

4 Contrapuntal Reading: Scripture, Lectionaries and Alternative Dynamics

Introducing the Conversation

We have already made the point that postcolonial criticism has largely so far engaged theological circles in the realm of biblical studies, with some quite recent overtures in the area of systematic theology. The Bible, however, has a life beyond academic theology and biblical studies, and Christian worship provides arguably the main context in which the Bible is read, engaged and performed in liturgical practices. In terms of the latter, we note that in the context of colonial history, the Bible, which was made accessible through assemblies of the church, became for colonial subjects a key text in the edification of enslaved peoples and a means to improvise and signify understandings of the colonizers. Hence, the title and theme of this Part: "the word in liturgical contexts."

The Bible in the Church

Worship is an important setting in which to consider the Bible in the course of our explorations in postcolonial approaches to liturgy. We believe that a large part of bringing the insights of postcolonial criticism to bear beyond the academy will involve looking at such criticism that can be related to how the Bible is used not only in the classroom but in assemblies or gatherings of the church and local congregations. This task is especially significant given that at least some diasporic communities, such as those of the Black Christian Diaspora, define their ecclesial identity with particular reference to

the Bible. This point is made by Joe Aldred about Black Majority churches in the UK, in which he is a bishop:

Biblical models are crucial for Black Theology in Britain because the Black Christian community, especially Black-led churches, is a biblicentric community. Any theology, therefore, that does not engage in a primary way with biblical text will find itself *ipso facto* [sic] divorced from the Black Church with which it seeks to engage.¹

We take Aldred's point in its broad contours. However, we have some misgivings about his ease of use of the singular – "the Black church" – for what we know is textured ecclesial realities. We also hesitate at his suggestion that all Black churches are "biblio-centric," at least in senses that would reflect Aldred's own reading of biblical texts.

The insights of Philip Potter, Robert Beckford and Anthony Reddie can serve to underscore our suspicion of Aldred's talk of a singular "Black church," and our preference for assertion of diversity within, as well as between, Black ecclesial tradition(s). Potter, a Methodist who became General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, grounded his own theological articulations on re-readings of biblical texts, consistently noting that Black folks of the African Diaspora are "biblical realists," not literalists.² Hence, Potter's re-readings would typically include critical scrutiny of particular biblical texts under consideration, and as part of that those texts viewed through the optics of colonial history and the experiences of enslaved Africans. Beckford, a Black British theologian and cultural critic of Pentecostal background, evidently does affirm the centrality of the Bible for Black spirituality, yet he readily argues against a fundamentalist and literal reading of scriptures. Hence, his use of a hermeneutical strategy which he calls "dub optics" to re-read the gospels.³ Reddie, a Black British Methodist theologian of Caribbean ancestry, also affirms the centrality of scriptures in the ecclesial life of Black Christians, yet he too goes beyond a critique of literalist and conservative approaches of biblical texts. Using narratives of transatlantic Black experiences (especially in the context of colonial history) as his departure point, Reddie critically interrogates, questions and re-reads the Bible to the extent of even giving precedence to Black experience over the Bible as the word of God.⁴ Our point in invoking these exemplars is that while each of them appreciates the centrality of scriptures

in the ecclesial lives of Black Christians, each in their own way, and especially when juxtaposed, underscore multiple ways that, in Aldred's terms, "biblical models" are developed, exercised and interpreted in view of integral, complementary understandings and authorities.

The significant point for us here is that Aldred seems not to wish to use a postcolonial optic to interrogate the Bible so as to be able to locate the imperial agenda in biblical texts. The others cited above can and do embrace postcolonial convictions. Each of them honours the Bible and affirms its theological importance, albeit with slightly different nuances. But the term "biblio-centric" means different things to them. So while the Bible is indeed crucial for a large body of Black British Christians of all ecclesial traditions, in terms of what we might call the dynamics of biblio-centricism, Aldred speaks for some and not all of them.

It is important to be clear, then, that many Black Christians (as other "kinds" of Christians) would certainly not mean by "biblio-centric" what Emmanuel Lartey (himself a Black Christian) points out as what is meant by "biblicism":

In which the literal words, or else the book itself, are such sacred objects that they are taken literally and may become a legalistic battering ram used more to defeat than inspire and encourage persons.⁵

Lartey himself contests "the assumption that only literal, and not critical or contextual, readings and interpretations lead to hearing 'the word of God'." Engaging with the Bible "in a primary way," for many Black Christians and certainly for Black theology means bringing sharp questions into play with biblical texts. We see no reason to exclude from the idea of engaging the Bible in a "primary" way the kind of postcolonial approach to the texts which is demonstrated by Reddie, among others.

The Bible – a Plural Book

The word "bible" itself comes from *biblia*, a plural word meaning "books." Its plurality is, however, easily misrepresented by being bound in one volume in the way it is often handled in its canonical

context or elsewhere in collections of lectionary sequences for liturgical use. The downplaying (intentional or not) of the inherent diversity within the collection (as is clearly evident in the four gospel accounts and the pastorals) has colonial overtones. As Sugirtharajah observes:

One of the characteristics of colonial discourse is the rejection of diversity. Colonial discourse is staunchly wedded to unvarying and exclusive truth and tolerates no dissent or debate.⁶

Certainly, controlling truth under the pretext of countering heresies has been one reason that we have the Bible in its present form,⁷ as well as a long proclivity towards homogenizing of the biblical stories.

Another reality we need to be aware of is related to texts which have been excluded from the collection that comprises the *biblia*. Hence, Sugirtharajah rightly observes:

Postcolonial biblical criticism needs to expand the biblical canon and incorporate those diverse texts which were suppressed or excluded in the ecclesiastical power-game of selection and rejection.⁸

This is why scholars such as Sugirtharajah strongly contend that "canonical scriptures are not the sole conveyors of truth" and suggests the need to move "beyond the limitations of the Jewish-Hellenistic context and pay attention also to the Jewish-Aramaic" context.⁹ But even in terms of the plurality already to be found in what we have as the canon, *when* its plurality can be kept in view, we have a signal reminder that the Bible does not, and can barely be expected to, communicate one core, or central, message or truth. In fact the reality of the Bible can much better be imagined as layers and complexities to "truth." The Bible envelops multiple voices, sometimes more or less in harmony with each other, yet at other points sharply divergent, even contradictory.

Lectionary Dynamics

The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), or some modest variation of it (such as that employed in the Church of England), has become very

widely used, and as such a very significant expression of ecumenism in contemporary Christianity. So the RCL is perhaps the most widely employed pan-Protestant liturgical resource, particularly, as just noted, in its having been taken up in traditions where lectionary schemes had previously been unfamiliar. And the RCL is not only important across Protestant traditions, because its ecumenical stretch is broader, having grown out of shared reflection on the Roman Catholic Church's experience of its Lectionary for Mass. For each Sunday over a three-year period, the RCL provides a reading from Hebrew scripture, a psalm, a New Testament reading and a gospel reading. The readings are always in that order – Hebrew scripture, psalm, New Testament, gospel – though the way that the four readings relate to each other varies. That is, the psalm may be related to the first (Hebrew scripture) reading, and both of these are independent of the New Testament and gospel, which are in turn not intended to be "linked" with each other. So the separate readings stand in a sequence which connects them, but into which no particular governing theme is intended to be read.¹⁰

Following this observation, it is important to note that ritual books in different traditions increasingly allow the sermon to be preached after any of the readings in the sequence, rather than after the final (i.e. gospel) reading, as had previously been customary in many traditions. Indeed, the same ritual books oftentimes suggest that "sermon" may be understood in a variety of ways, allowing for a range of engagements with text and context – including discussion, testimony, and various art-forms.¹¹ A steady feature of the lectionary dynamic is, however, that the gospel is always read last (at least when it is read – some traditions mandate use of gospel reading at a eucharist, while others do not). Hence, the lectionary encourages a sense of Jesus "getting the last word," with accounts of his actions, if not always his recorded words, being proposed as the principal interpretive lens at the culmination of the sequence of other texts.

In effect, a strong christological hermeneutic is proposed by the Revised Common Lectionary, which may be one of the things that has commended it to churches which had previously rejected set schemes of reading. Despite its sense of christological privilege, however, it nevertheless remains the case that to some extent at least, in lectionary chains, different Bible readings are juxtaposed to

one another – according to Gordon W. Lathrop, explicitly and intentionally speaking “different – even wildly contrasting – views.”¹²

Lectionary patterns can, then, be regarded as particular ways of being conscious of, and honouring, the diversity of the Bible. They resist the isolation of one text alone being held up before a congregation – least of all one drawn from the preacher’s whim – and insist that one reading is heard alongside another. Readings set alongside each other provide contexts of meaning for individual pericopes proclaimed in a sequence – although that meaning is of course shaped not only by questions about what readings are included (and excluded) from the sequence, but from the order in which they are presented, framing the next, perhaps grating against the previous one, to mention just two of the most obvious possible dynamics. At least the juxtaposing of various biblical texts carries with it the potential to subvert and challenge dominant and centralized notions related to workings of the divine.

The ways in which juxtaposed texts interpret each other – different sequences enabling different interpretations – also needs to be remembered in the wider ecumenical pattern of worship which most commonly moves from word to sacrament, a shift in which the ministry of the word, focused on scripture, is juxtaposed with the “visible word” of the table (or foot-washing, or some other kind of broadly sacramental action). Gordon Lathrop, who, with Gail Ramshaw, has been one of the key liturgical theologians to present versions of lectionaries for use in Christian assembly,¹³ argues that the juxtaposition of word and sacrament is a pattern learned from the Bible itself. So he suggests that:

the truth about God ... takes at least two words... In this world speaking about God with just one “word” – one connected and logical discourse for example – will almost inevitably mean speaking a distortion, even a lie. It will suggest that God is a consequent idea, not a burning fire and a mysterious presence ... for us the mystery of God, for all that it may indeed be graciously present in human speech, must be proposed by triangulation. Words, even such contradictory words as “now” and “not yet” or “judgment” and “mercy” or “absence” and “presence” or “death” and “life” or “one” and “many,” will necessarily be put side by side, like two candles near the altar or the two cherubim on the ark of the covenant...¹⁴

Yet, sacramental celebrations also propose a christological hermeneutic akin to that inherent in lectionary sequences which build up to a gospel reading in so far as sacraments, infused as they are with paschal imagery, zoom in to focus at some key point on a centripetal narrative of Christ’s life, death and rising. So in word and table set alongside each other, Jesus also “gets the last word” in sacramental actions, which are themselves always juxtapositions of signs and/or movements and dominical words or deeply traditional words associated in some close way with Christ. By noting these dynamics in the context of the exploration of the lectionary, we are able to see that there are different levels of interplay between words and actions in liturgy, which at least some liturgical theologians (notably Gordon Lathrop, cited already) want to relate to intra-biblical lectionary dynamics. If this is the case, then apart from anything else, the interplay of word and sacrament is arguably one way of being “biblio-centric,” à la Joe Aldred, although it may not be what Aldred had in mind. Moreover, the ways in which lectionary sequences concern readings shaping contexts for readings, and the wider liturgical dynamic they encourage, can readily be imagined as being hospitable to other contextual readings.

The kinds of juxtaposition that mark lectionary sequences influence a whole style of theological thinking, such as the “schools” within liturgical theology that are indebted to the influential lead of Gordon Lathrop. Lathrop sees the Bible – in its plurality and multivalence – as itself teaching the church theology by what he calls “triangulation” and what, elsewhere,¹⁵ he most commonly calls “juxtaposition.”¹⁶ One of Lathrop’s key points is that use of a lectionary continually holds such juxtapositions before those churches that use it to order their pathways through scripture. Lathrop’s stress on the lectionary’s embrace of “different,” “wildly contrasting” views is especially salient to what we wish to say in later parts of this chapter.

Canonical and Lectionary Contexts

Canonical and lectionary contexts for biblical pericopes are two different ways of searching for meanings in the diverse corpus of

the scriptures. A key question for us is whether understandings and practices of lectionary reading encourage the discernment of the multiple voices there to be found in the canon, or whether lectionary reading may rather represent a colonial tactic of encouraging one controlling voice. In its prescriptions for reading pathways through biblical material it is vulnerable to the charge that it bolsters one version of reading through a diverse corpus, often smoothing down what is in fact chaotic and difficult terrain. Although not a postcolonial scholar, we value the liturgist Michael Vasey's insistence on the "liberating chaos of the scriptures,"¹⁷ itself expressing a conviction that the discordant character of the Bible may be as much gift – liberation – as problem. Indeed, we note Vasey's own attempt to re-read scriptural pericopes that had long been used as tools to define and confine the practice of homosexual persons such as himself.¹⁸ Notwithstanding Vasey's hope of liberation in the scriptures, it remains that from a conscious postcolonial perspective the controlling reading tactics of lectionary patterns are matters that must be engaged with the like of Sugirtharajah's comments about "rejection of diversity."

In this context, Edward Said's notion of contrapuntality, drawn from musical genres, is of great merit. It works with a practice of juxtaposition, familiar in understandings of lectionary, and proposes that readings are juxtaposed with particular kinds of responses, counterpoints that reveal colonial implications of texts. Said introduced his own understanding of contrapuntality with reference to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, in which protagonists within her story – the family of "Sir Thomas Bertram" – enjoy privilege in large part because Bertram owns an estate in Antigua. Their prosperity – and the noted extravagance of some members of the family (Bertram's eldest son) – depends upon morally ambiguous "overseas interests" and colonial expansion. As the exploitative dynamics of empire are not the subject of critical reflection within the novel, a contrapuntal reading of the text will involve the interspersing of counterpoints which make clear the costs of Bertram's wealth. Furthermore, Said notes that exposure of colonial dynamics within Austen's stories has not been a strong feature of literary criticism of her work, which is a further layer of complicity – through silence – in suspect imperial

privilege; hence, established canons of interpretation also need to be counterpointed and challenged.¹⁹

Contrapuntal reading can therefore be seen to push further than the perhaps more neutral notion of juxtaposition, familiar in liturgical theology, towards a more confronting mode of engaging texts. In contrapuntal method, it is not just that one voice might stand adjacent to another; rather, contrapuntality suggests that voices do more than stand alongside each other in order. They may interject, interrupt, disrupt, upset, and contest.

We note that contrapuntality has not been a major feature of liturgical practices commended by the churches. It is, however, possible to find liturgical precedents, albeit ones about which some caution is needed. Richard Giles's handbook for "creating transformative worship throughout the year," *Times and Seasons*,²⁰ is the successor to his *Creating Uncommon Worship*, on "transforming the liturgy of the eucharist."²¹ Both books veer from official, denominationally mandated practices – notably by commending, in an Anglican context, the practice of local assemblies writing their own eucharistic prayers. In contrast to Anglican liturgical canons, Giles asserts, "it is a sign of a healthy and mature community of faith when the assembly can set about creating a eucharistic prayer appropriate to its own story and situation"²² – a defiance that can, of course, be harnessed in postcolonial critique of ecclesial authorities' proclivities to control. In *Times and Seasons*, Giles proposes an alternative to a carol service, "Not a Carol Service: A Non-Liturgical Service in Advent." It suggests use of well-known carols such as "O Come All Ye Faithful" and "While Shepherds Watched," though the apparently well-worn pattern of Advent celebration involves a surprise:

During this hymn, the service is interrupted by a member of the faith community acting the part of an amiable drunk who engages the worship leader in an exchange about the meaning of what is going on.

The drunk ushers in his heavily pregnant girlfriend. They have nowhere to sleep that night; consternation, embarrassment.

Not knowing what to do, the organist strikes up "Away in a manger" and the congregation manages a few lines before the drunk interrupts again, demanding attention and help.

The worship leader invites the young couple to come up and sit beside him/her, and suggests the assembly listen to a story.²³

The story which is then read is not from the Advent sequence of gospel infancy narratives, but rather the parable of the Good Samaritan from Lk. 10.29-37. The romanticizing reference to "amiable drunk" and other stereotypes notwithstanding, there are things to commend in this gentle subversion of expectations of Advent carol services. Strength of commendation might depend much on what is made of exposition of the Good Samaritan story – itself ripe for postcolonial interpretation that evokes self-awareness and practical solidarity. Nevertheless the emphasis on interruption, and demand for attention and help – albeit here staged – perhaps open up a pathway from familiar expectations of liturgical events towards the possibility of more spontaneous, risky counterpoint.

If the biblical canon as a whole, and particular pericopes on their own and in manifold intra-biblical juxtapositions, are intertwined with the history of western European hegemony, should not canonical and lectionary contexts and contents be explored from the perspectives of both colonizer and colonized? And should not the colonized interrupt the ordered readings of colonizers, and those who inherit the colonizers' privilege? Said's notion of contrapuntal reading proposes ways of engaging both imperialism and resistance to it by commending that texts are considered so as to open up imperial proclivities, which involves listening to how the texts are read, heard and perhaps resisted, by different kinds of respondents. So Said suggests some significant ways of developing postcolonial scrutiny of the use of lectionaries.

Whereas the postcolonial engagements with the Bible conducted in the academy may be conscious of the Bible in its canonical shape (even if not prioritizing that configuration of its various materials), the lectionary sequences within the shape of Christian worship in many ecclesial traditions do not seem as yet to have been engaged with. We need also to note that not all Christians follow a lectionary, let alone the same one. It is most likely that some of those for whom Joe Aldred speaks in Black British Pentecostal Churches are one case in point. But it remains that shared lectionary patterns are coming to be embraced by an ever-wider circle of ecclesial traditions, including some that had previously eschewed set patterns of readings, preferring to think that readers and/or preachers might better lean into the leading of the Spirit, perhaps. So, although their "commendation"

is clearly weaker than traditions which mandate use of lectionaries (such as the Church of England), the British Methodist Church now commends use of the ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary, as do the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the United Reformed Church. We acknowledge the ecumenical significance of such developments, and we wish to invite ecumenical attention to problems – resistance to diversity, the smothering of subaltern voices, witting or unwitting colonization, and so on – that may in fact be bolstered by such gains. At the very least, a postcolonial perspective on lectionary patterns as important features of Christian worship will wish to demand that both users of lectionaries and the contents of lectionaries themselves are beyond naïveté about what kinds of power they may shelter and sustain.

"Deviations" from Lectionary Sequences

Having outlined the above, we now search for constructive ways of both engaging and contesting particular lectionary dynamics. We begin by noting that it is not always appreciated how much freedom to depart from set or suggested readings (at least at certain times of the year – in fact the most part of it) is granted in some traditions that employ lectionaries. The Church of England is a case in point, which although stressing that "authorized lectionary provision [is] not matter for local decision except where that provision permits,"²⁴ permits wide variation. *Common Worship* outlines the rule that during the Christmas cycle (from Advent Sunday through to Candlemas) and the Easter cycle (from Ash Wednesday through to Pentecost) and on Trinity Sunday and All Saints Day, the prescribed readings must be used.²⁵ However, outside those times – all of "ordinary time" and, therefore, a majority of each year – local lectionaries may be produced "for pastoral reasons or preaching or teaching purposes."²⁶ The point about departure is important, because it highlights permissions – if they are needed – to engage explicitly postcolonial approaches, among others. In what follows, we want to encourage engagement with such permission, while at the same time also voicing critical concerns about the lectionary such that we do not wish simply to commend a compliant "playing by its rules."

Dynamics of Power

Both canon and lectionary were composed by north Atlantic persons, largely White males, and often with ecclesiastical function – and power, such as those who authorize ritual books for use by others.²⁷ In the compilation of lectionary chains, no matter what claims are made about the independence and autonomy of one reading in relation to another, many important decisions are and must be made about what parts of the Bible are included in the lectionary (parts of the *Epistle of James* and so much of the *Song of Songs* are notable exclusions from the RCL), which reading is heard next to another, and in what order.

The compilers of lectionaries are therefore powerful, to put it mildly. One of the most obvious assertions of power is in the way that the lectionary is organized around the liturgical year which reflects the natural seasons of the northern hemisphere, and which is consequently deeply out of kilter with experience across the southern hemisphere, where the majority of the world's Christians are located, and to where it is commonly said the "weight of gravity" of Christianity in the twenty-first century has/is shifted/ing. In this sense the lectionary confirms the "normalcy" of European and North Atlantic Christians while provoking a considerable sense of dissonance for many in the global south.²⁸

In galvanizing a calendar organized in relation to natural seasons, the lectionary of course to some extent simply mirrors the particular circumstances of the environment in which divine incarnation is alleged: Jesus was born in the northern hemisphere, and the church's proclamation, at first more locally, and over time further afield, might naturally draw on the realm of experience open to persons in the north. Still, apart from wishing to question why symbols (from the natural cycles of times, or anything else) should continue to be drawn primarily from the north, a postcolonial optic on the lectionary will also wish to revisit why early churches' "inculturation" of the calendar entailed outright contest with both Jewish and pagan religious traditions, as awareness of the origins of key festivals such as Easter and Christmas makes plain to be the case. Dynamics of superiority, disengagement, and renunciation are inscribed in the

origins of the Christian calendar, and are arguably re-inscribed by contemporary use of a lectionary developed primarily in the north.

Challenging Lectionaries: Postcolonial Reading Strategies

In our conversation thus far, we have already hinted at the ways that when viewed via a postcolonial optic, how lectionaries' dynamics can be both challenged and at the same time offer vistas for a constructive conversation. We have also seen that while lectionaries offer a diversity of readings from a multiplicity of biblical voices and theological positions, there is a tendency towards a christological bias, a bias towards the seasonal cycles of the northern hemisphere and power dynamics that favour a particular group (geographical, ecclesial and gendered). Certainly, one cannot rule out the possibilities of homogenizing and controlling proclivities in lectionary selection and interpretations, in spite of the "deviations" from lectionary sequences.

Mindful that lectionaries and their constitutive pericopes are not value-free aspects of the liturgical life of ecclesial communities, a postcolonial perspective opens up possibilities for a necessary critical conversation. How, for instance, can we locate colonial tendencies and entanglements in our lectionary and pericope readings? And how have imperial practices and hegemonic tendencies shaped these? As we have already hinted, this may very well happen due to the ways these are put together and the agendas of those responsible for this task. It may also be pertinent to contemplate the reasons for lectionaries, or indeed any other pattern of reading, in the performance of Christian liturgy. We would suggest that postcolonial optics can serve as a tool "to detect oppression, expose misrepresentation," and to "promote a fairer world" to borrow from Sugirtharajah.²⁹

In arranging lectionary readings, ecclesiastical authorities do not seem to engage as a major concern the problematics related to biblical narratives and the texts of the biblical canon. Understandably, this is not their focus in compiling "readings for the assembly," and yet we would assert that promoting a fairer world certainly ought to

be within the orbit of concern of ecclesial groups. We would urge from a postcolonial perspective that in future lectionary revision such a concern is both explicitly stated and efforts to enact it explained, for unstated, any appeal to authority and faithfulness in lectionary compilation is likely to reflect the interesting relationship with hegemonic proclivities to control and shut down debate and dissent found within the scriptures themselves as well as canonical compilation.³⁰

What a postcolonial scrutiny will insist on and demonstrate is that any such selection cannot be neutral. There is always an interest at stake. Thus, by assigning texts to be read on specific feast days and through significant seasons of the church, ecclesiastical authorities and their representatives do in fact make theological judgments in their selection (and editing) of readings and how they group these in terms of their understanding of the liturgical seasons and feasts. Evaluating these selections and the reading/interpreting of these texts through a postcolonial optic will raise critical questions about any tendency, whatever the theological or hermeneutical colour, that gives the Bible the unquestioned benefit of the doubt as *the* only place where answers for critical and urgent questions facing humankind today, where God has spoken with finality and where liberation and hope, can be found.³¹ In other words a postcolonial reading will not only give agency to a multiplicity of voices in terms of these and other issues: it will also highlight that the Bible is a complex and problematic textual repository that embodies the historical, socio-political and cultural complexities not only of its own world, but that of the shapers of what we presently have as an acceptable canon and pattern of proclamation and interpretation. From a postcolonial perspective, one key question for future conversations on lectionaries will be around ways to "expand the biblical canon and incorporate those diverse texts which were suppressed or excluded in the ecclesiastical power-game of selection and rejection."³²

In a previous section we noted the possibility of "deviations" in lectionary sequencing. Perhaps this can open up opportunities for the use of non-canonical biblical texts. Deviations, on the other hand, will sit very well within the postcolonial agenda, as it offers opportunities for praxiological impulses that can give shape to theological

and liturgical dissent, and the subverting of totalizing tendencies geared at restricting theology, rituals and practices. In this regard, the postcolonial strategy of textual juxtapositions and contrapuntal reading become a necessary strategy and habit to nurture and employ. We wish to highlight and borrow from Edward Said's contributions with regard to the ways one should read a literary text that takes into account intertwined histories and perspectives. This strategy does offer possibilities of how we can juxtapose, read and interpret lectionary readings. For Said, contrapuntal analysis or counterpoint reading functions on the premise that there is a multiplicity of voices at play that may appear as an organized whole, but with only a provisional privileging allowed to any one voice. In our specific case, the gospel reading may be last, but this method would not see this as Jesus having the last word or even point to a rigid christological bias. It will certainly want to juxtapose the Pauline tendencies towards universalizing the gospel (and in the process neutralize ethnic and cultural differences) and that of the Galilean/Palestinian Jew, Jesus, whose mission and ministry was configured and reconfigured within a Jewish religious framework.

Postcolonial optics, via contrapuntal reading, will be largely concerned with reading strategies and interpretations. Their concern will be to interpret different perspectives simultaneously while trying to see how the text interacts with a lectionary chain as well as with historical, biographical and socio-political contexts. Reading will be done with an awareness of the many ideological interests in the text, including the ways they have been juxtaposed, the canonizing of scriptures and the link between the history of the Christian church and empires. Hence, what is not said may be just as important as what is said; and what went into the readings is as important as what the author excluded.

Further, there are also other ways in which contrapuntality or counterpoint may take on creative possibilities. One such opportunity is one that will encourage suitable interruptions, challenge, contesting and argument in the liturgy. As Surgitharajah puts it in the context of hermeneutics: "[t]he interpreter has not only a discursive function but also an interventionist one which is ethically and ideologically committed."³³ It may be that opportunities can be created to allow counterpoints, interventions and interruptions from apocryphal

readings and from popular readings of marginalized groups (for instance asylum seekers, aboriginal peoples etc.) whose voices are rarely given agency in our liturgies.

We close by drawing attention to two particular writings which make constructive contributions to postcolonial reading of the Bible in Christian assemblies. Firstly, we note Jione Havea's call for a "Commoner's Lectionary" that will both complement and contest the Common Lectionary.³⁴ Havea's essay is a contextualized or *sited* example (in his case, especially relating to the Pacific Islands) of how the "commonness" of lectionary schemes which purport to be common ones can begin to be challenged and unravelled. In "attempting to rescue the RCL from the colonial legacy," Havea suggests the need

to give attention to the traditions, experiences and the reasonings of commoners. There are two interconnected moves here: critique the mainline (hermeneutics of suspicion) and make room for the sidelined (hermeneutics of identification and of retrieval).

He is aware that this would evoke both "growing sighs from the dominant classes, who will loathe the questioning of their mainline ways" as well as "sighs of release from sidelined commoners, who will rejoice in their recognition." The Commoners' Lectionary in Havea's imagination would be biased towards local readers or more appropriately "tellers," and amongst other things would consider

biblical texts (from different slants), *other ancient texts* (e.g. selections on hospitality and care for the outsider or stranger taken from the Vedas, Qur'an, Talmud or church fathers and mothers), *local instructions* (in the form of stories, dances, riddles, proverbs or legends), and *recent popular texts* (e.g. novels, artwork, craft, lyrics and movies).

Alongside the kind of approach commended by Havea, the work of someone like David Joy can provide important impetus for postcolonial reading of the Bible in the assembly of the church. Joy's work, "a hermeneutical paradigm for a postcolonial context,"³⁵ specifically his own India, carefully sets the Gospel of Mark in multiple overlapping contexts, including the history of western scholarship, its deployment in colonial missionary endeavour and particular subaltern readings – such as that by Dalit persons. More than this, however, he exposes colonial powers and what he evocatively calls

"imperial scars" within the Markan material itself. Both the voices of oppressors and the pervasiveness of the poor within the gospel are identified, and subaltern presence within the Markan narratives is especially lifted up. Readings of particular Markan texts are offered through the lenses of race, gender, nationhood and their intertwining in hybrid forms. The colonized context in which "Mark" writes, as well as colonizing dynamics of later interpretations, are foregrounded.

In our view, the biblical scholarship represented by Havea and Joy is the kind that needs to be engaged in Christian assembly. Such scholarship is invaluable for the critique and conversation we wish to encourage and crucial to postcolonial perspectives being expanded beyond the confines of the academy.