Hilary Carey

Religion and the “Evil Empire”

This paper provides an historiographical review of the rhetorical and historical sources for religious suspicion of empires and imperialism in the west. It begins with an analysis of Ronald Reagan’s celebrated “evil empires” speech of March 1983, and traces its polemical roots to scriptural precedents, notably in the Book of Revelation, in which “empire” is equated with the unjust rule of Babylon. Some comparisons are made between the general use of religious ideologies to support imperial regimes in ancient and other, more modern, world empires including China and Islam. The final section considers the debate about the role of religion in supporting — or critiquing — modern, secularised empire states such as the second British Empire. The paper argues that it is not possible to understand the problematical relationship of religion and empire in modern societies without recognising the ongoing force of Christian polemic even when religious arguments have not specifically been invoked.

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1 This paper was originally presented to the “Enlightenment, Modernity, Secularization, Resacralization in western Europe and east Asia” conference, University of Wuhan, China, in September 2006 and retains some of the features of the original presentation to that audience. I am grateful to University College Dublin for funding my travel to China, and to Hugh McLeod for inviting me to join the University of Birmingham delegation to the conference.
1. Introduction

In 8 March 1983, the then President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, made a speech to the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in which he urged Americans not to “ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire.” Later, in 1983, he went on to announce the establishment of a technologically advanced defensive weapons program popularly known as “star wars.” (The “star wars” in question referred to the movie series directed by George Lucas which was then at the height of its popularity.) “Star Wars” was a major undertaking of the Reagan administration and many commentators have suggested that the use of scriptural rhetoric, of empires and evil, battles and forces, right and wrong, was one of the ways in which he was able to sway public opinion behind the massive funding commitment that the program required. A similar dualistic rhetoric was invoked by the President of the United States, George W. Bush, in speeches following the terrorist attacks of 9 September 2001. These people were “evildoers” who would not cow the American people in their mission to establish a “new world order.” In his 29 Jan. 2002 State of the Union speech, Bush

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2 Text of speech together with later comments on the Ronald Reagan website:


3 Speeches by US President George W. Bush referring to “evildoers” and “axis of evil” listed by the non-profit Center for Media and Democracy


4 Richard A. Horsley, Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Order

characterized Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an “axis of evil,” against which it may have seemed appropriate to launch unilateral action. By invoking the forces of evil, both US Presidents were appealing to the religious convictions of their supporters who were responsive to denunciations which evoked the evil empire of Babylon, as depicted in the Book of Revelation.5

What relevance does this old news have for an historical paper on religion and empire? I begin this way because I think it is worth reminding ourselves that the forces of religion and imperialism remain enmeshed in the modern world and international popular culture. In order to understand why the US Presidents’ speeches were so readily able to tap into currents within American society, we need to look at the historical basis of the relationship between religion and older imperialisms that long predate the contemporary United States.

This paper is chiefly concerned with Britain and the British Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth century because this is the subject of my current research.6 However, it also provides a long historical account of religion in the empires of the classical and early Christian worlds which underpin modern western empires. It considers the developing historiography of religion and empire, a topic of some significance but


one, as John Gascoigne notes in the introduction to this collection, which has been relatively neglected. The final section examines some ways in which religion was interwoven with British imperial history. The latter, I go on to suggest, is responsible in quite significant ways for the very considerable support for Empire which almost all the larger Christian churches in settler colonies such as Australia have given to the imperial ideal, despite the scriptural rejection of “the evil empire.”

2. Discourses of imperialism in the Christian world

1. Empires in scripture

Before we consider the impact of religion on European empires and especially the British Empire, it is useful to consider the scriptural and theological critique of empire which forms the backdrop to Christian understanding of imperialism in western Europe. Scripture presents two very different accounts of secular power and its relationship to the just man. On the one hand, particularly in the Old Testament, we hear about the fall of empires and their corruption; prophets speak against imperial power and commend its downfall. The people of Israel engage in constant struggle with the imperial forces that besiege them, lead them off into captivity, and subvert the destiny of God’s chosen people. According to the prophet Jeremiah (34:1), for example: “Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army and all the kingdoms and peoples in the empire” fight against Jerusalem. While Jeremiah refers specifically to the exile of the Israelites in Babylon (586-538 BCE) and the destruction of the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE, the idea of the “Babylonish captivity” was to become emblematic for the unjust imperial oppression of first Jewish and later Christian people.
everywhere in subsequent centuries. It is this essentially unsympathetic representation of Empire which continues to permeate imaginative worlds and popular culture.  

But the scriptural critique of secular power is by no means consistently hostile. When empires collapse, the people of Israel are taught not to expect a power vacuum, but rather the rise and triumph of a just ruler and his kingdom, the messiah. For example, the prophet Daniel (11:3-5) predicts the downfall of the mighty, the overthrow of empires, and the coming of a just king who will uproot all other kingdoms. The notion of a messiah, a descendant of King David who would restore the Jewish kingdom, does not emerge until after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. But it was strengthened by the renewed imperial captivity that followed the Roman occupation of Israel several centuries later. Messianism carries with it the notion of both the overthrow of oppressive government and its renewal. Christ may have said that His Kingdom is not of this world, but the “Lord’s Prayer” (Luke. 11: 2-4) called for the coming of the kingdom as its second petition. In considering the relation of church and state, there are four texts which are the most frequently cited. These are Mark 12:17 (“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”); Rom. 13: 1-7. 9 (“The authorities that exist have been established by God.”); Acts 5:29 (Peter: “We must obey God rather than men”); and Rev.

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13: 1-8. ([The beast from the abyss] “was given power to make war against the saints . . . and he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation.”) In the first two texts, there is general support for deferral to worldly power. Indeed, they would seem to suggest that some kind of relationship between the religious believer and the state is a practical necessity, even if both states and rulers continue to fall short of the messianic ideal in this world. The third text calls on Christians to defer ultimately to God, whereas Revelation provides a devastating attack on imperial rule which is radical and uncompromising. How were these very different interpretations of the role of secular power, and especially the role of imperial power, reconciled in the course of western history?

There is no simple answer to this question not least because the notions of empire and imperium are themselves not unitary, but have a complex range of meanings in medieval and modern political thought.9 As Kroebner demonstrated in his study of the words “empire” and “imperialism,” a medieval ruler who aspired to imperium might seek no more than rule over more than a single dominion, though he could also be making claim to all the continental land mass of Europe and Asia.10 It is actually the narrower sense of imperium, as simply a region in which a ruler might aspire to a plenitude of authority, which is reflected in one of the most famous declarations of imperial power, that made on behalf of Henry VIII in 1533 when asserting his rights against papal


authority: “This realm of England is an empire.”\textsuperscript{11} But as we consider the history of imperialism in the west, it is worth recalling that the language of empire, kingdom and imperium employed by secular rulers had a scriptural precedent which was mostly kept out of public political discourse but which always just below the surface. It was the kingdoms of scripture and the need to fight the evil rulers of unjust empires which give political impact to the speeches of the US Presidents with which this article opened.

2. Religion and the Roman Empire

Those who ruled Empires invariably felt the need to generate some kind of justification for them and this is where religion has generally made itself useful. In the empires of the ancient world, it was normal to find a close association between religion and the apparatus of imperial power, often focussed on the person of the ruler. The historian Averil Cameron refers to this as the “rhetoric of empire” and associates it particularly with the spread of Christianity.\textsuperscript{12} Of course, it is curious that a religion such as Christianity, which was founded by the son of an artisan who seems to have preached a message of renunciation of this world, should have served this purpose and there remained a few rather visible cracks in the arrangement. Even in pagan and imperial Rome, there had initially been considerable resistance to the establishment of a state cult of the Emperor as had been the norm in the Hellenistic empires. Indeed, Romans did not abandon other practices and a cult of the emperor was patched on to classical pagan

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} From the opening sentence of the \textit{Act in Restraint of Appeals} (1533).
\item \textsuperscript{12} Averil Cameron, \textit{Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
\end{itemize}
traditions. Even in its modified and apologetic Roman form, however, imperialism and emperor worship came to have a special status in relation to Christianity. This was partly because of the powerful propaganda of Revelation 13:1-8, the text mentioned above, in which the persecution of Christians was linked directly to their opposition to emperor worship. In addition, as Richard Horsley has also argued, the cult of Caesar was not simply one new religion among many, but had become by the time of St Paul “the dominant cult in a large part of the Empire.” Whatever the actual status of Emperor worship in the later Roman Empire, for the last two millennia Christians have tended to argue that priority of belief, worship and allegiance must be given to a spiritual rather than a secular ruler. Emperors, who claimed divine support for their empires, or divine status for themselves, have called down a hearty Christian anathema. The origins of this, morally pejorative, use of the terms imperator and imperium lie in the Renaissance but survived to modern times; the imperial titles adopted by Napoleon in 1804, and Queen Victoria in 1876 aroused some popular anxieties.

The opposition of Christians to the divine aspirations of the Emperor were modified in the period after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (306-37 CE) and

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15 Muldoon, Empire and Order: The Concept of Empire, 800-1800, 148-49.
his decision to make Christianity his favoured religion.\textsuperscript{16} Despite ongoing modern claims to the contrary, Constantine did not make Christianity the official religion of the Empire and on his death it was by no means certain that Christianity would come to dominate the former territories of the Roman Empire. However, he set up a special relationship between western political power and the church within the unified state that was Christendom.

3. Medieval world

Despite some theological hesitation about the notion of the worship of the secular ruler, many early Christian states evolved new traditions which elevated the person of the king to divine status, or linked religious observance to the normative support of the state. In the medieval Christian world, the old worship of the emperor can be seen to have been substantially revived with the revivification of the idea of the Roman emperor under Charlemagne and his immediate predecessors. The crowning of the Frankish king Charlemagne as Emperor on Christmas Day 800 by Pope Leo III (795-816) was a logical development of earlier arrangements made by the papacy and the Frankish majors of the palace and their successors. It placed the new, formerly barbarian, kingdom in a special relationship with the papacy which was to frame much of the later history of Western Europe. The claim by the religious power, as represented by the papacy, to dominion over the secular was bolstered by the Donation of Constantine (c.750-800). This

document was probably created by the papacy centuries after its purported date at a time when the Frankish king, Pepin the Short, was seeking to oust the ruling Merovingians and be installed as king in his own right. It purported to be a record of the donation of power “more than our empire and earthly throne” to the pope by Constantine. While the document was clearly a forgery (and was recognised as such in the Renaissance), it nevertheless represented well a particular way of looking at the relationship between the earthly and the secular power in the middle ages, one in which religion had precedence over imperium.

These historical events are crucial to understanding the complex relationship between church and state in Western Europe. The notion of Emperor was revived in the tenth century by the Ottonians. The power of the Holy Roman Emperors ebbed and flowed as did those of the papacy over the next centuries. The nominal victory of Pope Gregory VII in 1077 over Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor at the height of the struggle for supremacy known as the Investiture Controversy, did not in fact concede real authority to the pope but it set the terms for the debate. When France dominated the papacy, generally in opposition to the Holy Roman Empire, the pope tended to find it more convenient to live away from his hostile subjects in Rome. Papal schism, rival

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popes, antipopes and controversy dogged both pope and emperor throughout the middle ages until, at the Council of Constance (1414-1418) called by Emperor Sigismund, the Council secured the deposition of no less than three rival claimants to the papacy then at large.

To accompany the fiery debates and Europe-wide animosities unleashed by these disputes, there was the most lively and politically informed polemical literature, the general terms of which have left their mark on contemporary political discourse. Much of this literature was explicitly millenarian in tone, informed as it was by a reading of Daniel and Revelation and the medieval prophets who wrote in the same idiom. Daniel wrote of four great world empires and the coming of an emperor who would reign in the last days at the end of history. One of the most potent commentaries on Revelation was that of the Cistercian Joachim of Fiore (c.1132-1202). According to Joachim, history was divided into three ages, an Old Testament age of God the Father, the present New Testament age inaugurated by God the son, and an imminent age of the Holy Spirit. This future age would see the emergence of new religious orders who would inaugurate a perfect spiritual church. This writing, much copied for different radical causes over the next few centuries, played a role in more recent political writing about the fall of modern empires and debates about the relation between religion and political states.


To summarise: the struggle between papacy and empire in the middle ages bequeathed to modern times a well developed theory about the standing of religion in relation to the state, of hostility to the ungodly emperor and to empires generally. However, there was a countervailing discourse which praised the state and the just king. Much of this political writing was highly polemical in nature and, partly because the original texts were drawn from the Book of Revelation, it tended to dualism and polemic. It was assumed that a Christian ruler would seek to bring peace and good order and it was inconceivable that secular and religious power could be exercised independently.

3. Non-western Empires and religions

So far, we have been discussing the history of political and theological writing for and against empires in the western world from the time of Christ. But there have been other empires and in these, too, religion has played a major role.20

The world of the Old Testament, was one in which the empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia rose and fell and in most of these historical empires there was a connection between the imperial order and an associated religious hierarchy. It is not necessary to restrict attention to scripture and the ancient world to look for examples where religion worked in support of empire. Across the early modern world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from the Incas and Maya of ancient America to the great and complex civilizations of China, India, we can point to parallel phenomena. As

we might expect, there are many variations on the pattern of interaction between religious and secular states in these very different cultures. Conrad, for example, argues that prehistoric cultural development among the Aztec and Maya was largely determined by changes in traditional religion, whereas other imperial rulers chose to allow religious diversity.21

Since many empires have lasted for centuries and, almost by definition, cover a vast range of territory, it is also important to note that patterns of imperial rule in relation to religion can change over time and place even within the same dynastic tradition. A good example of this phenomenon is that of the rise of Islam, which spread rapidly so that by the time of the death of the prophet Mohammed in 632, Islamic rule stretched along the southern Mediterranean from the Atlantic to central Asia. In the 18th century, there were three great Muslim empires, the Ottoman Empire, the Safavid in Iran, who established Shi’ism as a state religion and suppressed all other religious practices, and Mogul India. Despite their origins in jihad or holy war, none of these empires was consistently belligerent to non-Muslims, and a partial tolerance was always extended to Jews and Christians as “people of the book.” Their main religious hostilities were often directed at Muslims in rival states. Nevertheless, Islam provided a powerful unifying ethos for these societies, as it does for their heirs in the modern world, and one which was sustained by force. Historically, Islam and imperialism, in both its military and cultural guises, would seem to be good companions.

If I might be permitted two examples from imperial China, it might be noted that while it was rare for rulers to attempt to impose uniformity of belief on all classes of society, this was not the case for the administrative elite. In the sixteenth century, Lin Chao-en (1517-1598), as is well known, developed a corpus of classical texts in which Confucian teachings were supported by Buddhism and Taoism. The Confucianism of the scholar elite was given particular prominence as the religion of imperial China through the encounter with it by Italian Jesuits, Michael Ruggerius and Matteo Ricci (1553-1610), during their stay in Chao-ch’ing Kwangtung Province. The Jesuits admired Confucianism and the devotion to the imperial cause of the scholar elite not least because it reflected in some respects their own learning and devotion to the counter-Reformation papacy. A more ambitious program to control popular religion is associated with the expansion of Chinese imperial society in the eighteenth century. A study of Qing imperial administration argues that administration of new territories could only be ensured by controlling both “faithful and the faith,” including Islam, Buddhism, or Tibetan Bon religion. It was recognised that military domination, without the support of local religious hierarchies, was not enough to ensure control of local populations.

In the western “age of empires,” religion is perhaps associated most closely with that of the first European powers to establish itself themselves the New World from the

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fifteenth century, namely Catholic Spain and Portugal. In work which has now extended to four volumes, Jonathan Hart has stressed the significance of cultural aspects of the representation of imperial rule in the age of empires, though he gives more weight to literature and art than to religious issues; text, rhetoric and propaganda have more signifying power, in his analysis, than ritual, belief and mission. Prior to the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the French Empire was associated overtly with the determination to spread the religion of the imperial power, again Catholicism. However, the Revolution, by secularising the state, a process which proved very difficult to reverse, instituted a new kind of imperial expansion, that of an enlightened secular power which sought to bring order, rationality and the benefits of European Enlightenment to the world. In these new modern empires the fashion for religious justifications of imperial expansion was diminished. Empires were justified pragmatically, because they brought


economic benefits, or on the grounds of a secular improving ethos of modernity and civilization — in a word, “enlightenment.” Now these things were only debatably the prerogative of the French powers and the enlightenment was soon a global as much as a French movement, but they marked a new way of doing empire.

The empires which expanded in the eighteenth century were justified without the necessary accompanying discourse of religion, or in an increasingly subsidiary fashion. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many European powers extended their influence in Africa, India, Asia and the Pacific, establishing settler colonies where the resistance by indigenous peoples was weak, military and commercial bases along trading routes, and manipulating or ousting ruling elites where it was not practical to seek to replace the native people. The process accelerated in the last decades of the nineteenth century, with Africa being particularly affected by the scramble for territories. Most European powers, even those with little interest in expanding their overseas possessions, felt religious obligations toward their new territories, whether chaplains for military bases, missions for native people, or migrant clergy and subsidies for settler churches. But religion was not foremost in the rhetorical justification of these later empires. By the twentieth century, even missions, the most overtly religious of imperial projects, was justified in terms of the secular, social and scientific benefits they had brought to the post-colonial Christians of the world, the heirs of the civilizing mission of European empires.27

Of these, there is space to consider only one in outline, the British Empire to which we

now turn.

4. British Empire

Interest in religious aspects of British imperial history has undergone a revival in recent years. Nevertheless, there remains a tendency to relegate religion below political and economic features of this, the greatest of all western empires, as John Gascoigne notes in his introduction to this special issue. There are also a number of important debates, especially over whether the bible followed the flag, that is whether religion and more specifically missions served the economic interest of the British empire. Another highly contested issue has been the extent to which colonial subjects were implicated in the imperial project, sparked partly by a reaction to post-colonial interpretations which sometimes assumed all colonisers were dupes of imperial ideology or complicit with it, and that there was no effective critique and resistance to imperialism by either colonised


people or western humanitarians and liberals.

In contrast to the determination to write religion out of the second British Empire, there has always been general agreement that religion played a central role in the colonization of the First. The initial impulse to settle in a new world was for some small, ardent colonisers directed by the wish and sometimes the necessity to escape that close association between religion and ruler which had given rise to the establishment of the Church of England. To some extent these colonial strategies mirrored struggles to find alternatives to established episcopalianism in Britain itself which might be seen as a kind of internal imperialism, that of England, the dominant partner in the political union. Episcopalianism did not survive as the established church in Scotland, and in Wales and Cornwall there was a strong challenge in the rise of Wesleyan Methodism in the eighteenth century. In Ireland, the majority religion was and remained Catholicism whose adherents were opposed to taxes for the support of an established church associated with the ruling gentry. The various components of the conglomerate nation based in the British Isles were therefore not particular unified by religion, even before the explosion of new faiths and forms of belief practised in the more tolerant setting of the American colonies.

That the colonies were more tolerant environments for religious practice is due to a particular interpretation of English law as reflected in the commentaries of the celebrated English jurist, Sir William Blackstone (1723-1780). According to Blackstone, not all parts of the English law were necessarily transported to a settler colony along with the settler. Indeed, “colonists carry with them only so much of the English law, as
is applicable to their own situation and the condition of an infant colony.” In particular, he argued that the unwritten civil code was not necessarily a part of the law to be followed in the American colonies where it was the prerogative of local governments to set laws regulating commerce, policing and spiritual order: “The artificial refinements and distinctions incident to the property of a great and commercial people, the laws of police and revenue, (such especially as are inforced by penalties) the mode of maintenance for the established clergy, the jurisdiction of spiritual courts, and a multitude of other provisions, are neither necessary nor convenient for them, and therefore are not in force.” Blackstone seemed to imagine that the colonies might have an established clergy, though not necessarily attached to a particular established church, but that provision for their financial support would be open to local negotiation. This reflects the pragmatic development of the colonial churches and the marked tendency of British imperialism to move independently of established British Protestantism. Indeed, attempts to appoint a bishop to lead the Church of England in the American colonies was one of the irritants which focussed the minds of colonists in the lead up to the War of Independence. Colonists who were loyal to the crown saw the appointment of bishops as a demonstration not just of a commitment to meet the religious needs of immigrants,


31 Blackstone Commentaries, Bk. I, ch. 1, sec. 4.

but of one of the essential props of the British nation scattered across the Atlantic. But on its own religion was an insufficient force to sustain the political union.

In the absence of state religion, it can be argued that religious settlement in the American colonies was driven by the same market forces that drove economic expansion and settlement. Demand for religious services was fuelled by the evangelical revival led by preachers such as George Whitfield and by the nexus between commercial success and religious adherence which puzzled and intrigued the German sociologist, Max Weber, on his visit at the turn of the nineteenth century. Protestant missions to the native Americans were inspired by the same radical, occasionally millenarian enthusiasms of the awakening, but religion overall was generally part of a commercial rather than a spiritual or political empire. Protestant dissenting sects flourished and in general were tolerated in this benign climate. When the American colonists rebelled, it was the political not the spiritual union which was sundered for many denominations, particularly those swept up in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century.

After the American War of Independence (1775–1783), Britain retained little of

33 The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism, expanded from an article published in the Frankfurter Zeitung (1906), was intended as a supplement to Weber’s collection of essays, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism


35 Eliga H. Gould, "Prelude: The Christianizing of British America," in Etherington,
its original empire. This situation was not allowed to remain for long and in the course of
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Britain created a new empire consisting of both
colonies established for essentially trading and security purposes, and settler colonies
where British settlers displaced indigenous peoples to set up new British societies in
places such as Canada and Newfoundland, the Cape Colony (now South Africa),
Australia, New Zealand. In terms of territory, people and economic activity — not to
mention religious diversity — this was the largest empire the world has seen. At its
greatest extent, just before the First World War, the empire covered a quarter of the
world and ruled over 470 – 570 million people. One important way in which it differed
from the first British Empire was in the greater degree of toleration that was afforded
both British subjects and settlers who did not agree with the theology and financial
support given to the established churches of Britain. Another was the way in which
missionary ventures, initially seen as an activity confined to the most ardent Christians
from the “awakened” Protestant churches, came to be identified with the humanitarian
voice of the entire British race.36 Imperialism and religion were intertwined in the British
as they were in other empires. But, as Andrew Porter has noted,37 the entanglement was
most evident in three areas: namely, support for the establishment of Christian missions;

36 For the case of the LMS in Tahiti (1796), see Kathleen Wilson, The Island Race: Englishness,
Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century (London and New York: 2003), 82. Cited by
Porter, Religion Versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700-
1914, 7.

humanitarian concern for people who suffered directly as a result of British imperial expansion; and, finally, in the very considerable support which members of some churches found it natural to bestow on the imperial ideal.

Christian missions may have been a natural reflection of the religious aspirations of British imperialists, but it was not one which was pursued with particular vigour, at least initially. The earliest missionary organisations, the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (1698), established by Thomas Bray, an Anglican priest, and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (1701) received government endorsement through their own acts of parliament. However, the real extent of their influence was not very extensive. Even in the American colonies, the main function of the Societies was not to bring about the conversion of the native Americans, but rather to provide books and clergy which were desperately needed by European colonists. The SPCK supplied bible and tracts which assisted the convict chaplain Richard Johnston who went with the first convict settlers of the east coast of Australia in 1788 and the SPG did send missionaries to India (1820) and to China (1821) but it continued to put its major effort into support for colonists. The real expansion in the British overseas missionary movement did not occur until the establishment of voluntary societies at the end of the eighteenth century. Inspired by the evangelical revival of the 1790s, all the major denominations founded missionary societies which were to carry out the great bulk of British missionary work during the age of empire. The first society to be formed was the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, followed soon after by the London Missionary Society (1795) which came to be dominated by the Congregationalists, and then the Church Missionary Society (1799). Scottish missionary society followed immediately,
the first of these was the Edinburgh (later Scottish) Missionary Society in 1796.

From the beginning therefore the British missionary societies, other than the SPG and the SPCK, were not tied directly to the organs of government. Their objectives were religious and, initially at least, were millenarian and other-worldly in nature. When the LMS sent its first missionary expedition to the South Seas, having been alerted to the presence of these new lands from the voyages of Captain James Cook (1728-79), its major aspiration was to do all that was necessary in anticipation of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This included the conversion of the heathen, not the commercial advancement of the territorial expansion of the British Empire. Similarly, if we examine the experience of the first Baptist missionaries in Serampore led by William Carey (1761-1834), their work was focussed on translation and printing of scripture and their actual success in converting the majority Hindu population was very limited.38 This did not concern the missionaries who never seemed to have anticipated that they would see large numbers of converts in their own lifetimes.

Although the religious objectives of missions were never set aside, it is also true that a far more worldly phase of mission work followed the early work of the British missionary organizations. In the 1820s, success met the efforts of missionaries in the South Seas, where the large-scale conversion of the island kingdom of Tahiti, and later the Maori of New Zealand, were the first fruits of what were anticipated to be bountiful harvests in Africa, India and the East. Missionaries and evangelicals at home were also

inspired by the success of humanitarian campaigns against practices such as suttee, or widow burning, in India, and the Atlantic slave trade (1823). Other humanitarian victories followed, including the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi with the Maori of New Zealand which was seen as the only effective way to put an end to settler violence and appropriation of land and an ongoing and spiralling pattern of retaliatory violence. Reflecting this new confidence, parliamentary representatives turned their attention to other targets of immorality in the Empire, no longer accepting the argument that different standards were acceptable for the treatment of British subjects overseas and at home.

The imperial high tide of the British Empire was, not surprisingly, also the high tide of its religious aspirations. At the end of the eighteenth century, evangelicals had lacked the political influence to do more than lobby hopefully in the corridors of power. However, with the ascendancy of William Gladstone as Prime Minister, and Earl Grey in the Colonial Office, the governance of both home and colonial affairs lay in the hands of committed Christians. While it would be going too far to suggest, as some have done, that their objective was the establishment of a Christian empire, the entanglement of church and the British state was probably never closer than at this time. The number of missionaries and missionary societies expanded dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century and a number of new societies, such as the inter-denominational China Inland Mission (1865) and the Roman Catholic Mill Hill Fathers (1866), were founded. The China Inland Mission (CIM), however, is a reminder on the limitations of a model of

the interaction between empire and religion which places too much emphasis on religion as a vehicle for imperial expansion. The mission ethos of the CIM was particularly apolitical, following the lead of its founder, the English missionary Hudson Taylor, who believed that missionaries should be led by faith in their dealings with non-Christians leaving behind all other objectives. This message was one which appealed strongly to women and men of pious but humble origins who lacked the education required to secure a ministry at home. The means by which the British churches peopled and pastored the churches they seeded, the theme of religion and colonisation, must be the subject of future research and still awaits an historian.

Conclusion

This article has considered the ways in which religion and imperialism have been entwined forces in western European history. While most world empires have, to some extent, depended on religion as part of their cultural rhetoric, European empires in the nineteenth century expressed diffidence and uncertainty about the extent to which their rule was supported by God. There were two reasons for this. In the first place, the philosophical movement of the eighteenth century known as the Enlightenment had thrown up numerous arguments antagonistic to the intimate relationship between church and state that had become normative in the ancien régime. The post-revolutionary empire of France, no less than the second British Empire, was conceived as rational and scientific projects, or as accidental accompaniments to the advance of trade. Religion was no longer seen as having a key role to play in justifying the exercise of secular power. In the second place, Christian thinkers familiar both with scripture and the history of the
relationship between the papacy and the Roman Empire of the classical world, and the Holy Roman Empire which aspired to succeed it, were already ambivalent about the moral legitimacy of empires. Christ’s kingdom was not of this world, but was to come. On his return, all empires would be overthrown. In the heyday of empire, the churches found it difficult to resist being recruited to champion the imperial cause. However, there were always religious radicals who saw mission work as essentially subversive or at least irrelevant to the economic and political work of empire. These days historians are more inclined to absolve missionaries from the many sins of imperialism with which they have been too readily tarred. However, the question of their overall complicity (if this is an historical issue) remains open. Imperialism was a force which caused new connections and hierarchies to be established throughout the world in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although the nature of these later European empires was rather different to those of the ancient worlds in either the east or the west, the religious element of imperialism is one that has remained constant, just as it has remained contested.