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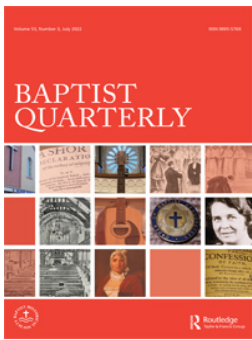
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Baptists, Race and Empire, 1792–1914

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the stances on race and empire of four British who featured in the overseas missionary movement in this period. William Ward of the Serampore Mission brought some elements of his early political radicalism into his attack on Hinduism as a system of priestly oppression. The writer and BMS secretary Edward Bean Underhill blamed the Jamaican plantocracy for the plight of the former slaves after emancipation, and defended black Jamaicans against racist attacks on their character. In contrast, Herbert Sutton Smith, a BMS missionary on the Congo from 1899 to 1910, wrote a book about his years at Yakusu that is full of racial stereotypes. Finally, Joseph Booth, a Baptist from Derby who began his own self-supporting mission in Malawi in 1892, became an outspoken critic of British involvement in the region, while still retaining a theoretical hope that Queen Victoria would intervene on behalf of exploited Africans.

KEYWORDS

Baptist missionary society;
race; imperialism; India;
Jamaica; Congo; Malawi

Introduction

In 1985 I addressed the Baptist Historical Society at its Summer School in Bradford on the topic of 'Nineteenth-century Liberation Theology: Nonconformist Missionaries and Imperialism'.¹ My paper began by quoting two passages from the Serampore Trio which spoke in glowing terms of the British imperial mission to India. First I cited a letter from Joshua Marshman to John Ryland in 1807, in which Marshman expressed his own certainty – and that of 'every one of my Brethren' – that British rule in India was 'the greatest temporal benefit that could have been conferred on the inhabitants in general'.² Then I cited a sentence from William Ward's multi-volume account of popular Hinduism, first published in 1811, *A View of the History, Literature, and Religion of the*

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¹The paper was published in *BQ* 32, no. 1 (1987): 5-18.

²Joshua Marshman to John Ryland, n.d. [1807], Rev. J Marshman's Correspondence, 1799-1826, BMS archives, Angus Library, Regents Park College, Oxford; cited in E Daniel Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India 1793-1837: The History of Serampore and its Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 202.

Hindoos: 'Never were such miseries to be removed – never was such a mighty good put within the power of one nation – the raising of a population of sixty millions to a rational and happy existence, and through them the illumination and civilization of all Asia!'³ Both Marshman's letter and the first edition of Ward's work preceded the revision of the East India Company Charter in 1813, which for the first time imposed on the Company a legal obligation to grant licenses to those seeking to disseminate 'useful knowledge' and 'religious and moral improvement' – a circumlocution for missionaries.⁴ Even when the corporate embodiment of British power in India was continuing to throw obstacles in the path of evangelical missionaries, Marshman, Ward (and Carey also) were in no doubt that British rule in India, despite all its abuses, had divine sanction and purpose.

The argument of my 1985 paper was that early nineteenth-century Nonconformist missionaries were intrinsically just as prone as their late nineteenth-century successors to adopt a providentialist view of the British empire, although the greater incidence towards the end of the century of threats to indigenous interests in areas of British influence meant that a Christian theory of benevolent empire was now more likely to issue in explicit support for the extension of British colonial territory. I also maintained that no distinctively Baptist view of empire could be identified: Baptists aligned themselves with the stance of evangelical Nonconformists as a whole, and, on most occasions, with a broader evangelical consensus shared by Evangelical Anglicans.

In this present paper, I hold essentially to the same conclusions, but attempt a rather different enterprise. My scope is confined to Baptists, and my approach is to identify four individual English Baptist missionaries or mission strategists, and to observe both the commonalities and differences between their respective stances on empire and race. Between them they span the whole period between the 1790s and 1914, and they embrace a variety of geographical locations: India, Jamaica, the Congo, and, less predictably to a Baptist constituency, Malawi.

William Ward

William Ward originally had pronounced radical and republican sympathies. An apprentice printer who was appointed editor of the *Derby Mercury* in 1789 at the age of nineteen, Ward became prominent in the Derby Society for Political Information, founded in December 1791, the earliest of the corresponding societies that gave Pitt's first ministry such anxiety. He was not one of the more radical

³William Ward, *A View of the History, Literature, and Religion of the Hindoos*, 3rd ed., 4 vols (Serampore, 1820), III, liv. Ward's work carried varying titles in its different editions. The sentence cited also appears in the first edition of 1811. Ward's work is accessible online via the Cambridge University Press electronic re-print, published in 2012.

⁴Penelope Carson, *The East India Company and Religion, 1698–1858* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 250.

members, but was a gifted political orator and pamphleteer. His address given at the first public meeting of the Society on 16 July 1792, just after the third anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, was published in *The Morning Chronicle*, and led to the (unsuccessful) prosecution of the newspaper for seditious libel.⁵ His biographer, Samuel Stennett, avoided all mention of Ward's early political activities. A generation later, in 1859, John Clark Marshman, by then a man of very substantial wealth, wrote in disapproving terms in his *Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward* of the 'vigour of language and bitterness of spirit' demonstrated in the rules of the Derby Society that Ward had composed.⁶ Marshman reassured his readers that Ward had 'renounced all interest in politics and journalism' following his baptism in Hull in August 1796 and subsequent theological study in John Fawcett's academy at Ewood Hall near Halifax.⁷ This may be true, though the claim would need to be tested, perhaps by examination of the content of the *Hull Advertiser and Exchange Gazette* under Ward's brief period of editorship.

Ward's early political radicalism may well have waned, but it left a visible residue on his *A View of the History, Literature, and Religion of the Hindoos*, a much reprinted work which leads one modern historian to describe him 'as one of the most widely-read European commentators on India during the first quarter of the nineteenth century'.⁸ Ward's assertion that 60 million Indians deserved 'a rational and happy existence' and his repeated emphasis on the irrationality of popular Hindu 'superstition' betrayed his indebtedness to Enlightenment ideals of reasoned argument and empirical discovery. He claimed that the European mind had been 'kindled by the collisions of genius, the struggles of parties', 'called into action by the voice of their country, by the plaudits of senates, by the thunders of eloquence', and 'enlarged by the society of foreigners, and by voyages and travels into distant realms.' In pitiful contrast, he alleged, 'we find the Hindoo still walking amidst the thick darkness of a long long night, uncheered by the twinkling of a single star, a single Bacon.'⁹

In his massive work Ward repeatedly describes Hinduism and its caste hierarchy as an idolatrous and irrational religious *system* regulated by those who manipulate that system in their own economic interests – the Brahmanical caste from which the priesthood was drawn. The analogy with autocratic

⁵E Fearn, 'The Derbyshire Reform Societies 1791-1793', *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*, 88 (1968), 47-59, at 54; see also Ronald Ellis, 'William Ward, the Strutts, and the Derby Society for Political Information', accessed 16 June 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0-iWTbWXOY>.

⁶Samuel Stennett, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. William Ward, Late Baptist Missionary in India* (London, 1825), 6-14; John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward*, 2 vols (London, 1859), I, 94.

⁷Marshman, *Life and Times*, I, 96; see also Stennett, *Memoirs*, 34; and E Daniel Potts, 'Ward, William', *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730-1860*, ed. Donald M Lewis, 2 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), II, 1197.

⁸Geoffrey A Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 160.

⁹Ward, *View of the History*, 3rd ed., III, xxvii, cited in Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism*, 162. 'Bacon' refers to Francis Bacon (1561-1626), philosophical pioneer of scientific method.

Catholic states in Europe is implicit in Ward's writing, except that the oppression wielded by the Brahmanical priesthood is even worse than that in Catholic Europe: 'the clergy in catholic countries', observes Ward, 'devour little of the national wealth compared with the bramhûns'.¹⁰ The parallel with Catholicism is reinforced by the profusion of gaudy images in the temples and the Hindu devotional practice of incanting the names of the deities in repetitive mantras. The repeated utterance of sacred cosmic sounds is presented as a striking contrast with the Protestant elevation of intelligible vernacular prayer, and reminds Ward of the priestly vocalisation of the Latin mass. He dismisses Hindu mantras as the 'vain repetitions' of those whom the King James version called the 'heathen' (the Greek is *ethnikoi*) of which Christ spoke in his teaching on prayer in Matthew 6:7. 'In this', he observes, 'the heathen are followed by all the Christian churches who have preserved least of the true spirit of Christianity: the Roman, Armenian, and Greek Christians in India, as well as the Musulmans, are continually practising "vain repetitions"'.¹¹ India, he asserts, is a country 'bleeding at every pore from the fangs of superstition'. A solemn duty therefore lies on the British government to do all it can to remove from 'the Hindoo race' such tragedies as *sati* (widow burning) or the voluntary immolation of pilgrims crushed beneath the wheels of Jagannath's mighty carriage at the various pilgrim festivals in the honour of this deity.¹² Ward's vision for British India is one of a radically reforming humanitarian empire dedicated to the elimination of the theological scandal and consequent moral enormities of 'idolatry'. To modern eyes, it appears grossly arrogant, but his dismissal of Hinduism as a system of priestly oppression had a humane and egalitarian tone. Within a few years of Ward's death in 1823 a similar absolutist moral framework would lead in the West Indies to the demand for immediate slave emancipation.¹³

Edward Bean Underhill

Edward Bean Underhill wrote many more books than William Ward, but with less success in terms of influencing public opinion. Whilst his primary interest for our purposes derives from his years as a BMS secretary (1849-76), Underhill should also be regarded as one of the forefathers of the Baptist Historical Society on account of his foundation in 1845 of the Hanserd Knollys Society, seven of whose ten volumes, reprinting seventeenth-century Baptist texts, he edited. In addition, he wrote biographies of James Mursell Phillippo, Alfred Saker, John Wenger, and Edward Steane, collated two collections of essays on Christian missions and their animating principles, and issued a lengthy

¹⁰Ward, *View of the History*, 3rd ed., III, 88.

¹¹Ward, *View of the History*, 3rd ed., II, 335, cited in Robert A Yelle, *The Language of Disenchantment: Protestant Literalism and Colonial Discourse in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 116.

¹²Cited in Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism*, 167. I have been unable to trace this reference in Ward's original text.

¹³See my article, 'Baptists, anti-slavery and the legacy of imperialism', *BQ* 42, no. 4 (2007): 284-95.

pamphlet detailing a notorious instance of harassment of Baptist converts in East Bengal by Hindu landlords, *The Case of the Baropakhya Christians* (1856).¹⁴ Perhaps the only works of Underhill's that are still widely read today are those dealing with the West Indies and the conflicted legacy of plantation slavery. They included *The West Indies: Their Social and Religious Condition* (1862) and his controversial attack on the Jamaican legislature, *A Letter Addressed to the Rt. Honourable E. Cardwell*, written in January 1865.¹⁵ Thirty years later, Underhill returned to the subject of Jamaica with an account of the Morant Bay Rising of October 1865, *The Tragedy of Morant Bay* (1895). These works are regularly cited by modern historians of Jamaica, notably by Catherine Hall in her *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination* (2002).¹⁶ Catherine Hall was reared in Baptist circles, being the daughter of J O Barrett, minister of Fuller Baptist Church, Kettering, and from 1949 to 1962 Superintendent of the North-Eastern area of the Baptist Union, and her interpretation of Underhill, though critical of his paternalism, is not unsympathetic.¹⁷

Underhill was an Oxford grocer before devoting himself to Baptist history and then to the BMS joint secretaryship. Although, like Ward, he had experience in publishing – he was proprietor and editor of the short-lived *Baptist Record, and Biblical Repository* from 1848 to 1849 – he lacked Ward's journalistic flair.¹⁸ His writing is what one might expect from a successful grocer, carefully measured, replete with figures, but a little dull. His most substantial book, *The West Indies: Their Social and Religious Condition*, was based on a deputation tour of the BMS West Indian fields undertaken by Underhill and Rev. J T Brown of Northampton in 1859-60. It diagnosed not only the ills of the Jamaican Baptist churches whose membership had been falling since the early 1840s, but also the wider economic malaise that had afflicted the Jamaican economy since the progressive reduction in the protective sugar duties instituted by the British government in 1846. Underhill's case was that the blame for Jamaica's problems lay partly with Westminster, but even more with the sugar proprietors, who continued to regard their black labourers 'only as the instruments of wealth, as so much sugar machinery, without affections, and born only to labour in the cane

¹⁴Edward Bean Underhill, *Life of James Mursell Phillippo, Missionary in Jamaica* (London, 1881); Alfred Saker, *Missionary to Africa: A Biography* (London, 1884); *The Life of the Rev. John Wenger, D.D., Missionary in India, and Translator of the Scriptures into Bengali and Sanscrit* (London, 1886); *Memorials of the Late Rev. Edward Steane, D.D.* (London, 1883); *Christian Missions in the East and West, in Connection with the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792-1873*, 2nd ed. (London, 1873); *Principles and Methods of Missionary Labour* (London, 1896); *The Case of the Baropakhya Christians* (London, 1856).

¹⁵E B Underhill, *The West Indies: Their Social and Religious Condition* (1862), new ed. (Cambridge 2010); idem, *Dr Underhill's Letter: A Letter Addressed to the Rt. Honourable E. Cardwell, with Illustrative Documents on the Condition of Jamaica and an Explanatory Statement* (London, 1865); idem, *The Tragedy of Morant Bay: A Narrative of the Disturbances in the Island of Jamaica in 1865* (London, 1895).

¹⁶Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

¹⁷See the editorial review of *Civilising Subjects* by John H Y Briggs, *BQ* 40, no. 3 (2003): 130-2.

¹⁸According to the British Library catalogue, the final volume in 1849 bore the title of *The Christian Record and Biblical Repository*.

field, [and] who act as if it was their right to control and coerce the labourer for their own sole advantage.¹⁹

Underhill's book was an abolitionist riposte to Anthony Trollope's *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (1859), which was a depressingly successful exposition of the racist theme that God had 'created men of inferior and superior race.' According to Trollope, and the West India interest as a whole, the negro, though admittedly 'a man and a brother', was 'the very idlest brother with which a hardworking workman was ever cursed'.²⁰ Underhill's response was to employ painstaking statistical analysis of the land economy of the black Jamaican smallholders to prove that 'idleness is certainly not a marked characteristic of the race'.²¹ Although Underhill's book is of sufficient historical importance to have twice been republished by academic presses in modern times,²² in its day its sales figures failed to rival Trollope's book. 'Only sensational books are selling', Underhill lamented in 1863 to his friend and BMS colleague, David East.²³

Underhill was a less sensationalist writer than William Ward, but his endorsement of an underlying moral purpose to the British empire was essentially the same. When he did write about India, he could, as late as the 1870s, employ language that echoed Ward's. The worshippers of Krishna and Shiva were 'wretched' and 'deluded', and 'the Gospel alone can secure for India, order, good government, and peace. It alone can destroy the dark superstitions of the land, and place the British power on an unassailable and righteous foundation.'²⁴ Nevertheless, there were significant differences of tone from Ward's earlier invective against Hinduism: 'The impression is prevalent in the minds of the population generally, that the reign of Hinduism is drawing to a close. The festivals of the gods are celebrated with less pomp and circumstance, pilgrimage is on the decrease, fewer temples are annually erected, Brahmins complain of the diminution of their gains.'²⁵

Underhill's perspective from the 1870s reflects a growing but ill-founded optimism among Victorian Christians that Hinduism was in terminal decay, and a sense that the post-1858 government of India under the British Crown was more favourable to Christian missions than the East India Company had been: 'Its servants have lost that admiration for idolatry which many of them once professed, and they now largely aid the missionary in his work.'²⁶

¹⁹Underhill, *The West Indies*, 330.

²⁰Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (1859), new ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 61-2, 66, cited in Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 217.

²¹Underhill, *The West Indies*, 415-23, quotation at 423.

²²By the Negro Universities Press in 1970 and Cambridge University Press in 2010.

²³Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 224.

²⁴Underhill, *Christian Missions*, 125-6. This work was a compilation drawn from published BMS documents, so we cannot be sure that Underhill penned these words himself, but his inclusion of this extract may safely be taken as an endorsement of its sentiments.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 115.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 119.

Underhill, like Ward before him, identified the Bengali peasantry as an oppressed population, but the oppressors were now less the Brahmins as a caste and more the landlords (zamindars), who held the tenant cultivators (ryots) in a state of virtual slavery.²⁷ His first-hand experience of the deep-rooted problems of post-emancipation Jamaica had heightened Underhill's awareness of oppression as a system of economic exploitation. The zamindars were the Indian equivalent of the Jamaican plantation owners, and a supposedly benevolent British imperial rule was the answer to them both.

Underhill never deviated from his belief that the black population of the West Indies could not be blamed for the economic problems that followed emancipation, and should be encouraged in their efforts at small-scale production. Underhill's published letter to Edward Cardwell in 1865 gave him heroic status among Jamaican blacks, whose mass protest meetings against the pro-planter stance of the Governor, Edward Eyre, became known as 'Underhill meetings'.²⁸ By the 1860s, however, only a minority of the European pastors who filled the leading Jamaican Baptist pulpits shared Underhill's undimmed confidence in black capacity. The response of the Jamaica Baptist Union to his letter was to produce a report which, in Hall's words, 'reflected the disappointment of the missionaries, their tendency to fall back on a racialised understanding of African character which stressed natural indolence and absence of civilisation'. All of its signatories, bar one, were white.²⁹

Such racialised understandings of African character were eroding the humanitarian confidence that had underpinned the early nineteenth-century anti-slavery movement. They never eliminated that confidence entirely, because the missionary movement was founded on the premise that the gospel contained within it sufficient motive power to achieve a full transformation, both of individuals and their societies. Nonetheless, my third case study illustrates how, by the early twentieth century, some Baptists had fallen under the influence of racist ideologies.

Herbert Sutton Smith

Herbert Sutton Smith, a member of the Devonshire Square church in Stoke Newington, was trained at Regent's Park College, and in 1899 was appointed to the newly established BMS mission at Yakusu on the Upper Congo River. Sutton Smith is the least well remembered of my four case studies. His missionary career was relatively short. Ill health compelled his departure from the Congo in 1910 and relocation to Shandong in China, where he died in 1917. His significance for our purposes lies in his one major book, *Yakusu: The Very Heart of Africa*, published in 1912.³⁰

²⁷Underhill, *Principles and Methods of Missionary Labour*, 103; idem, *Life of John Wenger*, 220.

²⁸Bernard Semmel, *The Governor Eyre Controversy* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1962), 43.

²⁹Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 244-5. The one black signatory was William Knibb's son-in-law, Ellis Fray.

³⁰C E Wilson, 'Herbert Sutton Smith. Congo, 1890 [sic] -1910. China, 1912-1917', *Missionary Herald* (November 1917), 175-6; see also C E Pugh, "'Kienge" - H. Sutton Smith', *ibid.*, 194.

Yakusu: The Very Heart of Africa is representative of the embryonic anthropology that began to appear from missionary authors influenced by the call of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910 for the construction of a new discipline of 'missionary science'. Published just ten years after the appearance of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Sutton Smith's book drew on the lurid imagery first popularised by Henry Morton Stanley in his *In Darkest Africa* (1890). Sutton Smith makes no direct reference to Conrad's work, though the book opens with an allusion to 'the great gloomy forest' which Stanley had vividly depicted; he also includes several direct quotations from Stanley's text.³¹ Sutton Smith's book chronicles in some detail the secret *lilwa* societies which the Lokele people revered as custodians for the veneration of the ancestral spirits, and recounted the disastrous attempts of the missionaries to forbid their young Lokele converts from undergoing the *libeli* initiation rites into the secret societies.³² In 1977, Alberic Clement, then Home Secretary of the BMS, could describe *Yakusu: The Very Heart of Africa* in the *Missionary Herald* as a 'fine book', and repeat a judgment made in the Anglican journal *The Churchman* in 1912 that it was 'one of the most valuable contributions to the scientific study of missions' issued since the Edinburgh conference.³³ The (anonymous) review in *The Churchman* went on to commend the book for displaying 'close and accurate observation, and a marked power of generalization from first-hand evidence.'³⁴ In the light of the passages I am about to quote, such praise for the scientific objectivity of Sutton Smith's work may seem wholly inappropriate, but we should remember that the earliest ventures in anthropology were widely viewed as contributions to 'racial science', and often formed part of the ideological underpinning of European colonial rule.³⁵

I will now cite extracts from the book, and the reader should be prepared to be disgusted:

The native is always a child mentally, though he often becomes a very cunning child as he grows older. His memory is good. He possesses no originality of thought, and hence is lacking in invention, and generally in the power of creative imagination. ... Add to this that he lives in terror of other people's medicine on every journey he takes ... and some idea can be formed by the faith-freed European of the sombre pall that heathenism casts over its victims.

No wonder there is no growth, no ascent, but a constant withering away and descent into the grave. ...

³¹Herbert Sutton Smith, *Yakusu: The Very Heart of Africa* (London, n.d. [1912]), xiii, 2-4, 133-4.

³²*Ibid.*, 61-8, 215-17; see Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 346.

³³Alberic Clement, 'Eric Sutton Smith: An Appreciation', *Missionary Herald* (July 1977), 110. Eric Sutton Smith was the third son of Herbert and Ethel Sutton Smith, and a BMS missionary in China and Sri Lanka.

³⁴*The Churchman*, 26, 1 (1912), 78.

³⁵On this subject see Patrick Harries, 'Anthropology' in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 238-60; and Patrick Harries and David Maxwell, eds., *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

They cling pathetically to their little huts, their fragile pots, their unsteady canoes, their unprofitable mode of fishing, their clumsy money, their unhappy marriages, their insanitary ways, and their endless palavering. ...

It is a long way to the back of a black man's mind, and how to get there is the most serious problem the European missionary has to face. Upon just what kind of world does the black man look out? To really help him I must see the world with his eyes. Looking, then, at truth from his point of view, I may be able to present it acceptably to him.

The superficial observer laughs at his oddities, and condemns him as puerile for his low ideals. But there is nobleness in his race, or we should not find such characters as Samuel Crowther and Khama, who, at a single bound from savagery, present to the world a strength of mind, a loftiness of aim, a purity of life and a devotion to goodness which have won and held the respect of the most enlightened. ...

It is surely our duty to do the most we can for the people we love and work for, that they may not always be the lowest down, but may be fitted to take the places they can take if they are willing to make the degree of effort necessary for it. That the Bantu is equal to answering such a call, and will make the mental effort required to meet it, is abundantly proved by the extraordinary success of Lovedale in South Africa, of Blantyre in East Africa, and of our own work on the Lower and Upper Congo.³⁶

There is enough evidence here to satisfy most modern juries that Sutton Smith should be convicted of the charge of racism. His book is a particularly obnoxious example of what could happen to the missionary creed of the regenerative power of the gospel when Christians influenced by the racial ideologies of the high imperial age found themselves in indigenous cultures hitherto insulated from contact with Europeans. Unlike the so-called scientific racists of his day, however, Sutton Smith at least *professes* to want to see the world through African eyes; he still adheres to the Christian hope that radical moral transformation of both individuals and societies is achievable, and appeals to examples from other missions to make his point. The first black African Anglican bishop, Samuel Adjai Crowther of the Church Missionary Society's Niger Mission, or Sekgoma Khama, a convert of the London Missionary Society and paramount chief of the Ngwato people in what is now Botswana, were powerful testimonies to the capacity of the gospel to elevate. However, to Sutton Smith's mind, these are rare examples of individuals who, 'at a single bound', have been able to escape from their 'savage' environment. More typical are the instances of slow permeation of an African culture by 'Christian civilisation', as represented by the Scottish missions at Lovedale in South Africa or Blantyre in what is now Malawi, or the work of the BMS itself lower down the Congo River. The fatal flaw in his thinking was his naïve – and decidedly un-Baptist – equation of European societies with consistent Christian profession (notice the phrase 'the faith-freed

³⁶Sutton Smith, *Yakusu*, xv-xviii, 279-80.

European'), and the converse identification of African societies with 'savagery' and superstition.

Within a few years, those equations would become more difficult to sustain in the light of the First World War. The Western missionary movement typically exhibited what may be termed 'culturism', that is, a slippage from a laudable insistence that the leaven of the gospel has the potential to permeate the entire fabric of a society to a disastrous assumption that Western societies constituted the gold standard of spiritual and civilisational achievement. Sutton Smith's example presents a salutary warning of how easily this 'culturism' could degenerate into what may be termed a 'soft' form of racism. In contrast to the so-called 'scientific' racism of the day, it still held out the possibility of collective and radical change, but only within a framework that viewed African societies with pity, and barely disguised contempt.

Joseph Booth

Joseph Booth was born in Derby in 1851. He was converted as a young man from a secularist position, largely through the influence of his first wife, Mary Jane. He joined the Baptist church in Rotherham, where he became church secretary.³⁷ On emigrating to New Zealand in 1879, the Booths joined Wellesley Street Baptist Church, which in 1881, under the ministry of Thomas Spurgeon, re-located to become Auckland Baptist Tabernacle. In 1887 the Booth family moved to Melbourne, where they joined Brighton Baptist Church, of which Joseph soon became a deacon. It was there that the couple felt a call to missionary service, initially to China, but in October 1891 Mary Jane died of pneumonia. Booth and his two children then returned to England.³⁸

While in London, Booth inquired about serving with the BMS, but received a negative response: it was said in the interview that at over forty he was too old, and his ideas for reviving Carey's ideal of a self-supporting mission were dismissed as fanciful.³⁹ However, Booth established contact with the evangelical missions enthusiast Dr Henry Grattan Guinness, and attended C H Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle, where the supply minister, the American Presbyterian A T Pierson, laid hands on him, commissioning him for service in southern Africa.⁴⁰ The Booths arrived in Cape Town in February 1892, before travelling north to British Central Africa (now Malawi) with a vision of establishing an industrial mission that would follow Carey's self-supporting principles. In an article published in August that year in Pierson's *Missionary Review of the World*, he outlined his vision of recruiting 'farmers, artisans, engineers, miners, mechanics, and tradesmen' to a mission that would draw upon Africa's rich

³⁷Harry Langworthy, *'Africa for the African': The Life of Joseph Booth* (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1996), 20.

³⁸Klaus Fiedler, *The Making of a Maverick Missionary: Joseph Booth [in] Australasia* (Mzuzu: Luviri Press, 2016), 8-42.

³⁹Langworthy, *'Africa for the African'*, 24.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 25; for Pierson's pulpit supply at the Tabernacle at the end of Spurgeon's life, see Dana L Robert, *Occupy until I Come: A. T. Pierson and the Evangelization of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 208-15.

natural resources to 'take possession' of Africa, not for their own enrichment, but in the name of Christ. At this stage, Booth did not adopt an explicitly anti-colonial stance. His prospectus for the mission in fact envisaged that its initial base would be in territory in the Zambezi valley acquired by Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company.⁴¹

In practice Booth's vision of a self-supporting mission proved unrealistic, and he began to look to African Americans for pump-priming support for his Central Africa mission. Two fund-raising visits to the United States in 1895 and 1897 at a time when lynching of African Americans was endemic introduced him to black Baptist networks and a style of evangelicalism that had overt implications for racial politics. This bore fruit in Durban in September 1896 in plans for an Africa Christian Union, which aimed to unite all 'Christians of the African race' in an enterprise that was now political as well as missional. It would not simply promote self-supporting industrial missions, but also place on record 'the great wrongs inflicted upon the African race', and 'urge upon Christians who wish to be clear of African blood in the day of God's judgments, to make restitution for the wrongs of the past, and to withstand the appropriation by force of the African's land in the present.'⁴² In 1897 these ideas were incorporated in *Africa for the African*,⁴³ a book published in Baltimore, though only sparsely distributed.

Booth's book carried a three-fold dedication: 'First to VICTORIA, QUEEN OF GREAT BRITAIN'; 'Second to the BRITISH AND AMERICAN CHRISTIAN people'; and 'Third and Specially, to the AFRO-AMERICAN people of the United States of America'. Whereas in 1892 Booth had proposed that his self-supporting mission should be located in British South Africa Company territory, by 1897 his condemnation of the Company, as also of Sir William Mackinnon's Imperial British East Africa Company and Sir George Goldie's Royal Niger Company, was unqualified. These chartered companies had deprived Africans of vast tracts of land, and symbolised the fundamental injustice of the European 'partition, invasion, conquest and exploitation' of Africa. Nevertheless, Booth still appealed to Queen Victoria 'personally', and to her advisers, to reconsider British African policy. His demand was that 'the welfare of the multitude of Africans dwelling in such vast areas should be under Imperial oversight and control, and freed from the administration of companies whose sole business is the production of wealth'.⁴⁴

⁴¹Joseph Booth, 'THE GREATEST WORK IN THE WORLD – A PLEA FOR MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE', Joseph Booth Papers [hereafter JBP], Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library, MS2501/5; see Langworthy, *Africa for the African*, 25-6, 275; and *The Missionary Review of the World* 5 (1892): 573-80.

⁴²George Shepperson and Thomas Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1958), 74-5, 531-3.

⁴³Joseph Booth, *Africa for the African* (Baltimore, 1897), new ed. edited by Laura Perry (Zomba: Kachere Series, 2008).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

Booth is often remembered as a rare example of a missionary who was an 'atheist of empire', and that label is justified in so far as he had become a passionate opponent of European commercial and political involvement in tropical Africa. Yet we should take note that he, like Ward, Underhill and Sutton Smith before him, still adhered to the vision of a benevolent protective imperialism. What distinguishes his position from theirs is his deep scepticism towards the various corporate embodiments of British commercial interests in the non-European world. It is ironic that William Ward had looked to an earlier British chartered company, the East India Company, to *liberate* Indians from the chains of caste and Brahminical power. Edward Underhill had similarly appealed to the British Colonial Secretary, Edward Cardwell, to change the direction of British Jamaican policy in favour of the interests of the black population. Now Booth in his turn turned his gunfire, not on colonialism per se, but on the chartered companies, the proxies through which Britain had acquired her new African empire.

There is a further new note in his writing that cannot be found in either Ward or Underhill. It is the use of the category of 'race' as a positive category of black identity and emancipation. Sutton Smith in 1912 also employed the vocabulary of race, but as an indicator of how far Africans were supposed to have fallen short of European standards of civilisation. Booth, in contrast, saw in the embryonic pan-African movement signs of hope, and the promise of liberation. The combination of his experience of racial politics in southern Africa and his exposure to African American Baptists in the United States had turned him into a white apostle of Ethiopianism. In 1891–2 his family letters were annotated by the same heading 'Africa for Christ', with which the BMS had heralded the start of its Congo mission in 1877;⁴⁵ in a letter to his sister Emily, Booth linked the slogan to Psalm 68:31: 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God'.⁴⁶ By the late 1890s that text, long beloved of missionaries to Africa, was being turned into a slogan of pan-African consciousness, and Booth, while still inspired by the vision of 'Africa for Christ', was proclaiming the controversial slogan of 'Africa for the African'.

In 1896 Booth had married Annie Watkins, a nurse and life-long Anglican.⁴⁷ They left British Central Africa in 1903. In 1912 Professor Wayland Wilcox, an American Seventh-Day Baptist visited the Booth family home in Cape Town, and was disturbed to find that he had as a house guest the black editor of the *King William's Town Gazette*, in contravention of the segregation laws of the newly formed Union of South Africa. In his private journal Wilcox voiced his puzzlement at Booth's capacity to combine admirable self-sacrifice for

⁴⁵ Stanley, *History of the BMS*, 117; 'Africa for Christ: An Offer and an Appeal', *Missionary Herald* (September 1877), 181–91.

⁴⁶ JBP, MS 2501/1, Joseph Booth to Emily Booth, 17 June 1892; see also letter to his father, John Booth, 19 December 1891.

⁴⁷ Langworthy, 'Africa for the African', 73–4.

African interests with an obstinate indifference to 'law or reason': he was 'the strangest combination of consecration and egotism I have ever seen'.⁴⁸ Three years later, Booth's Yao cook, and first Malawian Baptist convert, John Chiblembwe, became in 1915 the leader of one of Africa's most celebrated anti-colonial risings. Booth was in Basutoland (Lesotho) at the time, and knew nothing of the rising until afterwards. Nonetheless, his previous connections with Chiblembwe were enough to get him expelled by the colonial authorities from both Basutoland and South Africa.⁴⁹

Booth was a 'maverick', and a 'religious hitchhiker' who was willing to catch a lift from whichever denomination was passing by at the time.⁵⁰ Though consistently baptistic in his convictions, he worked his way through a bewildering succession of denominational connections – first with English, then Scottish, and next Australian Baptists, followed by the National Baptist Convention in the USA, the Seventh-Day Baptists, then the Seventh-Day Adventists, then The Church of Christ, before dallying with the Watch Tower movement in northern Malawi. After his deportation from South Africa in 1919, he renewed connection with Yorkshire Baptists, and for a period was employed jointly by the Yorkshire Baptist Association and the Congregational Union cooking and cleaning at a camp for servicemen near Ripon.⁵¹ He died in 1929 in Weston-Super-Mare.

Conclusion

It is unwise to make generalisations on the basis of an eccentric who has elicited widely varying evaluations from historians.⁵² Booth, no doubt, was the exception that proves the rule. Nevertheless, his example, when viewed alongside the other three case studies, highlights the obvious truth that English Baptist stances on the British empire were not all the same, although certain continuing motifs can be identified. Booth used the problematic concept of race in a diametrically opposite way to Sutton Smith. Whilst the most politically radical of our four figures (though Ward must run him close), Booth was the most theologically conservative, with a tendency to read the Bible with wooden literalness. His conversion to Seventh-Day principles in 1898, for instance, was the result of his persuasion that the Christian observance of Sunday as the Sabbath was a

⁴⁸JBP, MS2504/9, Wayland D Wilcox, 'Journal of Travels and Experiences on African Trip, April 1st to October 1912', entry for Saturday, May 7. Wilcox was sent by the Seventh Day Baptist Mission Board in the USA to investigate its Nyasa mission; see Shepperson and Price, *Independent African*, 164, 509; and Wayland D. Wilcox, 'The Needs of Industrial Missions in Africa', *The Biblical World* 41, 2 (Feb. 1913): 103-8.

⁴⁹Langworthy, 'Africa for the African', 448-58; Shepperson and Price, *Independent African*, 356-9.

⁵⁰Fiedler, *The Making of a Maverick Missionary; Seventh Day Baptist Mission Work in Nyasaland, Africa. A Report by N. Olney Moore* (Chicago, 1950), 1, cited in Shepperson and Prince, *Independent African*, 28.

⁵¹Langworthy, 'Africa for the African', 467. Langworthy, who was Booth's great-grandson, narrates Booth's succession of denominational and mission connections in great, if confusing, detail.

⁵²Robert B Boeder, *Alfred Sharpe of Nyasaland: Builder of Empire* (Blantyre: Society of Malawi, 1981), 68, dismisses Booth as 'a sick frustrated individual whose life was full of sadness, but unworthy of excessive praise'.

contradiction of the fourth commandment, and an infringement of the Protestant principle that 'the Bible is the *only rule of faith and practice*.'⁵³

These four case studies also illustrate the truism that empire was a complex and pluriform phenomenon. There was not one imperialism, but many competing and divergent ones. None of our four British Baptists – not even Joseph Booth – saw empire *per se* as a moral evil. Rather they tended to rate empires according to how they responded to particular known evils, above all the evil of slavery or slave trading. Sutton Smith, for example, cited with approval a Yakusu colleague who commended Belgian colonial rule because it had crushed the power of the Arab-run East African slave trade in the Upper Congo region,⁵⁴ though he said nothing in his book about the red rubber atrocities inflicted by its predecessor, Leopold II's Congo Free State.

We find it easier to perceive the flawed nature of our forebears' naïve trust in the willingness of divine providence to turn imperial actors into deliverers than to give them credit for the genuineness of their humanitarian passion. This is particularly the case when we consider those who, like Herbert Sutton Smith, viewed indigenous peoples through lenses distorted by the racial assumptions of the age. His attitude to empire differed little from that of Ward or Underhill, though the contrast between him and Booth is more apparent. What shapes our own evaluations may be not so much the grand theory of empire that these figures espoused, but rather something more tangible, namely the moral tone of their contrasting responses to human racial and cultural difference. Before passing judgment on them, it behoves us in our own day to pause and examine our own responses to similar challenges.

Disclosure Statement

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⁵³JBP, MS2501/5, Joseph Booth, *Why I Abandoned Sunday-Keeping ... by Joseph Booth, Industrial Missionary, Nyasaland [sic], East Central Africa, Late Superintendent of Zambesi Industrial Mission, Nyassa Mission, and Baptist Industrial Mission of Scotland*, 4.

⁵⁴Sutton Smith, *Yakusu*, 212, citing S O Kempton.