

‘GRAND AND CAPACIOUS GOTHIC CHURCHES’:  
PLURALISM AND VICTORIAN MISSIONARIES

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Nothing is easier than to set the nineteenth century missionary movement up as a resource for negative models of missionary work. Thus its missionaries can easily be presented as unreflective imperialists—the bible in one hand, with the flag of their country in the other; as culturally insensitive imagining that no objective was higher than replicating European and American value systems in previously pagan settings; as narrowly evangelistic without any concern for a fully-orbed Gospel able to take account of social needs; as uncomprehendingly hostile to every religious system they met which was not Christian, indeed which was not evangelical Christian. There is obviously some truth in all of these assessments and it would not be difficult to assemble apparently supportive evidence.

It will be argued however that there was a much stronger awareness of the issues than we often credit; that theologically the insights were often quite profound; that weaknesses there undoubtedly were but that these related less to an absence of theology than to a disputed theology. In brief Victorian missionaries provide not an example of a generation which thought little or which thought simplistically about mission strategy but rather one where the thinking, at any rate of some of its some most significant figures, was unexpectedly profound. If that is so, then it makes them somewhat more disturbing. It is not then that they lacked sophistication but rather that they very imperfectly implemented a quite profound analysis. They did not for example fail to move from mission to Church because they ignored the question—indeed they provided quite detailed analysis of how that end could be achieved. If the Victorians saw some of the problems and failed to solve them, then they become a richer quarry for the missiologists than if they had been blissfully unaware of them. They also become much more disturbing for a generation which tends to assume that solutions follow fairly readily once the problem has been diagnosed.

### I. Victorian Attitudes to Indigenous Culture

The Willowbank report of the Lausanne Committee on Gospel and Culture is a good example of the process I am tilting at. It argues that in the early part of the nineteenth century it was generally assumed that the churches on the mission field would be modelled on churches at home. 'The tendency', it asserts, 'was to produce almost exact replicas. Gothic architecture, prayer book liturgies, clerical dress, musical instruments, hymns and tunes, decision-making processes, synods and committees, superintendents and archdeacons—all were exported and unimaginatively introduced into the new mission-funded churches'. All this, it continues, 'was based on false assumptions that the Bible gave specific instructions about such matters and that the home church-pattern of government, worship, ministry and life were themselves exemplary'.<sup>1</sup>

They go on to point out that there were 'pioneer missionary thinkers' such as Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson who, from the middle of the century, moved in the direction of the euthanasia of a mission. What I would like to argue is that some of these perceptions were far earlier than Venn and Anderson: that these very considerable missionary strategists were not so much pioneers as the most able exponents of what rapidly became the conventional wisdom and that it remained such until the last decades of the century. Then, thanks partly to a change in theology and partly to rampant imperialism, attitudes changed and became rather more like those we traditionally regard as typically Victorian.

#### 1. Serampore Trio.

When the early Baptist missionaries, Carey, Marshman and Ward (the Serampore Trio), first came to India, their evangelism was aggressive and dismissive of Indian culture and religion. The sophisticated Henry Martyn found that their approach lacked sensitivity: 'I felt pain that he', he said of Marshman in 1806, 'should so frequently speak with contempt of the Brahmins, many of whom

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<sup>1</sup>Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *Lausanne Occasional Papers: No 2, The Willowbank Report—Gospel and Culture*, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, (Wheaton 1978) 23.

were listening with great respect and attention'.<sup>2</sup> If however they started with such attitudes, they moved substantially through their long missionary service. They came to a position where they respected the Indian cultural heritage and made a very considerable contribution towards its better understanding.<sup>3</sup>

William Ward, for example, wrote a massive four volume study of Hinduism entitled *Account of the Writings, Religion and Manners of the Hindoos*. It can be criticized as being too polemical and unsympathetic<sup>4</sup> but modern scholars judge it quite positively.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, he came to form a very favourable assessment of Hindu culture:

No reasonable person will deny to the (ancient Hindus) the praise of very extensive learning. The variety of subjects upon which they wrote prove that almost every science was cultivated among them. . . The more their philosophical and law books are studied, the more the enquirers will be convinced of the depth of wisdom possessed by the authors. . . let the most learned and profound of the Hindoo writings be compared with the writings of any nation flourishing in the same period, and the decision. . . will be in favour of the Hindoos.<sup>6</sup>

Carey produced highly influential Sanskrit and Bengali grammars and a Bengali dictionary which, in the words of a twentieth century scholar, was 'a majestic work of scholarship'.<sup>7</sup> Not only that, but the Trio began to devote a great deal of time to translating some of the ancient Hindu classics into Bengali and English. Their motives in undertaking this were mixed. It would, they urged, aid missionary work in that it would throw more light on the 'antiquities. . . history, mythology and manners of India'.<sup>8</sup> In that sense the motives were evangelistic, though an evangelism which thought that cultural understanding was very important. At the same time they clearly valued much in what they read. Carey said of the *Mahabharata* that it

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<sup>2</sup>E. Daniel Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India, 1793–1837: The History of the Serampore and Its Missions*, (CUP, Cambridge 1967) 216.

<sup>3</sup>M.A. Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal, 1793–1847*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1972) 55–6.

<sup>4</sup>Potts, *op. cit.*, 93.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.* 94.

<sup>6</sup>Laird, *op. cit.*, 58.

<sup>7</sup>Potts, 96.

<sup>8</sup>Potts, *op. cit.*, 91.

was ‘written in most beautiful language; and much upon a par with Homer—and was it like his Iliad only considered as a great effort of human genius, I should think it one of the first productions in the world, but alas! it is the ground of Faith to Millions of . . . men; and as such must be held in the utmost abhorrence’. He said of Sanskrit literature in general that it was ‘a golden casket exquisitely wrought but in reality filled with . . . pebbles and trash’.<sup>9</sup>

That the Trio should give so much time to translating heathen ‘fables’ was not always to the liking of Enlightenment Evangelicals.<sup>10</sup> Indeed it is possible that some of the more critical comments they made may have been to reassure their friends in England that they had not departed from evangelical and English orthodoxy. Another insight into their convictions was the founding of Serampore College (1818). The aim was to give Sanskrit the position in the curriculum which the Greek and Latin Classics occupied in European education.<sup>11</sup> They in fact had the hope of stripping out Hindu religion from Sanskrit language and literature so that they could survive after the religion had died as had happened in the Graeco-Roman world. Their view was therefore of a land Christian but still fundamentally Indian. They looked to a time when, in Marshman’s words, ‘the oriental classics shall be cultivated in subservience to divine revelation, and when the splendid imagery of the great national poets shall be employed to elucidate and adorn Christian truth’.<sup>12</sup>

Underpinning these convictions was the theological confidence that there was a sufficient image of God in all people for bridges to be built between Christianity and their own cultural and even religious understandings. Christianity, said Marshman, fulfilled ‘the loftiest aspirations of the human spirit which was made after his image’. So, he continued, the Hindus were not ‘destitute of either intellectual or moral principles which could enable them to comprehend the intrinsic excellence of the gospel’. They acknowledge God, his involvement with the world and sin. There was

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<sup>9</sup>Laird, *op. cit.*, 56 and see also Potts, *op. cit.*, 91, and Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Apollos, Leicester 1990) 159.

<sup>10</sup>Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions, (The Pelican History of the Church)*, vol. 6, (Penguin, London 2nd ed. 1986, 1964) 225.

<sup>11</sup>Laird, *op. cit.*, 144.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 235.

much common ground with Hindus even in their much criticized logic and here, as elsewhere, he asserted the terms in which they spoke were 'the language of their intellect; and it is a necessary acquisition to a man who wishes to address himself to their intellect'.<sup>13</sup> Marshman's overall objectives were those which would gain much support today even from the most culturally aware of missionaries. They were summarized by his historian son:

They (sic) regarded it as the duty of the missionary to obtain as complete a knowledge as possible of the language and religious institutions, the literature and the philosophy of the people among whom he laboured, and to leave a record of his acquisitions through the medium of the press, for the benefit of his successors. They considered that every contribution to this store of knowledge was an additional facility for the prosecution of missionary labours, and they were anxious that these researches should go hand-in-hand with the communication of secular and divine truth to the people.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The CMS and Mar Thoma Church.

Another example in the same area is the CMS's attitude to the ancient Mar Thoma Syrian Church. It might easily have been dismissed as corrupt or ripe for metamorphosis into Anglicanism. No such goal was defined. Rather it should be revived. The instruction to the missionaries who went out in 1818 are clear and unimperialistic:

The Syrians should be brought back to their own ancient and primitive worship and discipline rather than be induced to adopt the liturgy and discipline of the English Church; and should any consideration induce them to wish such a measure, it would be highly expedient to dissuade them from adopting it, both for the preservation of their individuality and entireness, and greater consequent weight and usefulness as a Church.<sup>15</sup>

## 3. Alexander Duff.

Very different was the first missionary of the Church of Scotland to India, Alexander Duff. The Scottish Presbyterian tendency had been to regard education and civilization as of central importance—perhaps as a prerequisite to the Gospel. There had been a vigorous debate on

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 254–5.

<sup>14</sup>Potts, *op. cit.*, 112.

<sup>15</sup>Eugene Stock, *A History of the Church Missionary Society*, 4 vols, (CMS, London 1899–1916) i, 233.

the issue in the General Assembly of 1796 when it was argued that ‘Men must be polished and refined in their manners before they can be properly enlightened in religious truths’.<sup>16</sup> The more evangelical members of the Church were able to overcome this argument but, when they went out as missionaries, they remained deeply influenced by Enlightenment confidence in reason, in the compatibility of science and religion and, because of all this, in the importance of education. David Bebbington points out that ‘the conviction that the pattern of cause and effect. . . underlies all phenomenon’ was very pervasive within nineteenth century evangelicalism and, he observes, the ‘academic citadel of such an approach was Scotland’.<sup>17</sup> The high priest of the approach was Thomas Chalmers. He was a supporter of missions and he encouraged one of his most brilliant disciples, Alexander Duff, to go to Calcutta in 1830.

In keeping with his background and theology, his approach was radically different from that of the Serampore Trio. The key to evangelism for him was education. Almost certainly he shared the Scottish Enlightenment view that society could be seen through four stages of development—hunting, pastoring, agriculture and commerce. The last was the highest and most civilized. Heathen societies, from this perspective, in Brian Stanley’s words, ‘remained frozen in an ice-age of primitivism, which the warmth of gospel light had long since thawed in Protestant Europe’.<sup>18</sup> Someone who had absorbed these ideas was unlikely to see such primitive cultures as vehicles of truth. Certainly Duff was not interested in Sanskrit or Bengali culture. He did not even bother to master Bengali adequately.<sup>19</sup> He spoke of ‘the revolting legends’ of the Ramayana.<sup>20</sup> He had absolutely no confidence in the Serampore vision of joining Christianity to Hindu culture. The Hindus, he maintained, were unaffected by the usual evidences for Christianity—history, prophecy,

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<sup>16</sup>Laird, *op. cit.*, 196.

<sup>17</sup>D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (Unwin Hyman, London 1989) 59.

<sup>18</sup>Stanley, *op. cit.*, 162 and see also Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher, eds. *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey*, (Dawson, Folkestone 1980) 345.

<sup>19</sup>Laird, *op. cit.*, 207–8.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 212.

miracles or the internal evidences—because they could all either be out-matched by Hindu mythology or they would seem meaningless. What had to be done therefore was to “impart that knowledge which enables those whom we address to comprehend the nature and strength” of evidences—in other words’, judges a recent interpreter, ‘to Europeanize, the basic intellectual outlook of the people of India’.<sup>21</sup> The task then must be to teach English, scientific knowledge and thus bring about a new intellectual awareness:

in the very act of acquiring English, the mind, in grasping the import of new terms, is perpetually brought in contact with the *new ideas*, the *new truths*, . . . so that, by the time the language has been mastered, the student must be *tenfold less* the child of Pantheism, idolatry and superstition than before.<sup>22</sup>

It was an exciting vision of education laying the foundations for the Gospel because:

Every branch of sound general knowledge which you inculcate, becomes the destroyer of some corresponding part in the Hindu systems. And if branch after branch be communicated, one stone after another will be thrown down from the huge and hideous fabric of Hinduism; and by the time that an extensive range of instruction is completed, the *whole* will be found to have crumbled into fragments; not a shred will be left behind.<sup>23</sup>

What actually happened was that many of Duff’s pupils turned from Hinduism without turning to Christianity! None the less, his methods were important in that they gave education a central role and much missionary strategy of the future. Yet they did not lead to an unthinking Europeanization partly because some of the old Carey/Serampore wisdom lived on and partly because Duff was himself convinced of the importance of evangelizing through Indians.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation.

It was another Scot, David Livingstone, who tightened the connection between Christianity, Civilization and Commerce still further. He

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 253–4.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 207–8.

<sup>23</sup>Eric J. Sharpe, *Not to Destroy but to Fulfil: The Contribution of J.N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought before 1914*, (Gleerup, Uppsala 1965) 65.

<sup>24</sup>Laird, *op. cit.*, 255; Sharpe, *op. cit.*, 66.

became a sort of prophet of imperialism<sup>25</sup> and yet, from a person so positively disposed towards Africans as Livingstone, it was a call not so much for European Domination—rather a means of bringing justice to Africa. In no other way could the slave trade be stopped and the exploitation by the Portuguese and the Arabs be halted.<sup>26</sup> It brings us to a point made frequently by Stanley that those missionaries most anxious to enlist imperial powers for their peoples were often doing so because they thought of it as the only way of preserving them from rapacious individuals and nations.<sup>27</sup> For example, it was his theology which in particular convinced yet another Scot, John Philip, in South Africa of the equality of the natives with the Europeans.<sup>28</sup> That conviction drove him to become an ardent imperialist in order to increase the influence of a more upright imperial power over unprincipled and greedy settlers.<sup>29</sup>

There remained however, those who were much more doubtful about Christianity, commerce and civilization. The late CMS secretary, Henry Venn, spoke out against the ‘bewitching’ idea that ‘again we must settle and civilize in order to convert’. Civilization, he argued, might be an advantage but it certainly was not a necessity.<sup>30</sup> His American compatriot, Rufus Anderson, similarly spoke of the dangers of over-emphasizing civilization because it would link Christianity with ‘the creation among heathen tribes of a highly improved state of society, such as we ourselves enjoy’.<sup>31</sup> Neither used the Livingstone slogan and both were very aware of the dangers of, for example, creating theological colleges which would train ministers far in advance of their people and consequently make them ‘exotics’ in their own cultures.<sup>32</sup> Yet they were not opposed to civilization.

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<sup>25</sup>Tim Jeal, *Livingstone*, (Heinemann, London 1973) 188.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>27</sup>Stanley, *op. cit.*, 98.

<sup>28</sup>Andrew Ross, *John Philip (1775–1851): Missions, Race and Politics in South Africa*, (Aberdeen University Press, Aberdeen 1986) 95.

<sup>29</sup>Stanley, *op. cit.*, 97–8.

<sup>30</sup>C. Peter Williams, *The Ideal of the Self-Governing Church: A Study in Victorian Missionary Strategy*, (Brill, Leiden 1990) 20.

<sup>31</sup>R. Pierce Beaver, *To Advance the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids Michigan 1967) 14.

<sup>32</sup>Williams, *op. cit.*, 7.

They agreed with Livingstone that the slave trade was not likely to be suppressed until there was a visible alternative; until, that is 'the native had learned through Christian civilization the true value of agriculture and commerce'.<sup>33</sup> To say however that Christian morality ruled-out certain heathen practices and to see a role for trade was not a call for a root and branch introduction of western civilization, nor for the adoption of a particular ecclesiological scheme. That there should be no exact replica of western civilization or western churches was stressed not only by the likes of Venn and Anderson (often considered to be prophets out of their time) but by much more pedestrian mission secretaries.

The first missionary conference held at Liverpool in 1860 provides good evidence of a great deal of theological and pragmatic thinking on these issues. The Bible, it was stressed did point to ordered congregations but, continued the secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, 'the Scriptures while laying down general laws, permit the exercise of a large discretion in working out details'.<sup>34</sup> The Scriptural pattern showed the Apostles setting-up churches but not becoming their pastors. They had the confidence to rely on their converts, risky as this was, and missionaries should do likewise.<sup>35</sup> The objective of the Christian was to act as leaven in the world and thus the whole idea of, for example, Christian villages was suspect.<sup>36</sup> The LMS secretary, Mullens, made similar points: 'we all agree that, in their dress, manners and style, native pastors and missionaries should continue to live like their countrymen: our aim being not to make them hybrids, but to Christianize their own native life'. Thus the aim should not be to build 'grand and capacious Gothic churches' as happened in some places,<sup>37</sup> but rather to encourage designs which would be, in the words of Dr Trestrail, 'confined to the native idea of size, cost and general structure', and not, Trestrail also argued, to

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<sup>33</sup>CMS Archives, CA2/L3, 386–98, 388, 24 October 1864, Venn, 'Memorandum on the Relations between the British Colonies on the West Coast of Africa and the Native Races'.

<sup>34</sup>Secretaries to the Conference, *Conference on Missions Held in 1860 at Liverpool*, (James Nisbet, London 1860) 279.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 284.

reproduce the pomp and hierarchy of ministry in Britain but rather to discover titles for ministers which would ‘harmonize with the customs and habits of thought and expression’ which prevailed locally.<sup>38</sup> Most held the conviction that the Christian truth could be, in the words of another speaker, ‘nationalized’; in other words, that it should become in ‘look, tone, word, imagery, idiom’, appropriate to the people, ‘even the most degraded’ to whom it was presented.<sup>39</sup> From this perspective the ‘Higher Christian Civilization’ of the missionary was seen by many as a positive hindrance likely to produce dependency and, as a result, very active measures had to be taken to prevent missionaries becoming pastors and thus interfering even more with the local cultures.<sup>40</sup>

These were not exceptional views. The CMS wrote passionately about the danger of missionaries expecting that converts would be denationalised. They pointed, in particular, to the negative example of the Irish and Welsh churches where English clergy and bishops had been introduced into an alien context and had, as a result, produced an alien church which felt isolated ‘from the native community around it’.<sup>41</sup> It was frequently stressed how important it was that a good Christian should remain ‘homogeneous with the masses around’. ‘If the Hindu’ the *Intelligencer* wrote, ‘thinks that, with a change of faith, national essentials must be changed, he will decline having to do with an element so disturbing’ as Christianity. What the Hindu wants to see, it went on, is whether Christianity ‘can leave behind English materiality, and, as a simple spiritual system enter into the Hindu, and deal with Hindu materiality as it has done with that which is English’.<sup>42</sup> It was not a vision confined to evangelicals. Anglo-Catholics like Bishop Steer of the UMCA,

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 280–1.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 310, 227–31.

<sup>41</sup>C. Peter Williams, ‘Too Peculiarly Anglican: The Role of the Established Church in Ireland as a Negative Model in the Development of the Church Missionary Society’s Commitment to Independent Native Churches, 1856–1872’, in W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood, eds., *Studies in Church History: The Churches, Ireland and the Irish*, vol 25 (Blackwell, Oxford 1989) 299–310, 303.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 304–5.

believed that each nation should have 'its own Church and its own bishop and clergy'<sup>43</sup> and he remained very suspicious of the baneful effects of civilization.<sup>44</sup> It was crucial that Christianity accepted 'the marked outward features of the native life from which it springs'. This would mean that 'uncivilized' people might be given office in the Church. There would be nothing new about that. 'The chief ornaments of the Apostolic Church would certainly be regarded as uncivilized in the present day. . .but the Christian church is not affected by distinctions such as these. She has no commission to bring all nations to any other uniformity than that of faith'.<sup>45</sup>

From all this it is clear that significant missionary teachers were prepared to argue that cultural pluralism had to be accepted; and that what was important was allowing Christianity to be expressed in the terms of the culture it was addressing. Yes, civilization might come and it might even be necessary for quite other reasons (a defence against the dominance of slavery for example) but it was in no sense the essence of the Gospel that it should happen. Indeed, there was quite a profound awareness of adverse developments if it happened out of tune with the thinking of the local society.

##### 5. The Comparative Failure to Evangelise Indigenous Forms.

That grand, capacious, Gothic churches were built is of course partly because the insights we have been considering (and which came in the main from the leaders and intelligentsia) at home, were not implemented by the missionaries. They generally accepted the ideal but regarded it as one to be developed at some point in the more distant future. They tended, said their critics at home, to exaggerate the weakness of the native church, to put off the day when they would leave and thus inevitably imprint the mark of their particular tradition more forcefully. For much of the second half of the century the missionary secretariates were prepared to do battle with them and constantly urged them to bring forward suitable indigenous leaders.

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<sup>43</sup>J.T. Moriyama, 'The Evolution of an African Ministry and the Work of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa in Tanzania, 1864–1909', (University of London PhD, 1984) 93.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 76–7, 114, 126–7; see also R.M. Heanley, *A Memoir of Edward Steere, DD, LLD: Third Missionary Bishop in Central Africa*, (George Bell and Sons, London 1888) 209 & 245–6.

<sup>45</sup>Heanley (1888) 245–6.

The New Testament gave no examples, it was argued, of the Apostles subjugating the church to foreign control.<sup>46</sup> The great barrier to indigenous structures, the CMS argued, was the European resident settler or soldier or administrator. He should not however be allowed to dominate the local and young church:

Where the Anglo-Saxon cannot be at home, there neither can his Church. . . While the English wish to enjoy the role and discipline of their Church exactly as in England, the Native Christians already show signs of desiring for themselves a Church modified to some extent in its forms, its ceremonies and its organization, to suit their oriental nature and their oriental life. Hence it is essential that the ultimate function of an independent Native Church be steadily kept in view, and no action taken which would interfere with or hinder such a consummation.<sup>47</sup>

In the last decade of the century the ideology of the secretariat changed. They began to accept that missionaries would stay for longer; that the ideal should be European and native working together; that there was much spiritual weakness in the indigenous church. Whereas previously the spiritual and moral defects in the New Testament Corinthian church had tended to be used as an argument against imposing over high western standards, these defects were not used as an example of the disaster which might ensue if missionaries left too quickly as it was argued that Paul had done.<sup>48</sup> Exactly the same process has been traced in the UMCA as Bishop Steere's vision of an African church was replaced by 'a quasi European Church' in which the European missionaries were the permanent pastors and administrators.<sup>49</sup>

It is generally recognized that the alteration in attitude had two sources—on the one hand there was the heightening of imperialism with its fragile self-confidence in the superiority of the west. One small example of this process in the CMS must suffice. In the midst of the very fraught controversy over how to deal with Bishop Crowther's diocese in West Africa the CMS secretary, Wigram, rebuked one of his committee members for corresponding with members of the indigenous church. You are, he reminded him, a

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<sup>46</sup>Williams (1990) 76.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>49</sup>Moriyama, *op. cit.*, 237, 272 & 230–83 for a more extended study.

member of 'the Governing Body' and it was consequently unacceptable for him 'to carry on a correspondence with the governed of a frank kind'.<sup>50</sup>

The other factor was Keswick spirituality and, in particular, the influence of Hudson Taylor. Hudson Taylor was a very great missionary. He emphasized constantly dependence on the Holy Spirit and he was frequently dismissive of the methods of missionaries of the past. His trust in the Holy Spirit tended to cut through many of the cautions of other missionaries—missionaries could be recruited from a far wider circle than had been thought wise; they did not need such long training; they should preach the Gospel and move on quickly; they should be holy and form churches which were holy. In the hands of young and immature missionaries these were heady ideas and led easily to a highly individualistic, even arrogant approach—the more so as Taylor appealed particularly to the upper-middle classes trained in 'notions of service, feelings of superiority, habits of authority'.<sup>51</sup> It produced a theological climate of certainty and high expectation which entirely lacked the sort of flexibility that is essential in any operation where the sympathetic understanding of another culture and the development of leadership within that culture is central.

## II. Attitudes to Religious Pluralism

There was some difference of attitude as we have seen between Duff and Carey but both would have agreed that the systems they faced were false. Most also concluded that their adherents were perishing,<sup>52</sup> though others, like Venn, were agnostic on this matter.<sup>53</sup> Certainly however the last half of the century brought the traditional view under greater challenge and one of the most effective arguments was the immorality of a doctrine that supposed that millions were consigned to

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<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>51</sup>Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850–1983*, (Longman, London 1975) 199.

<sup>52</sup>Stanley (1990) 65.

<sup>53</sup>C. Peter Williams, 'The Recruitment and Training of Overseas Missionaries in England between 1850 and 1900', (University of Bristol MLitt, 1976) 192; Stanley (1990) 66.

everlasting torment for not responding to a message they had never heard. By the end of the century the phrase ‘the perishing heathen’ was seldom heard.<sup>54</sup> This coincided with a gradual increase of respect for other religions. On the other hand, missionaries in the Hudson Taylor tradition emphasized continually that souls were perishing—that ‘more than a thousand every hour’ were ‘passing away into death and darkness’ was central to the Taylor challenge<sup>55</sup> and he wrote into his basis ‘the everlasting punishment of the lost’ as a fundamental truth to be accepted.<sup>56</sup> This starting place gave him little sympathy with any attempt to understand Confucianism from the inside or with proposals to tolerate Ancestor Worship.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, there was a growing interest in other religions, and by the end of the century, many were not only less confident in the eternal punishment of the heathen, but less confident that their religions were valueless. There was a tendency to see Christ as the fulfilment of all religions<sup>58</sup> and certainly the World Missionary Conference of 1910 gave much more attention than any conference hitherto to other religions. It is easily, Stanley argues, combined with the dogma-less social gospel of liberalism to present Christ as a figure of ethical idealism and social justice but one whose achievements were so linked with those of the West that his followers were likely to have little patience with the cultural reality in other countries.<sup>59</sup>

If most early nineteenth century missionaries were incapable of discerning merit in systems other than Christianity, they were prepared to labour hard at the task of understanding the cultures to which they ministered because Christianity would have to be clothed within them. In significant contrast while at least some of their successors came to accept that the highest of these religious systems

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<sup>54</sup>Williams (1976) 198.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 195. Much later, after he had given up effective control of the CIM, Taylor came to be much more agnostic about the fate of the heathen (*Ibid.*, 199).

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>57</sup>P. Barr, *To China with Love: The Lives and Times of Protestant Missionaries in China, 1860–1900*, (Secker & Warburg, London 1972) 146.

<sup>58</sup>Williams (1976, 197) Sharpe (1965) 38.

<sup>59</sup>Stanley (1990, 164).

contained insights which fell just short of Christianity, they tended to regard the cultures in which they were clothed as inadequate stepping stones to western enlightenment. Thus if Carey's vision was of using 'the splendid imagery of the great national poets' of India 'to elucidate and adorn Christian truth', that of the late nineteenth century BMS missionary in China, Timothy Richard, was that of Christianity as modernisation; 'the great ideological engine which, in partnership with Western science and education, would drive China into the modern world of freedom and prosperity'.<sup>60</sup>

In brief the earlier missionaries, for all their weaknesses, sought to think the issues through in biblical terms, while the later missionaries were much more influenced by prevailing cultural understanding and this made them an easy prey to the cultural imperialism of the West. Certainly liberal Christianity in China 'self-consciously and deliberately presented itself as the central ingredient of an integrated package of Westernisation'.<sup>61</sup> The results were disastrous.

It is then quite inappropriate to dismiss all our evangelical missionary forefathers as being unaware of the cultural issues in evangelism. It was indeed their more liberal successors who were most likely to become uncritical apostles of the secular ideologies in which they had been formed. A thought-provoking parallel is provided by examining the reaction of the churches in Germany to Nazism. Though the evidence is complex, it does seem that the churches became more culturally bound (more uncritically accepting of the ideology of Nazism) as they became more 'liberal' in their interpretation of the Bible. However that may be, it has seemed important to re-emphasize the positive understanding of cultural issues which was part of the accepted wisdom of many quite unexceptionable Victorian missionary thinkers.

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<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 145.