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978-0-521-19410-5 - God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World, c. 1801–1908

Hilary M. Carey

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Part I

God's empire

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1 Colonialism, colonisation and Greater Britain

Greater Britain – the English-speaking settler colonies of the British empire which we are more likely now to refer to as the British world – was an idea as much as a set of territories.¹ For the free Christian churches of the peoples of Great Britain and Ireland, it was also a mission field. This is a novel idea and one which I hope to argue throughout the course of this book. Chapter 1 begins by examining the idea of Greater Britain, first as a concept in the writing of Charles Wentworth Dilke (1843–1911), and then as it was taken up by the churches who adopted the term as their own in the last decades of the nineteenth century. It also introduces topics raised in subsequent chapters which examine the arrangements and organisations that were marshalled across the empire in order to provide religious services for colonists. In subsequent chapters, this book considers the development of missions to British settlers, including the colonial missionary societies (Chapters 3 to 7), missionary training colleges for colonial clergy (Chapters 8 to 10), church emigration societies (Chapter 10), and Christian colonisation (Chapters 11 and 12). Together, these provisions for the colonial churches helped shape the powerful, shared sense of British identity that suffused the British world and to which Dilke was able to give a name.

In 1897, the English Baptist pastor and writer, John Clifford (1836–1923), completed a tour of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, during which he was swept up in the elaborate colonial celebrations for the Queen's diamond jubilee.² Experiencing at close hand the wave of colonial devotion to the Queen, he confidently predicted a great coming federation of Greater Britain, which would be made up of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, the Dominion of Canada and Newfoundland,

¹ For settler loyalism and the 'imagined British world', see C. Bridge and K. Fedorowich, eds., *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (London, 2003); S. Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace: The Demise of the Imperial Ideal* (Melbourne, 2001); P. H. Buckner and R. D. Francis, eds., *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary, Alberta, 2005).

² J. Clifford, *God's Greater Britain. Letters and Addresses* (London, 1899).

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United Australasia, United South Africa and United Hindustan.³ To his British Nonconformist readers, Clifford was delighted to report the extent to which the colonists had successfully cast off the burden of the 'Romanising Anglican Establishment', and had extended Christ's kingdom by democratic and social reforms.⁴ An admirer of Kipling (whose verse he liked to quote), Clifford preached fervently about the prospects for even greater unity ahead: the whole world was becoming one through the redeeming power of Jesus Christ in the British empire. His published letters give us some idea of the power of his preaching on this theme:

One insistent Voice reaches us at home; let us heed it! Go preach the Gospel to every Englander, and persuade him to accept it before he leaves for the new worlds of Africa, or India, or Canada or the Southern Seas, so that wherever he goes he may carry with him the saving energies of the Redeemer.⁵

At one level, Clifford's enraptured sermon offers transparent and enthusiastic endorsement for British, and indeed for specifically English, imperialism. However, religious rhetoric needs to be carefully deconstructed, and it must be emphasised that Clifford's enthusiasm was reserved for a religious rather than a political empire, though clearly he saw no real conflict between the two.

In the late nineteenth century, Nonconformists such as Clifford were among the many enthusiastic advocates of the cultural promise of the English-speaking lands of the British empire. For all the churches, the empire created opportunities for the construction of transnational spiritual networks that aimed to transcend the cultural constraints and legal proscriptions of the past. Like Clifford, Anglicans, Catholics and other Nonconformists were keen to take advantage of the empire to extend the geographical and spiritual boundaries of their churches. John Wolffe has suggested that religious leaders expressed this awareness of the British world through events such as the Lambeth Conferences, which called Anglican bishops from throughout the world to assemble in London every ten years beginning in 1867, as well as travel by church delegations.⁶ At the close of the century, many Protestant churches held their own worldwide meetings in Britain, which drew delegates from Australasia, Canada, Asia, America and Africa, and encouraged similar aspirations.⁷ For Catholics, the nineteenth International Eucharistic

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144. ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁶ J. Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843–1945* (London, 1994), p. 220. For Nonconformist enthusiasm for empire, see J. Cox, 'Were Victorian Nonconformists the Worst Imperialists of All?', *Victorian Studies*, 46 (2004), pp. 243–55.

⁷ E.g. the 'Pan-Presbyterian' Councils held in 1888, 1892, 1896 and 1901; Congregationalists met in London (1891), Boston (1899), Edinburgh (1908), Boston (1920)

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Congress, held in London in 1908, was an opportunity to celebrate the imperial credentials of British Catholics.⁸

The common Christianity which suffused Greater Britain was, for the most part, assumed to be a 'generic' Protestantism, which encompassed imperial loyalty and the celebration of uniquely British (or Anglo-Saxon) virtues of freedom, tolerance, justice and civic duty.⁹ In this modified form, it continued earlier visions of Britain as a Protestant nation heroically resisting the Catholic menace of Spain, France and Ireland, which Linda Colley, in an influential thesis, has suggested was integral to the British state forged in the eighteenth century.¹⁰ The Evangelical Anglicans who founded the Colonial and Continental Church Society, considered in Chapter 5, were so entranced by the idea of Greater Britain that they incorporated the term in the title of their journal, the *Greater Britain Messenger*. In 1876, the following poem was recited at the close of a sermon delivered on behalf of the Colonial and Continental Church Society, in the hope that it would inspire listeners to respond to the religious needs of colonists:

Rest not! but heed thy brother's cry of anguish
For 'living bread' across the stormy sea.
Shall famished souls in 'Greater Britain' languish
When God has sent His messengers to thee?

Haste! where as yet no heaven-pointing tower
Reminds the settler of a better world;
Go! teach his sons the source of England's power,
The 'Spirit's sword', the Gospel-flag unfurl'd!¹¹

Though directed at an Evangelical Anglican rather than a Baptist audience, this poem sums up sentiments that are similar to those expressed

and Bournemouth (1930). The equivalent meetings of the Church of England included the Lambeth Conferences of bishops (from 1867), the Missionary Conferences of the Anglican Communion (1894) and, subsequently, the Pan-Anglican Conference (1908); the Methodists gathered in 1881 (London), 1891 (Washington) and 1901 (London); the first Baptist World Congress was held in London in 1905.

⁸ *New York Times*, 6 September 1908.

⁹ C. Hall, K. McClelland and J. Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 47. See also H. McLeod, 'Protestantism and British National Identity, 1815–1945', in *Religion and Nationalism in Europe and Asia*, ed. P. Van Der Veer (Princeton, NJ, 1999), pp. 44–70.

¹⁰ L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1770–1837* (New Haven, CT, 1992), p. 3. For discussion, see A. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 61; K. Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 146; S. Pincus, "'To Protect English Liberties': The English Nationalist Revolution of 1688–1689", in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650–c. 1850*, ed. T. Claydon and I. McBride (Cambridge, 1998), p. 76; R. Strong, *Anglicanism and Empire* (Oxford, 2007), p. 20.

¹¹ *Greater Britain Messenger*, no. 1 (April 1876), p. 7.

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by Clifford: the gospel was the source of England's power; British settlers had spread throughout the whole world; the Gospel flag, as much as the British flag, should be their source of unity. Embedded in hymns, sermons and tracts, texts such as these assumed that Britain's overseas settler colonies formed part of a wider Christian realm, a cultural community that both transcended and reinforced other, more political bonds.

As for 'God's Empire', preachers sometimes referred to this as well. However, there was an important theological tradition that considered all empires to be tainted with a burden of sin, if not actually evil.¹² Christ had said, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18: 36), and this was generally taken to mean that Christians, especially professional Christians such as missionaries, should stay out of politics. In a sermon preached in 1866, the English Baptist, Octavius Winslow (1808–78), a descendant of one of the Pilgrims who escaped the English yoke by fleeing to America on the *Mayflower* in 1620, spoke of God's rule extending over the four kingdoms of nature, providence, grace and glory: 'These are not separate and independent sovereignties, but are parts of one perfect whole – divisions of one great empire, God's sceptre ruling alike over each and all. We may confirm and illustrate the unity of God's empire, by the spiritual conversion of His people.'¹³ In this view, conversion, not conquest and colonisation, was the way to hasten the coming of Christ's kingdom or perfect God's empire on earth.

These two alternative visions of empire, one more or less spiritual, the other a vehicle for the expression of a British nationalism that transcended religious, political, racial and class difference, could hardly be reconciled in a single ideology. However, for churchmen in the imperial age, the ideal of 'Greater Britain' provided an opportunity for doing so.

Greater Britain

The term Greater Britain is as old as the first British settlements of America where it was used to refer to the combined territories of the first British empire. However, according to Duncan Bell, the concept

¹² H. M. Carey, 'Religion and the "Evil Empire"', *Journal of Religious History*, 32 (2008), pp. 179–92. For 'the Empire of Christ and the Empire of Britain' in relation to India, see J. Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818–1940* (Stanford, CA, 2002), pp. 23–51.

¹³ O. Winslow, *The Lord's Prayer: Its Spirit and Its Teaching* (London, 1866), p. 206. The term 'God's Empire' is used in a similar, purely religious sense by J. Vaughan, *Sermons Preached in Christ Church, Brighton* (London, 1867), p. 3.

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of Greater Britain (if not the term itself) was first formulated in the 1830s and 1840s in the wake of the Canadian rebellions (1837 and 1838). It was not until this time that it was felt necessary to articulate an ideology that favoured closer union between colonies and metropole since, before then, the colonies lacked a separate apparatus of government. Additional impetus for change came with the much-increased emigration to the British settler colonies that followed the end of the French wars. Between 1815 and 1840, about 1 million people left the British Isles; from 1847, the depopulation of Ireland (from 7.7 million in 1831 to 4.3 million in 1936) began, and, between 1850 and 1900, emigration from Britain to the colonies exceeded 7 million people. So immense was the impact of this global outpouring that James Belich has dubbed it the 'settler revolution', arguing that it was responsible for the creation of an Anglo-speaking, transnational superpower whose influence remains dominant in the world today.¹⁴

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the major colonies of settlement gradually became independent of British rule so that, by 1872, there were ten self-governing colonies: Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Canada (Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick), New Zealand, New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria and Queensland and, most recently, Cape of Good Hope.¹⁵ There were also important, if smaller, settler populations in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia as well as parts of India and South America. While rebellions in Canada and the Boer War (1899–1902) were challenges to the ideal, it could generally be assumed that British settlers overseas were loyal supporters of Britain – independent in many respects, but forming part of a common cultural sphere.

As a term in common use, 'Greater Britain' was popularised through the writing of Charles Wentworth Dilke (1843–1911) whose account of his youthful travels in 1866 and 1867 was a Victorian bestseller.¹⁶ Dilke considered the preface to *Greater Britain* to be the best thing he ever wrote, largely because of its articulate defence of British colonisation, something he called 'the true as against the bastard Imperialism'.¹⁷ While *Greater Britain* and its sequels are mostly unabashed apologies

¹⁴ Figures from C. E. Carrington, *The British Overseas: Exploits of a Nation of Shopkeepers*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 501–11; J. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World* (Oxford, 2009).

¹⁵ D. Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire, Nation, and the Future of Global Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), p. 3.

¹⁶ C. W. Dilke, *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English Speaking Countries During 1866 and 1867*, 2 vols. (London, 1868).

¹⁷ Cited by S. Gwynn and G. M. Tuckwell, *The Life of the Right Hon. Sir Charles W. Dilke*, 2 vols. (London, 1917), p. 96.

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for British imperial expansion, Dilke was under no illusions about the moral cost of colonisation; he referred to the Anglo-Saxons as 'the only extirpating race' and subjected their treatment of native people in America and Australia to harsh criticism.¹⁸ Dilke himself was not an advocate either of imperial federation or Anglo-Saxon supremacy; in *Problems of Greater Britain* (1890), he took pains to emphasise the differences as well as the common bonds which held the different parts or 'states of Greater Britain' together.¹⁹ Indeed, Dilke regarded Greater Britain as a commodious term, and under that umbrella he included colonies and territories from both the older and the newer British empires: Newfoundland, Canada, the United States, the West Indies, Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific, South Africa and India – a much more heterogeneous group than simply the majority British settler colonies. What he admired was the energy, enthusiasm and possibility created by British influence over this swath of territory, not its uniformity or submission to British norms.

The notion that the Anglo-Saxon people formed a union that crossed political and national boundaries and included core cultural values was one that proved enormously fruitful in the decades that followed the publication of Dilke's book. Greater Britain was celebrated in songs and music, exhibitions and conferences, manuals for settlers and emigrants, and through publications which surveyed the history and expansion of the white, Christian, English-speaking British empire.²⁰ Perhaps because the term was later taken up by more radical enthusiasts for the imperial idea and, in the 1930s, by fascists such as Oswald Mosley,²¹ 'Greater Britain' has come to be associated with the most strident excesses of Anglo-supremacy. However, this was not necessarily the case. For many religious and humanitarian thinkers and writers, Greater Britain was linked to the expansion of all that was best in British culture: its language, morality, system of law and constitution, the love of justice and religious and political liberty. Bell has argued that discussion of Greater Britain and especially the idea of a closer political and cultural union with settler Britons was an ideal that was discussed and embraced by public intellectuals across the political spectrum – from

¹⁸ Dilke, *Greater Britain*, p. 561.

¹⁹ C. W. Dilke, *Problems of Greater Britain*, 4th edn (London, 1890), p. 4.

²⁰ For songs and music, see Felix Burns, *Greater Britain Dance Album* (London: J. H. Larway, 1910); George R. Ceiley, *Greater Britain ... War Song* (London: Weekes & Co., 1915); Clarence Collingwood Corri, *The Sons of Greater Britain ... in Gay Piccadilly* (London: Hopwood & Crew, 1901); *The Greater Britain Exhibition, Earl's Court London* (London: Spottiswood & Co., 1899); G. Gordon Brown and G. Noel Brown, eds., *The Settlers' Guide: Greater Britain in 1914* (London, 1914).

²¹ O. Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London, 1932).

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proto fascists who argued in favour of British world domination and political federation, to humanitarian idealists for whom imperial union was anathema.²² What these thinkers had in common was the conviction that British or, more narrowly, English or 'Anglo-Saxon' values, might profitably be transported across the world. For some thinkers this vision was almost entirely secularised and rooted in racial and cultural hierarchies that bore little connection to religious ideals. For many others, religion provided significant props to the overall project.

Greater Britain was one solution to the problem created by British expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century – how to shape a national identity in the absence of a convincing internal or external Catholic threat. While 'Protestant Britain' had been an effective vehicle for a warrior island state, it was of less use in the changed conditions of the post-Napoleonic world in which religious divisions were an impediment to good order and government. In the British empire, multiple rather than unitary nationalism became the norm and Britishness supplied a new overarching identity that supplemented rather than supplanted older ethnic and religious loyalties. The Britishness encapsulated in the term 'Greater Britain' was all the more effective as a vehicle for colonial identity because it provided nationalism without government or religious establishment (though some people had aspirations in this direction).²³

These ideas reflect the seminal influence of Benedict Anderson, who stressed the contingent character of the nation, which he defined as 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.²⁴ Anderson considered that nationalism was the most important modern heir to two earlier cultural systems, namely, the religious community, including the medieval notion of 'Christendom', and the dynastic realm.²⁵ In other words, nationalism was a kind of secular religion. Nevertheless, because he defined nationalism as the precursor rather than the collaborator to the creation of the nation state, Anderson's thesis about the cultural construction of national identity has some limitations as a tool for the religious historian. Even

²² Bell, *Greater Britain*, p. 11.

²³ On the death of Queen Victoria, it was proposed that King Edward VII should take the title 'King ... of Greater Britain beyond the seas'. For the defeat of this suggestion, see P. A. Buckner, *Canada and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2008), p. 89. For a scheme to create a governing structure for Greater Britain, see B. H. Thwaite, *The Electoral Government of Greater Britain* (London, 1895). On the history of a federated empire, see J. E. Kendle, *Federal Britain: A History* (London, 1997).

²⁴ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edn (London, 1991), pp. 5–6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

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in modern secular states, religion and nation are constantly interacting with one another in multiple ways and should never be considered isolated phenomena.²⁶ Adrian Hastings came closer to the mark when he argued that religion, like language, was a component of all nationalisms.²⁷ This was true for Greater Britain as it was for earlier imagined communities of the peoples of the Atlantic World. Throughout British North America, Australia, New Zealand and southern Africa, the settler churches carried with them the burden and aspirations of the fused ethnic and religious communities of their home societies. In these new Britains, older religious ethnicities did not entirely disappear; rather, under the imperial umbrella, the churches accommodated English Anglicanism, Welsh Nonconformity, Irish Catholicism or Scottish and Irish Presbyterianism, in modified forms.²⁸ In general, the sort of religious nationalism promoted through events such as the feasts of the patron saints of England, Scotland or Ireland was thoroughly sanitised before being endorsed by the churches for consumption by the faithful. However, it was one of the mechanisms through which British imperialism continued to sustain a dialogue with its Christian and ethnic roots in Great Britain and Ireland.

Defining the religious character of Greater Britain more precisely than this is something of a challenge. However, unlike Britons in the eighteenth century, Greater Britons in the new century tended to define themselves less by their belligerent Protestantism than by their religious toleration and love of liberty. Just as Great Britain had freed her slaves, so she had granted full rights of citizenship to Catholics, Jews and Nonconformists. The ending of war with France also defused tensions which demonised the Catholic 'Other' and aggravated sectarian hostility at home. It was also significant that, as the British empire expanded, it incorporated more and more non-Christians while providing ample opportunities for Scots, Welsh and Anglo-Irish of all faiths to participate and prosper.²⁹ Even the despised colonial Irish could be redefined as part of the white, Christian ruling class in opposition to the subject heathen races of India, Africa and Asia.³⁰ This involved significant

²⁶ For examples, see Michael Jeismann, 'Nation, Identity and Enmity', in *What Is a Nation?: Europe 1789–1914*, ed. T. Baycroft and M. Hewitson (Oxford, 2006), pp. 20–4.

²⁷ Hastings, *Construction of Nationhood*, p. 31.

²⁸ For comments on religious aspects of Irish, Scottish and Celtic nationalism, see the essays in O. D. Edwards, *Celtic Nationalism* (London, 1968).

²⁹ C. Williams, 'The United Kingdom', in *What Is a Nation?: Europe 1789–1914*, ed. T. Baycroft and M. Hewitson (Oxford, 2006), p. 278.

³⁰ For whiteness and the Irish in America, where they were defined against Afro-Americans, see N. Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London, 1995). For the