

Book Review

Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World. Kwok Pui-lan,
Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books 1995. Reviewed by John England.

The author describes this book as “an attempt to dialogue with the Bible from multiple perspectives as an Asian woman theologian”. Following the Prologue - a dramatised Bible-study - three chapters outline the grounds for a critique of Eurocentric and androcentric Biblical interpretation. In place of the “universal truth claims” for a “sacralized” and closed Biblical canon - which are seen as part of a colonial discourse - a multi-faith hermeneutic is offered which uses “dialogical imagination” to interpret the Biblical text. (These terms appear prominently in the anthology of R.S. Sugirtharajah *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Thirds World*, London 1991 along with an early paper on the theme by Kwok Pui-lan.) This recognises the different narratives of silenced majorities, in particular those who are non-western, non-white, non-male. Four further chapters then present resources and critical principles for an Asian Feminine hermeneutic.

These give particular attention to oral interpretation, examples of multi-faith hermeneutics, and the contribution of women to a post-colonial hermeneutic.

This work offers major challenges and resources on many levels and in various areas of Biblical and theological interpretation. Major sections outline the radical critiques of established hermeneutic assumptions, which are available in increasing numbers from third world - and especially women - scholars. These feature in particular; a naming of Jewish and Christian colonialism in the of the Bible, a recognition of the diversity and pluralism both within the Bible and in Christian tradition, and a use in hermeneutic of narratives and symbol systems from a wide range of cultures and life-situations. Here, Kwok Pui-lan suggests the model of “the talking book” for the Bible, which finds its authority only in a dialogue with those who search for truth in their specific situation. Drawing on Chinese tradition, she describes hermeneutics as just such a “search for wisdom in particular living” and utilizes cultural and linguistic studies from both Asian and Europe-America to amplify such a hermeneutic. These are clearly stimulating approaches for inter-cultural dialogue and for all biblical interpretation. But the book is perhaps even more valuable for the survey it provides of work already being done in the Asian region to explore and use such criticism and reclamation. The examples outlined include the dialogical approach of Sugirtharajah and Yeo Khiok-khng, cross-textual comparisons by A. Lee Chi-chung and G. Soares-Prabhu, and what Kwok

terms “the people hermeneutic” of C.S. Song and colleagues in the Programme for Theology & Cultures in Asia. Chapter 6 gives a composite interpretation of the Syro-Phoenician woman’s “Ministry to Jesus” to show the liberating hermeneutic of a non-Jewish woman. Full references and bibliography make it possible to study more fully these and other models for a multi-faith, post-colonial and many-dimensional method.

Such a survey cannot of course spell out all the assumptions, nor the implications, for the major re-orientations outlined. In clarifying these we will need for example to distinguish between learning from previously ignored worlds of meaning and suffering, and arguing for this from numbers or percentages (P. 2) Recognition of extensive past misuse of the Bible - and of limitations in the Biblical canon itself - will still require an explication of its distinctive role for Christians. And even though we reject all the imperialism, patriarchy and racism which have often accompanied monotheistic belief, belief in a universal covenant (P. 59) need not be divorced from the belief of Christians and others, in “One God of all”, which in real life supports the fullest dialogue and collaboration.

It would perhaps have been helpful if Kwok had outlined a little more of the assumptions and the process involved in a dialogical hermeneutic. The role of one’s faith when “not absolutized” needs more explication for example: the final chapter of “10 Theses” is scarcely more than a summary of earlier arguments. Certainly also one or two errors such as the designation of Yagi Seichi as a Buddhist instead of an eminent Christian Japanese theologian should have been avoided.

Despite these minor points the book remains an outstanding and ground-breaking work, particularly for its survey of the extensive work in post-colonial hermeneutic done by Asian/third world women (and other) theologians. It deserves world-wide study.