

Panel Proposal, NAVSA 2013
Evidence at the Margins: The Interpretation of Subaltern Religious Testimony

Papers:

'Pleasing Testimony': Examining the Lower-Class Response to Religious Tracts, 1800-1850,
Joseph Stubenrauch (Dept. of History, Baylor University)

Interpreting Native Christian Voices and Negative Testimony in Baptist Missionary Publications, 1800-1850, Kelly Cross Elliott (Dept. of History, Abilene Christian University)

"God With Us": Varieties of British Religious Experience in the Second-Anglo Boer War,
Sarina Gruver Moore (Dept. of English, Calvin College)

Panel Abstract

Evidence at the Margins: The Interpretation of Subaltern Religious Testimony

This panel explores evidence of British religious experience at the margins of race, class, and empire in the Victorian era. Soldiers fighting in the Second Anglo-Boer War wrote letters replete with religious rhetoric, offering prayers for the fallen and loved ones, and struggling with the problem of evil. In the publications of the London Religious Tract Society, middle class evangelicals presented the responses of the London poor to the gospel, citing working class eagerness to receive tracts as evidence of evangelical success. Similarly, Baptist Missionary Society reports highlighted the conversion narratives and testimonials of native Christian converts to demonstrate the spread of the Christian message in South Asia.

We are particularly interested in how this kind of testimony, of marginalized or subaltern individuals—indigenous Christian converts, the London poor, the rank-and-file soldier—was constructed and interpreted by contemporaries: middle-class philanthropists, late-Victorian newspaper editors, and British missionaries working in India. Evangelical publications often presented the testimony of the working class, the colonized, and other groups on the periphery of British and imperial society as evidence of God's work among the downtrodden. But how reliable is such testimony as a true indicator of religious experience? How should historians interpret this kind of evidence?

We are interested in exploring the validity of such testimony as indicators of the perspectives and experiences of subaltern groups, and hope to discuss some possible methodologies for gleaning accurate "evidence at the margins" from sources like these.

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Abstract for the NAVSA 2013 Conference

“‘Pleasing Testimony’: Examining the Lower-Class Response to Religious Tracts, 1800-1850”

The efforts of early nineteenth-century British evangelicals to reach the poor by means of cheap publications are usually studied from the vantage point of social control. Tracts that focused on deferential behavior, the evils of lower-class pastimes, and the world to come rather than the miseries of the here and now fit easily into the narrative of bourgeois evangelicals using religion as a tool to reinforce their own class dominance and suppress radical politics. The publications and accounts of the London Religious Tract Society (RTS) contain anecdote after anecdote of working-class people who were eager – even desperate – to receive tracts. On one hand, such stories seem obviously self-serving and were meant to encourage the evangelical rank and file while also to justify repeated pleas for financial support. On the other hand, these anecdotes purport to record numerous encounters, life stories, and the words of Britain’s poorest in the early nineteenth century – a group whose voices and lives have left little in the archives compared to the middle and upper classes. To what use can scholars put these testimonies?

As Leah Price’s recent *How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain* and my own work has argued, religious publishers thought extensively about how their products reached their intended readers. Likewise, lower-class readers often used or repurposed these cheap publications in unexpected ways. In developing and honing its own methodology of evangelism, the RTS hungrily requested and compiled reports from its distributors. The most inspiring of these were selected for widespread circulation.

This paper weighs how scholars might approach this biased evidence and what glimpses of working-class life and attitudes it reveals. I argue that this evidence can be sifted to reveal broad trends as well as telling details. From them emerges a rich picture of a diverse working-class engagement with religious tracts. The disjunctions between RTS expectations and lower-class responses, often recorded for humorous effect, confirm middle-class snobbery yet also open a rare window onto popular culture. The poor used the tracts as objects – as decorations, symbols of respectability, children’s entertainment, and objects to show off to the neighbors. They rejected them, gave them away to others, attempted to use them to curb their neighbor’s and spouses’ behavior, and sometimes found that they spoke to their own spiritual needs. RTS testimonies even reveal obscure popular practices, such as when some lower-class women placed the tracts on a continuum with amuletic texts that they believed protected their homes and granted them safety during childbirth. This paper considers how to navigate this evidence and the rewards of doing so.

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EMPLOYMENT

Assistant Professor, Baylor University. (2011- Present)

EDUCATION

Ph.D., British History, Indiana University. Chair: Dror Wahrman. (2011)

DISSERTATION

Faith in Goods: Evangelicalism, Materiality, and Consumer Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain.

ARTICLES

“Silent Preachers in the Age of Ingenuity: Faith, Commerce, and Religious Tracts in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Church History* 80:3 (2011), 547-574. The American Society of Church History awarded this article the *Sidney E. Mead Prize*.

REVIEWS

“Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850-1939, by Georgina Byrne,” *Victorian Studies* 52:2 (2012), 339-341.

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS

“The Evangelical Battle for the Cottage Walls in Late Georgian Britain,” Pacific Coast Conference on British Studies, March 2012.

“Evangelical Innovations in the Age of Ingenuity,” North American Conference on British Studies, November 2011.

“Gathering the People in the Palace of Glass: Evangelicals and the Great Exhibition of 1851,” American Society of Church History Spring Meeting, April 2011.

“Consumerism, Mourning, and the Picturesque in Romantic Evangelicalism,” Midwest Conference on British Studies, October 2010.

"Evangelical Geographies: Religious Tourism and Souvenirs in Early Victorian Britain," Midwest Victorian Studies Association Conference, April 2010.

SELECTED GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND AWARDS

Sidney E. Mead Prize, American Society of Church History, 2011.

Burgan Prize, Midwest Victorian Studies Association, 2010.

Bernadotte Schmitt Grant, American Historical Association, 2009.

NACBS-Huntington Library Fellowship, North American Conference on British Studies, 2009.

Walter L. Arnstein Prize, Midwest Victorian Studies Association, 2009.

W.M. Keck Foundation Fellowship, Huntington Library, 2009.

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Paper Proposal, NAVSA 2013

*Interpreting Native Christian Voices and Negative Testimony in Baptist Missionary Publications,
1800-1850*

Nineteenth-century British missionary societies produced a wealth of literature about their efforts in the far corners of the Empire. Much recent historiography views such literature primarily as a venue for the construction of colonized peoples as different from and inferior to European Christians. That is, mission publications functioned primarily to craft British identity and control public understanding of the missionary enterprise as part of a civilizing imperial project. Thus the appearance within missionary publications of native convert testimony—sermons, hymns, and conversion narratives—might be considered poor evidence of religious experience at the margins of empire and race, since convert testimony is mediated by the concerns and perspectives of Victorian missionaries.

However, within publications such as the *Periodical Accounts of the Baptist Missionary Society*, society minutes, letters, and sermons, the purported first-hand testimony of indigenous Christians does appear. Historians such as R.E. Frykenberg and Peggy Brock have clearly demonstrated that what success nineteenth-century British missions did experience was due in large part to the efforts of these very individuals. Yet the lack of attention to the voices and experiences of native Christians remains one of the preeminent problems in the historiography of the modern missions movement. Thus any evidence of subaltern religious perspectives and experiences must be valued as rare insights, though interpretation of such evidence may prove difficult.

This paper will examine the problems and opportunities presented by indigenous Christian testimony within Baptist missionary texts, and propose some suggestions towards interpreting this kind of evidence. Specifically, we must ask the following: how accurate and valuable are English-language mission sources, published in Britain, as indicators of convert perspectives and experiences? Is it possible to read such sources creatively in order to glean these perspectives without denying the limitations that European cultural and religious influence, financial and social concerns, and language barriers doubtlessly placed upon native agency? What can the historian do to account for the constructed nature of these texts, while avoiding the mistake of allowing such concerns to effectively erase indigenous Christian agency entirely?

Complicating broad narratives of British cultural supremacy, the sermons, conversion stories, and letters written by South Asian Christians show that converts and missionaries frequently disagreed, and that the missionary gospel was rejected, misunderstood, or reappropriated to serve unexpected ends. Further, missionary assessments of key moments in the history of the Empire—informed by relationship to native Christians—often differed from mainstream interpretations. For example, Baptist publications record Indian Christian testimony about such widely-publicized events as the Mutiny of 1857 in stark contrast to many contemporary British narratives.

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Education

PhD, British history, Florida State University	Spring 2010
Dissertation: " <i>Chosen Race: Baptist Missions and Mission Churches in the East and West Indies, 1795-1875</i> "	Advisor: Charles Upchurch
M.A., European history, Florida State University	Spring 2007
B.A., history, with French minor, Harding University	Fall 2005

Selected Publications and Conference Papers

Review of Parna Sengupta, *Pedagogy for Religion: Missionary Education and the Fashioning of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal* in *Journal of World History* (forthcoming)

"Negative Testimony and Native Christian Voices in Baptist Missionary Publications," Western Conference on British Studies, September 2012.

"Baptist Conversion in the Colonial Context, 1801-1840," Presentation at Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, Symposium on Evangelicalism, October 20, 2011.

Convener/Panelist, "British Official and Missionary Responses to Obeah in the British Caribbean, 1825-1845." European History Section of the SHA, Baltimore, MD, October 2011.

"Providential History as Divine Metanarrative in Baptist Missionary Publications, 1799-1840." American Society of Church History, Grand Rapids, MI, April 2011.

Review of Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* in *Chronicle of Historical Studies*, vol. VIII (Spring 2011).

"Indian Responses to Christian Missions in Bengal, 1795-1875." International Conference on Religion and Spirituality in Society, University Center, Chicago, February 2011.

Honors and Awards

Rhinehart Postdoctoral Fellowship, Appalachian State University (declined)	2010
Lynn E. May Research Grant, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives	2009

Professional Memberships

European History Section of the Southern Historical Association
North American Conference on British Studies
American Society of Church History

“God With Us”: Varieties of British Religious Experience in the Second-Anglo Boer War

Evidence: NAVSA 2013

**Sarina Gruver Moore, PhD
Calvin College, Department of English**

At the same historical moment the American philosopher William James was at the University of Edinburgh delivering the 1901-1902 Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion—lectures that would eventually become *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)—British soldiers were fighting a brutal war against outmanned and outgunned Dutch farmers in South Africa. In the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), the British Empire confronted a fierce and unexpectedly prolonged guerilla resistance. And while Britain was ultimately victorious in the David and Goliath conflict, this resistance unnerved the British populace—perhaps Britannia no longer ruled so easily.

In response to the trauma of war, the British soldier sent letter after letter home from the African battlefield to the mother country. These private letters to family and friends were then often brought to the local newspaper to be published, in part or in full. Soldiers wrote home to request supplies (tobacco is the number one request), communicate battlefield success or the news of fallen comrades, and make commentary on how the war was being conducted by their superiors. In particular, these letters from the edge of Empire provide evidence from the margins about the religious life of the average late-Victorian soldier.

This paper looks at religious rhetoric employed by soldiers in their accounts of the war: their hopes for a safe return home, their prayers for loved ones far away, their ruminations on the nature of evil. Despite the theodicy of war—the problem of reconciling the idea of a loving, omnipotent deity with the experience of human brutality—these soldiers are remarkably consistent in their expressions of personal piety and consent to orthodox Christian belief. As Timothy Larsen reminds us in his recent study *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in the Nineteenth-Century* (2009), the standard narrative of the Victorian period as one of a crisis of faith is only partially true. In Jamesian language, the varieties of British religious experience are more diverse than one narrative can express, and a “large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas” (*Varieties* v). I read these letters in conversation with James’s *Varieties*—two very different kinds of texts, but produced at the same historical moment and in response to many of the same world-historical events.

This paper also builds on my presentation at the 2012 NAVSA conference in which I looked at the patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric used in letters from the Boer War; in writing home about the war, soldiers were also often “writing home” in the descriptive sense, describing their own versions of the cultural meaning and character of the home country. Methodologically, I continue to use the large-scale digital British Newspaper Archive (BNA), which makes searchable the vast periodical holdings of the British Library.

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Education

Ph.D.	English Literature, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA	2011
M.A.	English Literature, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA	2004
B.A.	English and Philosophy, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL	1997

Employment

Fall 2011-present	Visiting Assistant Professor: English, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI
Fall 2009-Spring 2011	Instructor: English Department, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI
2010-2011	8 th Grade Teacher: English, Trinitas Classical School, Grand Rapids, MI
Fall 2003-Spring 2005	Adjunct: English, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL
Spring 1999-Spring 2002	Graduate Teaching Assistant: English, Univ. of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA
Summer 2001	Adjunct: Wheaton-In-England, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL
Fall 1995-Spring 1997	Teaching Assistant: Philosophy, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL

Teaching & Research Interests

I teach special-topic seminars ("Global Austen"); 300-level historical literature courses in the long 19C; and a wide variety of 100-300 level academic and creative writing courses at Calvin College. My research interests are in Victorian British culture and literature; urban architecture, discourse, and lived experience; religion in the long 19C; the Boer Wars; and Elizabeth Gaskell. I am currently at work co-editing an essay collection commemorating the 150th anniversary of the death of Elizabeth Gaskell, *Place, Progress, and Personhood in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, to be published in 2015.

Recent Academic Service

Calvin College Curriculum and External Affairs Committees: organizing committee for Midwest Conference on Christianity and Literature (2012); "One Festival, One Department" book discussion host (2010-2012); Calvin Festival of Faith and Writing (2009, 2011).

Honors & Awards

Dupont Fellowship, University of Virginia 2000-2002
Travel Scholarship, "Locating the Victorians" Conference, London 2001
Academic Enhancement Program Fellowship, University of Virginia 1999-2000
B.A., cum laude, Wheaton College, IL 1997

Publications

"Courts Obscure: The Architectural Shaping of Identity in 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras.'" *The Gaskell Society Journal*, vol. 20 (2006), pp. 73-90.

Presentations

I have presented at NAVSA (2012), British Women Writers Conference (BWWC: 2005, 2012); College English Association (CEA: 2005); Midwest Victorian Studies (MVSA: 2005), and an international conference on *Elizabeth Gaskell and Manchester: Identity, Culture, and the Modern City*, Manchester, UK (2005). In April, I will be presenting at the 2013 BWWC in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Professional Associations

Modern Language Association (MLA), North American Victorian Studies Association (NAVSA), British Women Writers Association (BWWA), The Gaskell Society

