

**POSTCOLONIAL  
THEOLOGIES**



POSTCOLONIAL  
THEOLOGIES  
DIVINITY *and* EMPIRE

EDITED BY  
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published works include edited volumes with contributions such as *Voices from the Margin* (Orbis, 1991 and 1995), *Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield 1998), *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (Sheffield, 1999) and *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (Orbis, 2000, and SCM Press, 2003).

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## Preface

The very choice to name this volume *Postcolonial Theologies* exposes a hope and a risk. The hope is indelibly marked by the biblical eschatology of promise—that a time, a space, an earth beyond the colonizing powers of every imperialism, every supremacism, is really *possible*; and that we may as people of faith so commit ourselves to that possibility that we already participate in its realization. But the language of the “postcolonial” also poses a risk: that we imagine ourselves already in some sort of decolonized condition. For this and other reasons that this volume investigates, “postcolonial” remains a contested and provisional term. Moreover, our title suggests that even some of us who are situated amidst the privileged colors or classes of a “neo-colonial” or “imperial” United States may claim to do a “postcolonial theology.” Furthermore, few of us in this volume represent a literally postcolonial political context (such as that of many Asian, Latin American, and African nations). Yet all of us make use of “postcolonial theory.” It is a theory that we believe offers a particular gift for religious thought. It deserves consideration as one among many strategies, a discourse added to other traditions of liberation. But we use postcolonial theory in ways that commit us to something more than theory—that is, to an engaged and engaging theology, a work of resistance to the layered, ongoing, and novel colonizations of the planet. This book offers itself as a resource not just for scholars of religion and theology, but for seminarians, pastors, and all who recognize in religion a power of social transformation; indeed, for all who feel the lure to an ever more embracing, more radically relational, more truly planetary theopolitics.

The idea for this volume sprang from a conference sponsored by the Theological School of Drew University in New Jersey on the subject of “The Colonial, the Postcolonial, and the Theological.” We called it *Com/Promised Lands*, to indicate the broken integrities both of those subjected to economic, cultural, sexual, and military colonization; and of those who benefit from their subjection. Postcolonial theory knows that the two groups cannot be simply divided and opposed, that both terror and illusion crisscross the dividing line. So we wished to explore that zone of ambiguity. But the title also indicated the “promise” arising in that very zone—to which most of us in different ways belong.

Several chapters in this volume grew from drafts presented at the conference. But many of the papers of the conference were reserved for

other contexts of publication, some less centered on theology. So we thank Karen McCarthy Brown, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Andrew Jacobs, Kwok Pui-lan, Fernando Segovia, and Vincent Wimbush for the exciting contributions they made to the symposium, which infect the essays gathered here. And in order to generate a more comprehensive and rather consistently theological discourse, as well as to update our reflections, we commissioned several additional essays. It is not a collection balanced by any mechanics of representation. Rather, a wide diversity of authors, many of them fresh and exciting theological voices, and all of whom have already been working with postcolonial theory, have been willing to join this conversation. We thank all our authors (including one another, the three editors) for some intensive and perhaps trying interactions. Some of these essays are stunningly creative, others prophetically lucid: All are theologically constructive, not merely deconstructive or critical, in their visions for Christianity.

In particular, we are indebted to two contributors, Stephen D. Moore and Mark L. Taylor, for their invaluable suggestions as the volume began to take shape. Jon L. Berquist, formerly of Chalice Press, was a marvelous enabler of the volume in its first stages. Sadly Jane E. McAvoy died suddenly while following up on the volume. We are grateful to the staff at Chalice, especially Sarah Tasic, for firmly seeing the project through; and to Krista E. Hughes of Drew University for her dauntless proof-reading. We are thankful to the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies at Drew for its cosponsorship of the conference, of which the 2002 event was the second in a series of annual conferences; to Virginia Burrus for her leadership on the steering committee; also to several (then) graduate students, notably Nicole Roskos and Sigridur Gudmarsdottir for their organizational work for the conference, and to several others for leading and presenting in the excellent junior scholar symposium that followed. We warmly thank Dean Maxine Beach for her commitment to and support of the Drew Colloquium in Transdisciplinary Theological Studies.

# Introduction

## *Alien/nation, Liberation, and the Postcolonial Underground*

*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens.<sup>1</sup>*

### The Subway

Like a great subterranean serpent, we churn along in the maze beneath the city. Warm and close, avoiding eye contact as if our life depends on it, like cells in an organism guarding our glimmer of identity. We are a beast clothed in many colors. Suits of success gleam with morning confidence. Outfits of night work rumple in exhaustion. Others in stoic tidiness or in sass and sullenness face one more thankless day. The clean glow of a bible-reader awaits another day. Within the blurring roar arise a riff of Spanish, a lilt of Caribbean, a clip of Wall Street, a jolt of Chinese, a bar of Harlem—and fall into the rumble of our serpentine indifference. Suddenly, a young woman of North Asian provenance bursts into uncontrolled laughter. The collective beast startles but pretends to notice nothing. Then we see that her gaze is locked onto the eyes of a woman seated across from her, who grips a huge cello case between her legs. She is also Asian or Asian American, and convulsed with giggles. They look away, trying to break the circuit. But they can't help glancing at each other again, triggering another cascade. A few of us look at one another, yearning to share the joke. But the women primly tuck in their faces and get off at the next stop.

Just an ordinary moment. The parable won't carry much freight. But it lets us set the scene for this book. It is a metropolitan scene, moving at a fast pace. Yet few rural landscapes are free of its effects. A U.S. scene, in fact, but it could be elsewhere. The cultural diversity generated by immigration, travel, and globalization accustoms us to ever new levels of cultural and ethnic multiplicity. The international blurs into the national. "We" do not quite know who is "us" and who is "them." Neither race nor language can any longer define nationality. Our species' togetherness is

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<sup>1</sup>Lev. 19:33f.

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becoming more apparent—as is all that separates us. Fear lurks in the blurred boundaries. And how manipulable is that fear—that the “alien” will disguise itself as “us,” is secretly invading, will strike again. (The subway line we ride lost its southernmost station to the attack on the World Trade Towers.) At any moment the borderlines of religion, of economics, of nation state, of gender or sex or race sharpen and cut through the postmodern pleroma of pluralism.

Our differences divide us all the more harshly in the face of our planetary interdependence. For we are now so globally—economico-info-techno-militarily—linked that we are paradoxically all the more divided. The injustice whereby the resources of the planets and the gifts of its peoples are distributed is ever more “in your face.” Some are marked as “aliens”—regardless of legal status—others as “citizens.” One nation’s hegemony is alienating the rest of the world, yet cannot keep that world out.

There is a wild laughter that breaks through the scene. It infects but does not unify us. We are—all together, all apart—in a state of alien/nation. Yet do we not yearn for that intimacy? Would we “love the alien as ourselves”? “the alien who resides with us”? within us?

### **A Mazing Grace**

Who is observing, in the perspective of the parable? Who is this textual “we”? There are three of us gathering these essays. We live at this moment in the greater metropolitan area of New York; one of us is Puerto Rican, one is European, one is Euro-American. “We” are part alien. (But unlike a science fiction crossbreeding of extraterrestrial and human, we are very much of the earth!) We work across worlds, with multiple imbalances of power. At the center of empire, in the terms of its language, we share a project, a space, a discourse. It is as Christians and as theologians that we find ourselves together in this work.

We have brought together a set of voices who in dramatically varied ways are all reflecting on the relation between what is called “postcolonial theory” and the tasks of Christian theology. Many are “aliens” to or in the United States. All articulate an alienation from the predominant patterns of unification and division that constellate present planetary arrangements, patterns that conform increasingly to the demands of a transnational economy and the dictates of a single superpower with absolutely unprecedented global reach. All actively—and religiously—resist the uncritical fusions of Christianity with such economic or military globalizations. All work with the church in its struggle to face its long implication in empire as a present and not only historical condition.

The “we” of this volume is embedded in the church, and the church is also in our figurative subway—not just as the lone visible Bible-reader!

All of us in this diasporic volume participate actively in a global Christianity. We affirm that church, which offers local spaces for the nurture of the gifts of difference—and a global space for the critique of globalization itself. We practice that critical nurture as both a spirituality and a politics of liberation. We have found insight for this practice within the discourses of “postcolonialism,” and particularly of postcolonial theory. Indeed, this theory helps us to figure out not just *what to do*—but *who we are*. It helps us, as liberation theology has, to identify our social location in terms of power relations: Who is oppressor, who is oppressed? It helps us to understand, as have, for instance, the analyses by women of color, that many are multidimensionally oppressed. But it especially highlights the multiple and often contradictory elements of who “we” are. Our colors and cultures, our sexualities and nationalities, crisscross each of our identities, forming complex mazes of power. Whatever our bloodlines or our religious backgrounds, we find ourselves within these mazes. We find these mazes within us.

This labyrinth of identities winds through an intriguing space: the space of postcolonial theory, an “in between space” in which the boundaries between identity and difference, between cultures, nationalities, and subjects, are called into question. Here, there appears what Homi Bhabha calls the “postcolonial hybrid”; a famous character of postcolonial theory, this one wears many guises: misfit, mestiza, mulatto, half-breed, Creole, mongrel, Gypsy, queer, krip, immigrant, outcast—the ones whose language or look keep them always somehow alien. Even perhaps with one another. The ones who at the crossing of the Jordan mispronounce “shibboleth.” Who cannot pass. And also those who can, but never know the feeling of home.

Postcolonial theory offers guiding insight into the mazes: zones of mixture and confusion, threat and discovery. Yet some of its key texts read like mazes themselves, dense with theory. And the most influential of postcolonial theorists—Edward W. Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha—are literary theorists working outside of any religious institution. Its terms require some decoding—indeed, some effort of concretization, contextualization, and critique—before they can support a theological project. But we find value in the effort. Theology always depends on the philosophies and social theories of its time in order to transcode the Christian witness. Moreover, Christian thinkers have begun to access these works, especially in biblical studies, as the work of Fernando Segovia, R. S. Sugirtharajah, Stephen Moore, Musa Dube, Roland Boer, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and others shows. Yet as one of these biblical scholars puts it—in a essay within this volume: “While these disciplines are coming to terms with the reality of colonialism, what is striking about systematic theology is the reluctance of its practitioners

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to address the relation between European colonialism and the field.”<sup>2</sup> This volume, composed largely by theologians (who may or may not call themselves “systematic”), works to overcome the hesitation. Theologians—those within this volume and a couple besides, notably Kwok Pui-lan and Marcella Althaus-Reid—have worked for several years to formulate postcolonial theologies.

So the maze runs through the church—and the church runs through the maze! The ancient church was born a hybrid of the Jewish religion with the plurality of cultures mingling within the Roman Empire. Later, Christianity seemed to become identifiable with European or white civilization. Today, another global hybridity, with both its wounds and its potentiality, is again redefining Christianity. The old European and American denominations, if they are growing at all, are most likely and most vividly growing in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. And within North American cities, immigrant churches have altered the religious landscape. They provide home-space in the in-between, amidst the alienation. Sometimes they share buildings with mainly European American congregations—sharing space more than they share stories. They will add their own buildings to a scene modulated no longer only by the architectures of Christianity and Judaism (an ancient hybridity and hardly a settled interchange in itself), but also by mosques, Hindu temples, centers of Santería, Yoga, or Zen. They will all retain links to other homes, even as they are willy-nilly Americanized, hybridized, mixed. And Christianity, however tightly it caulks its cracks and fissures, springs leaks in all directions: interreligiously without; interculturally, nationally, ethnically within.

What of the traditionally white congregation—there where, as one of our parents preached it half a century ago, “We are gathered together for the great hour of segregation”? Even here the alien, the other, appear more than ever in the pew—or pulpit: in the African-American, Korean-American, Chinese-American—hyphens that at once divide and connect. Yet do not even the hyphenated identities of the Euro-American—Italian, Irish, Scottish, German, English, French, Scandinavian—have tales to tell? With their own complex local and global histories, older stories of migration and of alienation, of courage, shame, and hope—must they accept their homogenization? Must the “white-washing” of Christianity continue to bleach out the colors of all our lives? Or might we find redemptive resources along the entire spectrum of Christian—and human—complexity? Can liberation not begin anywhere in the cultural labyrinth?

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<sup>2</sup>See R. S. Sugirtharajah’s “Complacencies and Cul-de-sacs,” chap. 1 in this volume.



## **Liberation and Postcolonialism**

The engagement of postcolonial theory by theology is incoherent outside of the effects of liberation theology. The liberation theologies of the Americas have been the ones to thematize “liberation” in the biblical tradition, to lift the tradition of exodus and its prophetic replays into Christian prominence. Indeed, it is liberation theology that has made us conscious that the church is political by default if it is not political on purpose—and has fostered solidarity among groups as diverse as base Christian communities all through Latin America, black churches in the U.S., Minjung movements of Korea, and throughout North American and European Christianity.

Beginning in the late 1960s, liberation theology marked a watershed in the history of Western theology. Inspired within Roman Catholicism by the liberalizations of the great Second Vatican Council, and within North America especially by the civil rights and Black Power movements, it took as its starting point the “preferential option for the poor.” It claimed that God’s love demands a commitment to those who lived in conditions that denied life and thus were contrary to the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus. Hence, liberation theology placed questions of appropriate praxis at the center of the theological task. This shift of focus from orthodoxy to orthopraxy inspired a number of social groups to give theological voice to the particularities of their own struggles for liberation. As these theologies developed and diversified, multiple forms of oppression were being identified alongside the issues of economic injustice to the south and racial injustice in the north. The range of racial/ethnic injustices beyond the U.S. black/white binary, then sexism beyond and within the church, the corollary question of heterosexism, as well as ecological devastation rendered up new starting points for theological reflection—all bristling with embodied and absolute urgency. Each disclosed a new axis of identity in the particularity of each context. Liberation theologies—including now the modes of feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theology—continued to agitate and evolve. Yet their contexts overlapped, colluded, leaked into each other as they struggled to represent a utopia, a future free of the larger topos of oppression and its internalized effects.

By the 1990s, these theological methods began to recognize complications that early liberation movements did not face: the oppressive dynamics internal to oppressed communities; the ambiguous and shifting complexities of national, cultural, even sexual identities; and the difficulties of creating sustainable coalitions—including coalitions with progressives who do not embody a specifically oppressed identity. At the same time it began to realize that the very modern Marxist style of oppositional analysis—the purely oppressed revolting against the merely

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oppressive—offered limited resources for addressing the complexities of postmodern power structures. As Latin American theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid explains, “Oppression is perhaps what we cannot have in common, because oppression is built in overlapping levels of multiple and contradictory elements which, according to context, produce variably dense, saturated effects...[A]ny theology concerned with issues of wealth and poverty needs to consider more the incoherence of oppression and its multiple dimensions rather than its commonalities.”<sup>3</sup> The decentralized powers of a post-cold war, globalized capitalism flexibly yoked to a single, undeterred superpower challenged liberationist theory and practice.<sup>4</sup>

All these challenges have motivated some theologians to search for additional interpretive frameworks to support the political dimensions of the Christian witness. We persist within the force field of liberation theology. No political theology could “supersede” and in some fundamental way transcend the historic work of liberation theology. But within our shifting and diverging contexts, where the very notion of a Christian or a poor or a black or a lesbian or a feminist or a Latina “identity” does not move on straight tracks, we seek fresh insights into emancipation. We need—as theology has always needed, whether it admits it or not—timely theories that can better attune our faith to the new problems and potentialities of its context. The contributors to this volume find in postcolonial theory an important resource for this task.

### Defining Postcolonialism

“Postcolonial Theory” is a subset of “postcolonial studies,” itself a subset of a “postcolonialism.” This anthology attends with considerable consistency to the theory but roves across the wide, transdisciplinary range of the “postcolonial.” First, one does not want to fall into a very common confusion: that “postcolonial theory” is presuming the end of colonialism. “Post” in this discourse never means simply “after” but also “beyond”—as an ethical intention and direction. Western imperialism is the frame of reference for the term “postcolonial,” which emerges in the struggles of the colonies of Europe for their independence. As Fernando Segovia, a leading exponent of postcolonial discourse within Christian studies, explains, the “postcolonial” may be understood especially in two ways, “each with its own significant semantic range.” It covers “a

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<sup>3</sup>Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 168f.

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed discussion on the relation between liberation hermeneutics and postcolonial biblical criticism, cf. R. S. Sugirtharajah’s “Convergent Trajectories? Liberation Hermeneutics and Postcolonial Biblical Criticism,” in *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 101–23.

temporal (what-follows-the-colonial) as well as a critical application (what-questions-the-colonial).”<sup>5</sup>

The first designates the “historico-political”: the “period of time following the formal separation or ‘independence’ of a ‘colony’ or group of colonies from a governing ‘empire.’”<sup>6</sup> Within the framework of Western imperialism, this might include the end of the eighteenth century, when the United States reeled off from the British Empire.<sup>7</sup> In the literature of the postcolonial it usually refers to the entire nineteenth century, during which Latin America and much of the Caribbean achieved independence from Europe; and to the twentieth-century process, largely culminating after the Second World War, during which most of Africa, Asia, and Oceania gained political independence. But the achievement of the status of nationhood and freedom from European empires—while profoundly coveted and achieved at great cost—did not solve the problem of imperialism for the (formerly) colonized peoples.

Other forms of domination, largely driven by a globalizing capitalism, quickly replaced the formal structures of empire. The concepts of “neo-colonial,” “imperialist,” and “neo-imperial” articulate this condition of informal subjection of a sovereign state to a superpower and/or to transnational corporate priorities. Forms of formal colonialism, however, also survive alongside of neo-colonial ones. As Robert Young points out, “The list of colonies, dependent, trust and unincorporated territories, overseas departments, and other such names signifying colonial status in some form is still surprisingly long (still-extant colonies that enjoy a wide diversity of labels designating their subordinate status as dependent territories include British Gibraltar, the Falklands/Malvinas and a dozen other islands; Danish Greenland; Dutch Antilles; French Guiana, Martinique, Réunion, St. Pierre and Miquelon, off Newfoundland; US Puerto Rico, Samoa, Virgin Islands; Spanish Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands).”<sup>8</sup>

So this is where the second sense of postcolonial comes into play: Its “post” indicates not a chronological but a critical idea, and so indicates the intention to go *beyond* the colonial in all its forms. Postcolonial analysis does highlight the historical effects of the European empires, with both their settler and exploitation colonies. But it pursues this historical archeology in order to shed light on the aftermath of that

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<sup>5</sup>Fernando F. Segovia, “Interpreting beyond Borders: Postcolonial Studies and Diasporic Studies in Biblical Criticism,” in *Interpreting beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, vol. 3 of *The Bible and Postcolonialism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 12.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>With the declared intention of founding its own empire. “Even as early as 1783, the United States was, to Washington, a ‘rising empire.’” Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 74.

<sup>8</sup>Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 3.

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imperialism. This aftermath persists. And thus, postcolonialism is a discourse of resistance to any subsequent related projects of dominance—as, for instance, those of economic globalization and United States hyperpower.

As Sugirtharajah characterizes this strategy of resistance, however, it is irreducible to a simple and direct oppositionalism: “Postcolonial discourse is not about the territorial ejection of imperial powers or about learning, Caliban-like, the art of cursing the evils of empire. Rather, it is an active interrogation of the hegemonic systems of thought, textual codes, and symbolic practices which the West constructed in its domination of colonial subjects. In other words, postcolonialism is concerned with the question of cultural and discursive domination.”<sup>9</sup> We are not, then, pursuing a traditional style of *anti*-imperialism, with its rigid binarism. Rather, we espouse a genre of inquiry highly sensitive to textual nuance, historical ambiguity, and the ways that colonial power shapes not only the outer limits of the globe but also the inner reaches of subjectivity. Domination deforms not only politics but also language—*logos* itself—and those who utter it.

Even the most sublime religious language has been transcoded for imperial purposes. Therefore, the prophetic tradition always challenged first of all its own communities. Indeed, liberation theology can be said to have pursued a tri-focal critique (1) of the oppressive powers of state, economy, and culture; (2) of how the church has absorbed, justified, and benefited from these powers; and (3) also of the ways the people, the poor, the oppressed (often but not always considered as Christians) have themselves internalized oppressive patterns, requiring hence a process of conscientization, a “pedagogy of the oppressed.”<sup>10</sup> Postcolonial theory will further our understanding of this three-way circulation. It will help in the analysis of the troubling ways that Christianity, born as a movement of a colonized people, could also come to mimic the empire.

### Postcolonialism and Theory

What is called “postcolonial theory” emerged in the aftermath of the British Empire from studies of the construction in English literature of the colonial relationship, and reciprocally of the literary representations of the relationship by writers from the former colonies. In the academy it is located in the intersection of literary, subaltern, diasporic, or cultural studies. But as “theory” it also makes use of what is called—always problematically—postmodern thought. Thus, thinkers such as Bhabha, Said, and Spivak (the “holy trinity” of postcolonial theory mentioned

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<sup>9</sup>R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism, Bible and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 17.

<sup>10</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000).

above), as well as Robert Young, Trinh Minh Ha, Rey Chow, Chela Sandoval, and others, draw freely, if critically, on the work of leading poststructuralists Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva.

Some postcolonial thinkers would eschew this largely French school of theory as just another wave of Eurocentrism. Thus, “postmodernism is still seen as Eurocentric in its conceptual and aesthetic thrust.”<sup>11</sup> It disappoints in “its lack of a theory of resistance; its failure to cultivate a transformative agenda due to its detached attitudes; its revalidation of the local and its celebration of differences, which are liable to lead to further alienation of subalterns thus assigned to their own space and concerns; its repudiation of and skepticism toward grand-narratives, which fail to take into account liberation as an emancipatory metastory...”<sup>12</sup> With Sugirtharajah’s summation of the critique, we underscore the crucial bond that any postcolonial revision of theology will want to maintain with liberation theology. Nonetheless, the tension within postcolonial studies will not be resolved by any curt dismissal of French theory.

“Postcolonial theory,” in fact, also challenges any hegemony of Eurocentric high theory, but it does so in part through its positive engagement of the French paradigm. What does it find there? Postcolonial theorists have found in the French poststructuralists a prism for the autodeconstruction of Eurocentrism. For as Robert Young observes, “deconstruction [is] a deconstruction of the concept, the authority, and assumed primacy of, the category of ‘the West.’”<sup>13</sup> Above all, postcolonial theorists borrow the critique of “the same”—of the identity of the dominant Western subject, as an imperial identity that is established by its violation of difference, that is, its appropriation or annihilation of the Other. Derrida has focused on the “ontotheology” of this sameness, Foucault on the regime of “power/knowledge” that advances its sciences, Lacan and Kristeva on the construction of its subjectivity. All poststructuralists point to the cultural power dynamics at work in this ontology that reduces otherness, alterity, difference to a unifying sameness.<sup>14</sup>

This ontology emanates from Greek metaphysics. But it was early absorbed by Christianity; indeed, it became the foundation for Christian theology. It conceives of “being” as changeless self-identity over and

<sup>11</sup>Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics*, 15.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 19.

<sup>14</sup>For discussions on the relation of poststructuralist and postcolonial theory, cf. Stephen Moore’s “Postcolonialism,” in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretations*, ed. A. K. M. Adam (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Setting to Work of Deconstruction,” in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999) and Young, *White Mythologies*.

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against change and difference. These abstractions did not remain abstract. They exercised great historical force. Once Christianity converted the Roman Empire, this logic of sameness over difference stimulated a Christian allergy to difference. And it could conveniently collude with the imperial project of a homogenizing dominance. Hence, the deconstruction of these ontological assumptions is indispensable to any counter-imperial Christian theology.

Through the biblical witnesses, however, Christian tradition bears the scars of imperial forms that predate Constantine and even Christianity itself. For almost the entire history of the biblical corpus is formed in reaction to one empire or another. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is in the area of biblical studies and early Christian history that postcolonial theory has already generated a considerable library.<sup>15</sup> Postcolonial theory facilitates new readings of scripture and of the history of the interpretation of scripture, helping to uncover their complex ties to empire. As liberation hermeneutics have focused on the anti-imperial thematics of scripture, it identifies itself unreservedly with the biblical witness. By contrast, postcolonial readings operate with a more troubling ambivalence, tracing both decolonizing and colonizing themes within scripture. They also “mine the Bible for its liberative strands. However, it is important to be mindful that this same Bible contains elements of bondage and disenfranchisement. What postcolonial biblical criticism does is to make this ambivalence and paradox clear and visible.”<sup>16</sup> As the African feminist Musa Dube insists, postcolonial criticism must ask “why biblical texts endorsed unequal power distribution along geographical and racial differences; why, in the wake of political independence, power has remained unequally distributed; and how to read for empowering the disempowered areas and races or creating a better system.”<sup>17</sup>

We are interested in the specifically *theological* character of this ambivalence as attention to the imperial contexts of the church, ancient and contemporary—and so in critical reconstructions of the language of faith itself. We are exploring constructive theological pathways to counter-imperial Christian action. There have been important works of theology engaging postmodern philosophies. Yet in spite of the excitement postcolonial theory has been generating in other areas of religious studies and the liberal arts for more than a decade, the use of postcolonial theory as a tool for theological reflection is just beginning to emerge. This particular “post,” this “after,” has eschatological resonance, imminent in its significance if not in its fulfillment: “Postcolonial theology” invokes a discourse yet “to come.”

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<sup>15</sup>See the bibliography in this volume.

<sup>16</sup>Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, 101.

<sup>17</sup>Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 17.

## Themes of Postcolonial Theory

One of the main targets of postcolonial critique has been the modern understanding of *identity*. Modern thought organized itself according to discrete and mutually exclusive categories: same/other, spirit/matter, subject/object, inside/outside, pure/impure, rational/chaotic. Human beings could then in the politics of modernity be identified according to a corollary logic as: civilized/primitive, Christian/pagan, native/alien, white/black, male/female, rich/poor, whole/disabled. These categories supported a myriad of exclusive and oppressive practices—as well as revolutionary reactions. Liberation theologies dramatically challenged the hierarchies built on those binaries. But inasmuch as they content themselves with exalting a single, liberatory identity such as “the poor,” or “the people,” “blacks” or “women,” they remain, we have suggested, more or less within the (*same*) modern paradigm. Postcolonial theory, Spivak argues, turns its “critical glance not specifically at the putative identity of the two poles of a binary opposition, but at the hidden ethico-political agenda that drives the differentiation between the two.”<sup>18</sup> It attends to the processes through which categories such as “Third world,” “woman,” “native,” are created, but also to the between spaces in which they may be undermined.

In Latina/o discourse, for example, the between spaces of crossroads, borderlands, *fronteras* have become favored metaphors of identity. The ancient Jewish metaphor of dispersion, “diaspora,” appears among immigrants from Asia and Africa as well. The use of such spatial figures reflects the shift of focus in discussions of identity and (or *as*) difference. To some extent, this shift of focus responds to the realities of the post-cold war world. The displacement of peoples from former colonies to the metropolitan centers as a result of global capitalism has given birth to cities where refugees, migrants, and exiles from all over the world are in constant interaction among themselves and with the dominant cultures. The signs of these interactions are vivid. Gloria Anzaldúa explains playfully what “to live in the Borderlands means”: “to put *chile* in the borscht,/eat whole wheat *tortillas*,/speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;/be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints.”<sup>19</sup>

The prominence that postcolonial thought gives to the borderlands, the interstices or in-between spaces, however, is more than descriptive. It gives rise to what Bhabha calls an “interstitial perspective,” which challenges familiar understandings of identity. This perspective accompanies a new sense of subjectivity, resistant to the dynamics of subjection, an “interstitial subjectivity.” For identity is not here a fixed set

<sup>18</sup>Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 332.

<sup>19</sup>Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 216.

of traits, but rather evolves through a continuing process of interrelation, identification, and differentiation. A person's identity is formed as she or he negotiates a sense of belonging to some groups and being distanced from others. Where this fosters closing off a separate identity, whether as a church, a person, a creed, or as a political entity, a nationality, or a social group, it creates the delusion of an identity detached from all that it excludes. We may call such a delusion *the idolatry of identity*. This is the point at which the *difference* of identity separates and hardens into *an essential sameness*. Such separation renders an identity in some qualitative sense independent of the rest of creation. But this is to deny its own creatureliness—theologically, the ultimate idolatry.

Whereas colonialism's "worst and most paradoxical gift, was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or black, or western, or oriental," Edward Said argues, "survival in fact is about connections between things."<sup>20</sup> In contrast to colonialism's hardened identities, postcolonial thought focuses on the complexities of those groupings, of their feelings of home and diaspora, of belonging and exile. In contexts where boundaries are established to identify some as insiders, some as out, the space collapses for this in-between existence of hybrid identities. For a system that runs on unifying identities has a limited tolerance for hybrids. They show its failure. For according to the theory we are considering, the systemic demand for fixed identities and absolute differences is undermined by its own insistence that the colonized *imitate* the colonizer. The British Empire with its "civilizing mission"—and, in eerie repetition, the U.S. superpower with its "democratizing mission"—have functioned by offering themselves as the ideal to be imitated. Yet of course it is known (but concealed) that such imitation can only fail. One may recreate oneself in the image of the colonizers—like *The Mimic Men* in V. S. Naipaul's great novel, in which a fallen Caribbean leader, as an immigrant in London, seat of the former empire, reflects on how his generation of postcolonials imitated the gestures, styles, and attitudes of the British. "We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World."<sup>21</sup> But mimicry does not achieve its end; the mimic man/woman remains "almost the same, but not white."<sup>22</sup> Not quite, not white. This mimicry becomes "a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 336.

<sup>21</sup>V. S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men*, cited in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 88.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*



The postcolonial hybridity is produced by empire: by direct invasion, violation, and rape, or by the indirect subjection that stimulates survivalist strategies of mimicry and appropriation. Postcolonial theory (though often accused of such) never simply “celebrates” difference *or* hybridity. Yet it can—this would be its postmodern temptation—collapse into “the triumphalist self-declared hybrid,”<sup>24</sup> whose elite status Gayatri Spivak ironizes. Postcolonial theory at its best resists the dissipation of liberatory energies into an urbane multiculturalism. It rightly recognizes that hybridity, in all its ambiguity, remains incurable—and contains great potential for resistance. Postcolonialism questions the basis on which “insiders” and “outsiders” are identified—the “rules of recognition.”<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, it threatens the practices of exclusion and subordination that are based on those distinctions. And these are not only practices of the oppressors but also—whether by imitation, tradition, or defensive reaction—of the oppressed.

So the hybrid must constantly negotiate her/his position between contrasting, often contradictory, realities. This in-between position can be painfully torn between conflicting loyalties and subject to the rejection of all groups—“caught in the crossfire between camps/while carrying all five races on your back/not knowing which side to turn to, run from.”<sup>26</sup> It can also be an enriching position, nurtured by multiple sources.

It may access the excitement of multiple art forms, flavors, languages, traditions—like the energies of a great city, in which multiple immigrant groups struggle and suffer, but also survive and create. And the hybrid may turn that intensity—in all its ambivalence—to transformative use.

### Christianity and Hybridity

Christianity, after all, offers as its central doctrine the symbol of a divine/human hybrid, at once mimicking and scandalizing the operative metaphysical binaries of the time. And what is Christianity but a great hybrid, comprised at the urban crossroads of the Roman Empire? It exploded into mission on Pentecost: a vision of a multilingual understanding dancing in dissident flames upon the heads of its first community. It cannot be understood apart from the extraordinary creativity of its high-risk hybridities—for instance, its “neither Greek nor Jew”—that is, *both* Greek *and* Jewish, which let it spread like wildfire.<sup>27</sup> Yet neither can it be understood apart from its early acquiescence in empire, discernible according to some postcolonial hermeneutics already in the

<sup>24</sup>Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 361.

<sup>25</sup>Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 110.

<sup>26</sup>Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 216.

<sup>27</sup>For a reading of Daniel Boyarin’s *A Radical Jew* from the perspective of contemporary diasporas, cf. Segovia, “Interpreting beyond Borders.”

gospels, a mimicry that prepares the way for its imperial—and monolingual—appropriation of multiple cultures after Constantine.<sup>28</sup>

If empire is the contextual condition within which Christianity and its texts must always be read, hybridity is a pervasive symptom. There remain for Christians, then, no unambiguous identities, no sites of pure identity or of pure difference. Rather, every place, every subject-position, must be read as an event in-between—between aliens, between places, between times. Indeed, as even some Western Christianities—such as process, feminist, and ecological theologies—have already well understood, every identity whatsoever must be read as an event of relationship: A subject *takes place* amidst a dense ecology of interdependence. Relationships are internalized through mimicry as hybridity. Within the imperial condition, then, a human subject is a hybrid event rent by the asymmetries of power.

A theology that decolonizes the between-spaces of our interdependence will shift its task from boundary-protection to border-crossings: hardly an “alien” metaphor for Christianity. The task of a postcolonial theology will not be to shore up the barriers between the Christian and the non-Christian, the holy and the profane, the church and the world, the ethical and the immoral, even the Creator and the creation. Nor will it be simply to demolish them. We will want instead to pay careful attention to what happens in all these in-between places. What refuses enclosure? What *crosses* over? What revels and reveals itself in the many tongues of many peoples? What is dis/closed in the shifting borderlands?

Put in terms of ecclesiological practice: Postcolonial theory in theology will increase the church’s capacity to speak meaningfully within an ever more globalized and cosmopolitan environment. It may help to sensitize Christians of the northern hemisphere to the complexity of the global church. For five hundred years, the synergy of conquest, commerce, and Christ worked the church across the face of the globe. Of course, the churches of Europe and North America still exercise disproportionate influence, paralleling the processes of economic globalization. Nonetheless, the result of this long-term Christian globalization is, ironically, that the churches of Europe and North America no longer *own* Christianity. According to Segovia, the stunning numbers drive the point home: In 1900 approximately 65 percent of the world’s Christians lived in Europe or North America, while today that figure is “about 35 percent. Similarly, while in 1900 Christians in Africa, Asia and Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean represented 17.2

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<sup>28</sup>This is starkly outlined by Musa Dube, who worries white feminist readers of, for example, the gospel of Matthew, for their failure to investigate its imperial context. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*.

percent of global Christianity, today that figure is placed at 60.3 percent.”<sup>29</sup> This is a dramatic reversal. If the Christianities of the postcolonial peoples still necessarily mimic missionary Christianity—they implicitly mock by their success the pale home churches, dwindling both in numbers and in burning tongues! Indeed, sometimes this mimicry reenergizes the most conservative, patriarchal, and heterosexist legacy of the West.

Within the imperial centers, a church ministering among recent immigrants and long-term diasporas—among people with an increasingly complex ethnic identity, with wildly varying combinations of traditional faith and plural, “syncretistic,” religious formations—cannot rely on inherited “rules of recognition.” It is challenged to ever greater flexibility in its community building. It hears again the ancient, underfulfilled command—corrective of any idolatry of identity—to love the alien/stranger/immigrant *as yourself*.

Even in its relatively homogenous rural and suburban forms, the church hears this voice and faces a choice: to form a fortress against the chaotic uncertainties of postmodern life, providing familiarity and refuge but risking the asphyxiation of the Spirit; or to embrace a new democratic cosmopolitanism in which the Spirit connects rather than separates our differences. In this Spirit we will continuously—not just once—renegotiate Christian discipleship. It will be a negotiation not limited to matters of doctrinal and denominational identity, but responsive also—and always—to the nagging questions of culture, ethnicity, sexuality, and economics. Is theological depth—or spiritual freedom—dissipated through such multiplying concerns? The authors in this volume believe that these more “political” questions, when refracted through the postcolonial prism, do not dilute but rather enrich the space of doctrinal negotiation. Traditional theological themes—such as God as creator, as Christ, as Spirit—may take on a new dimensionality, indeed an incarnation, in the interstitial perspective of a postcolonial theology.

### Essays in Postcolonial Theology

The essays in this volume are not content with political and cultural criticism. They together work toward a constructive postcolonial theology. From one point of view, the essays form something like a doctrinal landscape, clumping together under the headings of **Theology**, as disciplinary framework; **Christology**, both vis-à-vis the biblical Jesus and the Christ of faith; **Theological Anthropology**, as the reconstruction of Christian subjectivity in *imago dei*; and the doctrine of **God**. These doctrinal loci form an interconnected archipelago within a roiling sea of difference. And as is true of all livelier theologies, the action

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<sup>29</sup>Segovia, *Interpreting beyond Borders*, 21.

in each of these essays takes place not within an abstract doctrinal formulation, but *between the doctrinal symbols* themselves, and *between the doctrines and the contexts* in which they come to life. Both stylistically and substantively, each of these essays may be heard in a certain sense mimicking, even mocking, the dogmas they consider—thus very carefully and riskily prizing open the space for their imaginative contributions to Christian theology. They were not commissioned to reconstruct specific doctrines. Rather, they have arisen quite spontaneously in such a way as to allow us to map them—if only momentarily, fluidly, and problematically—on the grid of a systematic theology. This arrangement demonstrates the surprising theological *intensity* (not only the predictable social *extensity*) of the postcolonial potential.

First, **Theology** is reimagined within the shifting context of the postcolonial. Balancing on both biblical and British edges of theology, R. S. Sugirtharajah's essay frames the challenge to the historic discipline of theology. If, as he says, "there has been a marked hesitancy to critically evaluate the impact of the empire among Systematic Theologians," he also challenges the secular bias and relative ignorance of religion of most postcolonial theorists. Offering a rich narrative of the negotiations between nationalism and Christianity by Indian converts under the British Empire, he moves on to deploy the concept of "vernacular cosmopolitanism." Resisting the tendency to "glorify the local and discredit the global," this discursive practice requires "an exchange of ideas in all directions," while "keeping a constant vigilance over the predatory nature of western values." He thus sets the stage for this project: "It is in this multi-directional swirl of cultural ideas that I foresee the emergence of postcolonial theology."

Mark Lewis Taylor enunciates for the volume the "postcolonial spirit." Detecting a "turn to spirit" among postcolonial thinkers as well as communal conditions that manifest a "postcolonial ethos of differential liberatory struggle" both in certain Christian communities and in interreligious coalitions, he proceeds to lay out "four practical tests" for theological resistance to U.S. violence and imperialism. Any possible U.S. postcolonial theology, he suggests, must pass these tests. "Postcolonial spirit is found in the turning toward ever new hybrid spaces where the struggle for liberation is underway."

**Theological Anthropology** as the doctrine of the human creature recreates itself in the postcolonial encounter. Taking their stance within or between diverse sociopolitical locations, the essays in this section interrogate dominant constructions of identity. They imagine subjectivities that resist the homogenizing and divisive tendencies of racial and ethnic labels, normative appearances, or religious and national identities. Theology can rethink its understanding of the *imago dei* with the help of theories of the split subject—as the embodiment and

internalization of colonizing ideals, but also as the site of *spirited* resistance.

Asking “Who Is Americano/a?” Michelle Gonzalez narrates the quest for a Latino/a identity—as a properly and profoundly theological task. She shows that Latino/a theologians—often preceding postcolonial theory—“offer a fruitful starting point for a theological anthropology that takes hybridity seriously.” Attending to the complexity of its identities, Latino/a theology emphasizes the relational character of a humanity that is the image of a trinitarian God. This attention to hybridity highlights a risk for conceptualizing subjectivity: “Too often, the contributions of people of color are parochialized into a sub-category, seen as a quaint exception to the dominant rhetoric.”

Asking “Who/What Is Asian?” Namsoon Kang offers a Korean postcolonial analysis for theology. She brings to this collection a perspective from outside of both U.S. hybridity and the legacy of the British Empire. “Postcolonial theological anthropology must reject the search for the unchanging, culturally essential core of Asians/Asianness,” writes Kang. “The hybrid self, decentering any foundational notion of Asian, can be a Christian ideal of losing oneself to find oneself.”

Such a self is not self-identical, self-same, or unified. Thus, the Spirit might find space within the splits, fissures, and wounds of the subject. Occupying the theological field between pneumatology and anthropology, Sharon Betcher’s reflection on the politics of disablement exposes a secularized eschatology at work in the medical technology of “miraculous” remediation. She traces the links between missionary justifications of colonialism, and the colonizing ideal of the “wholesome” body. As an alternative she invokes a Spirit that lives not beyond but within the vulnerabilities of our interdependent flesh.

And when Michael Nausner asks after the subject and its boundaries, he finds the subject situated at the boundary itself. He lets postcolonial theology challenge the U.S. rhetoric of “homeland security” as it mushroomed following the attack on the World Trade Towers. In “Homeland as Borderland,” the border itself emerges as “the unavoidable and dynamic location of Christian subjectivity,” the site of a “community of negotiation.”

**Christ**, the symbolic epicenter of Christian theopolitics, from one perspective conquers, from another decolonizes, the world. As Christian constructive theology, this volume is blessed with four essays meditating on the liberating force of Jesus as the Christ. Such liberating power is thematized already in Nausner’s depiction of Jesus as a borderland person, destabilizing and inhabiting divisive boundaries.

Stephen D. Moore explores the postcolonial ambivalence of Mark’s gospel. He asks whether its christology is “merely mirroring Roman imperial ideology” by “inaugurating an empire of God that inevitably

evinces many of the oppressive traits of the Roman empire it displaces.” While uncovering deep tensions within the gospel’s explicitly apocalyptic sections, Moore nonetheless discovers elsewhere in Mark “a counter-imperial apocalyptic ethic.”

W. Anne Joh, negotiating the between-space of a Korean American context, explores the Korean concept of *jeong* as a postcolonial “in-between” space—different from the liberationist-oppositional notion of *dan*. While Kang warns of the dangers of the uses of the Korean concept of *han* (suffering) when it leads to the homogenization of Asians’ experience or their representation as “pure victims,” Joh finds *han* in the midst of the hybridity arising in the dynamic contexts of immigration and seeks subversive strategies that recognize its complexity. Read through the lenses of *jeong*, Jesus’ practice of liberation opens “the interstitial space, from which radical subversive resistance can emerge creatively.”

Exploring the economic implications of neocolonial empire, Marion Grau imagines the trickster Christ of a “divine commerce.” Her multidimensional *economia* draws on early Christian scriptural and dogmatic sources in order to “queer” postcolonial theology—and thus to render it mobile and efficacious within the contemporary United States.

Lurking within and behind all of these theological proposals is the question of **God**. Can speech about “God” liberate rather than oppress, release rather than repress? Can it help us to live as creatures within a gorgeous creation—that we have already irrevocably violated? As Spivak says, “the planet is a species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan.”<sup>30</sup> Might we yet inhabit the planet—in its socialities and its ecologies—with the respect we *owe* it? Does this other “system” not resonate with the language of “God”—albeit differently?

Mayra Rivera’s “God at the Crossroads” introduces a postcolonial *theology of divine wisdom*. By way of an excavation of the ancient colonial context of the biblical Wisdom figure, she recovers Sophia the Hybrid—God with an unmistakably foreign and female accent, appearing at the crossroads with the *atravesados*, the misfits and mestizos, at once disturbing and reconstructing the space of theology itself.

In his reflection on “Liberating God-Talk,” Joerg Rieger asks “what happens when God-talk is turned loose from the powers that be, when it comes from those who bear the marks of colonialism and neo-colonialism in their flesh?” Advocating the emancipatory truth of the gospel of John, he stresses the needed continuity between liberation and postcolonial theology.

From the perspective of a theology of creation—as the operation of a creativity within a bottomless chaos of relations—Catherine Keller’s

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<sup>30</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), 72.

“Love of Postcolonialism” poses a two-way genitive: for it is not only that there is academic appetite for postcolonial theory, but that the theory itself yields an unexpected intimacy. This essay considers both a political and a theological critique of postcolonial theory. It finds, however, that even the criticisms become embroiled in the planetarity of an irreducible—and irreducibly divine—Love.

These postcolonial theologies lovingly inhabit the mazes of their contextual specificities even as they dare to imagine theology in its multiple, even cosmological, dimensions. The spirit of postcolonial theologies—found, for instance, in the negotiations of early Christian communities, Indian nationalist struggles, Latin American base communities—inspire varying visions of vernacular cosmopolitanism, communities of differential liberatory struggles and negotiation. Similarly, meditation on the complexities of human subjectivity that are often suppressed beneath rigid identities, the “multiple forms of corporeal flourishing” suffocated under mandatory appearances, gives way to postcolonial theological anthropologies. They enunciate a self in relation to an other—within and without, human or non-human—and a Christian identity dynamically emerging at the borderlands. Christ is approached from various sites of the various traditional christological models—scriptural witness, liberatory practices of early Christian communities, and atonement theory. These postcolonial christologies attend to the complexities found at the boundaries where the human-human or human-divine interactions occur. Here, redemption requires a full and tricky embodiment. At the crossroads of local struggles and global challenges, of personal subjectivities and communal identities, of human and divine encounters, postcolonial theologies open themselves to the risks and hopes of a radically planetary love.

In the “community of negotiation” formed by these essays and developing with their readership, the interstitial complexity begins to make itself felt. This negotiation seems at once to enable communication—and to exceed its boundaries. For at its best the postcolonial embrace of complexity may stimulate not only analysis but action, not only the ironies of ambivalence but the coalitions of hope. And perhaps even an occasional underground laughter.





# PART I

## THEOLOGY IN POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

# Complacencies and Cul-de-sacs

## *Christian Theologies and Colonialism*

R. S. Sugirtharajah<sup>1</sup>

One of the weighty contributions of postcolonial criticism has been to put issues relating to colonialism and imperialism at the centre of critical and intellectual inquiry, and, with some success, to alter the premises in several subject areas within the humanities and social sciences. While these disciplines are coming to terms with the reality of colonialism, what is striking about systematic theology is the reluctance of its practitioners to address the relation between European colonialism and the field. There has been a marked hesitancy to critically evaluate the impact of the empire among systematic theologians, both during and after the European expansion. Theologians in the West cannot excuse themselves by suggesting that the empire had little impact “at home.” New studies in literature, visual culture, geography and history in the last decade have demonstrated the numerous ways in which the empire was central to English domestic life and popular consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

While other disciplines have grappled with the wider cultural implications of the empire, European colonialism has never been a popular subject for theological inquiry in Western discourse despite the very substantial links between the churches in Britain and the missions in the colonial world. My colleague, Robert Beckford, claims that more books have been written by Western theologians about being nice to animals and the environment than about colonialism or race. For

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<sup>1</sup>Footnotes replace in-text citations in this reprint of chapter 9 of R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>For the influence and impact of cultures of the colonies in British art, journals, novels, dress habits, and children’s books, see Julie F. Codell and Dianne Sachko Macleod, eds., *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture* (Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 1998); David Armitage, “Literature and Empire,” in *The Oxford History of the Empire: The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 1, ed. P. J. Marshall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 99–123; and Kathryn Castle, *Britannia’s Children: Reading Colonialism through Children’s Books and Magazines* (Manchester, N.Y.: Manchester University Press, 1996).

instance, the two major surveys of English theologies, Vernon F. Storr's *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century 1800–1860* and Elliott-Binns's *The Development of English Theology in the Later Nineteenth Century*<sup>3</sup> which narrates the story from where Storr left off, do not mention the existence of the empire or colonialism. These volumes maintain a certain reserve when it comes to discussing the impact of colonialism. They devote a considerable amount of space to the impact of German biblical scholarship, of rationalism, and of the rise of atheism, but the empire is absent from their discourse. It is not as if leading Anglican theologians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Maurice and Westcott did not take serious theological interest in the empire, but these surveys make no reference to this aspect of their work. Or, for that matter, for the later colonial period, take a look at the two leading British theological journals, *The Expository Times* and *Theology*. During the period from 1900–1960 they did not carry a single article on colonialism or on the impact of the empire. The main preoccupation of theologians of the time according to Mascall, who surveyed the theological scene as it was in the closing years of British imperialism, was with the new discoveries of scientists, historians, and literary scholars and how they were making Christian living extremely difficult and the Christian faith vulnerable.<sup>4</sup>

### Justifying Empire

An exception to this were two books published in the 1950s. One was *Caesar the Beloved Enemy* by an English mission-executive, Max Warren,<sup>5</sup> and the other was *Nations and Empires* by a German American, Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, they came out of different political, social,

<sup>3</sup>Vernon F. Storr, *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century 1800–1860* (London: Longmans, Green, 1913). L. E. Elliott-Binns, *The Development of English Theology in the Later Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green, 1952).

<sup>4</sup>E. L. Mascall, "Anglican Dogmatic Theology, 1936–60 a Survey and Retrospect," *Theology* 63, no. 475 (1960): 1–7.

<sup>5</sup>M. A. C. Warren, *Caesar the Beloved Enemy: Three Studies in the Relation of Church and State, Reinecker Lectures at the Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia, February 1955* (London: SCM Press, 1955).

<sup>6</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nations and Empires: Recurring Patterns in the Political Order* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959). The American title was *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959). The original title suggested by Niebuhr was *Dominions in Nations and Empires: A Study of the Structures and Moral Dilemmas of the Political Order Relevant to the Perplexities of a Nuclear Age*. T. S. Eliot, who was at Faber and Faber, was appalled at the title and urged the American publishers to come up with something simpler. See Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography with a New Introduction and Afterword* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 268–69. Though Niebuhr's ethical articulations were aimed at North American and European audiences, he had a considerable influence on Asian theologians in the 1950s and 1960s. T. B. Simatupang acknowledges his indebtedness to Niebuhr during the Indonesian independence struggle. M. M. Thomas was another, but he distanced himself from Niebuhr's view when the latter veered away from his earlier Marxist tendencies and embraced right-wing ideas. See M. M. Thomas, "Non-Western Dynamics and American Strategy: A Third World View of Christian Realism," *Christianity and Crisis* 45, no. 1 (February 1986): 8–10.

and cultural contexts. Warren's book was written after Indian independence and about the time when African nations were agitating for independence and bursting with liberatory aspirations. More to the point, England was about to lose its colonies and relinquish its role as an imperial power. Niebuhr's book came out at a time when the Cold War was at an embryonic stage, and Western politics was concerned with communist expansion, and in the international political landscape America and Russia were emerging as the two neo-colonial superpowers.

At the risk of over-simplifying the complex ideas of these two theologians, let me paraphrase and reconstruct what they said about colonialism and empire. Warren was probably one of the few interested in working out a theology of imperialism. For him, such a task was incumbent upon anyone who was engaged in Christian mission. This theological reflection was fuelled by the idea that Asia and Africa had been associated with the political, economic, and cultural aggressions of the West.<sup>7</sup> What Warren does in the name of theologizing is to dismiss all notions of imperialism as "minted in hell" or as an "organized vice," and rehabilitate it by calling it the "Beloved Enemy," as indicated in his subtitle.<sup>8</sup> In other words, imperialism is now reconstructed as a likeable rogue. He seeks to make the whole sordid enterprise native-friendly. His aim is to make imperialism "command respect."<sup>9</sup> He prettifies and sanitises colonialism in five ways.

First, for Warren, imperialism "has a place in the purpose and providence of God."<sup>10</sup> In biblical terms, imperialism has eschatological significance, being preparatory in character. It has provided law and order, it has made obscure tribes citizens of the world, and drawn them into a common cosmopolitan culture. Otherwise these backward nations of Africa would have remained "an empty map on which cartographers would have put elephants in place of towns."<sup>11</sup> Secondly, empires can be "a vehicle of great good to a subject people."<sup>12</sup> In Warren's view, no other method had been devised so successfully for keeping the peace and making progress possible. Under imperialism, "love, power and justice have been seen to take shape redeeming some tragic situation."<sup>13</sup> Thirdly, imperialism has a virtuous and ethical ring about it. The empire is about exercising vocational consciousness and vocational feeling. These were the ideas Tillich considered as hallmarks of the now emerging American superpower. Warren found these abstract Tillichian ideas acted out in

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<sup>7</sup>Warren, *Caesar the Beloved Enemy*, 12.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 28, 20.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 31.

concrete examples of colonial benevolence such as working for an unheard of tribe in Sudan, or creating an Indian Civil Service. Fourthly, he cites a number of grateful “natives” for applauding the work of the empire. These voices support the authorial intention of emphasising the advantages of the empire.<sup>14</sup> Fifthly, he attributes the atrocities committed in the name of colonialism to human failure—the sinful nature of human beings. Colonialism is an exercise of power by sinful human beings, which reaches its widest range of potential good and evil under the form of imperialism.

For Niebuhr, too, colonialism was an inevitable stage in the development of civilizations. Countries exposed to colonialism were either “on the primitive level of tribal life” or, as in the case of ancient cultures like India and China, lacking in “technical means of communication which are important sources of cohesion in an integral community.”<sup>15</sup> Colonialism is about strong nations relating to weaker nations. It is God’s purpose for less privileged peoples and a temporary, passing phase. As for Warren, so for Niebuhr imperialism was not in itself immoral. Each empire must be considered individually. He also made a distinction between older and modern empires. The earlier empires were marked by nationalistic imperialism, where the stronger dominate the weaker. These were morally inferior to modern empires. The new empires are merely servants of the universal community.<sup>16</sup> Colonialism, for Niebuhr was triggered off by three motivations—missionary, economic, and political.

First, the missionary motive. This, for Niebuhr, should not to be confused with mission in the conventional Christian sense, but is a desire to spread and advance the benefits of the religious, political, and technical resources of strong nations. The missionary motive is based on the conviction that empires are “trustees of civilization” and that they are able to “bestow a value of universal validity.”<sup>17</sup> Secondly, he concedes that imperialism is motivated by economic factors, though Niebuhr

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<sup>14</sup>The two “native” voices used by Warren were Rajah Rammohun Roy and K.M. Panikkar. Though in Rammohun Roy’s time, the mood was that of pro-empire, he was not a passive applauder of colonialism. He sided with Irish peasants against the absentee landlords and showed solidarity with the people of Latin America by throwing a public dinner at the Town Hall of Calcutta when constitutional government was established in the Spanish controlled South America. See Susobhan Sarkar, *On the Bengal Renaissance* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1985), 21. More significantly, he wrote: “Enemies to liberty and friends of despotism have never been, and never will be ultimately successful.” See Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Sadharn Brahmo Samaj, 1962), 131. In Panikkar’s view, Warren’s was a classic case of selective reading which overlooks his devastating critique of mission. See K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1965), especially 297.

<sup>15</sup>Niebuhr, *Nations and Empires: Recurring Patterns in the Political Order*, 202.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 203.

strongly disputes the communist charge of “capitalist aggressiveness” as the sole intention. In his view, the ethnic and cultural arrogance of European empires caused much more devastation in the colonies than did economic exploitation. Thirdly, there was the political motive, which takes into account self-defence, security, power, prestige, and glory. It is worth noting that Niebuhr, before the Second World War, was a liberal Marxist and cautioned against the dangers of the US imperialism, but changed his mind when America emerged as a superpower and talked about responsible use of its new-found power.<sup>18</sup>

Warren and Niebuhr present empire as morally neutral, open to misuse, but with the right rulers a worthy enterprise. What Warren and Niebuhr failed to acknowledge was the fundamental premise of empires. Empires are basically about technically and militarily advantaged superior “races” ruling over inferior and backward peoples. When imperial powers invade, the conquered are not permitted to be equal to the invaders. This was true of all empires, Roman to British and American. This basic assumption of superiority is never questioned in their writings.

The writings of Niebuhr and Warren emphasize lofty intentions of uplifting deprived but appreciative natives. There is a passionate belief in empire, but how the whole enterprise is essential to the well-being of the Western powers hardly comes into the equation. While pointing out the benefits bestowed on the colonies, no reference is made to colonies as sources of raw material, cheap labour, secure markets, and potential sites of investment. India’s importance for the wider mercantile interests of the British empire is rarely addressed. This apparently “native-friendly,” sympathetic, and favourable face of colonialism conveniently overlooks the predatory aspect of the economy of colonialism.

In the name of theologizing what we have here is old-fashioned imperial self-justification based on ignorance of the rich heritage of other peoples’ traditions and an excessive optimism about what the West has done and can do for Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Such an attitude overlooks what those at the receiving end felt about the process. The basic imperial assumption that Western values ought to prevail throughout the world is fine from a liberal Western perspective, but it does not always follow that the rest of the world wishes to adopt them. The Welsh resistance leader spoke for all the conquered people, when he was captured and brought before the emperor in Rome, and said: “Because you desire to conquer the world, it does not necessarily follow that the world desires to be conquered by you.”<sup>19</sup>

For most European theologians at the time, the empire was a matter of divine dispensation, and, as such, beyond ultimate criticism. Stephen

<sup>18</sup>Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1981), 183–84.

<sup>19</sup>Cited in *The Guardian*, 9.6.2002, 15.

Neill, who on the whole took a similar line, was a little more cautious when he came to his conclusion: "The history of the Christian mission in the colonial period must in the end be left to the judgement of God, who alone knows all the facts, who alone can exercise a perfectly objective and merciful judgement."<sup>20</sup> What is ironic about this statement is that the people who passed indiscriminate judgements on other peoples' cultures, manners, and customs, are unusually silent when it comes to scrutinizing their own. What is also ironic is that systematic theology in Britain has continued to the present day as complacently unwilling to confront the reality of empire and its postcolonial consequences.<sup>21</sup>

### **Responding to the Raj**

Indian Christian responses to colonialism vary with the particular constituency one is looking at. Among the vast majority of Indian Christians from the subaltern class—a class largely rural, semi-literate, minimally if at all Westernized, and non-brahminical—who came to Christianity mainly through mass conversions, the common attitude was one of gratitude and admiration. For these converts, who were mainly outcastes and tribals, their principal encounter with the colonial power was through the mission agencies and their welfare work. They were the recipients of the beneficent effects of missionary work. These converts from the oppressed classes experienced for themselves the schools and hospitals that the missionaries ran and personally benefited from their work. They saw their dignity being restored by the intervention of missionaries and colonial administration in cases like the Upper Cloth Movement in South Travancore. A community which has stigma attached to it as being the lowest of the low, is now being repeatedly told by missionaries that, contrary to the Aryan racist myth, the Bible teaches that all people are descended from one human being made in the image of God. As Christians "they have special prerogatives and privileges bestowed upon them by their Divine Master which places the poorest and humblest Christians above the princes and rulers, and the richest and the mightiest people of this world." They "were not part or a section of the Indian nation in the same way other communities are." On the contrary, "they were a nation, a separate nation, a holy nation separate and distinct from all other nations of the world."<sup>22</sup> Such claims and bestowal of these epithets, "holy nation", "separate nation," and "the new

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<sup>20</sup>Stephen Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966), 424.

<sup>21</sup>For a survey of the current status of British theology, see David Ford, "Theological Wisdom, British Style," *Christian Century* (5 April 2000): 388–91; David Ford, "British Theology After a Trauma: Divisions and Conversations," *Christian Century* (12 April 2000): 425–31; David Ford, "British Theology: Movements and Churches," *Christian Century* (19 April 2000): 467–73. British Black theology does not even get a mention.

<sup>22</sup>*The Indian Witness*, 77 (28) 1947: 217.

people of God,” were an unimaginable boon to these culturally marginalised and economically deprived people. These converts saw only the positive side of missionary activity. Moreover, they were taught by missionaries who had no interest in criticising a system which worked to their advantage.<sup>23</sup> The *Missionary Herald* reported that missionaries did more to reconcile Indians to “the British regime than any other single Western element operating in India.”<sup>24</sup> The British Raj, to these disadvantaged Indians, was different from the Raj experienced by high-caste Western-educated Hindus. More to the point, they preferred British rule to the enormous oppression they suffered under their own Hindu neighbours. They feared that if the British left, the social and economic benefits and achievements they had gained under the British regime would be lost. When orthodox Hindu voices began to be heard in contradistinction to the liberal national movement, these Christians from the depressed classes feared for their place in the new India. The letter columns of missionary journals of the time were full of such fears. Here is one of them:

Unquestionably I agree with Bishop Subhan that Christianity is in danger, and unless we rise unitedly to confront it, our position will be delicate in new India. Already cases have been brought to my notice, when poor Christians have been approached by members of other communities to change their religion. The economic condition of the Christian community is dreadful, and unemployment of its members by the government and Hindu concerns would reduce the community to poverty and destituteness, with the result that many of its members would find salvation in changing their faith.<sup>25</sup>

For the majority of these converts, what mattered most were their local networks of caste, family, and village rather than a pan-Indian identity in a newly freed India.

Another constituency was that represented by the national Christian forum in the form of the National Council of Churches of India. The Council was formed in 1923, at the height of colonialism and consisted mainly of Protestant Churches. The leadership of the Council was initially largely in the hands of foreign missionaries. Kaj Baago, who studied the history of the NCC, points out that the Council on the whole was “anxious to defend British policy both past and present in India”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>There were a handful of missionaries, such as C.F. Andrews, Jack Winslow, and his associates, including Verrier Elwin, who were exceptions to this and offered a critique of the empire.

<sup>24</sup>*Missionary Herald*, (April, 1879): 144.

<sup>25</sup>*Indian Witness*, 77 (30) 1947: 233.

<sup>26</sup>K. Baago, *A History of the National Christian Council of India 1914–1964* (Nagpur, India: The National Christian Council, 1965), 28.



and theological critique was low on its agenda. During the agitation for Home Rule, all that the Council did was to issue statements which were “vague, woolly and cautious in their choice of words, so that they could be interpreted both ways.”<sup>27</sup> Their only repeated gesture was to organize prayers for peace: “We may not offer advice, but we will give ourselves to prayer, and endeavour as far as in us lies to promote the spirit of goodwill.”<sup>28</sup> The editorial in the council’s journal, dated August 1947, the very month India gained its independence, is interesting and reflects a fear of Hindu domination like that of low-caste Christians. While praising the relinquishment of power by the British as a tribute to their “sincerity and statesmanship,” it went on to question the proposed new symbols of the nation—the national flag, the national anthem, the national dress, and salutation. The editorial<sup>29</sup> found that the national flag did not symbolize the unity of India and objected to the Asoka Wheel included in it because it represented a different philosophy of life—the transmigration of souls, which not all communities subscribed to. The editorial felt that the proposed national anthem—Bankim Chandra’s celebrated hymn to the motherland, *Bande Matram*—was written in a high-flown Hindi, the tune “most uninspiring.” Perhaps the editor was uncomfortable with a hymn that had been a potent rallying call during the mass nationalistic struggle.<sup>30</sup> The editorial conceded the new national salutations such as *salam* and *namaste* as harmless but thoroughly opposed the idea of the Gandhi cap, previously proscribed by the British authorities because of its symbolic potency, replacing the “majestic turban.”<sup>31</sup> All along the attitude of the NCC had been cautious, detached, and apolitical.

Among the group of high-caste, Western-educated converts in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British rule was seen as an opportunity—an opportunity to reconfront their culture, reclaim it, and reshape it to meet the demands of the time. These “babus” welcomed the British presence but perceived its function in their own way. They saw in the work of Orientalists an important dimension of their cultural achievements now being elevated and acquiring recognition. This unearthing of a monumental past by the Orientalists provided an opportunity for these “babus” to bask in an ancient glory and to shake Hindu and Aryan culture out of its theological complacency and degradation. What was important for them was the instrumentality of British rule in providing a stimulus to revitalize the now debased Aryan culture and identity and in the process advance the cause of national rebirth. K. M. Banerjea, an

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>29</sup>The editors were all Indians—R. B. Manikam, M. T. Titus, J. W. Sadiq, and E. C. Bhatt.

<sup>30</sup>It was Rabindranath Tagore’s *Jana gana mana* that became the official national anthem for the Republic of India.

<sup>31</sup>“Editorial Notes,” *The National Christian Council Review* 67 (8) August 1947: 343–44.

outstanding national figure of his time, saw, in the coming of the British, the mystery of Godliness which was revealed to the ancient seers, and which had been hitherto “locked up, as under a seal, in musty manuscripts” now being brought into “the light under the auspicious patronage of England’s crown.”<sup>32</sup>

As with most of their Western counterparts, there was a reluctance among most of these Indian theologians to criticize colonialism. One could attribute two reasons for this. The early converts, especially the ones who articulated their faith in a written form, were faced with two urgent questions and spent their energies addressing these rather than engaging in a theological evaluation of the empire. One, to prove that they were true patriots, and the other to demonstrate that the Christianity they embraced was not a foreign religion but was continuous with Vedic Hinduism. The general perception of Indian converts at that time was that they were perceived as people who had given up their national customs and habits and had become deracinated. The Brahmo Samajists constantly castigated the converts for forsaking their true religion and cultural practices. Keshub Chunder Sen, in one of his public addresses, taunted Indian Christians for their tendency to imitate their rulers:

I must therefore protest against that denationalization which is so general among Native converts to Christianity. (Cheers). With the religion of their heathen forefathers, they generally abandon the manners and customs of their country, and with Christianity they embrace the usages of Europeans; even in the dress and diet they assume an affected air of outlandishness, which estranges them from their own countrymen. They deliberately and voluntarily cut themselves off from Native society as soon as they are baptized, and, as an inevitable consequence, come to contract a sort of repugnance to everything Oriental, and an enthusiastic admiration for everything European. (Hear, Hear) They seemed to be ashamed of their country and their nationality.<sup>33</sup>

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, himself a convert, noted how others looked at Christians: “People here understand by the term Christian, a man who drinks liquor and eats beef, who hates the scriptures of India as lies and her inspired men as imposters.”<sup>34</sup> Faced with such criticism, these

<sup>32</sup>T. V. Philip, *Krishna Mohan Banerjee: Christian Apologist*, Confessing the Christian Faith in India, no. 15 (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1982), 198.

<sup>33</sup>Keshub Chunder Sen, *Keshub Chunder Sen’s Lectures in India* (London: Cassell and Company, 1901), 34–35.

<sup>34</sup>Julius Lipner and George Gispert-Sauch, eds., *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: Including a Resume of His Life and Thought*, vol. 1, Library of Indian Christian Theology (Bangalore: United Theological College, 1991), 2.

early converts sought to project themselves as patriotic Indians. The way they went about this was to project Christianity not as an alien religion but as part of the Vedic tradition. Thus, they were proud Christians. They argued very persuasively that Christianity, far from being an imported and an alien faith, was truly the heir of the ancient Indian tradition as distinct from the decadent contemporary Hinduism. Like Indiana Jones, they raided their own textual archives to demonstrate that these Vedic texts were already Christian or modernist, so that conversion to Christianity was not in any way an act of disloyalty to India. They were able to demonstrate that Vedic Hindus and Christians in India were the true descendants of the Vedic Aryans. In *Arian Witness*, written to prove the “patriotic honour” of Indian Christians, Banerjea told his readers that it was the Western-educated Hindus who had deviated from the faith of their forefathers, and that only Hindu Christians were the true upholders of the theory and practice of their primitive ancestors. He went on to claim that they were “the Brahminical Arians of India, and that if the authors of the Vedas could by any possibility now return to the world, they would at once recognise the Indian Christians, ‘far more complacently’ as their own descendants, than any other body of educated Indians.”<sup>35</sup> In one of his lectures, Banerjea told his audience: “Embracing Christ, you will find in Him a strength and comfort which your ancient Rishis would have regarded as a most valuable treasure had they lived in these days. You will find in Him everything worthy of your lineage, worthy of your antiquity, worthy of your traditions, and worthy of your education, and at the same time just to your children and to your successors in life.”<sup>36</sup> Christianity, for Banerjea, was Vedic doctrine “in its legitimately developed form.” He writes: “The relation between Vedic doctrine and Christianity is indeed so intimate that you can scarcely hold the one without being led to the other, much less can you keep hold on the one while resisting the claims of the other.”<sup>37</sup> He was able to show that God had been active not only through brahminical traditions but also through Christ, and the Christian gospel as a maturation of and climatic finale of the Vedic hope. By endowing Vedic texts with crypto-Christian ideas, these Brahmin converts challenged the missionary view that Hinduism was unfit to bring about a healthy national rejuvenation. More importantly, they argued for a historical continuity between Christianity and Hinduism whereas missionaries were advocating a complete break with the latter. Unlike the missionaries, they were not interested in contrasting Hinduism with Christianity but perceived Christianity as the

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<sup>35</sup>K. M. Banerjea, *The Arian Witness: Or the Testimony of Arian Scriptures in Corroboration of Biblical History and the Rudiments of Christian Doctrine, Including Dissertations on the Original and Early Adventures of Indo-Arians* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1875), 10.

<sup>36</sup>Philip, *Krishna Mohan Banerjea*, 201.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 200.

fulfilment of Hinduism. Whereas missionaries used Christ and Christian experience as a benchmark to expose the defects of Hinduism, these converts used Hindu texts and Hindu experience to elucidate the meaning and purpose of Christ.

In these Hinduized theologies national redemption was sought not so much by advancing political strategies but by placing faith in the Christian gospel as a remedy for India's problem. They believed that Christianity could provide the solid basis for Indian nationhood. All these thinkers were true patriots and believed in the nationalist cause and uplifting of India from its misery, but their teleological aim was to make India Christian. For instance, Banerjea who was politically active during the colonial era, and notwithstanding his status as a true patriot, believed that national redemption lay in "adopting the religion of the present rulers with all its temporal and spiritual blessings."<sup>38</sup> For him, the answer to India's moral welfare and economic progress was to be found in the Christian faith. He wrote:

Christianity alone has resisted the bewitching charms of the goddess, and thrown down her altars. Christianity alone has quenched the Brahmin's fire and the ignited darts of Shiva. Christianity alone has destroyed caste, educated females, stopped the marriage, or rather the prostitution, of infants, relieved widows, and proclaimed due liberty to the captives of the Zenana. Christianity, wherever it has got a footing, has transformed the Hindu's house from a scene of idolatry, female debasement, ignorance, and idleness, into one of rational worship, of moral energy, intellectual advancement, and female aggrandizement.<sup>39</sup>

Brahmabhandab Upadhyay, another Christian who was caught up in the national politics during the colonial era, exhibited a similar attitude, and saw his task as bringing his people to what he called the Hindu-Catholic faith.<sup>40</sup> The high-caste 19<sup>th</sup>-century converts sought to identify a Hindu textual basis for Christianity by delving into the most ancient Hindu texts. Far from being imitations of Western modes, these intertextual studies produced within the colonial contexts were not only complex transformations and transgressions of existing native

<sup>38</sup>K. M. Banerjea, "Hindu Caste," *Calcutta Review* 15 (1851): 70.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>40</sup>This was a common view of later also. Pandipedi Chenchiah, who threw himself into the cause of national liberation, also, spoke in terms of Jesus as the answer to India: "India needs the living and the present Lord. We offer to India the Jesus of history, the founder of Christianity, as the way to salvation... We present Jesus as an exemplar, ideal and model—that is, as a tonic to the soul; India wants him as a perpetual life-giver, renewer of her youth... We have offered new lamps for old, God for God, religion for religion, temple for temple," D. A. Thangasamy, *The Theology of Chenchiah*, Confessing the Faith in India 1 (Bangalore, India: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1966), 216–18.

conventions, but also disrupted and invigorated conservative Christian modes of the time by integrating native idioms. This was the Hinduism of the elite and high culture in which dalits hardly figured. Notwithstanding his disapproval of the caste system, Banerjea's main theological focus was the Brahmins. In one of his lectures he made it clear who the natives were: "I use the term, however, in a *restricted* sense, meaning thereby the descendants and successors of the Aryan emigrants who occupied the country in the earliest ages of which we have any history or tradition, and formed that great community of scholars, heroes, artisans, and merchants which willingly placed itself under the spiritual guidance of Brahmins and Rishis. To the descendants and representatives of that great family, I now address myself."<sup>41</sup>

For some Indian Christians in the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by Gandhi, national freedom was of supreme importance, British rule to be opposed as exploitative and corrupting. These Gandhian Christians were a relatively small but important group, among them S. K. Rudra, S. K. George, and J. C. Kumarappa. More accommodating theologically, slightly later was the internationally known and respected M. M. Thomas. For him, the empire was part of the divine ordering of structures and powers. Echoing Marx's double vision of the British in India, one destructive and the other regenerative, Thomas wrote that God used British imperialism "first to judge and correct traditional Indian life and put India on the path of progress."<sup>42</sup> For him, colonialism was like "St. Paul in Romans 13, where he says that the Roman power is ordained of God 'for your good.'"<sup>43</sup> While acknowledging the exploitative nature of colonialism, Thomas saw it as God using "one evil to correct other evils."<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, in his correspondence with Max Warren, referred to above, Thomas agreed with Warren's main proposal, but he differed from him on three counts. One, like Warren, Thomas, too, saw British rule as God's providence and British imperialism in India as laying the foundation for political unity and social progress. But, unlike Warren, Thomas added Indian nationalism as part of a continuous act of Divine Providence in India. Later, when a virulent form of Hindu communal nationalism emerged as an alternative resolution to colonialism, Thomas became less enchanted with it. Secondly, Thomas redefined God's providence in the light of God's redemption. He wrote: "It means seeing providential ordering and reordering of power and structures of power in political history as different from and at the same time related to the

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<sup>41</sup>Philip, *Krishna Mohan Banerjea*, 160.

<sup>42</sup>M. M. Thomas, "Indian Nationalism: A Christian Interpretation," *Religion and Society* 6, no. 2 (1959): 7.

<sup>43</sup>M. M. Thomas, "Some Notes on a Christian Interpretation of Nationalism in Asia," *The South East Asia Journal of Theology* 2, no. 2 (1960): 23.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

divine work of redemption in Christ.<sup>45</sup> People who imagine themselves to be agents of God's providence and conscious of God's call end up as self-righteous and become destructive of their fellow human beings. Thirdly, along with the positive cultural impact of the West, colonialism has also introduced to India new gods such as materialism, secularism, rationalism, and communism, which not only vie with other existing gods in India, but also pose a threat to the Christian gospel. Thomas's critique of nationalism in some respects resonates with the fears of national leaders of the time like Rabindranath Tagore. Whereas Tagore wanted to replace Indian nationalism with Indian civilization with its "demonstrated capacity to live with and creatively use contradictions and inconsistencies,"<sup>46</sup> Thomas proposed the Christian gospel and the Kingdom as viable alternatives. Thomas believed in nationalism as a preparation for the gospel: "It is from that angle, I would say that nationalism and nation-building are a divine preparation for the Gospel. It is creating a situation in which Christian social thought and action and the preaching of the Gospel are integral to each other as raising the Question and giving the Answer."<sup>47</sup> For him, in any national struggle and in any cultural transformation, people are "led to a decision for or against Jesus Christ."<sup>48</sup> In an ironic way, Thomas's solution was another form of colonialism—conquering Indians for Christ.

M. M. Thomas and Western-educated liberals paid less attention to critical rereading of Hindu texts than their forebears, though they valued their importance. Their strategy was synthetic and accumulative rather than a question of reforming, or purifying, Hinduism. They relied on insights drawn from biblical theology, evangelical piety, and a selective appropriation of secular ideologies such as Marxism, socialism, and humanism.

### Postcolonial Cogitations

Theologies in India arose as a result of responding to colonialism and later in the cause of nation building. It was the compelling business of national independence, and the rearticulation of nationhood after colonial occupation and its ravages which principally shaped Indian theologies, rather than ecclesiastical practices, doctrinal beliefs, or philosophical or rational concerns. Undergirding their theological concerns was the fundamental issue of relating to the way one constructs and characterizes one's own identity. It was rather their endeavour to establish a self and national identity as minorities living in communities

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<sup>45</sup>Thomas, "Indian Nationalism: A Christian Interpretation," 8.

<sup>46</sup>Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 83.

<sup>47</sup>Thomas, "Some Notes on a Christian Interpretation of Nationalism in Asia," 26.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

shaped by a variety of textual and oral traditions both sacred and secular, and by the ongoing socio-political process, which influenced the questions these Indian theologians put to the gospel. When the colonial rulers wondered whether a country like India with a multiplicity of cultures and a diversity of languages could ever become a viable and cohesive nation-state, the emergence of a Western-educated elite was able to lay a basis for a pan-Indian nationalism. They were able to achieve this by reinventing, restoring and reconfiguring some of their religious and cultural symbols.

One may not find in these discourses many of the theoretical issues, theological vocabularies, or textual forms we often see in Western theological writings. These theologies are mainly about belonging and identity and how Indian Christians have negotiated and continue to negotiate an Indian-Christian identity in a country which is inured to perceiving Christians with suspicion and prejudice. Any comparative enterprise is likely to discredit Indian Christian theology. Indian theology is either appreciated as *pukka* theology in the Western scholarly sense, or it is not. If it is not, then it is seen as inchoate and bankrupt by Western standards. These theologians, though, were not interested in measuring up to alien standards. They set up their own parameters by naming and identifying hermeneutical concerns which were relevant to their context, and set out to ask questions which were not addressed elsewhere, and went on to solve the problems they set for themselves. I think there is a lesson here for the current theological enterprise in India, which desires only to “catch up” with the West.

One of the incongruities of postcolonial discourse is that its proponents hailed from a number of Islamic societies but rarely took account of the potency of religion in these regions. The pioneer theoreticians who investigated colonialism came from the Arabic world—Albert Memmi from Tunisia, Frantz Fanon from Algeria, and Edward Said from Palestine. But religion rarely gets into their theoretical agenda. Rae, one of the characters in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*, is spot-on when he remarks: “Even Fanon, who I have always admired, had no insights into the religious feelings of the North Africans he wrote about. He never made the link between Islam and anti-colonialism.”<sup>49</sup> Said’s own preference for secular criticism over theological did not help either. Since the Enlightenment, the secular has been favoured and the spiritual and theological have been denigrated as signs of primordial urges and as unmodern. The treatment of Islam in the popular media is a conspicuous case in point. After September 11, many have pointed out how Islam is a faith trapped in a medieval time-warp and is yet to go through an 18<sup>th</sup>-century-style enlightenment. Linking Islam to medieval savagery may

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<sup>49</sup>Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (Edinburg: Polygon, 1999), 97.

serve for theological point-scoring, but such a proposition assumes that barbarism died as the Renaissance emerged in the Christian West. Even a causal reading of history will reveal that the real masters of evil, who even managed to turn genocide into a mundane reality, all lived in the last century and most of them came from the Christianized West. Postcolonial criticism which was influenced by Marxism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis, and which is now thriving in modern, secular, and liberal cultures, has sadly paid little attention to the potency of religion and theology among Third World peoples.<sup>50</sup> The secular bias and assumptions of postcolonial discourse have not only increased the gap between the theory and religions, but have also failed to acknowledge alternatives rooted in religion. There is a considerable distance between the theoretical interests of postcolonialism and the hermeneutical interests of postcolonial societies. Religion and religious symbols have been used successfully both in colonial and postcolonial societies as a way of surviving, subverting, and challenging colonialism and Christendom. The future legitimacy of postcolonial criticism depends on paying attention to this issue.

In a postcolonial context, geography is no longer an arbiter in defining what theology is. It appears that a theological imagination need not be in harmony with a specific geographical terrain. The idea of India can be invented elsewhere, away from the sub-continent, as is happening in the novels of Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, and Bharati Mukherjee, to name a few. Amy Tan, Le Ly Hayslip, and others have wrestled to integrate Chinese and Vietnamese heritage into their new immigrant experience.<sup>51</sup> In theological discourse, too, this is happening but it is at a nascent phase. Peter Phan, Jung Young Lee, and Eleazar Fernandez have tried to articulate a theology away from their Vietnamese, Korean, and Filipino homes.<sup>52</sup> At a time when national boundaries are becoming blurred, and attachment to a particular locale

<sup>50</sup>There are books on Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism dealing with postcolonial concerns such as orientalism and representation of these religions, but they do not come up with postcolonial theories or strategies to understand religions. See Anouar Majid, *Unveiling Traditions: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); and J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>51</sup>The literature on Asian-American literature is too vast to be listed here. A convenient entry point to the subject is Qun Wang, "Border Crossing, Cultural Negotiations, and the Authenticity of Asian American Voices," *Passages: Journal of Transnational and Transcultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (1999): 278–89.

<sup>52</sup>Jung Young Lee, "A Life In-Between: A Korean-American Journey," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, ed. Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999); Eleazar S. Fernández, "Exodus-towards-Egypt: Filipino-Americans' Struggle to Realize the Promised Land in America," in *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).



is being disturbed through displacement of peoples, what is the task of contextual theologies which have invested so much in locations, roots, indigenous resources, and soil? There are a couple of options in the offing.

One would be to search for answers in the vernacular and in the ancient heritage which colonial education taught us to sneer at. It would be a painless rebuff to globalization and its tendency to devour vernacular modes. Jettison the larger cosmopolitan canvas for a smaller rural one. Two characters in novels, one written during the colonial time and the other in the postcolonial context, typify such an option. *Thillai Govindan*, written at the height of colonialism by Madhaviah, is an engrossing account of the eponymous hero, a Tamil Brahmin's loss and recovery of self and identity under the impact of the British rule, Western education, and Christianity, and his finally finding peace and consolation in an indigenous text—the *Bhagavad Gita*.<sup>53</sup> The other, *The House of Blue Mangoes*, a postcolonial look at colonial India, is a novel chronicling three generations of a family from South India, but this time a Christian one. Daniel Dorai, the second-generation head of the family, is a Christian from a non-brahminical class. Typical of his generation, he lionized the work of the missionaries and looked forward to centuries of British rule. This proclaimed appreciation is deceptive. It appears that in spite of his ardent Christian faith and gratitude to the British, at a time of personal and national upheaval and uncertainty, he, too, like Thillai Govindan, found spiritual refuge in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Some weeks after his death, a family member found among his belongings well-thumbed and neatly-underlined in blue ink a copy of the *Brhad-aranyaka Upanishad*.<sup>54</sup>

The second option would be to follow the new global nomads depicted in Hwee Hwee Tan's futuristic novel, *Mammon Inc*. This is about the new generations who have “no fixed cultural identity” and who embrace the cosmopolitan culture enthusiastically and wallow in the possibilities it offers. They are the “cosmopolitan citizens of the world, equally at home in a 212 or 0207 area code, equally well versed in the work of George Lucas and Joseph Campbell to be able to analyse the mythological arches in Star Wars.”<sup>55</sup>

Or, there might be a third option, namely to blend creatively cosmopolitan and vernacular cultures. It is not blending into someone else's culture which the globalizers blindly advocate and which will inevitably lead to destruction of one's own identity and history, but the

<sup>53</sup>A. Madhaviah, *Thillai Govindan* (Madras, India: Tinamani Press, 1944), 128. The page number refers to the Tamil version. The English version published by T.F. Unwin, London appeared in 1916.

<sup>54</sup>David Davidar, *The House of Blue Mangoes* (New Delhi: Viking, 2002), 345.

<sup>55</sup>Hwee Hwee Tan, *Mammon Inc*. (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 143.

blending into one's own culture some of the liberative elements of someone else's. This is not a particularly original idea. The 19th century converts mentioned above—K. M. Banerjea, Upadhyay, and others from Southern Indian such as Krishna Pillai and Vedanayaga Sastriar—have cleverly and creatively combined Bengali and Tamil with Christian ideas. The blending I have in mind differs notably in three aspects from these earlier experiments. (1) It should go beyond identity hermeneutics. Self-affirmation and restoring the lost pride and emasculated dignity of an alienated people are fine and worthy causes in themselves. But to hold on to them, and to reiterate them uncritically when the context out of which these issues arose has moved, is to risk turning them into theological clichés. (2) It should move beyond its high-caste moorings and take into account the legends and myths of the dalits and tribals. (3) It should shed its overtly Christian superiority and smugness. The earlier attempts at assimilation suffered from Christian triumphalism. What I envisage is a form of vernacular cosmopolitanism, like that advocated by Homi Bhabha, which is not constrained by old boundaries and entrenched positions but allows transgression. Vernacular cosmopolitanism is a cultural act and translation which is “not simply appropriation or adaptation; it is a process through which cultures are required to revise their own systems of reference, norms and values, by departing from their habitual or ‘inbred’ rules of transformation.”<sup>56</sup> Vernacular cosmopolitanism is about an appropriation and transformation of cultures which resist any simplified binary understanding. This latter, all too often tends to glorify the local and discredit the global. It is a discursive practice which anticipates a complicated negotiation requiring an exchange of ideas in all directions, and keeping a constant vigilance over the predatory nature of Western values and treating circumspectly the immaculate qualities of the vernacular. It is in this multi-directional swirl of cultural ideas that I foresee the emergence of postcolonial theology.

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<sup>56</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, “The Vernacular Cosmopolitan,” in *Voices of the Crossing: The Impact of Britain on Writers from Asia, the Caribbean and Africa*, ed. Naseem Khan (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000), 141.