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**Race, Religion and Empire: The Church of England and the construction of
racial discourses in England, 1919-1939.**

This paper examines the role of the Church of England and Nonconformist groups in the construction of racial identities during the interwar years. It also explores their role in the dissemination of images and ideas about other peoples and cultures to the British public in order to highlight the importance of the Church in shaping concepts of national identity and ideas about race. Through an analysis of both regional and national newspapers, this paper explores the development of racial discourses and the construction of racial identities in the North-West of England, setting this experience within the national context.

The role of religion and specifically Protestant missionaries in Britain's colonial expansion has been well documented. Whether through conscious participation or not, missionaries could not escape association with Britain's imperial mission.¹ While much of the historiography on missions focuses on the nineteenth century, it was the interwar years that saw the largest number of British missionaries sent abroad.² Missions also sustained a presence at home in England and called for support for both specific and general campaigns through propaganda in the national press.

In Britain missionaries had played a crucial role in the dissemination of information about the colonies and their inhabitants.³ Much of the information that missionaries had about other peoples and cultures, and the images of them that they constructed for the British public were based on their experience of living and working in Britain's overseas colonies. The racial aspects of this knowledge varied and were often at odds with the pseudo-scientific theories permeating public discourses in the nineteenth century.⁴ Andrew Porter notes that while 'a general discourse of paternalistic benevolence' characterised the missionary

experience of colonial 'others', the principle of universality, central to the missionary belief in the possibility of conversion, allowed them to look beyond biological definitions of race.⁵ The primary material certainly supports this view. Speaking at the Wesleyan Central Hall, Manchester, in March 1926 the Rev. Henry Carter declared that 'the world was not made for white people; it was made for mankind'.⁶ In June 1927 we have one example of many regarding the introduction of the Colour Bar Bill in South Africa as the Rev. George Ayre, speaking at the Primitive Methodist Conference, Leicester, vehemently attacked the 'placing of the Colour Bar Bill on the South African Statute-book' and racial prejudice in general.⁷ The Rev. Dr. Drummond, speaking in Edinburgh in 1927, attacked the "colour ban" blighting the city, in light of incidents where black men had been denied entry to certain dance-halls; he stated that those involved 'were guilty of the grossest treachery against the British nation and, worst of all, doing what was utterly alien to the spirit of Christ'.⁸

Despite these sympathetic responses, missionary discourses on race were often infused with a language and rhetoric that took for granted white, western superiority over other peoples and cultures. They rejected biological definitions of race, because, as Susan Thorne notes, 'if character is biologically fixed, then conversion would be pointless'; race could not be a fixed concept as all ethnic groups had to be capable of being elevated to the standards set by a white, and above all Christian society.⁹ The Rev. Henry Carter, for example, wanted to stress the idea that 'the world was not made for white people', while emphasising their 'peculiar responsibility' as the race charged with civilising the rest of the world.¹⁰ While individual missionaries may have differed in their views on imperial policy, their overall attitude towards colonial 'others' was perhaps unavoidable. As Jeffrey Cox observes: 'British missionaries entered a world beyond the boundaries of Britain where the social and racial superiority of the people of Britain over non-Western peoples was treated as axiomatic.'¹¹

Missionary and imperial discourses on race were inexorably linked. Susan Thorne, John Mackenzie and Keith Robbins have all observed that the Church itself was an important site for the transmission of knowledge about other peoples and cultures, specifically those who lived in Britain's overseas colonies.¹² Catherine Hall's work emphasises the importance of the missionary's imperial experience on racial discourses at home in Britain.¹³ Yet the interplay between race, empire and religion in the interwar period still awaits comprehensive examination. The lack of work on the link between religious, imperial and racial discourses in the 1920s and 1930s is symptomatic of a general failure by historians, with the notable exception of Callum Brown, to acknowledge the continuing importance of religion and religious institutions to the social and cultural life of Britain during this period.¹⁴ This is in large part due to an overemphasis in the historiography on the link between modernity and secularization.¹⁵ Brown's compelling thesis that secularization in Britain began suddenly in the 1960s, illustrates the need for a reassessment of the role of religion in the early decades of the twentieth-century.¹⁶

That the Church played a key role in discourses on race during this period is evident in the response of Church leaders to events such as the so-called 'race' riots of 1919. Both the Rector of Halewood and the Bishop of Liverpool gave official responses to the riots (that took place in several British cities including Liverpool) in June 1919. On 27th June, *the Garston and Woolton Weekly News* printed a lengthy appeal from both the Rector of Halewood and the Bishop of Liverpool on the subject of racial prejudice. The Rector of Halewood reminded his audience:

let us try to prevent these coloured men from judging Christianity by what they have experienced at the hands of those who are utterly unworthy professors ... Remembering, moreover, how white men have forced themselves into other countries which did not want them, let us take good care not to force away from our land strangers who have much more right to be here-many of them even our fellow-subjects.¹⁷

The church certainly had a vested interest in promoting racial harmony. The Rector's comments echo the frustrations of missionaries who, since the earliest clashes between missionary and imperial interests in Britain's North American colonies, felt that the behaviour of white settlers towards indigenous peoples made their efforts to convert much more difficult.¹⁸ The repetition of such sentiments with reference to events in Britain rather than the colonies highlights the importance of religious figures as intermediaries in encounters between different ethnic groups. This underlines their involvement in the construction of racial discourses, as they sought not only to better understand other peoples and cultures in order to facilitate conversion, but also to oppose racial prejudice that hampered their efforts to achieve it. Imperial interests were often brought to the fore in debates about racial prejudice. The Bishop of Liverpool's response to the riots focused on the specific threat to empire imposed by such an outpouring of violence. He appealed on the grounds of upholding Christian values and preventing revenge attacks against white people in the colonies:

We are false to our faith and unworthy of our Christian name if we treat with injustice and cruelty those who have been reared under different skies and come of a different race to ourselves...The stories of deeds of violence wrought in Liverpool circulate like wildfire through the world. They are told in every market and bazaar and exchange in Asia and in Africa. They rouse the worst passions of a hot-blooded race. They provoke reprisals. They will lead to the shedding of the blood of defenceless men and women of our own race.¹⁹

There are two themes that can be identified as illustrative of the connection between the Church and the social construction of race in the interwar period. The first is the Church's involvement in the Empire Day celebrations, and the second is the role of missions in racial discourses. Empire Day was a celebration of the British Empire that took place on the 24th May each year from 1904 until 1958 when the title 'Commonwealth Day' was deemed more appropriate.²⁰ Aside from schools and other public places, the church was a key site where

people could experience Empire Day. Church's marked the occasion through sermons designed to educate the congregation about Britain's imperial responsibilities. The Empire Day celebrations were a regular annual event for both the local and the national press. On the 26th May 1919, an article in *The Times* on the Empire Day celebrations stresses the importance of the Church to the occasion, stating that: 'throughout the country military parades and religious services expressed the pride felt in the soldiery of Empire and a thankfulness for the cessation of hostilities'.²¹ The following year, the *Garston and Woolton Weekly News* reported on a service that took place at Farnworth Parish church. According to the paper, 'The preacher pointed out the position of advantage that the possession of the Empire gave to the British people, and called upon his hearers to do their part in living up to the responsibilities entailed by those advantages.'²² It was not a coincidence that the church was an important site for the celebration of Empire Day-it was seen as an appropriate place and its use was actively encouraged. A letter-to-the-editor penned by the treasurer of the Empire Movement, on the subject of Empire Day, suggested that, amongst other things, 'a religious service of praise and thanksgiving for mercies received, held in church and chapel, and in some places out of doors, should form an essential feature of the celebrations'.²³

The Church's involvement in an event specifically designed to celebrate the British Empire, confirms that the Church itself was crucial as a space for the construction of racial discourses and racial identities. Jim English's research on the subject of Empire Day attests to its significance as a means of reinforcing certain ideas about British national identity centred on militarism, imperialism and patriotism, especially amongst schoolchildren.²⁴ Both imperial and religious discourses portrayed the British as racially superior, a people charged with "civilising" the rest of the world. The experience of Empire Day also reveals another significant role of the Church during this period-that of educating the public. Missionaries certainly took up this task in the colonies, but it was also central to the Church's activities at

home in Britain. This was the key means by which they shared their experiences and impressions of the colonies with the British public.

To missionaries, their key responsibility was to convert non-Christians to the faith. As Bishop Frodsham informed his audience at the University of Cambridge in 1919, ‘The function of the Church was not to reproduce Europe in Asia or in Africa, but to establish the Kingdom of God.’²⁵ In order to do this effectively, missionaries attempted to understand the different cultures and religions that they encountered. This was often discussed in terms of understanding the ‘colonial mind’. In November 1920, at a meeting of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, Lord Lamington who had been both Governor of Queensland and of Bombay argued that it was possible to convert the Indian population to Christianity if only missionaries were prepared to better understand the existing culture of the people they were trying to influence. Reporting on the event, the *Manchester Guardian* observed that he:

...did not think it would have been possible for the Empire to have been built up had it not been for missionary zeal...in India there were tremendous possibilities for the missionary if he took pains first of all to understand the mind of the Indian and then tried to imbue him with the greater beauty and truths of Christianity.²⁶

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was founded in June 1701 to facilitate the provision of religious teaching for both settlers and natives in Britain’s North American colonies.²⁷ It’s continued efforts to convert colonial people in the interwar period highlights the long-standing relationship between missionaries and empire and the critical impact of this relationship on their attitudes to race. According to Lord Lamington, with the right amount of knowledge missionaries could change the way Indian people thought about their own culture and turn them away from their own religion. That this placed the people attending the Society’s meeting in an extraordinary position of power is clear and underlines

the fact that, despite their best efforts, missionaries could not help but be embroiled in a discourse of domination in relation to colonial peoples. In October 1921, *the Weekly News* published an article under the headline ‘Missionary Exhibition at Widnes’ giving details of an event designed specifically to provide knowledge of colonial customs and thereby aid the Church in its efforts at conversion:

Under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society a week’s exhibition dealing with Africa and the East was opened in the Parochial Hall ... the objects are to instruct the Church at home as to the needs of the heathen and Mohammedan nations and the triumphs of Christ’s kingdom throughout the world...there are a series of courts showing life and customs in Palestine, Uganda, West Africa, India, China, and Japan.²⁸

Further evidence of the Church’s involvement in colonial “knowledge gathering” (to use Tony Ballantyne’s term) can be found in an article from *the Times*, on a “Missionary Week” organised by the Central Board of Missions of the Church of England.²⁹ The subjects covered at the various meetings and conferences included, “Missions and African Labour” and “Christian Ethics and African Life”.³⁰ Indeed, newspaper evidence indicates that missionary exhibitions were viewed as a useful tool for disseminating knowledge of missionary work to the general public, particularly in Manchester. In February 1924, the *Manchester Guardian* noted that a series of exhibitions had been held in Manchester and Salford during the winter of 1924.³¹ In May 1927, the Bishop of Hulme opened a missionary exhibition in Fallowfield, Manchester, that educated visitors through the use of ‘different “courts”’ and ‘illustrative kinema displays’.³²

For the Church, missionary exhibitions were essential in order to raise public awareness and thus funds for missionary activities. The process of transmitting knowledge to the general public often took place within church. The church building and the services held within them provided a space where many people could meet those from different ethnic backgrounds, perhaps for the first time. On 14th October 1932, *the Weekly News* reported the following:

Practically every seat was occupied in St. Paul's Methodist Church, Runcorn, on Tuesday night, when Miss Alyce Fraser, the well-known West Indian soprano, provided a unique programme...An interesting programme, mainly of negro spirituals and folk songs, was greatly enjoyed, the whole of Miss Fraser's contributions being thoroughly appreciated...During the evening a collection was taken on behalf of the women's department of the missionary society.³³

This source illustrates the way in which Churches sought to attract people using popular entertainment. The "negro spiritual" was a common feature of minstrel shows and other entertainment acts that appeared at the music-halls of the period. The religious nature of the songs is a simple explanation for their appearance at a fund-raising event such as this, but perhaps of more significance is the fact that their roots in slavery appealed to a philanthropic sentiment borne out of the anti-slavery movement.³⁴ The image of black people portrayed here is that of a once enslaved people who were still reliant on the benevolence of the Church; the music and the setting are crucial to the construction of this image.

Other opportunities for encounters with the racial 'other' did present themselves during this period, most notably at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. Amongst the attractions laid out for the public were real life examples of colonial villages complete with "human exhibits".³⁵ The British Empire Exhibition afforded the Church the opportunity to extend its "knowledge gathering" to a greater extent, as a conference on 'living religions within the Empire' was held at the British Empire Exhibition by the School of Oriental Studies (University of London) and the Sociological Society.³⁶

In the case of Liverpool, one of the main ways that the Church came into contact with the city's different ethnic communities was through the distribution of welfare. This allowed the Church to function as a space where the city's diverse communities could encounter one another and participate in the construction of specific ethnic identities. The Church's charitable activities not only illustrate how its influence extended beyond the pulpit, but also underline the far-reaching implications of its impact on the question of race and racial

identities. An investigation of the situation in Liverpool adds another dimension to our understanding of this subject as city-based missions situated in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods became places where both the established local population and new arrivals to the area could congregate to worship and receive much needed welfare support.

The case of Pastor Daniels Ekarte and the African Churches Mission exemplifies how places of worship acted as spaces where people from different ethnic backgrounds could interact with one another. It was not only white missionaries who facilitated this. The Reverend G. Daniels Ekarte was a Nigerian preacher who, while in Nigeria, had been a student of the Scottish Presbyterian missionary Mary Slessor.³⁷ He set up the African Churches Mission in 1931 in the Toxteth area of Liverpool.³⁸ As well as a place to worship, the ACM acted as ‘the local centre for those in need’, sheltering wives and children from violent husbands, and offering free meals to the destitute.³⁹ In her study of the Mission, Marika Sherwood uses oral testimony to recreate the life of Pastor Daniels and the work of the ACM. One such testimony comes from a Mr Dave Young who remembered how, in the 1940s, the Mission was an ‘open house, the door never shut, anyone was welcomed, colour of skin made no difference’.⁴⁰ A *Liverpool Daily Post* reporter, who visited the Mission in 1932, noted that amongst the congregation were ‘several white people among the Africans’.⁴¹ Pastor Daniels himself remembered, ‘holding services in private rooms and in the open air...All sorts of people listening, Chinese, Arabs, Africans like myself’.⁴²

The Church in the interwar period was not only a place of worship that people attended to be reaffirmed in their faith. During national events such as Empire Day, sermons were preached on the subject of imperial responsibility that reaffirmed a notion of national identity firmly linked to the British Empire. Even when Church leaders attempted to quell the flames of racial prejudice, they conveyed a paternalistic message that reinforced racialised hierarchies, as they appealed to the public on the grounds of religion and empire to take the

moral high ground to avoid disrupting imperial boundaries and hindering the process of conversion. Their chief aim was to convert people and the urgency with which they set about doing this was rooted in the theological belief that they had to be saved from a certain eternity in hell.⁴³ This meant that there could not be an equal relationship between missionaries and colonial peoples as, whatever their views on race⁴⁴, from a cultural and religious point of view they believed them to be inferior; they succumbed to the language of 'paternalistic benevolence'.⁴⁵ People from different ethnic backgrounds were constructed as culturally inferior and in need of civilising through the process of conversion.

By exploring the role of the Church in the construction of racial discourses, we gain an invaluable insight into what people understood about the concept of race in the 1920s and 1930s, who provided them with this information, and the methods that were employed to 'educate' them about different peoples and cultures. This paper also emphasises that the Church itself was an important space where people could actually encounter those defined as 'racially other'. While church attendance figures may have started to decline, that the church had a considerable impact on the social and cultural life of England during this period is undeniable. By exploring the role of religion and the Church in the social history of interwar England we can enhance our understanding of the history of the idea of race in Britain.

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⁴⁴ It is important to note that the concept of 'race' was contested during this period and not all Church leaders rejected biological definitions of race; indeed some religious figures were prominent in the eugenics movement during the interwar years.

⁴⁵ Porter, *Religion versus Empire?*, p. 288.