

Conference on Faith and History
Biennial Meetings, September 2014

Panel Proposal: "Indigenous Christianities in the British Empire"
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Presenters: Kelly Elliott (Assistant Professor, Abilene Christian University), Chandra Mallampalli (Professor, Westmont College), Paul Grant (Doctoral Candidate, University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Chair: Steve Edgington (Hope International University)

Dear CFH program committee,

The following constitutes a proposal for a three-paper session for this fall's meetings at Pepperdine. The session offers three looks at the complicated relationship between imperial Britain and her Christian subjects in India and Africa. Taken together, these three papers suggest distinct approaches to the problem of "Christian Historians and their Publics", insofar as their research speaks into the profoundly moral relationship between the Christian message and the imperial conquest. This problem remains combusive to this day, and Christian historians must proceed with great sensitivity.

"Jesus Christ's *Golam*:" Bengali Baptist Evangelists, 1800-1850
Kelly Elliott

The historiography of the modern Protestant missionary movement often gives pride of place to the British Baptist Missionary Society's first sphere of labor at Serampore, near Calcutta in British Bengal. The Serampore mission and its legendary evangelists, BMS founder William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward, became giants of the evangelical imagination in the early part of the nineteenth century, and their story is well known even today. Yet the Serampore Trio themselves declared that "the grand desideratum that would move the Hindoo nation" were not European evangelists like themselves, but indigenous preachers—Indian converts whose knowledge of local languages, religious beliefs, and culture no European could match.

This paper examines the writings of some of these Bengali evangelists as they appear—as translated sermons, hymns, and missionary journals—in British sources. These little-explored fragments of Bengali Christianity reveal that Indian evangelists did not simply parrot the preaching methods and approaches of European missionaries, but presented the Christian gospel in terms and metaphors that were rooted in their own context and culture. Complicating broad narratives of British cultural supremacy, the sermons, conversion stories, and letters written by South Asian Christians show that indigenous converts and European missionaries sometimes disagreed, and that hearers often rejected, misunderstood, or re-appropriated the missionary gospel to serve unexpected ends.

Bengali Christians, though converted initially by European effort, quickly took ownership of their own religious lives and institutions. BMS missionaries, including the Serampore Trio, recognized the abilities and spiritual maturity of particular evangelists by laying hands on them to set them apart as missionaries, and emphasized the need for independent churches under Indian leadership. The influence and agency of these Indian evangelists calls into question the view of modern missions as the religious arm of empire.

“Reflections on the Protestant Legacy in India in light of the 1857 Rebellion”

Chandra Mallampalli

Among the most momentous challenges to British imperialism in the nineteenth century, perhaps none matches the scale and intensity of India’s 1857 Rebellion. Historians attribute the Rebellion to many factors; but by far the most widely cited pertain to cultural and religious factors. Indeed, much of the literature surrounding the event assigns at least some blame to the collusion of Evangelicalism and colonial state. This paper explores how the Rebellion has assigned to Christians an enduring place in the history of modern India. It pays particular attention to the roles of Protestant missionaries as assailants and interlocutors of Indian culture and religion. Missionaries often criticized India’s Hindus and Muslims by citing contradictions in their sacred texts and exposing inconsistencies between what was taught in the Koran or the [Hindu] *shastras* and how Indians actually lived. How does this heritage continue to shape debates about Christians in contemporary India, including the heated debate over religious conversion? Is it possible to write Christian history without invoking this trope of ‘Protestant preaching and ensuing resistance/rebellion’?

“Germans were once Pagans: Ghanaian Christians study the ancient conversion of their missionary guests, 1840-1880”

Paul Grant

In 1870 in West Africa, when the British went to war against the Ashanti Empire, they discovered among their native conscripts several Christians—employees of the German-speaking Basel Mission. In contrast to converts the British knew and understood from elsewhere in Africa, these young men were quite clear that their loyalty to the cross had no bearing whatsoever on their loyalty to the Union Jack.

Uniquely among nineteenth century missionary communities in Africa, the Basel Mission’s native employees enjoyed first-hand knowledge of the missionary homeland in Germany. Having seen abject poverty, ignorance and petty debauchery, these Africans’ rejection of missionary supremacy was an informed stance. But these African visitors to Germany did more than form loose impressions. They taught each other about the incomplete early medieval German conversion from primal religions. Focusing on the Ghanaian churchman David Asante’s Twi-language publications on pre-Christian German paganism, this paper discusses the African construction of Europe as a mission field.

Steve Edgington will then offer comment, drawing on his own field of British Rhodesia, and connecting the papers to the conference theme.

