



Vidyankur: Journal of Philosophical and Theological Studies

XXII/2 July 2020 | ISSN P-2320-9429 | **57-64**

<https://www.vidyankur.in> | DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4101697

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4101697>

Review Article: The Wretched of the Earth: A Postcolonial Interpretation of the Bible

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Mukherjee, G. (2020). *Emancipation for the wretched of the earth: A postcolonial interpretation of the Bible*. New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, Delhi. ISBN: 9789351484806

Postcolonialism and its distant cousin postmodernism have a lot to offer, especially as a critique of our contemporary economic, political, religious and philosophical systems. Contemporary worldviews and lifestyles are intimately linked by the colonial-post-colonial divide. Such a divide exists in almost all areas of life and is poignantly felt at the religious level, where human beings feel closest and most intimate to themselves.

Cite as: Pandikattu, Kuruvilla SJ. (2020). Review Article: The Wretched of the Earth: A Postcolonial Interpretation of the Bible (Version 2.0) Vidyankur: Journal of Philosophical and Theological Studies. July-Dec 2020 XXII/2 www.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4101697 57-64.

Thus, the attempt made by a young and dynamic research scholar Gargi Mukherjee to critique the religious and biblical basis through the lenses of postcolonialism is truly commendable. Though herself is not a Christian, the scholar has undertaken the courageous task of unravelling some of the colonial interpretations of the Bible, enabling the contemporary people to rediscover the freshness and liberative dimension of the Bible, especially from the experiential dimension of the poor, marginalised and the wretched of the earth. In the prophetic reinterpretation of the Indian Biblical scholar George Soares-Prabhu (1929-1995), she has found someone who has interpreted the Bible for the “natives,” taking into consideration their dreams, aspirations and hopes. As we celebrate the 25th death anniversary of this well-known biblical scholar, this book may be regarded as a modest tribute to this prophetic hermeneut, revolutionary thinker and radical visionary. May he continue to inspire us to interpret the Bible meaningfully for our community.

A Post-Colonial Interpretation of the Bible

This book is dense in its theoretical underpinning of post-colonialism. It does a tremendous service to the Christian community to rediscover the freshness and vigour of the Bible. It challenges the philosophers and scholars to be truly open to the “wretched of the earth,” in their analysis of the world-views. It encourages ordinary people to personalise the authentic experience of God in ordinary and normal experiences of life, including the exploitation of the migrants during these Covid-19 times!

In this book, Mukherjee asks the following questions: What is the relevance of postcolonialism today? How does it relate the colonial powers to the present world order? How can a new interpretation of the Bible emancipate the poor and the wretched

of the earth? These are some of the philosophical questions that we will be taking up in this book.

According to her, postcolonial reading exposed the colonialist interventions in the reading of the text, and it helped to detect the conscious and dormant elements of colonizing powers in the reading practices of the text. Colonial intervention is a historical fact, embedded as one of the layers of the consciousness of the people of the Third World or what Fernando F. Segovia calls as Two-Thirds World. These Colonial cultural interventions still continue to play a vital role in the readings and the practices of the colonized masses. Postcolonialism which emerged as an academic discipline in the West attempts to identify the colonial excesses and cultural remains in the practices of the natives. By exposing the aspect of power in the construction of knowledge systems, Postcolonialism attempts to neutralise such power relations. This sort of neutralization of power relations in the knowledge discourses is what we call decolonization.

In the present work, the author tries to identify and explore the colonialist interpretation of the Bible, the postcolonial interventions in order to rupture the colonial fabric of the readings of the Bible and the rereading of the Bible as a decolonizing project from the standpoint of the oppressed native. Thus, through postcolonial hermeneutics of the Bible, the author tries to make the Bible a liberating experience for the oppressed native.

The Objective of the Study

In this inspiring book, the author tries to define the following problems. Orientalism defined the native as exotic and the other of the West. This Orientalist project helped the realization of colonialism. Even after the end of colonialism, the colonial impacts are still visible in the post-colonial reality. The interrelatedness between the power and knowledge in the colonial constructions has been explored by postcolonial scholars. This led them to undertake the project of decolonization as a way of emancipatory

reinterpretation of the text. This rereading and reinterpretation of the text were undertaken by postcolonial scholars as an emancipatory project. This rereading of the text is also used in the realm of biblical criticism, paving the way for identifying the colonial power relations in the interpretation of the Bible.

In this work the relations of power in the colonial interpretation of the Bible is problematized, using the postcolonial tools and understandings.

After Edward Said's studies on *Orientalism* (Said, 2019), it is understood that Orientalism and colonialism mutually strengthened each other in the modern period. The Western colonial understanding of the colonized was intertwined with the Orientalist reading about the natives. Such colonial-oriental readings are still prevalent in the post-colonial

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era also. Postcolonialism identifies the colonial continuities and tries to emancipate the oppressed native from the cultural imperialism of the West. This project of postcolonialism is termed decolonization and it is done from the native cultural standpoint. As postcolonialism emerged as an academic discipline in the academic institutions of the West, it concentrated on the rereading and reinterpretation of the text rather than undertaking it as a practical venture of the everyday life of the native. Such postcolonial rereading influenced biblical studies too.

Significance of the Work

With the emergence of free nations from the colonial clutches in the 1960s, the post-colonial period begins. The post-colonial period necessitated the revisiting of the colonial discourses. This revisiting of the colonial discourses, coupled with the postmodern understanding of the interrelations of power and knowledge systems, made the Third World natives realise their cultural subjugation during the colonial discursive practices.

In this context, the present study gains its significance as it tries to understand the colonial continuities in the present-day readings of the Bible and how postcolonialism attempts to decolonize them by reinterpretation of the Bible from the native standpoint.

Methodology of the Book

Postcolonialism is understood as a multi-disciplinary subject. It involves cultural studies which are considered to be post-disciplinary studies. Hence in order to explain the concept and theories related to colonialism, Orientalism, postcolonialism and biblical criticism, descriptive, analytical, historical and critical methods are used.

Further, the interpretative methodology will also be used as colonial and postcolonial interpretations differ widely according to contextual reality. As postcolonial criticism is also understood as an interventionist approach, the critical hermeneutical method is also used.

General Overview of the Book

In order to explore the significance of a postcolonial interpretation of the Bible, the present volume is tentatively divided into four chapters as follows.

The first chapter, ***Orientalism and Colonialism: Theory and Practice***, attempts to discuss how Orientalism and Colonialism mutually contributed to each other in respect of theory and practice. Towards this end, this chapter discusses the conceptual elaborations

of the theory of Orientalism as explained by Edward Said and the conceptual understanding of colonialism as explained variously by different scholars.

The second chapter titled, *Postcolonialism: Some Theoretical Considerations*, tries to understand the emergence of postcolonialism in the academic departments of the West. Postcolonial beginnings can be located in the theory of Orientalism propounded by Edward Said. Though we can trace the beginnings of postcolonial studies in theoretical understandings of Orientalism, there are many other contributing factors to the emergence of postcolonialism as an academic discipline. The emergence of the scholars from the Third World, or Two-Thirds World as described by Fernando F. Segovia, in the academic departments of the U.S and Europe made postcolonialism a vibrant field of study, critiquing the Western attitudes and practices about the colonized countries. Further, though the scholars from the Two-Thirds World are rooted in the culture of their native colonized countries, they experienced a sense of hybridity of their existence due to the intervention of colonialism and their migration to the West.

The third chapter titled, *Decolonizing Colonial Exegesis: Postcolonial Biblical Readings*, attempts to understand the historical emergence of the application of postcolonial studies for the rereading of the Bible from the standpoint of the colonized. Though the method of postcolonial Biblical criticism derives its strength from

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the reactionary derivative discourses of postcolonialism, it has its roots in Biblical criticism too.

Postcolonial Biblical criticism, like postcolonialism, is the cultural contestation, carried out by the colonized and suppressed, against the dominant cultural hegemony of the West, through textual criticism and interpretation. It situates colonial practices and interventions at the centre of the Bible and biblical reading, Sugirtharajah (2016) says. It introduced the relation of power and knowledge production into the realm of biblical criticism, to show how the textual interpretation of the missionaries is implicitly linked to European colonialism. And the overthrow of colonialism made it a possibility to go for the decolonization of the texts, through the reinterpretation of the text from the colonized experiences.

The last section of this chapter deals with a contemporary theologian of repute, Prof George Soares-Prabhu (1929-1995) who has made use of creative biblical hermeneutics, which is certainly post-colonial, though he himself does not use the term. Prof Soares-Prabhu was a well-known scriptural (Biblical) scholar from Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, who has popularised an Indian and liberational interpretation of the Bible (Soares-Prabhu & D'Sa, 2001). He has done his Licentiate in the Bible from the prestigious and elite Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome and completed a PhD in Biblical theology in Lyon, France, under the guidance of one of the best-known Biblical scholars, Xavier Léon-Dufour. With his commitment to Indian roots and intellectual rigour, Soares-Prabhu can never be regarded as the “bourgeoisie of the colonialist country” (Fanon, 1963: 43). According to him, the message of the Bible is primarily addressed to the poor people for their freedom or liberation, a theme very close to the post-colonial interpretation (D'Sa, 1997). He takes into account the exploitation and suffering of the poor people and suggests that only an interpretation of the Bible that does justice to the poor and the marginalised is worth considering in our context today.

The final chapter, *Concluding Remarks*, attempts to analyse and arrive at certain conclusions based on the discussions of the previous chapters.

Recommendations

Though the present research work tries to understand the colonial continuities and the postcolonial interventions theoretically, such a theoretical elaboration is not only limited to the textual rereading. It embraces particularly the reinterpretation of the Bible from the existential experiences of the colonized and suppressed, leading to an emancipation of the wretched of the earth!

So I recommend this study as a critical and respectful approach to study the Bible and to draw relevant insights from the Bible.

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Received: April 27, 2020: Accepted May 12, 2020: Words: 2870

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