire of the corporate world. Once 'a people nurtured on the Bible' was seen as 'essentially a cultured people'.[48] Now the Bible is introduced into various sub-cultures and a niche carved out for it. The Bible which was hailed as a universal word, transferable to all cultures irrespective of time and space without contaminating the purity of its message, is now being marketed tarnished with traces of the very cultures it once abhorred. Now it is presented as an easily consumable commercial object—a postmodern fate for an artefact which emerged as a shining example of modernity.

What of the future? Empires do not last. They emerge, dominate and then, due to their own hubris and vanity, and to national resistance, they disintegrate though often paving the way for other empires. As to the Bible, there are two ways of perceiving its future survival. These two ways of perceiving are exemplified in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a novel about the fate of stories. One understanding of the Bible could be equated with Kattum Shud, a character in the novel, the monstrous hater and arch enemy of all stories, who would like to control all stories. On the other hand, the Bible could be likened to the Ocean of the Stream of Stories, the vast library of stories which the Water Genie introduces to the eponymous Haroun. In this library, stories are held in 'fluid form' and they retain 'the ability to change, become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories'.[49] One is about control, single interpretation, sticking to the letter, and denial of imagination, and the other is about the ability to move, mingle and mix

46. Lacey, *The Street Bible*, pp. 301-302.
47. Lacey, *The Street Bible*, p. 295.
48. Sidney Dark, 'Christianity and Culture', *The New Green Quarterly* 2.2 (1936), p. 85.
49. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (London: Granta Books, 1990), p. 72.

and morph into other stories, to become new ones so that 'even the oldest ones would taste as good as new'.[50] Stories flourish on innovative revitalization. They lose their appeal and die when they are tethered to their ancient origins and declare too much veneration for the past and insist on their own purity. The Bible can either become a mono text or become part of a mosaic of texts. The choice is either to become a single and isolated story or be part of the Ocean of Streams of Story which is 'made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity'.[51] The Bible's future, I incline to think, lies with the second option. This is not too much to ask of a book which all along has proved its vitality and adaptability. As a character in Rushdie's novel puts it 'Any story worth its salt can handle a little shaking up!'[52]

50. Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, p. 175.
51. Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, p. 72.
52. Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, p. 79.

8

FUTURE IMPERFECT: ASIA, THE BIBLE AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

> Asia is, and can be one, only under the imperial eye of the West.
>
> *L. Ching*[1]
>
> We have always been watching the West.
>
> *Al –e Ahmad*[2]

Let me begin by recalling some of the notable recent changes that have been taking place with regard to the Bible and biblical interpretation. First, I will provide a general picture and then I will focus on Asia.

Thrilling Texts, Threatened Orthodoxy

The Bible, a sacred text to countless millions of Christians, has recently assumed an additional, different identity. It is now being perceived as literature which has the potential of being a thriller. The enigmatic content of the Bible, especially the details surrounding Jesus, have sparked off interest and curiosity, and the biblical narratives have become a treasure trove for mystery writing. Suddenly novelists and amateur scholars are snooping around the early Christian literature with a view to unveiling conspiracies and chicaneries that might have gone on in the early days of Christianity. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* started the trend and a random selection of the best-sellers list are an evidence of this new interest: *Holy Grail, Holy Blood* (Michael Baigent), *The Gospel of Judas*, *The Jesus Papers* (Michael Baigent), *The Templar Papers* (Oddvar Olsen), *Sion Revelation* (Lynn Picknett) and *The Jesus Dynasty* (James D. Tabor). Besides providing entertainment, these books have introduced their readers to a form of Christianity

1. L. Ching, 'Yellow Skins, White Masks: Race, Class, and Identification in Japanese Colonial Discourse', in K. Chen (ed.), *Trajectories: Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 70.

2. Al- e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1982), p. 11. I owe this epigram to Alastair Bonnett.

that had been suppressed. They have helped to reconceive and rejuvenate vanished Christianities, reawaken concealed or buried ecclesiastical histories and have unearthed alternative theologies and histories of Christian origins.

In the public arena of competing ideas, people are getting their knowledge and ideas about Christian origins from those very sources—the Gnostic gospels—which the institutionalized Church despised and rejected. These books drawing upon the Gnostic gospels have not only unsettled the faith of some Christians but have also called into question the official version of early Christianity. In the process, these writers have given a new lease of life to the Gnostic gospels, which previously, following their recent discovery, were largely confined to the studies of scholars. These rejected gospels are now taken as representative of the resistant voices which were subdued and written out by the church, whereas the canonical Bible is seen as a sieved-out record put together in the interests of the early church establishment. As a reviewer in the Indian national newspaper *The Hindu* put it: 'I couldn't help feeling that if only the early Christian church had turned Gnostic (or had taken the Cathars seriously), it would be today a more intellectual, mystical, inclusive faith'.[3] Countless readers are now coming to know the facts or fabrications about Christianity from books like *The Da Vinci Code*. This one in particular poses awkward questions such as 'have the men who ran the church defamed the sacred feminine?'

The Bible is now being read by people from the outside—who may or may not be Christians—who treat it as a historical document and a deposit of ecclesiastical intrigues. There is as much interest in the shenanigans of the scheming ecclesiastical officials and crafty priests as there is in the actual narratives. What fascinates the common reader more than the spiritual upliftment provided by the Bible are the machinations and manipulation that lay behind the religion which emerged from the Bible.

The Hordes outside the Gates

Another change that is taking place in the hermeneutical arena is the emergence of interpretation undertaken by external readers who are not normally associated with the discipline. Once these readers were passive receptors, in awe of and at times intimidated by the church or academic articulations, but now they are making life awkward for both of these traditional dispensers of interpretation. As I see it, there are three kinds of interpreters now active outside the hitherto accepted parameters of biblical studies. First are scholars 'from the side', namely from other academic disciplines, providing

3. Pradeep Sebastian, 'Remarkable Thrillers', *The Hindu Literary Review*, online edition (4 June 2006).

different and often challenging insights. To name a few: Alain Badiou and Jacob Taubes—both from philosophical studies—have offered a variant reading on the theology of Paul[4]; Terry Eagleton from English Studies has delved into the books of the Bible in order to glean liberation insights[5]. Second are a category that comes 'from outside' of the discipline, from the world of fiction, film, drama and art, where the ancient biblical stories have been stretched to accommodate and reflect changing social, cultural and political concerns and experiences. These creative innovations have served to reconnect people with and provide interpretative links to ancient stories. Thus, several of the old biblical figures have been humanized and given a narrative voice by novelists such as Kazantzakis, Saramago, Vicente Leñero, Shusako Endo and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and film-makers like Pasolini, Arcand and Gibson. The third category comprises ordinary readers 'from below'. I am not referring to the subaltern voices celebrated in Third Word hermeneutics but voices in cyberspace, those ordinary readers who comment and reflect theologically on a variety of issues. These non-specialists make use of numerous web-sites and employ blogging as a way of recording and commenting on events. These are the citizen-critics, the hermeneutical counterparts of citizen-journalists, a new-media phenomenon. The tsunami on the Boxing Day 2004, the London bombing in July 2005, Hurricane Katrina in October 2005, have all provided occasions for bloggers to come out with their own theological interpretation of these events. For instance, Google has 2,410,000 sites on the tsunami and the Bible. Bloggers are the cyber version of the old pamphleteering tradition when ordinary citizens made use of the then new medium—the printing press. Like the all the world wide web material, the bloggers spectrum stretches from the serious and responsible to the outreaches of idiocy. All these categories of interpreters need a greater scrutiny which can await for a later occasion.

Once, the Bible and its interpretation were seen as the exclusive property of the ecclesiastics. Then it was redeemed from the oppressive authority of the church, and was taken over by the academy. Now it has been wrested from supposed academic neutrality and historical objectivity by the 'outsiders'. While ecclesiastical and academic interpretations have hitherto always set the parameters and have narrowly restricted the debate, these new interpreters are able to offer audacious and forbidden interpretations which would not otherwise be possible or available. They are trying to articulate religious and spiritual meanings beyond the institutionalized framework and dry, arcane academic reading. What is clear is that one can do interpretation

4. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul.The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), and Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

5. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

without the mediation of trained biblical scholars and ecclesiastics. The inevitable question, then, is there any difference between the professional biblical critic and the citizen-critic? The fact is, everybody is a critic. We all have our own opinions on the book we read, the film, the play, and the TV programme we watch. What these interpretations 'from the side', 'from the outside' and 'from below', have done is (a) to confirm the notion that interpretation is a simple thing complicated by the professionals, and (b) to call into question the assumption that those who are inside provide a better and more effective analysis than those who are outside. This polarizing divide is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

These interpreter-free interpretations have helped to democratize biblical interpretation. What we are witnessing now is that the ownership of the Bible and the art of biblical interpretation are slowly changing hands. The Bible is being given a new lease of life not necessarily by those who are inside the discipline but by those who have traditionally been unconnected with it, and not least by those untrained and untrammelled by biblical scholarship. These literary, artistic and filmic works have made the conventional division of sacred and secular, canonical and non-canonical, inspired and non-inspired, almost redundant. In the market place of texts and ideas, what matters is who can attract attention. Biblical interpreters who busy themselves exclusively with philological and historical analyses will lose their control over texts and their interpretation, but mercifully the book will find a new readability with or without the benefit of professional interpreters.

Present Tense between Home and Abroad

To turn now to the Asian hermeneutical landscape, where too there have been recent changes. First, theologies which energized Asia in the '80s such as Korean minjung, theology of struggle in Philippines and liberation theology of religions, have reached a stalemate. This impasse is partly due to the political and social movements which produced these theologies having moved on. Asia and especially India and China are emerging as powerful economic blocs in the world. The current situation is marked by multinationals, markets and enterprise culture. Individual responsibility, competitiveness, efficiency and personal initiative have become the virtues of the twenty-first century. This capitalist success story should not blind us to the instability and poverty which haunt India and China. More crucially, these theologies emerged in the wake of the euphoric days of liberation theology, which itself had emerged as a counter-discourse and provided much-needed energy and optimism to theologies which were trying to find a voice beyond the surfeit of dry, secular and academically animated theologies that prevailed at that time. Liberation theology as such lost some of its

potency due to the reluctance and shyness of some of its practitioners to embrace a wider liberative agenda such as environmentalism, globalization, asylum-seeking, terrorism, and homosexuality. Now, more alarmingly, this resistant hermeneutics has been co-opted by the mainstream. How this happened is one of the fascinating stories of our time. This accommodation was fairly painless because the mainstream was able, without losing too much of its academic integrity, to exploit the basic tenets of liberation theology. Now liberation itself is recast as apolitical and merely personal empowerment, almost shirking the once crucial questions of social and economic inequality. In the end, liberation theology became traditional and triumphalistic, its exclusively Christian tone too jarring in multireligious and poly-cultural contexts. Let me conclude this passage with a renewed call for a re-definition of liberation for our changing times. As long as there is oppression, liberation will retain the force of a grand narrative. Those who situate themselves within the liberation hermeneutic are well aware of this and are attending to the problem.

The second change in Asia specifically has been the miniaturization of the discipline and the fragmentation of audiences and readership. Once there was the biblical theology of D.T. Niles, M.M. Thomas, Koskue Koyama and C.S. Song, whose biblical expositions were largely influenced by Karl Barth, and they dared to speak for the whole of Asia. They produced a kind of biblical theology which was entirely different from that envisaged by the pioneers of the biblical-theology movement in the West. While the Western biblical theologians were celebrating the historical-critical method, these sages from the East, prompted by Barth, were able to circumvent the historical relativities caused by the historical method by pointing to a transcendent reality and coming up with and extracting theological ideas not always apparent in the texts. Recent years, however, have witnessed the emergence of suppressed voices with new agendas and interests which have made such theologies superfluous. While once there were Asian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Indian theologies, these generic theologies have now ruptured into a number of smaller if vibrant discourses which have successfully confronted sexism, racism, casteism in both mainstream and marginal theologies, thus providing a fuller picture of rejection and exploitation. Once it was a case of one size fitted all. Now it is the one size that matters. As an illustration, one can cite the case of Indian tribal theology. Once it was simply Indian tribal theology. Now, and rightly, it has expanded into Ao, Khasi, Mizo theologies. Such diversification has its troubling side. Such hermeneutics tend to reduce, fragment and destroy links across marginalized groups. Moreover it creates hermeneutics of competitive grievance. Every time one group highlights its suffering, others too get into the act, fearing that they will lose out in the agony race. While identity hermeneutics has

allowed people to empathize with social movements which try to rectify the injustices of the past, an obsessive focus on narrow identity issues may result in the neglect of shared values. The question arises whether these ethnic, gender and racial markers are not the inventions of hegemonic interpretation to keep the marginalized in their allocated places, the master supplying the labels. One needs to be alert to the likely adverse consequences of the splintering of marginal hermeneutics. It is unlikely that such a fragmented status will radically trouble mainstream biblical study. On the contrary, it might well serve to add justification to such already-designated labels as 'exotic', 'fantastic' and 'bewitching'. The deployment of the least threatening aspects of subalternity—the pain and suffering—may be overdone at the expense of glossing over the deeper structural issues. A hermeneutics based on ethnic, gender and sexual orientations is so vulnerable that it plays into the hands of the mainstream only too easily. As happened to liberation theology, identity-driven hermeneutics is liable to be assimilated and repackaged. As Edward Said has warned, 'Being completely focussed on yourself means that you are far more likely to fall prey to a stronger, more secure and dominating culture'.[6]

The third change is the emergence of Asian diasporic hermeneutics. Asian biblical interpretation has hitherto been seen as the preserve of those settled in Asia. Currently two Asian biblical hermeneutics are emerging, one in the homeland and the other in the diaspora. It looks as if these are facing two different audiences. If the '80s were the time of the of the subalterns, now is the time of the diasporic intellectuals. The current hermeneutical landscape is littered with Asian-American, African-American, Hispanic-American articulations, with further fragmentation into Filipino-American, Korean-American, etc. It is too soon to speak of the emergence of a formidable diasporic theology, but the current output is sufficient enough to arrest attention. A notable example of the Asian diasporic hermeneutics is the *Semeia* volume, *The Bible in Asian America* 90/91 (2002), edited by Benny Liew.

It is clear that these discourses, the one from home and the other from abroad, are motored and motivated by different agendas. A quick scrutiny of the two discourses will reveal stark differences in their motivation and mission. The key terms for articulations emerging from home might begin with Aids, backward classes, base communities, burakumins, capitalism, dalits, development, environment, free-trade, or World Trade Organization. The list for the diasporic scenario might begin with alterity, border-thinking, body-politics, carnival, deconstruction, the end of history, mimicry and so forth. Similarly, these two discourses summon and anchor their work in

6. Edward W. Said, *Peace and Its Discontents: Gaza-Jericho 1993–1995* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 96.

different families of authors and texts. The theologies at home might include Ahn Byung Mu, Ambedkar, Banerjea, Chao, Gandhi, Jyoti Rao Phule, Samartha, Song, Kitamori and Koyama. Diasporic discourse might begin with Althusser, Anzaldua, Bakhtin, Bhabha, Cabral, Derrida, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Edward Said, Amy Tan and Žižek. There are methodological differences too. One is more worried about the practical task at hand than text or technique, whereas the other is concerned with multiple identities and intersections between race and religion, power and knowledge. I may have over-stressed the differences, for both are minority discourses needing to preserve their distinctiveness and legitimacy through wanting to enter the dominant discourse through a fusion of Christian narratives with Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and secular stories. Nevertheless, the dissimilarities are palpable: one is located firmly in the cultural, pastoral and political milieu of the people and explores the social conditions affecting them, whereas the other is desperately seeking a home and acceptability in the academy, enamoured of and entrapped by its theoretical sophistry and methodological procedures.

One of the questions that diasporic hermeneutic has forced us to face is, who are the authentic representatives, the ones who stayed behind at home or those who left to find new homes elsewhere? Will Indians, Koreans, Africans and Cubans who are physically resident in their respective homelands continue to mediate a true and authentic theology, or will it become the preserve of the domiciled, diasporan intellectuals? What diasporic hermeneutics has done is to make regional-based theologies such as African, Asian or Latin American almost redundant. Does geographical location provide the parameters for theology, or can one frame and shape geographically inflected theologies far-removed from the safety of their original territorial confines?

Who speaks for whom and who is the new authentic voice will be debated for a long time to come. Which will be the reliable place of productive energy—the hustle and bustle of Madurai, Nairobi or Nanking, or university departments in Harvard, Birmingham, Paris or Madrid—will depend not least on who has the economic resources and expertise to set the agenda and produce a vibrant set of theological visions.

Finally, these shifting contours are further modified by a new entrant—postcolonialism, which is seeking, like liberation theology, to unsettle Western hegemony and address the concerns of the 'other'. If liberation theology is the product of modernity, postcolonialism is of post-modernity. If liberation has its roots in Christian values, postcolonialism's pedigree is in left secular humanism. Liberation emerged as a way of dealing with people's suffering and has its base in church communities, whereas postcolonialism arose in anti-colonial struggle and is now located in the academy, seeing its

task as to rectify the discursive defamation of the 'other'. One tries to tend the victims of past and present forms of neo-colonialism, whereas the other tries to challenge the colonizers both old and new. One seeks to tell the truth about the powerful to the poor; the other strives to tell truth to power. One attempts to reclaim the monotheistic god as a benevolent god of the poor, the other investigates the colonizing tendencies of this very monotheistic god and seeks to understand the many-layered polytheistic context out of which early Christianity emerged. If the aim of liberation hermeneutics was to understand and interpret and make the text secure, postcolonialism, on the other hand, perceives its task as critiquing, problematizing and exposing contradictions and inadequacies in both the text and its interpretation. Liberation hermeneutic privileged the Bible as a sound and secure book for the faithful, whereas postcolonialism makes the tenets, theology and ideology of the book messy, awkward and complicated.

Let me add a worrying concern—in the current political climate, which is palpably conservative, liberation is equated with terror and terrorism. Any resistance movement which fights for the rights the rest of us take for granted is routinely branded as a terrorist outfit. It is here that postcolonialism becomes a serviceable tool. It can not only bring to the fore the potency of past liberation movements, warts and all, but can also provide lessons and warnings gleaned from these previous emancipatory instances in order to face the present prevailing oppression.

Temptations and Triumphalism

On occasions like this, when a new association is formed, one is consumed with an excessive passion to be triumphalistic and utter a John R. Mott-type rallying call. Remember his speech at the conclusion of the 1910 Edinburgh meeting, 'the end of the conference is the beginning of the conquest'. The temptation is to say 'go forth, reclaim the immaculate power and centrality of the Book', and urge us to go back to the source and to reiterate its power as the Word. This type of rhetoric emerged at a time Asia when was seen as a mission field. Biblical studies in Asia have been tethered to and determined by mission interests. In a multi-religious society which is riddled with so many sacred texts, and where the word 'missionary' has few positive connotations, the Bible needs a non-missionary profile. I see the task as not returning to the book, but repositioning it as a repository of an earlier paradigmatic vision of a community which has to take its place now with other paradigmatic visions fashioned by other faith communities, and situating the Christian scriptures as part of a wider intertextual continuum. As a collective memory, the Bible is constrained and determined by the culture in which it was produced, and its contents remain unfinished and uncertain.

As an illuminating model it is not intended for straightforward application. Asian biblical hermeneutics has been relentless in its attempt to make the Bible speak to our time and has seen its task as rereading, contextualizing, appropriating it, as if the message and task could be easily reinstated in our times, whereas what we need to do is to emphasize the strangeness, alienness, and incompleteness of the Book, and not seek to defend the more irrelevant and offensive messages embedded in it. Every text has a meaning but not every text is meaningful, even within a sacred text.

The second temptation is to call for a renewal to bridge the gap between the church and the seminary. All along, Asian biblical hermeneutics has been addressing the church, and Asian biblical theology has been acting as a cheer-leader for the churches and has provided enormous biblical support by squeezing out meanings when they are not apparent from the texts in order to facilitate the church's effort to indigenize, engage in development work and tackle ecological issues. The time has come to turn our attention to the academy. In their attempts to cater to the Church's needs, Asian biblical scholars have isolated themselves from the academy and at times viewed its articulations with hostility. This isolation has resulted in intellectual sloppiness in our work. Globalization does not simply mean Starbucks, cheap air travel and smart shopping malls. It also involves constantly interacting with global ideas and intervening in international debates. There are a number of academic areas where Asian voices are hardly heard, and, even when they are, they simply replicate the mainstream vision. There are no Asian voices in the Jesus Seminar, nor are any Asian scholars involved in the study of the Gnostic gospels. Rarely do we find Asian scholars involved in the study of Arabic or Persian versions of the Bible. Then there is a whole world of African, Latin American, Caribbean and Pacific biblical hermeneutics with which Asian biblical scholars seldom interact. We have remained so contained within our Asian world, ignorant even of the existence of these discourses. What is required is an intellectual adventurousness which goes beyond the protectiveness and diffidence that keeps so many Asian biblical scholars within their own little sectarian, caste-ist and ecclesiastical orbits. Asian involvement might throw new light on some of the issues I have mentioned, and help to change the course and direction of debates which are currently driven by a Eurocentric agenda.

A third temptation is to think in terms of 'rejuvenating Asian values'. A closer examination will reveal that when someone speaks of Asian values, it inevitably means only one thing, namely the 'spirituality' for which Asia is renowned. Routinely and repeatedly, we hear that spirituality is the backbone of Asia and synthesis our critical method. Invoking Asian spirituality has resulted in neglecting other values of Asia, such as reason, rational argument and debate. The call for spirituality goes back to the colonial era when nationalists and the newly converted 'natives', faced with Western

Christianity and modernism, made a stark distinction between the spiritual and the material. Partha Chatterjee describes how anticolonial nationalism worked by positing these two domains, 'the material and spiritual'. The material is 'the outside world' where the West 'has proved its superiority' in science and technology, economy and statecraft, and the East by contrast was found wanting. 'The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one's spiritual culture'. This, in Chatterjee's view, is the 'fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa'.[7] This is a kind of Orientalism—not the tainted variety which Edward Said exposed in his writings, but a calculated or tactical orientalism employed by orientals themselves, as a way of getting even with the West.

Fascination with Asia's spirituality meant not only disregarding Asia's materialistic and rational traditions but also the misperception that Asia had nothing to offer in the field of astronomy, medicine, political economy, linguistics, science and technology. Asia is projected as a place of incessant spirituality and illogical mysticism and her people as lacking intellectual curiosity. There is a new wave of studies challenging the notion that reason, rationality, debate and critical thinking are exclusive to the Western tradition. The influence of Arabic thinking on the European Enlightenment and science has already been documented. Asia, too, and especially the Chinese contribution to the European Enlightenment has been highlighted by John Hobson. Arguing that many of the achievements which enabled the West to dominate were actually disseminated from China, Hobson writes: 'Chinese ideas were particularly important in stimulating the continental European and British Enlightenment. Chinese ideas influenced European ideas on government, moral philosophy, artistic style, clothes, furniture and wallpaper, gardens, political economy, tea-drinking and many other matters'.[8] The Enlightenment idea of regarding reason as central to everything has made Confucius 'the patron saint of eighteenth century Enlightenment'.[9] According to Hobson, Voltaire, one of the architects of the European Enlightenment, 'drew on Chinese conceptions of politics, religion and philosophy—all of which were based on rational principles—in order to attack the European preference for hereditary aristocracy. Indeed, many of the major thinkers derived their preference for "rational method" from China'.[10]

7. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 6.

8. John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 194.

9. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, p. 195.

10. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*, p. 195.

Amartya Sen, the Indian Nobel Laureate, has traversed the Indian epics, classics and recorded history to demonstrate that discussion and dissension, protest and resistance, have always been part of Indian discursive tradition. He provides a number of instances such as: the 'arguing combat' of Gargi, the woman scholar in *Brihandāranyaka Upanishad*;[11] 'the important motivational question' raised by Maitreyžī, the wife of Yājnavalya;[12] the Buddhist councils under the patronage of Ashoka, which had a 'great commitment to discussion as a means of social progress' and were trying to resolve disputes between different schools of thought;[13] and the interfaith durbars of the Emperor Akbar, which were marked by 'a celebration of reasoned dialogues' where the 'pursuit of reason rather than reliance on tradition is the way to address difficult problems of social harmony'.[14] Like spirituality and synthetic thinking, intellectual debates and critical awareness were integral to Asian mentality and were not simply borrowed from the European Enlightenment. I am sure there are parallels in Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese and Indonesian traditions as well.

What I am contending against here is not the spirituality and religious inventiveness of Asia. nor the survival potential provided by a synthetic mode of thinking, but the bypassing of the Asian intellectual and critical tradition.

Professional Societies and their Shortcomings

My call to get involved in the academy and to recover our intellectual tradition conveniently leads to my next point. We need to be careful not to replicate some of the vices of the other biblical bodies such as SBL and SNTS. One can see how these esteemed societies have unwittingly helped to encourage at least four such vices—scripturalism, historicism, religionism and specialism. I am not the first to identify these, but it is worth recalling this at a time when we form a new association[15]. First, scripturalism. In spite of giving the impression of being critical, what we see is a sophisticated Biblicism which believes in the magic of the text and the permanent significance of the events textualized in both testaments. The text is endowed with enormous weight and authority. It is this fascination with the text which brings together interpreters from varying theological and ideological

11. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 7.

12. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*y, p. 8.

13. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, p. 15.

14. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, p. 16.

15. See, for instance, Hector Avalos 'The Ideology of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Demise of an Academic Profession', *The SBL Forum* 4.6 (August 2006), online edition.

persuasions, from evangelicals to Marxists to post-structuralists. We, in Asia, have a relaxed attitude to texts and we need to remind ourselves that texts are only pointers to reality and not themselves reality, and that there are other ways of experiencing and communicating that reality. Second, historicism, a historical approach absorbed in such activities as a philological study of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek words, or concerned with the search for the Ur text of Mark, without raising the contemporary relevance of biblical narratives. Third, religionism, which tries to present a systematic biblical religion which draws upon contrasting Jewish and Hellenistic concepts. This hybridized biblical religion sets the standard for both ethical issues and human redemption. Such a predominantly Christian standard-setting agenda will be problematic in a multi-religious context. Finally, specialism, its purpose the production of experts. We have not only put asunder the testaments but have also produced specialists within these testaments. So now we have Markan scholars, Pauline pundits and experts on Ezekiel. In an era of increased specialization, sectarian advocacy and niche thinking, what we need to do is to make connections and act as bridges within and across the discipline, and speak intelligently to the academy and a wider audience. We need to guard against producing scholars with only narrow and obscure interests. In John le Carré's novel, *Absolute Friends*, Dimitri, one the characters, says that his understanding of the world is informed not by the writings of specialists but by writers who combine scholarly work with alertness to people's needs:

> I have in mind such thinkers as the Canadian Naomi Klein, India's Arundhati Roy who pleads for a different way of seeing, your British George Monbiot and Mark Curtis, Australia's John Pilger, America's Noam Chomsky, the American Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz, and the Franco-American Susan George of the World Social Forum.[16]

When I said earlier that we need to be academically involved, it was this type of involvement celebrated by Dimitri in le Carré's novel that I had in mind—namely, the refusal to speak only to specialist audiences, avoidance of the expert-speak which alienates people, and, most importantly, placing the needs of people high among one's priorities rather than merely scholarly niceties.

Future Continuous

What are the pressing matters which we need to attend to. First, how do we react to the forces of globalization which are sweeping through the world and collapsing all cultures into one. One possible antidote to this rampant

16. John le Carré, *Absolute Friends* (London: Coronet Books, 2004), pp. 276-77.

universalism is to explore and revive culture-specific hermeneutics, but without replicating the excesses and errors of past experimentation. When an earlier form of globalization in the form of British colonialism tried to introduce and replace local religions with Christianity, Indian reformers drew upon the large store of Indian myths and texts in their cultural heritage, and spoke to the masses in the stories they knew well. Hermeneutics works much more significantly through articulating theological meanings which resonate with peoples' cultural experience and expression than through mere symbolic gestures or translations. It is not a question of setting the story of Christ within the quintessential metaphors of Indian, Korean or Chinese life and culture, but of constructing new stories in the light of unfolding world events, the changing experience of sexual orientation, caste sensibilities and class motivations. It is not a matter of simply using Bantu, Tamil or Kasi idioms to restate Judeo-Christian ideas, but of seeking to express new truths by re-mixing local and global, biblical and non-biblical, Christian and non-Christian elements. Faced with new realities, this new process of mixing serves not merely to translate biblical truth, but to expand and elucidate it, and, more pertinently, to emancipate it from its narrow exclusivism. This is not to advocate a return to nativism: cultural specificity itself is not enough. One has to be political, otherwise we repeat the mistakes of the old indigenizing project which was marred by its neglect of political analysis and commitment. Neither are cultural specificities necessarily superior because they resonate with national aspirations and are part of a people's library. Along with more positive aspects, they come with the whole baggage of patriarchal, anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic values. They can provide a virulent agenda for those who want to espouse a romantic ruralism or create a singular idealized past.

Secondly, and paraphrasing Fanon, those engaged in marginal hermeneutics need to avoid behaving like natives who dream of substituting themselves for the colonialists. Among those who celebrate the shifting of Christianity's centre of gravity from Western to non-Western countries may be Christians with colonial intentions of expansion and conquest. It is not the numerical power of the Christianity which is emerging, especially in Africa, but the type—conservative, politically obscurantist, Pentecostal and charismatic—that gives cause for concern. If in the '70s theologians in Latin America brought a new lease of life to the Bible and made it relevant to people's needs, in the new millennium a small of group of church leaders in Africa are making the same Bible an uncaring, mean-spirited and cruel book by using it uncritically, especially in the vilification of gays and lesbians. The imposition of one's culture on others is plainly unacceptable, whether done by past colonialists or contemporary post-imperialists. The margin between postcolonial pride and imperial intentions is imperceptibly

blurred. What those scholars who work within the liberation-postcolonial framework have to do is to make clear that the Bible we read today is not the same as the one read or heard by the contemporaries of the Priestly writers or of Paul, as this handful of self-appointed interpreters would have us believe, but is a book which is continuously open to a re-reading of its moral and theological claims, a re-reading pressed upon it by intellectual inquiry, human-rights struggles and democratic aspirations.

Thirdly, at a time when there is an open conflict between a single and secure meaning of the text and competing and multiple interpretations, the task of Asian biblical hermeneutics is to side with and encourage open and pluralistic readings. Not a single day passes without some new group agitating and arguing that they know the truth and others have got it hopelessly wrong. There are Christian fundamentalists who oppose plays and films which deviate from received texts. Muslims resist novels and cartoons for the sake of scriptural purity. Hindu bhaktas frighten film crews for besmirching Hindu sentiments. Secular ideologies are also in the game. It was the Marxist government in West Bengal which banned the film, *The City of Joy*. These guardians of traditions act as if they were divinely approved copy editors.

The paranoia for the single reading has been the result of the replacement of the once prevalent four-fold meaning of texts—literal, allegorical, typological and spiritual—with the 'original' meaning established by historical criticism. The current interpreters of every fundamentalist tradition are heirs to this legacy, which insists on a single and stable meaning of a text and on thus ruling out and depriving the text of any possibility of multiple readings. The story of Babel is a warning to those who espouse a single reading. The narrative, as I read it, is not about a united humanity but about humanity's attempt to use a solitary language as a way of reaching heaven and assuming divine powers. As the narrative puts it, God found that having a single language is 'only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them'. The Tower of Babel is the story of the defeat of interpretative colonialism which insists that all speak the same language and accept one discourse. It is a reminder of how those who control the discourse want to be seen as spokespeople for God. Ultimately the question for Asian biblical interpreters is how do we treat the Bible. Do we see it as a book with a singular and static meaning, transferable to all contexts, or as a book pulsating with competing and at times unrelated meanings which have to be constantly negotiated to meet the needs of changing contemporary contexts.

I started with the Bible and let me end with it. What of its future? The future of the Christian Bible lies in its ability to find its place within the ocean of sacred oral and written stories and texts. This means losing its

Western trappings and posturings and becoming part of the family of Eastern and other texts. The Christian Bible, the supreme artefact of modernity, has until now lived in splendid isolation from its own West Asian environment. This separation was further facilitated by Max Müller when he made the monumental mistake of omitting the Bible from his epic, multi-volume edition of the sacred books of the East. The Bible's non-Western credibility does not depend simply on the fact that half of the New Testament was written in Asia or written for the communities there. It depends on the impact and influence of eastern religious traditions on the nascent faith. Biblical ideas were shaped not only by Hebrew, Hellenistic and Gnostic thinking, but, as scholars have increasingly come to acknowledge, by Buddhist and Eastern teachings as well. Recent research has recognized the presence of Buddhist conceptual and textual allusions in the New Testament writings. One of the enduring contributions of the much-maligned historical-critical method is that textual traditions are not pure, unconnected and uncontaminated by outside influences, but are interactive and creatively juxtapose concepts and ideas from one another. Religious texts are not 'closely sealed' as the Book of Revelation wants us believe. The imperial claims that are made for religious texts are not sustainable. The New Testament does not replace the Hebrew Old Testament nor is the Koran the last testament. The Bhagvadgita will not be the eternal gospel for all people, nor will the Buddhist Dhamma take over the whole world. All the great religions are strong and vibrant, too strong and vibrant for such takeovers and eclipses. Under these circumstances, the credibility and the usefulness of these texts will be enhanced as they acknowledge their interconnectedness and the overlapping of their narratives. Salman Rushdie's novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, put it better in its celebration of Asia's religious plenitude and hospitality: 'Our lives, our stories flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete'.[17]

17. Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 37.

Part IV

THEORIES, RE-TRACINGS

9

CATCHING THE POST OR HOW I BECAME AN ACCIDENTAL THEORIST

> What great teachers we were, when we didn't worry about our methods.
>
> *Daniel Pennac*[1]

> Hurt by too many German philosophers in translation.
>
> *Narrator*[2]

What follows is a somewhat haphazard attempt to re-arrange and reorder some important hermeneutical moments as an interpreter, and how I survived and tried to stay sane in the field of biblical studies. In doing this, I will be violating the idea that any theological articulation should be devoid of personal reflections. This academic dictum, some of us eventually came to realize, has a sub-text: outside the sanctioned confines of theoretical frameworks you are incapable of thinking for yourself.

All was Quiet on the Eastern Front

Like most of my generation of Sri Lankans (at that time it was known as Ceylon), I went to study theology in India, at the United Theological College (UTC), Bangalore. This was well before the escalation of regional and vernacular theological education. The mention of UTC evokes two images, the twin towers of ecclesiastical discourse—ecumenical and liberal. The label ecumenical is easy to explain. UTC being probably the first inter-denominational theological college in Asia, the description, ecumenical was apt. 'Liberal' needs some explanation. It had a narrow application. In this context, it meant that students were exposed to a then new and contentious entrant—the historical critical method, at that time known as the higher criticism. Later, I will discuss what prompted the founding missionaries of the college, most of whom were products of evangelical theology, to

1. Daniel Pennac, *The Rights of the Reader* (London: Walker Books, 2006), p. 21.
2. Daniel Alarcón, *War by Candlelight* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 79.

grudgingly embrace modern criticism and expose us hapless students to what was xenophobically described as 'the German menace'. I will also point out the effectiveness and also the tensions and traumas of applying the method in the sub-continent. Apart from this liberal element, in all other respects, and like most theological institutions, UTC was pretty conservative and not much more than pseudo-scholarly, and this image still persists.

Theological education at that time focussed on two things—the Bible and Christian doctrine. The rest of the subjects were like the extra features we get in the current mobile phones. It is up to you to select and use the features that tickle your fancy. Indian Christian theology was unheard of at that time. Kaj Baago's *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity*, introducing some of these hitherto neglected Indian Christian writings, came out in the early '60s. It was nearly two more decades before Indian Christian theology was established as a proper discipline. Apart from an introductory course, there was no compulsion to study Indian religions. To paraphrase what Paul said to the Athenians—we lived and moved and had our being in these religions, but they were not seen as a theological priority. Indian Church History, too, was treated with disdain. Although the Christian church has been in existence in India since the inception of Christianity, it was not included in the curriculum. The bits and pieces we came to know about Indian and Sri Lankan church history were introduced to us more or less incidentally through courses like Early Church History and History of the Ecumenical Movement.

Let me first say what really went on in our theology classes. Those were the days before 'indigenization' and 'contextualization' became buzz-words and were incorporated into theological discourse. Such ideas were not considered interesting, or worthy to be addressed in systematic theology classes, and were promptly consigned to the penal colonies of worship and liturgy classes. It was the theological writings of Aquinas, Barth, Brunner and Baillie, removed from their original historical contexts, which pervaded our class rooms. A considerable amount of time was spent not only on these difficult foreign authors and their books, but also on defending the universal validity of their methods and message. The prevailing view was that, like the word of God, these great theologians were speaking for all people and for all contexts. The classes proceeded on the assumption that one-theology fitted all contexts. Koyama's Northern Thai farmers were left on their own to flounder on with their water buffaloes, cock-fighting and sticky rice.

This was the time when theologians were busy writing obituaries. Some obituaries made a great splash. *Time* magazine came out with a cover posing the question: Is God Dead? Although the imagined transcendental God of the West was dead, gods and goddesses in Asia were alive and thriving. While American theologians such as Van Buren, Altizer and Hamilton

were proclaiming that God was dead, in India Raimundo Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* was reviving the ancient thesis that God was very much alive and that the divine presence could be felt in other faith traditions—a thesis which K.M. Banerjea and T.E. Slater had espoused during the colonial period. It was all there to be seen. Rapid industrialization and the accompanying transport networks enabled people to travel and see for themselves busy shrines and temples of gods and goddesses.

In addition, at a time when the West was celebrating its new-found secular vision, most of the former colonies were gaining their freedom and undertaking massive redevelopment programmes, and the vigorously debated theological issues connected with this were going unnoticed in both the Western mainstream and our own sub-continental theologies. While we were struggling to enter the thought-world of Western theology, it was study-centres such as the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue Centre in Colombo which were raising and addressing the issues connected with rapid development, urbanization, and religious resurgence in our newly independent countries. Unconcerned with Panikkar's book, the reinvigorated popular piety, and the issues of nation-building, we ploughed on with Barth, Brunner, Bultmann and Baillie.

The dominant theologies which held sway at the time were the secular theologies and biblical theology. Secular theology and its worst incarnation, 'the death of god', was well past its sell-by date in the West, but its influence was palpable in Indian theological classes. This was the brief period when sceptics and doubters held sway, before the current God brigade began to assert their virulent version of Christianity. One of the texts that became almost a founding document of the time was Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Written at a time when he was facing trial, these letters were complex, layered reflections on a variety of matters varying from the personal to politics to theology. Put loosely, one of his theological proposals, which became almost the slogan for the secular '60s, was that one should live in the world as if God did not exist. This idea—and indeed the spell Bonhoeffer's entire life, work and death seemed to cast on his admirers—so mesmerized the theological fraternity that nobody cared to point out that his letters invariably ended with biblical quotations or a commendation of the recipient to the care of God, 'God bless you and all of us each day and give us strong faith'. What such commendations demonstrate is that theologians are most appealing when they are most paradoxical and when they embrace ambiguity.

Now about the biblical classes—but before I come to that, let me recall a less serious matter which was nevertheless vital to my well-being. I was the only one doing Greek at the Master's level and the classes were held at

Harold Moulton's house (son of the famous Moulton who wrote the Greek grammar). Harold, like me, was a serious student of cricket (read fanatic). This was before computers took over time-tabling and class-room booking. The date and time of the classes were fixed by Harold and myself with careful regard to the programme of cricket test matches between India and England, so that they did not clash with the broadcast commentaries. Live cricket telecasting, like Big Brother, was yet to hold the nation in thrall. Harold, like the Victorian amateurs, knew there was a world outside Greek syntax and the Markan Secret.

Needless to say, the critical principles and historical methods of the Enlightenment, which our missionary educators espoused, continued to be applied to study of the Bible. These were the halcyon days of biblical theology. Walter Wink was yet to come up with his startling claim: 'Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt'. Anyone in the discipline will know that historical criticism is a collective term covering a series of textual investigations which evolved gradually over the years in the West, as lower, higher, source, form and redaction criticism. These methods were introduced to us, though, as a single finished product, as if all these developments had happened simultaneously. It was as if carrier pigeons and emails were all bursting onto the scene together.

Unlike the current practice, where students are offered fast food-style ten-week salamied modules, the courses tended to run the whole academic year. For instance, we used to start with Mark in June and expected to finish it the following April, though we were lucky if we got beyond ch. 8. This was well before the academic managers inflicted on us heavy-handed ideas like 'learning outcomes', 'personal transferable skills' and 'effectiveness of design and content of the curriculum'. Everything was done at a leisurely pace. This was the academic equivalent of forty years in the wilderness. We minutely dissected every single verse of Mark. We gazed upon small variations and minor contradictions until they were magnified into great theological propositions. Meanings were squeezed out of particles and conjunctions. The narrow quibbles of Vincent Taylor, C.H. Dodd, or Norman Perrin were noted with equal measures of awe, intimidation and boredom. The classes were a kind of mental torture which some future human-rights activist might care to refer to the International Court of Justice as a peacetime war crime.

The exegetical focus was far too narrow. Paul's letter to Romans was restricted to chs. 1–8, and the pivotal parts where he deals with election and God's initiative in choosing other people—vital issues in a multireligious context—were inexplicably left out. The Biblical Studies curriculum was vigorously laundered and scrubbed clean of the inter-faith matters with which Paul deals, especially in 9–11. The fact that the curriculum framers

failed to include this segment was an indication of the deadly grip Barth had on them. Most of the time was spent determining which were the genuine letters of Paul. The number of Pauline letters depended partly on what German biblical scholars (yes, it was German scholars) had pronounced at that time, and partly on the theological persuasion of those who taught the epistles. If the lecturer was liberal, the Pauline corpus was restricted to only five—Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and 1 Thessalonians, and the rest were dismissed as tainted. The identification of the beloved disciple was another guessing game we used to play. The identity varied from John to Timothy to Philemon, again depending on the latest doctoral monographs from the Western academy. Later, I discovered through R.C. Amore that the idea of the beloved disciple was closely allied to and perhaps derived from Buddhist sources, with Ananda, the disciple of the Buddha, providing the prototype. Biblical Studies was essentially Eurocentric and the methods were Western, and there was no reference to any Indian way of reading the Bible. Any mention of *dhvani* would have meant the name of a fancy Indian curry. There was not even a hermeneutical circle for us to dance around.

The other hot methodological issue which reigned supreme at that time was demythologization—an off-shoot of the historical method. Bultmann become a patron saint or villain, depending on one's theological inclinations. The popular ditty at that time was:

> Hark! the herald angels sing
> Bultmann is the latest thing
> At least, they would if he had not
> Demythologized the lot.

Put simply, demythologization was an attempt to strip supernatural elements from the biblical narratives and so make the message applicable to a modern audience, specifically one of German Lutherans. No one bothered to ask how a discourse worked out in Germany to suit its theological needs was relevant to students in India. The whole discussion was marked by two absences. One that we were not told about was the Indian proto-Bultmann who had done a similar exercise during colonial times, Raja Rammohun Roy. Roy's *Precepts of Jesus* (1820), which exemplified the spirit of the Enlightenment, was an attempt to cleanse the gospels of their narrow dogmatism and free the biblical God to be God of 'all living creatures, without distinction of caste, rank or wealth'.[3] I have shown elsewhere how Roy's agenda was larger than the one Bultmann had adopted. Secondly, in

3. Rammohun Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness; Extracted from the Books of the New Testament, Ascribed to the Four Evangelists with Translations into Sungscrit and Bengalee* (Calcutta: The Baptist Mission Press, 1820), p. 1.

our tightly focused biblical classes, nobody was troubled by the abundance of myths and mythological figures which pervaded Asian cultures, and the various functions they performed in the lives of Indians and Sri Lankans. The demythologizing project led to the perception that anything to do with Indian myths was irrational, untrue and unscientific. Unlike German theologians fed on the diet of the Enlightenment, Indians took it for granted that myths were devised to deal with the human mess and to cope with a certain types of event, from natural disasters to personal tragedies. Ananda Coomaraswamy's definition of myth as the 'penultimate truth, of which all experience is a temporal reflection', and myths as 'timeless and placeless' and 'true nowhere and everywhere', and that can be told 'with equal authority, from different points of view', hardly entered the culture-free zone of Biblical Studies. What was needed was not the debunking of biblical stories as myths, but encouragement to re-use and reconfigure old myths to meet the practical and political needs of the time. The writings of these German giants were imposed as the Gospel truth on generations of students in the former colonies, whose scholarly progress depended on being able to regurgitate their blinkered ideas, however inappropriate to our circumstances. As these were the days of pre-Saidian innocence, so we lapped up everything from the German giants. Before I describe how the scales started to fall from our eyes, a brief comment on the historical-critical method.

Troubling Tools and their Troubled History

The intellectual landscape of Germany which had produced higher criticism, as it was known at that time, was somewhat different from that of India. A mixture of pietism and rationalism contributed to the emergence of the method. The anti-dogmatic and anti-institutional stance espoused by pietism combined with scientific inquiry to create space for rational criticism to emerge, leading to the questioning of the veracity of biblical accounts of the creation and the patriarchal narratives. The emergence of science did not trigger off secularization in Asia, as it had done in Europe, nor did it pose a threat to Asian religious beliefs. India did not witness such a traumatic disturbance, and scientific inquiry as such was never seen as a direct danger to religion. Indeed, the contrary was true: 'The advancements in both science and religion went hand in hand from the ancient times. Scientific developments had attained a significantly advanced level even during the Vedic age, and never had been in conflict with religion'.[4]

4. V. Indira Devi, *Secularisation of Indian Mind: A Study of Political Ideas in India from 1885–1914* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2002), p. 60.

Historical criticism, as anyone who is familiar with it will know, is good at providing a close reading of the text and identifying problems surrounding the textual history of a narrative. Its weaknesses are many and these have been well-rehearsed: it breaks narratives into separate pieces, scrutinizes single words, deconstructs phrases, exposes textual inconsistencies. What happens in historical criticism is similar to what goes on in a kebab shop. The meat is sliced and served in pita bread. Like the chef, the biblical critic carves a large chunk of narrative into palatable pericopes. Instead of lettuce, the interpreter embellishes the pericope with his or her lexical wizardry. The distinctive Hellenistic and Hebraic influences are served up as a hot chilli sauce. The trouble with such a carve-up is that it doesn't help you to ask the big questions. Its focus it is so much on minor details that the larger picture is overlooked. In its relentless quest for the constitution of the text and its narrativity, historical criticism misses the human story residing in the text.

The role of the historical-critical method in metropolitan centres and the colonial margins was an intriguing one. The greatest damage that historical-criticism did was not in its questioning of the veracity of the creation and flood narratives, or in exposing the inadequacy of biblical ethical codes, or undermining the biblical concepts of providence and prophecy, but, more worryingly, in making the contents of the Bible look primitive and uncouth beside the march of modern progress. In the stages of human development and human thought, biblical narratives came to be seen as the literary product of tribal people and uncivilized times. Seen from the urbane, romantic and humane eighteenth-century Western perspective, the biblical myths and morality looked crude and in need of refinement and civilization. The decline in the West of the Bible as the definitive supplier of information pertaining to human development and knowledge began long before the advent of historical criticism. Historical criticism, nevertheless, provided the final nail in the coffin. Under the severe onslaught of the Enlightenment, biblical scholars found it difficult in the West to uphold the idea of the Bible as a uniquely distinguished book deserving special attention. When the Bible thus lost its moral and religious high ground, in order to traverse the ensuing morass, it was re-conceived as another form of literature. With its images and poetry, it came to be regarded as radiating sublime truth. Cut loose from its doctrinal roots, it was refashioned as part of the secular narrative of the West. It came to seen as a human document and so the principle of *sola scriptura* came to be regarded as an exaggerated claim. While in the metropolitan centres the Bible which played a pre-eminent role in providing spiritual as well as legal guidelines, scientific knowledge and ethical principles came under a severe re-appraisal, in the colonies the Bible was projected hubristically as a culturally and theologically superior text.

One of the driving forces of historical criticism—the idea of linear history—proved to be a profitable ally for the missionaries in the colonies. The founding missionaries of the UTC at the beginning of the twentieth century did not view 'higher' or 'modern' criticism as the work of the devil bent on destroying the basic biblical tenets, but as a collaborator in their missionary work. They were not deterred by the horror of a soulless tool being thoughtlessly applied to transcendental texts, nor were they dismayed by the spiritual damage that such a technical examination would cause. While the old theory of verbal infallibility offered confusion and contradicted some of the biblical claims, for these missionary educators modern criticism enabled them to place God's revelation in a chronological sequence and order, and to trace the growth of a people from a primitive and often cruel and barbaric condition to the glorious status of a chosen people. Missionary educators saw such a progression being replayed in India. Just as the Israelites had been extremely slow to apprehend the mind of God, a similar slowness among the Indians almost convinced the missionaries of their eventual enlightenment. One missionary educator, writing under the name X.P., went on to defend the introduction of modern criticism in the mission field when many, including the British and Foreign Bible Society, queried its application: 'The object of the present writer has been to urge that the increasing acceptance of the results of the higher criticism need be no cause of alarm to those who are interested in the spread of Foreign Missions. We as individuals may have to modify our views, and in some respects our methods of teaching'. Such a notion of a teleological progress, as envisaged by historical-critical scholarship, is very much stacked against the colonized, who would always be seen as falling behind in the imagined march of progress. Such a constrained logic not only provided a justification for 'redeeming' the incorrigible natives but also affirmed the righteousness of the imperial endeavour of the West. Historical-critical scholarship, thus became an ally of imperialism, with the Bible masking the exploitation of colonialism.

When the Bible was introduced as a class text (in the Marquess of Tweeddale's phrase) in Indian schools, after much persistent lobbying by Anglicists against the religious neutrality of the British, as a way of luring upper-caste Hindus to Christianity, it was not promoted for its literary values but for its religious significance—more specifically, for its condemnatory potentiality. A book which generated so much religious uncertainty in the West was re-branded for India as a source text for religious belief, morality and in particular for its convictive capability. Whereas in the West its poetic images were seen as a pure and lofty form of spiritual aesthetics, in India the biblical images were seen as a way of exposing the spiritual inadequacies of Indians, and, as such, a vehicle for eventual conversion. As

one the missionary journals of the time put it, these biblical images would give the reader 'a shocking spectre of his own deformity, and haunt him, even in his sleep'.[5]

Despite reservations about historical criticism today, it is still a serviceable tool. One of the enduring results of source criticism is to demonstrate that sacred texts are not hermetically sealed entities. They echo each other's ideas, however faint or tenuous the connections may be. Teachings which are strongly promoted as a singular characteristic of one religious tradition may, in fact, not be the exclusive property of that tradition. For instance, the ideas of heaven and hell, resurrection of the body, life after death, teachings on Satan, demons and angels, and apocalyptic beliefs such as millennial saviours, the ending of the entire cosmos, are found in both the Hebrew and Christian testaments, and may appear as typical of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but actually have their roots in Zoroastrian sources. Initially entering and influencing the Jewish worldview, they were later borrowed, clarified or queried by Christianity and Islam. While Judeo-Christian revisioning of these concepts is recognized, the conceptual and intellectual roots are Iranian. Similarly, the New Testament ideal of 'non-violence, the concept of treasure in heaven, the quest for a pure mind' and the 'doctrines of the pre-existence of Jesus, the stories about his birth and infancy and the belief in his return to heaven followed the Buddhist model'.[6] At a time when the purity of a textual tradition is marshalled as a key weapon in the spurious war of religious certitudes, the considerable achievement of historical-critical scholarship has been to draw attention to the interrelatedness of different texts and demolish any claim for pure and unalloyed status.

The trouble with historical-criticism is that did not go all the way. Some of its targets such as angels, miracles and unnatural incidents in the biblical narratives, were easy ones, irritants to the modern mind. But its investigative incisiveness arbitrarily stopped at the claim that Jesus was exceptionally used by God. The method and its practitioners were tethered to its Christian roots and were reluctant to question one of the crudest manifestations of the Christian God as abusing and inflicting pain and punishment on his son, and then engaging in the most spectacular supernatural act of all, by raising him from the dead so that the world could be saved. Faced with the cruelty of this death and the accompanying images of savagery, even liberal theologians who employ historical-critical tools resort to mythological and pietistic defence which runs along the well-trodden argument that God's

5. Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 55.

6. Roy C. Amore, *Two Masters, One Message: The Lives and Teachings of Gautama and Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), p. 185.

ways are inscrutable and humans are incapable of understanding the true meaning of the event. There is often a self-censorship and a refusal to pursue what Jacques Berlinerblau calls, 'the delectably blasphemous implications of its own discoveries'.[7]

Let me conclude this section with two characters, one fictional and one historical whose words could be applicable to historical-criticism. In a sketch Harold Pinter wrote for the BBC, 'The Trouble at the Works', a sketch about a boss and a trade union official—the employee tells the industrialist that his workers were no longer interested in making a highly specialized machine tool. 'What do they want to make it in its place?' inquires the boss. 'Trouble' replies the union official.[8] This is exactly what historical criticism should do—make trouble and be an academic nuisance. The second is what Ed Murray, the CBS journalist who fought Senator Joe McCarthy said about the power and potential of TV, in the recent film, 'Good Night, Good Luck'. His closing words were: 'The instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes it can even inspire, but it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box'. To translate the last sentence, historical criticism will be merely technique and weasel words on a page unless its services are used for empowerment and emancipation. Our critical tools are by nature not defensive and are at their best when they are trenchantly offensive. They are designed not to sanctify the status quo but to be irreverently iconoclastic.

Orient and Career

What Germaine Greer calls 'the Samarakand moment' occurred when I came across two pieces of writing which came out in the '70s but attracted my attention only in the '80s. Importantly, both jolted the unpostcolonized world that I inhabited. The first was José Miguez-Bonino's 'Marxist Critical Tools: Are They Helpful in Breaking the Stranglehold of Idealist Hermeneutics?'[9] It was my colleague, Bas Wielenga who gave me the SCM pamphlet which carried the article. In it, Miguez-Bonino lobbed in three incendiary bombs—ideological bias in interpretation, the need to place texts in their socio-economic context, and theory and practice as an indivisible single

7. Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 10.

8. Stuart Jeffries (2007), 'Playing it Straight' *Guardian* 2 (26 January 2007), p. 12. Note. In the televised version, the BBC deleted this scene.

9. José Miguez-Bonino, 'Marxist Critical Tools: Are They Helpful in Breaking the Stranglehold of Idealist Hermeneutics?', in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 58-68.

function. To many of the present generation of interpreters, these may well be routine, familiar matters, but to those who were trapped in the academic gulags of neutrality, objectivity and methodological technicality, they were daringly refreshing at that time. The Miguez-Bonino article, which I reprinted in *Voices from the Margin*, was, so far as I am aware, one of the earliest attempts to introduce 'ideological suspicion' into the flaccid world of biblical interpretation. Using Marxist analysis as a 'powerful instrument', Miguez-Bonino was able to show how mainstream biblical scholarship, contrary to its claim to neutrality, had entrenched its own ideological biases. This supposedly 'scientific' exegesis was in fact aiding and abetting the interests of dominant classes. Miguez-Bonino exposed the subjective, 'liberal bourgeois spirituality' deeply rooted in the writings of one of the revered masters of the time—Joachim Jeremias, demonstrating how even 'an honest and respectful exegete' like Jeremias could betray class bias. Later, when I came under the influence of Said, I was alerted to detect and expose the Orientalist tendencies in Jeremias' writings. In his article, Miguez-Bonino went on to show how biblical scholars ignored the historical and political significance of biblical events such as the death of Jesus and the Parousia, and turned them into 'individualistic and inward' looking experiences. Mainstream scholarship at the time focused chiefly on religious and theological aspects of the narratives and largely neglected the social and economic environment from which these emerged. Miguez-Bonino widened and moved the hermeneutical goal posts in order to include the socio-economic context of the text, and expose ideological bias in biblical interpretation.

The other text was Edward Said's *Orientalism*—a text that has now achieved cult status. I really cannot recall who introduced me to Said, but I still remember where I bought my copy—in Birmingham at Hudson's bookshop, which has now been turned into a designer-clothes emporium—a sign of post-book days. Said's *Orientalism*, like President Bush, coerces scholars to make polarizing choices—either you are with it or against it. When the book came out, it was attacked by scholars both on the left and on the right. It has many faults, and Said himself has acknowledged and rectified some of these in Introductions and Afterwords to later editions, and has also answered his critics in subsequent works. In many respects, Said's work was much larger and more ambitious and went beyond Miguez-Bonino's. While both address the vital issue of economics and the link between politics and interpretation, engagement and reflection, Said widens the investigation to include culture, representation and, more significantly, colonial presence in fictional works and colonial impulses in historical documents. His perception of Orientalism became a model of how various European disciplines and institutions had come to construct knowledge about the colonized and used this to dominate them.

Apart from giving a complex new meaning to the word 'Orientalism', which until then simply signified serious scholarship in the field, his work made it clear that cultures and ideas of the colonized were available for examination largely in the form of imperial articulations. What, in effect, Said was trying to do was to challenge the unwillingness to acknowledge the presence and relevance of colonial experience in the scholarly and literary works of the time. Said's book also launched a critique of the integrity of Western scholarship. It made scholars conscious of their starting points, sources and standing in the community at large, and was arguing for non-suppressive and non-manipulative forms of knowledge production. More personally, Said's theoretical framework gave those of us who work in the biblical field the confidence and intellectual wherewithal to question the exegetical articulations of Western biblical interpreters and write back.

After reading Said, at least two things became clear to me. One was the conservatism of biblical studies, not just in its theoretical outlook but in its intellectual and, more pointedly, its political conformity. Its style and tenor made it a closed discipline, a guild with strict rules, regulations and austere conventions. The other was the impossibility of taking any interpreter or interpretation at face value. Hermeneutical projects which claim neutrality often succumb to and display imperial attitudes such as racism and sexism.

Said's work was crucial for the development of what is now known as postcolonial theory, although Said himself advocated and continued to use the phrase 'secular criticism'. Postcolonialism as critical practice is an intensely contested project which has acquired different meanings and nuances depending on who wants to use it and for what purpose. Elsewhere, I have defined the term, narrated the history of its origins, described its method and provided examples of how it operates in biblical studies. I can only hint here at some possible directions it has taken for me. First, what postcolonialism does is to place empire at the centre of biblical narratives. Biblical history was played out within the contours of various empires. Biblical texts are laced with imperial features such as subjugation, deportation, dispossession, exile and diaspora. The Hebrew scriptures mention how the history and destiny of the biblical Jews and their neighbours were intertwined with the presence of Egyptian, Assyrian and Persian empires. The New Testament may be silent about the contemporary world order, but most of the New Testament writings were located within the Roman imperial context. What postcolonialism tries to do is to show how empire and imperial presence are pivotal to the biblical narratives. For instance, when looking at Matthew's gospel, unlike mainstream commentators who are preoccupied with religious themes and spend their energies on the intra-theological rivalries between feuding local synagogues, postcolonial biblical criticism will set the gospel within the imperial context. The aim of

postcolonial biblical criticism in questioning the dominant way of reading Matthew and situating it within the imperial context, is to study how the writer was responding to the pressures of the empire—was he colluding with its imperial intentions, or was he offering a counter-narrative to the Roman power?

The second challenge of postcolonialism is to uncover colonial concerns which have shaped biblical interpretation. In spite of the alleged claim to neutrality, much biblical interpretation has its roots in various colonial projects of the nineteenth century. Postcolonial criticism has shown how much biblical scholarship is riddled with Euro-American nationalism and racial overtones. Albert Schweitzer, famed for his search for the historical Jesus is a notable case in point. At a time when everyone was disapproving colonialism, Schweitzer, who later became a missionary to Africa, asserted bluntly that for the sake of Africans Europeans should continue to be in control of that continent and should say to Africans: 'I am your brother, but your elder brother'. Schweitzer was no exception. The work of key figures of the time such as F. Schleiermacher, D.F. Strauss, and E. Renan was driven by nationalism and imperialism. Recently, Halvor Moxnes has shown how these three, in their reconstruction of Galilee as the location of the historical Jesus, were influenced by the prevailing European cultural ideas of the time: colonialism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and racism.[10] It has now come to light, also, how the nationalism and the racial bias of some of the leading German and French biblical scholars were regularly erased in translations of their work, leaving only a liberal hermeneutical agenda on show.

Another hermeneutical project which smacks of oriental tendencies is social science criticism. Some of the methodological presuppositions of those who apply social science criticism to the Bible border on Orientalism and Occidentalism. Their articulations unusually emphasize and exaggerate the difference between the West and Middle Eastern cultures, and reinforce the notion that the West knows Middle Eastern societies better than the indigenes themselves. They are reminiscent of Victorian travellers discovering for the first time the fauna and flora of the dark corners of the empire. What Said said on another occasion is equally applicable to the social science project: 'the Oriental become more Oriental, the Westerner more Western'.[11]

A third aspect of postcolonialism concerns the twin task of 'writing back', and 'listening again'. Writing back is a counter-discursive activity which aims at re-telling the story from the perspective of the Other. It is a

10. Halvor Moxnes, 'The Construction of Galilee as a Place for the Historical Jesus: Part I', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31 (2001), p. 26.

11. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 46.

hermeneutical attempt to clear away some of the defamatory and propagandist discourse of the colonizer which has painted the colonized in an unfavourable light. Re-writing is not a defensive, reactive exercise in which a set of disapproving images is replaced with an affirmative set. Rather, it is about re-examining the complex colonial contact to produce knowledge which is non-exploitative and does not domesticate. Equally important is to listen again, detecting those voices which were submerged and neglected under the grand narratives of national independence and development.

A fourth aspect of postcolonialism is its method. Although it has been unashamedly eclectic and has borrowed critical practices from other disciplines, one reading practice—contrapuntal reading—could be claimed as its own. Contrapuntal reading is interpretative reversal of the earlier dubious comparative method which put biblical texts and Western Christian discourse at the pedestal and castigated the 'other' texts for failing to measure up to Christian standards. By nature comparative hermeneutics was antagonistic, adversarial and judgmental, whereas contrapuntal reading is an attempt to topple this hierarchy and to avoid the rhetoric of censure and slander. It is also a way out of the binaristic manner of thinking which makes claims for 'our' against 'your' texts. The operative principle of contrapuntal reading is that although sacred texts are complex and uneven they are connected at some level, however hidden or tenuous that connection is. The task of the contrapuntal reading then is to place these texts side-by-side and bring out the convergences, contradictions, discrepancies, oversights and omissions in them and to show that no one text has the finished and once-for-all meaning, and to challenge and to prevent claims of any text possessing the 'last' word.

One of the great benefits of contrapuntal reading is that it encourages one to read outside one's discipline. One may not be fully acquainted with the works of Appadurai, Bhabha, Derrida, Foucault, Spivak, Said and Žižek, but one needs to know something about them to grasp the dynamic of hermeneutics. Contrapuntal reading makes us, as Kermode said in a different context, 'smatters'. As he went on to say in the same interview, 'a certain amount of civilization depends on intelligent smattering'.[12] There is another advantage, too. In an age of increased specialization and niche thinking, contrapuntal reading tries to connect disparate disciplines and texts. It is a theoretical and pedagogical necessity.

12. John Sutherland (2006), 'The Ideas Interview' The Guardian G2 (29 August 2006), p. 24.

Methods, Meanings, Manners

In current theological writing, methods and structure are so pervasive that creativity is stifled and replaced with programmatic and formulaic conventions. Working with a pre-planned method has advantages in that that one need not stray too far from the desired focus of study, but the flip side is that one ends with predictable and pretty dull stuff. To rephrase Mark Twain, methodology has become the last resort of the unimaginative. In the research-ridden academic world where most of us work, instinct and improvization are treated with disdain and regarded as unscientific and emotional. Cleverly crafted methodologies alone will not make good writing. We like to think of theological writing as a battle ground for ideas, methods and paradigms, independent of imagination and spontaneity. But once the methodological procedure has done its work, it is the inspired guess which enables the researcher to take the final leap. Listen to the words of anthropologist Oscar Lewis. When rattled by an unrelenting student pressing to know exactly what methodological procedure Lewis had adopted when selecting one oral story over another, he was supposed to have said: 'maybe, sometimes, I hear a voice that says this is the way to go, here not there'. Biblical interpreters, too, who claim ruthless objectivity, have been known to fall back on intuition. A conspicuous example is Miller and Hayes. In order to reconstruct the origins of Israel and Judah, they looked at both biblical and non-biblical literary sources, and at archaeological evidence, and brought into play various models derived from Middle Eastern cultural patterns and current social sciences. In the end they conceded that, in addition to all this, 'a considerable amount of intuitive speculation' went into their work.[13] It is an enormous relief to hear that inspiration and intuition play a role alongside ratiocination in solving profound and complicated issues. The message is that interpretation is not just about dense theories, and that there is room for the 'bath tub and Eureka' moment. It must allow for visions and taking risks and taking the plunge. Come to think of it, the two different responses by the shepherds and the Magi to the Nativity in Luke make helpful metaphors for what I am driving at—the shepherds spontaneously rush to see the new-born child after the angelic revelation, and the Magi studiously study the stars, taking time to weigh up the evidence in searching for the scene. One views interpretation as an intuitive, impressionistic activity, and the other sees it as taking time while the methodological procedure is selected, the facts tested, the evidence analysed.

13. J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 77.

Kosuske Koyama, who has a way with words, once asked whether a scholarly analysis of 'chop sticks' is more revealing than the experience of eating with them? That was in his pioneering Waterbuffalo days in Thailand, when he knew that making theology relevant to his Thai farmers required him to discard all abstract ideas in favour of their everyday interest, sticky-rice and cock-fighting and so on. Now, though, knowing that the context that prompted the question has changed, he would be the first to elaborate on the metaphor and say that his proverbial Thai farmer needs both an instinct for chop sticks and the ability to apply analytic skills to agriculture and the market if he is to continue to enjoy his sticky rice and his cock-fighting.

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