

Mukti Barton

When those of us doing these talks met last November to draw lots for which Reader would get which writer, I looked quickly down the list of 12 names and thought 'I know something about nine of these, and I've vaguely heard of another two. There's only one I've never heard of, so that's only a 1 in 12 chance. I'm not likely to get that one'

First mistake, as I drew Mukti Barton out of Peter's hat. It would be interesting to ask how many of you, like me, had never heard of Mukti Barton.

Still, I thought as I drove home, I can look him up on Google and at least find out something about him. Second mistake – he turns out to be a she, which maybe says something about my own unconscious prejudices, something we'll come to later.

But at least Wikipedia if not Google will definitely give me information about all the books she has written and I can probably get some of them cheap online. Third mistake. While there are a number of articles in journals or chapters in edited collections, she has only written two books, neither of which is currently in print or readily available, even, perish the thought, on Amazon. And actually there's precious little information about her – she doesn't even have a Wikipedia entry, so what's on the hand-out is the bare minimum I have been able to glean.

At that point, I thought I'm going to have to use Peter's get out of jail card and say 'I can't do this. Please can I have someone else.'

However, I persisted and managed to get hold of and read a library copy of each of the two books. So what I have I found out about Mukti Barton and, perhaps more importantly, what has this Asian, womanist, liberation writer, whose theology is rooted in the racial and gender oppression of women of colour, got to say to us?

I'm going to concentrate on *Scripture as Empowerment for Liberation and Justice*, but I'll start with a few words about *Rejection, Resistance and Resurrection*. Told largely in the words of West Indian, African and Asian Christians, it charts their experience as immigrants, mainly but not exclusively in the diocese of Birmingham, coming into, and often being or feeling rejected by Church of England churches from the 1950s and 1960s onwards. It's a deeply disturbing book, challenging us as white Christians today about our attitudes to those of other races, creeds and colours. It's a reminder that like all institutions in Britain, the church, even with its Christian values and principles, is a microcosm of society, and as the then Bishop of Birmingham, John Sentamu, writes in his foreword to the book, liable to the same kinds of institutional racism found in society as a whole. It's a reminder that, as the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, of which our archbishop was a member, reported, 'Unwitting racism can arise because of lack of understanding, ignorance or mistaken beliefs. [...] Such attitudes can thrive in a tightly knit community, so that there can be a collective failure to detect and outlaw this breed of racism.' It's a reminder that without being openly racist we perpetuate racism through negligence and weakness, what Martin Luther King called the appalling silence of good people. And with debate about immigration high on the political agenda, it's a highly relevant

reminder, if we needed it, listening to the views expressed openly by some politicians, parts of the press, and by the man or woman in the street, and even inside the church, how easily it can tip over into outright racism.

But if *Rejection, Resistance and Resurrection* is highly relevant, if not particularly theological, *Scripture as Empowerment for Liberation and Justice* is, at least at first sight, just the opposite – highly theological but less obviously relevant to us. It is, in its opening words, a study of the reclamation by Christian and Muslim women in Bangladesh of their scriptures as a source of empowerment for the liberation of women. Its aim is to uncover the neglected resources within those scriptures for liberation and justice. It does so against a background of a country where patriarchy is inextricably woven into the family and legal systems of society, and gender inequality and oppression of women are legitimised and justified by institutional religion, both Christianity and Islam, though Barton is at pains to point out that it is not religion but patriarchy that it is primarily responsible for women's sufferings. We can't go into any of the detail of that background, because in the time available I want to concentrate on the theological response to that situation that Barton presents.

It's a theology shaped by the experiences of Bangladeshi women in a male-dominated society, using incidents and stories from their own context to reflect on their scriptures and to challenge and ultimately transform the unjust patriarchal structures of their society. Marrying together what Barton says about the principles underlying the approaches of Muslim and Christian women to the interpretation and use of their scriptures and the theology that emerges from that, I have identified five closely connected aspects which I think summarise what she says are the key features of Asian women's theology. Again given the limitations of time, in quoting examples I'll concentrate mainly on Asian Christian women's theology, though the principles apply equally to Muslim women.

The first key feature is that it's contextual; it is as Barton says 'inducted from the lived world experience'. In her words in relation to the gospel story of the woman accused of adultery, 'Just as John saw Jesus from his own perspective and interpreted this part of the Jesus tradition in the light of his own experience of life, so contemporary Bangladeshi women re-read the gospel in the context of their own lives.'

The fundamental reality of that context is that, as well as being Asian and female, they are, overwhelmingly, poor, and this, particularly for Asian women Christians has a profound effect on their theological thought. You don't have to be a follower of Karl Marx to consider religion to be the opium of the people. Napoleon well understood the value of religion to the ruling classes when he said it 'prevents the rich from being massacred by the poor by relating the idea of equality to heaven.' In all religions, including Christianity, Barton argues, the poor have been made to accept the disparity between themselves and the rich, and in the name of God women have been compelled to agree to the social and religious creation of division between them and men. Exploited people have been made to believe that God wills social inequalities.

The second is that it is dialogical, that is it juxtaposes the Bangladeshi and scriptural contexts. Bangladeshi women's own stories enter into a dialogue with scriptural narratives that have many similarities with the Bangladeshi reality of today, since the culture of biblical times is continued to some extent through institutional religion which is the inheritor of the Bible. This forms the meat of Barton's exploration of Asian Christian women's theology. She draws parallels between on the one hand the stories of Hagar in Genesis and the woman at the well in John, and the stories of Susanna attached to the book of Daniel in the Apocrypha and the woman accused of adultery in John, and on the other hand the experience of women in Bangladesh.

Hagar (and indeed Sarai) is under the tight control of a patriarchal society. She, like the woman of Samaria, is considered inferior because of her race, her gender and her social, political and economic status. Yet both find their God, the source of living water, who responds to their cry. That same biblical God responds today to the cry of Christian and other women in Bangladesh who still have the responsibility for walking long distances to get water for their family, and who are similarly dispossessed and marginalised and subject to fear of defilement on grounds of nationality, gender, class or caste. And it does not escape notice that the story of the liberation of Hagar, a black woman who is of course an important figure in the Asian Muslim cultural heritage, comes even before the Exodus in the Old Testament.

Likewise the stories of Susanna and the woman accused of adultery, which have striking similarities, including being brought to trial by the (male) elders of the community in a religious 'court' on an alleged charge of adultery; being liable to summary execution, yet in the absence of the supposed male counterpart; and finding a prophet of God coming to her aid; have parallels in modern Bangladesh. Women there are still brought to trial by (male) religious courts and condemned on flimsiest of evidence, the only difference being that whereas Susanna and the woman in John's gospel survived, many Bangladeshi women do not.

The third is that it reads the scriptures in the context of their overall message and asserts the right of everyone to read them for themselves and question the teachings of religious scholars, past and present. These are particularly expressed as hermeneutical principles that underlie Bangladeshi Muslim women's interpretation and use of their scriptures, but are of course equally applicable to Christian women. This is not challenging the Bible or the Qur'an but a critique of previous interpretations of scripture, disentangling individual stories from their popular (male) interpretations, and allowing them to be understood in the wider context of the overall message of the scriptures. So for example, the primacy of the message of Genesis 1.27 (and its Qur'anic equivalent) over passages that have been misused by generations of male interpreters to give a supposed justification to slavery, apartheid and the subjugation of women has become a liberating force for women in Bangladesh.

The fourth is that it reclaims a distinctively Asian cultural and Christian heritage from the western Christian theology that the churches in Bangladesh have inherited, a process that has involved disentangling the Bible from a western theology that originated in the context of imperialism, colonialism and male domination and has little relevance for powerless women whose country was colonised by the authors of this theology. Western missionary expositions of the Bible, unduly influenced by Paul's

patriarchal socialisation, have both undervalued the part played by women in the proclamation of the gospel and over-influenced the church's perception of women and, more importantly, of God ever since. Pronouns in Bengali do not denote gender, so Jesus' declaration to the woman at the well that 'God is spirit' and not male is tremendously liberating for women in Bangladesh.

Barton acknowledges that those who brought Christianity to Bangladesh and first interpreted the Bible there might have been unaware of the influence of their western context on their biblical understanding. However, as James D Smart points out, 'The presence of the context is more frequently unconscious than conscious, and the interpreter is most under its influence when he is most unconscious of it.'

And finally, the fifth key feature of Asian women's theology is that it is inter-religious. In much traditional Christian teaching in Bangladesh, the influence of Hellenistic dualism is prevalent; if Jesus is the right way, others must be wrong, even evil. For Christians in Bangladesh, accounting for less than 1% of the population, Barton argues it's impossible to do theology without engaging with the majority Muslims and then other religions. So from the story of Jesus and the woman at the well, Asian women's theology understands that truth is not something to be imposed on others; it is something revealed to us, to be recognised, acknowledged as truth and acted upon.

This is, as Barton says, very different from academic theology. 'It is not about learning theology from theological institutions, rather it is about "doing theology"'. Unlike institutional religion, it gives primacy not to orthodoxy (right belief) but to orthopraxy (right action deriving from theological reflection). In this it is consistent with the emergence in the late twentieth century of practical theology and the pastoral cycle as important methodological tools for the discipline of theology – the cycle of experience leading to analysis leading to theological reflection leading to action. In the Bangladeshi context, that cycle supports Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's contention that 'all theology, willingly or not, is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed. Intellectual neutrality is not possible in a world of exploitation and oppression.' Or as R S Sugirtharajah, Emeritus Professor of Biblical Hermeneutics at Birmingham writes, 'Hermeneutical neutrality is impossible in a divided world – either you are part of the solution or you are going to be part of the problem'.

Now all this won't, I suspect, be everyone's cup of tea. You might or might not be in sympathy with black or feminist or liberation theology, and even if you are it's not difficult to find inconsistencies in Barton's argument, perhaps most obviously her insistence on not bringing one's own preconceptions to scripture to find support for them from particular texts, but instead abandoning stereotypical concepts and searching for justice for all, looking at the whole of scripture. Leaving aside the intellectual difficulty of dispensing with who and what you are in coming to scripture (can we really do that?), this strikes me as basically replacing other people's preconceptions by your own implied better ones.. And even if you are broadly sympathetic to her approach, its relevance to our situation in Northeast England might not be terribly obvious. Indeed, having a Western, white male, albeit chosen through Peter's hat, presenting it might not be the best way to elicit a sympathetic reading anyway.

Having said that, and at the risk of turning what should be a lecture into a sermon by moving from exegesis to application, I want to draw out some points that I think are relevant for all of us, whatever our gender or race, and whatever the context in which we are working. I justify doing that on two grounds:

- Firstly, the whole basis of Barton's work is that it is practical theology; that it should result in action, rather than being a purely intellectual exercise.
- Secondly, though I don't know why Peter chose this particular session to open this whole Readers on Writers series, it seems to me that it should be not just the aperitif for this evening but the starter course for the whole series.

So how do I think this is relevant to us? Picking up those five key features of Asian women's theology, let me suggest five questions we might ask both of ourselves as Readers and of the eleven theologians who are yet to come in this series.

1. How, if at all, do we/they relate the liberating word of God to the racial, gender and economic inequality in the world?
2. Do we/they use the pastoral cycle in a way that relates the world to the word and leads to action, or does orthodoxy trump orthopraxy?
3. Does our/their use of the Bible give primacy to its overall message or does it concentrate on individual verses, perhaps taken out of context, albeit through centuries of similar interpretation?
4. Do we/they at least try to understand how our/their own preconceptions, albeit unconsciously, might be influencing our/their interpretation of scripture?
5. How do we/they relate our/their understanding of truth to the beliefs of those of other religions, or even (perhaps especially) Christians of other persuasions?

Bangladesh might seem a small country long way away. But perhaps the theological thinking that has been going on there has something to teach us.