

R. S. Sugirtharajah. *Jesus in Asia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. 320 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05113-3.

Reviewed by James Hommes

Published on H-Japan (July, 2018)

Commissioned by Martha Chaiklin

When I was a young child living in Japan, my parents took our family to a site in northern Japan that was claimed to be Christ's burial place. I remember wondering how anyone could believe that Jesus was buried in a mound so far away from Jerusalem. In my mind, it was simply a hoax. However, it may also have been an attempt by Japanese Christians to bring Jesus and his legacy to Japan in a tangible way. In many ways, the cultural process of appropriating Christ for various contexts is nothing new in the history of Christianity. R. S. Sugirtharajah's work *Jesus in Asia* highlights attempts by various people in Asia to appropriate and present the figure of Jesus Christ in different contexts throughout Asia.

Sugirtharajah, emeritus professor of biblical hermeneutics at the University of Birmingham, has established himself through his vast corpus of research and publications as an authority on the interpretation of the Bible from a non-Western, postcolonial perspective that has focused not only on Asian interpreters but on other contexts such as Africa. In many ways, *Jesus in Asia* relies on the theoretical framework established in his prior works such as *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretation* (1999) and *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method and Practices* (2011). *Jesus in Asia* is less theoretical, but it is also more nar-

row in focus than many of his previous works. It focuses only on the figure of Christ and only in parts of Asia, that is, India, China, Korea, and Japan. The presentation of a variety of contexts throughout Asia is a strength of this work, but it is also a weakness in that the work cannot cover any of these contexts in detail. Though he does mention the fact that Jesus was originally "Asian" in that he lived in Palestine, this is not a major point in this work. He also limits his work historically, focusing primarily on interpreters from the early nineteenth century until the twentieth century. One exception to this is the first chapter, in which he discusses both the Nestorian Monument and the Jesus Sutras in China in the seventh and eighth centuries, as well as the work *Mirror of Holiness* (1602), a portrayal of Christ's life written by the Jesuit Jerome Xavier, Francis Xavier's nephew. This chapter seems incongruent with the other chapters because the historical context is different, and Sugirtharajah is not interested in missionary interpreters in the period he focuses on. In his previous works he covered some missionary interpreters such as James Long in India and Bishop John Colenso in South Africa, but in this work he is interested in analyzing native interpreters in Asia.

The period of focus, from the late eighteenth century until the twentieth century, was, as Su-

girtharajah mentions, a period of both massive growth of imperialism in Asia and the expansion of missionary movements of Western Christians. This period from the Enlightenment onward was also simultaneously a period in which religious skepticism grew, and rational critiques of traditional interpretations of the Bible and the life of Christ became more common throughout the West. Sugirtharajah assumes the reader is familiar with various aspects of the academic study of the gospels, in particular, the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), but also some of the Gnostic gospels. In addition to comparing Asian perspectives with the traditional gospel accounts, he also assumes that the reader is acquainted with nineteenth-century historical-critical interpretations of the gospels, particularly the search for the “historical Christ” in the work of interpreters such as Albert Schweitzer. He also compares these Asian interpreters to twentieth-century interpretations such as the focus on the kerygmatic Christ, represented by theologians like Rudolph Bultmann. Overall, this gives the work a depth and breadth that is impressive, but it also may make it less accessible to readers who are unacquainted with this vast array of research.

Undoubtedly, Sugirtharajah’s work is undergirded by the biblical hermeneutics and historical scholarship relating to the study of the gospels, some of which is found in his previous works. However, where Sugirtharajah shines is in his ability to show the distinctiveness of these Asian interpretations in a way that unites most of them. In many ways, the book’s primary focus, in terms of theme and application (and new material not covered in previous books), begins in chapter 3 with his analysis of Ponnambalam Ramanathan’s biblical commentaries on the gospels of Matthew and John. In Sugirtharajah’s previous work, *The Bible and Asia* (2013), he mentions coming across these fascinating commentaries but that it was too late for him to take them into account in that work. Thus, Sugirtharajah was finally able to incorporate Ramanathan’s interpretations into his

work, and in many ways this chapter is one of the best in terms of its analysis and creative interpretations of Christ. Ramanathan’s approach, according to Sugirtharajah, focuses on Jesus as a “Sanctified Teacher” sent forth by God to bring salvation to humankind by changing natural human beings into spiritual ones” (p. 74). In many ways, Ramanathan encapsulates many of the overarching aspects of the Asian interpreters in the book—a focus on a spiritual Christ and his teachings, a lack of interest in the “historical” Semitic Jesus, and an insistence that the content of Christ’s teachings is already found in the Eastern religious traditions.

One aspect that unites these interpreters is that they are less interested in the “historical” Jesus of the gospels than in a spiritual Christ, a move that preceded similar Western approaches in the twentieth century. This also leads to an interpretation of Christ that is more individualistic, such as Shusaku Endo’s Jesus who comforts those who are suffering and ministers to their personal needs. Thus, in many ways, this personalized Jesus commonly found in Western societies today is mirrored in some of these Asian interpretations that depict Christ as helping individuals to achieve salvation from this world, a pursuit that is also very amenable to Buddhist, Jainist, and Hindu religious perspectives.

Another aspect that most of these interpreters display is a desire to respond culturally to the “Christian” imperialist powers by critiquing their religion and displaying a disinterest in institutionalized Christianity or doctrinal standards. Though a subjective approach to Christ is clearly evident in these Asian interpretations, Sugirtharajah insists that it is not limited to them. He writes that “historical portrayals of Jesus’ life, though often touted as objective, are intimate, intuitive, and emotional affairs. Jesus’s life story has been enlisted for various political and national causes varying from validating the Victorian values of British colonialists to supporting the National Socialists’

Aryan agenda, to promoting Christianity via Hindu reformers” (p. 141). This ideological and instrumental use of Christ is one of the aspects that Sugirtharajah emphasizes in his analyses—whether it is reflected in Hong Xiuquan’s claim to be Christ’s brother in the Taiping Rebellion, Radhakrishnan’s portrayal of Christianity as merely one among many Eastern paths to salvation, or in Ahn Byung Mu’s radical political involvement on behalf of oppressed Korean people. Most of the interpreters, as Sugirtharajah admits, did not become Christians or join churches. Some, like the nineteenth-century Indian scholars Chandra Varma and Dhirendranath Chowdhuri, were Hindu reformers who were openly hostile to Christianity. Even those who did become members, like the Jaffna convert Francis Kingsbury, were often forced out of the church because of interpretations that challenged biblical accounts of Christ’s life.

A third aspect of these Asian interpreters is that they were more interested in comparing Christ to previous Asian religious leaders such as the Buddha, Confucius, and Zoroaster, and did not adhere to the exclusivist claims of Christianity. Thus, Hindu interpreters such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan were more interested in incorporating Jesus into the Indian religious tradition: “The great religious tradition of India which has had a continuous life from the seers of the Upanishads and the Buddha to Ramakrishna and Gandhi, may perhaps help to re-integrate this bruised, battered, broken world and give to it the faith for which it is in search” (p. 197). Ironically, Sugirtharajah notes that some of the interpreters, such as Radhakrishnan, even as they opposed Western imperialism sometimes acted as “subtle spiritual imperialist[s]” in that they wanted to “civilize” or impose certain spiritual (in this case Indian) solutions on others. Sugirtharajah also notes with irony that these interpreters often used the tools of the West—including critical theological research on the gospels and the nineteenth-century Western academic study of Asian

religions by scholars like Max Müller—to critique Christianity or reshape Christ into a figure they think would appeal to the particular, and largely Asian, audience they were addressing.

Sugirtharajah’s deep understanding of a variety of historical, cultural and religious contexts as well as his fair yet critical assessment of all perspectives—describing both admirable qualities as well as criticizing their shortcomings—is impressive. His success in highlighting some lesser-known interpreters as well bringing these disparate perspectives together in one work is quite a feat. The interpreters had different motives—to undermine Christianity’s claims, to challenge traditional and missionary theological interpretations, and to focus on the aspects of Christ that would appeal to Asian religious audiences. He demonstrates that Asian interpretations of Christ were varied and creative, but he seems to conclude that they were completely subjective and personal, all the while virtually ignoring Christian institutions, missionary interpretations, and interpretations of converted Christians in various Asian contexts. His conclusion that “no quest for Jesus is final” (p. 264) is very much in accordance with both these particular Asian and many academic interpretations today, but in many ways his work adds to the cacophony of voices and confounds any resolution. Sugirtharajah implies that, just as these Asian voices found their own interpretations of Christ which resonated with them (and perhaps with their audiences), so we must continue to do the same today. But, do these interpretive creative spaces for Christ fill the place of a “religious” perspective in the sense that Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Islam do? And, would people who self-identify as Christians in these Asian contexts find in this work the Christ that they worship and believe in? His work focuses more on the Indian subcontinent and this is understandable, but what would Indian Christians today think about his interpreters? His chapter on Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping is a fascinating discussion of a devastating movement in which reli-

gion played a large role, but it was incredibly destructive for China. Would contemporary Chinese Christians agree with his assessment of Chinese historical interpretations of Christ? His chapter on *minjung* theology in Korea also ignores much of the recent growth of Korean Christianity, though it does focus on a fascinating potential Asian style of liberation theology.

One interpreter who seems to be an exception to some of Sugirtharajah's claims at first is Shusaku Endo, who was a Japanese Roman Catholic, albeit one who did not see eye-to-eye with his church. Japan, unlike the other countries, was not a victim of Western colonialism for very long, but was itself an imperialist power that eventually subjugated its neighbors. However, in many ways, Endo's interpretation seems to be one of the most appealing to Sugirtharajah not only because of Endo's portrayal of a compassionate Christ, but also because Endo was a novelist. Though the chapter on Endo focuses on Endo's *A Life of Jesus* (1973), which is not a novel, his interpretations of Christ are in many ways more open-ended because he writes even this nonfictional work from the perspective of a novelist. It is fitting that Sugirtharajah ends the work with a novelist because he seems to want Asians—and in fact, all people—to be able to fashion a Christ that is creative and imaginative. His concluding paragraph refers to the Indian novelist Sarah Joseph's novel, *Othappu* (2005), in which one character struggles to figure out how to tell the story of Jesus to her children. The novel ends with a blank page, which Sugirtharajah interprets as acknowledging "the impossibility of reconstructing a meaningful, straightforward history of Jesus in the modern era" (p. 265).

Certainly, in *Jesus in Asia*, Sugirtharajah has highlighted many fascinating Asian interpreters who attempted to fill in their own blank pages on the life of Christ, but the significance of these blank pages in the religious, political, and cultural experiences of Christians in Asia is not as clear

from this work, which does not take into account the larger growth of Christianity in many of these contexts, particularly in the last half-century. These voices should be added to the voices of Sugirtharajah's intriguing interpreters to give a balanced perspective on the impact of portrayals of Christ throughout the vast continent of Asia.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan>

Citation: James Hommes. Review of Sugirtharajah, R. S. *Jesus in Asia*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. July, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51564>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.