

R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Jesus in Asia*

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While modern interpretations of Jesus have fascinated biblical scholars in the West since the eighteenth century, the growth of Christianity worldwide has taken Jesus to a new intellectual level, where indigenous people in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the West Indies have participated in engaging, comprehending, and theologizing the meaning of Jesus Christ's life and teachings against the backdrop of their own unique cultural contexts. R. S. Sugirtharajah's *Jesus in Asia* offers an Asian perspective on the historical quest for Jesus. Taking a critical look at literary representations of Jesus in various East and South Asian settings, Sugirtharajah argues that local Asian views on the subject have the potential to broaden the scholarly investigations of Jesus on a global scale.

To better appreciate the richness of this study, readers should move beyond the conventional approach based on assumptions of neutrality, objectivity, and positivism.

According to Sugirtharajah, the guiding principle for an Asian reading of Jesus is that of “continental self-reference,” defined as “an intentional, deliberate, and dignified method of self-discovery and decolonization in the face of colonial degradation” (2). The epistemology undergirding this approach is that modern biblical scholarship does not cover the full range of colorful interpretations of Jesus. What should matter is a contextualized Jesus that appeals to Asians.

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, *Jesus in Asia* includes eleven case studies, outlining a variety of Asian interpretations of Jesus’ relevance to their own societies. A key argument which links these examples together is that the historicity of Jesus should not be taken as the sole concern in these writings. For the purpose of religious conversion, Jesuit missionary Jerome Xavier (1549-1617) presented a Jesus to the Muslim Mughal Emperor Akbar within the longstanding framework of orthodox Catholicism (Chapter 1). The same desire motivated Japanese novelist Shūsaku Endō (1923-1996) to depict a feminized image of Jesus to his non-Christian readers (Chapter 9). In the seventh century, Syriac-speaking Nestorian missionaries in China found it equally important to adapt and adjust the Eastern Christian doctrine of Jesus to integrate Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism in order to win the support of the Tang Chinese court (Chapter 1). Traditional Chinese cultural ideas were similarly employed by Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864), the leader of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1850-1864), who drew on the Chinese concept of pantheon to declare himself to be Jesus’s flesh and blood brother (Chapter 2).

Chapters 3-7 bring in South Asian interpretations of Jesus. Some were Christian but most were brought forward by Hindu reformers. Ponnambalam Ramanathan (1851-1930) situated Jesus in conversation with Tamil Saivism (Chapter 3). The works of Kahan Chandra Varma, Dhirendranath Chowdhuri (1870-1938), C. T. Alahasundram (Francis Kingsbury), and Manilal Parekh (Chapters 4-6) reflected a similar debate on the historical Jesus in Western writings. Some of these South Asian depictions challenged Jesus’s supreme divine nature and portrayed him as a lesser god in the Hindu pantheon. Most Hindu thinkers appreciated Jesus’s moral authority. Like a Hindu guru who enlightened the mundane minds, Jesus was regarded as a noble figure who guided humanity toward the path of self-realization. And yet, one does not need to confess to Jesus exclusively; the Indian thinker and statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), saw no difference among Jesus, the Buddha, and Krishna (Chapter 7).

Christian apologetics may find some of these Hindu interpretations offensive as they question soteriologically the atonement that Jesus offers to human beings. Yet, as Sugirtharajah points out, most of these interpretations arose in a British Indian colonial context in which Hindu nationalists were countering the British missionaries’ attack on Hinduism with an indigenous discourse of Jesus. If the Hindu readings gave rise to an aloof Jesus who detached himself from the people, South Korean theologian Ahn Byung Mu (1922-1996) reconceptualized Jesus as a source of hope and liberation for the *minjung* (people). Ahn’s Jesus was shown to be in solidarity with the suffering masses who were terrorized under the dictatorial rule of former Korean President Park Chung-hee (1917-1979) (Chapter 8).

These Asian representations broke little new ground in scholarly research on the historical quest for Jesus, but they illustrate how engaging with Jesus and the Gospel appeared to be the best way to make Christianity relevant to Asia. A major strength of this volume is the way in which Sugirtharajah approaches the authors and their writings

from both historical and intertextual perspectives. Readers with little background about East and South Asia will find the overall arguments easily accessible. Sugirtharajah contextualizes the wide range of literary, theological, and philosophical texts with adequate biographical sketches and historical details. Furthermore, he problematizes these writings through the lens of postcolonial critique and biblical hermeneutics and offers useful commentaries and expositions. Placing his own assessment of these thinkers at the end of each chapter, Sugirtharajah does well in guiding readers to appreciate the rich insights in these indigenous literatures before assessing their methodological limitations.

One problem of Sugirtharajah's analytical scope is his slightly narrow definition of "Asia," as he only focuses on the writings of political and intellectual elites from China, India, Japan and South Korea. Another question concerns about representativeness. Some reception history for each figure may have been helpful to see how influential these authors were, and continue to be, in their respective national circles.

Nevertheless, Sugirtharajah has made a significant contribution to the field of World Christianity. His forceful assertion that the quest for Jesus in Asia and the West "ends up projecting a Jesus of the interpreter's own imagination and ideals" (258) reminds us of the malleability of Christianity. The Asian examples in the book challenge the widespread misconception that the meaning of Jesus can only be attained through a Western interpretive lens. While the authenticity of Jesus in the Bible may be exhausted and rationalized within a rigorous academic framework, a sustainable understanding of Jesus has to be mediated through an indigenous cultural framework that matters most to people in different corners of the globe.

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