

REVIEW ARTICLE

# *Christian Humanitarianism, Violence and the Debate over Empire*

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*Colonialism. A moral reckoning.* By Nigel Biggar. Pp. xvi + 480 incl. 1 map.  
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*Pacifying missions. Christianity, violence, and empire in the nineteenth century.* By Geoffrey Troughton. (Studies in Christian Mission.) Pp. xiv + 209.  
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It may appear odd to write a review article focused on two books that are fundamentally different in intention and scope. The first is a self-conscious attempt by a moral theologian of conservative inclinations to contribute a Christian ethical perspective to the culture wars currently raging on both sides of the Atlantic on empire, race, and slavery. Its author, Nigel Biggar, is the Emeritus Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at the University of Oxford. The second book is a collection of papers by imperial and mission historians given at a workshop at the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, in July 2018. Its brief is more limited, namely to explore the professed commitment of nineteenth-century Christian missions to bringing a gospel of peace into contexts that were frequently sites of violence, not least between indigenous peoples and European settlers and other colonial actors. Its geographical remit is limited to Africa and the Pacific. Biggar's book has provoked a predictable storm of criticism, both within the historical academy and beyond it. The *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, for example, rapidly published a 15,000-word rebuttal of Biggar's arguments by Alan Lester,

Professor of Historical Geography at the University of Sussex, together with an almost equally lengthy reply by Biggar.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Geoffrey Troughton's edited volume, extremely valuable though it undoubtedly is, seems unlikely to attract notice beyond the limited constituencies of professional historians and scholars of mission studies. Although obviously differing in character, these two books, when set in juxtaposition, bring into focus some of the most pertinent issues raised for Christianity by the imperial past and the ambiguous role played within it by Christian missions.

This review article will make no attempt to engage in detail with the case studies of imperial history that form the bulk of Biggar's book, as these do not allot a central place to Christianity or Christian missions. Lester's review article has already attempted that engagement, working through nine of Biggar's examples, and in every case dismissing his conclusions as essentially flawed, and based on selective reading of sources. Readers of *Colonialism: a moral reckoning* will form their own judgements on the relative persuasiveness of Biggar's conclusions and Lester's rebuttals. Rather, my intention in this review article is to uncover and appraise the supporting framework of Biggar's argument in relation both to the nature of colonialism or 'empire' and to the various roles played by Christian humanitarianism in extending, regulating or critiquing empire. Troughton's volume supplies important historical resources for this appraisal, and more widely for any attempt to form summative estimates of the relationship of Christianity to imperial violence.

It should be observed at the outset that Biggar's book is mistitled. It is a moral evaluation, not of colonialism or empire *per se*, but rather of the British empire in particular. That limitation in scope is perfectly reasonable, but the temptation to deduce generalised judgements about empire from the single case that dominates contemporary debate should be resisted. Biggar is quite right to remind us (pp. 3–4) that empires have been the stuff of human history for millennia and are in no way the peculiar product of European peoples. The distinguished Oxford historian of empire, John Darwin, originally a collaborator with Biggar in the 'Ethics and empire' project at Oxford that gave rise to the book, until he resigned from the project, has written that 'empire (where different ethnic communities fall under a common ruler) has been the default mode of political organization throughout most of history'.<sup>2</sup> Biggar could have emphasised that oft-forgotten truth more strongly, for it tends to support his case. It

<sup>1</sup> Alan Lester, 'The British empire in the culture war: Nigel Biggar's *Colonialism: a moral reckoning*', and Nigel Biggar, 'On *Colonialism: a moral reckoning*: a reply to Alan Lester', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* li (2023), 763–95, 796–824.

<sup>2</sup> John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: the rise and fall of global empires, 1400–2000*, London 2008, 23.

raises several questions, the first being ‘How then should we define an empire in contradistinction from other forms of political organization?’

In answer to this first question, Biggar volunteers his own definition (p. 3): ‘An empire is a single state that contains a variety of peoples, one of which is dominant.’ The problem about that definition is the word ‘state’, which conjures up the distinctively modern phenomenon of the nation state. Darwin’s formulation, ‘where different ethnic communities fall under a common ruler’, is better, but still fails to embrace all cases. The Portuguese empire, for example, was originally a seaborne network of commercial predominance that included only a few strategic entrepôts as territorial hubs of Portuguese economic hegemony. The large part of India that came under East India Company rule before 1858 was not formally a British colony (and even thereafter it never came under the jurisdiction of the Colonial Office), yet it was an essential constituent of the British imperial network of seaborne power. European imperialism in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China was an undoubted reality, but its territorial embodiment was limited to the chain of treaty ports imposed by Britain and France in particular. They were never colonies of a single European state, but rather legally-bounded enclaves of intrusive European mercantile power, paradoxically embedded within an Asian empire, that of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty. Any attempt to arrive at a moral reckoning of empire – a historical reality that embraces a wide range of types of control, not restricted to formal territorial rule – has to come to terms with such ambiguities. It would then lead inexorably to the unfashionable conclusion that the contemporary world order, though it may possibly be ‘postcolonial’, and even that is debatable, is certainly not post-imperial.

A second question is ‘to what extent was the British empire exceptional among empires or among all units of political sovereignty in its deployment of political, military and cultural violence against the peoples who came under its rule?’ Biggar devotes his chapter viii to an attempted refutation of the now common accusation that the British empire was intrinsically violent. His case is that, while it was indeed frequently violent, and on occasion excessively so, the same charge can be levelled against ‘almost every state in history, precolonial, colonial and postcolonial’.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Biggar was here citing John Darwin *verbatim*: while there is room to interrogate this assertion as an overstatement, it cannot therefore be dismissed as an ill-informed judgement by an interloper into the historical discipline. There is legitimate debate among historians of empire over whether violence is intrinsic to empires in a way that it may not be to nation

<sup>3</sup> Nigel Biggar, *Colonialism: a moral reckoning*, London–Dublin 2023, 218, citing John Darwin, ‘Imperial history by the book: a roundtable on John Darwin’s *The empire project*: reply’, *Journal of British Studies* liv (2015), 993–7 at p. 994.

states, in part because the distinction between the two is inherently problematic. Darwin himself, and not Biggar alone, has been criticised by Alan Lester on the inherently violent nature of empire.<sup>4</sup>

Assessments by historians and political scientists of whether modern colonial empires were intrinsically and consistently guilty of *cultural* violence also differ widely. The political scientist David B. Abernethy has claimed that European empires were distinctive in their sustained efforts to ‘undermine and reshape the modes of production, social institutions, cultural patterns and value systems of indigenous peoples’.<sup>5</sup> Certainly imperialists and colonial settlers have almost invariably assumed the superiority of their own civilisation or, to use modern parlance, culture, but it does not necessarily follow that imperial policy-makers (as distinct from the awkward squad of white settlers) have deemed it prudent to mount an onslaught on the cultural values and institutions of colonised peoples. The logic of indirect rule as favoured by the British empire in fact suggests the contrary. In the vast territories administered by the British in Hindu India, British imperial governance was in fact preoccupied with the task of reinforcing Hindu institutions – for example, by managing the landed endowments of Hindu temples or by elevating the social institution of caste to become the primary category of census recording and local administration. ‘The entire structure’, writes Robert Frykenberg, ‘– vital flows of information and revenue – depended upon collaboration with “Hindu” or “native” elites belonging to the highest castes.’<sup>6</sup> In the growing proportion of the African continent that from the 1880s onwards became both Islamic in religion and British in territorial control, Muslim emirs were indispensable agents of colonial administration. That required colonial governors to refrain from overt support for Christian missions, a stance which aroused frequent indignation among their numerous domestic supporters, and repeated hand-wringing from missionaries, who, as Biggar notes, were the even more awkward squad in the eyes of many district colonial officials.<sup>7</sup> In African territories that had not yet been Islamicised, the

<sup>4</sup> Alan Lester, ‘Imperial history by the book: a roundtable on John Darwin’s *The empire project*: comment: geostrategy (and violence) in the making of the modern world’, *Journal of British Studies* liv (2015), 977–83 at pp. 982–3. See also Lester, ‘The British empire in the culture war’, 777.

<sup>5</sup> David B. Abernethy, *The dynamics of global dominance: European overseas empires, 1415–1980*, New Haven 2000, 10. For a critical review of this book by a historian see the review by Jeremy Black in *Journal of European Studies* xxxi (2001), 107.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Eric Frykenberg, ‘Christians and religious traditions in the Indian empire’, in Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley (eds), *The Cambridge history of Christianity*, VIII: *World Christianities*, c. 1815–c. 1914, Cambridge 2006, 473.

<sup>7</sup> Biggar, *Colonialism*, 86–7; Brian Stanley, ‘Church and State relations in the colonial period’, in Lamin Sanneh and Michael J. McClymond (eds), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to World Christianity*, Chichester 2016, 197.

British did all they could to shore up the increasingly fragile authority of tribal chiefs and solidify the identities of ‘tribes’, striving, frequently in vain, to limit the weakening of traditional loyalties by urbanisation and the aping of western ways.<sup>8</sup>

Though not without internal contradictions, all such stratagems were attempts to preserve political stability. If empire is ultimately about the pursuit of commercial profit and the raising of revenue to make that pursuit possible – and there is a strong argument that it is – then consciously inflicting massive cultural disruption on a host territory seems a strange way to maximise profitability and tax revenue. Biggar’s claim in chapter v that the charge of cultural genocide now being laid at the door of the British empire is inaccurate is a persuasive one precisely because the charge of genocidal intention runs against the grain of the economic logic of imperialism. However, where white settlers had sufficient political power to dictate the terms of encounter with indigenes, as in Tasmania or New South Wales, the charge carries much greater force, as Biggar in part acknowledges.<sup>9</sup>

There is a third question which in different ways lies beneath the surface both of Biggar’s book and the contributions to Troughton’s volume: Was the British empire in any way distinctive in the extent to which Christian humanitarianism, anti-slavery and missionary activity shaped imperial policy and practice, whether for good or ill? Since Biggar has limited his analysis to the British empire, he can make no systematic comparison, but his emphasis in chapter ii on ‘From slavery to anti-slavery’ on the Christian and Evangelical roots of British abolitionism suggests that he would answer the question in the affirmative, and he would be right. *Pacifying missions* implicitly tends to a similar conclusion by devoting most of its attention to British missionaries working in British colonial contexts, with only two partial exceptions: David Maxwell’s chapter v on missionaries, humanitarianism and slavery in late nineteenth-century central Africa properly pays attention to the White Fathers as well as to British Protestant missions;<sup>10</sup> whilst Amy Stambach’s chapter vii on the Church Missionary Society in Moshi-Kilimanjaro is a useful reminder that British missionaries sometimes had to conduct their work in territory ruled by a colonial competitor to the British – Germany in this case.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, 15, citing Thomas Spear, ‘Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention in British colonial Africa’, *Journal of African History* xlv (2003), 3–27.

<sup>9</sup> Biggar, *Colonialism*, 144–5.

<sup>10</sup> David Maxwell, ‘Not peace but a sword: missionaries, humanitarianism and slavery in late nineteenth-century Africa’, in Geoffrey Troughton (ed.), *Pacifying missions: Christianity, violence, and empire in the nineteenth century*, Leiden–Boston 2023, 107–29.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Stambach, ‘“In the interest of peace, the Society yielded”: mission growth and retreat in Moshi-Kilimanjaro’, in Troughton, *Pacifying missions*, 155–73.

There is now a vast historiographical literature on British abolitionism, imperial humanitarianism and the extent to which anti-slavery sentiment became a dynamo of imperial expansion in Africa, and also in the Pacific. Anti-slavery did as much as slavery to build the British empire. Eighty years after the publication of Eric Williams's *Capitalism and slavery*, historians continue to debate the precise equilibrium between humanitarian idealism and prudential calculation that lay behind the abolitionist victories of 1807 and 1833. Whilst Biggar is correct to note (p. 58) that few historians now follow Williams in claiming that Britain abolished her transatlantic slave trade in her own economic interest, even fewer can be found willing to endorse W. E. H. Lecky's famous accolade that 'The unweary, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade of England against slavery may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations.'<sup>12</sup> Boyd Hilton, for example, while conceding that 'there is no escaping the fact that religion was the main impulse behind abolition', then translates Williams's charge of self-interested benevolence into theological categories: abolition, he suggests, was 'a spiritual insurance policy', an act of theological calculus to avert the threat of divine judgment on the nation, which was an ever-present reality in the mind of Evangelicals.<sup>13</sup> In Hilton's argument, abolition proceeded, not from the shifting balance sheet of plantation slavery, but from the unhealthy balance sheet of national sin and spiritual insolvency. In response to Hilton, it needs to be emphasised that Evangelical repentance, both national and personal, stemmed from an awareness of divine grace as much as of divine judgement, as the Methodist historian of abolition Roger Anstey cogently argued nearly half a century ago. Evangelicals, wrote Anstey, 'had a greater sense of the horror of evil just because they had come to see its enormity in themselves'.<sup>14</sup> Biggar cites Anstey, but only to gather surplus ammunition against the economically-based arguments of a long-since vanquished foe, Williams; he seems unaware of the instrumental twist Hilton has given to the rehabilitated link between Evangelical Christianity and abolition.<sup>15</sup>

Over the last two decades the focus of imperial historiography has shifted from the abolition campaign itself to the part Christian humanitarianism played in the aftermath of the slave emancipation of 1833–4. Particular attention has been paid to evaluating the influence of humanitarian

<sup>12</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and slavery*, Chapel Hill, NC 1944; W. E. H. Lecky, *A history of European morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, 3rd edn, revised, New York 1917, i. 153.

<sup>13</sup> Boyd Hilton, '1807 and all that: why Britain outlawed her slave trade', in Derek R. Peterson (ed.), *Abolitionism and imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, Athens, OH 2010, 75, 77–9.

<sup>14</sup> Roger T. Anstey, *The Atlantic slave trade and British abolition, 1760–1810*, London 1975, 198.

<sup>15</sup> Biggar, *Colonialism*, 51–2, 58.

lobbies in shaping British policy towards indigenous peoples ('aborigines') in colonies of British settlement, notably New Zealand and the Cape Colony, and also in inspiring Thomas Fowell Buxton's ill-fated Niger Expedition of 1841, intended to eliminate the source of the transatlantic slave trade in West Africa.<sup>16</sup> Biggar's chapter iv on 'Land, settlers and "conquest"' interacts with little of this recent scholarship. In contrast, several of the contributors to *Pacifying missions* make full and creative use of it in their discussion of the often self-contradictory ways in which missions sought to promote peace in mission fields that were also theatres of colonial expansion. Troughton's introduction helpfully identifies three distinct modes of this pacific discourse. Missions regularly supported the extension of the colonial frontier in the hope that colonial rule would bring peace to peoples disturbed by warfare, either between indigenous polities or between indigenous peoples and white settlers. Troughton terms this mode of relationship 'priestly', in which British missions, from Nonconformist as well as established-church backgrounds, sought to forge a harmonious alliance between Church and colonial State. That such an alliance often failed to deliver the anticipated outcome of model Christian states is suggested by the frequency with which a second 'prophetic' mode of pacific discourse appears in the historical record: missions can also be found acting as advocates of a 'subversive peace', challenging colonial violence on Christian principles. A third 'evangelistic' mode of mission advocacy of peace was animated by the conversionist goals of missions: the instability engendered by violence was inimical to the goal of conversion of individuals and societies. Yet the pursuit of peace *via* any of these three modes was inherently ambiguous, above all in settler colonies, for the imposition of peace and protection of indigenous peoples from land-hungry settlers presupposed endorsement of coercion by the colonial state. Trusteeship implied humanitarian governance, and humanitarian governance necessarily implied some degree of coercion.<sup>17</sup>

Here is one crucial point of connection and contrast between these two volumes. Didier Fassin and Michael Barnett have maintained that tension between pacific and coercive impulses is intrinsic to the rationality of humanitarianism.<sup>18</sup> That is true enough insofar as humanitarianism is driven by a moral absolutism about the intrinsic rights or dignities of all

<sup>16</sup> For example, Elizabeth Elbourne, 'Violence, moral imperialism and colonial borderlands, 1770s–1820s: some contradictions of humanitarianism', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* xvii (2016): <<https://doi-org.eux.idm.oclc.org/10.1353/cch.2016.0003>>; Zoë Laidlaw, *Protecting the empire's humanity: Thomas Hodgkin and British colonial activism, 1830–1870*, Cambridge 2021; and Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the origins of humanitarian governance: protecting aborigines across the British empire*, Cambridge 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Troughton, *Pacifying missions*, 1–9.

<sup>18</sup> Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian reason: a moral history of the present*, Berkeley, CA 2011; Michael Barnett, *Empire of humanity: a history of humanitarianism*, Ithaca, NY 2011.

human persons and a consequent intolerance of actions that infringe such rights or dignities. This observation is as applicable to the twenty-first-century apostles of decolonial orthodoxy whom Biggar finds so objectionable as it is to nineteenth-century missionaries. Esme Cleall observes in *Pacifying missions* that missionaries such as John Mackenzie (1835–99), Scottish missionary of the London Missionary Society in southern Africa, could employ the rhetoric of peace as ‘a euphemism for British rule’.<sup>19</sup> However, people resort to euphemisms when they wish to present what they regard as distasteful without employing offensive language. It is Cleal, not Mackenzie, who regards British rule as inherently distasteful. She and the other contributors to *Pacifying missions*, along with many other imperial historians, agree with Biggar that missionary humanitarianism could lead to Christian advocacy of British colonial rule as a ‘solution’ to the endemic violence of the colonial frontier. In the words of Amy Stambach, those who arrived on the mission field proclaiming a gospel of peace could find themselves ‘becoming entangled with colonial violence’.<sup>20</sup> Where Biggar and his critics differ fundamentally is in the nature of their response to that colonial violence. Biggar, in his chapter viii, assembles six of the most notorious cases of British imperial violence, and proceeds to deliver a moral theologian’s calibrated verdict on how justified or unjustified the resort to violence was in each case. The First ‘Opium’ or Anglo-Chinese War of 1839 to 1842 receives an unambiguous thumbs down, whereas the Benin naval expedition of February 1897 receives the thumbs up. The other cases receive a middling verdict: the Second ‘Boer’ or South African War of 1899 to 1902, we are told, was itself justified, though the administration of the internment camps was ‘culpably negligent’; whilst the suppression of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the Amritsar rising in 1919, and the counter-insurgency methods adopted by the colonial government in the Mau Mau emergency in Kenya, are labelled as instances of the ‘disproportionate and indiscriminate use of violence’.<sup>21</sup>

It is not surprising that the response of academic historians to such overt ethical calibration has been overwhelmingly critical.<sup>22</sup> They object, not simply to the individual verdicts given, but to the very enterprise of

<sup>19</sup> Esme Cleall, ‘John Mackenzie’s “true vision of the future”: imagining peace in nineteenth-century southern Africa’, in Troughton, *Pacifying missions*, 132.

<sup>20</sup> Stambach, “‘In the interest of peace’”, in Troughton, *Pacifying missions*, 169.

<sup>21</sup> Biggar, *Colonialism*, 272.

<sup>22</sup> The historians whose endorsements are printed on the covers of *Colonialism: a moral reckoning*, Niall Ferguson, Ruth Dudley Edwards, Zareer Masani, Andrew Roberts and Robert Tombs, are known for their Conservative politics, though of course that does not in itself invalidate their judgements. None of them, however, is within the mainstream of contemporary ‘imperial’, or at least ‘decolonial’ historiography.



systematic moral adjudication. It is not what historians do, or at least it is not what they *think* they do. ‘We [professional historians]’, writes Lester in his review of *Colonialism*, ‘are interested in explaining phenomena, not allocating collective virtue or blame.’<sup>23</sup> Assessing virtue or blame, however, is precisely what moral theologians do, though not so often in relationship to state actions in the distant past, which may explain why the historians have not noticed it. Whether professional historians are quite so indifferent to passing moral judgement is, however, arguable. Historians of the Nazi Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide of 1994, for example, do not, and surely should not, maintain strict moral neutrality about their subject matter, even though their first duty as historians is indeed to ‘explain phenomena’. A chapter in *Colonization and the origins of humanitarian governance*, a volume jointly written by Lester and Fae Dussart, a geographer colleague at the University of Sussex, assesses the careers of two notable humanitarian British colonial governors, George Grey and George Arthur; the former is discussed in *Pacifying missions* in a fine chapter by Norman Etherington on the New Zealand Wars, while the latter receives a positive appraisal in Biggar’s *Colonialism*.<sup>24</sup> Lester and Dussart conclude that in these two cases ‘humanitarian governmentality ... fostered cultural genocide and ... enabled the beneficiaries of invasion, destruction and exploitation to feel that they were doing good. At the same time, and quite compatibly, it resisted racial determinism, notions of “irreclaimability” and physical genocide’.<sup>25</sup> Their verdict that Grey and Arthur fostered cultural genocide while resisting physical genocide is a finely tuned historical judgement based on their reading of the evidence. Nevertheless, the use of the term ‘genocide’ carries moral freight, as does the accusation that humanitarian governmentality enabled those who benefited from ‘invasion, destruction and exploitation’ to ‘*feel* that they were doing good’. Lester and Dussart go on to endorse Michael Barnett’s assertion that ‘humanitarianism is first and foremost about ministering to the emotional and spiritual needs of the giver’.<sup>26</sup> This is an extraordinary statement that appears to deny the possibility of genuine altruism in human behaviour. Like Hilton’s calculation of the spiritual balance sheet of abolition, it comes close to turning nineteenth-century Christians into play-actors at benevolence, motivated ultimately by preoccupation with the destiny of their own souls. It is also a two-edged sword. Are the passionate efforts of decolonial historians to highlight the violence that

<sup>23</sup> Lester, ‘The British empire in the culture war’, 770.

<sup>24</sup> Norman Etherington, ‘Māori Christianity, missions, and the state in New Zealand wars of the 1860s’, in Troughton, *Pacifying missions*, 87–106; Biggar, *Colonialism*, 138–40, 142–3.

<sup>25</sup> Lester and Dussart, *Colonization and the origins of humanitarian governance*, 273–4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 274, citing Barnett, *Empire of humanity*, 223.

European imperialists have done to subject peoples not ultimately motivated by a proper humanitarian concern to bring into the open ugly realities about the imperial past which have too often been concealed? If so, must we conclude, therefore, that, in Barnett's words, they are 'first and foremost ministering to their own emotional and spiritual needs'? I suspect Biggar would say that they are, while they would presumably resist the logic of their own analysis of humanitarian motivation.

In 1878 William Ewart Gladstone, the most profoundly Christian thinker ever to be British prime minister, made the remarkably anticolonial claim that 'It is the business of every oppressed people to rise upon every reasonable opportunity against the oppressor.'<sup>27</sup> Gladstone, notes Colin Matthew, though not 'anti-empire' in principle – hardly anybody was in his day – was 'anti-imperialist' in the sense that he deplored imperial pride and usually tried to resist colonial expansion.<sup>28</sup> Yet Gladstone in his second administration presided over an unprecedented expansion of British colonial territory in Africa, South East Asia and the Pacific. The existence of such contradictions in the history of the British empire throws into question the common assumption that there was a single co-ordinated 'colonial project' in which Christians were notoriously complicit. Biggar's book, although broader in its concerns, is an attempt to grapple with some of these complex paradoxes of empire from the perspective of a Christian ethicist. Some of its arguments against untenable unitary conceptualisations of the 'colonial project' are well-rehearsed historical ones, previously advanced by such distinguished imperial historians as Jack Gallagher, Andrew N. Porter and, most recently, John Darwin.<sup>29</sup> These valid arguments deserve more respect than Biggar's critics have given them. They are, however, overshadowed by two fallacious and objectionable assumptions that recur in Biggar's text.

The first is that Western cultures really were (or even still are?) superior to non-Western ones. There was, asserts Biggar, 'a vast disparity in cultural development' between Western and non-Western societies.<sup>30</sup> This stark assertion, he contends, cannot be described as racist, because it was based on the possibility of development to a higher level.<sup>31</sup> To be fair to Biggar, Victorian Christians would, with few exceptions, have endorsed this defence, which many today find unconvincing. They were not 'scientific' racists, but 'culturists', firmly convinced of the superiority of

<sup>27</sup> W. E. Gladstone, 'The peace to come', *Nineteenth Century* iii (1878), 221, cited in D. W. Bebbington, *The mind of Gladstone: religion, Homer, and politics*, Oxford 2004, 260.

<sup>28</sup> H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone: 1875–1898*, Oxford 1995, 158.

<sup>29</sup> Jack Gallagher, *The decline, revival and fall of the British empire: the Ford Lectures and other essays*, Cambridge 1982; Andrew N. Porter, *Religion versus empire? British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700–1914*, Manchester 2004; Darwin, *After Tamerlane*.  
<sup>30</sup> Biggar, *Colonialism*, 159.  
<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 70, 131.

Western Christian cultures but also of the infinite possibilities of development available to all, through the regenerative power of the Gospel. The enterprise of making comparisons between societies according to standards of economic and social ‘development’ set largely by Western thinkers is still widely accepted in our supposedly postcolonial age, even though the comparisons are no longer explicit or laden with moral judgements. However, strangely for a moral theologian, Biggar’s primary measure of civilisational achievement appears to be the development of parliamentary democracy or supposedly Western-originated technical skills such as ‘writing, technology, agriculture and medicine’ rather than the cultivation of the humanitarian virtues of compassion for the vulnerable and a concern for justice for the oppressed.<sup>32</sup> He makes the sweeping claim that, even as late as 1960, ‘Asian and African peoples had yet to acquire the virtues that make democratic politics work’, with the clear implication that Western societies had attained such virtues. While he concedes that at the time of writing (2022), ‘British and other Western peoples stand in danger of losing them’, the blame for this is laid not on the manipulations of democratic process by Boris Johnson or Donald Trump, but on ‘illiberal “cancel culture”’.<sup>33</sup>

The second foundational assumption of Biggar’s that must be judged dubious is his insistence that the single-minded pursuit of power that characterised the British empire, as also many others, was itself ‘innocent’ or ‘morally neutral’.<sup>34</sup> Again, it is surprising that an explicitly Christian thinker should be so reluctant to acknowledge that the potential of human nature for corruptibility expands in step with the scale of the power conferred, whether on individuals or on nations. In the much quoted words of Lord Acton, doughty Catholic opponent of papal empire at the time of the First Vatican Council, ‘power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’.<sup>35</sup> That is precisely why the academy, and the world at large, still needs professional historians of the calibre of the contributors to *Pacifying missions*. Their carefully tempered writing refrains from the overt moral judgements which Biggar defends as his proper academic calling and which also lie concealed beneath the ostensibly impartial invective of his decolonial opponents. Their measured scholarship is unlikely to feature prominently in the high-visibility culture wars of our own day, but it remains indispensable to the formation of just estimations of the part played by Christian actors in the infinite complexities of the imperial past.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 131.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 215.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 256, 286.

<sup>35</sup> Lord Acton, *Essays on freedom and power*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb, Boston, MA 1948, 364.