

THE EAST INDIA COMPANY AND RELIGION

1698–1858

PENELOPE CARSON



*The East India Company and Religion,
1698–1858*

WORLDS OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

ISSN 1752-5667

Series Editor

H. V. Bowen (Swansea University)

Editorial Board

Andrew Cook (British Library)

Rajat Datta (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)

P.J. Marshall (King's College, London)

Nigel Rigby (National Maritime Museum)

This series offers high-quality studies of the East India Company, drawn from across a broad chronological, geographical and thematic range. The rich history of the Company has long been of interest to those who engage in the study of Britain's commercial, imperial, maritime, and military past, but in recent years it has also attracted considerable attention from those who explore art, cultural, and social themes within an historical context. The series will thus provide a forum for scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, and for those who have interests in the history of Britain (London and the regions), India, China, Indonesia, as well as the seas and oceans.

The editors welcome submissions from both established scholars and those beginning their career; monographs are particularly encouraged but volumes of essays will also be considered. All submissions will receive rapid, informed attention. They should be sent in the first instance to: Professor H. V. Bowen, Department of History and Classics, Swansea University, Swansea SA2 8PP

Previously published titles
are listed at the back of this book

*The East India Company and Religion,
1698–1858*

Penelope Carson

THE BOYDELL PRESS

© Penelope Carson 2012

All Rights Reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owner

The right of Penelope Carson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published 2012
The Boydell Press, Woodbridge

ISBN 978–1–84383–732–9

The Boydell Press is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

The publisher has no responsibility for the continued existence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Papers used by Boydell & Brewer Ltd are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Corydon, CR0 4YY

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Note on Hinduism	ix
Abbreviations	x
Map of India	xii
Introduction	1
1 A Christian Company?	7
2 The East India Company, Britain and India 1770–1790	18
3 The 1790s: A Time of Crisis	34
4 The Pillar of Fire Moves Forward: The Advent of British Missionaries 1793–1806	52
5 The Wisdom of the Serpent and the Innocence of the Dove: The Vellore Mutiny and the Pamphlet War 1806–1808	70
6 Troubled Years 1807–1812	90
7 Battle Lines Drawn: Missions, Dissent and the Establishment	110
8 The 1813 Renewal of the Company's Charter: The Religious Public Takes on the Company	130
9 A Turbulent Frontier: The Company and Religion 1814–1828	151
10 A New Dawn? The Era of Lord William Bentinck 1828–1835	183
11 Between Scylla and Charibdis 1836–1858	206
Conclusion and Epilogue: Strangers in the Land	237
Appendix 1: Presidents of the Board of Control	245
Appendix 2: Governors-General and Governors of Madras and Bombay	246
Appendix 3: Aide Memoire to Names	248
Appendix 4: 'The Pious Clause'	250
Bibliography	251
Index	261

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My interest in India was aroused by my parents, who met there during the Second World War. My Roman Catholic father was serving with Hodson's Horse and my Anglican mother was a VAD nursing auxiliary. I was born at an American Baptist mission hospital in the Shan States, Burma. Through my husband's membership of the Skinners' Company, a London livery company, I have another connection to India. James Lancaster was a Skinner, as were Thomas Smythe and William Cockayne, who served as 'Governor' (Chairman) of the East India Company for many of the first 50 years of its existence. The Company also met in the house of Thomas Smythe for some years. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Skinners' Hall became important again when challengers to the 'Old Company' met there. These 'Dowgate adventurers' were instrumental in the formation of a rival 'New Company', which was granted a charter in 1698. This met at Skinners' Hall and eventually both Companies had to accept an Instrument of Union in 1702.

This book has been a long time in gestation and there are two people whom I cannot thank sufficiently. The first is Professor Peter Marshall, who has long been a friend and mentor. He has encouraged me to write this and kept me going when I have been ready to give up. His perceptive comments have helped immeasurably and stopped me from making some stupid errors. Likewise, my husband, Hugh, has kept me at it, read the chapters time and again and made many helpful comments. He has slaved over the map. I am so grateful to Peter and Hugh for all the time they have given me. Margaret Humphrey, a former English teacher, has checked the text for spelling, grammar and comprehensibility. I take full responsibility for any errors that remain.

Aspects of this study have appeared in print over the years. 'An Imperial Dilemma: The Propagation of Christianity in Early Colonial India' for the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* in 1990 gave an overview of some of the problems faced by the Company, as did 'Missionaries, Bureaucrats and the People of India 1793–1833', in *Orientalism, Evangelicalism and the Military Cantonment in Early Nineteenth Century India* (1991), edited by Nancy Cassells. My article, 'Christianity, Colonialism and Hinduism in Kerala: Integration, Adaptation, or Confrontation', in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500* (2003), edited by Robert Frykenberg goes

into considerable detail about the situation in Kerala. I discuss the Anglicist/Orientalist educational controversy in 'Golden Casket or Pebbles and Trash? J. S. Mill and the Anglicist/Orientalist Controversy', in *J. S. Mill's Encounter with India* (1999), edited by Martin Moir, Douglas Peers and Lynn Zastoupil.¹

Over the years I have been helped by many librarians and scholars and I received a grant from the Irwin Fund of the University of London to travel to India. I am grateful to the Isobel Thornley Bequest for a grant towards publication costs. My thanks must also go to all our friends who have been so understanding while I completed this project. Finally, I thank Huw Bowen, my editor, who has shown extreme patience while waiting for the manuscript.

I dedicate this book to Hugh, my long-suffering husband, Peter and my parents.

Back of Ecton, October 2011

1 Full citations are given in the Bibliography.

NOTE ON HINDUISM

When the British arrived in India, the bulk of the people seemed to follow a variety of sects and cults that formed a monolithic religion that they began to refer to as Hinduism. It was assumed that these sects and cults were ancient in origin and had characteristics and religious ideas in common, complete with scriptures that could be referred to. By the late eighteenth century we find Company officials beginning to refer to the 'Hindoo' faith and religion. The word 'Hinduism' gradually became a word of rapid reference that began to have wide use by the early nineteenth century, signifying the existence of an all-embracing religious system. Recent studies have shown that such ideas about 'Hinduism' did not reflect reality.¹ The development of Hinduism as we know it today took place over many centuries and under many different influences. Official documents and correspondence also use the term 'Hindoo' as a generic reference to the Indian people, most of whom were believed to be followers of 'Hindooism'. The term 'Hindoo' was also used to refer to Indians generally. For the purpose of simplicity, I shall use the term to refer to those Indians who followed the various sects and cults that gradually became accepted as coming under the umbrella of Hinduism.

- 1 A useful discussion can be found in G. A. Oddie, 'Constructing Hinduism: The Impact of the Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding', in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*, ed. R. E. Frykenberg (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, 2003).

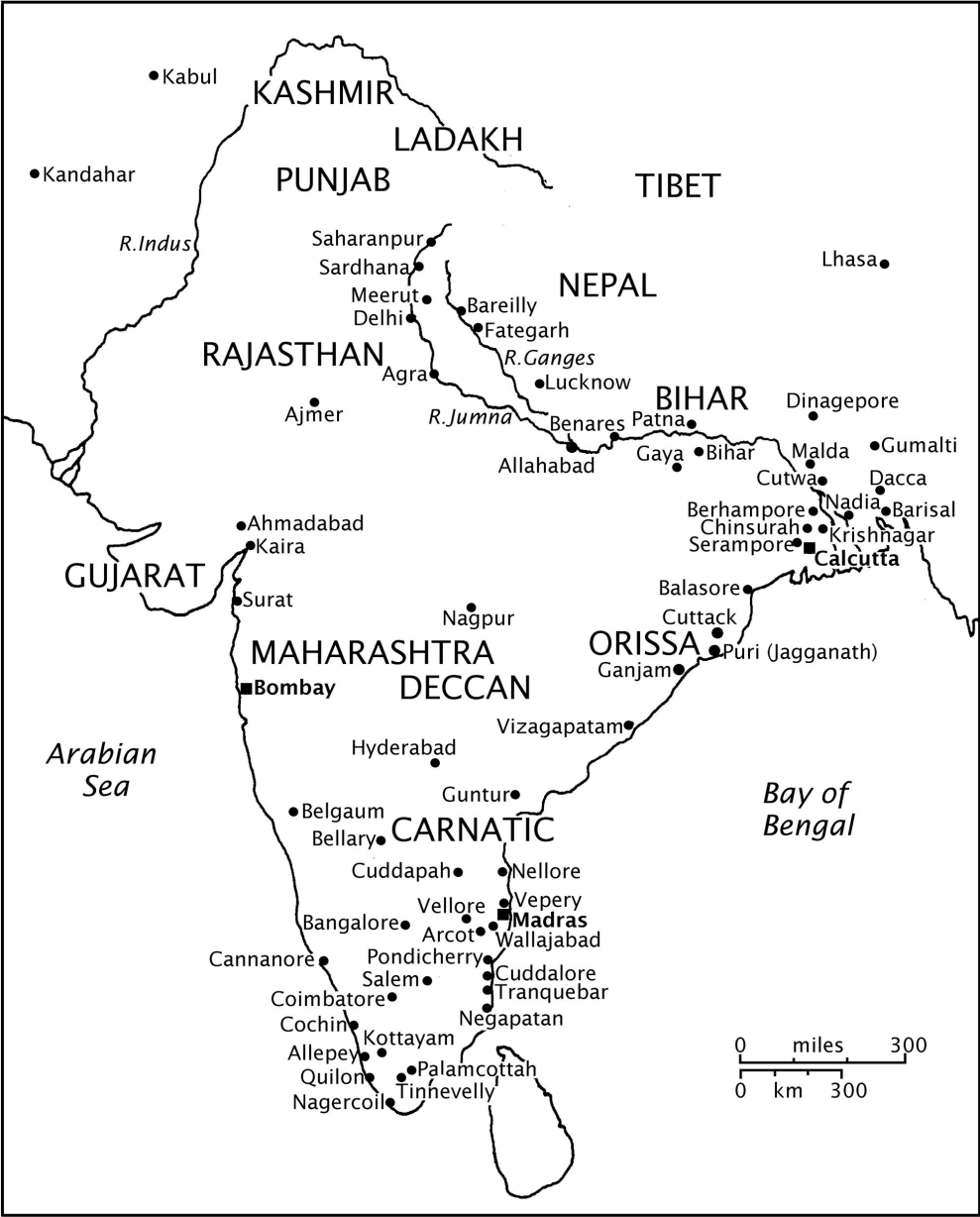
ABBREVIATIONS

A	Archives
ABCFM	American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions
Add.	Additional
ALRPC	Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford University
B&FBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
BL	British Library
BMS	Baptist Missionary Society
BP	Bentinck Papers
BUL	Birmingham University Library
col.	column
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CMSA	Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham
CSBCA	College Street Baptist Church Archives, Northampton Record Office
CUL	Cambridge University Library
CWMA	Council for World Mission Archives
EUL	Edinburgh University Library
Eur.	European
fn.	Footnote
GCPI	General Committee of Public Instruction
H. Misc.	Home Miscellaneous
IOR	India Office Records
LMS	London Missionary Society
MS	Manuscript
MSS	Manuscripts
NLS	National Library of Scotland
NLW	National Library of Wales
NUL	Nottingham University Library
para./paras	paragraph/paragraphs
<i>PD</i>	<i>Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803</i>
PSPRL	Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty
RH	Rhodes House, Oxford University
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies

SPCK	Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel
SRO	Scottish Record Office
SSPCK	Scottish Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge
WMMS	Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

I have tried to retain consistency with the primary sources in order to make comprehension easier for the reader. Spellings of Indian place names are those used most frequently in the sources. There will inevitably be some inconsistency.



Places named in text

INTRODUCTION

Yesterday the Christians were in the ascendant,
World-seizing, world-bestowing,
The possessors of skill and wisdom,
The possessors of splendour and glory
The possessors of a mighty army.

But what use was that,
Against the sword of the Lord of Fury?
All their wisdom could not save them,
Their schemes became useless,
Their knowledge and science availed them nothing-
The Tilangas of the East have killed them all.

Azad: 24 May 1857¹

THE EAST INDIA COMPANY's worst fears came to gruesome fruition in 1857 when many of the sepoys of its Bengal army mutinied and killed not only their officers but also their wives and children. After two and a half centuries, the Company was about to be ejected from India in ignominy. It was clear that whatever the precise motives were behind the actions of those who rebelled, the Indian Uprising of 1857/8 was for many, at least in part, a war of religion. The British similarly regarded their own brutal retaliation as revenge for the slights to Christianity as well as for the murders of their people. Religious language predominated in the rhetoric of both Britons and Indians.

When the merchant venturers of the English East India Company began to set up factories on the Indian subcontinent from 1600, India was not the united country we have today. The subcontinent was politically fragmented, formed of a myriad of princely states, many of which owed allegiance to the Mughal emperor. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were times of great fluidity with shifting alliances as various groups, Indian and non-Indian, tried to take advantage of new opportunities. The English merchants played an increasingly important role in events in the subcontinent as time went on. They encountered societies that operated in very different ways to their own and peoples of many faiths. These included, amongst others, Jains, Parsis, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims and Christians. Because of the power exercised by Muslim princes, the British tried to ensure that Islam was not

offended. They had long regarded Muslims as bigoted and fanatical and particularly sensitive of any perceived insults to their religion. The bulk of the inhabitants, however, were not Muslim but seemed to follow a variety of sects and cults, which today have come under the umbrella of Hinduism. By the late eighteenth century Company officials were referring to the 'Hindoo faith' and the 'Hindoo religion'. They believed that the followers of this supposed monolithic religion clung tenaciously to their religious beliefs and were under the sway of 'the Brahmins' or priestly caste. The story of how the Company dealt with the fact that it was a Christian Company, trying to be equitable to the different faiths it found in India, has resonances for Britain today, as it attempts to accommodate the religions of all its peoples within the Christian structure and heritage of the State.

Most Company officials quickly came to believe that it would be counter-productive to interfere with Indian religious beliefs and practices. Once the Company began to assume territorial rights, Indians were assured that they would be allowed freedom of worship. The Company also permitted Roman Catholic priests and missionaries to provide services for its Roman Catholic subjects. Thus, while the focus of the East India Company's encounter with India was trade, it could not avoid addressing questions of religion: for its own servants and later its mixed-race subjects and for the way it should treat the Indian religions with which it came into contact. The need to develop some sort of policy towards Indian religions was heightened when the Company started recruiting a sepoy army to defend its interests. Company officials believed that Indians would acquiesce in British suzerainty, provided they were left alone on the vital issue of religion. They were never under any illusion that the Company's continuance in India was dependent upon its sepoy army remaining loyal and the population believing in British power. It became an early Company maxim that offending Indian religious beliefs, particularly those of its sepoys, was the surest way to incite trouble and might even lead to the loss of India. Religion was never far from the surface in a land where religion and culture were so closely entwined as to be virtually indistinguishable.

The story that follows addresses how the Company dealt with religious issues from its early mercantile beginnings to the bloody end of its rule in 1858. It examines the pressures in both Britain and India that shaped its policy towards religion. Officials were torn in two directions. On the one hand they wanted to keep their Indian territory as secure and stable as possible. On the other hand, they were Christian and while some saw much to admire in Hinduism and Islam, there was also much they abhorred. The stakes became much higher once the Company became a sovereign power in the mid-eighteenth century. By this time, pressure from both India and Britain forced the Company and the British government to address the question of how far Britain's presence in India could be justified. The conclusion was that British

rule could only be justified if it led to the ‘happiness’ of the people. How this somewhat nebulous concept was to be achieved was contested by the different groups with a stake in India. By the late eighteenth century various interests in Britain contested the Company’s monopoly, not just of trade but also of the right to decide who should enter India. Strong emotions were aroused when the Company appeared to be putting obstacles in the way of the new British Evangelical missionary societies who wanted access to India. Some missionaries managed to arrive clandestinely and local officials had to decide what to do with them. They were permitted to carry on once they arrived in India, but by 1810 the Company appeared to be adopting a harder line against them. Missionaries and their Evangelical friends in Britain came to the conclusion that Parliament had to force the Company to revise its policy towards Christianity.

In 1813, as part of the negotiations for the renewal of the Company’s charter, Parliament was therefore asked to decide whether or not the acquisition of empire carried with it a bounden duty to promote Christianity. The religious public, aroused to an extent never before seen in Britain, had forced this question on the Company and Parliament. Petitions poured into both Houses. A related and very important question was what kind of Christianity this should be: that of the Established Church or embracing all Protestant denominations? Issues of toleration, liberty and equality were at the heart of this discussion. Various religious groups argued that it was their right to have free access to India and operate there without restriction. The Company argued that it was the right of Indians to worship as they wished, without being put under any pressure to become Christian. Another emotive issue was the extent to which it was acceptable for a Company of Christians to involve itself in Hindu festivals. The support of a wider British public was obtained by publicising harrowing descriptions of practices such as the burning of Hindu widows and female infanticide. Some time will be spent discussing the way in which the powerful religious public in Britain was able to force the Company and Government to admit that they had a duty to provide for the religious and moral improvement of India. Most histories of the Company and India treat the 1813 religious campaign as a mere footnote. However, the unprecedented 908 petitions with over half a million signatures presented in Parliament in 1813, demonstrated the strength and organisation of the religious public in Britain, which was determined to have its say in the running of empire. The Company’s 1813 charter was a significant turning point. In addition to losing its monopoly of trade to India, it was now required to provide for the ‘religious and moral improvement’ of its Indian subjects.

The final chapters examine the extent to which this ‘pious clause’ forced the Company to change its religious policy. The Evangelical lobby kept up constant pressure. They demanded protection and rights for Christian converts and an end to Hindu practices considered to be inhumane and abhorrent.

Perhaps the most emotive issue for Evangelicals was the Company's participation in the management of Hindu temples and festivals. In the 1830s Evangelicals began to succeed in their demands and the Board of Control insisted that the Company's involvement with 'idolatry' should come to an end. Thus, Evangelicals confronted Indians head-on in an area where emotions ran high and blood was likely to be spilt. Many Indians came to believe that the British intended to convert them forcibly. Clashes began to be more numerous and often violent. Despite the Company's protestations that Indians were free to worship as they wished, Indians began to feel that the Company had broken faith with them. Eventually, in 1857 resentment over this and other matters boiled over. For some time it looked as if Britain would lose India. The East India Company paid the price and its rule came to an end.

The Company's policy towards religion was affected by the two worlds in which it had to operate. The first world was the world of domestic politics, in which the Established Church, Church Evangelicals, Dissenters, Government and the Company pursued complex aims. The second was the world of British India. This was a world in which territory was held by a mainly sepoy army and one in which the distance from England precluded close oversight of the actions of Company officials. In India there were many competing interests as individuals and groups attempted to manipulate the situation to their benefit. Whatever religious rhetoric both Indians and British employed, questions of economic and political advantage were never far away. This study concentrates on the religious controversies that occurred, putting them into context as far as possible. Inevitably much has to be left out.

Missionaries feature prominently in what follows. They are widely regarded as the 'bogey-men' of the story. One can argue about whether or not missionaries should have been in India in the first place. However, as with the legacy of British rule as a whole, the record is not wholly bad. One should recognise that these men and women came to India fervently believing that Indians would perish both spiritually and materially if they did not follow the tenets of Christianity. Evangelicals believed they would be answerable to God for any failure to look after God's people, who included the whole of humanity. Many missionaries suffered greatly, became ill, died young and lost wives and children. They agonised over the best way to impart Christianity. Yes, they were insensitive, treated Indian religions with contempt, lobbied Government for support and social change and brought upon themselves much hatred. However, they also improved the conditions of many Indians as they fought for justice, brought medical aid, education, training and generally fought for 'the poor and oppressed', as Christianity enjoined them to do. It was inevitable that dominant groups would resist any changes to the *status quo*. However, both Hindus and Muslims would be the first to admit that religion permeates the whole of life if it is to have any meaning. Some missionaries, such as William Carey and James Long in Bengal, are revered

by non-Christians as well as Christians in India to this day. So the story is not straightforward. Arrogance and misunderstanding went side by side with devotion and kindness. Religious rhetoric on both sides concealed as much as it revealed.

Note

- 1 Cited in W. Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of Delhi, 1857* (London, 2006), p. 162. Azad was referring to the Company's sepoy when he used the term 'Tilangas'.

One

A CHRISTIAN COMPANY?

Happy will it be, if our conquests should open the way for a farther introduction of the Gospel, and for the extension and enlargement of Christ's Kingdom ...What a lustre would such an accession give to British conquests in the Eastern world!¹ (Dr Glassey)

A CENTURY before this quotation, Humphrey Prideaux, who was to become Dean of Norwich, castigated the East India Company for bringing down God's curse on it for neglecting to propagate Christianity in India. He pointed out that the English East India Company had fallen from wealth and power while the Dutch company, which furthered Christianity in its territories, was thriving. Prideaux put forward nine proposals to bring the English company back into God's favour. Amongst them, he recommended that the Company should provide chaplains, set up schools and establish a seminary to supply Protestant ministers who would 'oppose the Popish priests who swarm in India'. Consonant with the spirit of the age, with its rash of societies for the improvement of England's morals and manners, Prideaux sought to improve the morals and manners of India. He also advocated the appointment of a bishop in order to ensure a proper Anglican footing for the clergy. Prideaux, however, was sceptical of the Company fulfilling its Christian obligations voluntarily and urged his readers to ensure that a law was passed in Parliament to force the East India Company into action.² His fears were well founded. It took more than a century before parliamentary pressure forced the inclusion of a 'pious clause' into the Company's charter.

Some of Prideaux's proposals were acted upon in the 1698 charter granted to the new East India Company. It reiterated earlier requirements that the merchants should maintain a minister and schoolmaster in every garrison and superior factory, together with 'a decent place for divine service'. The Company also had to provide a chaplain, approved by the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Bishop of London, for every ship of 500 tons and upwards. There was no mention of a seminary or of any ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is surprising at this early stage, and in the light of subsequent history, to find

the clause going on to state that ministers ‘were to learn the Portugueze and Hindoo languages, to enable them to instruct the Gentoos &c in the Christian religion’.³ Thus, Parliament had laid down that the Company was not only to provide ministers for its own servants and to pay for them, but also that these ministers should try to propagate Christianity to the Indian people. However, it was one thing for Parliament to decree and quite another for the Company to act. From the outset, the Company evaded the stipulation about providing chaplains for its ships. Indeed, Philip Francis tells us in the debates at the 1793 renewal of the Company’s charter that this stipulation was the reason why the registered tonnage was always below the cut-off tonnage.⁴ The Company was also reluctant to build churches at its own expense. Most were built via private subscription.⁵

It was not until 1712 that the Court of Directors wrote a despatch to India regarding the Christian terms of the charter. By this time subtle changes to the wording had occurred. The Court stipulated that ministers were to learn the native languages in order to instruct the ‘Gentoos’ that ‘shall be servants or slaves of the Company’s’ (*rather than ‘Gentoos’ generally*) ‘as their Agents in the ‘Protestant religion’ (*rather than ‘Christianity’*).⁶ As far as the Company was concerned, combating Roman Catholicism was at least as important as converting the non-Christian population to Christianity. In the event, the Company paid lip service to the charter’s religious clause. It provided very few chaplains, was reluctant to provide churches and, as we shall see, soon relied heavily on Roman Catholic and German Lutheran missionaries to provide essential religious services.

Much as most Englishmen would have liked to see the Company act as a bulwark of Protestantism, the Company was under a legal obligation to look after the interests of the Roman Catholics in the Bombay Presidency. The 1661 cession of Bombay from Portugal to England had been conditional upon Roman Catholics having the ‘free exercise of their religion’.⁷ Although the Company Directors in England regretted the necessity of making concessions to Catholicism, as the inclusion of the word ‘Protestant’ above demonstrated, its servants in India felt that it would be counter-productive to alienate the large numbers of mixed-race Portuguese-Indian Catholics living and working in its territories, whose knowledge of Indian languages and customs was so useful. Roman Catholic priests were also required to minister to the Company’s Catholic soldiers. The Company’s forces contained Spaniards and Frenchmen as well as many Roman Catholic Irishmen.⁸ ‘Inducements’ offered to attach Roman Catholics to the Company’s interest included land for houses and the services of a priest. Support for Roman Catholicism, however, only went so far and relations with the Portuguese were often strained. Various officials tried to prevent priests from making new converts amongst Europeans. The political loyalty of the Portuguese priests was often suspected. Catholic missionaries had to have the permission of the Company to reside in its

territories and to take an oath of obedience to his Britannic Majesty. Despite taking this oath, in 1715 some Portuguese clergy who were under the jurisdiction of the Portuguese *Padroado* (the right granted by the Vatican to the Portuguese crown to exercise patronage and control over dioceses in the East) were implicated in a Hindu plot against the British. The Court of Directors secretly approached the Vatican and in 1720 formally expelled the Portuguese clergy, replacing them with more politically acceptable Carmelites from Surat, who were subject to the jurisdiction of the Vatican's *Propaganda Fide*, which had been set up in 1622 to provide missionaries under vicars apostolic of episcopal rank.⁹ Later, when the Company worried that Roman Catholics might be seduced into sedition by Catholic France, the Court of Directors made it clear to the Madras government that it would not 'suffer' any priest of the Church of Rome except those of the Capuchin order, stating that it had heard that 'the Capuchins now with you are in your interest and will not secretly endeavour to do you mischief'.¹⁰ Thus even in these early days, a 'yo-yo' situation existed in which the Company veered between allowing *Padroado* and *Propaganda* clergy to operate in its territories. How far this could be described as allowing Roman Catholics the 'free exercise' of their religion is open to debate.

The Carmelite Vicar Apostolic of the Great Mogul invited to Bombay after the Portuguese priests were thrown out in 1720 realised that he had to assure the Company of his loyalty and that of his priests. Accordingly, he swore that they 'would neither meddle nor busy ourselves in anything concerning the Government, nor in any other thing that might any way prejudice the interest of his Majesty or the Hon'ble East India Company. We shall, as far as in our power, strive to render the Christian inhabitants Faithful and Loyal subjects to the Hon'ble Company.' In addition, the Vicar Apostolic asked for the Company's protection. Not content with the Vicar Apostolic's expressions of loyalty, the Company also insisted that each priest take the following individual oath of allegiance:

At all times I will pay implicit obedience to his Britannic Majesty, that I will not directly or indirectly insinuate nor maintain anything whatever contrary to the honour and dignity of his Britannic Majesty nor to the interest of the ... Company, that I will pay due obedience into all orders issued by the Governor and his successors at all times.¹¹

We shall see later that the Protestant missionaries wanting to work in Company territory were also careful to stress their loyalty to the Government and were well aware that they needed the Company's protection. The Court of Directors summed up the Company's position on religious matters in 1744 when it informed the Madras government that 'the Church must never be Independent [of] the State, nor the French suffered to Intermeddle in our affairs'.¹² Paranoia about the French reached an extreme in 1756 in the wake

of the loss and recapture of Calcutta when the Governor-in-Council forbade its Roman Catholics to practise their faith. The Court of Directors censured this action, in 1758 telling the Bengal Council: 'We cannot approve of you so generally interdicting the progress of the Roman Catholic religion within the whole bounds, as such a step may be attended with many inconveniencings . . . As to Fort William itself, it will be a prudent measure so long as the French war subsists not to suffer any person professing the Roman Catholic religion, priests or others, to reside therein, and this you are strictly to observe.'¹³ It was one thing to stop Roman Catholics from residing in Calcutta temporarily but quite another to interfere with the practice of their faith.

The Early Years of Protestant Missionary Interest

Earlier Catholic empires had imposed Catholicism on their conquered territories, asserting the state's duty to bring the benefits of Christianity to subject peoples in order to further the progress of the '*Corpus Christianum*'. In Britain it was assumed that its colonial expansion would include the expansion of its Established Church and Humphrey Prideaux was not the only Anglican thinking about propagating the Gospel abroad in the late seventeenth century. In 1699 the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) came into formal existence. Although a private society, the SPCK had a high number of clergy members and was led by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London.¹⁴ It can be regarded as a halfway house between the government-patronised Catholic societies of continental Europe and the Protestant voluntary societies of late eighteenth-century Britain. In 1701 the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) was incorporated by royal charter to operate in Britain's colonies and its work was supported by parliamentary grants. Its aim was to enhance the standing of the Anglican Church overseas, to counter the influence of Protestant Dissenters and to provide for the religious instruction of 'heathens' in British dominions. It is significant that the religious instruction of heathens comes last in the list, while the first two aims concerned the status of the Established Church. The Church of England was determined to claw back ground it believed it had lost to Dissenters at home and abroad, especially in America. Church/Dissent rivalry was to become an important element in determining attitudes towards the propagation of Christianity. While the SPCK considered the needs of England its primary role, it was induced to look towards India after reading reports of the work of some German Lutheran missionaries who had arrived in the Danish enclave of Tranquebar in 1706 under the auspices of the Royal Danish Mission, which had been founded by the Danish king, Frederick IV. Mission reports circulating in Britain via Anton Böhme, chaplain to Queen Anne's consort, Prince George of Denmark, encouraged the SPCK

to support the fledgling mission. From 1709 the SPCK gave direct financial aid to the Royal Danish mission via public subscription, arranged for large numbers of a Portuguese translation of the New Testament to be sent out and purchased a printing press for the mission. The Company allowed these to be carried freight free.¹⁵

It was not long before these Lutheran missionaries spread out from Danish into British territory, partly as a result of the hostility they encountered from both Danish officials and the Indian population. The Company had to decide whether or not to let them work in its territories. Contrary to what one might have expected from subsequent events, the missionaries received a favourable reception. In 1712 the SPCK approached the Company, requesting it to protect and encourage 'the Protestant missionaries' and to allow them to erect charity schools in Madras. The Court, aware that the Society was patronised by key bishops and other influential people, thought the 'designs of the Society truly great and Noble' and was willing to help. Its despatch reminded the Fort St George Council of the requirement in the Company's charter to provide ministers who would learn the languages so that they could instruct the Company's Indian servants in the Protestant religion. It instructed the Council to give the Protestant missionaries 'countenance and protection' and to 'do what else you think proper for strengthening their hands in this difficult but honourable work of spreading the Gospel among the Heathen'. A free passage for Plutschau, a Royal Danish missionary, was also approved. The Court did not grant the SPCK's further request that any 'natives' instructed by the missionaries should be preferred over other 'natives'. The Court felt that a decision on this could wait until the success of the endeavours was known.¹⁶ At the same time pressure was also being put on the Company to support the work of the Tranquebar missionaries by George Lewis, the chaplain at Fort St George. He told the Company that:

The missionaries at Tranquebar ought to be and must be encouraged. It is the first attempt the Protestants ever have made in that kind. We must not put out the smoaking [*sic*] flax. It would give our adversaries, the papists ... too much cause to triumph over us.¹⁷

It seems from this comment, and the fact that the Court's despatch had told Fort St George to provide Portuguese liturgies for the missionaries, that there was less concern for converting Hindus and Muslims than with staving off the influence of 'Papism'. Although the Company felt that it had to tolerate Catholicism for the pragmatic reasons discussed earlier, it would have much preferred to see Protestantism expand. Any inroads Protestant missionaries could make on the dominance of Catholic Christianity in India were to be encouraged.

The official reply of the Governor-in-Council to the Court's exhortations was that it was happy to give pecuniary support and was sure that others

would do the same, provided that the missionaries were of ‘tempers and qualifications fit for the undertaking’. In 1715, Harrison, Governor of Fort St George, told the Tranquebar missionaries that there would be no impediment from him. In 1717 the Court was informed that the German missionaries had set up a charity school at Cuddalore and two at Madras.¹⁸ However, it seems that there was a certain amount of Indian hostility to missionary activity even in these early days. In 1716 the chaplain, William Stevenson, told the SPCK that if ‘the itinerant missionaries, catechists &c’ were not to be ‘molested nor interrupted in their work, they must be powerfully recommended to the favour and protection of the Governors at Fort St George and Tranquebar’.¹⁹ This was contemporaneous with the Carmelite Vicar Apostolic’s request for the Company’s protection for its work in the Bombay area mentioned earlier.²⁰ Little is known about the details of the hostility about which both Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries had complained. However, it was evidently not of a degree to give the Company cause for concern about supporting their efforts.

The SPCK decided to put its relationship with some of the Royal Danish missionaries on a more formal basis. In 1727 it took on Benjamin Schulze as its official agent, who had settled in Madras with the Company’s permission. The Lutheran missionaries taken on by the SPCK, however, only had a nominal relationship to the Anglican authorities and were essentially independent of their control, a situation that was to cause tension once an Anglican bishopric was set up in 1813. The SPCK again asked for the Company’s protection. This, as before, was granted on condition that missionaries would ‘behave respectfully and suitable to the Rules of the place’.²¹ The SPCK-sponsored Lutheran missionaries were well regarded by Madras officials and the Court of Directors expressed its satisfaction and the hope that ‘all in your several stations will give due Countenance to their laudable undertaking’.²² By 1740 the work of SPCK agents was well established and replacement of deceased or retired individuals had become routine. For instance, in 1744 the Court of Directors permitted Mr Klein and Mr Breithaupt to take passage on one of their ships in order ‘to carry on that good work among the Indians’.²³ The Company was generous, granting the missionaries free passages, a free mail service, and allowances for performing divine service and running charity schools and asylums in its territories. It also helped with land and buildings. By 1752 the Court of Directors seemed so convinced of the positive effects of Protestant missionary work that it informed the Madras government:

As further encouragement to the said missionaries to exert themselves in propagating the Protestant religion, we hereby empower you to give them, at such time as you shall think proper, in our name, any sum of money, not exceeding 500 pagodas, to be laid out in such manner and appropriated to such uses as you shall approve of.

However, as with the Roman Catholic priests and missionaries, this was not without *caveat* and the Governor was also instructed to 'give us from time to time an account of the progress made by them in educating children and in increasing the Protestant religion, together with your opinion on their conduct in general, and what further encouragement they deserve'.²⁴

In other words, by the 1750s the Company had approved the principle of missionary work, and was prepared to support it financially, provided the missionaries behaved well in the eyes of the local officials. Indeed, Robert Clive invited John Kiernander (1710–1798), a Swede who had trained at Halle and for seventeen years had been maintained by the SPCK at Cuddalore, to Calcutta in 1758. Clive thought highly enough of Kiernander to agree to be godfather to one of his children. Kiernander opened schools for European and Indian boys and erected a church at his own expense, which became known as the 'Old Mission church'.²⁵ It is often forgotten that, without the Company's consent and material help, missionaries, Catholic or Protestant, would have been hard pushed to carry on in India. Their chief limitation was a chronic shortage of money and men. However, Roman Catholic missionaries did not fare as well as their Protestant brethren when political expediency demanded that priests and missionaries of one nationality be removed and replaced with those of another. The Company's right to expel those it considered unfit later became a source of friction between it and other Protestant societies wishing to work in India, who started arriving from 1793. The new societies believed that 'worldly' politicians were not the people to make such a judgement. The propagation of Christianity throughout the world was to them a positive command of God, which should not be hindered by man.

The definition of what constituted 'fitness' was subjective, and hinged on perceptions of who was considered 'respectable' at this time. Anyone wishing to be licensed to reside and work in India had to be deemed 'respectable' or 'fit' by the officials of the East India Company. The German Lutheran missionaries sponsored by the SPCK seem automatically to have been considered respectable. They were men of learning and had patronage from both the Danish king and the British royal family. Their conduct in India reinforced their initial acceptance and they gained the respect of the Company chaplains, local officials and the SPCK. As representatives of the Established Church of England, the Company chaplains held the key to their acceptance or otherwise. Denominational rivalry did not appear to be an issue at this point, possibly because German Lutherans were not seen as a threat to the status of the Church of England at home.

Missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, were also useful for the smooth running of Company affairs. This must have been an important factor in gaining them acceptance and standing in the local community. There were far too few Company chaplains to minister to the needs of the Europeans and

missionaries were prepared to step into the breach. They also set up charity schools and hospitals for indigent Europeans and the mixed-race population. Concentrating on Europeans inevitably restricted their work amongst the Indian people and was the cause of considerable heart-searching and controversy. Yet, because the Company paid them for their services, it provided much needed money which, in turn, enabled them to do more work amongst the ‘heathen’.²⁶

A constant problem for the SPCK was lack of funds. In 1771 it was ‘emboldened’ to ask for further assistance from the Company. Its petition to the Court of Directors bears repeating because it demonstrates that the Society felt that the Company would respond best to arguments of expediency. In addition to pointing out that the missionaries provided useful services in the Company’s settlements, and were a bulwark against ‘Popery’, a new argument appears. The SPCK contended that Christianity would unite Indians to the British and help provide a Protestant bastion against the Catholic French who were threatening British interests:

In this urgent necessity therefore they bethought themselves of soliciting the Honourable East India Company for their encouragement and assistance in an undertaking which tends so manifestly to the advancement of the glory of God, at the same time that it eventually conduces to the good and benefit of the East India Company. For, besides promoting Christian knowledge among the natives, who as they become more acquainted with our religion, will be likewise united in a more close and friendly manner with our settlers; the Missionaries are successfully employed in making converts from Popery, and thereby contribute in some measure towards the establishment and furtherance of the Protestant interest in those parts: whilst, in the midst of their labours, they are always ready to minister to the spiritual wants of the Europeans, and to render every other service in their power to the Company’s settlements; for which they have been frequently honoured with singular marks of favour from the several governors abroad.²⁷

The Company agreed to pay them 500 pagodas.

The East India Company also had to develop a policy towards the indigenous religions of India. As a private trading corporation, the merchants wanted trade to be carried on as smoothly as possible in a land where they were vastly outnumbered. Company officials enunciated a pragmatic policy of what they termed ‘toleration’ or ‘religious neutrality’ towards all religions. Such a policy recognised the reality of the early Company’s vulnerability and its fears of alienating Indian rulers, but it was also elevated into a principle. In the wake of the Glorious Revolution and the subsequent 1689 Toleration Act, and with the influence of the Enlightenment beginning to be felt, a key word in debates about India was the concept of ‘toleration’. Englishmen liked to contrast their own ‘toleration’ with what they took to be the ‘persecution’ of the Portuguese: hence the Court’s instructions to Calcutta not to stop Roman

Catholics from practising their faith.²⁸ Maxims about the Company's obligations to 'tolerate' Indian religions were to have a very long life.

Yet, as Evangelical Christians were to argue strongly in the future, Company policy went much further than mere toleration towards Indian religions as it tried to conduct itself as a sovereign power from the late eighteenth century. The Company was anxious to legitimate its rule in Indian eyes and to be seen as an element of continuity rather than change. It therefore wanted interference to be kept to a minimum. Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of Bengal, expressed this when he wrote that he believed that the duty of the British was 'to protect their [Indian] persons from wrong and to leave their religious creed to the Being who has so long endured it and who will in his own time reform it'.²⁹ Increasing the sum of Indian 'happiness' by allowing Indians the freedom to exercise their religions was a pragmatic response to the reality of trying to control its millions of Indian subjects by means of a few Europeans and a mainly sepoy army. This policy was not new. Indeed, in 1662 the Company ordered that there were to be no compulsory conversions, no interference with Indian religious prejudices and cow killing was forbidden in 'Hindu' areas.³⁰ This long-standing policy of non-interference was eventually codified in Section 1 of Bengal Regulation III of 1793. This was later included in the Company's charter of 1813 and became known as the Company's 'compact' with the Indian people. As part of its consolidation of control, the Company continued Hindu and Muslim processes of state making by absorbing religion into state structures.³¹ The endowment and protection of religious institutions was an important function of Hindu kingship, which the Mughals had also chosen to follow. Many sacred sites had massive endowments. The Company attempted to cement local loyalties by confirming the tax-exempt status of such endowments, collecting pilgrim taxes for the upkeep of shrines and their priests, giving police support and showing marks of respect, such as firing salutes at the major festivals associated with many of the temples. In Indian society such transactions conferred benefit on both patron and recipient. They affirmed the power of the patron to act as kingmaker and alliance-builder and gave enhanced prestige and legitimacy. The Company was certainly involved in Hindu festivals and temples in the 1780s and probably well before that. Warren Hastings mentioned the supervisory role played by Company officers at the Gaya pilgrimage and in 1784–5 the Company gave the Collector at Gaya permission to collect the pilgrim tax as part of the excise tax. In 1788 Christopher Keating, the Collector of Beerbohm, took upon himself direct management of the temple of Deoghar.³² The increasing Company involvement in attending festivals and managing Hindu religious activity played a crucial part in the construction of what we now know as 'Hinduism' as a recognisable official entity.³³ It also provoked a growing campaign of protest in Britain against official connection with 'idolatry', which it was argued,

went well beyond the bounds of ‘toleration’ and was done mainly for financial gain. Discontent with this policy was first aroused with Wellesley’s takeover of Orissa and the temple of Jagannath in 1803. As a result of the takeover of this important temple, the Company researched precedents set by earlier Muslim and Maratha rulers and eventually decided to collect the pilgrim tax at Jagannath and codified the way in which this should be done.³⁴ As Evangelicals rightly pointed out, this was more than ‘toleration’ or ‘neutrality’. By the early years of the nineteenth century it seemed to many British Evangelicals as if the Company could scarcely be regarded as Christian. In their eyes it was running British India as a Hindu-Muslim state in which there were three government-supported religions: Christianity for Europeans and Hinduism and Islam for Indians. The perception that professedly Christian governors were treating Hinduism and Islam on a par with Christianity was anathema to Evangelical Christians. However, the inconsistencies were not all on the Company’s side. Both Protestant and Catholic missionaries asked for more than toleration for themselves. Their receipt of government salaries and other concessions and requests for protection took the Company out of its professed policy of religious neutrality. As the next chapter will demonstrate, a new era was dawning in the relations of the Company with Christianity.

Notes

- 1 Dr Glasse’s Charge to Rev. Mr Paezold, 29 January 1793, *An Abstract of the Annual Reports and Correspondence of the SPCK from the Commencement of its Connexion with the East India Missions, AD 1709 to the Present Day* (London 1814), p. 361.
- 2 ‘An Account of The English Settlement in the East Indies, Together With Some Proposals for the Propagation of Christianity in Those Parts of the World’, 23 January, 1694/5, *The Life of the Reverend Humphrey Prideaux DD . . .* (London, 1748), pp. 161–81.
- 3 A précis of the text of this charter can be found as Document 30, in P. J. Marshall, ed., *Problems of Empire: Britain and India 1757–1813* (London, 1968), pp. 194–6.
- 4 P. Francis, 13 May 1793, *The Senator or Parliamentary Chronicle*, 7 (1792–3), 810. This evasion was a long-standing one.
- 5 S. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India 1707–1758* (Cambridge, 1985), Chapter 5.
- 6 Extract of General letter to Bengal, 1712/13, para. 195, BL, IOR, H. Misc. 59, pp. 195–7.
- 7 E. R. Hull, *Bombay Mission History* (Bombay, 1927), 2 vols, 1, 20.
- 8 K. Ballhatchet, *Caste, Class and Catholicism in India 1789–1914* (Richmond, 1998), p. 14. It is thought that by the nineteenth century some 40% of the Company’s European troops were Irish Catholics.
- 9 Hull, *Bombay Mission History*, 1, p. 27. There were perhaps two million RC Christians in India and Ceylon by 1700.
- 10 Court to Madras, 25 January 1716, Neill, *Christianity in India*, p. 96.
- 11 Hull, *Bombay Mission History*, 1, 31.

- 12 Court to Madras, 7 February 1744, para. 42, BL, IOR E/3/109. This was in response to the Madras decision not to allow a Frenchman sent out by his order to superintend the RC missions in India and Persia. In 1744 fighting broke out between Britain and France at sea and moved to the mainland in 1746. From 1746–1761, when the British gained the upper hand, France and Britain fought for supremacy in the south.
- 13 Neill, *Christianity in India*, fn. 28, p. 490.
- 14 M. Dewey, *The Messengers: A Concise History of the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel* (London and Oxford, 1975). Subscription lists indicate that it was in existence from at least 1696.
- 15 F. Penny, *The Church in Madras*, 3 vols (London, 1904–22), vol. 1 (1904), p. 181.
- 16 Court to Madras, 2 February 1712, paras 144–6, BL, IOR, E/3/97.
- 17 Penny, *Church in Madras*, 1, p. 184. Tranquebar is on the Coromandel coast about 150 miles south of Madras.
- 18 Penny, *Church in Madras*, 1, pp. 185–8.
- 19 *SPCK Abstract*, p. 22.
- 20 See above, p. 9.
- 21 Court to Madras, 14 February 1727, para. 93, BL, IOR, E/3/104.
- 22 Court to Madras, 11 February 1731, para. 75, BL, IOR, E/3/105.
- 23 Court to Madras, 20 March 1744, para. 6, BL, IOR E/3/109.
- 24 J. C. Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, 2 vols (London, 1859), 1, p. 39.
- 25 Neill, *Christianity in India*, p. 108.
- 26 The greatly loved and respected missionary, Christian Schwartz, was appointed chaplain to the Europeans at Trichinopoly in 1767 with a salary of £100 p.a., which he put into the funds of his mission. In 1786 he was granted a salary of £100 p.a. as interpreter at Tanjore, plus 20 pagodas for a palanquin. The Company also supported his schools. Neill, *Christianity in India*, pp. 45–56.
- 27 SPCK petition, 3 December 1771, *SPCK Abstract*, pp. 120–3.
- 28 See above, p. 10.
- 29 A. Wild, *The East India Company, Trade and Conquest from 1600* (London, 1999), p. 162.
- 30 A. Mayhew, *Christianity and Government in India* (London, 1929), p. 39.
- 31 See discussion in S. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900* (Cambridge, 1989).
- 32 For a full discussion of the collection of the pilgrim tax, see N. G. Cassels, *Religion and the Pilgrim Tax Under the Company Raj* (Delhi, 1987). The details cited can be found on pp. 18–21.
- 33 There is a large literature on this question. A good overview can be found in G. Oddie, ‘Constructing Hinduism, The Impact of the Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding’, in *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross Cultural Communication since 1500*, ed. R. E. Frykenberg (London, 2003), pp. 155–82.
- 34 Cassels, *Pilgrim Tax*, Chapter 2, pp. 35–55.