

## Book Reviews

R. S. SUGIRTHARAJAH, *Jesus in Asia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. 311 pages, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0199553440

In nine chapters, R. S. Sugirtharajah, a prodigious Sri Lankan writer on biblical and postcolonial topics who enjoyed a career on the theological faculty of the University of Birmingham, retrieves from relative obscurity eleven figures, some Christian, others not, to highlight what they might contribute to a more multifaceted, less Eurocentric understanding of the “historical” figure known as Jesus. From the first page – where the author frames his approach in terms of the quest for the Jesus of history associated with Albert Schweitzer and legions of others down to the present – to the last, where he waxes pessimistic about the entire enterprise and declares “a meaningful, straightforward history of Jesus in the modern era” to be an “impossibility” (p. 265), Sugirtharajah’s intention is to break the monopoly on the debate over Jesus by means of a more inclusive “quest for the historical Jesus beyond the narrow confines of the Western world” (p. 1). Readers may be excused for wondering how fair it is of the author to impose this kind of analysis upon his eleven subjects, only a few of whom actually evince an interest in the question, although, to be sure, the canon of scholarship, especially in the theological academy, stands in need of recognising the existence – not to mention the relevance – of extra-European Jesuses.

Of the many subjects who could be included, Sugirtharajah singles out Tang Dynasty Christians (7th–9th centuries); a Jesuit at the court of Akbar in the 1600s (Jerome Xavier); Hong Xiuquan (self-professed “Younger Brother of Jesus” and leader of the Taiping rebellion in mid 19th-century China); a cosmopolitan fin de siècle Tamil Hindu (Ponnabalam Ramanathan, after Vivekananda one of the first guru figures popular abroad); two Hindus, Chandra Varma and Dhirendranath Chowdhuri (the one of the Arya Samaj, the other of the Brahmo Samaj); a Tamil Christian, Francis Kingsbury, whose controversial views on the historicity of Jesus earned him notoriety in the Indian church; Manilal Parekh, a Gujarati Anglican from a mixed Hindu-Jain background; Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the renowned Oxford philosopher; a relatively understudied twentieth-century Korean Minjung theologian, Ahn Byung Mu; and, lastly, Endō Shusaku, the globally-famous Japanese Catholic novelist whose primary work of non-fiction, *A Life of Jesus* (1978), rounds off Sugirtharajah’s heterogenous sample of Asian voices from whom readers might gain new insights into Jesus’s historicity.

Employing a predominantly text-based approach (even when the “text” is a Tang Dynasty inscription), Sugirtharajah does precious little to situate the texts he discusses within their time frame and context. Chapter one, for instance, toggles between the oddly-paired Tang Dynasty “Jesus Sutras” in Taoist-inflected Chinese and Jerome Xavier’s Persian-language *Mirror of Holiness* (*Mirat al-Quds*), adduced by Sugirtharajah as contrastive types of inculturation, the former a model to emulate and the latter a model to eschew. Here at the book’s beginning, two symptomatic issues arise. First, for sinologists and other Asian studies scholars, Sugirtharajah seems unmindful of the risk involved in relying on the loose “translations” of the Jesus Sutras by Martin Palmer. At the least, Sugirtharajah could have footnoted the rudimentary state of scholarship on this body of texts as discussed in volume one of Nicholas Standaert’s *Handbook of Christianity in China* (Leiden: Brill, 2001). And as for Xavier’s *Mirror of Holiness*, much is known about the reception of the text at Jahangir’s court where (nearly) verbatim records were made of the royal soirées at which it was discussed (on this, see Gulfishan Khan, “Contestations of Catholic Christianity at the Mughal Court”, in Chad M. Bauman / Richard Fox Young (eds), *Constructing Indian Christianities*, Delhi: Routledge, 2014, pp. 61–85). Instead, Sugirtharajah offers his own pronouncements, which, though informed and informative, are purely speculative.

While one can learn a great deal *about* Jesus in Asia from Sugirtharajah, it is difficult to escape the impression that the author himself has actually found very little worth learning *from* his Asian interlocutors, ancient or contemporary, that would enrich and enliven his own quest for the historical Jesus – or, for that matter, the Western academy. In part, that impression stems from the fact that Sugirtharajah declines, rightly perhaps, to pretend that he has no professional views of his own on Jesus’s historicity. Throughout the book, starting with the author’s discussion of Hong, the Christian Taiping rebel, variations on phrases such as “unlike Jesus in the Gospels [...]” (p. 55) become a refrain symptomatic of the author’s normative baseline, from which his subjects (almost) invariably deviate, sometimes egregiously, including individuals to whom he warms the most. Of Kingsbury, like the author Jaffna Tamil, Sugirtharajah tells us that his Jesus was “distant”, “detached”, and – evidently for him, the cardinal sin – “dull” (p. 141); the portrait of Jesus he finds in Parekh, the Gujarati Anglican, turns out to be “clichéd” and “lackluster” (p. 165); Ahn, the Korean Minjung theologian, he finds “too addicted to Bultmann”, reducing the “purchase” of his scholarship today (pp. 220–221, *passim*); and, for an author so demanding, it should perhaps seem unsurprising that Endō’s Jesus also falls short, being “deeply rooted in a Japanese middle-class milieu” and “hardly the type who would be found in the bars and slums of Tokyo” (p. 247). Already, halfway through the book, Sugirtharajah begins to voice his own dissatisfaction with the Asian Jesuses his endeavours

have unearthed, when he states of Kingsbury, dismissively, that he “did not break any new ground” or “perceptibly change the agenda of the Jesus-quest enterprise” (p. 138). Winding down, Sugirtharajah’s desultory comments on the quest for the historical Jesus conclude on such a pessimistic note, as observed above, that one is left to ponder how the author calculated the loss and gain of engaging in his project in the first place. And while I heartily concur with Sugirtharajah that “Jesus is not the private property of Western scholarship” (p. 3), I find more value in the anthology of extra-Christian readings entitled *Jesus Beyond Christianity*, compiled by Gregory Barker and Stephen Gregg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and recommend it highly.

*Richard Fox Young*

ARNE SEIFERT, *Dialog und Transformation. 25 Jahre OSZE- und Zentralasienforschung*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017. 303 pages, €64.00. ISBN 978-3-8487-3827-4

Arne Seifert, a diplomat and researcher, has worked on Central Asia, in particular on Tajikistan, over the last three decades. This volume, which was published by the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH), on the occasion of Seifert’s 80th birthday, provides an excellent synopsis of his research and writings since the mid-1990s.

Arne Seifert grew up in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), studied International Relations and Diplomacy in Moscow, and served from 1964 to 1989 as a diplomat for the GDR Foreign Office. After the collapse of the Soviet Union he was deployed to the OSCE mission in Tajikistan in 1996 and 1997, where he became an eyewitness to the final phase of the country’s civil war. Afterwards he switched to academia and became a member of the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) at the IFSH.

The title of this volume, *Dialog und Transformation* (“Dialogue and Transformation”), thus nicely summarises Seifert’s cross-border work at the interface between academia, diplomacy and practice. Overall, this fine collection of his articles includes sharp analyses and deep insights into Central Asian society and history, which are enriched by illustrative examples collected during his diplomatic deployment to Tajikistan. In the first two sections of the book the author reflects on his experiences when he served with the OSCE mission in Tajikistan. The third and fourth parts of the book are based on his work at CORE/IFSH, where he conducted several dialogue projects between Germany and Central Asia, particularly focusing on the role of political Islam.