

# POST-COLONIAL ENGAGEMENTS

By Rev Dev Anandarajan

What is Post-Colonial and what does that have to do with Church life? Prof RS Sugirtharajah, Emeritus Professor of Biblical Hermeneutics at the University of Birmingham, says post-Colonialism can be seen in two ways: “One is historical, marking the dismantling of the empire and its attendant instruments of power, and the other in an intellectual project that searches for ‘alternative source, alternative readings and alternative presentation of evidence’.”

“Essentially, post-Colonialism identifies the dominant power, exposes it and engages critically with it,” he says. Or, to put it succinctly, post-Colonialism describes “the modern history of imperialism, beginning with the process of colonialism, independence, and to the contemporary neo-colonialist realities”, such as diaspora, multiculturalism, refugees and asylum-seeking.

Post-Colonial criticism seeks to critique the Colonial biases in the biblical narratives and in the interpretation and to bring to the surface the voices that are suppressed to engage with and to include them among other diverse voices.

“In this post-Colonialism analyses, the relation between the culture of the coloniser and the colonised grapples with issues of identity and distinctiveness and intentionally devotes in theories of the Indigenous and the diaspora,” Prof RS Sugirtharajah says.

In its analysis of the biblical texts, post-Colonial reading alerts us in particular to the nature of their political contexts. It brings to the fore the empires of the Biblical world and reminds us that the history, faith experiences, and the shaping of the books of the bible - both the Old Testament and the New Testament - happened when they were under various empires. Hence in the study of the biblical texts, the post-Colonial critic analyses the relationship of the empire to the text.

How does the writer present the imperial power? Do they challenge or support them? Where is the author’s allegiance - with those who are ruled or the ruler? How do they present the subjects of the empire?

While critiquing the way the Bible was used to serve the agenda of the colonialists, it also does another important task which has been disregarded for so long. It is involved in retrieving the side-lined or, rather, silenced voices within the text and reclaiming the resilient voices of the natives who appropriated the gospel in their cultural context and confronted the master.

In Australia, the challenge of doing post-Colonial theology is manifold. On one side are the issues of the Indigenous communities for whom European colonialism is still a present reality. In many colonised countries, the European colonialists have left the country of occupation, but in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa they have remained and grabbed their land and disenfranchised a people who once were a sovereign people.

Even though some in the Indigenous communities have embraced the religion of the Bible (the white man's religion) it is also perceived as a tool used to overpower them.

Like the African and Latin American people who have found liberative elements within the Bible for their emancipation, Australian Indigenous communities have also started unearthing liberative elements in the texts. But there is still a reluctance to critique not only the cultural superiority mindset with which Christianity was propagated, but also the marginalising mindset and cultures within the very text that enslaved them.

The issue may lie not with the text of the book only, but more importantly how the Bible has been divinised and presented as having holy sanction.

Indigenous theologians need to delve into their oral traditions (as well as written history and stories, which are very few, but emerging) to redeem their lost status and bring them on par with the texts of the Bible to engage with equity if they want to find their true selves again - their God-intended selves.

For those of us who are later migrants (especially from colonised countries), post-Colonialism poses different challenges. To begin with, we need to critically analyse the national politics of our own post-independence societies, and the tendency to venerate vernacular ideals of our culture.

We need to understand and own that we are products of both colonial and western impartation of faith. Even our theological education and formation have been largely influenced by the western models.

Many of our teachers were Western-trained, including the natives. The theological institutions were training ministers for the Western model of Church structure and theology that we had inherited or rather was imposed on us. Even though Indigenisation has tried to recover some of the lost cultural expressions and forms, we have not adequately addressed the cultural mindset that was embedded in the gospel culture, which was reflective of the superiority of the culture of the coloniser. Hence, in a subconscious way, we may be imitating the culture of the coloniser in the practice of our faith even though we may be critical of the social and political impact of colonialism.

There is another challenge for doing post-Colonial theology in Australia. It comes from the menacing and dominant presence of the Anglo-Celtic mindset. How do we engage with the hegemonic culture which has demonised both Indigenous and immigrant cultures (and demonised indigenous faith) as inferior, colonised us with their practices and now expects us to serve her?

Even though we have embraced the faith by conviction, is there space for us to speak about, contribute to, practice, share our stories, insights, perspectives and engage with her to inform, critique and seeks ways of being an intercultural diverse Church in order that we may become an inclusive Church with diverse expressions of leadership, ministry practice and faith expressions?

How do I engage with her so that she is able to understand my feelings, perspectives, insights, experiences and biblical reflections which may be quite/very different? How do I re-articulate my faith in non-threatening ways to my fellow natives of Indigenous faith and other faiths both here and in my country of birth? How can I re-read the Bible in a way that is liberative for me as well as for my neighbour who is different?

Central to this exploration is the Jesus figure. According to Prof Sugirtharajah, “current biblical scholarship has turned its energies to historicising and humanising Jesus and placing him within the context of his Jewish environs and have made him more Jewish than Jews in general. Any attempt to place him within a wider religious and cultural context that might diminish the distinctiveness of his teaching and personality will be seen as anti-Semitism”.

Prof Sugirtharajah goes on to say that Biblical scholars who are convinced of the deep-seated influence of the Near Eastern religions on the New Testament are reluctant to accept the influence of the Eastern religions. The influence of Eastern religions on the formative years of Christianity has not been acknowledged.

Moreover, the rediscovering of the marginal voices within Christianity and among Indigenous voices and their interpretation of the Jesus story will also enlighten us to critique the dominant narrative and the marginalising tendency of the Bible.

Post-Colonialism calls for a radical examination not only of the impact of Colonialism in the propagation of Christianity, but also the future of Christianity in a pluralistic world. It calls for a rethinking of our traditional theologies and the many disciplines within theology to articulate anew the Christian faith that may lead to God-intended justice, equality, peace and harmony for the whole inhabited earth.

For this to occur, how we perceive our holy text, the Bible, and interpret it becomes very crucial. Post-Colonial discourse also invites us to be critical of the superior mindset of the coloniser's religion we have inherited and the imperial, colonial biases within the Biblical text so that we may rediscover the gospel anew.

**In August 2021, the Cross Cultural Mission and Ministry unit held a conference, with the theme “Decolonising the Bible & Christian Theology”. One of the keynote speakers was Prof RS Sugirtharajah.**

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