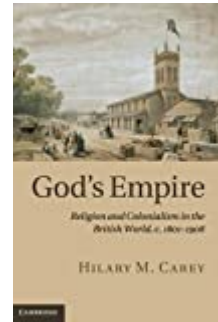


Hilary M. Carey. *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c.1801–1908.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 446 S. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-19410-5.



Reviewed by David Lindenfeld (Louisiana State University)

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Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Ministering to Settler Colonists

In this study, Hilary M. Carey sheds light on a relatively neglected aspect of missionary activity in the British Empire, namely, as directed to those who settled in the colonies rather than to the colonized—an attempt to prevent the heathenizing of Christians rather than “Christianizing the heathen,” as one enthusiastic advocate put it (p. 180). Thus the distinction between “colonial” and “foreign” missions runs through the book. Carey notes that the original meaning of “mission” (from the Latin *missio*) was to establish church structures in new geographical territories, and only incidentally to convert non-Christians. The lack of attention to the former in recent historiography, however, is not merely due to fashionable postcolonialism; the interest in converting the heathen increased steadily in British popular consciousness during the nineteenth century itself. Yet, as Carey points out, colonial settlers were far from a negligible quantity: the populations of the British in both Australia and Canada exceeded those in Scotland and Ireland by the 1920s, and most of these claimed allegiance to some Christian denomination. Carey’s work

thus reinforces that of the New Zealand historian James Belich, whose 2009 study points to a “settler revolution” by English-speaking peoples. In New Zealand, for example, settlers saw their new homeland not merely a part of “greater Britain,” but as a “better Britain,” free of the class divisions that plagued the mother country.[1]

This emphasis has important implications for the historiography of both missions and empire—and how the two are related. Recent work on missions has tended to question too tight a relationship between missionaries and colonial officials, whether of the trading companies or of the state, pointing to occasions where the two groups worked at cross-purposes.[2] Some of Carey’s evidence supports this picture, as in the opposition to the churches’ colonizing schemes in New Zealand by the “foreign” missionaries who had worked with the Maori for decades before. But the overwhelming rhetoric of the “colonial” missionaries was of course to tighten the intellectual and emotional bonds between Christianity and empire. This was true even as race-based discourse came to the fore during the late nineteenth century. Carey

views the language of Rudyard Kipling and Cecil Rhodes, for example, as a mutation of the Christian attitude rather than as a purely secular alternative to it.

This is an ambitious work, based on archival research in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Australia and covering in detail the work of Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist institutions, not to mention the evangelical currents within the Anglican and Presbyterian churches themselves. All this is framed within the larger narrative context of the transformation of Christianity within nineteenth-century Britain—from Protestant nation to Christian empire, as she puts it (p. 40). The increased toleration of Catholics and Nonconformists by the Church of England over the course of the century led to a broader notion of Christianity as an integral part of British imperial identity. The originality of her work lies not in this general picture, which is already well established, but in the internal workings of each of the denominational missionary societies and how they handled this transition. She points out that the origins of colonial missionaries often had pragmatic rather than ideological roots: for example, the need for chaplains for the British soldiers serving abroad and for the British convicts in Australia. Much of the subsequent flow of missionaries to the settler colonies predictably followed the tides of massive emigration during the nineteenth century in the wake of such disasters as the Irish potato famine.

Almost half the book is devoted to a blow-by-blow account of these societies, taking into consideration their leading figures and their differences in religious approach. This is followed by a section on the colonial clergy and the institutions that developed for training them, such as St. Augustine's College in Canterbury and the Catholic Missionary College of All Hallows in Dublin, the latter sending at least two thousand priests abroad. The final section deals with the attempts at setting up colonies that had a church basis—in Sierra Leone, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.

Several paradoxes run through these detailed accounts. One is the ubiquity of interdenominational rivalry, repeatedly invoked as a fundraising device for missionary societies and colleges. One might view this as a sign of healthy competition, which it certainly was, but it apparently coexisted with the appeal to the commonality and solidarity of Greater Britain—a mystical union of opposites, perhaps. Another is that many of these colonial missionary groups eventually succumbed to the temptation of appealing to converting the

savage heathen as well, in response to the increasing popularity of imperialism in Britain. As the evangelical rhetoric became more inflated as a result—using New Zealand as a beachhead for converting Asia and Melanesia, for example—the line between the two types of missions became increasingly difficult to draw. Similarly, ambitious colonization schemes, such as those of Edward Wakefield, combined commercial and religious appeals, thus smudging another boundary that earlier colonial officials had sought to keep clean.

A great strength of the book is its extensive use of statistical data. There are twenty-six tables, documenting such things as the geographical distribution of priests and ministers, the incomes of the various societies, and the destinations of alumni of the colonial colleges. If nothing else, the book will serve as a valuable reference source for such information.

The book also has certain weaknesses, of which I will point out two. First, the section on the colonization of Sierra Leone is brief and incomplete. As an attempt to establish a Christian colony, Carey views it as a failure. Yet she ignores the role of the seventy-four thousand recaptives or returnees who were brought there from captured Portuguese slave ships after the slave trade had been banned in England. Some of these returnees (called Saros) made it back to their countries of origin in West Africa and were among the first carriers of Christianity to these regions. In the case of the Yoruba, such returnees played a key role in establishing a common written language, thus contributing to a sense of Yoruba identity.^[3] Perhaps these results were not foreseen by the colony's founders, but they should have been taken into account.

A more serious problem lies in the introductory chapter, in which Carey seeks to come to terms with contemporary postcolonial theory. She is undoubtedly right in her claim that this literature does not do justice to the realities of settler life in the colonies, but she does not succeed in posing a coherent alternative. Instead, the reader is faced with a number of contradictory statements, embodying rather than illuminating the paradoxes mentioned above. For example, her claim that the settlers who came to occupy Greater Britain shared a high degree of cultural cohesion to the extent that they thought of themselves as British subjects clashes with her statement that it is also important to avoid the assumption that white settlers formed a cohesive cultural bloc (pp. 17-18, 26). She takes Franz Fanon to task for posing a Manichean opposition between colonizer and colonized;

yet her response—*it* was never a simple case of *us* and *them* (p. 27)—seems equally formulaic and at odds with the overall gist of her narrative: in the trajectory from Protestant nation to Christian empire, the savage eclipsed the Catholic as the monolithic, superstitious Other, thus providing the justification for the removals and the destructive cultural crusades that hover in the background of this story.

Other passages reveal a lack of sure grasp on what constitutes religion. “While it is a term that is too convenient to discard,” she writes, “religion is not an especially helpful category of historical analysis for British imperial history. We must talk instead about churches and their ethnic and political character” (p. 27). Yet on the next page we learn that “a disparate coalition of thinkers contributed to the creation of a religious model of the British empire” (p. 28). If her first claim is correct, it undercuts the premise of the entire book, as highlighted in its subtitle. In fact, Carey *does* provide a convincing portrait of a religious model of the British Empire, despite her lack of confidence in it. At one level, the various denominations bought into what she identifies as a “generic” Protestantism, which encompassed

imperial loyalty and the celebration of uniquely British ... virtues of freedom, tolerance, justice, and civic duty” (p. 5). At another level, the ubiquity of churches throughout the settler colonies served the purpose of simply reminding their inhabitants of home. Perhaps such a simple sentiment is the most powerful one after all.

Notes

[1]. James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*, pt. 1 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

[2]. Norman Etherington, ed., *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

[3]. J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 142, 286.

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