

Chosen Race: Colonial Christianity against the Hierarchies of Empire

Kelly Cross Elliott

Introduction

In September 1855, the city of Calcutta witnessed an extraordinary gathering: missionaries from a number of Protestant denominations—Baptist, Anglican, Congregationalist, and Free Church—and from multiple nations—England, Scotland, Switzerland, and India—came together to discuss the progress of the Christian gospel in Bengal. Over the course of four days, the missionaries conversed and prayed about topics ranging from the merits of English vs. vernacular education to the problems of dependent churches. Perhaps the most interesting moment of the missionary conference took place on the first day, when the Reverend A.F. LaCroix of the London Mission formally spoke “On the Peculiar Difficulties Encountered by Missions in Bengal.” The major obstacle to Bengali conversion, LaCroix proposed, was the Bengali nature.

Apparently unfazed by the presence of his native Bengali missionary colleagues at the meeting, Reverend LaCroix proceeded to enumerate the many unfavorable characteristics he observed amongst Bengalis in general, including their “distressing *unimpressability*, when the most momentous concerns of religion are brought to their notice... obsequiousness...and apparent sincerity, so easily assumed by the natives in this part of India.” LaCroix thus constructed a monolithic national character for the people to whom he preached, and helped explain his lack of success in converting them to Christianity. The Bengali tendency towards deception made it “extremely difficult to form a correct estimate of the professions of many who come to us under the plea of being enquirers after the truth,” LaCroix lamented. He further emphasized “their *extreme*

timidity, and their deficiency in nearly all those qualities which constitute manliness, such as moral and physical courage, fortitude, independence of mind, and firmness of purpose.” Such lacks could, of course, be contrasted against the European, and particularly the British, national character, which was typically portrayed as active, masculine, and energetic against the weakness and effeminacy of the colonized. He concluded his presentation by baldly claiming, “there is no people on earth so much under the sway of the opinions of others, so easily affected and disconcerted by ridicule, as the people of Bengal.”¹ By implication the missionary seemed to ask, with such deficiencies rampant among those who received the missionary message, how could one expect the gospel to spread, or churches to spring up, with the rapidity that missionaries desired?

An agent of the London Missionary Society, Reverend LaCroix here nicely represents a stereotype that appears both in Victorian literature and, I would argue, in much of the current historical scholarship about missions and imperialism. LaCroix’s casual racism, his arrogant assumptions about the superiority of his own culture, and even the gendered language he uses all fit the common portrayal of the nineteenth-century European missionary as, at heart and in effect, an imperialist. The ideas contained in LaCroix’s speech mirror many scholarly assumptions about what the missionary project was—the religious arm of cultural and economic imperialism—and what it was trying to achieve—the remaking of colonized peoples as civilized and manly subjects who would become like the colonizers themselves. Indeed, LaCroix’s words would not have been

¹ *Proceedings of a General Conference of Bengal Protestant Missionaries, Held at Calcutta, September 4-7, 1855* (Calcutta: Published at the Baptist Mission Press, 1855), 25-6. On the gendered construction of Britons and Bengalis in nineteenth century colonial rhetoric, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The Manly Englishman and*

out of place at a typical Anglo-Indian club, in the halls of Westminster, or in the pages of Punch. His prejudices betray his connection to the colonizer.

However, Reverend LaCroix's words do not represent the entirety of this story. Several missionaries rose to respond to him, and the fourth was the Reverend Lal Behari De. A native Bengali missionary employed in his own right by the Free Church of Scotland, Lal Behari De exemplifies the voice we do not usually hear in historical scholarship—that of the indigenous Christian who pushes back against European denigration of his culture, who expresses Christian faith while maintaining cultural identity. Lal Behari De first pointed out that “some of the difficulties mentioned by Mr. LaCroix seemed to him not at all peculiar to Bengal. The national character of every people presents some obstacles; but these are probably quite as great in other countries as in this.” In particular, he objected to LaCroix's claim that Bengalis were particularly covetous, arguing that “Englishmen are just as covetous as they.” Reverend Lal Behari then turned his colleague's cultural condescension on its head by reminding him that “there are some qualities distinctive of his [Bengali] countrymen which, if sanctified, might raise them to a higher place in the Christian church.” For instance, the Bengali people were “undoubtedly the most religious people on the face of the earth.” The deep spirituality of Indian culture was a strength that God could use for good, he believed. “If then through the grace of God [people of Bengal] become Christians, we may hope that they will, more than other races, live habitually under the power of their purer faith.”²

² *Proceedings of a General Conference of Protestant Missionaries*, 40. It should be noted that LaCroix did not actually refer to Bengalis as covetous; it seems that Lal Behari extrapolated from LaCroix's assertion that some Bengalis came to the missionaries claiming interest in the gospel for ulterior motives—hoping to receive a job, perhaps—to conclude that LaCroix saw the people of Bengal as covetous. See *Proceedings*, 26.

The implication is unstated, but present: the great religiosity of the Bengali people held more potential for true faith and for service to the church than European culture did. Though he responded courteously and did not deviate from the formal order and tone that characterized such meetings, the presence and the words of missionary Lal Behari De made LaCroix's remarks more difficult to credit. Here was a Bengali who clearly possessed the characteristics of energy, truth-speaking, and firmness of purpose that LaCroix found so lacking amongst the people of India. As a missionary formally employed by a European missionary society, Lal Behari could not have been accused of laziness or timidity; the intensity and difficulty of missionary labor was acknowledged the world over. And certainly, it must have required great moral courage and fortitude for the Indian missionary to stand up in a formal meeting where he was one of three Indians in a room otherwise filled with European ministers, and stoutly counter the harsh judgments of his colleague. But he did stand, and he did speak. Such a man could hardly be characterized as passive, dependent on the opinions of others, or easily swayed by fear of ridicule. Lal Behari De's very presence, as well as his strong defense of his own culture, contradicted LaCroix's claims. Beyond the significance of their exchange in the moment, such conversations call into question many historiographical assumptions about the relationship between missions, imperialism, and the global expansion of the Christian faith.

Reverend Lal Behari De's participation in the 1855 General Conference of Protestant Missionaries in Bengal offers several significant insights to the historian. First, and perhaps most important, the Bengali missionary was present in this meeting, he

spoke, and his words are recorded, apparently faithfully, in British missionary sources. Such testimony of colonial Christians, and especially of indigenous missionaries, is rare and valuable. Many colonial Christians in South Asia, the British Caribbean, and other British colonies became preachers and teachers in their own cultural contexts. Their experiences, sermons, and persecutions are catalogued in itinerant preaching journals and letters, scattered through missionary archives and publications. Their accounts represent the other side of the story that is often represented only by men like Reverend LaCroix. Why, then, do we hear so little of voices like these? Why are there so few scholarly studies of indigenous mission work and of local leadership in the forging of colonial Christianity?

Second, it is important to recognize that Lal Behari's words changed the conversation that was taking place in the meeting. The intervention of an individual whose appearance and place of birth associated him with the colonized played a significant role in this missionary gathering and certainly influenced the thinking of the other ministers who were present. The response and the context of the colonized to the missionary gospel deeply shaped colonial churches, missionary strategies, and perceptions of Christianity's relationship to empire. The Protestant missionary expansion of the nineteenth century unfolded in environments where indigenous hearers far outnumbered European missionaries, and it was these local hearers who most determined the fate of the Christian gospel through their rejection, modification, or adaptation of it. Ultimately, recognition of the significant influence missionary *hearers* exercised over the reception of the gospel and the shape Christianity took in the Empire drives home the fact that it was under God's roof that the so-called civilizing mission of imperialism was most

vulnerable, most undermined, most confused. 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.

Finally, we must consider the complexity and ambivalence inherent in the polite confrontation between LaCroix and Lal Behari. This brief exchange between European and Indian, colonizer and colonized, is partially about barriers to Christian conversion, but it is also about race and power. In 1855, Lal Behari De would not have been welcome in most gatherings of white men in Bengal. He certainly would have been barred from accessing the Anglo-Indian clubs that functioned as important centers of imperial culture in India. Since he was a convert to Christianity, one might expect some contact between Lal Behari and European Christians at church services, but probably always with racial barriers and colonial power relationships still intact. But those imperial hierarchies do not seem to hold true here. Lal Behari De is a missionary, an equal to LaCroix and every other missionary present. He has the same platform from which to speak, and he uses that platform not to pander to European racial assumptions or to stress Indians' ability to become like Europeans, but to lift up Indian culture and its potential in the hands of God. Lal Behari's incisive response tears down LaCroix's assumptions about Indian culture and European superiority; it should also challenge our narrow view of the missionary project. Here we see the racist rhetoric and cultural

condescension we expect from imperialism—and perhaps from missionary work in general—but we also see the unique and radical potential of colonial Christianity to subvert those hierarchies. The exchange thus highlights the tense and uncertain space that the missionary project occupied in its colonial context: a gospel of freedom and radical brotherhood unfolded in an imperial environment where national, racial, and cultural differences were crucial to maintaining the hierarchies that supported British power.

This book explores the ways in which colonized people in the British Empire shaped the global expansion of Christianity in the nineteenth century. A Protestant missionary effort that began in the late eighteenth century with European, primarily British, funds and missionaries rapidly evolved into a process of delicate cross-cultural negotiation between missionaries and colonial hearers. The complex imperial setting of this exchange gave significant cultural and political power to the missionaries, whose race and nationality identified them with the colonizer even when they eschewed the label themselves.

However, the colonized people who heard the missionary gospel also held considerable power in their overwhelming numbers, the resilience and plasticity of their cultures, and a great facility for adapting and altering the Christian message to fit their own needs and desires. Ultimately, it was not European missionaries, but their hearers—the colonized peoples of South Asia, the West Indies, and West Africa—who rejected, modified, or adopted missionary Christianity, molding it to their own cultures and contexts. Western Missionaries did not retain control of their gospel or colonial churches for long. Rather, the interventions of colonial hearers and the evangelism and leadership of indigenous

believers most influenced the reception of the Christian gospel and the shape of Christian churches in the Empire.

Following the assumptions of nineteenth-century evangelical writers, much of the historiography of the modern missions movement accepts a symbiotic relationship between imperial and missionary expansion, declaring that Christianity marched hand in hand with British economic and cultural influence. In this view, the missions movement functions as the religious arm of the British Empire, and Christian converts in the colonies become imperial subjects, wax figures imprinted with British religion and civilization. Much of the source material available to historians of missions tends to support this assumption, since it was written by European missionaries or published by Western missionary societies. The *Annual Report of the Baptist Missionary Society*, for example, clearly seeks to present its British subscribers with a coherent narrative arc that highlights the success of evangelization in line with a Victorian understanding of Providential history.³ Colonial converts appear in such publications as evidence of missionary success and reason to continue the battle for souls. Often, prolific and eloquent missionary writers and translators emerge as protagonists, the leading actors in the story of global evangelization, while colonial faces and voices recede into the background.

Many excellent histories of the modern missionary movement reproduce this narrative emphasis on the European missionary's role in the colonial encounter,

³ *Periodical Accounts Relative to A Society formed among the Particular Baptists, for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen*, 6 vols. (Clipstone: J.W. Morris, 1800); continued after 1819 as *The Annual Report of the Committee of the Baptist Missionary Society, being a continuation of the Periodical Accounts relative to the said society* (Bristol: J.G. Fuller, 1819).

underscoring the influence missionary literature had on British conceptions of empire and highlighting missionaries' power to construct their converts as civilized Englishmen and women.⁴ Other scholars have used missionary documents to demonstrate the movement's role in contemporary political debates over slavery abolition and religious liberty or to point out the wider imperial influences on nineteenth-century British theology.⁵ These analyses broaden our understanding of the landscape of Victorian religious and political life and add complexity to the way we view the relationship between Britain and the Empire. But they tell us little about the experiences, contexts, and faith communities of those who played the most significant role in forging locally relevant colonial churches with indigenous leadership. 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.⁶

⁴ Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 2002); Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire, and Gender in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁵ Two of the best examples are Michael Rutz, *The British Zion: Congregationalism, Politics, and Empire, 1790-1830* (Baylor University Press, 2010), and Timothy Larsen, *Contested Christianity: The Social and Political Contexts of Victorian Theology* (Baylor University Press, 2004).

⁶ Notable exceptions include most of the work of R. E. Frykenberg, especially *Christians and Missionaries in India: cross-cultural communication since 1500, with special reference to caste, conversion and colonialism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); *Christianity in India: from Beginnings to the Present* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008). Also see Judith M. Brown, R. E. Frykenberg, Elaine M. Lowe, *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Peggy Brock, "New Christians as Evangelists," in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood*

This lack of attention to the influence and leadership of indigenous Christians, and to the intervention of colonial hearers, most of whom did not adopt the missionary message at all, remains one of the preeminent problems in the historiography of the modern missions movement. Christian evangelization in the British Empire was not a one-sided affair, as missionaries quickly discovered. Hearers derided the missionary message, warned that the gospel would destroy indigenous culture and custom, or accepted some parts of Christianity while completely rejecting others. Even receptive converts altered the missionary message through misunderstanding or reinterpretation. Further, indigenous believers rapidly took over the task of evangelizing their neighbors using more locally appropriate and effective strategies than British missionaries had, and in the process, they sometimes clashed with the British evangelists who had converted them.

This complex exchange between missionaries and the people who heard them unfolded in an environment molded by the very real inequalities of imperialism. The unique paradox of the nineteenth-century missionary expansion—that men and women associated with the colonizer preached a gospel of liberty and community despite difference to the colonized—has likewise received strangely little attention from historians. Some scholars simply assume that mission churches and relationships between British evangelists and native converts mirrored the racial and cultural hierarchies that existed in British colonial society. The missionary rhetoric of freedom in Christ proved to be just that, for missionaries actually sought to remake the people to whom they preached in their own image as obedient, civilized colonial subjects. But this

Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853 (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

historiographical commonplace does not reflect the self-consciously radical churches that both missionaries and colonial Christians seem to have believed they were building.

In colonial mission churches, both indigenous and European Christians claimed to believe in a gospel that made one sanctified family of all people, all alike in their need for God. Many missionaries in the field advocated tirelessly for native preaching and leadership, even when missionary society leadership in Britain doubted the abilities of colonial Christians. And converts spoke with gratitude and respect of the missionaries, their sacrifices, and their genuine love for colonial Christians. In South Asia and the Caribbean, Baptist missionary preaching and teaching laid the foundation for the establishment, by indigenous Christians, of distinctively South Asian and Caribbean forms of Christianity. As the limitations of European experience and manpower became clear, local converts quickly took up active roles in evangelism, leadership, and the construction of autonomous churches in their own cultural contexts. As Robert Eric Frykenberg contends, the “most important of all reasons not to conflate or confuse Christian missions with Western colonialism rests, very self-evidently, in the essential participation, power, and presence of [indigenous] Christians.”⁷ A complete picture of the missionary movement and the emergence of colonial Christianity must account for the responses—both positive and negative—of missionary hearers. Such an interpretation achieves a nuanced understanding of the missionary enterprise as a negotiation of multiple strategies, revisions, successes, and failures, and of colonial

⁷ R.E. Frykenberg, “Christians in India: A Historical Overview of the their Complex Origins,” in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, ed. R.E. Frykenberg (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 61.

Christianity as the product of conversation and exchange between disparate individuals and cultures with sometimes conflicting goals.

This book illuminates portions of this more complex picture by examining South Asian and Caribbean responses to the gospel preached by agents of the British Baptist Missionary Society between 1792 and the 1870s. Most of the historical scholarship on the Baptist Missionary Society focuses primarily on the British missionaries themselves. In contrast, nineteenth-century BMS publications and archival materials contain extensive evidence of the variety of ways in which the people of India, Burma, and the British West Indies responded to the missionary message. Rejection and disappointment abound in these writings, demonstrating the limitations of missionary influence and the extent of colonial agency and independence. The documents also reveal the often contentious relationship between missionaries and colonial governments, calling into question the facile connection between empire and evangelism.

Most interesting, though, are the accounts and even firsthand testimony of indigenous Christians. In the pages of the *Periodical Accounts* and the *Annual Report of the Baptist Missionary Society*, and in preaching journals and letters written by native Christians, we see evidence of the interactions between Hinduism and Christianity, between slave society and a gospel of spiritual freedom. Convert writings reveal why some people in South Asia and the West Indies found missionary preaching attractive, but they also underline sources of conflict and hesitation—the costs of conversion. The documents provide insight into colonial Christian worship styles, hymnody, approaches to fellowship, and community-building. Surprisingly, multiple incidents of persecution, apostasy, and even conflict and miscommunication between missionaries and converts

also appear. Such sources help reveal the extraordinary complexity and ambivalence of the missionary project, but even purported firsthand texts like itinerant preaching journals written by Indian Christians have received surprisingly little attention in the scholarship. As Peggy Brock points out, “The accounts these local missionaries left behind them come as close as modern scholars are likely to get to the spirit that animated the key agents of missions within the British Empire.”⁸

Of course, the historian must bear in mind the filters such testimony must have passed through. Though direct accounts did appear in missionary society publications, purportedly from a convert’s own hand, European mediators almost certainly edited the original words. Even apparently first-hand writings such as native Christian autobiographies or conversion narratives often faced the pen of a mission amanuensis, who doubtlessly crafted and filtered the narrative.⁹ It may be that missionary society reports provide more insight into how missionaries perceived native hearers than perspective on the experiences of hearers or converts themselves. Discussion of colonial responses to the gospel in such texts must be read with the concerns, goals, and theology of the missionaries and missionary societies in mind. Constraints of genre, form, theology, and language shaped even first-hand accounts.¹⁰

In spite of these limitations, however, missionary publications provide rare, valuable insight into the experiences of missionary hearers and the forging of colonial Christianity. To read these sources only as indicators of the power white missionaries

⁸ Peggy Brock, “New Christians as Evangelists,” 137.

⁹ Griffiths, “Trained to Tell the Truth,” 156.

¹⁰ Gareth Griffiths notes that mission “texts were censored through...a long process of control exercised over the record of the lives of their converts.” Griffiths, “Trained to Tell the Truth: Missionaries, Converts, and Narration,” in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington, 153.

and evangelical editors had over the lives and voices of the colonized would simply reify the unequal relationships that existed in the first place. The colonized people whom the nineteenth-century missionary movement aimed to evangelize were not just an audience for British missionaries to preach to and act upon. They had cultures and motives of their own, and the mediation of a mission amanuensis or society secretary cannot wholly dim the vividness of their experience. Their responses, reinterpretations, resistance, and active participation shine through missionary documents repeatedly, providing a window into a critical moment in the history of global Christianity.

From British Baptist missionaries, West Indian and South Asian colonial subjects heard a message of brotherhood despite difference, even as British capital and military force expanded their global reach, justifying the exploitation of the colonized by claiming to bring civilization through empire. The missionary movement, couched unavoidably within the framework of imperial hierarchy, created complex and often paradoxical conversations that gave colonial interlocutors a uniquely powerful voice. Missionaries believed the gospel had to be willingly received by those who heard it. As free agents who could choose to accept or reject what British evangelists taught, colonial hearers held the key to the success or failure of the missionary movement. Further, if Christianity were to grow beyond infancy in foreign soil, native preachers would have to do most of the planting. Few other colonial encounters offered such opportunity for the colonized to set the terms of discussion and determine its outcome. Few other colonial encounters placed the hopes of the colonizer—the missionary who desperately wanted his hearers to believe—so squarely in the hands of the colonized.

Missionary society documents look outward, facing east and west from the British Isles, and upward, seeking the outlines of the providential plan for global evangelism. What happens if these documents are read from the opposite perspective, if the action flows from Calcutta, or from Kingston? What if Asian and West Indian protagonists drive the narrative? It was not British missionaries, but the women and men who heard them, who most shaped this story. The responses of nineteenth-century missionary hearers, those who converted and those who did not, determined the character and form of colonial Christianity. Their religious lives helped reshape both their own communities, and the broader missionary movement. Ultimately, native converts played the leading role in spreading Christianity, and the gospel they carried was no whole-cloth Western import accepted without question by colonized subjects, but a message that had been transformed by indigenous Christians, who communicated it in terms and lived it in communities that were familiar to them.

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, it must be borne in mind that 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 always shaped the way people heard the missionary message. Specifically, individual hearers in British colonies actively took sermons or religious tracts or copies of the New Testament and altered them to change their message, apply their ideas to a new setting, or promote their own needs and desires. Baptist missionary documents make it clear that native hearers and colonial cultures routinely intervened in the process of evangelization. The missionary enterprise was a two-way street.

In the second chapter, the influence of the empire comes into focus. Officials of the British colonial governments, and other British nationals more directly involved with imperialism than missionaries, 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 missionary preaching and skewered Dissenting churches in the press as politically radical and anti-British. In India, the British colonial government did little to support Baptist missionary efforts, even closing down churches and making preaching illegal in some areas. Mission work and colonial Christianity found themselves under scrutiny for teaching a gospel that militated against obedient subjectivity; missions were often (not unfairly) associated with rebellion and mutiny. In multiple colonial settings, 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 more 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.

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 native Christians organized religious activities that 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, as well. These moments of tension underline, again, the strength of native religious culture and the corresponding lack of authority missionaries had 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. Converts played key roles in enforcing church discipline, and in some cases, older converts advised and led younger British Christians.

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 of both missionaries and indigenous Christians to build churches that transcended the 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. But it is nevertheless significant that many indigenous Christians and British missionaries tried consistently to understand and accommodate each other in order to build colonial churches that razed imperial hierarchies and fostered unity between people in spite of this.

What then, is the relationship between empire and religion? The question is far from simple, and any attempt to answer it must recognize the overwhelming influence of colonial cultures, native responses, and indigenous Christians. It is vital to acknowledge that colonial hearers, far more than British missionaries, determined the success or failure of the nineteenth-century missionary movement. Many native hearers rejected the missionary message; those who did accept it modified it to meet their own needs and fit their own contexts. When West Indian and South Asian people did convert to Christianity, they quickly became the primary evangelists in colonial contexts; their contributions shaped the colonial church most. The faith communities that they built thrived in local cultures, distinct from British Christianity. The legacy of the nineteenth-century British missionary expansion in the empire was shaped most crucially by native Christians. Their context, their culture, their preaching and community-building determined the contours of Christianity in these colonized spaces, actively militating against the hierarchies and inequalities inherent in the imperial project.