



## Review of

**Tat-Siong Benny Liew, editor,**  
***Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah,***  
**The Bible in the Modern World 23**  
**(Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009).**

Reviewer: Erin Runions, [erin.runions@pomona.edu](mailto:erin.runions@pomona.edu)

*Postcolonial Interventions* is a fitting title for this book of collected essays in honor of R.S. Sugirtharajah, given that Sugirtharajah has repeatedly argued for thinking about postcolonialism not as an immutable or bounded theory but as an interventionist strategy, intervening into dominant readings of the Bible, and allowing those normally marginalized to have a voice. This collection of essays does just that: it produces readings that confront the

mainstream, and it also intervenes into the production of postcolonial biblical criticism itself. It is a remarkable volume, with so many lines of inquiry. For instance, it includes analyses of the imperial impulses of the biblical texts (e.g., Dora Rudo Mbuwayesango, “Canaanite Women and Israelite Women in Deuteronomy: The Intersection of Sexism and Imperialism,” 45-57). It looks at points of rupture within imperializing texts (e.g., Hemchand Gossai, “Challenging the Empire: The Conscience of the Prophet and Prophetic Dissent: A Postcolonial Perspective,” 98-108). It explores the use of the biblical text in creating and negotiating hybrid identities (e.g. Jeffrey L. Staley, “‘Come over and help us’: A Postcolonial Reading of Biblical Imagery in the WHMS Oriental Home National Fundraising Tour, 1908-09,” 190-211). It examines the imperial co-optation of hybrid identities (e.g. Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan and Mai-Anh Le Tran, “Reading Race Reading Rahab: A ‘Broad’ Asian American Reading of a ‘Broad’ Other,” 27-44). And it takes up critiques of postcolonialism; discussions of pedagogy; and constructive approaches to biblical hermeneutics including reading interreligiously and ecologically (see the discussion below). All of these readings speak to the remarkable impact of Sugirtharajah’s work.

In the spirit of intervention, I want to lift up one of the debates in this book, which is that between liberation theology and postcolonial criticism. This debate comes out of Sugirtharajah’s attempts to distinguish postcolonial criticism from liberation theologies, which is somewhat critical of liberation theology, and therefore raises some people’s hackles. Gerald West frames the debate somewhat hostile terms, as a relation of co-option and commodification of local liberationist strategies by diasporic postcolonialism (in “What Difference Does Postcolonial Biblical Criticism Make? Reflections from a (South) African Perspective,” 256-73). Fernando Segovia notes it more mildly as a difference of emphasis on materialist or discursive analyses of

power relations (“Tracing Sugirtharajah’s Voice from the Margin: From Liberation to Postcolonialism,” 213-39). Daniel Smith-Christopher does not want the liberationist focus on justice to be lost (“Teaching Sugirtharajah: A Field Report from Los Angeles,” 240-54). Jeremy Punt looks at the promise and failure of postcolonial criticism in South Africa. He outlines both the attractiveness of liberation theologies, and the unpopularity of postcolonial strategies of biblical interpretation in South Africa, despite postcolonialism’s subversive potential. (“Postcolonial Theory as Academic Double Agent? Power, Ideology and Postcolonial Biblical Hermeneutics,” 275-95).

The polarization of the two sides of the debate can be somewhat baffling, yet it seems to recur in anthologies on postcolonial biblical criticism (see also Moore and Segovia 2005). There appears to be a divide between Marxist and poststructural, or, modern and postmodern starting points, as well as a difference between what has traditionally been important to the working class and the intellectual class. West suggests that Sugirtharajah describes it as the difference between @home and diasporic strategies of reading. In Sugirtharajah’s view, the issues of concern, and forms of oppression are very different for Third World and diasporic communities, which means that strategies of engagement are different (262-63). I want to engage this question—as someone who has been deeply influenced and compelled by liberation theologians and biblical critics such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Itumeleng Mosala, as well as postcolonial critics such as Sugirtharajah, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. Let me situate myself. I am a queer feminist cultural biblical critic, who teaches at an elite liberal arts college, and who has been involved in anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-prison, anti-corporate-globalization activism in the new empire

that is not my home. I am not free of contradictions, but I am deeply committed to theoretical intellectual work, and deeply committed to justice and on the ground action.

I see a place for the hyphen between liberation and postcolonial strategies. This hyphenation is what Tat-siong Benny Liew in his introduction to the volume calls a shuttling back and forth (2); it is a shuttling back and forth between methodologies and starting points, as much as between margins and diaspora. In my view, the difference between the two sides is one of starting place rather than of goal. In other words, I think that postcolonial criticism absolutely has liberation as a goal, but its way of getting there is a little different than Marxist liberationist strategies have been. One side starts from unity and certainty of truth (i.e. speaking truth to power), which is useful as a mobilizing strategy, while the other constantly puts those certainties into question, as Punt points out (289-90). Postcolonial criticism may not have mobilized people on the ground as Marxist strategies have done, but from my experience with Marxism on the street, it sorely needs postcolonial analysis to counter its sometimes propensity to absolutes that can so quickly form new kinds of exclusion, racialization and heteropatriarchal masculinism. As important as is the economic analysis that Marxist criticism has contributed to struggles against oppression, I do not think it is sufficient. We need both sides: we absolutely need systemic and economic analyses, but we also need the nuance and critique of origins, unities, and absolutes that comes through the poststructural tendency in postcolonialism. (It is not as if economics and discourse can be separated, after all; they are overdetermined, as Foucault's recently published lectures on biopolitics so clearly show, where he traces the discursive emergence of neoliberalism, 2008.)

Even though the debate continues to be presented as an opposition, I wonder if it is really a false divide, which I think is the argument that Liew makes in the introduction. And although West appears to be the staunchest defender of Marxism and liberation strategies in his article, ultimately he also seems to want the hyphen, and refers to Musa Dube's postcolonial work as a model. At the end of the day I believe many who are engaged in postcolonial criticism concur with what Sugirtharajah writes in *Postcolonial Reconfigurations* (2003):

Ultimately the question is not what to do with the hapless hyphen, or whether our project is seen as colonial or postcolonial, modern or postmodern. When we come to decide the questions that affect our communities and our people, such as housing, health care, social security, education, or homeland, the relevant questions will be about how they affect the lives of the people, rather than whether the proposal is modern or non-modern, colonial or anti-colonial. The task of postcolonialism is to ensure that the yearnings of the poor take precedence over the interests of the affluent; that the emancipation of the subjugated has primacy over the freedom of the powerful; and that the participation of the marginalized takes priority over the perpetuation of system which systematically excludes them. (2003, 33)

I disagree, though, that the hyphen is hapless—and so, I think, does the intervention of *Postcolonial Interventions* as a whole. The hyphen is indeed an important safeguard against the dangers to which either side on its own is prone—that is, the potential atomization and fundamentalist nativism of the margins about which Sugirtharajah worries in much of his writing, and the consumption and commodification of the Other in the diaspora, as West worries. The hyphen is clearly evident throughout this volume honoring Sugirtharajah and inspired by him. The essays in the volume are very much interested in the lived material realities that produce oppression, which they also understand these to be a result of the larger intersecting

hegemonic constructs of discourse and economy. This is perhaps a result of Sugirtharajah's connection to the kind of cultural studies that moves back and forth between culture, discourse, and economy.

The papers in this volume do not forget the larger economic structures that produce oppression. To be sure, few of the papers say they are explicitly Marxist in orientation—in the fashion of Roland Boer's, "Resistance or Accommodation: What To Do with Romans 13?" (109-22), which suggests that "Paul navigates at an intellectual and literary—or ideological—level the difficult passage from one socio-economic system to another" (116). But many are concerned with understanding the impact of economic structures. To give just a couple of examples, one of the main points of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's discussion of the use of slavery as a metaphor in Paul is that the metaphor buys into larger economic structures of oppression within the Roman empire; further she is concerned with how adopting Paul's language uncritically can effect current practice in the church ("Slave Wo/men and Freedom: Some Methodological Reflections," 123-46). Vincent Wimbush's attention to Olaudah Equiano's re-reading of the Ethiopian Eunuch draws attention to Equiano's resistance to Atlantic economic systems of slavery ("Scriptures for Strangers: The Making of an African-ized Bible," 162-77). Stephen Moore's discussion of the love and hate of Roman empire apparent in John's use of Roma and the Whore is very much interested in the way empire (and its economic dominance) translates into the future ("Metonymies of Empire: Sexual Humiliation and Gender Masquerade in the Book of Revelation," 71-97). Jayakiran Sebastian looks at the way that conversion of Dalits to Christianity not only brings a sense of dignity around death, but it also, remarkably allows members of the Dalit community to participate the in Hindu religious

practices from which they have been excluded. Sebastian's discussion of Dalit conversion cannot proceed without an understanding of the economics of the caste structure, and the work that conversion might do specifically within that structure ("On Walking through the Cemetery: Continuity and Transformation in Reading Death in an Indian-Christian Community," 178-89).

But from an activist or liberationist perspective, when it comes to fighting for healthcare or housing or education, the problem is always how to get a mobilization started. Discourse analysis does not seem to move the masses in the way that truth propositions do. But truth propositions are not a good way to get started either—whether they are about the truth of the market, moral truth, or the truth about the nature of God—because they so easily descend into vilification of nontruth. Moreover, feminists have been thinking about for quite a while about the way that localized propositions and identities are phallogocentrically elevated to the status of unitary truth. As Mayra Rivera puts it in her essay, drawing on the work of Laurel Schneider (2008), "the logic of the One subsists only by repressing the singularity of real bodies" and, moreover, it governs "the imperial fantasies that haunt monotheism" (349) ("Elemental Bonds: Scene for an Earthy Postcolonial Theology," 347-60).

Several essays in the last part of the festschrift are particularly helpful for thinking about how to get liberation started without truth claims. These essays take up what Rivera calls Sugirtharajah's "proposed intervention in monotheistic discourses" (349), and they argue for what Ralph Broadbent terms—in his call to reassess the value placed on proto-orthodox traditions in early Christianity—"a multifaith and multicultural perspective that does not allow for one particular religious tradition [or, I might add, political position] the final word" (301) ("One Step Beyond or One Step Too Far? Toward a Postcolonial Future for European Biblical

and Theological Scholarship,” 296-309). What these essays propose, instead, is *relationship*, or to borrow from Rivera on Schneider again, an understanding of multiplicity, or the way in which things and people constitute each other (350). Rivera uses the metaphor of the fire of the burning bush that burns but does not consume. “Fire,” she writes, “is not a substance, but a relationship. It is an interaction between other elements” (355); “it is nothing but relational transformation” (357). In the introduction to the volume, Liew picks up on this notion of mutually constitutive relationships, when he says that in diaspora, “the boundaries or margins of the self—like those of a discipline, text, or perhaps a nation—are fluid, permeable and constantly open to reconfiguration” (14). Liew implies that reconfiguration comes through interpermeation, through the shuttling back and forth between margin and diaspora. In another vein, Peter Phan argues that forging relationships through interreligious reading is necessary to the hermeneutic project, “the fourfold sharing of life, work theological dialogue, and religious experiences with non-Christians is ... an intrinsic part of the hermeneutics of religious texts” (321) (“Can We Read Religious Texts Interreligiously? Possibilities, Challenges, and Experiments,” 313-331). Elaine Wainwright shows how interreligious reading can also remind us of our relationship with the entire ecological community (“Land of the Kauri and the Long White Cloud: Beginning to Read Matthew 1-2 Ecologically,” 332-36).

In short, this volume makes an argument for the hyphen as the *relational prerequisite* for postcolonial-liberation. Change will not happen without mutually constitutive relationships, or what Sathianathan Clarke and Sharon Ringe call in their essay interlocation: that is, “seamless mutual trespassing” between those on the margins and those in the center, as well as between text and interpretation, history and meta-history, materiality and spirituality (67-68) (“Inter-location



as Textual Trans-version: A Study in John 4.1-42,” 58-70). Eleazar Fernandez insists that this kind of relationship requires radical hospitality, that can and must resist “binary-hierarchical categories,” nativism, and “annihilation of the diaspora–hybrid” (154) (“Diaspora, Babel, Pentecost, and the Strangers in our Midst: Birthing a Church of Radical Hospitality,” 147-61).

As a whole, this volume suggests that revolutionary momentum can only begin once usually discrete elements and identities are put into conversation—this means between home and diaspora, insider and outsider, marxism and poststructuralism, monotheism and religious pluralism, human and nonhuman, conservative and progressive. Solidarity has to be forged across these lines. The challenge, I think is to enter into these relationships, rather than isolate into the ease of identity groupings, truth claims, or academic discourses. This is *not* the same as saying we should all just get along. Part of relationship is disagreement. It also means feeling another’s pain—real lived pain, caused by economic systems and injustices. What this volume argues for is not an easy task, as Phan suggests, but it can be deeply transformative (327). These relationships might burn, but, if mutually constitutive, they should not consume.

## Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*.

Ed. Michel Senellart. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moore, Stephen and Fernando Segovia, eds. 2005. *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism:*

*Interdisciplinary Intersections*. London: T&T Clark.

Schneider, Laurel. 2008. *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*. New York: Routledge.

Sugirtharajah, R.S. 2003. *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology*. London. SCM.