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# THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

## JOURNAL OF THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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### HOME AND COLONIAL: IMPERIAL MISSIONS?

Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, Apollos [Inter Varsity Press], 1990, 212 pp, £10.95.

This volume gives us Brian Stanley's overall view of the relationship between missionary activity and imperial developments in the nineteenth century and may usefully serve to sketch in the background to his forthcoming study of the history of the BMS. Certainly he successfully puts Carey in the context of the wider evangelical interest in missions in the 1780s and 90s. Whilst relating that mission perspective to a century of British expansion, he is adamant that the only adequate explanation of the movement is to be found in the emergence of a changed theological climate in Britain, which not only reflected the impact of the writings of Jonathan Edwards but also more congruence with the thought of the Enlightenment than once was admitted.

The belief that the Bible and the flag went hand-in-hand in the history of western imperial expansion owes more, in Stanley's view, to the writings of the journalist and the theologian than to carefully-evidenced historical writing. Because of the danger of this being treated as an historical orthodoxy, the thesis is here laid open to critical scrutiny before it becomes uncritically accepted by all. Special situations may also have

over-influenced the hypothesis: 'the Communist revolution in China, by its grafting of the "Leninist" concept of imperialism onto the long-standing Chinese cultural tradition of anti-foreignism . . . made common currency of the theory that Christian missions were in essence the ideological arm of Western imperial aggression'.

Though primarily concerned with the last century, the study is introduced by an illuminating study of the emergence of contemporary thinking about mission and imperialism that helpfully sketches in much recent history. In the 1960s missionary strategists were already aware of the need for a reassessment of missionary strategy in a post-imperial world, and for the imperial phase to be reassessed in terms of a 'theology of imperialism'. This took place in an historical context in which Stanley isolates a number of crucial factors. Conflict soon arose between post-colonial regimes and the power and influence of the churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church and the sects. The growing influence of Marxism in some African countries was accompanied by acceptance of its standard critique of the role of religion in the colonial era, which seemed particularly well incarnated in the Portuguese system of government. The replacement of expectations of colonial 'modernization' by varieties of 'dependency theory' which argued that a global economic system was manipulated by the rich North in its own interests, created a predisposition to see agencies such as missions as part of that conspiracy.

In the 1960s and 1970s Third World Theologies began to attack western missions for teaching their converts to despise indigenous cultural values. Beyond the polemics came a call from the South Indian theologian, M. M. Thomas, to the Asian churches to discover 'a new self-hood' and to 'develop their own confessions to Christ in their own historical situations'. In Latin America, where missionary activity historically had been primarily Catholic and colonially-integrated, the new Liberation theology adopted an antagonistic response to half a millennium of endeavour since 1492: the church itself needed to be liberated 'from its historical complicity in colonial and capitalist oppression', and Christianity from its association from the culture of western imperialism. Within the ecumenical movement, the supplementation of western leadership by more radical leaders from the Third World became clear at the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1968, and the foundation of its Programme to Combat Racism in the following year: in the 1970s this led on to the call for a moratorium on the sending out of western missionaries which received more sympathy in WCC circles, though it was also debated by the Lausanne committee, for its initial East African proposer had an evangelical background. Certainly as influential an evangelical writer as the Puerto Rican Baptist, Orlando Costas, was critical of the imperialist identification of much missionary endeavour.

Stanley's study, fertile not only in perspectives, theological insight and historiography, also provides in a remarkably economic fashion a series of illuminating cameos of a rich diversity of mission work in practice over a period of two hundred years. Concluding chapters look at 'Christianity and Culture' and 'Empires and Missions under Judgment'. Whilst overseas cultures were not neutral but often judged depraved, evangelical missionaries' disapproval of social structures did not lead them to become racist in terms of any notion of genetic inferiority; limited achievement was the result of generations of contextual impoverishment, not of innate capacity, according to George Grenfell. More difficult was an appreciation of other faiths and a relating of them to the exclusive claims of New Testament Christianity, which Missionaries in the more liberal tradition, reflecting the relativism of much twentieth-century thought, found

## EDITORIAL

it increasingly difficult to uphold. In a dynamic situation a more complicated reading of the histories of the various western democracies, which were now seen as less certainly universal paradigms of what Christian civilization ought to offer, also impacted on mission as a process of social regeneration, as also on the idea that those who rightly read the great religious systems of the world would find in Christianity the true fulfilment of those hopes. The emergence of independently-organized African Churches was posing quite different questions about the relationship of church and culture.

Such an analysis leads Stanley to plead for a 'third way' between attempts to extend the boundaries of Christendom on the one hand, and a purely private Christianity on the other. Such a 'third way' will involve 'the construction within each society of a Christian counter-culture to exemplify the absolute values of the kingdom of God within that particular cultural context'. He goes on to emphasize that such a socialising of Christian commitment must indeed be a counter-culture and not just the reflection of any previously existing or socially-generated value system.

Attempting to develop a Biblical theology of power, Stanley weighs up the failings and the achievements of both imperial endeavour and protestant missions, showing proper concern that too often in the last century missionaries sacralised the secular empire, whilst in the twentieth century missionaries in the liberal tradition have been too inclined to deny Christianity's imperial character for, claims Stanley, 'Christianity is an inherently imperial religion in the sense that it claims that the revealed truth of God was incarnated uniquely in the person of Jesus Christ, that all men and women are called upon to respond in repentance and faith to that revelation, and that the kingdom of God inaugurated in the coming of Christ makes absolute demands upon all people and all cultures.'

### BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

This will take place on Monday, 27 April 1992, at 4.15 p.m. in the Westminster Room at Westminster Central Hall, with the Annual Lecture following at 4.45 p.m. This year's lecture is on

**Planting Self-Governing Churches:  
British Baptist Ecclesiology in the Missionary Context**

by Dr Brian Stanley MA  
*Lecturer in Church History, Trinity College, Bristol  
and author of the forthcoming history of the  
Baptist Missionary Society.*