

CHRISTIANITY AS AN ARM OF EMPIRE: THE AMBIGUOUS CASE OF INDIA UNDER THE COMPANY, c. 1813–1858

IAN COPLAND
Monash University

ABSTRACT. *For many years it was widely assumed that there was a close connection between the rapid expansion of European imperial power and acquisition of territory overseas during the nineteenth century, particularly in Asia and Africa, and the congruent Protestant Christian missionary project to save the ‘heathens’ of these places by persuading them to embrace the ‘redeeming’ message of the Gospels. Over the past several decades, however, the thesis that empire-building and Christian evangelizing were mutually supportive activities has come under sustained attack from a group of British historians led by Brian Stanley and Andrew Porter – to the point where the Stanley–Porter revisionist line now occupies centre-stage. This article shows that, contrary to the dominant consensus, the relationship between church – in the form of the missionary societies – and state – in the shape of the English East India Company, initially cool, gradually warmed as the two parties came to realize that they had a common interest in providing ‘civilizing’ Western education to the Indian elites. Indeed it provocatively suggests that the colonial state might well, in time, have given its endorsement and even its support to the spread of Christianity had not the Mutiny intervened in 1857. However the analysis of the benefits generated by this South Asian partnership finds, paradoxically, that it undermined the Company’s authority, and may well have deterred many Indians from converting to Christianity – which had come to be widely seen as a privileged and imperialist religion.*

We now know that with perfect safety our Christian Government may assert its national faith without offence either to Mahomedan or Hindoo.

John Kaye, 1858

I

It used to be said that modern European imperialism was actuated by a quest for ‘God, Gold and Glory’ – ‘God’, in this alliterative tripos, standing in for Christian (or more specifically, Protestant Christian) missionary proselytizing to spread the ‘good news’ of the Gospels that sinners can find redemption – and gain ‘eternal life’ – through the ‘saving grace’ of Jesus Christ. Where the flag went, another metaphor proclaimed, the cross was never far behind.

On the face of it, the existence of a Christian dimension in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European expansion seems almost axiomatic, since (1) the two

Faculty of Arts, Monash University, VIC 3800, Australia Ian.Copland@Arts.monash.edu.au

movements both sought to extend European influence overseas and impart a measure of European civilization, however broadly defined, to backward and barbaric lands, and (2) the two movements happened more or less concurrently. The eighteenth century in northern Europe and colonial North America witnessed a great religious awakening within Protestant communities that gradually solidified into a common theological tendency that a later generation would label 'Evangelicalism'. The Evangelicals held that humankind was congenitally infected by the Original Sin of Adam, 'not slightly and superficially but radically'¹ – and therefore, otherwise, damned. However, they also believed that God had provided a way out of this awful impasse by the sacrifice of His 'only son' Jesus. Redemption from sin, through the divine intercession of Christ, was available to all sinners willing truly to repent and receive Him into their lives. The centrality assigned in Evangelical thought to the need for individual repentance – often it was likened to a process of 'rebirth' – meant that Evangelicals instinctively looked to 'conversion' as a means of promoting religious renewal. And this proselytizing tendency was reinforced by the Evangelicals' conviction that spreading the Word of God as contained in the Bible was not simply an act of beneficence but a bounden duty – one incumbent upon all believers. To be sure, not all Evangelicals looked to making converts amongst the 'heathen' abroad; for many, such as the Wesley brothers, the more urgent challenge was to save the Godless poor at home.² Yet, from the start, the movement expressly envisioned its mission as a potentially global one. Evangelicalism's warm embrace of the doctrine of Atonement left no place for the Calvinist notion that salvation was only available to an elect. As veteran German missionary, C. F. Swartz, reminded his friend Dr Gashim: 'The glorious God, and our blessed Redeemer, has commanded his Apostles to preach the Gospel to *all* nations.'³ Though opposed on most other things, the Evangelicals and their rationalist contemporaries of the Enlightenment movement were as one in their conviction that race and culture posed no insurmountable barriers to human improvement. In the late 1780s, English Evangelicals started making plans for exporting the message of the Gospels to Bengal, Africa and the Caribbean.⁴ By the end of the century three major new societies were in the field: the Baptist

¹ Rev. John Newton, quoted in Allan K. Davidson, *Evangelicals and attitudes to India, 1786–1813: missionary publicity and Claudius Buchanan* (Sutton Courtney, 1990), p. 39.

² On the varieties of nineteenth-century Protestant Evangelicalism, see David W. Bebbington, *The dominance of Evangelicalism: the age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Leicester, 1988), ch. 2. The movement embraced all established Protestant denominations, except the Quakers, and created quite deep rifts within them, not least in the case of the Church of England, which persist to this day.

³ Swartz to Rev. Gashim, sec., Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 13 Feb. 1794, *Parliamentary Papers (PP)*, 1831–2, VIII, Report of the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, App. 1, p. 92 (my italics).

⁴ John Wesley's *Plan for the Society for the Establishment of Missions Among the Heathen* (1783), Anglican David Brown's 'A proposal for establishing a Protestant mission in Bengal and Bahar' (1787), and Baptist William Carey's *An enquiry into the obligations of Christians, to use means for the conversion of the heathens* (1792) were the most influential.

Missionary Society (BMS), the inter-denominational, later Congregational, London Missionary Society (LMS), and the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS). Others would follow. Comprehensive statistics on missionary deployment are difficult to come by, but it is likely that at least 50,000 British Protestant missionaries ventured overseas during the nineteenth century in pursuit of converts.⁵

Can it be merely a coincidence that this major global missionary initiative occurred during a period of frenetic European political and economic assertion – a period that saw a major part of the land surface of the planet fall under European and American sovereignty? Some respected scholars of the Protestant missionary enterprise, such as Brian Stanley, remain sceptical. Yet it is difficult to accept Stanley's assertion that *no* 'plausible connection' can be established between the export overseas of Protestant missionary evangelism and 'trends in British colonial policy'. If the loss of the North American colonies 'implanted in British governments a marked antipathy to the acquisition of new colonial responsibilities',⁶ this view had scant effect on post-1783 developments on the 'imperial frontier' in India, which continued to expand by leaps and bounds in apparent defiance of the self-denying clauses of Pitt's India Act. Call this informal or 'free trade' imperialism if you will, the fact of the matter is that the years immediately following the debacle in America saw not only large acquisitions of territory by the East India Company in the subcontinent proper, but also strategic acquisitions by the Company in Malaya – and the beginnings of white settlement in Australia. It was the same story in China after 1840 and in the Pacific after 1870. Here too, missionary expansion and political expansion appear to have gone hand in hand. Moreover this was also, by and large, the impression of the British public at the time. The bishop of Stepney declared: 'The Imperial spirit in the State calls for an Imperial spirit in the Church.'⁷ For journalist John Hobson, a critic, 'imperial Christianity' was a major constituent of British 'jingoism'.⁸

So: two movements, largely synchronous, and, at least in the eyes of contemporaries, allied. But what was the nature of their connection? Did the missionary societies help to drive imperial expansion, or did they merely take advantage of it better to pursue their ultimate goal of saving souls? That is the issue which continues to exercise the minds of historians.

⁵ Andrew Porter suggests that by 1900, 10,000 British Protestant missionaries were working overseas. Christopher Bayly gives a figure of 100,000 for Africa, but this must be a misprint. Andrew Porter, 'Religion, missionary enthusiasm and empire', in Porter, ed., *The Oxford history of the British Empire*, vol. III (Oxford and New York, 1999), p. 222; and C. A. Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914: global connections and comparisons* (Oxford, 2004), p. 349. There would have been at least as many again Americans, who dominated the China field. Catholic missionaries were fewer, but probably numbered in extent of 15,000 world wide around 1900.

⁶ Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the flag: Protestant missions and British imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Leicester, 1990), pp. 58–9.

⁷ 'The empire and the church', in Charles Sydney Goldman, *The empire and the century: a series of essays on imperial problems by various writers* (London, 1905), p. 166.

⁸ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: a study* (3rd edn, London, 1938), p. 216.

The scholarly consensus of the 1950s and 1960s echoed the Hobson line. Christian evangelism encouraged empire building and reinforced its impact. According to A. F. Madden writing in the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, the late nineteenth century witnessed a ‘developing sense of imperial mission for Christianity and civilisation’.⁹ K. M. Panikkar went further, arguing that Christian evangelism represented an attempt by the Europeans to impose ‘a mental and spiritual conquest’ as a way of buttressing their political authority.¹⁰ While some scholars posited links between the ‘Three Gs’, others detected a symbiotic connection between the nineteenth century’s iconic ‘Three Cs’: Commerce, Christianity, and Civilization.¹¹

And this interpretation continues to have its adherents. A recent analysis of missions in India by Susan Visvanath concludes: ‘The conversion of the East to Christ ... was a major political plank for imperialism.’¹² Susan Thorne and Catherine Hall demonstrate how Evangelicalism, during the Imperial Age, moved from the periphery to the centre of British social and political life.¹³ Last but not least, Panikkar’s notion that Christian evangelism constituted an extreme form of Western cultural imperialism has influenced a number of scholars working on missions in sub-Saharan Africa, such as the Comaroffs, and T. O. Beidelman, who concludes that the missionaries working in that region ‘demonstrated a more radical and morally intense commitment to [colonial] rule than political administrators or businessmen’.¹⁴ Still, over the past twenty years, the pendulum has swung significantly – and these days the ruling consensus is much more sceptical:

It is often argued that the missionary movement and expansion of Britain’s Christian denominations represented distinct forms of cultural and institutional ‘imperialism’. Despite small numbers of converts, their presence and teaching [it is contended] undermined customs and self-confidence, eroded respect for traditional authorities and created social and political conflict. Thus weakened, non-Western societies succumbed to the broader pressures of Western expansion; internal collapse and significant cultural changes [then] opened the way to direct colonial rule ... In reality, however, the relation between religion and empire was rarely so clear-cut.¹⁵

⁹ E. A. Benians, Sir James Butler, and C. E. Carrington, eds., *The Cambridge history of the British Empire*, III (Cambridge, 1967), p. 344.

¹⁰ K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and western dominance* (London, 1959), p. 314.

¹¹ See, for example, A. P. Thornton, *The imperial idea and its enemies: a study in British power* (London, 1963), p. 15.

¹² Susan Visvanath, ‘The homogeneity of fundamentalism: Christianity, British colonialism and India in the nineteenth century’, *Studies in History*, 16 (2000), p. 227.

¹³ Susan Thorne, *Congregational missions and the making of an imperial culture in nineteenth century England* (Stanford, 1999); and Catherine Hall, *Civilising subjects: metropole and colony in the English imagination* (Cambridge, 2002).

¹⁴ T. O. Beidelman, *Colonial evangelism: a socio-historical study of an East African mission at the grassroots* (Bloomington, IN, 1982), e.g., p. 6.

¹⁵ Porter, ‘Religion, missionary enthusiasm and empire’, pp. 238–9.

The old argument that evangelism consciously served the purposes of empire has been replaced by one that holds that relations between church and state on the frontier were characteristically ‘temporary, grudging, [and] self-interested’ – and that the two were ‘as likely to undermine each other as they were to provide mutual support’.¹⁶ The two major proponents of this revisionist view, British scholars Brian Stanley and Andrew Porter, started out canvassing a distinctly minority view, but their prolific and erudite studies of the question over many years have turned the debate around. Porter’s recent monograph, *Religion versus empire*, which offers a magisterial summary of the case for reinterpretation based on evidence drawn from every part of the British overseas Empire, is currently, without doubt, the definitive work on the subject.¹⁷

And weighty evidence it is. The revisionist case establishes that missions were active in some parts of central Africa and the Pacific well before these places came under the control of Western governments; that the missionaries in some cases opposed formal annexation; that many Protestants, especially those belonging to the dissenting sects, such as the Congregationalists and the Baptists, but also those High Church Anglicans associated with the Oxford Movement, had deep religious reservations about lending their support to the political projects of secular governments; that many others did not accept the Evangelical argument that Christians were *obliged* to convert the Heathen; that Christian thought was never fully comfortable with the hierarchical racist claims, advanced in the nineteenth century, to justify permanent European rule over ‘lesser breeds’; and that, by the twentieth century, missionaries, far from trumpeting the virtues of imperial rule, were increasingly to be found amongst its most strident critics.¹⁸ Conversely, the revisionists demonstrate that colonial officialdom was often, perhaps more often than not, cool towards missionary proselytizing. For example, Stanley shows that in British East Africa missions were generally regarded as a source of ‘embarrassment’.¹⁹

In the light of this new research it is impossible to maintain any longer that Protestant missionary evangelism and European imperial expansion were simply two sides of the same coin; that much is abundantly clear. Yet this finding does not altogether dispose of the question raised earlier about the nature of their relationship. If we accept that missionary societies and colonial governments were

¹⁶ Andrew Porter, ‘Religion and empire: British expansion in the long nineteenth century’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 20 (1992), pp. 376–7; and *ibid.*, p. 245.

¹⁷ Andrew Porter, *Religion versus empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester, 2004). The book seeks to bring out the ‘vanity and nuance of missionary standpoints, their detachment from empire and the measure of anti-imperialism ... associated with Britain’s Christian missionary enterprise’. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

¹⁸ Porter, ‘Religion and empire’, p. 377; Davidson, *Evangelicals*, p. 241; Porter, ‘Religion, missionary enthusiasm and empire’, p. 240; Arthur Schlesinger Jr, ‘The missionary enterprise and theories of imperialism’, in John King Fairbank, ed., *The missionary enterprise in China and America* (Cambridge, MA, 1974), p. 359; and Robert Eric Frykenberg, ‘Christians and religious traditions in the Indian Empire’, in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, VIII (Cambridge, 2006), p. 491.

¹⁹ Stanley, *The Bible and the flag*, p. 182.

generally opposed, was this always the case? And if not what contingencies sometimes drew them together? As we know, the British Empire by the nineteenth century had become worldwide and, as a consequence, very diverse. One very obvious measure of this diversity is the fact that missionaries working in different parts of the Empire – engaged in a common enterprise and using similar proselytizing strategies – achieved quite dissimilar rates of success in respect of conversions: high in the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Pacific, low in Asia and the Middle East. If local variables affected the capacity of missions to fulfil their religious goals, did similar variables also affect their dealings with colonial authority, and the colonial state's attitude towards their proselytizing endeavours?

In particular the global paradigms constructed to explain nineteenth-century British colonialism have always struggled to accommodate the Indian case. South Asia has often seemed the exception that proves the rule. For instance, according to Porter, there was a growing perception in Britain by the middle of the century that trade and Christianity could 'reinforce one another'; but he acknowledges that this view exercised much less sway among 'those whose focus was India or the East'.²⁰ Actually, taken at large, colonial India probably does bear out Porter's contention that Christian missions and colonial governments were 'as likely to undermine each other as they were to provide mutual support' – though perhaps for reasons other than those Porter advances. Still, I would submit that the revisionist picture of state and church at loggerheads does not work for India during the early nineteenth century. The following section will show that the East India Company and the missionary societies, although at first suspicious of one another's *bona fides*, eventually developed a fruitful and at times even intimate relationship, based in part on their shared faith, and in part on their common interest in providing Western education to the country's elite. Later I explain why this honeymoon did not last, and why, after 1858, both sides came to re-evaluate the benefits of partnership in the light of new theological strategies and changing political imperatives.

II

For the church, India was an irresistible temptation – the quintessence of heathenism and home, therefore, to countless 'lost souls' crying out mutely for 'salvation'. James Long of the CMS wrote: 'the thought of 800 millions passing into eternity every thirty years without a ray of hope often overwhelms me'.²¹ Alexander Duff reflected later: 'God has, in a strange way, given us India in trust for the accomplishment of *His* grand evangelizing designs concerning it.'²² Yet in

²⁰ Andrew Porter, "'Commerce and Christianity': the rise and fall of a nineteenth century missionary slogan", *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), pp. 615–16.

²¹ Letter of 12 Oct. 1838, quoted in Anthony Copley, *Religions in conflict – ideology, cultural contact, and conversion in late-colonial India* (Delhi, 1997), p. 9.

²² Alexander Duff, *The Indian rebellion* (London, 1858), p. 255.

the eighteenth century missionaries were actively discouraged from entering the East India Company's burgeoning dominions because it was feared that their proselytizing would give rise to the suspicion that the British intended to impose Christianity by force or stealth. For all that the Company now reigned supreme in the subcontinent, following a string of victories over Tipu's Mysore and the Marathas, its officials remained nervous, conscious of how few they were and how much they depended for their security on the collaboration of mainly Hindu native soldiers – a collaboration that hinged, it was generally believed, on the Company's promises that the religious and social status quo would not be tampered with.²³ Accordingly, Protestant pioneer Swartz was forced to open up shop in Danish Tranquebar; while the first trio of English Baptist missionaries to make the journey, William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward, were compelled on their arrival at the Company's Bengal headquarters, Calcutta, in 1793, to seek political sanctuary in another Danish enclave, Serampore, located several miles up river.

But the Evangelical movement was determined, and in the 1790s a campaign was got up to persuade parliament to amend the Company's Charter to compel the presidency governments of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras to admit credentialed missionaries into their territories. Emotive sermons were delivered from pulpits; tracts were penned; clergymen lobbied their local MPs; and no less than 813 monster petitions were sent to parliament.²⁴ However, while the campaign sought to overturn Company policy, it ostentatiously eschewed criticism of British rule in India per se, and concentrated instead on trying to convince the Company's supporters at Westminster that Christian proselytizing posed no threat to the nascent British imperium on the subcontinent. An influential tract written by Serampore missionary Joshua Marshman contended 'that one of the most effectual means of perpetuating the British dominion in India' would be 'the calm and silent, but steady and constant, diffusion of christian light among the natives';²⁵ and similarly disarming claims were advanced by Calcutta-based Anglican chaplains David Brown and Claudius Buchanan.²⁶ Whether these interventions made a difference is unclear, because in the event the issue was decided, in 1813, somewhat by default. Thanks to some clever strategizing by the Evangelical parliamentary lobby led by William Wilberforce, the crucial vote in the House of Commons on his 'pious clauses' did not take place until 3 a.m., by which time most opponents of the measure had left. But it seems to have made a positive impression on certain senior officials in India. This would prove crucial

²³ Evidence of Thomas Cockburn before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company, 28 Apr. 1813, *PP*, 1812–13, VII, p. 288. See also minute by William Thackeray, Board of Revenue, Madras, dated [Nov. 1822], British Library (BL), Oriental and India Office Collection (OIOC), F/4/960/27324.

²⁴ M. D. David, *Missions: cross-cultural encounter and change in western India* (Delhi, 2001), p. 37.

²⁵ Joshua Marshman, *Advantages of Christianity in promoting the establishment and prosperity of the British government in India ...* (London, 1813), p. 6.

²⁶ Davidson, *Evangelicals*, p. 45; and Porter, 'Religion, missionary enthusiasm and empire', p. 230.

later on. In the meantime, the passage of the Charter Bill, complete with Wilberforce's amendments, opened the gate to the evangelizing of the subcontinent. As well, the legislation provided for the dispatch of a bishop of the Church of England to Calcutta to oversee the spiritual needs of the expatriate English population, an initiative that, in time, helped to bridge the divide between the mainly Evangelical missionary movement and the Anglican establishment.

The Company still had the right to refuse entry to individuals of dubious character, or who were thought likely to make trouble; in the event, only a tiny few of the torrent of applications received by the Court of Directors from would-be missionaries during the first five years of the Act's operation were formally rejected.²⁷ Yet gaining access to India did not put an end to the latter's difficulties. Once there, the missionaries found themselves hamstrung by bureaucratic red tape. Sometimes obstacles were placed in the way of their purchasing land for buildings; they were discouraged from travelling into the interior of the country; and they were barred from preaching in certain places sacred to Hinduism such as Nasik and Puri. Just when official attitudes looked about to change for the better, in 1824 yet another sepoy mutiny, this time at Barrackpore, a suburb of Calcutta, broke out, reawakening old phobias.²⁸

More frustratingly still, the government steadfastly refused to patronize, or publicly endorse, the Christian Evangelical project on the ground that it was bound by repeated commitments²⁹ to follow a policy of strict religious neutrality. As we have seen, the Company had adopted this course largely for political reasons – out of a conviction that any attempt on their part to tamper with Indian custom could jeopardize their fragile hold on the affections of the people. But increasingly, they also sought to defend it with reference to the novel, and still rather contentious, Enlightenment doctrine that the state should not concern itself with the 'religious prejudices' of its citizens.³⁰ This latter *apologia* struck the missionaries as specious and hypocritical because it implied that 'church' and state in the Company's dominions had been de-linked, which was not the case.

Certainly the Company could claim that its Muslim and Hindu subjects enjoyed full freedom of worship. Although the government had reluctantly legislated to strip the prevailing system of Islamic criminal law of several of its more gruesome penalties, such as amputation and stoning to death, and would shortly do so again to outlaw the Hindu rite of *sati*, even the Imam of Delhi, Shah

²⁷ John Jebb and George Pattison, Court of Directors, to George Canning, president of the Board of Control, 27 Feb. 1818, *PP*, 1812–13, VIII, p. 253.

²⁸ In London, Company directors Sir Charles Forbes and Sir Hyde East attributed the disaffection of the Barrackpore sepoys to the 'shoals of missionaries which have been allowed to go in among them'. E. Daniel Potts, *British Baptist missionaries in India, 1793–1837: the history of Serampore and its missions* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 152.

²⁹ For instance, Kaye reports that when Coorg was annexed in 1834, its inhabitants were assured 'that their civil rights and religious usages will be respected'. John Kaye, *Christianity in India: an historical narrative* (London, 1859), p. 393.

³⁰ Marquess Wellesley to the Court of Directors, 9 July 1800, in Ramsay Muir, ed., *The making of British India, 1756–1858* (Karachi, 1969), p. 243.

‘Abd al-Aziz, who was no admirer of the new rulers, was forced to concede that daily and weekly congregational prayers, and Muslim rights in respect of cow-killing, had not been interfered with.³¹ As for the Hindus, the pro-government *Bombay Times* summed up the situation fairly accurately in this editorial upbraiding the local native elite for showing a lack of gratitude for the liberal policies of its British rulers:

Their temples are as much respected as the Churches of their Western brethren and they are all equally at liberty to worship God according to the dictates of their consciences; their priests are free to teach their followers what they please ... They are left in the full enjoyment of their noisy holidays ... Their religious mendicants are left to wander where they like ... If this is not both civil and religious liberty, we know not the meaning of the terms.³²

Nevertheless the Company’s policy on religion fell a long way short of the secularist vision that American founding father Thomas Jefferson had sketched out in his letter to the Protestants of Danbury, and that had been enshrined in the Constitution by the First Amendment of 1789. As the Company extended its territorial sway into the west and south, it inherited not only the lands and revenues of the former regional kings but also their religious obligations, which involved, amongst other things, overseeing the management of state-owned temples and making ceremonial appearances at important Hindu festivals. Of course it could have ignored tradition and farmed out these duties to some appropriate native agency (which was the solution eventually adopted by its successor, after the trauma of the Great Revolt). But it did not do so. Instead, it opted for what it saw as the safer path of conformity. In Madras, Company servants were compelled by law to attend Hindu temple ceremonies and festivals.³³ At Surat, it was given to the district collector – an Englishman – to preside over the annual coconut festival, in which capacity he was required to beseech the regional river goddess to ‘pardon all our sins’.³⁴ Although budgetary figures for this period are rather sketchy, it is probable that the Company was spending, by the 1830s, in excess of 10 *lakhs* (a million rupees) a year supporting Hindu charities and institutions.³⁵ Frykenberg’s bold assertion that ‘In many ways the Indian Empire actually was a Hindu Raj’,³⁶ while coloured by his

³¹ Shah ‘Abd al-Aziz in 1809 issued a celebrated *fatwa*, condemning the changes introduced by British rule. ‘Islamic law’, he wrote, ‘does not prevail at all.’ This ignited a fierce debate among the country’s Islamic theologians as to whether India was still *dar-ul-Islam* – a place fit for Muslims to inhabit. Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857–1964* (London, 1967), pp. 18–20.

³² The *Bombay Times*, 1 Apr. 1840, p. 211.

³³ Robert Eric Frykenberg, ‘Fundamentalism and revivalism in South Asia’, in James Björkman, ed., *Fundamentalism, revivalists and violence in South Asia* (Riverdale, MD, 1988), pp. 29–30.

³⁴ Quoted in Sir P. Maitland to the duke of Richmond [1839], *Bombay Times*, 13 May 1840, p. 308.

³⁵ Petition of D. O. Allen and H. Ballantine of the American Mission in Bombay and George Candy, corresponding sec. of the CMS, Bombay, 17 Dec. 1852, First Report of the Select Committee on Indian Territories, *PP*, 1852–3, xxvii, App. 7, p. 43.

³⁶ Robert Eric Frykenberg, ‘Religion and Company Raj in South India’, *Fides et Historia*, 17 (1985), p. 13.

preoccupation with Madras, is not wholly off the mark. Certainly the missionaries thought that was the case, Claudius Buchanan of the CMS accusing the Company of giving sanction to, and ‘conniving’ at, practices that were demonstrably ‘immoral, [and] irreconcilable [sic] with the Laws of Nature’.³⁷

Moreover, whilst the Company strove conscientiously to guard the religious rights of its Muslim and Hindu subjects, it failed to extend the same consideration to the rights of native Christian converts. It turned a blind eye, for example, to the harsh communal sanctions that were applied to caste Hindus who embraced another religion – which included their being barred from inheriting ancestral property. And it discouraged its officials from exempting ‘untouchable’ converts to Christianity from performing their traditional caste obligations during Hindu festivals. ‘It is the almost universal practice now in the Madras territories’, Company Chairman John Sullivan explained, ‘for the local magistrates to order the attendance of a certain number of labourers ... to assist in drawing the cars or heavy chariots around the different Pagodas’. Sullivan was not alone in thinking that this practice constituted ‘an infringement upon the liberty of the subject’.³⁸ But when, in 1828, the sub-collector of Tanjore took it upon himself to issue an edict excusing Pariah converts from duties at the local Ramseeram Temple, he was roundly censured by the Board of Revenue for acting in a fashion ‘calculated to weaken the confidence of our Native Subjects in the justice, wisdom, and toleration of the British Government’. The collector should have ‘adhered to that which he found established’, the Board concluded.³⁹ That a nominally Christian government could be so callous towards them struck the suffering converts as bizarre.⁴⁰ The irony was not lost on the missionaries either.

As late as the third decade of the nineteenth century, the two principal parties to the religious debate on India – the government and the missionaries – appeared to be separated by an unbridgeable ideological chasm; yet they were soon to find common ground. What brought them together?

III

The conventional view of the dissenting Protestant sects, noted above, holds that they were strongly opposed to secular political entanglements; however in Britain, at least, this aloofness was qualified by a pragmatic regard for the administrative power of the state. Antagonizing Westminster unnecessarily was

³⁷ Quoted in G. D. Bearce, *English attitudes to India, 1774–1858* (London, 1961), p. 81.

³⁸ John Sullivan to T. Hyde Villiers, 21 Feb. 1832, *PP*, 1831–2, IX, p. 267.

³⁹ R. Nelson, sub-collector Tanjore, to N. W. Kindersley, principal coll., Tanjore, 10 Oct. 1828, and D. Elliot, sec., Board of Revenue (BOR), Madras, to Kindersley, 11 Dec. 1828, BL, OIOC, F/4/1263/50837A.

⁴⁰ See the ‘Petition of the Christian inhabitants ... in the Zillah of Tinnevely’, encl. in memorial from the CMS to parliament dated 27 May 1853, quoted in Robert Eric Frykenberg, ‘Conversion and crises of conscience under Company Raj in South India’, *Colloques Internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*, 582 (July 1978), p. 314.

futile and dangerous. Conversely, as Allan Davidson points out, British Evangelicals were ready and willing to support governmental regulation of social behaviour where it served their religious purposes, as, for example, in respect of the proper observance of the Sabbath.⁴¹ The Charter Act amendment of 1813 raised the possibility that in the fullness of time church and state might co-operate, similarly, in India.

Also, much as the missionary societies deplored the 'idolatrous' stance of the presidency governments, they recognized the utility to their cause of the sub-continent being under a British administration committed to the rule of law. One of the earliest of the CMS missionaries in India, Agra-based Daniel Corrie, contended that:

Among the reasons why a Missionary should be sent to this country in preference to any other, I would beg ... to suggest ... the ... protection of equitable laws which put it in the power of a [Christian] missionary to do more good with less personal inconvenience than in any other Heathen country.⁴²

The Reverend Keane, sometime associate secretary of the CMS in Calcutta, concurred:

A missionary must feel himself deeply grateful for the benefits ... he enjoys from the Government of the Company. The perfect protection with which I lived for 16 months in a mud house in the ... jungle, six miles away from any one who could speak my native tongue, I owe to the Company. I was enabled, with perfect safety, to go from village to village for seven months and if I had ever been molested I had only to go to the Company's Officer, and I should have been received with respect, and obtained protection.⁴³

Likewise, it soon became clear to the missionaries that, despite its ideological failings from the Christian point of view, the Company Raj enjoyed considerable prestige, and that the native elite, to some extent, looked to it for moral guidance. They hoped that, in time, the natives would come to see the Company's government as a fundamentally Christian one, which would raise the profile of Christianity in the country and help to 'create an atmosphere in which [that] religion could flourish'.⁴⁴

But it was not just pragmatism that disposed the missionary societies, particularly the CMS, to co-operate with the official power structure in India represented by the East India Company. Evangelicals' piety and concern for the afterlife did not entirely inure them from worldly attachments, such as feelings of patriotism. On the face of it, the Serampore Baptists had little reason to love the Bengal government, which had exiled them. Yet they applauded Wellesley's

⁴¹ Davidson, *Evangelicals*, pp. 40–1.

⁴² Rev. D. Corrie to Rev. Josiah Pratt, 31 Dec. 1813, CMS, C/I/E/26.

⁴³ Evidence of the Rev. W. Keane before the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Government of Indian Territories, 19 July 1853, *PP*, xxxii, p. 315.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial fault lines: Christianity and colonial power in India, 1818–1940* (Stanford, 2002), p. 32.

victories over Mysore and the Marathas; and in a private letter to his colleague John Ryland, Marshman professed to be 'devoted to the soul of the British Government everywhere'.⁴⁵ Similar nationalistic feelings would inspire a later luminary of the BMS to class himself unapologetically as an adherent of 'British Christianity'.⁴⁶ But identification with nationalist goals and governmental policies came, perhaps, still more naturally to the CMS, with its ties to the established Church of England, which after 1813 dominated the British Protestant push into India. Guided by the cautious theology of Josiah Pratt, the early CMS leaders took the view that they should 'follow in the wake of imperial expansion rather than ... strike out on their own'.⁴⁷ This conviction led them to favour India over other possible destinations such as China, but it also reconciled them to the practicalities of Company rule.

As for the Calcutta government, it had already started to revise its hostile attitude to missionaries on the strength of its acquaintance with the Serampore-based Baptists. Existing after 1808 on sufferance, Carey, Ward and Marshman 'bent over backwards' to prove to the Company it had nothing to fear from their activities. In ten years they misdeed only once, putting out an inflammatory tract, which was quickly withdrawn on governmental advice. Lord Minto, governor-general 1806–13, came to count Carey as a personal friend. Ward was not wholly in the grip of wishful thinking when he told a meeting of supporters in London in 1821 that the Bengal government was 'as far as is prudent, entirely with us'.⁴⁸

This re-evaluation continued under the post-1813 licensing system, notwithstanding the setback of Barrackpore. As with the Baptists, personal contact served to vanquish some of the ingrained prejudices that had given rise to the Company's stand against Christian proselytizing. Up close, the new missionaries proved to be – as the Baptists had – persons, in the main, of unimpeachable character: moral, pious and law-abiding. At the same time, official fears that an avalanche of missionaries might endanger the public peace diminished, as the memory of Vellore and Barrackpore faded, and there were no further recurrences of unrest in the sepoy army. Official anxieties were also eased by the seeming indifference of most Indians to the Christian message; except in the far south, where a succession of 'mass movements' swept Tirunelveli district,⁴⁹ there was no general rush to convert. The Calcutta-based *Friend of India* reflected the new official mood when it editorialized that 'attempts to introduce Christianity can be dangerous to the public tranquillity only when the Government [itself] is found to be embarked on the [proselytizing] cause; and that even the success of missionary efforts will be attended with no danger while those efforts are not clearly identified with the State'.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Potts, *British Baptist missionaries*, pp. 176, 202.

⁴⁶ Hall, *Civilising subjects*, p. 371; and Schlesinger, 'The missionary enterprise', p. 347.

⁴⁷ Porter, *Religion versus empire?*, p. 64.

⁴⁸ The tract, in Persian, was critical of the Prophet Muhammad. Potts, *British Baptist missionaries*, pp. 172, 202.

⁴⁹ Frykenberg, 'Christians and religious traditions', p. 483.

⁵⁰ *The Friend of India*, 20 Feb. 1840, quoted in the *Bombay Times*, 7 Mar. 1840, p. 156.

Again, the process was assisted by the growing respectability of missions – especially of the CMS – within the compass of British society, and by a changing of the guard in the senior ranks of the Company’s bureaucracy. For 200 years, the Company had been a magnet for Englishmen on the make. Although most would have classed themselves as Christian, these would-be nabobs wore their religion lightly, attended church rarely, and appear to have been devoid of ‘intense religious devotion’.⁵¹ By the early nineteenth century, however, Company service was starting to attract middle-class boys bent on carving out a life-long professional career. Many of these recruits hailed from clerical families. Around 30 per cent had been educated at private academies run by members of the clergy. And, after 1805, all new recruits were required to attend the Company’s finishing school at Haileybury, where they were lectured to by a teaching staff that included a number of ordained Church of England clergymen and several noted Anglican Evangelicals, such as William Dealtry and W. E. Buckley, and which had been commanded by the Court of Directors to inculcate in its charges a respect for Christian values.⁵² Shaped by this teaching, and influenced more generally by the national wave of religious revivalism, the tyros who began their Indian careers during the 1810s and 1820s were typically earnest and pious; and many insisted on bringing their faith to bear upon their work. John Dalzell, the sub-collector of Bellary, was caught by his superior in 1822 distributing Christian tracts and copies of the New Testament translated into the Kannada language to his household servants and Indian subordinates; he defended his actions vigorously by appealing to ‘Divine authority’.⁵³ Another Madras civilian, G. J. Waters, the criminal judge of Chittoor, preached every Sunday to the inmates of the district jail, and often delivered sermons laced with Christian morality to the natives who gathered to witness his executions.⁵⁴ Initially a pilloried underclass, by the 1830s these Evangelical-minded officials were starting to occupy positions of power. James Farish, who became acting governor of the Bombay Presidency in 1838, kept a strict Sabbath, consorted with the Presbyterian missionary John Wilson, and often preached sermons at Sunday services. Lord William Bentinck, who, as governor-general from 1828, initiated the first serious governmental push for Westernizing reforms during the Company period, is usually remembered as a disciple of Jeremy Bentham, but he was a devout Christian too – for several years president of his local CMS branch. In Bengal, the CMS was managed ex officio, during the 1830s, by a committee that included Charles Trevelyn, the head of the government’s council

⁵¹ Percival Spear, *The Nabobs: a study of the social life of the English in eighteenth century India* (London, 1963), p. 110.

⁵² Bernard S. Cohn, ‘Recruitment and training of British civil servants in India, 1600–1860’, in Ralph Braibanti et al., eds., *Asian bureaucratic systems emergent from the British imperial tradition* (Durham, NC, 1966), pp. 119, 129, and 132.

⁵³ Minute by Sir Thomas Munro dated 15 Nov. 1822, BL, OIOC, F/4/960/27324.

⁵⁴ Waters to the sec., Madras BOR, 10 Sept. 1828, BL, OIOC, F/4/1261/50732.

of education, and Ross Mangles, who would go on to become, in 1857, chairman of the Company.⁵⁵

To be sure, the infiltration of the ranks of the Company's service by Evangelicals had little immediate impact on its religious policy, which continued to reflect the mostly hard-line views of the Court. Nevertheless their presence gave the missionary societies, for the first time, an entrée to the inner circles of Indian administration. Moreover, it made the government, from a Christian standpoint, more legitimate. Reverend Linke of the CMS stationed at Burdwan reported: 'With the English ... here we are in very good harmony ... Most of them are very pious people, and they contribute much to our schools.'⁵⁶ And CMS Associate Secretary William Keane had a similar message for a House of Lords Select Committee: 'we gratefully acknowledge' he declared, 'the high tone of [the] moral and religious character of the public servants of the East India Company ... it is so far above what we see in public offices, or the general community in this country'.⁵⁷

Last but not least, many of the missionaries possessed specialist skills that the British administration in India needed, and could not easily supply from within its own ranks. William Carey and Claudius Buchanan were recruited to the faculty of Fort William College, Marquis Wellesley's finishing academy for new recruits, to teach languages; Carey's Sanskrit and Bengali grammars, and William Ward's encyclopaedic *Account of the writings, religion and manners of the Hindoos*, became standard governmental reference works; Scottish General Assembly missionary John Wilson was frequently called on by the Bombay government for advice on curly questions of native religion, law, and custom; he and other missionaries also assisted with translations from Persian and the vernaculars; and missionary presses initially furnished the greater part of the government's printing requirements.⁵⁸ By making themselves useful, the missionaries put the government in their debt.

It was the issue of public education, however, that turned this warming relationship into something approaching a formal collaboration. The original driving force behind the English connection with India had been a quest for profit, and this goal continued to dominate imperial thinking about the sub-continent – except that the terms of trade had changed and India was now, in the early nineteenth century, viewed primarily as a vast potential market for the mass-produced exports of British factories, especially cotton textiles. But since the latter part of the eighteenth century, and the struggles against France, India had begun to figure, in British calculations, in other ways as well – first as a factor in the global military balance of power, and secondly as a place for which they were

⁵⁵ M. A. Laird, *Missionaries and education in Bengal, 1793–1837* (Oxford, 1972), p. 237.

⁵⁶ Rev. J. Linke to the lay sec., CMS, Calcutta, 30 Mar. 1832, CMS, C1/1/M5.

⁵⁷ Evidence of the Rev. W. Keane before the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Government of Indian Territories, 19 July 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, xxxii, p. 315.

⁵⁸ Potts, *British Baptist missionaries*, pp. 92, 96, 112, 174–6.

now, ultimately, administratively responsible. Again, this latter was approached, for the most part, pragmatically – with an eye to the advantages that the introduction of good government might bestow on Company and nation. Would not a peaceful and prosperous country, the argument ran, be more stable and secure? And would not such a country be able to support higher taxes, and have more money to spend on British goods? However, hard-nosed imperial pragmatism was tempered in this instance (yet also in a paradoxical, roundabout sort of way, reinforced) by the mounting conviction among Evangelicals, and other reform-minded sections of the British middle classes, that their country owed India, and had therefore a moral duty to act to ameliorate the lowly condition of its cowed, ignorant peoples by introducing them to the uplifting alchemy of Western – or more specifically English – civilization.⁵⁹ Once, such a goal would have been considered pointless – arrogant and unattainable. As late as 1813, the respected Company diplomat and proconsul, Sir John Malcolm, assured a Select Committee of parliament that it was delusional to think that the natives would become gradually more reconciled to the foreign yoke out of gratitude for the ‘benefits’ of Western civilization; while his equally celebrated colleague Sir Thomas Munro, soon to be appointed governor of Madras, testified before the same committee that there was, in his view, little prospect for ‘any considerable increase ... [in] the demand for European commodities among the natives of India’.⁶⁰ However the reformers thought it both fit and achievable. Ideological children of the Evangelical Movement and the Enlightenment, they shared not only a fervent Positivist belief in the immutability of progress at home, but also an unshakeable conviction that the values, institutions, and technologies that had lifted England up were applicable, and readily transferable to, other countries and societies. India might be backward, but as the Bengal civilian and future director Charles Grant wrote in his *Observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain*, penned in 1792, it could be redeemed:

If the character of the Hindoos proceeded only from a physical origin, there might be some foundation for thinking it unalterable; but nothing is more plain than that it is formed chiefly by moral causes, adequate to the effect produced: if those causes ... can be removed, their effect will cease; and new principles and motives will produce new conduct and a different character.⁶¹

By the 1830s this vision of an India transformed by acculturation had firmed up into a programme for governmentally driven social change, designed to produce

⁵⁹ The most eloquent and influential contemporary exposition of this theme was the multi-volume *History of India* (1817) by James Mill, the Company’s chief examiner of correspondence.

⁶⁰ Evidence of Sir John Malcolm before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company, 7 May 1813, *PP*, 1812–13, vii, p. 408; and evidence of Sir Thomas Munro before the same committee, 12 Apr. 1813, *ibid.*, p. 123.

⁶¹ Charles Grant, *Observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to morals; and the means of improving it*, App. 1 to Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company, 16 Aug. 1832, *PP*, 1831–2, viii, pp. 62–3.

what Whig MP and sometime law member of the Calcutta Supreme Council, Thomas Babington Macaulay, famously described as ‘a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect’.⁶² This programme appealed to the government, because, even as it made the Raj look appropriately benevolent, it also promised to buttress its hegemony. The more Westernized the Company’s native subjects became, the more they would be able to understand why they were required to contribute to its revenues, and the more they would learn to ‘appreciate every other benefit’ which they derived from British rule.⁶³ Additionally, these socialized subjects would possess an instinctive ‘submission to authority’ – a trait that the British in India were naturally keen to cultivate.⁶⁴

And how was this grand strategy to be realized? In Macaulay’s conception, essentially through the purveyance of government-sponsored ‘English’ – meaning both English-medium and Western – education, to the native elite. There was no lack of demand for the product. In Bengal, especially, the high castes had been clamouring for decades for the provision of a public system of Western education, which they increasingly saw as a springboard to lucrative government employment. Nor was there a need for the government to be deterred by the scale of the task, because there would shortly be a plentiful supply of acculturated elite natives available to impart the new knowledge to their social inferiors – and surely they would be happy to do so?

The burning issue, then, was not so much the means – schools of an English type had already been set up and appeared to work well – but how to pay for them. The East India Company did not want to assume the burden. Although the Charter Act of 1813 had authorized the setting aside of up to a *lakh* of ‘surplus’ rupees (about £10,000 at the then current rate of exchange) for the ‘revival and improvement of [vernacular] literature, and ... for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of British territories in India’,⁶⁵ for the first seven years of the life of the Act, total governmental expenditure on education across all the provinces only once topped £7,000. In Madras, educational spending during the 1820s averaged just £480,⁶⁶ which sufficed to support exactly one school, catering to 160 boys.⁶⁷ Was this parsimony taken to excess? Of course – but bear in mind that we are talking here about the

⁶² Minute of 2 Feb. 1835, quoted in William Theodore de Bary, gen. ed., *Sources of Indian tradition* (New York, 1958), II, p. 49 (T. B. was the son of Zachary, a leading Evangelical and close associate of Wilberforce).

⁶³ Evidence of Sir Charles Trevelyn before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Territories, 7 July 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, xxviii, p. 45.

⁶⁴ *Report of the Education Commission of 1882* (Calcutta, 1883), p. 307.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Ramsay Muir, ed., *The making of British India, 1756–1858* (reprint, Lahore, 1969), pp. 296–7.

⁶⁶ S. Nurullah and J. P. Naik, *History of education in India (during the British period)* (Bombay, 1951), I, p. 91.

⁶⁷ This was still the case in 1852. Petition of the Madras Native Association dated 10 Dec. 1852, *PP*, 1852–3, xxvii, p. 465.

early nineteenth century – still an age, even in Europe, of small government. Only in 1833 did the Westminster parliament venture to make its first modest grant towards public schooling;⁶⁸ and compulsory state-funded primary instruction would not begin in the United Kingdom for a further thirty-seven years. It would never have occurred to the directors that they might owe the people of India an education. Nevertheless, given its strong self-interest in the matter, the Calcutta government was more than happy for individuals and agencies in the private sector to take up the work; and in the absence of other potential providers, they turned to the missionary societies.

And the missionaries were more than happy to lend a hand – not necessarily because they subscribed to the East India Company's colonial project (although many of them did) but because they saw education as a means to their hallowed goal of conversion and redemption. One stream of missionary thought on the question of conversion held that a strong dose of Western science and philosophy, though secular, could serve, by exposing the falsity of the superstitions on which Hinduism rested, to make ready the minds of the natives to receive God's Word. Wilberforce, one of its earliest and most strident advocates, predicted that the dissemination of Western education would lead to the natives becoming Christians almost involuntarily – 'without knowing it'.⁶⁹ And the first bishop of Calcutta, Thomas Middleton, entertained similar expectations. In 1816, Middleton advised the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to have greater recourse to English as a teaching medium because 'the familiar use of it would tend very much to dissipate the prejudices and the indifference which now stand in the way of conversion'.⁷⁰ Another stream saw education, more pragmatically, as an alternative evangelizing strategy to the established one of itinerant preaching – which, as we shall see, had not so far produced the goods in respect of converts, or at least the high caste converts that the missionary societies saw as crucial to the conquest of Hindu India at large. Whilst more expensive than street preaching, education promised to pay better dividends: first, because the Indians asking for the introduction of Western learning were overwhelmingly Brahmins; secondly, because it opened up for the missionaries the possibility of directly accessing, and indoctrinating, impressionable young minds. By the 1830s nearly all the missionary societies operating in India had come round to the view that education was the way forward. In 1834 the Calcutta Managing Committee of the CMS went a step further, and voted to concentrate its efforts on the provision of higher education through the medium of English – a lead shortly followed by both the LMS and the BMS.⁷¹ Consequently, when the government's call went

⁶⁸ Laird, *Missionaries and education*, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Porter, "'Commerce and Christianity'", p. 603.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Bruce Tiebout McCully, *English education and the origins of Indian nationalism* (Gloucester, MA, 1966), p. 39.

⁷¹ Laird, *Missionaries and education*, pp. 240–2. On the itineration versus education controversy, see William Buyers, *Letters on India, with special reference to the spread of Christianity* (London, 1840), p. 129.

out, it found the missionary societies not only willing but also able – within means – to provide.

As joint purveyors of education to the Indian elite, the missionary societies and the East India Company found themselves at last on common ground. Moreover the mechanics of the business – deciding on what should be taught, and where, and how much public money should be spent in support of the missionary schools – pulled them progressively closer together. Old links were refurbished and new ones forged. At first, government funding and supervision was largely ad hoc; but in 1839 responsibility for decisions about grants was handed to a new government body – the Council of Education, based at Calcutta – which was also required to institute inspection procedures to ensure that the recipient institutions met basic standards. Under this system, state grants-in-aid, almost all disbursed to missionary schools, rose from the equivalent of £30,000 in 1839, to the equivalent of nearly £190,000 in 1852–3.⁷² This expenditure represented a very substantial de facto subvention by the Company to the evangelizing of the Protestant Christian churches – a fact frankly and unapologetically acknowledged by the Board of Control's Charles Wood in his landmark dispatch of 1854, which institutionalized the grant-in-aid system.⁷³

However, if the government's *rapprochement* with the missionaries had an essentially utilitarian purpose, namely to nourish the cause of 'English' learning, it would never have embraced their assistance if it had not been philosophically comfortable with the idea of supporting schools wherein the teaching of the Bible formed an integral part of the curriculum. This softening of the official line towards Christian evangelizing was of a piece with a number of other policy shifts on this front, which cumulatively made the Company Raj look much more, in practice, like the Christian regime it had always been at heart. In turn these policy changes can be traced to the increasing influence of Evangelical interests within the Court and at the Board of Control (BOC), which supervised its affairs on behalf of the Westminster parliament – a development symbolized by the elevation in 1830 of Charles Grant the younger to the BOC presidency.

Even after the door had been opened to them in 1813, the Evangelicals had continued to campaign vigorously against the Company's declared policy of religious neutrality for its indirect support for Hindu idolatry, and for its failure to protect the civil rights of Christian converts. Under pressure from the BOC, and from some of its principal stockholders,⁷⁴ and perhaps, too, in recognition of the stalwart assistance rendered by the missionary societies to the Company's project

⁷² Nurullah and Naik, *History of education*, p. 181. Distribution was uneven though, during the first decade or so of the scheme, due to the hostility of some directors of public instruction toward missionary schools. *Report of the Education Commission of 1882*, p. 435.

⁷³ In framing the dispatch, Wood consulted, amongst others, Macaulay, Marshman, and the 'Church missionaries', while the General Assembly's Alexander Duff made drafting suggestions. McCully, *English education*, pp. 136–7.

⁷⁴ Major shareholders in the Company had voting rights in the Court of Proprietors, to which the Court of Directors had to report.

of civilizing its subjects, the Court of Directors gradually gave ground on both issues, conceding, in a dispatch to Bengal in February 1831, that its administrative interpretation of neutrality may have erred too much in favour of conciliating the Hindu majority at the expense of other sections of the population:

It is almost unnecessary to say that no abatement has taken place in our conviction of the inexpediency of making the powers of government instrumental, either directly or indirectly, in the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian religion; but the neutrality which we think it our duty to observe on this subject, does not require that converts to Christianity should be placed by law in a less advantageous situation than other persons ... Perfect religious equality ... [means] that no disabilities should exist by Regulation on account of religious belief.⁷⁵

Shortly afterwards, the Court sanctioned a Bengal regulation, authored by Bentinck, prohibiting the disinheritance of Hindu apostates. In February 1833, it prescribed that officials in India should no longer interfere with 'the interior management of native temples, in ... the religious proceedings of their priests and attendants, [or take part] in the arrangement of their ceremonies, rites and festivals', nor have any connection with 'the collection, or management, ... of fines or offerings' related to Hindu worship, and that the Hindus should henceforward 'be left entirely to themselves'.⁷⁶ In 1840, the Bengal government abolished the traditional tax on pilgrims visiting the great Hindu temple complex at Puri, site of the notorious rite of the Jagannath car festival; in 1845 the governor-general Lord Hardinge ordered public work to cease on Sundays; and in 1850 the legal position of Christian converts was further buttressed by the passage of the Caste Disabilities Removal Act. Meanwhile, and perhaps most significantly of all, the Company began to relax its attitude towards Christian instruction in government-run schools, from the 1840s allowing Bibles to be placed in school libraries and, in 1854, amending its rules to permit teachers in public schools who were approached by their students for instruction in Christianity, to teach it, if they wished, after normal school hours.⁷⁷

To be sure, not everyone in authority embraced liberalization; a minority of the Court remained obdurate, and the reformist tide also met with resistance at the local level in India. For example, the Madras authorities blithely ignored the Court's instructions on severing official ties with Hindu temples for more than six years, a stance that led to the very public resignation of the pious Sir Peregrine Maitland, the commander of the Presidency Army, and forced the embarrassed directors in October 1839 to send out a further dispatch, to reassure the Indian government that the 1833 policy had not been secretly reversed.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Court of Directors to Govt of Bengal, 2 Feb. 1831, *PP*, 1831–2, IX, p. 345.

⁷⁶ Dispatch of 20 Feb. 1833, quoted in Kaye, *Christianity in India*, p. 417.

⁷⁷ Evidence of Frederick J. Halliday before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Territories, 25 July 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, XXIX, p. 56; and *Report of the Education Commission of 1882*, p. 129.

⁷⁸ Maitland to the duke of Richmond [1839], quoted in the *Bombay Times*, 13 May 1840, p. 308.

Nevertheless, if the path was not always straight, its overall direction remained constant from the 1830s through to the ‘Mutiny’ of 1857: every year, the Company’s government moved closer to identifying, philosophically, with the Christian cause in India. Lord Ellenborough, an unsympathetic governor-general, who followed Grant as president of the BOC, would later assert that the innovation of giving government grants to missionary schools had destroyed ‘the neutrality to which we have at all times pledged ourselves to adhere’. His successor, Lord Stanley, agreed: ‘while professing religious neutrality we have departed widely from it in fact’, he wrote in September 1858.⁷⁹

Indeed, the trajectory of the period in this respect is so salient that it begs the question of what might have transpired had not the Great Revolt intervened to disrupt it. Even as the sepoys and their allies were rampaging across north India, officials associated with the Punjab circle of John Lawrence were calling for full government support for the Christianization of India. ‘I believe myself’, wrote Herbert Edwardes in a letter to his mentor, ‘that there is nothing for it but to stand forward in future and govern India on openly Xtian principles, encouraging Xianity as much as ever we can.’⁸⁰ Mission historian John Kaye, writing in 1859, concludes that, but for the Mutiny, India would have had ‘State patronage of Christian education’ within fifteen years.⁸¹ It is possible. But we will never know. In the event, when the inevitable backlash hit, Edwardes was one of its first victims, ordered to sever his links with the missionaries and bound over to silence. The counterfactual moment had passed.⁸²

Although the 1857 outbreak was, from the start, universally condemned in Britain as a gross display of heathen folly and barbarism, its causes and ‘lessons’ rapidly became the subject of heated argument between different interest groups. Once again, church and state found themselves on different sides of the fence. For their part, the missionary societies interpreted the rebellion as a divine wake-up call, sent to spur the faithful to greater efforts. CMS secretary Henry Venn wrote:

Here the broad fact stands out to confront us, that India has been lying passive at the feet of Great Britain for the greater part of a century ... But the Christian Church has not taken advantage of the opportunities opened up in India ... The vast tracts of the country lying in unbroken Heathenism – the paucity of the Missionaries, scarcely one for half a million, reproach our neglect ... The instrument of Divine Judgement has been the cherished high caste Bengal army, from which the first sepoy Christian convert was expelled ... in the year 1819, by order of the Governor-General.⁸³

The Christianizing of India had not gone too far; it had not gone far enough. But the government’s judgement was quite the opposite. In Calcutta the rising was

⁷⁹ Quoted in T. R. Metcalf, *The aftermath of revolt: India, 1857–1870* (Princeton, NJ, 1965), p. 94.

⁸⁰ Edwardes to Lawrence, 31 Aug. 1857, BL, OIOC, Mss Eur F90/18.

⁸¹ Kaye, *Christianity in India*, p. 484.

⁸² Although there was a brief flurry of anxiety when Lawrence became viceroy in 1864.

⁸³ Statement by Venn on behalf of the CMS Corresponding Committee [Oct. 1857], *Times*, 7 Oct. 1857, p. 7.

attributed mainly to native prejudices and particularly to the exploitation of popular fears on the subject of Christian conversion. 'It is ... firmly believed', the governor-general, Earl Canning, wrote in 1859, 'that we ... made men soldiers and ... ordered them to lick Cartridges, in order to convert them'.⁸⁴ In London, the politicians made the same connection, but blamed the East India Company for encouraging this warped notion by, in Wood's words, trying to bring in 'a system foreign to the wishes and habits of the people'.⁸⁵ Conveniently overlooking the fact that the BOC had overseen these very same policies, parliament in November 1858 voted to wind up the Company and transfer its Indian territories to the Crown. To mark the handover, the Queen issued a proclamation, drafted by Wood but liberally amended in her own hand, which read in part: 'we do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under us [in India] that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects on pain of our highest displeasure'.⁸⁶

American historian T. R. Metcalf has characterized the post-1858 period in India as one of 'reaction' against the Company policies that supposedly had provoked the Mutiny. This was true, certainly, of the area of social policy, which became ultra cautious and defensive. The Evangelical project to trim Hinduism of its 'barbaric' excesses was put permanently on hold. However while the new Indian government made a great show, especially in the 1860s, of distancing itself from the evangelizing of the missions, it did not stop giving aid to Christian schools. In fact, in most provinces, the subvention actually increased – rising in the Punjab to 15 per cent of total government expenditure in 1868.⁸⁷ Nor did the government's warnings to its officials about the danger of their associating with missionaries stop pious members of the Indian Civil Service – and there continued to be many, such as Lawrence's protégé, Richard Temple (governor of Bombay, 1877–80), and Andrew Fraser (governor of Bengal, 1896–1901) – from publicly attesting to their personal belief in the moral superiority of Christian values.⁸⁸ Significant, too, in retrospect, is that the queen insisted on prefacing her Proclamation of 1858 with the assertion that she herself acknowledged the 'truth of Christianity' – and appears to have deliberately and pointedly struck out the reference to 'religious neutrality' from the government's draft.⁸⁹ As late as the mid-nineteenth century the issue of what, essentially, the Raj stood for, was still unresolved.

⁸⁴ Minute by Lord Canning dated 27 Apr. 1859, BL, OIOC, L/PS/6/464.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Metcalf, *Aftermath of revolt*, p. 45. See also the speech by Benjamin Disraeli in the House of Commons, 27 July 1857, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, 147, c. 461.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Gerald James Larson, 'Modernization and religious legitimation in India, 1835–1885', in Bardwell L. Smith, ed., *Religion and the legitimation of power in South Asia* (Leiden, 1978), p. 33.

⁸⁷ Tim Allender, 'Anglican evangelism in North India and the Punjab missionary classroom: the failure to educate the masses, 1860–1877', *History of Education*, 32 (May 2003), p. 276.

⁸⁸ For Fraser's views, see his *Among Indian rajahs and ryots* (London, 1904), ch. 19.

⁸⁹ Cox, *Imperial fault lines*, p. 33.

IV

The historical consensus is that there was, at best, fluctuating government support for Christian missions during the nineteenth century. Penelope Carson contests this, however, in the case of India. She believes that ‘a remarkable consistency on the part of the Court of Directors and the men appointed as governors of British India can be discerned in their attitudes towards missionary activity’.⁹⁰ The burden of the argument presented above supports Carson’s conclusions. Though initially poles apart, the Company Raj and the missionary societies found a common cause, ‘English’ education, and through this nexus, a robust partnership between the two was forged during the 1830s, which might well, in the fullness of time, have grown closer still, had the Great Revolt not intervened. But what imperial – or, for that matter, spiritual – benefits did it actually confer?

Let us begin with the state. Despite appearances to the contrary, the government did quite well out of its financial deal with the missionary societies. While the grants-in-aid to the missionary schools were costly, in rupee terms, they represented good value for money. Mostly, provincial expenditure on state-aided education hovered around 5 per cent of total budgetary outlays – not a large drain on the public purse.⁹¹ Moreover, according to the Hunter Commission, the cost of directly funded public education across all sectors and provinces was in 1882 Rs 297 per pupil; whereas state aid to missionary and other privately run institutions was achieving the same result for less than Rs 36 per head – a vast saving.⁹² Also, by tapping into the physical and human resources commanded by the missionary societies (tried and tested curricula, books, keen and qualified teachers) the government was able to push its educational project faster and further. By the 1850s, thirty-one English-medium public schools and colleges were operating in Bengal; they had a student population of 4,241; missionary schools in the presidency numbered twenty-two, but catered for over 6,000 pupils. The North-Western Provinces, by the 1850s, possessed eight government-run English schools and colleges serving 1,548 scholars, and twenty-two missionary-run English institutions catering to 1,754 pupils.⁹³ The figures for British India as a whole make the picture even clearer: missionary schools had 101,192 pupils, government schools just 23,163.⁹⁴ Whatever limited cultural impact Western education may have made by the end of the Company’s rule in 1858 (a moot

⁹⁰ Penelope Carson, ‘An imperial dilemma: the propagation of Christianity in early colonial India’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 18 (1990), p. 170.

⁹¹ Allender, ‘Anglican evangelism’, p. 276.

⁹² I do not have access to earlier comparisons, but it is unlikely that private education would have been any less competitive in the 1850s. *Report of the Education Commission of 1882* (Chairman, Sir W. W. Hunter), p. 454.

⁹³ Evidence of Rev. J. C. Marshman before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Territories, 18 July 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, XXIX, p. 25.

⁹⁴ Evidence of the Rev. J. Kennedy before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Territories, 8 Aug. 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, XXIX, p. 172.

point we shall return to later) was due mainly to the resources and energies contributed by the missionary bodies.

Again, while conversion of the natives to Christianity had never really been part of the imperial project, few Company officials, by the 1840s, would have quarrelled with the Scottish missionary Alexander Duff's assertion that there were 'not in all India more devoted and loyal subjects of the British Crown than those Natives who have openly embraced Christianity'.⁹⁵ Company surveyors Connors and Wood, who met a number of Christian converts while working in the state of Travancore, summed them up thus: 'Peaceful and valuable subjects, they return obedience for toleration and protection.'⁹⁶ John Sherer's impression, from his years of service in Bengal, was that Indians who had accepted Christianity had become 'eminently improved'.⁹⁷ Asked by a Commons committee whether he thought the conversion of the natives had potential administrative benefits, the Bombay Army's Major Rowland relied: 'I do, inasmuch as I believe it makes them more loyal and attached subjects.'⁹⁸ Hence, it came as no surprise to the government when, in 1857, Indian Christians rallied, *en masse*, to its defence.⁹⁹ In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that missionary schooling often had a salutary 'disciplining' effect, even when it did not result in conversions. Madras governor Sir Henry Pottinger was so taken by the 'moral improvement' wrought by the missionary system in his presidency that he prohibited public schools from being established in areas where missionary schools already operated.¹⁰⁰ And veteran Central Provinces administrator Andrew Fraser felt the same: 'some of the best servants of Government' in the province, Fraser avers in his memoirs, 'were trained in the Central Provinces Missionary College. Even when they had not been led to embrace Christianity, they had undoubtedly imbibed principles of the greatest value to Government.'¹⁰¹

But what the proselytizing of the missionaries did *not* deliver, during the tenure of the Company – either via itinerant preaching or schoolroom indoctrination – was a critical mass of fanatical converts. During the 1813 debates on the renewal of the Charter Act, it had been claimed that Christianity would spread rapidly, almost of its own volition, once the barriers to the entry of missionaries had been removed. That did not happen. By 1830 more than 100 missionaries had arrived

⁹⁵ Evidence of Rev. Alexander Duff before the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Indian Territories, 6 June 1853, *PP*, xxxii, p. 88.

⁹⁶ Quoted in John Wilson, 'Anti-Christian petition addressed to the governor of Bombay', *Oriental Christian Spectator*, Jan. 1840, BL, OIOC, F/4/1833/76054.

⁹⁷ Evidence of John Walter Sherer before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company, 19 July 1832, *PP*, 1831–2, ix, p. 251.

⁹⁸ Evidence of Major M. J. Rowland before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Territories, 4 Aug. 1853, *PP*, xxix, p. 156.

⁹⁹ This was certainly the impression created by the missionary lobby in England. Hall, *Civilising subjects*, p. 396.

¹⁰⁰ Minute by Sir H. Pottinger, gov. of Madras, dated 1 Nov. 1852, quoted in Petition of the Madras Native Association dated 10 Dec. 1852, *PP*, 1852–3, xxvii, p. 464.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Fraser, *Among Indian rajahs and ryots*, p. 267.

in India; by the 1850s over 400 were working there.¹⁰² However this large effort garnered only a scanty crop of souls for Christ. Whilst itinerant preachers never had any trouble attracting large audiences, they found it, not surprisingly, very difficult to convince their listeners that they were ‘mired in sin’ and faced the prospect of eternal damnation in hell. On tour in Bengal, the Reverend Francis recorded in his diary: ‘Talked with some people in Bicknaparee, who heard me with the greatest indifference.’¹⁰³ Further up-country, William Bowley of the CMS ‘conducted’ the men and boys of ‘Tryloke’s village’, near the Ganges, to a shady spot and ‘addressed them fully on the things of their Souls[s]’; but after three hours he left in disgust, recording later in his journal: ‘All remained mute, and gaped all the time we were engaged.’¹⁰⁴ And Henry Martyn received a similar response from the ‘heathen’ (but doubtless more sophisticated) residents of Masulipatam, in Madras, when he lectured them on the theme of ‘agents of the Devil’. ‘I thought that amidst the silence these remarks produced’, he recalls in his memoirs, ‘I heard sniggers and groans.’¹⁰⁵

As for the macro-picture, the best estimates we have, probably not entirely accurate, but adequate for our purposes, put the Christian population of India, at the half-way mark of the nineteenth century, at just over 90,000, made up as follows: Bengal 14,778; NWP, 2,032; Bombay 744; and Madras 76,591. How little these numbers counted, in the larger Indian scheme of things, can be seen by looking at the case of Bombay city, which, in 1852, housed a population of over half a million Hindus – and just 294 Christians.¹⁰⁶

Nor did this small population provide the Company with a wedge of politically useful influence in Indian society. The majority of converts, then and later, hailed from poor and low-caste families, marginal people who had little to lose and potentially much to gain by seeking the protection of foreign missionaries. Hardly any came from the elite groups who might have made a difference – such as the Brahmins and Rajputs.

How many Christian converts would have been required to secure British hegemony over India? Fifty million? Five million? If such a thing had been possible, we can be sure that it would have taken more than the meagre quorum of half a million touted by the missionaries during the Charter Act debate. In the event, when the challenge came in 1857, many converts did fight for the Raj, and most bravely; but their contribution had very little impact on the result. British arms really saved the day – helped by the friendly neutrality of the urban Hindu middle class,¹⁰⁷ which had consistently opposed the machinations of the missionaries.

¹⁰² Kaye, *Christianity in India*, p. 467.

¹⁰³ Journal of the Rev. G. Francis, p. 137, entry of 5 Sept. 1831, CMS, C1/1/M5.

¹⁰⁴ Journal of the Rev. W. Bowley, p. 11, entry of 3 Aug. 1831, CMS, C1/1/M5.

¹⁰⁵ *The memoirs of Henry Martyn*, p. 337, BL, OIOC, Sutton Hall Coll., MSS EUR F128/217.

¹⁰⁶ Evidence of Rev. J. Tucker before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Territories, 28 July 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, XXIX, p. 93; and David, *Missions*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁷ Metcalf, *Aftermath of revolt*, p. 81.

Again, the support, such as it was, that government received from the converts has to be weighed against the damage that was done to its standing in the eyes of the Hindu majority by its increasingly fraternal association with the Christian missionaries. As we have seen, the Hindus were perfectly happy to patronize missionary schools; and most did not object in principle to missionary preaching, so long as it was restrained. When the Reverend W. J. Deare of the CMS arrived in Krishnagar village, in Nuddea district, Bengal, he was not only provided with lodgings in the compound of its richest landlord, but was permitted to read from the Gospel to the landlord's Brahmin sons.¹⁰⁸ But the standard, confrontational style favoured by the itinerant missionaries did not go down well; and neither did their tactic of adopting stray children. While attached to the CMS missionary station at Bankura, the aforementioned William Bowley happened across a young boy sitting on the riverbank and, discovering that the boy had no living parents, took him back to the station compound and the following day enrolled him as a pupil in the Bankura missionary school. Several months later, an elderly woman turned up at the compound. As soon as she set eyes on the boy, the woman 'began to weep'. It transpired that she was his grandmother. Bowley gave the woman a rupee and 'sent her away'. A missionary colleague who witnessed the incident noted sadly in his diary that Bowley seemed both oblivious to the grandmother's pain, and wholly unworried about the effect her story might have on local opinion.¹⁰⁹ Then there was the issue of apostasy. Conversion of Hindus to Christianity may have been infrequent, but when it did happen, the repercussions were seismic. On 19 August 1832, the aforementioned Reverend Deare baptized four Hindu adults, laying the 'foundation stone' for what he hoped would eventually become a robust congregation. Immediately he was *persona non grata*:

The rage is great ... Before this I was visited from morning to evening, and every body courted my friendship; now no body comes near us; the teachers at the School come to me only in the night, so much is our house dreaded. Even the boys refused to come for their remuneration.¹¹⁰

This reaction was typical. In other Bengal *moffusil* towns, reports of conversions led to the picketing of church schools.¹¹¹ When some students attending the Scottish Free Church in Madras embraced Christianity in 1837, 70,000 Hindus signed a petition of protest;¹¹² and when two teenage Bombay Parsi boys were baptized in May 1839 by John Wilson, the uproar was such that the government took the unusual step of calling out European troops.¹¹³ And it did not stop with protest. Low caste converts in rural Madras were evicted from their houses,

¹⁰⁸ Journal of the Rev. W. J. Deare, p. 282, entry dated 17 Aug. 1832, CMS, CI/1/M5.

¹⁰⁹ Journal of the Rev. C. Kruckeberg, p. 222, entry dated 26 Jan. 1832. CMS, CI/1/M5. Kruckeberg was visiting when the above incident occurred.

¹¹⁰ Journal of the Rev. W. J. Deare, p. 283, entry dated 19 Aug. 1832, CMS, CI/1/M5.

¹¹¹ The *Friend of India*, 20 Feb. 1840, quoted in *Bombay Times*, 7 Mar. 1840, p. 156.

¹¹² This was in 1839. Frykenberg, 'Religion and Company Raj', p. 23.

¹¹³ *Bombay Times*, 8 May 1839, p. 292.

'stripped, and sent into the jungle to die'.¹¹⁴ Four converts in a village in Bengal were attacked with swords; and another, in the town of Howrah, was murdered. Children attending missionary schools were frequently beaten up. At Cuddapah, an English sub-collector died trying to rescue a missionary and his family from a Muslim mob. In 1845 a crowd of Hindus ransacked and burned houses belonging to converts in the district of Nellore.¹¹⁵ Bloodier vengeance still was meted out to native Christians in 1857. Andrew Porter's dismissive reference to these incidents as 'sporadic protests'¹¹⁶ hardly does justice to their spread, or ferocity. They may not have posed (until 1857) a serious threat to Britain's hold on the subcontinent, but collectively, over the course of the half-century, they cost the Company heavily in police and judicial time and resources. More importantly, the growing perception that the British were secretly encouraging the missionaries to spread Christianity caused important groups of subjects to lose confidence in the Company Raj, and weakened its authority.¹¹⁷

The missions fared, perhaps, even less well. Association with the imperial authorities certainly made the practical aspects of their evangelizing work easier. It afforded them a measure of protection, reduced bureaucratic delays, and provided them with a large additional revenue source, in the form of state aid, which allowed them to reach out to the sons of Indian elite on a scale that would not have been possible if they had been forced to rely exclusively on private donations.

However the religious returns derived from the Christian missionary education project were disappointing to say the least. The CMS high school in Tirunelveli town secured just thirty-six baptisms in twenty-seven years.¹¹⁸ By 1853 the sum total for the whole of the missionary colleges of Bengal was 'about 70'.¹¹⁹ Despite his best efforts, and considerable covert official support, Wilson was never able to replicate his success of 1839. Although the CMS College at Agra was boasting, by 1858, of a 30 per cent success rate, most other missionary institutions in north India before the 1870s were reconciled to, at best, 10 per cent of their students becoming nominal Christians.¹²⁰ High caste Indians appear to have embraced missionary schools with their highly sought after offering of Western education, in the expectation that traditional beliefs would successfully armour their sons against seduction. And the above figures suggest they were right to take the risk. Of course, for the missionaries, this object lesson in the resilience of culture came

¹¹⁴ Frykenberg, 'Christians and religious traditions', p. 483.

¹¹⁵ Carson, 'An imperial dilemma', pp. 184–6; and Frykenberg, 'Conversion and crises of conscience', p. 315.

¹¹⁶ Porter, *Religion versus empire?*, p. 177.

¹¹⁷ The extent of this only became fully apparent in 1857, when the leaders of the rebellion flagged religious interference as one of their major grievances. But as early as 1839 the Court of Directors registered its concern over the 'misperceptions' circulating about its religious policy. Court to Bombay, 7 Aug. 1839, BL, OIOC, E/4/1064.

¹¹⁸ Metcalf, *Aftermath of revolt*, p. 131.

¹¹⁹ Evidence of the Rev. J. C. Marshman before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Territories, 21 July 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, XXIX, p. 30.

¹²⁰ Allender, 'Anglican evangelism', p. 277.

as a terrible shock – since it raised awkward questions about the inherent power of God’s Word if not indeed His purpose. But faced with growing discontent amongst donors in England, who had been encouraged to expect, at some point, a visible return for their investment, they took the pragmatic path and wound back their involvement in Indian schooling, in some cases relocating to other, seemingly more hospitable, destinations, in other cases shifting resources to ‘medical missions’, or back to traditional itinerant preaching. By the late 1880s, only about 8 per cent of Indian college students were attending mission-owned institutions.¹²¹

V

How does the analysis offered above of the situation in colonial India in the first half of the nineteenth century, sit with what historians are saying, more generally, about the inter-relationship between Evangelical Christianity and European empire?

The current consensus, which owes much to the labours of Brian Stanley and Andrew Porter, is that the connection between Western imperialism and Christian evangelism was, at best, a tenuous one. The church–state relationship in the British Empire, Porter asserts, was ‘complex’, ‘strained’, ‘confused’, characterized by ‘frequent tension and conflict’; the connection was always more contingent than systemic; and it ebbed and flowed.¹²² While Porter accepts that missions were sometimes ‘overtaken by empire’, he thinks this was mostly the case in southern Africa and was less common elsewhere: by implication, in India.

The assessment offered here about India differs from the Stanley–Porter interpretation. It argues that, at least during the period, in the early nineteenth century, when the English East India Company was running things, the colonial state and the missionary societies, led by the CMS, built up a rather close and harmonious working relationship based on the shared perception that Indians desperately required ‘civilizing’. Initially, it is true, the Company had tried hard to keep missionaries out altogether; but after this option was closed off by parliament in 1813, the two parties really had no option but to try to co-exist, and on closer acquaintance their mutual suspicions faded; and by the 1830s, they had worked out a *modus vivendi* – an arrangement whereby the missionary schools would pick up most of the burden of delivering Western education to the Indian elites.

This was not a case, it seems to me, of missions becoming ‘unwittingly’ involved with imperialism – of their helping to buttress colonial rule inadvertently, despite their best intentions – a contention advanced by some historians of evangelism in Africa.¹²³ The missionary societies working in India knew exactly

¹²¹ Ibid., pp. 278–86; and Porter, *Religion versus empire?*, pp. 170–6 and 265–6.

¹²² Porter, ‘Religion and empire’, p. 386, and *Religion versus empire?*, pp. 324, 330.

¹²³ Porter, *Religion versus empire?*, p. 316.

what they were getting into; they took on the challenge of schooling the elite willingly and eagerly, because they saw education as an ideal way both to assist the government in its civilizing project and to achieve their goal of converting the 'heathen'. True, the latter had a higher priority. Nevertheless, I believe the extent to which the missionaries (especially, but not solely, the CMS missionaries) were also influenced by patriotic feelings, and a commitment to national objectives, has been widely underestimated. Similarly, if the prime duty of administrators was to serve the state, many Company servants acknowledged another, arguably 'higher', duty: to God. And not a few tried to combine the two in their work. Indeed for those stout Evangelicals, the Lawrence brothers, John and Henry, Indian administration was itself a kind of Christian calling.¹²⁴ Although usually treated in the historiography as a separate category, officials came from the same populations, often the same classes, and even, sometimes, the same families, as missionaries. Essentially the two groups had common values. This feature too, I think, has not been sufficiently appreciated.

Again, while Porter is right to emphasize expediency as a factor underpinning church–state relations in India, the importance of shared ideology should not be discounted. Notwithstanding its mantra of 'religious neutrality', the Company Raj was at heart a Christian state that sought to govern, as far as possible, in accordance with Christian standards of morality. As noted earlier, the Company's training college at Haileybury was supposed to impart an awareness of this obligation to new recruits. The fact that the Company willingly paid for the cost of maintaining both a considerable Church of England, and a smaller Presbyterian, ecclesiastical establishment, in India, also speaks volumes for its commitment to running a moral bureaucracy. Moreover, while it never embraced the Christianization of India as a policy, it is clear that the Company would have been more than content with an India that was Christian. Most officials accepted, even if they did not publicly advocate it, the principle that Christian subjects would be naturally more disposed to tolerate British rule. Of course any lingering hopes that the natives might eventually see the light and convert were dashed by the events of 1857, but the dream never completely faded. A decade on, Sir Stafford Northcote, secretary of state for India in the third cabinet of Lord Derby, could still muse: 'It seems natural to say [that] a Christian nation, possessing what it believes to be the highest form of civilization, *ought* to apply itself to Christianize ... those who have been committed to its charge.'¹²⁵

Less clear is what, if any, difference the support given the Raj by Christian missions during the early nineteenth century actually made. Certainly it helped greatly to expand the reach of the Company's policy of providing English education to the Indian elites as a means of indoctrinating them with Western ideas and values. But education proved a two-edged sword. Even before 1857,

¹²⁴ Michael Edwardes, *The necessary hell: John and Henry Lawrence and the Indian empire* (London, 1963).

¹²⁵ Northcote to Sir John Lawrence, 15 Aug. 1867, BL, OIOC, Lawrence papers, sec. of state's letters, vol. 4 (my italics).

some missionaries were becoming disenchanted with the products of the 'English' colleges. The Baptist J. C. Marshman, Joshua's son and sometime editor of the *Friend of India*, numbered the English-educated amongst 'the most strenuous opponents of Christianity' in the country.¹²⁶ By the 1870s the Raj was bemoaning the way English education had turned elements of the Indian middle class into seditious critics of British rule.¹²⁷ Christian converts, perhaps, came closest to fulfilling Macaulay's hegemonic vision. When the revolt broke out, they remained steadfastly loyal to their co-religionists, and this fidelity resulted in them being given preferential access after 1858 to the public service, particularly to strategic jobs in the railway and telegraph departments. Yet there were never enough converts of the 'right type' to tip the scales politically. Many historians now believe that the British position in India rested ultimately on the collaboration rendered by its subjects. If that was the case, one can easily see why the Raj was loath to lend official backing to the Christian missionary: the social groups who had the capacity to make a substantial difference in this respect – the Parsi industrialists, the Hindu intelligentsia, the north Indian Muslim nobility – were precisely those groups most strongly opposed to Christian missionary proselytizing.

Nor, conversely, did governmental patronage – actual and perceived – much help the missionary cause. We do not know how many Indians were discouraged from embracing Christianity during the first half of the nineteenth century, because they saw it as a cultural artefact of a hated foreign yoke. But if the putative links between the missions and the colonial state did constitute some sort of an obstacle, then logically India should have become a much more difficult place for them in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period of escalating anti-colonial nationalism. Instead, it became a friendlier terrain. According to George Smith's reckoning, the period 1850 to 1890 witnessed a sixfold increase in the number of Indian converts. By the time of the 1891 census there were more professing Christians than there were Sikhs. Figures for communicants (which Copley believes 'may be more indicative') rose, during the same period, from 14,661 to 182,722.¹²⁸ Ten years later India had a Christian population of 2,776,000. Over the five decades after 1850 Christianity in India grew at a rate both faster than that of the population at large and faster than any other religion.¹²⁹ The argument that this growth was facilitated by the post-Mutiny de-linking of the colonial and Evangelical projects, acquires even greater force when one considers the example of the tribal Nagas of the north-east, who began

¹²⁶ Evidence of J. C. Marshman before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Territories, 18 July 1853, *PP*, 1852–3, xxix, p. 28.

¹²⁷ See, e.g., the comments of Sir John Strachey and the viceroy Lord Lytton, quoted in Anil Seal, *The emergence of Indian nationalism: competition and collaboration in the later nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 133.

¹²⁸ G. Smith, *The conversion of India* (London, 1893), p. 204; and Copley, *Religions in conflict*, p. xiv.

¹²⁹ A. P. Joshi, M. D. Srinivas, and J. K. Bajaj, *Religious demography of India* (Chennai, 2003), tables 2.1 and 2.3.

to accept Christianity in the nineteenth century but only converted, *en masse*, in the late twentieth, by which time the colonial state in India had been completely dismantled.¹³⁰

James McCutcheon attributes the 'slow growth of Christianity' in Asia primarily to the greater reliance of missions there on imperial support.¹³¹ R. E. Frykenberg agrees. 'Christian movements seem to have been most successful', he concludes, 'when least connected to empire'.¹³² Christianity does appear to have been assimilated more easily during the nineteenth century in areas where European imperial authority was absent (as in Korea) or weak (as along the Indo-Burma frontier, or in the highlands of Indo-China). Whilst it is abundantly clear from recent specialist research that conversion decisions in India did not turn solely, or perhaps even primarily, on whether or not Christianity was perceived as an imperial religion,¹³³ the statistical evidence cited above suggests that state patronage certainly did not *help* the Christian Evangelical cause in the Indian subcontinent – at any rate, in the way that really counted for the churches – and may well have retarded it. In sum, the Indian case indicates that Protestant Christian evangelizing and European imperialism, though often intimate bedfellows, consistently struggled to consummate their partnership.

¹³⁰ Richard M. Eaton, 'Comparative history as world history: religious conversions in modern India', *Journal of World History*, 8 (1997), table 1, p. 246; and Richard M. Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876–1971', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 21 (1984), Table 2, p. 18. The percentage of the Naga population that claimed to be Christian rose from 17.9 in 1941 to 45.7 in 1951 and to 45.7 in 1951. The upward trend has continued. But Eaton's analysis shows that the takeup rate varied considerably between different sections of the community.

¹³¹ James M. McCutcheon, 'Protestant missionaries in Asia and the Pacific: agents of change for what purpose?' (unpublished paper delivered at the Asian Studies Association of Australia Biennial Conference, June 1992), p. 2.

¹³² Frykenberg, 'Christians and religious traditions', p. 492.

¹³³ See, e.g., Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity'. Eaton argues that the conversion of the Nagas was assisted by innovative strategies developed by the American Baptists, which included the transmission of the Christian message through a culturally sensitive translation of the Bible that meshed with local cosmologies.