

Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones, Editors
Ashgate Studies in Evangelicalism

Dear Drs. Atherstone and Jones:

I write to submit my manuscript, *Chosen Race: Colonial Christianity Against the Hierarchies of Empire*, for publication. I believe that this monograph is a good fit for your Ashgate Studies in Evangelicalism Series.

Set during the nineteenth-century flowering of the missionary movement, *Chosen Race* argues that the cultures, interventions, and adaptations of colonial hearers, far more than British influence, determined the outcome of missionary preaching and the development of Christian churches in the British Empire. Primarily using published and manuscript sources of the British Baptist Missionary Society from the 1790s through the 1870s, I highlight the responses of people in the West Indies and in South Asia to Baptist missionary preaching. Most hearers rejected the missionary message; some modified it beyond recognition; and others accepted Christianity, but quickly translated it into terms and communities that fit their own cultural contexts. British missionaries had little control over how their hearers perceived and applied their message, and colonial Christians most influenced the shape Christianity took in their homelands.

This book presents a provocative angle on the question of the relationship between imperialism and evangelicalism by centering the narrative on missionary hearers, their responses to the gospel, and their leadership in forging Christian communities appropriate to their own cultures. It provides a comparative analysis of indigenous responses to missionary expansion in two different spheres of empire.

In contrast, much of the scholarship available on the modern missionary movement in the British Empire, including Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects*, Susan Thorne's *Congregational Missions*, and Kathleen Wilson's *Island Race*, emphasize the European missionary's role in the colonial encounter. Those who heard the missionary message appear rarely in these narratives, and when they do emerge, they are imagined as passive imperial subjects, imprinted with British civilization and Christianity. The more theologically sensitive *British Zion*, by Michael Rutz, and *Contested Christianity*, by Timothy Larsen, also focus on the British perspective, demonstrating how colonial missions affected politics and religious identities in the metropole.

In some of the most important recent work on the modern missionary movement, Brian Stanley, in *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* and *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, and Andrew Porter, in *Religion versus Empire*, provide a helpful redirection of the scholarly conversation. Their attention to the providential worldviews and theological motivations of the missionaries, and the limits of their power to construct their converts as they chose, calls into question any facile connection between imperialism and faith.

Though they come to a variety of conclusions, all of these books tell the story of the modern Protestant missionary movement primarily from one vantage point: the perspective of European missionaries. A survey of the scholarly landscape suggests that missionary sources reveal much about British evangelical identity, but as yet, few historians have mined the texts produced by nineteenth-century missionary societies for what they can reveal about colonial Christianity and the people who built it.

There are a few significant exceptions to this trend. R.E. Frykenberg has written or edited multiple books that explore Indian Christianity through the voices of Indian Christians, especially in the Tamil Peninsula. Similarly, Andrew Walls has spent much of his career shedding light on Christian conversion, preaching, and community-building outside of the Western world, focusing particularly on Africa.

Chosen Race shares interpretive focus and theoretical orientation with these latter works. Like Stanley and Porter, I assume that one must take seriously the religious cultures and theological perspectives of historical actors in order to understand how missionaries and hearers responded to each other. Like Frykenberg and Walls, I insist that whenever possible, historians should present indigenous Christianity through the voices of the Christians who practiced it, giving attention to the ways that local cultures and leaders reshaped the missionary message and influenced the global church. I extend this focus on local response by examining both positive and negative reactions to the missionary gospel.

My book intervenes in the scholarly discussion of imperialism, global Christianity, and the missionary movement in several ways. First, *Chosen Race* will be the only comparative study of the way colonized people responded to the missionary gospel in two different spheres of empire. The other monographs in the field, including the work of Frykenberg and Walls, typically emphasize one geographical location. My close analysis of both the West Indies and South Asia allows for intensive comparative study of local responses to missions in two widely disparate cultures. This gives me the opportunity to ask new questions: why did new churches grow so rapidly in the Caribbean, but not in India? How did varying religious and cultural backgrounds influence the way hearers perceived ideas like baptism, the Lord's Supper, and religious liberty? What were the benefits and consequences of Christian conversion in different imperial settings? How did local cultures contribute to modifications and adaptations of the missionary gospel? I take this inquiry a step further than other monographs by combining investigation of missionary sources with other contemporary documents written by local people who encountered the missionary gospel—and often rejected it. The writings of Bengali intellectual Rammohun Roy, for example, provide a striking counterpoint to the missionary perspective on how Christianity should be received in India.

Second, *Chosen Race* uses published and manuscript source material of a single missionary society, the Baptist Missionary Society, from two major spheres of empire over a period of nearly eighty years. This material is supplemented by contemporary writings from both colonial officials and indigenous people who did not choose to

convert to Christianity. The book's scope—an eighty-year time span, but limited to the activity of one missionary society—permits discussion of change and development over time without sacrificing accessible narrative and human detail. People such as James Finlayson of Jamaica, Mrs. Felix Carey of Burma, and Keshub Chunder Sen of Bengal emerge as individuals who heard Baptist preaching and responded to it in a variety of ways, conditioned by their own cultures, needs, and desires. This interpretive focus on indigenous response has not been widely applied to Baptist Missionary Society sources before. Where most books look at the missionary movement and missionary sources for what they reveal about British identity and evangelicalism, I use these sources from the opposite angle, reading for colonial responses, interventions, and adaptations, and uncovering the local origins of the colonial church.

Third, no book-length scholarly study that I am aware of directly engages the great paradox of the nineteenth-century missionary movement: a gospel of freedom and brotherhood unfolded in an imperial environment, where national, racial, and cultural differences were crucial to maintaining the hierarchies that supported British power. *Chosen Race* addresses the contradiction between the missionary message and the inherent inequalities of power between British evangelists and the men and women who responded to them in South Asia and the West Indies. Contemporary documents reveal that colonial Christians and British missionaries struggled to understand one another and build genuine community in colonial settings. Tension, misunderstanding, and outright racism made it difficult to make the upside-down world of the Christian gospel into a reality. But it is vital to show that the racial hierarchies and assumptions of colonialism rarely translated fully to the relationship between missionaries and hearers. The very nature of the missionary enterprise, which depended for its success upon the free acceptance of the gospel by those who heard it, placed a great deal of power in the hands of the colonized, and created shared interests and communities of faith across barriers of race and nation.

A book that focuses on the origins of Christianity outside of the West has striking resonance at this precise historical moment. Recently, multiple studies have demonstrated the demographic shift in global Christianity from the Western world to the global south. Fewer Christians live in Europe and the United States; the faith and its leadership are centered now in sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central America, and parts of Asia. The remarkable papacy of Argentine Jesuit Jorge Mario Bergoglio likewise signals a sea change in the history of the Christian faith. Pope Francis represents the geographical transition of Christian leadership beyond the West, and his condemnation of global economic structures that perpetuate oppression echoes many contemporary Christian concerns. By shedding light on the attempts of nineteenth-century Christians to communicate and build churches across cultural, national, and racial barriers despite great inequalities, *Chosen Race* helps illuminate questions of relevance to contemporary people of faith—questions about globalization, economic exploitation, and the relationship between religion and cultural identity.

Chosen Race is intended for upper-level undergraduate, graduate, and seminary students studying the history of global Christianity, the history of imperialism, and missiology,

and for specialists in these fields. The manuscript will be approximately 65,000 words in length.

I am an Assistant Professor of History at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas, and received a PhD in modern British history from Florida State University. As referees who might offer helpful and qualified review of the project, I suggest: Michael Rutz, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh; Elizabeth Elbourne, McGill University; David Bebbington, University of Stirling; Timothy Larsen, Wheaton College; and Brian Stanley, University of Edinburgh.

Ashgate is the only press to which I am submitting the manuscript at this time. Many thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kelly Elliott, PhD
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Book Prospectus

Chosen Race: Colonial Christianity against the Hierarchies of Empire

Kelly Cross Elliott

Chosen Race: Colonial Christianity against the Hierarchies of Empire explores the responses of West Indian and South Asian peoples to British Baptist mission work during the nineteenth century, arguing that the cultures and interventions of missionary hearers deeply influenced the reception of the missionary gospel and the shape of Christian churches in the empire. The book grapples with three interrelated historical problems:

- 1) How did colonized peoples in South Asia and the Caribbean respond to the Baptist missionary message, and what influence did their rejections, modifications, and alterations have in shaping colonial Christianity? Why did people choose to convert in South Asia and the West Indies, and what did churches in these disparate settings look like?
- 2) To what extent was the Baptist missionary project able to fulfill its claim to a Christianity that razed boundaries of race, caste, and nation in colonial environments, where hierarchy and difference were inscribed upon the bodies of both missionaries and their hearers?
- 3) What was the relationship between British imperialism and the modern missionary movement? How should the interventions of colonial missionary hearers affect our understanding of this relationship?

In answering these questions, *Chosen Race* intervenes in the scholarly conversation about missions and empire—a conversation that has been woefully lopsided, weighted almost entirely on the side of the European perspective—by re-centering the narrative on the responses of West Indian and South Asian peoples who heard the missionary message. Where most historical studies tell the story of the modern missionary movement through the lens of European experience, my focus on the power of local hearers to reject, alter, and mold the missionary gospel highlights the unique complexity of the encounter between colonized hearers and missionary evangelists. These exchanges between Briton and Indian, Briton and Caribbean, colonizer and colonized were unlike any other interaction in the imperial context. Both the egalitarian nature of the Christian gospel and the necessity of willing conversion gave the right of choice and the burden of action to missionary hearers. Though histories often gloss over them or portray them as passive subjects, it was the colonized who determined the failure or success of British missions and most influenced the shape of colonial Christianity.

My interpretive emphasis on missionary hearers problematizes the two common views of the nineteenth-century missionary movement—as the vanguard of empire, or as a civilizing humanitarian project with few adverse consequences. The former interpretation, more widely accepted in academia, frames nineteenth century missions as one more means by which imperialist Britons imposed their culture on colonial peoples. In this view, though missionaries may have been well-intentioned, assumptions of racial and religious superiority colored their enterprise, and missions history is most valuable for what it reveals about how white British missionaries constructed their own identities

against the so-called primitivism of the people who heard their message. On the other hand, the portrayal of missions as a humanitarian project shades into hagiography, making missionaries into conquistadors whose forays into geographic and spiritual wildernesses should inspire even today's readers. Missionary hearers typically appear in these histories as evidence of successful evangelism, not as actors in their own right. Though their conclusions and emphases are different, at bottom these two narratives are the same. Both tell the story of the European missionary, exploring the ways that his encounters with people in the mission field influenced his identity, faith, and Britishness. This interpretation may illuminate our understanding of the empire's role in forging British identity, but it places far too much weight on the missionary's power to control and construct his hearers, silencing the voices and erasing the action of those who responded to evangelism.

Chosen Race offers a new interpretation that turns this traditional narrative of nineteenth century missions on its head, telling the story not through the eyes of European missionaries, but from the perspective of the people who heard their message. I employ source material that few other historians are using: the sermons, preaching journals, letters, and recorded testimonies of indigenous evangelists and converts, and the writings and accounts of colonial women and men who rejected or substantially modified missionary teaching to protect or serve their own cultures and needs. This unmined evidence reveals a fresh picture of the nineteenth-century missions movement: as a rare moment in British imperial history when colonial peoples determined the outcome of British hopes.

Thesis: Local responses to missionary evangelism in the West Indies and South Asia show that the relationship between British Baptist missions and British imperialism was varied and complex. Native hearers routinely rejected the missionary message, or altered it to serve local contexts and purposes. Even those who converted to Christianity translated the faith into appropriate cultural terms, often in spite of conflict with British missionaries. Thus the missionary enterprise was not the religious arm of Britain's global conquest in the nineteenth century. Rather, the nature of evangelism in colonial settings placed great power in the hands of the colonized, whose willing conversion and active participation in church leadership and preaching were vital to the spread of the Christian faith. Further, the missionary gospel's claim to make all humanity into one spiritual family despite difference ran counter to contemporary imperial discourses. The colonial churches that emerged from Baptist mission work in the West Indies and South Asia achieved increasing autonomy from British support, and convert-led churches in these areas forged distinctive worship and evangelism styles out of indigenous cultural material.

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Chapter Overview (Note: This material also included in the Introduction.)

The first chapter examines the environments to which British missionaries came, emphasizing the influence of South Asian and Caribbean cultural contexts upon the missionary message. When the people of these regions met British preachers, observed their activities, and listened to their sermons, their own religious backgrounds, languages, and subject positions colored what they perceived. Some missionaries sincerely attempted to present their gospel without British cultural dressing; others actively sought to Anglicize their hearers. In both cases, though, missionaries had very little control over what their hearers actually took away from a sermon or a conversation. Much of the time, missionaries were quite ignorant of how local custom and ideas influenced the reception of their message, and they certainly could not prevent colonial listeners from reinterpreting the gospel. This was true both in the general and the particular sense. Broadly, indigenous religious traditions and cultures shaped the way people heard the missionary message. Specifically, individual hearers in British colonies altered sermons, religious tracts, or copies of the New Testament to change their message, apply their ideas to their own settings, or promote their own desires. For example, Rajah Rammohun Roy, a rationalist who admired the moral teachings of Jesus but disliked the New Testament's references to miracles and divinity, published *The Precepts of Jesus*, his own version of the Christian gospels with objectionable portions deleted. Both Baptist missionary documents and the writings of local contemporaries like Roy make it clear that native hearers and colonial cultures routinely intervened in the process of evangelization. The missionary enterprise was a two-way street.

The second chapter brings the influence of the empire into focus, arguing that officials of the British colonial governments, and other British nationals involved in imperialism, likewise shaped the environments in which colonial Christianity was forged—usually by opposing missionary and native preaching and generally persecuting Christians. In the West Indies, the plantocracy tried to prevent slaves and former slaves from listening to missionaries and skewered Dissenting churches in the press as politically radical and anti-British. In India, the British colonial government was at best indifferent, and sometimes openly hostile to British missionary efforts, even closing down churches and making preaching illegal during moments of political tension. Mission work and colonial Christianity found themselves under scrutiny for espousing a gospel that militated against obedient subjectivity; missions were often (not unfairly) associated with rebellion and mutiny. In multiple colonial environments, persecution by the powerful brought missionaries and colonial Christians together. Shared suffering created unity when national and cultural differences might otherwise have divided them.

Chapter three highlights the experiences of men and women who converted to Christianity, exploring their possible motivations for adopting the gospel and the benefits

and consequences of their conversions. Indigenous Christians reinterpreted the missionary message into local languages and images, reframing the faith in culturally appropriate ways. Some converts experienced severe persecution; many became social pariahs in their native communities and struggled to build new support systems without becoming dependent upon British aid. Others discovered in their new faith significant opportunity for leadership, creativity, and community building. This chapter provides detailed discussion of several individual converts, sometimes spanning years of their lives, to demonstrate the significance of native Christian contributions to the shaping of Christianity in these areas.

One of the most significant challenges British missionaries faced in their work was the question of how to appropriately acculturate the Christian gospel within its colonial context. Some missionaries felt that, to be truly converted, new Christians must give up every aspect of their former culture—religion, clothing, social custom, and sometimes employment. Others recognized that Christianity would probably be best received if it did not look so foreign. As the fourth chapter shows, the forms of colonial Christianity that had real staying power were those that adapted to local expectations. Baptist missionary sources describe regional fellowship gatherings where local Christians wedded biblical and church tradition to Indian or Afro-Caribbean understandings of gender roles, spirituality, and meditation. Missionaries welcomed convert leadership in these events. Sometimes, however, colonial Christianity took on shapes that discomfited the missionaries. These moments of tension underline a point that is rarely stressed in other histories of the missionary movement: native religious cultures in the Empire were flexible and dynamic, and correspondingly, missionaries enjoyed comparatively little actual authority over many of the churches they founded.

Chapter five provides specific examples of indigenous agency and leadership in the context of British missions and the building of colonial Christianity. Native Christians often became preachers, leaving records of their itinerant evangelism and even complete sermons in Baptist archives and publications. Their culturally relevant illustrations and styles of argument made them more effective evangelists than British missionaries. Converts spoke to others about Christianity on their own initiative, sometimes preaching and teaching in spite of British opposition or doubts about their abilities. Local Christians were the strongest advocates for their own churches, particularly when British supporters questioned their legitimacy. They played key roles in enforcing church discipline, and in some cases, older indigenous Christians even advised and led younger British Christians. This chapter includes analysis of the 1870s debate over the Baptist Missionary Society's payment of Indian preacher salaries. I discuss the influence of South Asian voices on the conversation and its final outcome, highlighting Indian missionaries' advocacy for their fellow preachers in spite of British concerns about dependence.

The paradoxical setting of a gospel of brotherhood and equality in an environment built on hierarchy and difference is perhaps the most interesting facet of this story. How to practice Christian selflessness and sacrificial love when the imperial relationship between Briton and native assumed the superiority of one over the other? The struggles both

British missionaries and native Christians experienced as they attempted to build churches across boundaries of race and nation are evident in missionary sources. It proved impossible to fully realize many of the radical claims of the Christian gospel. Many scholarly studies of the nineteenth-century missionary movement contain repeated depictions of this failure, stressing the racism of missionary language and attitudes towards colonial converts as evidence of broader trends in British imperial culture. Yet studies like these ignore the theological underpinnings of missionary language and behavior, fail to acknowledge the vociferous and influential responses of the colonized, and sweep aside the genuine efforts that both sides made to understand and accommodate each other. In many cases, indigenous Christians and British missionaries did collaborate in order to build colonial churches that replaced imperial hierarchies and racial enmity with brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ. Chapter six directly engages the paradox of missions in the context of empire.

The conclusion reinforces the book's broader claim that missions did not represent a monolithic imposition of British culture and power. Rather, the influence of the places and people to which missionaries came powerfully affected the gospel they carried. By giving attention to moments that British missionaries interpreted as failures—the rejections and re-appropriations of the gospel by native hearers—and, most of all, to the vital participation, leadership, and cultural shaping of colonial Christians, *Chosen Race* changes the scholarly conversation about missions and empire.

Relevance

Historians claim to give voice to the past. Over the last several decades many scholars have particularly emphasized our responsibility to the voiceless, to the peoples without history. Our conference themes, the special issues of our journals, and in some cases our political ideologies all share a commitment to the stories of the subaltern. Yet thus far, most of our academic conversations about the history of the missionary movement and colonial Christianity have failed to fulfill that commitment. *Chosen Race* helps correct the one-sided narrative that has dominated our understanding of missions and empire by listening to the voices of missionary hearers: people whose position as colonial subjects did not prevent their powerful intervention in the process of missionary evangelization and the building of Christian communities in the Empire. By shedding light on the contributions of the developing world to nineteenth-century Christianity, the arguments of this book illuminate more recent trends in global Christian history, and speak to ongoing debates about the imposition of Western religious, cultural, and political norms on the developing world.