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978-0-521-18888-3 - Nature and the Godly Empire: Science and Evangelical Mission in the Pacific, 1795-1850

Sujit Sivasundaram

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Nature and the Godly Empire

Nineteenth-century historians have described how science became secular and how scientific theories such as evolution justified colonialism. This book changes this narrative by offering the first sustained account of the relationship between nineteenth-century science and Christianity outside the Western world. It focuses on the intrepid missionaries of the London Missionary Society, who reverently surveyed the oceans and islands of the Pacific and instructed converts to observe nature in order to interpret God's designs. Sujit Sivasundaram argues that this knowledge functioned as a popular science that was inextricably linked with religious expansion. He shows how Britain's providential empire found support from popular views of nature as much as elite science, and how science and religion came together in communities far from the metropolis even as disputes raged in Europe. This will be essential reading for historians of empire, science and religion, cultural historians, environmental historians and anthropologists.

SUJIT SIVASUNDARAM is College Lecturer and Director of Studies in History at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge.

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Behold yon rustic temple, pillared round
 With stems of stately tamanu and bound
 With wattled boughs, and white and shining wall,
 And wicker doors, thrown wide to welcome all
 And graceful cocoa-plumes and plaitain leaves
 Crowning its roof and drooping round its eaves!
 The pulpit steps are propt on warriors' spears –
 The peaceful badge of sanguinary years!
 While poisoned shafts and hatchets hung on high,
 And clubs like votive tablets, catch the eye –
 And gods, whose demon-dynasty is o'er
 Support the roof or fence the sacred door –
 Like vassals conquered in the field of war,
 And chained like trophies to the victor's car [...]
 Such is the temple of the rising state!
 The pledge and promise of a happier fate! –
 An infant Zion pointing to the skies,
 To melt the heart and 'draw the wondering eyes!' [...]
 How sweet, how lovely, in this isle remote,
 The first fair landmark raised to holy thought!
 Fresh as a fountain in the wilderness,
 Its living springs shall heal the land's distress! [...]
 All – all is changed! Where'er I turn mine eyes,
 The monuments of peace and love arise! [...]
 Little he deemed, who led the first enterprise,
 To watch the wheeling worlds that light yon skies –
 How soon – where thirst of science paved the way –
 The 'Men of Peace' should bring a brighter day!
 How soon – attracted by a brighter star,
 The light of Faith should follow from afar,
 Divulge new worlds – the slumbering isles arouse,
 Decked like a bride to meet her heavenly spouse!

Extracted from, Anon, *Polynesia, or Missionary Toils and Triumphs in the South Seas, A Poem* (London, 1839), 75–81. The author refers to the chapel of Raiatea, which was built by the missionaries who are at the focus of this book (lines 1–22) and to the voyages of Captain James Cook, which provided the inspiration for missionary work in the Pacific (lines 25–30).

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On the shores of Colombo, alongside the rocks that stud the seashore and the railway line that transports hundreds into the city, there is a school called St Thomas's Prep. Every morning, at seven-thirty, the bell tolls and hundreds of boys dressed in white and blue make their way in perfect lines to the chapel. It was at this school that I learnt my first lessons, and it was here that I was first introduced to the rudiments of Christianity.

As I think about the long journey I have made since then, I have many people to thank. But the ever optimistic teachers of St Thomas's Prep, who kept to the task of educating their charges, regardless of the rude interruptions from bomb blasts, curfews and riots, must come very close to the top. My parents, Siva and Ramola Sivasundaram, have been unstinting in their support and encouragement, and have coped remarkably well with a son who never emerged from university. I am also indebted to my grandparents, Mano Muthu Krishna and George Candappa, from whom I learnt to write.

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