

Ladies and Females:  
Women's Missionary and Educational Work in Nineteenth-Century India

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## Ladies and Females

In 1821 Mary Anne Cooke, a thirty-seven-year-old former governess, completed her journey from England and arrived in Calcutta as the first single female missionary to India. Over the course of her career there, she became a teacher, school supervisor, advisor to benevolently-inclined colonial elites, and headmistress and owner of an orphanage. She asserted authority over a large community of students, servants, assistant teachers, and potential converts and gave advice—heeded or no—to both missionary societies in Britain and Hindu and Muslim women in India. The life she created for herself was innovative and daring for her time, impossible for her to pursue in England and uncommon in India. Single women such as Cooke had few options for respectable work open to them in contemporary British society. Further, women missionaries, especially in India, were a small and not universally accepted group during the first part of the nineteenth century. Few single women followed in Cooke’s footsteps, and the 1820s and 1830s saw a scant handful of British women—mostly missionaries’ wives—travel to India to work in missions.

This picture had changed dramatically by the last quarter of the century. The largest missionary societies in Britain—the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the Church Missionary Society, the London Missionary Society, the United Presbyterian Church in Scotland, and the Church Missionary Society—all established ladies auxiliary committees to recruit female missionaries between 1858 and 1887. Women missionaries worked in many fields, but the prevalence of their work in South Asia has led Eliza Kent to call the years between 1860 and 1890 “the full flowering of women’s missions in India.”<sup>1</sup> By 1900, missionaries working in India were as likely to be women as men. As numbers of women missionaries increased, the jobs women performed in missions became more professional; they worked as college-educated teachers and heads of schools and as doctors in the expanding numbers of medical missions. Women’s presence in missions became established and took on an institutional structure, and their relationship to Indian society was defined and legitimized by ideologies that specified a female role in an attempt to educate and convert specifically elite Indian women.

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<sup>1</sup> Eliza Kent, *Converting women: gender and protestant Christianity in colonial South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 92

The change from Mary Ann Cooke to the established mission teachers who worked in the secluded women's quarters, or zenanas, of elite Indian homes, and from the renegade missionary pioneer of 1821 to the young women selected, trained, and sent out by missionary societies in the 1880s, was not a spontaneous one. It came about via a process of setting precedents and building institutions, one that did not begin in the 1860s with the expansion of the major missionary societies to include women. Rather, the work of the earliest women missionaries contributed directly to the later growth of female missionary work. Although few, their actions, and the actions of the very first organization dedicated to sending out women missionaries, helped build a new field of women's activity and contributed to the development of women's position within evangelical, British, and colonial society.

Women's missionary work from 1821 onwards grew up within a context defined by both imperial British and colonial Indian society, as a result of changing cultural mores and emerging institutions, as well as of the actions of individuals. The increase in numbers turned on the influence of a handful of different social and political causes, some embedded in British society and some shaped by the colonial context. On one side, women's missionary work was a response to developments within British society, including the ascending popularity of evangelical religion, the new popularity of benevolent societies, and the rise of the middle class. On another, it was a consequence of the expansion of women's participation in work outside the home. From still a different perspective, this growth was intimately connected with the expansion and consolidation of British imperial power throughout the century and the nature of the colonial relationship that developed between colonizers and colonized in India. Openings for women's work in India were enabled by a strengthened British colonial presence, and the work that women missionaries did contributed to contested discussions within Indian society over the extent to which the colonial occupiers should or could impose social and cultural reforms. This project draws together these different factors into one analytical framework in an attempt to illustrate the historical forces that came together to influence British women's entry into missionary work.

### The Indian Context

The period during which women's missionary work became commonplace was not one of stasis in either Great Britain or India, and the developments in the subcontinent created a

changing environment for missionary efforts. The East India Company, which controlled and administered British territory in India up until 1857, was an entity organized around profit in trade and was traditionally much opposed to missionary work. Although missionaries had been soliciting converts in India since the Jesuits came with the Portuguese to Goa in the 1500s,<sup>2</sup> the Company barred missionaries from its territories when it first began to administer lands during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This policy of opposition began to erode, however, as factions within the group of company shareholders, particularly Charles Grant and his supporters, began to lobby for missionary access to Indian territories. When the royal charter was renewed in 1813, it was modified to allow practicing missionaries entry into Company lands, and the following forty-year period saw a growth of mutual tolerance, converging attitudes, and in many cases real sympathy, between missionaries in the field and company officials.

Company policy was evolving during this time towards a more detailed administrative and educational practice in India. This change was propelled by a contested discussion between Orientalist and Anglicist factions, i.e., those who wanted to educate Indians in their own languages and govern them based on British interpretations of traditional law codes, and those who wanted to educate Indians in English and install British systems of law and government. The Anglicists eventually emerged victorious from this debate, propelled by Thomas Macaulay's influential *Minute on Education*, published in 1835, which famously dismissed the idea that any value could be gleaned from studying Indian languages or literatures. Missionaries—who were in no way a uniform body—also contributed their own arguments to the discussion over educational and social policy. Protestant groups, who made up the vast majority of the British missionary community, were in the 1830s primarily interested in attracting converts through itinerant preaching, but over the course of the mid-century there was a net shift within the community towards mission work based on education, a policy much more in line with Anglicist ideas of intervention and social reform.<sup>3</sup>

The great break in British rule in India came with the Mutiny, or Rebellion, of 1857. Although localized in the north of India, it shook the structures of British rule to their foundations, and resulted in the assumption of direct rule by the British government. Its impact

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<sup>2</sup> Ines G. Zupanov, *Disputed mission: Jesuit experiments and Brahmanical knowledge in seventeenth-century India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999)

<sup>3</sup> Antony Copley, *Religions in conflict: ideology, cultural contact and conversion in late colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997)

on missionaries was mixed, since on one side it contributed to the colonial government's fear that overt missionary efforts, perceived as threat to native religions, had stoked resentment of colonial rule and led to rebellion. On the other side, however, missionaries saw the mutiny as a judgment on East India Company officials for failing to instill a godlier rule, and took advantage of the greater security that came with crown administration to reinvigorate their efforts in India.<sup>4</sup>

The debate over social reforms was also one in which missionaries came into contact and disagreement with the new generation of English-educated Indian elite emerging in the years after 1857, the group who would give birth to proto-nationalist and, eventually, nationalist movements. Centered at first around the presidency town of Calcutta, religious reform and revival groups from the Brahmo Samaj to the teachers and students of Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan's Aligarh school took on the challenges of Christian evangelism and colonial government policy to affirm a positive vision of Hindu or Muslim religion and culture, one that could rise to the challenges of modernization, while still remaining Indian.<sup>5</sup> Missionary activity by the 1880s, the decade of the founding of the Indian National Congress, was contributing and responding to a contested public discussion over Indian religious and social identity.

### English Ladies and Indian Females

The changes in colonial India during this period had a pronounced effect on social issues affecting women, particularly in the field of Hindu religious reform. Starting in the early part of the century with the abolition of *sati* (the practice of widow immolation), through the debates over widow remarriage in the 1850s and the age of consent in the 1880s, Indian women's lives and the treatment of Indian women's bodies became a central point of contestation between colonial officials and Indian groups promoting reform and those advocating for the preservation of tradition. As Lata Mani has shown, women's bodies were the most common battleground in the ideological struggles of colonial Indian society. Although Indian women themselves were for the most part absent from the discussion, protectors of Hindu religious traditions, proponents

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 19

<sup>5</sup> Judith Walsh, *Domesticity in colonial India: what women learned when men gave them advice* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004)

of a modernized Indian national identity, colonial bureaucrats, and humanitarian advocates engaged in a prolonged dispute over what the female role should be in Indian society.<sup>6</sup>

Missionaries made up yet another group engaged in this struggle, and it was this engagement which provided an opportunity for British women to enter the mission field, something which ultimately helped shape the terms of the debate itself. British women entered missions in the cause of Indian women's education—one of the contested fields of social reform—and on the basis of both their commonality with and their difference from Indian women. Their common femininity legitimized the work of British women teaching Indian women in a Christian setting, while the difference asserted by the colonial ideologies of the time protected women missionaries and gave them power and authority. This difference is indicated by the semantics contemporary writings: British women involved in missionary teaching were typically “ladies,” while those they taught were almost always “females.”<sup>7</sup> Women missionaries became, over the course of the century, the “ladies” of benevolent societies and charity schools who would teach the “females” of India. This distinction implied a relative gap in levels of sophistication and intelligence: British women were grouped with the members of a civilized order, labeled to indicate their social standing, while their students were grouped under a biological term, suggesting their primitive, uncultured state. What both teachers and pupils would learn from this ideologically charged encounter provided impetus for the rapid changes that were affecting women's position, both in Britain and India.

A shift in women's position in society was, in fact, the most positive difference that such missionary work was able to effect. Missionary efforts in India had little success in terms of conversion, especially among the elite of society, who became more and more the focus of Protestant missionary efforts over the course of the century. Taken as a story of Christian evangelism, missionary work in India, female or otherwise, is largely one of failure and frustrated ambitions. Taken as the story of the missionary women themselves, however, it becomes one which explains how they came to prominence in Indian missions between 1830 and

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<sup>6</sup> Lata Mani, “Contentious traditions: the debate on *sati* in colonial India,” in *Recasting women: essays in Indian colonial history*, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989)

<sup>7</sup> The one major source for this paper which refers repeatedly to “female missionaries,” Mary Weitbrecht's, *Female missionaries in India: letters from a missionary's wife abroad to a friend in England* (London: J. Nisbet, 1843), is something of an exception. Further, as it is written in the form of advice to women in Britain interested in pursuing missionary work, the author places herself in a position of authority, as an instructor of less well-educated “females,” and in that sense reproduces something of the same power dynamic invoked when the term “female” distinguishes British missionary from Indian woman.

1880, and what effect their experiences and actions had on contemporary opportunities for and assumptions about British women as much as Indian.

This change came about slowly over the course of the mid-century and arose in part from the efforts of a small number of individuals and organizations. In the years after Mary Ann Cooke went out to India alone, some few independent women followed her. Many more went out as the wives of missionaries and worked alongside their husbands. A significant development came in 1834, when the Society for the Promotion of Female Education in the East (later the Female Education society, hereafter FES) was formed. The FES was not dedicated solely to sending its agents to India, but India was at the center of the society's mission, as the colony was of huge significance to Britain politically and economically in the nineteenth century. The organization created an institutional framework which normalized women's missionary work and helped move it out of the realm of the exceptional and the culturally marginal. The society organizers labored for the next seventy years to send single women abroad and to support women teachers and women's and girls' schools. Their goals, as well as the early date of the society's founding, have made it the central focus for this study. The records of its proceedings provide a window on the way women pursued missionary work and how the nature of that work changed.

### Historiography

The topic of missionary women cuts across a number of different historiographic fields, the first of which is the history of evangelical Christian missions in the colonial context. Missionary work has inspired a veritable library of works, starting with the triumphal narratives of the later nineteenth century that look back on earlier missionaries as heroes and pioneers. More recently, scholars studying European missionaries operating in colonial contexts have begun to question more directly the political aspects of nineteenth-century missionaries' work and to try to establish the extent to which their work supported the dominion of colonial rulers. This continues to be a hotly contested topic within the field. Historians such as Andrew Porter

and Jeffrey Cox have attempted to map the extent to which missionaries, while pursuing what they believed to be the greater Christian good, were acting in sympathy with colonial officials.<sup>8</sup>

Postcolonial historians particularly have often stressed the way that British cultural and religious forces were marshaled in the imperial project, and have pointed to the elements of cultural imperialism in missionary teaching. This study will follow the pattern of historical analysis laid out by scholars such as Nicholas Dirks and Gauri Viswanathan, which emphasizes the importance of structures of knowledge and accumulation of didactic authority to the propagation of colonial power.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, missionary work was undeniably tied to the British colonial presence in India, and the actions and experience of missionary women were shaped by that political reality.

Although influenced by the context of colonialism, missionary women were also responding to the changing mores of British society, and their history is as much one of changes in culture, class, and gender as it is of colonial relationships. Because the major feminization of missionary work did not come until the final decades of the nineteenth century, much recent scholarship on women missionaries has focused on this later period. Historians have pointed out the centrality of women's activity to India mission history by the end of the nineteenth century, and have tied that activity to the development of feminism and social welfare policy in Britain.<sup>10</sup> They have, however, neglected to assign sufficient significance to the first stirrings and calls for women missionaries some forty years before.<sup>11</sup> There is as yet little scholarship on the early period of women's missionary work, but the field is beginning to fill out with research that addresses the changing nature of women's roles during this time. Studies such as Valentine Cunningham's claim that for most of the nineteenth century women involved in missionary work were marginalized "helpmeets" of missionary husbands who suffered under male domination.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Porter, *Religion versus empire? British protestant missionaries and overseas expansion* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004); Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial fault lines: Christianity and colonial power in India, 1818 to 1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002)

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks, *Scandal of empire: India and the creation of imperial Britain* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006); Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of conquest: literary study and British rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989)

<sup>10</sup> Noteworthy scholars who have promoted this perspective in their works include Jeffrey Cox, Antoinette Burton, Martha Vicinus, Geraldine Forbes, and Susan Thorne

<sup>11</sup> Clare Midgley comments on this tendency to "downplay British women's early engagements with missionary activity," in "Can women be missionaries?" *Journal of British Studies* 45 (April 2006): 336.

<sup>12</sup> Valentine Cunningham, "'God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife': Mary Hill, Jane Eyre, and other missionary women in the 1840," in *Women and missions: past and present: anthropological and historical perspectives*, Fiona Bowie, Deborah Kirkwood and Shirley Ardener, eds. (Providence: Berg Publishers, 1993)

In contrast, work by historians like Clare Midgley suggest that the role of women in the early missions was a more negotiable one, where women were able to behave—to a limited extent—as independent actors, although still facing opposition from the prescriptive gender norms of their time.<sup>13</sup> The idea of women negotiating a position for themselves in the missionary sphere is also supported by the well-documented historical development of the opening of mission work to greater numbers of single women and the “professionalization” of women missionaries which took place later in the century.

This thesis focuses on the intersection between two different sets of social relationships which have traditionally been seen in terms of dominance, subordination, and marginalization: gender and colonialism. Women missionaries were, to an albeit limited extent, empowered agents who were able to use their opportunities for Christian and benevolent work to push the social boundaries on women’s positions in Victorian England. At the same time, their relationship to women and children of colonial India was not one in which they worked to liberate themselves, but rather to impose cultural values and standards of behavior on others. The situation of women missionaries’, as it emerged during the mid-century, was a liminal one: they were balanced between the strictures of respectable British society and the opportunity, created by the colonial context, to create a space of authority for themselves. In structure, this argument follows that of Tanika Sarkar’s in her paper on the struggle for Indian women’s rights. It describes a moment in which a faction of society with limited power—in this instance religiously-inclined and independent-minded British women—uses evolving social structures in the name of traditional and reactionary social mores to create hitherto unheard of opportunities for itself and in doing so changes the face of society.<sup>14</sup>

### Thesis Outline

This project is divided into five parts. The first section locates the work of women missionaries within the structures of colonial authority in order to clearly show the political context in which women missionaries first appeared. It argues that although the different individuals and factions that made up both missionary movements and colonial forces had

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<sup>13</sup> Midgley, “Can women be missionaries?”

<sup>14</sup> Tanika Sarkar, “A prehistory of rights: the age of consent debate in colonial Bengal,” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Autumn 2000), 601-622

varying, personally-driven goals that did not always coincide, there were mutually supportive structures that developed between the two groups.

After thus setting the stage, the next two sections describe the different causes that led the early women missionaries to the field and that defined their experience of missionary work. The first describes these factors on a social and institutional level: the changes in British society and the development of the FES as an organization that enabled women's missionary work. The third section's focus is on an individual level, and it examines the way that individual women acted within the structure created by the missionary society. It argues that their actions were as much the product of their individual interests as of the agenda that the society put forward, and that their activities influenced the field of women's missionary work to expand beyond the contemporary standards of missionary practice. Both of these middle sections turn on the idea that women's missionary work developed in inadvertent ways, at cross-purposes to the stated goals of missionary societies. Since most of the evidence is taken from official or propagandistic reports issued by missionaries or societies in favor of their own causes, the argument must overcome the opacity of sources that reveal little of the inner thoughts or motivations of their subjects. Accordingly, it echoes Ranajit Guha's method in his "Prose of Counterinsurgency" to draw on critical techniques of reading sources for the values, biases, and social dynamics that they suggest.<sup>15</sup>

The final part of the thesis suggests the significance of the early women missionaries in relationship to later developments in colonial India. The fourth section addresses the question of why, if women missionaries began going out under the aegis of an organized society in 1834, they only became a large part of the missionary movement after the 1850s and 1860s. It argues that the reason for this change was a shift in focus of women's missionary efforts to bring missionary work to women's zenanas. The ramifications of this shift illustrate the changing nature of women's missionary work at the end of the period under study, and the way that their activities related to the dynamics of elite Indian society at a critical moment when the first generation to publicly struggle with questions of Indian national identity was coming to prominence. The conclusion enlarges on the significance of this missionary work by suggesting some of the ways that British missionaries, even as they succeeded mostly in creating an

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<sup>15</sup> Ranajit Guha, "The prose of counterinsurgency" in *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983): 1-40

opportunity for women missionaries themselves rather than in educating or converting massive numbers of Indian women, also inadvertently helped open up a similar space for Indian women to pursue opportunities of their own.

## I. Missions and Colonialism

The relationship between missionaries and colonial forces in nineteenth-century India was generally a compatible and mutually beneficial one, although the different representatives of the two groups acted independently of each other, and their interactions and mutual perceptions varied widely. The early women missionaries who began to come to India in the 1820s, 30s, and 40s with the ultimate goal of Christianizing Indian women and children, were as often as not in practical opposition to the overt policy of the colonial government. Nevertheless, missionary work, particularly women's work, helped build a hierarchical society based on the patterns of dominance and subordination that buttressed British authority and influenced the development of a paternalist mentality, an ideology that would become an important strand of colonial rule in India by the late nineteenth-century. Further, the growth of missionary efforts by women for women was enabled by the strengthening of the colonial government that occurred during this period, just as women's missionary work itself helped increase the importance, in the British estimation, of the nation's colonial possession, by "taming" the image of the British Empire in India.

Traditionally, historians of missionary work have painted their subjects as unrelated to the history of colonial expansion, and, although recently more critical investigations have undermined this separation, the argument continues to be made that missionary work was distinct from colonial conquest. Missionary groups and societies write their own histories, works that, during the nineteenth century, served as advertisement and self-promotion as well as documentation. Modern mission histories, although they have shed the cultural chauvinism that characterized much of the early work, still tend to fall within what Jeffrey Cox has called the "providentialist master narrative," which paints missionaries as furthering the positive spread of Christianity, and fails to interrogate their actions for more complex motivations and implications connected to contemporary social and political realities. Cox also points out that traditional imperial histories have not focused on missionaries, seeing them as marginal figures in European struggles to establish power and dominion abroad.<sup>16</sup> Several historians, including Cox, have begun to question these assumptions, but the argument remains that missionaries worked independently of colonial conquerors and administrators. Andrew Porter, for example, whose

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<sup>16</sup> Cox, *Imperial fault lines*, 7-9, 11-13.

book *Religion versus Empire?* aims to make an overview of the ambiguous relationship between British protestant missionaries and British imperial expansion from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, writes that the missionaries did not think of themselves as colonial agents, but rather saw their work in God's service as larger and more important than the temporal attempt to spread national rule, a project which might aid their effort, but which might hinder them at times as well.<sup>17</sup> The crux of Porter's argument is that missionary work, although at times linked to imperial expansion, did not support the imperial project consciously or directly.

Such a position is premised on a limited viewpoint, which too narrowly defines the nature of imperial rule and the structures of power created by colonial authority. Scholars of colonialism and post-colonialism during the last thirty years have contributed to the understanding that imperial rule encompasses more than the military rule of force or the occupation of seats of government power and bureaucratic offices. It even encompasses more than the economic domination of one country by another. There is a cultural aspect to colonialism as well. Cultural contributions to colonial rule can come in the form of the mere production of knowledge of subject peoples, which asserts authority over them by defining them as other, and therefore inferior, as described by Edward Said in his foundational work.<sup>18</sup> There can also be a prescriptive aspect to cultural colonialism, which is much more direct. One of the ways that this ideology manifested itself was in arguments, made by many British colonial authorities regarding their rule in India, that subject people are not only culturally inferior, but that the justification of colonial rule is the effort to change, improve, and lift them up via the benefits of colonialism.

Although not the only ideological strand of colonialism, this perspective was a powerful motivator for many British authorities by the late nineteenth century, and missionaries working in India contributed to the influence of this viewpoint. These missionaries had their own ideas about the ways in which their teachings should change or improve Indians' lifestyles and behaviors. Many of them embraced the notion that they needed to "civilize" in order to convert, and this idea came to prominence in the missionary community as missionary efforts in general became more and more popular in the colonial metropole, which in turn influenced the

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<sup>17</sup> Porter, *Religion versus empire*, 116

<sup>18</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979)

development of colonial rule.<sup>19</sup> Susan Thorne has shown that British interest in foreign mission work embraced new ideals of philanthropic service and began to increase in popularity at the opening of the nineteenth century, just as the British empire shifted—with the loss of their American colonies—to center on India and employ a form of rule characterized by attempts to govern native peoples rather than replace them with white settler populations. Thorne argues that new ideas of missionary work were vital to the way that the British conceived of governing their new empire, and that philanthropic ideologies gave them a way to dominate imperial subjects without being autocratic or militaristic.<sup>20</sup> Missionary work, even though missionaries considered themselves agents independent of the state, helped contribute to a larger pattern of control and subordination that developed along with colonial rule.

Women's work in missions was particularly associated with a philosophy of evangelism which emphasized a "civilizing mission" that aimed to modify cultural practices as well as spread the Christian word. Although married women worked (largely unacknowledged) alongside their missionary husbands with increasing frequency almost from the time the earliest agents went into the field, proponents of missionary work only gradually began to make the argument that women had a particular role to play: they were to be the rescuers of native women. An Indian woman, according to the earliest arguments in favor of sending women into the mission field, was oppressed and degraded. She was "shrouded in darkness ... cut off from all sweet endearments of family intercourse, put down from her proper position as the friend, the counselor, the comforter of man, to a situation the most abject and humiliating."<sup>21</sup> Because of practices such as purdah (the isolation of married women within their husbands' homes), which limited male missionaries' access to female spheres, only the intervention of other women could help her. In this spirit, the FES, from whose early self-published history, *Female agency among the heathen*, this last quote was drawn, was founded in 1834 with the stated purpose of sending out British women to teach and Christianize eastern females, primarily those of India and China.<sup>22</sup> It was not yet universally accepted in Britain that women should travel abroad in missionary service, as even the official publications of the FES admitted, but the strongest

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<sup>19</sup> Porter, *Religion versus empire*, 92

<sup>20</sup> Susan Thorne, *Congregational missions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 36

<sup>21</sup> Female Education Society (hereafter FES), *Female agency among the heathen, as recorded in the history and correspondence of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East* (London: Edward Sutter, 1850), 3

<sup>22</sup> FES, bylaws, 1834, printed in Church Missionary Society Archive, section II, *Missions to women*, part 1, *Society for Promoting Female Education in China, India and the East, 1834-1899* (Marlborough, Wiltshire, England: Adam Matthew Publications, 1997) (hereafter *Missions to women*)

rationale for women's missionary work that its promoters could marshal was the need for British women to intervene in the lives of their heathen sisters, to save them by teaching them better ways of living as well as the Christian word. Even before the founding of the FES, the Reverend William Ward of the Baptist Mission in Serampore traveled to England on furlough in 1821 to promote educational efforts in India and while there made an appeal specifically directed "to ladies" calling attention to the "neglected state of females in India." It was this sermon that, according to *Hindoo Female Education*, a book published in 1839 under the auspices of the FES, first inspired Mary Ann Cooke to travel to Bengal in order to found schools for women and children.<sup>23</sup>

As contemporary supporters of female education in the mission context explicitly stated, ameliorating the position of Indian women was premised upon Indian acceptance of British cultural hegemony. By the 1830s, education policy toward the broader Indian population was a subject of debate among colonial officials as well as missionary leaders.<sup>24</sup> Promoters of education reform for men also argued that their policies would aid Indian women. Alexander Duff, one of the great advocates of English-language education in India, preached several public sermons in support of the FES. A published compilation of Duff's sermons also included an appendix written by the Reverend Baptist Noel, one of the society's staunchest allies, which argued that "the *great hope* of female education in India must arise from the present decidedly cheering prospects of male education.... Every individual who receives a *thorough English education*, whether he becomes a convert to Christianity or not, will with it imbibe much of the English spirit—i.e. become *intellectually Anglicized*; and hence will inevitably enroll himself in the catalogue of those who assert the right of females to be emancipated from the bondage of ignorance"<sup>25</sup> Such an argument makes clear that British influence on the position of Indian women involved the imposition of a value system which placed British culture above Indian culture as superior and desirable.

Education for the male population was a means by which missionaries hoped to reach Indian women, but, conversely, education and Christianization of Indian women was also a way to gain greater influence over the entire domestic sphere of Indian life. *Female Agency among the Heathen* lamented that, in India, social and religious prejudices prevented female education

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<sup>23</sup> Priscilla Chapman, *Hindoo Female Education*, published by FES, London, 1839

<sup>24</sup> Viswanathan, *Masks of conquest*

<sup>25</sup> Baptist Noel, in Alexander Duff, *Missionary Addresses* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850), 269-270

from following naturally in the wake of male education, and argued that the particular exertions of its “lady” agents were needed to teach Indian women, not only for the students’ own benefits, but because “so much of domestic and social welfare” depended on Indian women’s “direct and indirect influence.”<sup>26</sup> Women, once they had converted to Christianity and accepted British social mores, would be able to spread their influence through entire families. The Reverend Duff declared: “It must be granted that the improvement of the female mind would react on every member of the domestic circle—would not be lost on parents—would be influential on brothers—and, in another generation, would tend to new form the character of a whole family of sons and daughters.”<sup>27</sup> Missionaries wanted to teach Indian women but not bring them out of the private sphere. Rather, they believed that influencing women was the best way to gain access to the home. Their attempt to prescribe Indian social life amounted to an assertion of authority similar to that which colonial rule asserted in the political realm.

Many missionary practices, particularly the school-teaching that British women were involved in, makes it clear that their activity was an easy opportunity for Europeans to assert direct authority over those they were attempting to convert. The correspondence of Mary Ann Cooke (Wilson, after her 1823 marriage) makes abundantly clear that the relationship she cultivated with her native students was one of superiority. Her references to the objects of her Christian solicitude betray her belief in their inferiority: “artful, deceptive idolators,” “wicked people,” “grossly ignorant.” The best that she can say of them is that she is “most thankful I have been brought among these poor creatures.”<sup>28</sup> Further, her work and the education system she set up established herself in a position of authority over students and converts. She herself did not teach so much as superintend multiple schools, developing a managerial relationship between herself and the Indian teachers she had trained to instruct students. She encouraged the affluent and leisured wives of the colonial community in Bengal to become involved in this supervisory work, assuring them that they would remain aloof from the actual children they meant to help: “except for the annual examination, the Ladies and female pupils never meet!”<sup>29</sup> The sort of educational work Wilson was proposing was one which would not breach the separate spheres of colonial lady and native child, and the lady superintendent would be able to

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<sup>26</sup> FES, *Female agency among the heathen*, 3

<sup>27</sup> Duff, *Missionary addresses*, 237

<sup>28</sup> Mary Ann Wilson (née Cooke), letters 1835, 1822, 1824, 1829, Church Missionary Society Archive, Birmingham University, Birmingham (hereafter CMS archive)

<sup>29</sup> Mary Ann Wilson (née Cooke), public letter, 5/27/1825, CMS Archive

fulfill the role of Christian benefactress while still keeping the most limited contact with a population that needed to remain subordinate.

Wilson's letters also demonstrate that she considered her continual direction necessary to the project. Although the European ladies did not teach in the schools, she believed that the teachers they supervised could not be left to run their own program. One of her early letters, describing the changes that she wanted to effect in the Calcutta community asserted that, left to themselves, the natives were "too apathetic" to continue in the course she had set for them, but "with the constant and most frequent attendance of Europeans, much may be done in time" (emphasis in original).<sup>30</sup> An important part of this educational plan was that it had no definitive end date; the "in time" that Wilson specified extended vaguely into the future, suggesting that she did not imagine a period when British missionaries could or would step back from their managerial positions.

Wilson and those like her worked mostly with children, a situation that helped them maintain dominance over the objects of their solicitude. After years of superintending schools, in the 1830s Wilson shifted her attention to the construction of an Orphan Refuge that she would run for the remainder of her time in Calcutta. In an 1832 circular, she described her plan to "collect" twenty destitute girls and give them a redeeming occupation: they would be trained to be Christian School mistresses.<sup>31</sup> Other missionary women also commented on the importance of teaching children, particularly orphans, when they were removed from the context of their parents and home culture and could be more easily influenced. Mrs. Mary Weitbrecht, the wife of a CMS missionary at Burdwan in Bengal, who founded a girls' school and employed one of the earliest agents sent out by the FES as an assistant, rejected the idea of day schools altogether, believing that the only really effective teaching methods were those in which students could be under constant missionary supervision.<sup>32</sup>

Gathering children into orphanages or adopting them as permanent boarders at schools is a missionary practice with particularly ambiguous moral valence. On the one hand, many of the children in missionary orphanages had been left isolated by famine and illness, and missionaries were able to provide them with humanitarian care. On the other, children thus collected were not always orphans. Several mission historians have argued that such adoptions amounted to little

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<sup>30</sup> Wilson, letter 11/1822, CMS Archive

<sup>31</sup> Wilson, "Hindoo and Mahomedan girls' schools in India: to British ladies," 1832, CMS Archive

<sup>32</sup> Mary Weitbrecht, *Female missionaries in India*, 131

more than kidnapping, as missionaries rescued children from destitution but often made no effort to find their living kin or deprived relatives of any further relations with them.<sup>33</sup> According to Thorne, “that female missionaries and their British supporters might want to steal the children of their colonized sisters was a domesticated extension of the imperial state’s displacement of indigenous political authority in the empire,” a position which links the practical activity of women missionaries with native children to the ideological sympathy of missionaries to the colonial government.<sup>34</sup> Often it is impossible to know the complete details of the case, but examples such as even this euphemistically-worded announcement from a later missionary publication suggest the potential gray areas of such adoptions:

The quiet looking pair of little sisters whom we introduce to our friends in this month’s engraving, have found a Christian and happy home in the school of our friend, Mrs. Mengé of Lucknow. Their heathen mother has made many desperate attempts to obtain possession of them again, but the Lord has appeared for the poor children, and her endeavors have been frustrated. These little ones need special prayer, for the circumstances under which they were received, and owing to which they have been kept ‘from the snare of the fowler’ are very peculiar.

Such a vaguely worded passage only hints at the true dynamics of this situation, and makes it unclear what abuses and what rescues were actually visited upon these two girls, but it is apparent that there were cases in which missionaries used the force of their authority to step in between parents and their children and place themselves in surrogate positions. These girls had a living mother, who wanted to have them with her, but the missionaries’ decision, backed in this case by colonial authority, was that they would provide better care than she could.

Women’s missionary work also helped build structures that were dependent on British rule, or at least on the continued presence of Europeans.<sup>35</sup> Missionary teaching programs for Indians focused on Christianizing them, but also on training them in activities that, although missionaries considered them essential to civilized female activity, were of little use in the culture they grew up in.<sup>36</sup> Knitting, fancy work, and needlepoint supported European markets

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<sup>33</sup> Cox, *Imperial fault lines*, 164

<sup>34</sup> Thorne, “Missionary Imperial Feminism,” 55

<sup>35</sup> Porter comments that, by the 1850s and 60s, many missionary groups increasingly visualized their ultimate goal as the creation of self-sustaining Christian communities in the countries where they worked, but that “in most areas, the continuing absence of converts and indigenous agents, whether teachers, catechists, or ordained pastors, remained the fundamental problem, whatever the preferred educational recipe” (180). This failure to encounter sufficient initiative among the converts may be partly explained by missionary unwillingness to allow native Christians to take positions of authority, religious or otherwise.

<sup>36</sup> Chapman, *Hindoo female education*, 72

and European lifestyles. In the eyes of the missionary women, the most successful graduates of their schools were those whose training fitted them to take a place within the European-led community that missionaries were building. In one of her letters, Weitbrecht wrote that female education work had the aim of “raising up a superior class of women to aid us in future as teachers, and to become suitable wives for the young native Christians of good education.”<sup>37</sup> At her school for orphans, Weitbrecht trained girls in worsted work, spinning, household chores, and servants’ tasks, “their own industry thus being made to contribute to their own support.”<sup>38</sup> Another orphanage in Futtehpoore, also affiliated with the FES, made its self-proclaimed goal “to combine the paramount advantages of a Christian education, with the most industrious habits and attention to economy, and to take care that each child as it grows up shall become acquainted with some useful occupation that will render it independent in after life.”<sup>39</sup> The rationale for this kind of training grew out of protestant ideas of the redemptive power of work, but with a specific cultural and economic slant. The “useful occupations” pursued so “industriously” were most often in European-run sewing shops and fancy-work factories or among the servants of missionary and colonial communities. In fact the overarching goal of these teaching projects seemed to be the desire to make the poor of India over into an pre-industrial version of the British laboring classes: industrious, productive, working by the clock, and driven by the protestant work ethic.<sup>40</sup>

In pointing out the ways the mobilization of British women to teach Indian women aided a project of cultural imperialism, however, it is important to remember Andrew Porter’s point that missionaries did not see themselves as colonial agents. Although the connection between missionary activities and the colonial imposition of cultural hegemony is a historically important one, historians such as Susan Thorne, who emphasize the uses of missionary work for the colonial project, run the risk of portraying missionaries as simply an arm of the colonial government. Colonialism, as a system, was not monolithic and not without internal conflicts. Missionary work was part of it, but individual missionaries frequently negotiated tensions between their organizations and colonial administrators and between colonial metropole and periphery. These fraught relationships defined their experiences in various ways. In order to

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<sup>37</sup> Weitbrecht, *Female missionaries in India*, 131

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 147

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 156

<sup>40</sup> For a fuller discussion of the relationship between middle class British attitudes towards their imperial subjects and their attitudes toward the poor at home, see Thorne, *Congregational missions*.

fully assess the position of women missionary agents in this early period, it is necessary to examine the extent of their independent action, as well as their effective complicity with colonial rule.

Missionary work was, for one thing, not directly supported by the British government. When the East Indian Company Charter was renewed in 1813, Charles Grant, a shareholder in the company and a leader in the British evangelical movement, successfully agitated on behalf of the need for Christianizing efforts in India, and missionaries were officially given permission to enter British-administered areas to preach and proselytize. Officials within the colonial government, however, continued to refrain from overt support of programs of Christianization for fear that the perception of a threat to their religion would cause Indians to rebel against their rule. The fear of Christianization was widely blamed, among colonial officials, for the Mutiny or Rebellion of 1857, and even after the assumption of direct imperial rule, Victoria assured her imperial subjects that “we disclaim alike the right and the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects.”<sup>41</sup> Missionaries were not sent out by the colonial government, but by a host of privately founded societies, and their financial support came largely from private subscriptions, donations, and the sale of fancy work made my by sympathetic women in England.

Mary Ann Wilson’s career illustrates the extent to which multiple, autonomous organizations made up the missionary project, and the way that missionaries relied on voluntary, non-official support to continue their work. Her passage out from England was originally paid for by the British and Foreign School Society. She intended to work for their affiliate, namely the Calcutta School Society, but on her arrival it turned out that their funds were insufficient to support her work and she was added instead to the roster of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which already had several missionaries established in the area.<sup>42</sup> Her letters to CMS officials follow the constant theme of requests for support in the form of either donations, baskets of work to sell, or supplies for the schools and orphanages she founded.<sup>43</sup> In 1824 she helped organize the Calcutta Ladies Society for Native Female Education, composed mostly of the wives of colonial officials resident in the city, which raised money through local member

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<sup>41</sup> Ainslie T. Embree, “Christianity and the state in Victorian India: confrontation and collaboration,” in *Religion and irreligion in Victorian society: essays in honor of R.K. Webb*, ed. R.W. Davis and R.J. Helstadter (London: Routledge, 1992): 151-152.

<sup>42</sup> Calcutta School Society, minutes, 12/11/1821, CMS Archive

<sup>43</sup> Wilson, letters 1822, 1824, 1825, CMS Archive

subscriptions and petitioned the CMS for an annual allowance.<sup>44</sup> After the FES came into existence, it sent Wilson a small regular donation to support her Orphan Refuge. The society itself did not, in its first days, have sufficient capital to pay the salaries of agents in the field, although it provided funds for their training and passage out.<sup>45</sup>

There were frequent conflicts between missionaries and colonial forces that suggested an ostensible opposition between the two groups. Missionaries who wanted to promote women's work among women railed against the limitations placed on them by the colonial state in (what they perceived as) an attempt to protect Indians' traditional customs. In the pages of *Hindoo Female Education*, Priscilla Chapman complained that mistreatment of Indian women had little change of being remedied: "What encouragement do we find in the successful abolition of this fearful practice in our territory, to put bounds to the tyranny of *custom*, and to search into the deeply hidden motives, speciously cloaked with the character of religion, which the legislature is pledged to hold inviolate?"<sup>46</sup> She argued that the education provided by the colonial government could, without Christian preaching, never truly effect positive change since,

shackled as such instruction is, by obligations to which the authorities hold themselves bound, *not to interfere with their religious opinions*, they may, alas!, 'be ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth'.... [E]ncouragement of a much more pleasing nature is to be derived from the attendance at the missionary schools, where the whole instruction rests on divine truth.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the official opposition of the government, however, it is not clear how firm or obstructive their position actually was. Porter argues that from the 1830s on the relationship between missionaries and the East India Company grew closer as company officials came to accept missionaries as educators while still maintaining a position of "religious neutrality."<sup>48</sup> Even in 1826, when the Calcutta Ladies Society made an appeal to the company government of the province for a grant of money to help them build a central school in the city, the request was denied on the basis that the society promoted policies that were too overtly evangelical and that might offend local native elites, but the decision provoked an extended debate among the members of the governing board. Several board members supported a movement to grant the

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<sup>44</sup> Hannah Ellerton, Secretary of the Ladies Society for Native Female Education, letter June 16, 1827, CMS Archive

<sup>45</sup> FES bylaws, revised 1/1839, *Missions to women*

<sup>46</sup> Priscilla Chapman, *Hindoo female education*, 36-37.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 66-67

<sup>48</sup> Porter, *Religion versus empire*, 176.

money, and argued that the company had donated in the past to Christian educational organizations, such as the Calcutta Bible Society and the Serampore Mission College. Mr. Harrington, who was taking the minutes of the meeting, pointed out that he himself, in his private life, had been active in missionary organizations. In a similar vein, Lady Hastings and Lady Amherst, the wives of two successive governor-generals of Bengal, gave financial support to Mary Ann Wilson's work. Lady Amherst even became the patroness of the Ladies' Society for Native Female Education.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, the company policy of no overt support of missionary work was a position that many individual company men were willing to work against.<sup>50</sup>

Missionaries' relationships to colonial forces went beyond their contact with individual officials, and despite the international makeup of missionary networks, many of them supported the national and imperial interests of their home country. Whether or not the colonial authorities in India were supportive or obstructive, missionaries knew that Britain and its people ultimately supported their work, and they called on British influence in promoting their causes. Mary Ann Cooke wrote in one of her earliest letters: "I look to England as a stronghold. We cannot get on without money from home." In her ambitions for her schools, she hoped that the rich and powerful of the metropole would look favorably on her project and exclaimed, somewhat imaginatively, "Would that the King would command a sermon to be preached for the cause throughout his dominions!" In her "hope that Ladies in England will become friends of this work," she affirmed a tie between her own activities and the benevolent interests of British elites.<sup>51</sup>

The growth of British colonial government also helped missionaries, especially women missionaries, in a practical way. In an era where ladies could not respectably travel or live alone, the growth of colonial communities in India and the establishment of mission stations gave women agents traveling companions and places to stay. The early minutes of the FES contain many discussions of logistical calculations meant to ensure that their agents would go out aboard ship in the company of a missionary group or at least a respectable female fellow-traveler and that they would be able to stay in their port of arrival with some well-established family before

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Laird, "Wilson, Mary Anne (c.1795–c.1861)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/48959> (accessed January 20, 2010)

<sup>50</sup> Records of the Bengal Public Department, published 12/13/1826, Asian & African Studies Reading Room, the British Library

<sup>51</sup> Wilson, letter 11/1822, CMS Archive

traveling on to their appointed post. The spread of organizations such as the Calcutta Ladies Society, made up of benevolently-inclined wives of colonial administrators or British merchants resident in India, was followed by similar groups in the other major European settlements (for example, the Banaras Society for Native Female Education in 1830 or the Ladies Association at Bombay for the Promotion of Native Female Education in 1841).<sup>52</sup> Such societies also benefited from the growth of the colonial presence, as more British men brought their wives to India and those women became active volunteers in the cause of women's education, supporting schools which missionary women came out to teach in and superintend.

The emergence of a women's presence in Indian missions, although it did not grow to be a mass movement for another forty years after the founding of the FES, had an importance for the development of British colonialism that reflected not only the significance of their mission work, but the role of their gender in colonial society. Nicholas Dirks has argued that the British government and its people were able to embrace the vision of themselves as imperial rulers because they exorcised the scandalous connotations of the early Indian rule of the East India Company.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the idea of India as a British possession, a place within and under British control and to a certain extent "domesticated" for the British, gained strength over the course of the nineteenth-century. Growing women's participation helped make British presence in India seem to the rulers safer and more respectable, to the point where, by the end of the century, "the colonies needed professional women to make good the humanitarian commitments by which imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century was increasingly justified."<sup>54</sup> Just as the legitimacy of the colonial project made it more acceptable for women to go out in the missionary cause; so women's presence helped legitimize the colonial project.

Even with this sympathy between women's mission work and colonial rule, the growth from a corps of active missionaries' wives working with the assistance of a few single agents sent out by the FES in the early 1830s and 1840s, to a movement made up largely of professional female missionaries by the end of the nineteenth century is an evolution that depended on more than simply the expansion of British colonial presence in India. It was a shift that must be examined in more depth, as it arose from changes in gender and class attitudes in Britain as well

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<sup>52</sup> FES, pamphlet, 1840; FES committee minutes, 1/14/1841, *Missions to women*

<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *The scandal of empire*

<sup>54</sup> Mary Taylor Huber and Nancy C. Lutkehaus, Introduction, *Gendered missions: women and men in missionary discourse and practice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 9

as the colonies, and was one to which the activities of the FES and its individual female agents were of key importance.

## II. Early Missionary Work and Women's Roles

The first single women to travel to India in the mission cause were few in number, but their actions were symptomatic of social changes in Britain and significant as forces for change in and of themselves. The emergence of female missionary work was a response to developments in ideas of benevolent and philanthropic service in British society as well as to an early shift towards professionalization of women's occupations, a trend that would develop radically during the next fifty years. Women missionaries were part of a growing group who began to enter the public workspace as teachers and as social and religious workers, occupations that gained greater levels of professional prestige through the century, and that contributed to the social changes underlying the radical calls for women's rights heard at the end of the Victorian era.<sup>55</sup>

From the first, women traveling to the field did not meet with universal approval. The activities of the FES organizers and agents, as well as the other women active in the mission field during the mid-century, helped to break down contemporary popular opposition to the idea of a dangerous, unnecessary, or improper occupation by promoting an alluring image of missionary work and creating a living example of the roles that women could fill in the mission field. The proceedings of the FES provide a record of this early stage of women's missionary activity and of the society's role, both attractive and controversial, in the public imagination.

While there are records of a very few independent women who initiated their own missions, most of those who traveled to India in the early days did so through the organization of the FES. After Mary Cooke's arrival in 1822, she was followed the next year by a woman named Mary Bird, who, unlike Cooke, did not travel as the agent of a British society. She came to visit her brother, a judge in the East Indian Company civil service at Goruckpore, and remained until her death ten years later. Acting under her own initiative, she began work as the superintendent of a boys' and founder of a girls' school, and, later, to visit, teach, and proselytize women in their homes in Calcutta.<sup>56</sup> In 1834, the FES was founded in England at the suggestion of the Reverend David Abeel, an American missionary active in Chinese missions, who, while on furlough in England, preached a sermon calling for women to rally to the cause of female

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<sup>55</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: work and community for single women, 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985)

<sup>56</sup> Weitbrecht, *Women of India and Christian Work in the Zenana*, 164-167

education. While support of Chinese missions was the catalyst for the organization, India quickly became an equally important focus for the organizers, and the society was established to promote “Female Education in China, India, and the East.” The first three FES agents to reach India were Priscilla Wakefield, Eliza Postams, and Jane Jones, all of whom were sent out to the Bengal presidency in 1835 to assist at girls’ schools founded by missionary wives. By 1860, the often-acknowledged “beginning” of women’s missionary work, the FES had sent 90 agents into the field, many to India and others to destinations including China, Egypt, Cape Town, Ceylon, and Greece.<sup>57</sup> These numbers, when added to the community of missionary wives and other female family members already acting as teachers, suggest the scope of early women’s involvement in foreign and Indian missions. Although small, their existence was more than simply an outlier or early warning sign of a movement whose time had not yet come.

The entry of women into missionary work was partly the result of changes in ideas about philanthropy and social uplift in Britain. The early nineteenth century was a period when patterns of voluntary charity were evolving into more institutional forms. Frank Prochaska argues that organized benevolent societies grew at the beginning of the Victorian era in response to the pressures of industrial and urban growth, which made traditional forms of individual charitable action seem inadequate. In addition, the new benevolent societies also gave an articulate voice to the contemporary evangelical movement.<sup>58</sup> Britain from the 1790s onward had seen an outpouring of popular religious sentiment, which expressed itself through dissenting and revivalist movements that criticized and competed with the structures of the established church.<sup>59</sup> This new evangelicalism was characterized by a strong emphasis on personal religious fervor, concern for the health of society, and active involvement in good works, traits that commended evangelicals to the new charitable movements.<sup>60</sup> Increasingly, this new social voluntarism, propelled by the popularity of religious sentiments, would come to strengthen public interest in missionary projects.

Women frequently emerged as leaders in the Evangelical movement and in charitable organizations. Prochaska notes the importance of women’s participation and leadership in

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<sup>57</sup> FES Annual report, 1860, *Missions to women*

<sup>58</sup> Frank Prochaska, *Christianity & social service in modern Britain: the disinherited spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5-7

<sup>59</sup> W.R. Ward, *Religion and society in England, 1790-1850* (London, Batsford, 1972) 1-6

<sup>60</sup> John Wolffe, ed., *Evangelical faith and public zeal: evangelicals and society in Britain, 1780-1890* (London, 1995)

voluntary societies, and writes that they were particularly involved in societies which worked to instill moral reform and promote education.<sup>61</sup> Hannah More was only the most famous of a generation of women who wrote on evangelical reform and helped to develop theories of education that emphasized the importance of women's involvement. Joyce Goodman writes that, "In the early nineteenth century, women's transformative role was viewed as essentially domestic but was not located wholly in the home. Women transported domestic identities and cultural practices into local philanthropic educational ventures... In this way they built up the voluntary base of popular education"<sup>62</sup> Thus, not only were women's voices heard at the forefront of the movement, promoting charitable action as an expression of Christian zeal, but individual women were also active on the ground, accustoming themselves to positions as teachers in day schools and Sunday schools and working for such organizations as the British and Foreign School Society (BFSS), the body that would sponsor Mary Anne Cooke's voyage to India.

Part of the movement of women into social and educational work was based on an ideology that women possessed, by virtue of their gender, particular and inherent characteristics that fit them for such work. The Victorian idea of "separate spheres" of aptitude, expertise, and influence for men and women was beginning to strengthen through the early years of the nineteenth century, a development which Goodman's argument about women's participation in education takes into account. Although the idea of separate spheres often acted to keep women in the home and out of public positions of authority during the Victorian era, promoters of women's missionary work used this ideology to buttress their arguments for active participation in the cause. The history of the FES, *Female Agency among the Heathen*, asserted that female teachers were the best agents to promote Christianity among the women of India based on the essential common ground of their gender, since "who but a woman can understand the heart of a woman?"<sup>63</sup> Mary Weitbrecht wrote that missionaries' wives naturally promoted the mission cause, attracting and educating female converts. They would provide a living example of the ideal of wholesome domesticity and companionate marriage that the missionaries hoped to promote, as mission wives "afforded the most important examples of the happiness of domestic

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<sup>61</sup> Prochaska, *Christianity & social service*, 18

<sup>62</sup> Joyce Goodman, "Undermining or building up the nation? Elizabeth Hamilton (1758-1816), national identities and an authoritative role for women educationists," *History of Education* 28 (3) *Special Edition, Education and National Identity* (1999): 282

<sup>63</sup> FES, *Female agency among the heathen*, 5

life, when regulated on Christian principles.” Weitbrecht did not limit her call for women’s missionary activity to an emphasis on the exemplary importance of wives, but in her direct appeal to single and independent women, asked them to travel to India and teach those things that they were naturally fit for. Although she was careful to append to her argument a caveat distancing her position from any radical claim of feminine power (“do not mistake me, or imagine, for a moment, that I aim to put women on an equality with men; for I am quite conscious of the point on which she is and ought to be content to be his inferior”), she argued that women should be prepared just like male missionaries to instruct and attempt to convert those they met in the field, and that the women’s sphere, “in its place,” was as important a site as man’s for missionary work.<sup>64</sup>

The emergence of women’s missionary work depended not only on the growth of social voluntarism and the assertion of women’s natural aptitude, but on the early professionalization of teaching, particularly missionary teaching, as a woman’s occupation. Although many of the women involved with benevolent organizations, including missionary societies, were volunteers whose qualifications were simply their willingness to devote their time, energy, and money to the cause, some people began to argue that women teachers must master certain skills and systems of knowledge, which in turn would give them authority over their pupils and those whose lives they were trying to influence. In a study of the BFSS, Joyce Goodman comments that women involved in missionary education used their position to depict themselves as authoritative “experts,” particularly regarding the education of Indian women, who became the objects of many of the international efforts of that society.<sup>65</sup> As teaching, even in a foreign context like India, began to evolve into a profession guaranteeing certain authority, it became a more appealing and established path for women to follow.

A turn towards a more professional role for women teachers required standardization of the necessary qualifications for those candidates approved to teach in the field, a process that was reflected in the establishment of the FES. Women were barred from more formal and extensive training programs that male missionaries received during the first half of the nineteenth century; those who wanted to enter the mission field did not attend college the way that later female candidates would by the 1880s and 1890s. However, the records of the FES make it clear that

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<sup>64</sup> Weitbrecht, *Female Missionaries in India*, vii, 88, 87

<sup>65</sup> Goodman, “Languages of female colonial authority,” *Compare* 30, no. 1 (2000): 10

the recruiters of women agents believed it was necessary that they have a certain level of professional training. There were multiple instances in which the committee rejected a candidate because “her education did not seem to be sufficient.”<sup>66</sup> In the first year of the society’s existence, its leaders met with the Reverend Noel in a conference on teacher training and resolved that they should find some “suitable, temporary residence in London where they [potential teachers] may acquire general knowledge, study the British and other systems of education, & obtain such assistance in the languages as missionaries and others may be able to afford.”<sup>67</sup> The society’s eventual arrangement was to pay for the candidate to stay at the Borough Road School, a teaching and training institute set up by the BFSS, for a period of one to three months while she completed the application process. On top of this training period, the society’s committee tended much more frequently to select candidates who had previous experience as teachers, believing that they would be better fit to teach in a missionary setting.

Even those supporters of women’s missionary work who disagreed with the format of the FES program argued that some sort of specialized training was necessary. Weitbrecht commented that single women who came out had often acquired knowledge of “the most approved school systems; but this...they have not found of much practical use to them on their arrival in India.” She emphasized instead the practical importance of actual teaching experience in preparing candidates, but also made a claim much more radical—that female teachers should have some expertise in religious doctrinal knowledge. The female missionary, she wrote,

must have her understanding well-instructed in divine things. She must be truly established in those doctrinal truths, which can alone lead her to true faith and holy obedience.... Moreover, in order to assist others, she must be well instructed in a variety of points, in those especially in which she may meet the higher order of native heathen amongst whom she may be placed, and in which she may direct others in lower walks of life.<sup>68</sup>

In this instance, Weitbrecht asserted that women should acquire a level of theological literacy, an area of knowledge traditionally reserved for male missionaries, in order to better maintain their teaching authority and answer the questions of those they were attempting to convert.

Weitbrecht’s arguments resonate in the context of a contemporary debate in Britain over whether women involved in the new evangelical movements in Britain could, on the strength of the

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<sup>66</sup> FES minutes, 11/30/1835, *Missions to women*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 9/8/1834

<sup>68</sup> Weitbrecht, *Female missionaries in India*, viii

authority they claimed through spirituality, preach publicly in the evangelical cause. Preaching was an activity of ordained ministers, and as such a male province, but by the 1850s and 1860s, more and more women within the evangelical movements were beginning to appear as religious speakers.<sup>69</sup> Weitbrecht's assertion that women needed to be able to speak with theological authority illustrates the extent to which the presence of women in missionary fields helped contribute to the emergence of women preachers.

Women may have entered into missionary work in response to the growth of social voluntarism and the professionalization of women teachers, but their entry was not universally accepted by their contemporaries. Valentine Cunningham has argued that in the early nineteenth century "*missionary* was a male noun; it denoted a male actor, male action, male spheres of service," and that the efforts of missionary wives active in the field were marginalized in contemporary views on the subject. Clare Midgley has broadened and complicated this viewpoint to show that during this period women's place in missionary endeavors was in fact a contested subject.<sup>70</sup> As some missionary and religious leaders opposed women's entry into the field—in 1841, for example, Bishop Wilson of Bengal wrote, "I object, on principle and from experience of Indian life, to single ladies coming out to so distant a place with the almost certainty of their marrying within a month of their arrival. I imagine the beloved Persis and Tryphena and Tryphosa remained in their own neighborhood and families"<sup>71</sup>—those who held differing viewpoints had to combat their disapproval. Affiliates of the FES acknowledged the struggle against prejudicial opposition: *Female Agency among the Heathen* recorded that, when the society was formed, it found some popular support, but "others, a very small minority, gave a cold response, disparaging the general undertaking."<sup>72</sup> Weitbrecht wrote, "There is a great difference of opinion, even among experienced Christians and missionaries, as to the propriety and necessity of *single* females engaging in missionary work."<sup>73</sup> If writers who supported women's missionary activity admitted, in publications that were essentially meant to promote and celebrate it, to the presence of opposition in wider society, it must have formed a significant impediment to their endeavors.

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<sup>69</sup> Vicinus, *Independent women*; Jocelyn Murray, "Gender attitudes and the contribution of women to evangelism and ministry in the nineteenth century," in Wolffe, ed.

<sup>70</sup> Cunningham, "God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife," 89; Midgley, "Can women be missionaries?"

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Mary E. Phillips, "The Church Missionary Society," *Every woman's encyclopaedia* (London, 1910)

<sup>72</sup> FES, *Female agency among the heathen*, 9-10

<sup>73</sup> Weitbrecht, *Female missionaries in India*, 10

Midgley focuses much of her discussion of the struggle over women's work in missions on whether women could take the title of "missionary," a role associated with preaching as well as teaching. Women were excluded from preaching until the later half of the century, and early records of the FES, including the 1850 history, refer to its workers as teachers and "agents," rather than missionaries, but the assertion that women could not be termed missionaries in the early nineteenth century is an uncertain one, as evidenced by the title of Weitbrecht's 1841 book, *Women Missionaries in India*, which refers regularly to the teachers of Indian women and children as "female missionaries." In fact, the question of whether and how women became "missionaries" rather than "agents" is of secondary importance compared to the question of how they entered the field in the first place, since acknowledgement, semantic or otherwise, tends to follow in the wake of groundbreaking action.

In this sense the FES itself, and the practical opportunities it offered to send women abroad, worked directly to promote acceptance of women's entry in the missionary field. An annual report twenty-eight years after the society's founding commented on this dynamic, offering it as direct proof of the society's success: "When, in 1834, this society was first formed...the plan was regarded with contempt by some and with indifference by many. Those prejudices have given way before the results of actual experience." The report went on to cite the success that missionary efforts had met with in the field as the persuading factor in the shift in public opinion.<sup>74</sup> Published to promote the cause of missionary education to an audience of interested subscribers, it painted an overly-rosy picture of that success regarding the accumulation of converts, which, at least in the Indian schools women of the FES presided over, never reached very high numbers. The achievement of the society was not so much in meeting the goals of evangelism that it set for itself, but rather in changing attitudes in the wider missionary community towards the idea of women workers. It established a logistical procedure for women agents to travel to India, so that those who wished to go against popular opposition and "answer the call" did not need to strike out completely on their own.

A shift in Mary Ann Wilson's position on the subject of female missionaries coming out to join her illustrates the extent to which an established organization encouraged acceptance. In 1824, when she was only recently established in Calcutta, Wilson wrote to the Church Missionary Society in London, saying that she had heard that "some Ladies wanted to come out

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<sup>74</sup> FES, annual report, 1862, *Missions to women*

to India but were not permitted.” She agreed that this was a good thing: “we want money...and not assistants. Those can be procured here and much expense saved.” Even though she herself had gone out as a single woman to teach in India, she was wary of others following in her footsteps without sufficient institutional support, and would rather train Indian teachers as subordinates or depend on the assistance of missionary or East India Company wives already in India. Ten years later, in response to a request from the newly formed FES asking her to receive and direct the agents they sent out, she wrote a much more positive letter, which the Church Missionary Society had printed for circulation. In it she welcomed the FES solicitation, writing that “there never was a period more inviting than the present, for the labors of a *host* of pious, humble-minded Christian females: in short they are as much required as Missionaries.”<sup>75</sup> In her case, the existence of a legitimate organization to facilitate the travel of even a small number of women missionaries encouraged her belief in the need for their presence in India.

The FES also actively promoted acceptance of the idea of women’s missionary work in broader British society by relentlessly publicizing their aims and efforts. Aside from the central committee of the society, the FES relied for its support on a large network of subscribers, with whom they communicated via a steady stream of pamphlets, newsletters, and annual reports. From the first, they published news of their doings and calls for support and volunteers in many of the other widely-read missionary journals of the day. At the third meeting of the FES in 1834 the committee resolved that an appeal, “on behalf of Chinese and Indian female education” be made into a pamphlet for circulation and that some extracts be printed in *the Missionary Register*, *the Evangelical Magazine*, *the Baptist Magazine*, and *the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*.<sup>76</sup> The central committee also regularly invited well-known ministers and celebrity missionaries on furlough, such as the Reverend Alexander Duff, to speak on behalf of the society and then printed and distributed their sermons as a way of both raising money for their projects and further increasing public awareness of their endeavors. After 1854, the society began publishing a magazine called *the Female Missionary Intelligencer*, which printed letters home, stories, and anecdotes from the missionaries abroad. These publications portrayed women missionaries in a heroic light, and called for women in Britain to support them or even follow in their footsteps.

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<sup>75</sup> Wilson, letters, 1824, 1835, CMS Archive (emphasis in original)

<sup>76</sup> FES minutes, 8/29/1834, *Missions to women*

Mary Weitbrecht also made it clear that her purpose in publishing her work was to encourage more women to go out as missionaries. She wrote in the introduction to her book that it was “designed to teach a female, who is desirous of entering on the missionary work, the means of effecting the greatest measure of good, and to encourage such an individual in going forward to attain the blessings attendant upon the performance of this service. Would that the end of this little publication might be, to lead some who may read it to enter upon that course.”<sup>77</sup> The letters that followed included not only descriptions of her own experiences and of the kind of work that a woman missionary would engage in, but prescriptions for the background and personality a woman missionary should have, and directions about practical matters such as the best way to preserve health in India. Such a publication not only encouraged the growth of female missionary work through exhortation, but by providing a practical description of the day-to-day work of women in Indian missions, made it easier for women reading the book at home to imagine themselves traveling abroad as missionaries.

In supporting the travel of women agents abroad, requiring their training, and publicizing and encouraging their endeavors, the FES created an organizational structure that would be repeated with the founding of the women’s auxiliaries to the larger missionary organizations from the end of the 1860s onward. When, in 1866, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign parts (SPG), Britain’s oldest and most well-established missionary group agreed to create a ladies’ auxiliary dedicated to training and sponsoring women teachers, the subsidiary group adopted the same training format that the FES had pioneered. There is no evidence that the ladies’ auxiliary consciously modeled itself on the older organization, but the environment in which it was formed was one which had been shaped by the proceedings of the FES. In arguing for the establishment of a ladies’ auxiliary, the members of the SPG’s central committee argued, “Experience proves that the agency of Female Teachers is the most acceptable and most effectual in commending to their own sex the usages of a higher civilization and the practices of Christianity.”<sup>78</sup> That this conclusion had become common knowledge among the larger community of British missionaries was enabled by the early efforts of the FES to place women in the field as teachers. Of course, the FES was not an impersonal being, and the way in which its organizers strove to forward the cause of women missionaries was related to, but still distinct

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<sup>77</sup> Weitbrecht, *Female missionaries in India*, viii-ix

<sup>78</sup> USPG CWW/30 General Committee Minute Book 1866-1870, 3-4, Asian and Africa Studies Reading Room, British Library, London

from, the actions and experiences of the missionary women themselves—a topic complex and varied enough to form the subject of the next section.

### III. A Lady's Occupation

Given the social developments that enabled a women's missionary society such as the FES to come into being, what was the effect on the lives and experiences of the individual women involved in its work? It seems as first that some of the ideological positions that women's missionary work embraced, such as the presumed superiority of the colonizing society over the colonized, would ratify the missionaries' existing class and gender position in British society. Indeed, the introduction to the FES history of 1850 made this point explicitly, asking, with reference to the women of India and China, "what Englishwoman must gratefully acknowledge and adore the wondrous goodness that has made her to differ?"<sup>79</sup> This idea that missionary work abroad would encourage women to be, in response, grateful for their lot and to accept more readily the restrictions on their position in Britain has some rhetorical weight, but the actions of women, both in the field and in the home administration of the society, tell a different story. The structure and organization of the society was designed to enforce a measure of control on both the type of women who became missionary agents and on their activities in the society's service. The agents' actions often diverged from the ideals of feminine missionary behavior the society espoused, though, and those who went out as missionaries often took the opportunity to pursue their own interests and act of their own volition—sometimes in accordance with the overarching vision of the organizing society and stated ideals of the missionary movement, and sometimes not.

Despite the fact that many missionary authorities rejected the idea of women's work in the field, and that the social mores of the time gave missionary work for single women an aura of questionable respectability, there was a marked popular response to the first calls for women teachers to travel to foreign missions. As soon as the FES began to publish advertisements for volunteers, women answered with offers of service, expressing their interest in leaving England to pursue missionary work. The response was not large, but within two months of the first committee resolution to place an appeal in the leading missionary journals, the society started to receive a steady stream of application letters. FES minutes for the first decade of the society's existence record at that least one or two, and sometimes more, unsolicited application letters were read at each monthly meeting. These applications, although cursorily described in the

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<sup>79</sup> FES, *Female agency among the heathen*, 4

minutes, suggest that at least some of the applicants were very eager at the prospect of going out to work as missionaries. In one case the society recorded that the applicant, a Miss Holliday, wrote to offer herself as a missionary to go to Egypt, “for which work she has been preparing herself for ten years.,” and in another a Mrs. Barker actually offered her daughter as an agent, a suggestion which the committee chose to refuse on the basis of youth, since the girl was not yet twenty.<sup>80</sup>

The letters of interest from early applicants have not been preserved and, in the absence of testimonies, it is hard to say what drew them, but one attraction was the contemporary romantic reputation of missionaries. Many missionaries and missionary groups of the time promoted their work by publishing “psychobiographies,” or heroic life stories which portrayed individual missionaries in a hagiographic light. To be sure, these heroic figures were usually men, but, as Clare Midgley has shown, there was a growing library of female biographies, mostly authored by the husbands of deceased missionary wives.<sup>81</sup> The vision of a romantic, self-abnegating woman, dedicated to a higher religious cause was gaining cultural capital in Britain in the 1830s and 40s. Evidence of this ideal appears strikingly in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847. Estranged from Rochester and feeling her life in England to be without future, Jane wavers at the prospect offered by St. John Rivers of following him in his missionary calling. “Is it not,” she wonders, “by its noble cares and sublime results, the one best calculated to fill the void left by uptorn affections and demolished hopes?” Jane professes herself willing to go but refuses become St. John’s wife to do so, a condition he cannot accept. Although Valentine Cunningham has read this scene as evidence for the prejudices against single women missionaries in the first half of the century, it can as easily been seen as a response to the appeal of an idealized and heroic, martyred, but also romantic, vision of a missionary who could be a woman as well as a man.<sup>82</sup>

Further proof of the strength of the popular romantic stereotype of missionary work was the extent to which mission organizers tried to discourage hasty applications based on such ideas. Mary Weitbrecht cautioned in the introduction to her book, “Our sex is naturally so much under the influence of feeling, that we are particularly liable to be lead astray by it.... those whose

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<sup>80</sup> FES Minutes, 11/27/1835, 10/21/36, *Missions to women*

<sup>81</sup> Midgley, “Can Women Be Missionaries?”

<sup>82</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966), 430; Cunningham, “God and nature intended you for a missionary’s wife”

minds are at all led to think of engaging in mission work, have great need to be very jealous of themselves, and very slow in deciding on offering themselves for it.”<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Baptist Noel argued that “it is not excitement of romantic feeling, which often takes a specious form and assumes the language of zeal for the glory of God...but a deep steady principle of love of Christ, and a holy grateful obedience to his command” that should draw women to foreign missions.<sup>84</sup> That the promoters of women’s missionary work marked out such strong positions against a romantic notions of foreign service speaks to the power those notions had to motivate women—even those who had not fully considered the nature and difficulties of such work—to put themselves forward.

Like Weitbrecht and Noel, the FES committee did not want all women interested in missionary work to become agents. In fact, the society rejected the majority of the applications they received. Not only did the committee have standards of education and pedagogical training for their agents that not all applicants adhered to, but many candidates were judged unsatisfactory on the basis of youth, lack of serious religious commitment, or existence of conflicting family ties (although not, clearly, in the case of Miss Barker). In many cases the committee only gave the reasons that it chose to reject applicants in the most vague and euphemistic terms. During the first meeting after application letters first began to arrive, the committee recorded that “letters were read from other young persons offering to become agents of the society, but which were not thought to merit especial notice.”<sup>85</sup> Although it is impossible to know exactly what particular circumstances disqualified each applicant, it is clear from the number of rejections given that the prospect of missionary work aroused enough interest that the society could afford to be discriminating about those it chose as its representatives.

Sponsors of missionary agents and missionaries already engaged in the field had very specific ideas of the sort of women that they were interested in sending abroad. Besides being well-educated, missionary organizers often emphasized that teachers should be of the right temperament. In her first exchange of letters with the FES, Mary Anne Wilson described what sort of agent she thought they should send to India: “The Lady should be a sensible, middle-aged person, with a strong decision of character.” She also emphasized the importance of physical stamina—in order to resist the dangers of the climate—and the ability to tolerate a largely

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<sup>83</sup> Weitbrecht, *Female missionaries in India*, 10-11

<sup>84</sup> Noel, preface to *Female agency among the heathen*, 5

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 11/21/1834

unrewarding existence: “we require active, cheerful, good-tempered persons, who can be as happy alone, as in society.” Much of this emphasis on the need for a sensible, steady character reflected a concern, on the part of those promoting the cause, that women missionaries observe the strictest rules of propriety, i.e., that they appear sexually unavailable. This desire is evident in Wilson’s concluding suggestion that the ladies should come out in twos, perhaps with a sister, friend, or “pious, steady maid-servant” so that they could chaperone each other.<sup>86</sup> It is also a likely reason for the nature of a request from the Reverend Tucker, a missionary in Bombay, who wrote to the FES in 1835 asking the society to provide his mission with a woman teacher and “recommending that only a lady advanced in years should be sent to that station.”<sup>87</sup> In delineating the character of the women who should become missionaries, authoritative missionary figures indicated that women agents should adhere to contemporary ideals of Christian humility, chastity, and respectability.

In order to have more control over the type of women that they hired as agents, the FES committee standardized their application process early in the society’s life. In 1834, the society bylaws set out a procedure under which applicants under consideration must answer a detailed questionnaire, covering topics from the spiritual (“2. Have you reason to believe that you are yourself a partaker of Divine grace? If so, upon what grounds do you rest that belief?”) to the mundane (“18. Are your health and spirits good? 19. What is your age?”).<sup>88</sup> A candidate also had to provide at least two references from employers, family members, or clergymen “capable of testifying to her character and qualifications.” Finally, once she was accepted on probation, three different members of the committee held separate, private interviews with her before the society could finally confirm her acceptance.<sup>89</sup> Such a vetting procedure speaks even more strongly to the committee’s concern that the women they sent out should be of temperament and character that confirmed to their standards.

Important among these standards was the emphasis that agents of the society should be “ladies.” The society’s papers and publications refer typically to those in its service by that title, and discussion in the committee minutes over the suitability of various candidates often had a charged subtext surrounding the question of their gentility. A divisive discussion over a

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<sup>86</sup> Wilson, letter, 1835, CMS Archive

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 12/18/1835

<sup>88</sup> FES, questionnaire printed in the back of *History of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East* (London: Edward Sutter, 1847), 281-283

<sup>89</sup> FES bylaws, 1839, *Missions to women*

proposed assistant to one of the agents about to be sent to India in 1835 engaged the committee for most of a particular meeting, since some of the members felt dissatisfied with the assistant “relative to some reports respecting her manner.”<sup>90</sup> Lack of ladylike behavior could disqualify an applicant, as could conditions in her life which deviated from norms of respectability, even if those conditions were out of the applicant’s control. In 1840, for example, the society received a letter from “Mrs. Bromley of Deptford offering herself as a candidate, being a married woman deserted by her husband.” After minimal discussion, the committee “resolved that under their circumstances it is not expedient to encourage her application.”<sup>91</sup> In keeping with the unforgiving strictures of British society, no women who had been sexually compromised, even through no fault of her own, could be considered a lady, and if she was not a lady, she could not be a missionary.

The society’s desire that it only be represented by women standing firmly within respectable society arose from two important needs. One was to preserve the reputation of missionary women in English society, at a time when that occupation was only slowly gaining respectability. The other was to give the missionary teacher an edge of social authority over her charges. This desire is apparent in a committee discussion of the plans to book a passage to India for two agents in 1842. The organizers wanted to be sure that their women traveled with another female companion on board ship. It was pointed out that there would be one “native woman” passenger going, and was suggested that her services be engaged if she is of “respectable character.” No information was forthcoming, however, and the committee decided to delay the voyage, recording that they regretted the loss of the passage fare, but wanted to act “consistently with their responsibility as a Christian Institution, the object of which is to elevate the minds and characters of the females of the East.”<sup>92</sup> The implication was that, by traveling alone or in the company of a disreputable woman, the missionary agents would lose their good reputations, something that was essential if they wanted to have success as teachers and moral authorities in India.

Even though the society appeared to invest a lot of concern in the social position of its agents, they generally came from a very narrow, and not very high, social stratum. It is true that their origins could not be beyond the pale of respectable society, but neither were they of upper-

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<sup>90</sup> FES minutes, 12/18/1835, *Missions to women*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 1/17/1840

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 3/17/1842 (emphasis in original)

middle class backgrounds. Being a teacher in the service of the FES was a paid position (although the society did not pay the women's salaries itself in the first years, but rather arranged for sponsorship from another benevolent or missionary organization), and the women who applied tended to be those who needed to earn an income for their own support. There were occasional instances of applicants being solvent enough that they could offer to pay the expenses of the trip out themselves, as was the case with Miss Carter, whom the society sent out to Cawnpore (Kanpur) in 1835, but they were exceptions to the typical pattern.

The FES minutes do not often specify the applicants' personal histories, but from the instances where it is mentioned it seems that it was most common for future FES agents to be school-teachers, governesses, or clergymen's daughters. This set of qualities suggest that they had mostly poor backgrounds—they were not from the laboring classes, but were not from the newly-growing and financially solvent middle classes, either. Wilson recommended to the FES that “Ladies who have been governesses in families or schools would answer extremely well” as agents, an argument that the leaders of the FES seem to have taken to heart.<sup>93</sup> In 1835, they arranged to send to Malacca a Miss Thornton, who had formerly been a governess in a missionary family in the Mediterranean, and had superintended native schools there. Women with a working background and no source of family support were also the most likely to offer their services to the society. In 1842 the FES received an offer of service from a Miss Poppy, a teacher at the Infant School of Henley on Thames, who wanted to become a missionary agent, but who “requested permission to give six weeks notice to leave her present situation.”<sup>94</sup> That she would ask for such a thing suggests her need to maintain a good relationship with her current employer and perhaps her dependence on a continued paycheck up until the moment of her departure. FES agents were respectable, but often they also, as in Miss Poppy's case, needed to work to support themselves. It is likely, therefore, that most of the first single missionary agents were what might be called “shabby gentility.”

The background of most of the agents in the field created a class division within the society as a whole. As Susan Thorne has demonstrated in her discussion of British Congregational mission organizations, the popularity of benevolent societies in the nineteenth-century was part of an aspirational middle-class culture. Thorne writes that many of the actual

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<sup>93</sup> Wilson, letter, 1835, CMS Archive

<sup>94</sup> FES minutes, 2/20/1835, 1/13/1842, *Missions to women*

missionaries who went out were from the lower classes, men who had attained some level of education, but whose families had working-class roots and who were familiar with financial need. Conversely, those who ran the societies were from the middle and upper classes. This division, she argues, helped “establish relationships” between the different groups, creating boundaries and defining their respective roles more rigidly: “the celebration of plebian missionaries achievements subtly reinforced the prestige of the missionary movement’s middle class promoters, while allowing (if not requiring) them to remain safely at home.”<sup>95</sup> Such a division seems to have operated in the same way within the FES. In contrast to the “shabby gentility” of the agents, the members of the committee were women of leisure, who could spend their free time running a voluntary society and their surplus income supporting the cause, and the presidents of the society were titled ladies, members of the aristocracy.

Middle and upper class women may have most often assumed leadership positions in the society, but the FES was not entirely shaped by their vision, and lower class agents were also pursuing their own interests and aspirations by becoming involved in missionary work. Frank Prochaska points out that interest in religious charitable work and involvement in its causes had spread to working-class as well as middle-class women by the early nineteenth century.<sup>96</sup> Also, aside from the commitment they may have had to the ideals of the society, the fact is that by becoming its agents these women were taking jobs that significantly broadened the range of opportunities typically open to women of their time and social position. Besides working as a governess, teacher, or seamstress, there was little that a respectable woman could do in mid-nineteenth-century Britain.<sup>97</sup> By taking position with the FES, adventurous women might expose themselves to a range of opportunities to travel and see things outside of anything they would be able to witness while living a life of propriety in England.

It is important, however, to beware of assigning anachronistic motives to these early missionary agents. Although they may have been alive to the possibilities of broader and more varied experience that the foreign missionary work promised, and this was likely one of the reasons for the romance that came to surround the idea of missionary work, it is also clear that most women missionaries had strong religious feelings and believed fully in the evangelical cause. In 1841, for example, the FES committee reported that their agent in Malacca, “Miss

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<sup>95</sup> Thorne, *Congregational Missions*, 67-69

<sup>96</sup> Prochaska, *Christianity & social service*, 20

<sup>97</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent women*, 3

Thornton[,] has declined an earnest invitation to return to England for a year, in order to visit her family, her brother having offered to pay the expenses of both voyages.” The committee further recorded “their sense of her devoted conduct and persevering zeal.”<sup>98</sup> Women did not seek to work in foreign missions only because they needed to support themselves or because they wanted more freedom and autonomy, although those were also aspects of missionary life. A study of women’s applications to the London Missionary Society at the end of the century supports the argument that they were characterized by a “Christian earnestness and humility” regarding work which they saw as an offer of themselves to God’s will even while they took it opportunity to pursue “freedom and openings across the boundaries of national and domestic home.”<sup>99</sup> It is likely that the FES applicants of the previous generation had similar motivations.

Whatever their beliefs in the God-ordained nature of their work, women who went out to India and other foreign missions also took the opportunity to broaden their own authority and autonomy. As members of the colonizing group in a colonial situation such as India, they would have had greater relative standing than their lower-class origins, or their position as women, entitled them to at home. Wilson explained, in her invitation to the FES to send their agents out to Calcutta, the way that a European woman pursuing missionary work could set herself up as the ruler of her own little sphere: “In Bengal a Lady could easily get a school of 100 day-scholars and by degrees she might collect 10 or 20 orphans. These with Christian men servants, their wives and children, would form a very nice establishment.” Wilson also suggested that although agents would start as teachers of children, “they would also endeavor to use every opportunity to give religious instruction to adults, whether male or female.”<sup>100</sup> Attempting to convert grown men and women was a role that into which missionary women could take on by establishing precedent on the ground in India. In doing so, they moved into a higher echelon of church authority, one which, given the importance of religious organizations in nineteenth-century Britain, had significant implications for women’s assumption of public roles within their home society.

Wilson’s description was no doubt an optimistic assessment of the ease with which women could establish themselves in India, but there is evidence that they often attempted to

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<sup>98</sup> FES Minutes, 4/22/1841, *Missions to women*

<sup>99</sup> Jane Haggis, “A heart that has felt the love of God and longs for others to know it,” *Women’s History Review*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1998), 171-187, FN 179, 181

<sup>100</sup> Wilson, letter, 2/25/1835, CMS Archive

expand the autonomy of their positions once they arrived. Take the case of Miss Puddicombe, a single woman the FES sent to Bombay. In October 1840 the society minutes record the receipt of a letter from Miss Puddicombe telling of her of arrival in Bombay and explaining that plans for a school at Poona (Pune), the site that she had originally been engaged to teach at, had fallen through. She proposed instead “to remain at Bombay and devote herself to the education of the Parsees.” The committee moved to accede to her plan, but then two months later received letters of complaint from the Bishop of Bombay and from Miss Carr, the bishop’s sister and a woman also involved in missionary education, saying that Miss Puddicombe only turned down the Pune school because it’s students consisted of "Indo-Britons" and because it was placed under the management of a committee of benevolent colonial ladies. They argued that she had no valid grounds for refusing the position. Such a move on Miss Puddicombe’s part suggests that she was attempting to insert herself into a position where she would not be under the direct control of a board of interested ladies, but would be able to run a school independently. The society’s response, to pass a resolution that candidates were required to go where they were appointed, since "on more than one instance of late the agents of the Society on their arrival in India have considered themselves at liberty to select their own field of labour," suggests that Miss Puddicombe was not the only one who tried to increase the independence of her role.<sup>101</sup>

Women agents were in a somewhat liminal position in their simultaneous relationships to British society and Indian society. It was not always clear whether and to what extent missionary work gave them authority in relationship to their fellow countrymen or allowed them to escape their original social position. The travel arrangements the society made for Miss Jones, one of the first women it sent to India, encapsulate this ambiguity. The FES arranged for her to take a ship passage under the protection of a male missionary, Mr. Wilkinson, who was returning to India at the same time. He was to pay for her passage and in return she would look after his child for the duration of the voyage, “dining in the private cabin instead of the cuddy [officers’ and paying passengers’ mess room], but being in all respects treated as a sister missionary.” When she arrived in India, Miss Jones would, it was hoped, be given missionary work by Mary Ann. Wilson, but the committee cautioned that “she must be prepared to take a situation as a nursery governess in the meantime.”<sup>102</sup> This is a very mixed set of messages, which leave

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<sup>101</sup> FES minutes, 10/23/1840, 12/10/1840, *Missions to women*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 4/27/1835

unclear the extent to which Miss Jones could assume a new place in society with her role as a missionary agent, or whether she was to remain a servant in her relationship to other British colonial residents.

Single women were also sometimes prevented from realizing greater autonomy in the field because they were directly subordinated under the authority of local (male) missionaries. The FES received, in one instance, an application for financial assistance from a Reverend Crisp "to take out to Bangalore with him a young person who has resided for some time in his family & whom he considers well qualified to fill some subordinate situation in the work of female education in India."<sup>103</sup> The subservient position of such female dependents, whether they were servants or poor relations, made it possible for them to move into work as missionary teachers without leaving the patriarchal structure of the missionary household.

As the society became more well-established, though, its leaders began to use the group's institutional authority to prevent its agents falling into that kind of situation. In 1842, when the FES was attempting to expand the sphere of its activities into Greece, the central committee considered the case of an agent who wanted to move to a position in Mitylene to open a school for Greek children. A local missionary, Mr. Barker, wrote to the society on her behalf, "urging her to take this step, more, as it appeared to the Committee, as governess in his family, than as an Agent of the Society." This idea did not sit well with the leaders of the society, and they "resolved that Miss Holland...be cautioned not to allow herself to be monopolized by one family."<sup>104</sup> Such a warning illustrates a moment when the society's leaders were able to invoke the power of their committee as an authoritative body to promote the independence and autonomy of one of their agents.

The authority of the central committee also provided an opportunity for women who never left England to act in the mission cause with greater independence and personal power. Clare Midgley is right to point out that women were excluded from leadership positions in the large, mainstream missionary societies until the founding of women's auxiliaries and the expansion of the women's missionary movement to mass proportions. Well before that time, however, the FES was conducted by a group of women. The Reverend Noel stated, in his introduction to the FES history, that it was designed to be "a Society of Ladies," so that "it can

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 4/30/1842

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 2/17/1842

carry on its deliberations and execute its plans in a quiet, unobtrusive manner, suited to the subordinate and retired position of the objects of its solicitude.”<sup>105</sup> The societal mores of the time may have stated that women naturally behaved quietly and unobtrusively, but the practical effect of the society’s structure was that its female leadership was making independent, executive decisions about policies and procedures. Society meetings often included male missionaries and clergymen as guests, whose advice the committee courted, and the society had a male treasurer on its board to manage its finances, but the society itself was directed by women. At one point early in the organization’s existence, one of the noble patronesses suggested that they “obtain some gentleman connected with one of the various missionary societies as advisor, whose name might be printed as a sanction to the public.” The committee discussed this possibility, but rejected it by majority and continued to control their affairs themselves.<sup>106</sup> In providing such a framework for women’s authority, the FES set a precedent which later women’s missionary societies would follow, “creating an institutional space in which to engage in activities traditionally the purview of men.”<sup>107</sup> The FES central committee, therefore, contained some of the seeds which would grow into the proto-feminist spread of powerful women’s societies within fifty years.

Just because the women of the central committee and the women in the field were active in positions that allowed them to assert their greater independence, they were not always in harmony with each other. Sometimes the ways in which missionary agents pursued their own interests clashed with the vision that the organizers had for the society. This was already visible in the society’s negative response to Miss Puddicombe’s choice to change schools in Bombay, and their expressed desire to assert tighter control over her actions, but it is a dynamic that was most apparent when society agents took a step that, although it happened with great frequency, the society leadership never ceased to oppose. That was to get married.

Because of their belief that married women could not devote their full time and energy to the cause of female education due to the demands of their wifely duties, the committee intended that its agents should remain single. They even instituted a regulation that, if agents in the field

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<sup>105</sup> FES, *Female agency among the heathen*, 5-6

<sup>106</sup> FES minutes, 1/15/1835, *Missions to women*

<sup>107</sup> Thorne, “Missionary-imperial feminism,” in Taylor and Lutkehaus, eds 49

married before they had completed five years of service, they must refund to the committee the money it had spent sending them out:<sup>108</sup>

“To guarantee the Society against serious pecuniary loss by their marriage, or in any other way disqualify themselves for the objects contemplated by the committee, and not less to vindicate the agents themselves from all suspicion of interested motives, a form of engagement was drawn up, to which each lady, before embarking affixes her signature, attested by two witnesses”

Despite this punitive restriction, FES agents got married in the field more frequently than not, and there was little the society could do about it except complain. This they did fairly vociferously. In response, for example, to news that Miss Woodman, who was on her way to the Neyoor mission in south India, had married a LMS missionary "after an acquaintance of two days only, and in violation of her solemn engagement with the Society," it was "Resolved that the committee record their unqualified censure of a proceeding so repugnant to every feeling of female delicacy, of Christian propriety, & even of common honor, & so calculated to draw down reproach on the operations of this society & and on the cause of Missions generally"<sup>109</sup> Miss Woodman's side of the story is lost, and we know none of the details that might explain such a hasty marriage—whether she believed that she would have greater security as a missionary's wife than as a FES agent, whether she wanted to be free of financial dependence on the society, or whether she was simply out to find a husband and took the first likely-looking candidate that came along. Whatever her rationale, the wording of the central committee's response illustrates their fear that women's entry into the mission field would be imagined, in popular opinion, to be an excuse for illicit behavior not licensed in British home society.

To a certain extent this fear was justified, as missionary women often did take the opportunity to marry quickly and informally. The FES minutes record the removal of their agents through marriage before the completion of the five year contract again and again. These reports do not provide many details about the conditions of these marriages, save that they were often contracted under short notice. When the identities of the new husbands are known, they appear almost always to be clergymen and fellow missionaries. Usually the agents who married them shifted their work from the projects financed by the FES to those run by the societies their husbands represented. Clare Midgley has suggested that in the years before the FES and the later

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<sup>108</sup> FES, *History of the Society*, 30

<sup>109</sup> FES minutes, 10/23/1840, *Missions to women*

women's missionary societies came into existence, marrying missionaries became a strategy for interested British ladies to enter the field, just as St. John Rivers hopes that Jane Eyre will do. Yet marriage was also a goal for its own sake, and women used missionary work to pursue it, much as they used marriage to pursue missionary work. An example from the later period of greater women's missionary activity was Jane Johnson, an agent of the newly-created Ladies Association of the Society for the Promotion of the Gospel, who traveled to Delhi in 1869 and who was the source of much complaint on the part of her fellow missionaries. According to many reports, she behaved with scandalous independence, and seemed intent on finding herself a husband and little interested in her missionary labors.<sup>110</sup>

Although missionary women often acted against the desires of the organizing societies, their actions ultimately forced acceptance on their superiors. The FES organizers anxiously opposed the marriages of their agents, and entered into many long and convoluted correspondences with newly-married missionary wives in an attempt to get back their investments, but they could not stop these marriages from taking place. In fact, they often continued to have professional contact with their former agents. Some fifteen years after the debacle of Miss Woodman's hasty marriage, the FES annual reports mentioned her with approbation as a colleague to whose school (in the mission district where she worked with her husband) the society sent regular donations. Apparently the society's central committee members recovered from their annoyance with the former Miss Woodman and were able to continue to work with her on terms that she, as much as they, had set.

Through their work for the FES, female missionary agents who traveled abroad, took on positions of authority and independence, and even married under conditions of their own choosing, were pursuing their own interests in ways they largely could not at home. After the first few years, they worked under the aegis of an organization that supported their endeavors, but they did not limit their actions to the paths that it set out. They acted independently, and by breaking with old standards of behavior, set new ones. They became examples for missionary women who would come to India in greater numbers, as well as for women at home in Britain. Their behavior, whether it was in accordance with the desires of the central committee or against

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<sup>110</sup> Geraldine Forbes, in her essay on the women of the Ladies Association ("In search of the 'pure heathen:' missionary women in nineteenth-century India," *Economic and political weekly*, 21:17 (1986): 2-8), takes Johnson as evidence of the lack of sympathetic connection between British missionary women and their pupils, but her behavior also illustrates the greater freedom of license that missionary women by the colonies could obtain, even if they did so at the expense of their contemporaries' opinions.

them, worked effectively over the course of their careers in foreign mission service to change the practice of women's roles in missionary organizations, both in the colony and in the metropole.

#### IV. Expansion to a Mass Movement: The Importance of Zenana Missions

With the institutional backing of the FES, single women began to go out regularly as missionaries, and by doing so set standards and precedents guaranteeing the continuation of their work. The society's numbers grew steadily, but not particularly quickly, through the 1840s and early 1850s. Over the course of the next two decades, though, the field of women's missionary work in general and the operations of the FES in particular grew many times over. This growth, as the history of the FES shows, was not spontaneous, but neither was it in keeping with the earlier pattern of women's missionary work. Something had changed. There was another factor at work besides the actions of individual women and the shifts in British society that had been promoting such work for the last generation. This factor grew out of changing conditions in India which, given the pride of place that it held in Britain's international and colonial relations, influenced the nature of British evangelical activity in all foreign missions.<sup>111</sup> Stemming from the growth of an English-educated Indian elite class, these changes allowed for the development of homeschooling efforts geared towards upper-class, high-caste women living in purdah. Zenana missions, held in the women's quarters of upper class households, became the focus of missionary activity for women, at a time when greater numbers, especially greater numbers among the middle-class, were turning to such work.

Extending their evangelical and teaching efforts to high-caste Indians had been an area of intense and much-frustrated effort for many protestant missionaries, and women's missions to women echoed the same interests from the beginning. Among wealthy Hindu families, women's seclusion provided a barrier to the visitation of foreigners and outsiders. During her first year in Calcutta, Mary Ann Wilson referred in her letters to her desire to gain admittance to the homes of well-off Indians, and complained that she had not yet been able to "get among them."<sup>112</sup> She persistently advanced different schemes to reach upper-class women, none of which met with much success. In a letter some years later to the wife of a missionary who had returned to England, she included a sample of a circular she had written inviting rich Indians to send their daughters to one of her schools. She admitted before the end of the letter that "no one has had

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<sup>111</sup> Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of history: British feminists, Indian women, and imperial culture, 1865-1915*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994. Burton advances an argument about the importance of colonial India for the development of the British feminist movement in the late nineteenth century, an idea of the influence of the Indian context on development of women's roles in England to which I am much indebted.

<sup>112</sup> Wilson, letter 11/28/1822, CMS Archive (emphasis in original)

the courage to send the first child. However, I thought to inform them I was ready would do no harm.”<sup>113</sup> Preoccupation with reaching elite women was not a personal foible of Wilson’s; many of the earliest missionaries interested in female education expressed similar concern. At an FES meeting during the society’s first years Lady Bryant, a visiting noblewoman, spoke to the committee promoting “the possibility, by cautious and persevering measures, of introducing Christianity among the higher class of females, now sunk in darkness and superstition.”<sup>114</sup> Despite the numbers of schools that missionary’s wives and single women agents were able to set up and superintend from the 1820s onwards, they were often ill-satisfied with results that did not allow them to bring their teaching to the women of an Indian elite who would neither leave their homes nor allow westerners inside.

Such preferential interest in teaching upper-class Indian women was fueled by several different factors. One of these was a desire to spread Christianity to the Indian rich and powerful more generally, both due to the utilitarian rationale that those placed higher in society were its natural leaders, and so would be able to exert their influence in favor of further missionary work, and because of simple prejudicial biases toward the upper class. Missionary efforts to establish women’s and girls’ schools relied heavily on solicitations of support from benefactors in both England and the colonies, and missionary women often appealed to native as well as colonial elites for donations. One of Mary Ann Wilson’s major projects in the late 1820s was her plan to construct a Central School in Calcutta, a work that was only completed with the help of a donation of Rs. 20,000 by the Rajah Baidyanath Roy of Jorasenko. The FES continued to appeal for this kind of assistance: as a pamphlet of theirs from 1840 expressed it, they hoped that “wealthy and intelligent natives” would be inspired to make charitable donations to their cause.<sup>115</sup> That many missionaries also assigned greater importance to developing their relationships with native elite for reasons having more to do with snobbery and prejudice than financial planning is apparent from some of their rhetoric. In one of his sermons promoting women’s education, for example, Alexander Duff offered his audience the consolation that, although the cause was a vexed one in India, something may be done at least with “the poorer classes and inferior castes or hapless outcastes.”<sup>116</sup> Demonstrating similar attitudes, the later

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, letter 1829

<sup>114</sup> FES minutes, 12/16/36, *Missions to women*

<sup>115</sup> FES pamphlet, “An appeal and list of contributions,” 1840, British Library, London

<sup>116</sup> Duff, *Missionary Addresses*, 240

annual reports of the FES boasted repeatedly of the instances when their teachers were able to reach particularly high-class women, especially nobility or royalty.

Assigning greater importance to the education and Christianization of the middle classes and the elite was not a prejudice all missionaries shared, but it was a perspective which grew more influential within both the missionary and the Indian colonial communities as the century progressed. J.C. Ingleby, in his study of broader educational policies among protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century, emphasizes the lack of unity between the educational programs of different groups. He sees a fundamental tension between the desire to train Indian Christians as “native agents,” who would be able to establish an independent Indian church and proselytize in their own right, and “a more grandiose idea, the Christianizing of India by means of a direct influence on the influential classes.” Just as Brahminical practices within Hindu communities were imitated by other caste groups, so missionaries hoped that if Christian practices were taken up by former religious leaders, as well as by the wealthy and powerful of society, they would have the greatest potential to inspire large-scale conversion. Although this failed to happen, Ingleby writes that this second perspective gained ascendancy in the field of missionary education in India, aided in no little part because it fell into closer alignment with the educational aims of the colonial state.<sup>117</sup>

Not all missionaries subscribed to this educational policy. Instead, it was a source of conflict within the wider missionary community. Contradictory positions appear even among the pages of the FES records. Not only did early female agents spend the majority of their time superintending schools for poor children, even as they aspired to teach rich women, but through the later period dissenting voices were raised about the primacy of elite education. In 1862 *The Female Missionary Intelligencer* published an article about women’s schools which commented that the fact that attendance at missionary schools began with the lower classes “corresponds with what we observe in the origin and spread of Christianity in all countries. Not to the rich, not to the mighty, not to the noble, but to the poor, has the gospel been preached, so that no flesh may glory in the presence of God.”<sup>118</sup> It is worth noting, however, that this last was penned by the Rev. Behari Lal Sing, an Indian Christian rather than a British missionary, whose perspective arose from within an established Christian community trying to promote its own welfare instead

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<sup>117</sup> J.C. Inglebey, *Missionaries, education, and India: issues in protestant missionary education in the long nineteenth century* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), xii, 52-64

<sup>118</sup> *The Female Missionary Intelligencer*, 9/1/1862

of from outside of it in an attempt to remake Indian society on a different model. Despite such arguments' occasional appearances, the general trend among missionary groups in India was toward greater emphasis on elite education.

This shift in ideas about missionary education grew up along with greater changes in colonial Indian society. Between the first and last quarters of the nineteenth-century, the colonial government became deeply involved in efforts to educate Indians. English became the language of education, and Indians educated under British models began to move into (always low level) administrative positions within the colonial bureaucracy. Questions of how much and to what end Indians should be trained plagued colonial administrators and educators, and fear of loss of control (heightened by the 1857 Rebellion) made them reluctant to grant any power to the Indians whose services they employed. Nevertheless, by the end of this period there was emerging in the presidency regions, particularly in Calcutta, an English-educated elite class interested in self-promotion and self-definition. Their education often came under the tutelage of missionary schools, and their conversion was a new ideal for missionary groups.<sup>119</sup>

Along with the focus on middle and upper class education, missionaries' hope to teach Indian women within elite homes, although present from the first, strengthened over time, taking up a larger and larger portion of the attentions of the missionary agents and organizers. The shift is apparent in a comparison between two documents describing the mission of the FES. Before the shift to an emphasis on elite education, Priscilla Chapman's 1839 book divided the areas of the society's labors into five parts: 1) teaching women and girls of all ages in day schools supported by voluntary contributions, 2) recruiting children to be taught by individuals, privately, 3) visiting upper-caste women at home, 4) gathering orphans into asylums and educating them as Christians, and lastly, 5) boarding schools for native Christians.<sup>120</sup> In this recounting, zenana visiting is an important part of the society's mission, but it is not the only, or even the first goal they have set for themselves.

In marked contrast is a pamphlet issued by the society in 1884. This was not only well after women's missionary work had become widespread, but it was written for a very different world, one in which English-educated Indian elites were an active force in colonial society and politics (it was, in fact, the year the Indian National Congress was founded). Sensationally titled

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<sup>119</sup> Thomas Metcalf, *The aftermath of revolt: India, 1857-1870* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964)

<sup>120</sup> Chapman, *Hindoo female education*, 73

“Light through Eastern Lattices: A Plea for Zenana Captives,” the pamphlet made a histrionic case for the suffering of secluded high-caste women. Further, it recast the history of the society, explaining, “Its original aim was to enter the secluded interiors, where no Englishman could hope to gain admission.... It was only in consequence of the few openings, which occurred during many weary years, that the Society, for a time, devoted its chief energies to the Schools which have been so greatly blessed.”<sup>121</sup> Such a revision of the story of the society’s development to suggest that it was structured primarily and from the first around the attempt to reach women in zenanas shows to what extent the zenana visiting had come to dominate women’s missionary work by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Something significant had changed between Priscilla Chapman and the “Plea for Zenana Captives.”

Greater interest in possibilities of zenana visiting was also a corollary to the ongoing social developments within Britain that had first sanctioned women’s entry into the mission field. One of the practices that had become widespread among the women who flocked to the benevolent and charitable societies that had been growing in popularity over the course of the century was district visiting. After the middle of the century, it became common for charitably inclined middle class women in England to make a practice of visiting the poor of their neighborhoods, going into their houses to inspect and advise them on matters of household management, childcare, spirituality, and wifely duties. It was a form of charitable religious work that drew women particularly within a field already female-dominated. Frank Prochaska points out that “It was often said that visiting was best done by women, because they had wide sympathies, a knowledge of domestic management, and could more freely enter homes in which men were rarely found at visiting times.”<sup>122</sup> This argument strongly echoes the rationale which supported women missionaries as the sole acceptable visitors in Indian homes, and it is likely that the prevalence of visiting practices in their local environs made it easier for British women to imagine that they would or could do such work in the Indian setting.

Another development in British society arose to further promote women’s participation in missionary and zenana work: As Martha Vicinus has aptly demonstrated, by 1850 many middle class women were expressing public dissatisfaction with the enforced idleness of their lives. Inspired by the work of earlier famous figures such as Florence Nightingale, who became

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<sup>121</sup> FES, “Light Through Eastern Lattices: A Plea for Zenana Captives by the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East on the Occasion of its Jubilee, 1884,” London, 9

<sup>122</sup> Prochaska, *Christianity and social service*, 65

something of a cult figure for the nursing career that gave her successful and self-fulfilling work while at the same time upholding contemporary ideals of female piety and self-sacrifice, middle-class women began in the second half of the century to move out of the home and into the workplace, starting with spheres in which they had already been exercising their voluntary efforts—schools, hospitals, and the homes of the poor. Many of them sought work through religious institutions, as “religious belief gave many women courage to move beyond conformity to social norms.” The actions of such middle-class women helped bring about a broader social acceptance of their work by the end of the century.<sup>123</sup>

In the context of these developments, zenana missions were particularly appealing to women, since they offered an occupation motivated by religious zeal and situated well within the bounds of the feminine sphere, but still enabled British women to leave the bounds of their own homes and engage in active work elsewhere. Home visiting required less training for candidates than the earlier schoolmistress positions, and so zenana work was open to a greater number of interested women. As time progressed, however, and more middle class women entering the missionary field had attained higher levels of education, their work underwent a professionalization echoing that of the earlier FES agents. Zenana missionary work thus became a venue for changes in British society to expand the pool of potential missionaries from the lower-class agents of the early years to the ranks of the as-yet unoccupied middle classes and to provide middle class women with an avenue for work with a growing amount of training and status.

Although Vicinus does well to emphasize the agency of middle class women, there were other changes happening simultaneously which helped encourage them to enter missionary work. Public perceptions of middle class women’s position had shifted. Geraldine Forbes, to support her discussion of the founding of the Ladies Auxiliary to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, points out that contemporaries had begun to complain of superfluous single women in the years leading up to the explosive growth of women’s mission work. In the 1860s census reports for the British Isles recorded that thirty percent of all women over twenty were unmarried, and contemporary critics, such as William Rathbone Greg declared that “redundant women” constituted a social problem, particularly for the middle classes, whose women could not “solve” the lack of purpose attendant on their unmarried state by

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<sup>123</sup> Vicinus, *Independent women*, 1-45, FN 22

“disappearing” into the servant workforce. Greg advocated that such women be transported en masse to the settler colonies, such as New Zealand and Australia, where they could more easily find husbands in an environment where the gender balance was tilted very far in the other direction.<sup>124</sup> Although Greg’s scheme was based on an assumption that marriage was the logical fulfillment of middle class women’s lives, such arguments helped open up possibilities for women to travel and work, whether they meant to find a husband or pursue an ideal of religious self-sacrifice.

Greater numbers of women willing to go out as missionaries, however, do not explain why zenana work suddenly became an option in from the 1860s on, when it had been an object of interest among missionaries for years. Mary Weitbrecht, in her account of the short career of Mary Bird in the 1820s, applauded that woman’s early success in teaching Indian women in their homes: “These incipient labors of Mary Bird, in what is well known as zenana visitation, had their indirect effect in preparing the way for future efforts.”<sup>125</sup> This was not fully true, since after Ms. Bird’s death no woman associated with the FES was able to make much progress in zenana visiting for several decades, despite their best efforts. Miss Wakefield, an FES agent sent out to Calcutta in 1836, wrote in a letter to the society, “At present all attempts to get admittance to the native females among the higher class appear utterly useless.”<sup>126</sup> Families of high-caste women opposed missionaries who wanted to enter their homes, and there was little they could do, particularly given the unwillingness of the government to overtly support efforts at conversion. The public report of another missionary organization, the Calcutta Ladies’ Society for Female Education, in 1853 acknowledged a “reproach” from their audience that they only taught low-class girls at their school, but protested, “We would gladly teach the higher classes, did they feel their need, and were they willing to be taught; but they are not willing.”<sup>127</sup>

The key shift that allowed women’s missionary participation to expand when it did came from the new anglicized Indian elites. Many heads of Indian families in the British presidency towns, particularly Calcutta, decided to allow European women teachers into their homes.<sup>128</sup> Although there were instances from the 1820s onwards of elite Indian men providing fiscal

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<sup>124</sup> Forbes, “In search of the ‘pure heathen,’” 2-3

<sup>125</sup> Weitbrecht, *Female missionaries in India*, 167

<sup>126</sup> FES, *History of the society*, 59-60

<sup>127</sup> “Report of the Ladies’ Society for Native Female Education,” (Calcutta: Sanders, Cones and Co., 1852), 6, CMS Archive

<sup>128</sup> Forbes comments on the importance of this change as well

support for the founding of day schools for girls (such as the Rajah Baidyanath Roy) it was only during this later period that their support for women's education became more widespread. The publications of the FES noted this change with approval. The January 1866 issue of the FES magazine, *The Female Missionary Intelligencer*, for example, contained an article on zenana work in Calcutta that began by commenting on "the wonderful change which has taken place within the last few years in the native mind of India with regard to female education, [that] has created large openings for the labours of Christian teachers among the ladies of the upper classes."<sup>129</sup> Since they had been attempting to organize zenana teaching for the previous thirty years of their existence, the members of the society could not but acknowledge the extent to which the changing perspectives of upper-caste Indian men enabled the expansion of their work.

FES annual reports in the 1860s demonstrate the rapid growth of the society's efforts along with their new involvement in zenana work. Mrs. Mullens, the wife of one of the missionaries stationed in Calcutta, began what was to grow into a large project of zenana teaching in the 1850s. By the time of her death in 1862 she was running four schools with a total of seventy students, plus another eighty women who received instruction in their homes "from teachers chosen by her and enjoyed the benefits of her weekly and fortnightly visits and examinations."<sup>130</sup> The FES report from 1860 mentioned that the central committee had begun a correspondence with her that "elicited much of deep interest respecting her work among females of the upper classes."<sup>131</sup> Thereafter, discussions of zenana missions grew more and more frequent in the annual reports. Simultaneously, the reports themselves got longer, as the different places where FES agents were working and the number of agents sent into the field became more numerous. The FES continued to send women to stations in China, Africa, and the Middle East, but work in India took up a larger and larger part of the society's business. In 1867, the cusp of the period when most major missionary societies founded women's auxiliaries or overtly began to recruit women missionaries, the FES report stated, "zenana work, as may now be anticipated, is rapidly increasing, and the openings are so extensive as to render it imperative to put forth greater efforts than have yet been made."<sup>132</sup> It was a moment when conditions in India encouraged women to come as missionaries.

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<sup>129</sup> FES, *the Female Missionary Intelligencer*, London: Suter & Alexander, 1/1/1866

<sup>130</sup> FES, annual report, 1862, *Missions to women*

<sup>131</sup> FES annual report, 1860, 10, *Missions to women*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 1867, 13

The transformation of missionary work in India into an area of predominantly women's activity was an instance of influence flowing in both directions between metropole and colony. On the one hand were social developments in England that moved from the charitable voluntarism beginning early in the century, through the first efforts of the lady [delete] governesses and teachers whose work for the FES help establish new ideas of acceptable women's work, to the movement out of the home of large numbers of middle class women in the 1880s and 1890s; on the other hand were the conditions of colonial India, which changed in respect to the promotion of women's education with the evolving nature of colonial rule and the dynamics within the community of the educated elite. The role of women missionaries was a point of negotiation in which the dynamic of their work in female education in India affected the lives of the British women involved far more significantly than they [themselves] were able to effect women's conversion in India. In studying the lives and work of women missionaries, however, this last is a somewhat ambiguous element—how did Indian women, the objects of all this evangelical and educational effort, respond to the efforts of the growing body of women missionaries? Given the limitations of missionary documents and, more generally, of archival records, this is a frustratingly opaque historical problem, but it is one which, given the emphasis on individual experience which this study is premised on, it is important to contemplate.

## V. The Bible and Sewing: What Women Missionaries Did for Female Education

In 1862 the *Female Missionary Intelligencer* published a letter to the society by “a missionary’s wife,” titled “Zenana Visiting in South India,” recounting her efforts to promote education and Christianity in an unnamed mission station. In it the author refers to the schools she has set up for young children, and then goes on to describe in greater detail her experiences visiting upper-class women in their homes. First she gives the particulars of a visit she paid to the wife of the newly appointed subedar of the district, a woman who “was such a learned lady that she read the Shasters and Sanskrit.” This was a rare situation, and even more unheard of was the use the two women made of their time together. The missionary wife describes the visit as one in which the two women engaged in a theological debate for “nearly an hour,” the missionary trying to impart “what the Christian Shasters [shastras] teach,” and while the subedar’s wife “appeared firmly to believe her own religion,” but “earnestly inquired our opinions, and heard my objections with much calmness and candour.”

The second story the missionary’s letter relates tells of her interactions with a Brahmin family whose three widows were learning to read. One had attained enough knowledge that the missionary hoped to arrange for her to go to other houses and run her own zenana school. This plan fell through, however, “on account of the opposition of her friends.” The missionary wife describes her conversation with the head of the woman’s household on the subject, where, despite her arguments, the man could not accept that “a young Brahmin woman should go into the streets, and to the house of another, habitually.” He cited the opposition of the larger caste community as a factor in his decision, but told the missionary ““in our own house she shall do anything you wish; here you may have a school; ... you may come whenever you please, and teach Christianity too.”” Another of the widows of that household had been, according to the missionary’s description, unmoved by offers of education for many years, but in the wake of the loss of her daughter she decided to learn to read. The missionary remarks on the dedication she brought to her task: “Four successive weeks I saw this woman, who must be from thirty-five to forty years of age, poring over the alphabet...so bent is she on accomplishing this, that she refuses to look at needlework until this is done.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *The Female Missionary Intelligencer*, 11/1/1862

Although there is much in this anecdote that is unusual and case specific, it is nevertheless a telling story, for it suggests some of the possibilities of the impact of the “female education” that British missionary “ladies” brought to India, as well as its limitations. It is also important to recognize that, although the perspectives and reactions of Indian women are recorded in this vignette, they are filtered through the prejudices, intentions, and expectations of a very different woman, one who, was, moreover, writing for a public and particular audience, so it is well to recognize the limitations of such a source in describing the actual reaction of the subjects of female missionary work. However, this story does reveal a lot. It shows the ideas of curriculum and subject matter that missionary women wanted to bring to India—reading, Christian literacy, and sewing skills. It shows the extent to which missionary education was enabled by the willingness of Indian men and Indian families to allow teachers into their homes, as well as by the simultaneous increase of women’s education within Indian spheres. It also shows the limitations and boundaries that Indian families placed on missionary education, and the ways that they forced it to adjust to expectations about the privacy of the home, and the necessity of women remaining within the private sphere. Finally, it indicates some of the ways that women responded to the teaching offered them, with reservations and objections, but also with interest and the ability to take what they wanted from the encounter, particularly the prospect of learning to read.

It is impossible to generalize about the experience of Indian women taught by Christian missionaries. Missionary activity in India played out across a huge range of cultural settings. Missionaries attempted to teach women in widespread locations, and of very different class backgrounds. Even women missionaries themselves acknowledged the impossibility of reducing the story of their efforts to a single essential experience. In the opening lines of her book, for example, Priscilla Chapman specified that her description of women’s work pertained specifically to Bengal, since that was the region that she had direct experience of. Similarly, this study has focused primarily on Calcutta and its environs, spreading outward from there and from the other presidency towns as women’s missionary work itself did. In those different contexts, as Jane Haggis points out, local conditions “provided an important indigenous framework within which the educational and work agendas of the missionaries assumed a local significance and

meaning.”<sup>134</sup> Whenever missionaries were at work in India, their actions were tempered by the exigencies of the local environment in which they found themselves.

Given that, there was a certain unity in the program of education which women missionaries brought to India. As we have seen, the entire community of missionaries involved in education in India engaged in a lengthy debate over the extent to which they should aim to merely Christianize, or whether they must first “civilize,” by training Indians in English customs and habits, an argument which, by the middle of the nineteenth century, had largely been resolved in favor of the latter. In women’s education, this resolution ran parallel to a shift from a focus on schools for the poor to one on zenana education. But whether the objects of female education were high-caste or low, missionaries intended that “the blessing of education,” should be “on a scale suited to the extent of their wants and the condition of their sex,” as the Calcutta Ladies Society for Female Education proclaimed in 1825.<sup>135</sup> The programs of education described by FES affiliates attempted to instill cleanliness, godliness, and the Christian work ethic in the poor students, all the while keeping “the simplicity of their native habits as much as possible, and thus fitting them to become useful wives and companions to educated Christian youths,” and to engage the attentions of the rich ones with Bible passages and ladylike tasks.<sup>136</sup> To publicly illustrate their goals the FES published, in 1864, the approving comments of an Indian Christian missionary on his visit to England: “the object of your society is not to denationalize the women of India, but to introduce the Bible and the work box into every wealthy zenana, and every poor hut.”<sup>137</sup> As the social and political context of colonial India changed, missionary interests changed with it, and missionary intentions skirted the concerns of the developing national consciousness of the Indian elite and the political controls of the colonial government, while at the same time pursuing a narrow agenda of their own.

What missionaries taught and what their pupils chose to learn, though, could be quite different matters. Actual rates of Indian conversion as a result of women’s missionary work did not amount to a tale of brilliant success. Alongside their stories of conversion, missionary women recorded the resistance of those they taught to abandon their own beliefs. Mary Ann Wilson complained frequently about the “stubbornness” of the population she worked with. She

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<sup>134</sup> Haggis, “Ironies of emancipation,” 121

<sup>135</sup> Hannah Ellerton, letter, 6/1825, CMS Archive

<sup>136</sup> Ladies Society for Native Female Education, circular, 1824, CMS Archive

<sup>137</sup> FES annual report, 1864, *Missions to women*

commented that there were people, including some of the teachers in the schools, who made no opposition to the faith being taught, but still refused to convert: “some few indeed will start up, and tell us there are several roads to Government House, and go by whichever they please, all will be all right at last!”<sup>138</sup> That there were converts to Christianity in India is undeniable, but the legacies of missionary teaching were rather in what their pupils chose to absorb than in what they meant to teach.

Missionary efforts to educate Indian women also had consequences beyond those the missionaries intended, in that their arguments helped stoke the debate alive within the Indian community over the nature of women’s education. Partha Chatterjee and, following him, Judith Walsh, have discussed the ways in which, in Bengal particularly, the “woman’s question” dominated intellectual and political discussions. They point to the way that the struggle among the emerging English-educated professional class to modernize and revitalize their community was expressed in their debates over the position women should fill in society.<sup>139</sup> This was behind much of the changing opportunities for women teachers in colonial society (as suggested before), but it was also expressed in ways that competed with and defined themselves in opposition to ideas of missionary education. Not only were the educational programs of the new proto-national community opposed to Christianization (and staunchly Hindu, in the case of the Bengali upper class), but they suggested solutions to some of the concerns that missionary education espoused which were radically different from the missionaries’. For example, the rhetoric of many of the FES publications promoting zenana education suggested that the education missionaries would provide would save upper class women from the emptiness and idleness of their lives. As *the Female Missionary Intelligencer* promised, “the taste for reading, once acquired, saves poor Eastern ladies from many a tedious hour.”<sup>140</sup> In contrast, as Chatterjee points out, the idea of the westernized, novel-reading, idle *bibi*, who did no housework and “cared little for the well-being of the home,” became a central trope against which Bengali elite culture pitted its new ideal of the educated Indian woman.<sup>141</sup>

The debate over women’s place in Indian culture was a broad one that engaged the arguments of many different voices, native and colonial, in the last decades of the nineteenth

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<sup>138</sup> Wilson, circular, 2/23/1832, CMS Archive

<sup>139</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Judith Walsh, *Domesticity in colonial India* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004)

<sup>140</sup> *The Female Missionary Intelligencer*, 1/1/1862

<sup>141</sup> Chatterjee, *The Nation and its fragments*, 122

century. It is one in which missionary voices played only one part, and in which the voices of women themselves, as Lata Mani has pointed out, were generally eclipsed, so that the discussion became one over women, rather than about them.<sup>142</sup> The records of women missionary workers add their part to this debate, and although the subjects of their efforts are for the most part silent, what does emerge occasionally from the testimonies of lady missionaries and agents are the instances in which some women were willing and able to take advantage of the new opportunities for education, and use it to pursue their personal interests. Judith Walsh has commented that the scanty historical record has recorded at least the tenacity with which many Indian women, given the opportunity, pursued learning. This desire is suggested in the struggles of the unnamed widow from the story of the missionary's wife, who was determined to learn to read, whether or not she accepted the woman's message of Christianity. It is this ability to take what they wanted from the decidedly mixed blessing of Christian attention—as the more famous and well-educated Pandita Ramabai would demonstrate in the next decade—that characterizes the outer possibilities of what the missionary work of the FES did for Indian women.

The personal experience of the pupils of missionary education, in their individual responses to the schooling they received and the lectures they heard, helped shape the trajectory of women's education and missionary work. Similarly, this thesis has attempted to show, the individual actions of British women missionaries, along with the impact of wider social trends, affected the emergence of women's missionary work from the British side of the picture. They contributed to a charged discourse, in which their actions responded to and fundamentally altered the way British and Indian women lived in both England and India. The importance of personal action in the context of social change, one that affects individuals on both sides of the colonial divide, is a thread which unites the story of women missionaries and Indian women, the so-called ladies and females whose encounter was at the center of the development of nineteenth-century women's missionary work in India.

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<sup>142</sup> Lata Mani, "Contentious traditions," 88-126

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