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Alexander Robertson, Scottish Social Theology and Low-caste Hindu Reform in Early Twentieth-century Colonial India

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the social theology and practice of Scottish presbyterian missionaries towards hinduism in early twentieth-century western India. It reveals a radical contrast in Scottish missionary practice and outlook with the earlier activities of Alexander Duff (1806–78) in India from 1829 to 1864 as well as with contemporaneous discourse on non-christian religion and ethnicity which was prevalent at home in Scotland. The article argues that Scottish presbyterian missionaries selectively adapted and elaborated radical social theology from late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Scotland to deal with the hindu socio-religious out-casting and economic exploitation that they experienced during their christian proselytisation in early twentieth-century western India. In particular, the article analyses the social theology of the United Free Church missionary Reverend Alexander Robertson, who lived and worked in western India from 1902 to 1937. Robertson sought to re-invent and apply radical Scottish social theology to the material development and religious conversion of Dalit or impoverished out-caste hindu populations in western India. The article also contrasts this Scottish missionary social theology and practice with the secular Edwardian Liberal ideas of Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1871–1954), which Robertson's colleague and colonial administrator, Harold H. Mann (1872–1961) sought to implement towards Dalit people when he was Agricultural Chemist of Bombay Presidency after 1907 and Director of Agriculture for the Bombay Presidency in Pune from 1918 to 1927. In this context, the article argues more broadly that popular Orientalist discourse on non-christian religion and ethnicity at home in

Scotland and perceptions of a subordinate Scottish relationship with the London metropole conceal the radical dimensions of Scottish identity within empire and the ways in which the interaction of radical practices between imperial peripheries like Scotland and India conditioned imperial development.

Over the last decade, there has emerged an ever more forceful debate over how Scottish national and imperial identity was determined by Scottish participation in British imperial expansion. In varied forms, degrees and regions of the world, Bernard Bailyn, T. M. Devine, Colin Kidd, Michael Fry, John MacKenzie, Andrew MacKillop, Maratha McLaren, Avril Powell and many others have elaborated a Scottish sense of empire that might be defined as an outward extension of Scottish political philosophy, population, military identity and socio-economic practice to the wider world.[1] They and others have also demonstrated how such a Scottish role in empire influenced domestic Scottish society, economy, union, and nationhood. In particular, on this side of the debate, there has been a general focus on the building and distinguishing of Scottish civic networks, economic organisation, military configuration, and above all political identity. Some commentators, such as Tom Nairn and Linda Colley, have illustrated the limitations and inhibitions of Scottish national identity that involvement in empire brought.[2] Others have stressed the complementary development of concentric or simultaneous dual identities within Scottish society as a result of empire, such as in the work of Michael Lynch, David McCrone, and Graeme Morton.[3] Yet

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[1] I. H. Adams and Meredyth Somerville, *Cargoes of Despair and Hope: Scottish emigration to North America* (Edinburgh, 1993); David Armitage, 'Making the empire British: Scotland in the Atlantic world, 1542–1707', *Past and Present* 155 (1997) 34–63; Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: Emigration from Britain to America on the eve of the revolution* (London, 1986); Bernard Bailyn and P. D. Morgan (eds), *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural margins of the first British empire* (London, 1991); T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire, 1600–1815* (London, 2005); T. M. Devine (ed.), *Scottish Emigration and Scottish Society* (Edinburgh, 1992); T. M. Devine, *The Tobacco Lords: A study of the tobacco merchants of Glasgow and their trading activities c.1740–90* (Edinburgh, 1976); Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire* (East Linton, 2001); A. L. Karras, *Sojourners in the Sun: Scottish migrants in Jamaica and Chesapeake 1740–1800* (London, 1992); Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and scripture in the protestant Atlantic world* (Cambridge, 2006); J. M. MacKenzie (ed.), *David Livingstone and the Victorian Encounter with Africa* (London, 1996); J. M. MacKenzie, 'Essay and reflection: on Scotland and the empire', *International History Review* 15 (1993) 714–39; J. M. MacKenzie and N. R. Dalziel, *The Scots in South Africa: Ethnicity, identity, gender and race* (Manchester, 2012); Andrew MacKillop, *'More Fruitful than the Soil': Army, empire and the Scottish Highlands 1715–1815* (East Linton, 2000); Martha McLaren, *British India and British Scotland 1780–1830* (Akron, 2001); A. W. Parker, *Scottish Highlanders in Colonial Georgia: The recruitment, emigration and settlement at Darien 1735–48* (Athens, Georgia, 1997); Avril Powell, *Scottish Orientalists and India: The Muir brothers, religion, education and empire* (Woodbridge, 2010); John Robertson (ed.), *A Union for Empire* (Cambridge, 1995).

[2] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the nation 1707–1837* (London, 1992); Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and neo-nationalism* (London, 1977).

[3] Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A new history* (London, 1997); David McCrone, *The Sociology of Nationalism* (London, 1998); Graeme Morton, *Unionist Nationalism: Governing*

other analyses, such as those of Esther Breitenbach, T. M. Devine, Richard Finlay, and John MacKenzie have with greater or lesser qualification emphasised the potent role of empire in strengthening Scottish national identity.[4] In these economic, military and above all political discussions of Scottish out-reach to empire and the domestic impact of empire on Scotland, much less emphasis or direct focus has however been placed on the social reformist agenda which Scottish empire builders often brought to empire, especially as part of the so-called British 'civilising mission' in India, and subsequently re-imported in modified forms back to Scotland as a result of empire. This article seeks to contribute to the above debate by analysing how the socio-religious engagement with empire in India by Scottish presbyterian missionaries contributed to the shaping of social reformist attitudes, both in India and Scotland, as part of a wider Scottish and British sense of empire in the early twentieth century.

The Evangelical socio-religious thought and educational practice of Alexander Duff (1806–78) has tended to predominate in the literature on Scottish missionary contributions to empire in India in the early to mid-nineteenth century, just as in parallel James Mill's (1773–1836) admixture of Scottish enlightenment views of civilisation and Benthamite utilitarian philosophy is perceived to dominate English secular thought in India in a similar period.[5] It is important to recognise, however, that after Duff's departure from India in 1863, Scottish missionary attitudes in India underwent a substantial paradigm shift in socio-religious terms as Scottish and other missionary societies increasingly moved to replace Duff's focus on educated Hindu elite

[3] (Continued) urban Scotland, 1830–60 (East Linton, 1999); Tanja Bueltmann, Andrew Hinson and Graeme Morton, The Scottish Diaspora (Edinburgh, 2013).

[4] Esther Breitenbach, Empire and Scottish Society: The impact of foreign missions at home c.1790 to c.1914 (Edinburgh, 2009); T. M. Devine, Scotland's Empire, 1600–1815; Richard Finlay, A Partnership for Good? Scottish politics and the union since 1880 (Edinburgh, 1997); J. M. MacKenzie, 'Empire and national identities: The case of Scotland', Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 8 (1988) 215–31.

[5] On Duff, see Alexander Duff, India and India Missions (Edinburgh, 1840); I. D. Maxwell, 'Alexander Duff and the Theological and Philosophical Background to the General Assembly's Mission in Calcutta to 1840', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1995); J. M. Orr, 'The Contribution of Scottish Missions to the Rise of Responsible Churches in India', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1967), 73–109; M. A. Laird, Missionaries and Education in Bengal (Oxford, 1972), 179–262; M. A. Laird, 'Alexander Duff and Scottish educational influences in Bengal during Bentinck's administration 1828–35', Scottish Educational Studies 2 (1970) 11–18. On Mill and Bentham, see James Mill, History of British India (London, 1880); Duncan Forbes, 'James Mill and India', Cambridge Journal 5 (1951) 19–33; Eric Stokes, The English Utilitarians and India (Oxford, 1959); C. H. Philips, 'James Mill, Mountstuart Elphinstone and the History of India', in C. H. Philips (ed.), Historians of India (Oxford, 1961), 217–29; Raghavan Iyer, Utilitarianism and all That: The political theory of British imperialism (London 1983); Javed Majeed, Ungoverned Imagining: James Mill's The History of India and Orientalism (Oxford, 1992); Jane Rendall, 'Scottish orientalism from Robertson to James Mill', Historical Journal 25 (1982) 43–69; Ronald Inden, Imagining India (Oxford, 1990), 89–93, 165–73.

conversion with low-caste and out-caste or Dalit christian evangelism.[6] While this change was in part driven by indigenous socio-economic causes among low-caste groups in India, this article argues that such change was a confluence of these indigenous causes with changing social reformist attitudes to the Scottish working classes in the Free Church of Scotland from the 1870s and 1880s. It is argued that Scottish presbyterian missionaries in western India conceptualised their protestant christian evangelism in hindu society in India in terms of a late nineteenth-century shift in perception in Scottish churches and society away from what Donald Smith has termed 'passive obedience' to a divinely-ordained Calvinist natural order determined by individual piety, towards the rise of 'prophetic social criticism' which sought through biblical exegesis to change structural socio-economic inequalities and promote social justice for the underprivileged and exploited.[7] While still using everyday missionary techniques that were in part a practical legacy from Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) in his early domestic missionary work in Glasgow and Edinburgh, this late nineteenth-century conceptual paradigm of Scottish social theology and the missionary discourse and practices it engendered in western India had a substantial impact on the direction of Scottish and British imperial endeavour (as well as low-caste hindu socio-economic mobilisation). Such socio-religious radicalism abroad stands in contrast to the middle-class Orientalist discourse on missionary activities towards non-christian religions which Breitenbach has demonstrated existed at home in Scotland.[8] Furthermore this social radicalism challenges perception of a subordinate Scottish missionary relationship to policies of the colonial metropole and suggests that such missionaries actually drove forward a colonial agenda for low and out-caste hindu reform as a result of their christian proselytisation.

In this context this article examines the re-interpretation and application in hybrid forms of Scottish social theology to low-caste and out-caste hindu (Dalit) society in western India in the early twentieth century. The article in particular analyses the discourse and activities of the United Free Church of Scotland missionary Revd Alexander Robertson who sought to apply Scottish social theology to the out-caste Mahar population of western India from 1902 to his retirement in 1937. The article also investigates the intellectual debate over such socio-religious reformism which Robertson held with the British colonial official Harold H. Mann (1872–1961), who was Agricultural Chemist

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[6] D. B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and policies on caste of Anglo-Saxon protestant missions in India* (London, 1979); T. G. Gehani 'A Critical Review of the Work of Scottish Presbyterian Missions in India 1878–1914', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Strathclyde, 1966), 222–35; Orr, 'Scottish missions', 208–16; Andrew Porter 'Scottish missions and education in 19th-century India: The changing face of 'trusteeship', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 16 (1988) 35–57.

[7] D. C. Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest: Social criticism in the Scottish church 1830–1945* (New York, 1987).

[8] Breitenbach, *Empire and Scottish Society*, 96–118.

of the Bombay Presidency after 1907, Director of Agriculture for the Bombay Presidency in Pune from 1918 to 1927, and a proponent of Edwardian English Liberalism, especially the Yorkshire-originated secular strategies towards poverty of Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1871–1954).

Drawing on this missionary example, this article further emphasises that a Scottish sense of empire in India had a radical and experimental socio-religious dimension which cannot be fully understood in terms of the unidirectional imposition of Scottish social and religious ideas on colonial societies like India and recognition of such colonial societies as an 'other' against which to define domestic Scottish society, economy, and nationhood. It is argued that a Scottish sense of empire must also be understood in terms of the often radical and experimental Scottish-Indian forms which emerged from the cultural interaction of these two, and other imperial peripheries, while also interacting simultaneously with the values produced by the English-Indian colonial encounter of which Mann is an example. The purpose of this article therefore is not to decentre the focus on the London 'metropole' as one of the binary poles of empire, only to substitute it in greater or lesser degree, or supplement it in a duality of form with a Scottish 'metropole'. Rather it is to see empire and Scottish imperial identity as a dynamic nexus and expression of interrelating and often autonomous peripheries, and the cross-cultural views and practices to which their interactions gave rise. It is argued that it was the hybrid paradigms established through interaction and dialogue between colonial peripheries, while simultaneously engaging with so-called 'metropolitan' English colonial thought and practice, which constructed not only a Scottish sense of empire and concomitantly nationhood, but contributed to the development of a wider British imperial vision as well.[9]

Thomas Chalmers, the Godly Commonwealth and Missionary Practice

Stewart Brown has argued that Thomas Chalmers's career as a parish minister, a university academic, public speaker, prolific writer, Evangelical reformer, and ecclesiastical politician in the Church of Scotland and Free Church, is primarily to be understood in terms of his mission to promote an ideal christian society, namely a Godly Commonwealth, in response to the social dislocation of early nineteenth-century Scottish industrialisation and urbanisation. With its historical roots in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scottish Calvinism, the notion of a Godly Commonwealth laid special missionary

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[9] The interaction of provincial arenas in shaping empire has been noted, but the nexus of multiple interchanges has been much less recognised, see for example N. C. Landsman, 'The provinces and the Empire: Scotland, the American colonies and the development of British provincial identity', in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London, 2001), 258–87; Eric Richards, 'Scotland and the uses of the Atlantic empire', in Bailyn and Morgan (eds), *Strangers within the Realm*, 67–114; MacKillop, '*More Fruitful than the Soil*', 10, 220–41.

emphasis on the Old Testament concept of a covenant or special relationship of God with his chosen people in which church and state cooperated to elevate the whole of society by means of a faith that sought a holistic development of moral, political and socio-economic life. The aim of Chalmers's Godly Commonwealth was to establish christian discipline and common welfare as a basis for the rule of God on earth.[10] Such a view in Chalmers's early writings sought in part to challenge Adam Smith's emphasis on economic individualism, and James Mill's and Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian beliefs that the greatest happiness of the greatest number was achievable through individualistic pursuit of commercial production.[11] John Roxborogh has argued that Chalmers's reading of the English Evangelical writing of William Wilberforce (1759–1833) reinforced his view that it was the role of a practical christian faith and organic community outlook to deal actively with self-interested individualism and to mitigate inequalities within society.[12] Brown suggests that Chalmers was imbued with this form of Calvinism from his upbringing in rural Anstruther in Fife in the 1780s and 1790s and used this perspective as a basis for his ministry, first in Kilmany Parish (1803–15), and subsequently in the Tron Church (1815–19), St John's Parish in Glasgow (1819–23), and West Port in Edinburgh (1844–47).[13] As Brown and Roxborogh indicate, it is pertinent that from the beginning of his infusion of new Evangelical perspectives after 1811 in modification of his Moderate beliefs, Chalmers perceived the Godly Commonwealth as a missionary activity.[14]

In this respect, Chalmers's domestic missionary vision gradually evolved missionary methods which subsequently proved to be a legacy in practical terms for Free Church of Scotland foreign missionary activity. Roxborogh has argued that Chalmers's reading of the Moderate sermons of Samuel Charters (1742–1825) led him to emphasise the practical application of christian belief in ordinary, everyday life in his early activities in Kilmany Parish.[15] The use of ordinary language

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[10] Stewart Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1982).

[11] A. M. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion: Christian political economy, 1798–1833* (Cambridge, 1991), 217–52 analyses Chalmers's contribution to the debate on Christian political economy; see also Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 36–9; Thomas Chalmers, *An Enquiry into the Extent and Stability of National Resources* (Edinburgh, 1808); James Mill, *Elements of Political Economy* (London, 1821); Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London, 1789); Adam Smith, *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, 1775–6).

[12] W. J. Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers: Enthusiast for mission: The christian good of Scotland and the rise of the missionary movement* (Carlisle, 2000), 29–42.

[13] Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, p. xv, 371.

[14] *Ibid.*, 62–90; Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 28–65; see William Wilberforce, *Practical View of the Prevailing System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of Society contrasted with Real Christianity* (Glasgow, 1833); Samuel Charters, *Sermons* (Edinburgh, 1786).

[15] Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 29–42.

in preaching, propagation of the gospels in bible classes or Sabbath schools, and visiting parishioners in their homes, all sought to involve everyday parishioners in the church's mission for the individual moral and material benefit of themselves and the wider community. Similarly in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century western India, the use of the Marathi vernacular in preaching, regular visiting of christian convert households by missionaries, church elders and catechists, and christian education in Sabbath classes or church schools, were all measures which were adapted from domestic experience and used by missionaries like Robertson to form a basis for Free Church practice. R. A. Cage and E. O. A. Checkland have also emphasised that Chalmers recognised the importance of the poor being helped at the local level by their own people who had direct experience of their needs.[16] Such principles of locality likewise provided insight into families, neighbourhoods, and congregations in creating self-sufficient networks of mutual assistance in colonial India, where there was no state poor relief and increased social ostracisation and often violence after conversion.[17] Roxborogh too has noted that the way Chalmers mobilised the laity, welfare workers and congregations fostered a rising ethic of social consciousness for addressing poverty in Glasgow and Edinburgh, which was more important in the longer term than whether the poor relief accounts balanced in St John's Parish.[18] Such an impetus to social consciousness was particularly important in low-caste evangelism in western India, both in initiating conversion and developing a radical critique of high-caste hindu religious exploitation.[19] Above all, Cage and Checkland, and Brown have suggested that the educational provisions of the St John's and West Port experiments were by far the most successful elements of the missionary schemes by morally and materially empowering families through their children over their economic circumstances.[20] R. D. Anderson has recorded the influence

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[16] R. A. Cage and E. O. A. Checkland, 'Thomas Chalmers and urban poverty: The St John's Parish experiment in Glasgow, 1819–37', *Philosophical Journal* 13 (1976) 53; see also Olive Checkland, 'Chalmers and William Pulteney Alison: A conflict of views on Scottish social policy', in A. C. Cheyne (ed.), *The Practical and the Pious: Essays on Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847)* (Edinburgh, 1985), 135–6.

[17] For an example of such moral and material development, see Robertson's colleague, Tom Dobson, in Nicol MacNicol, *Tom Dobson: A champion of the outcastes* (London, 1924). On Chalmers's views, see Thomas Chalmers, *The Sermons Preached in the Tron Church, Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1919) in *Collected Works*, 9 vols (Glasgow, 1835–42), viii. 1–164, 183–309, 331–53; ix. 66–133; Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 38–65; Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 70–84; Mary Furgol, 'Chalmers and poor relief: An incidental sideline?' in Cheyne (ed.), *The Practical and the Pious*, 115–29.

[18] Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 126–7; J. F. McCaffrey, 'Thomas Chalmers and social change', *Scottish Historical Review* 60 (1981) 57.

[19] See for example, Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity* (London, 1980); G. A. Oddie, *Social Protest in India: British Protestant missionaries and social reform, 1850–1900* (Delhi, 1979).

[20] Cage and Checkland, 'Thomas Chalmers and urban poverty', 49; Stewart Brown, 'The Disruption and urban poverty: Thomas Chalmers and the West Port operation in Edinburgh, 1844–47', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 20 (1978) 77–9.

of Chalmers's educational measures in Scottish towns in the 1820s and 1830s and, as Atsuko Betchaku has indicated, this legacy was modified and developed by his deacon David Stow (1793–1864) whose principles were applied in both missionary and national educational schemes beyond Scotland, in Japan, Australia, the West Indies and, it should be added, India.[21] Overall, in the absence of poor law relief in colonial India (except in plague or famine), such emphases on the importance of locality, congregation and community, raising socio-moral consciousness, and education were Chalmers's legacy to Free Church missionary practice and strategy in India, just as Roxborogh has noted that they were a methodological legacy within the civic gospel which emerged to replace Chalmers's Godly Commonwealth in late nineteenth-century Scotland.[22]

The path which resulted in the translation of this missionary practice from domestic to foreign missions began with Chalmers's promotion of local bible societies after 1812 to support the British and Foreign Bible Society's dissemination of vernacular bibles.[23] In Chalmers's estimation, local bible societies like that in Kilmany Parish, encouraged parishioners to make small but purposive contributions on the grounds that such charity stimulated self-esteem, community of purpose among rich and poor philanthropists, and a mutual relationship between christian missionary work at home and abroad. This mutual relationship was based on the universality of human nature and applicability of Scottish Evangelicalism to foreign countries.[24] Similarly in St John's Parish, Chalmers established the St John's Parish Association for Religious Purposes which emphasised the mutuality of domestic and foreign missions

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[21] For example, the Glasgow Infant School Society founded in 1827 by Revd David Welsh (1793–1845), minister in St David's Parish, Glasgow; the Edinburgh Infant School Society (founded 1829) and the Glasgow Educational Society founded by George Lewis (1803–79) in 1834: see R. D. Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People, 1750–1918* (Oxford, 1995), 39–40 and R. D. Anderson 'Education and the state in nineteenth-century Scotland', *Economic History Review* 36 (1983) 518–34; Atsuko Betchaku, 'The Formation and Impact of the Scottish Evangelicals' Programme for Working-class Education 1818–46, including its Influence in post-Meiji Japan', unpublished Ph.D thesis (University of Edinburgh, 2006), 129–83. For the view that Chalmers's educational activities had more limited impact, see D. J. Withrington 'Scotland: A half-educated nation in 1834? Reliable critique or persuasive polemic?' in W. M. Humes and H. M. Paterson (eds), *Scottish Culture and Scottish Education 1800–1980* (Edinburgh, 1983), 55–74, and D. J. Withrington, 'Schooling, literacy and society', in T. M. Devine and Rosalind Mitchison (eds), *Peoples and Society in Scotland, I, 1760–1830* (Edinburgh, 1988), 180–5; Atsoko Betchaku, 'Thomas Chalmers, David Stow and the St John's experiment: A study of educational influence in Scotland and beyond, 1819–*c*. 1850', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 27 (2007) 170–90.

[22] Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 126.

[23] Chalmers's missionary thought had begun to develop earlier in 1796 as a student at George Hill's lectures at St Andrew's University on the propagation of Christianity—see G. Hill, *Lectures in Divinity* (Edinburgh, 1854)—and participation in St Andrews University Theological Society debates on missions from 1797–99; for details see Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 175–6.

[24] Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 54–9; Thomas Chalmers, *The Influence of Bible Societies on the Temporal Necessities of the Poor* (Edinburgh, 1814).

in the sense that support for foreign missions fostered the christian values of parishioners at home.[25] As Roxborogh details, this initial foreign missionary outreach slowly expanded from Chalmers's work in Kilmany (1803–15) and St John's Parish (1819–23) into his lectures on mission in support of the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, his requests for missionary access to India during the East India Company charter renewal in 1813, and his presidency of the St Andrews University Missionary Society (1825–28).[26] Stuart Piggin and John Roxborogh have also shown in their discussion of the founding of the Free Church Mission to India how Chalmers's foreign missionary outreach ultimately culminated during his professorship of moral philosophy at St Andrews University (1823–28), in the impact that he had on the lives of six of his students—namely Alexander Duff (1806–78), John Urquhart (1808–27), John Adam (1803–31), Robert Nesbit (1803–55), William Sinclair Mackay (1807–65), and David Ewart (1806–60)—of whom four became the foundation of the Free Church of Scotland Mission in India, while Adam went to India with the London Missionary Society in the following decades.[27] In terms of both a legacy of practical missionary techniques, which Free Church missionaries adapted to use in India, and a drive to establish a foreign missionary strategy through raising public involvement, political pressure to admit missionaries to India, and provision of the initial missionary personnel, Chalmers's role was formative in the establishment of the Free Church of Scotland mission in India.

In spite of this practical and strategic legacy, the model of Chalmers's domestic missionary work, especially in its implications for the material welfare of the working classes, has however been criticised for the social conservatism of the Godly Commonwealth in practice. While the Godly Commonwealth was prophetic in biblical terms, it often did not seem to presage social justice and compassion as a characteristic of the human relationships which it promoted, especially in Chalmers's attempts to apply the Godly Commonwealth in the urban setting of Glasgow and Edinburgh as a remedy for the dislocation and impoverishment caused by early nineteenth-century industrialisation. Theologically, as Atsuko Betchaku has demonstrated, Chalmers considered the rural parochial system, on which the St John's experiment was based, to be determined by Calvinist natural theology, where all ranks were encouraged to assume the responsibilities of their station as part of a divinely-ordained natural order in which human nature was in free

[25] Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 187.

[26] *Ibid.*, 176–88; See Thomas Chalmers, *The Two Instruments appointed for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Duty of the Christian Public to Keep Both in Vigorous Operation* (Edinburgh, 1813); Thomas Chalmers, *The Utility of Missions Ascertained by Experience* (Glasgow, 1816).

[27] Stuart Piggin and John Roxborogh, *The St Andrews' Seven: The finest flowering of missionary zeal in Scottish history* (Edinburgh, 1985); Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 198–226.

operation to provide natural support of those in need (as opposed to the artificial provisions of the state, which corrupted natural moral order).[28] Brown has also indicated that Chalmers saw philanthropy and poor relief that was not invested with the natural promotion of moral development and community to be a social evil because it transformed rich and poor into opposing groups and institutionalised social conflict rather than promoted closely-knit communities focused around a parish church and school with roots in christian self-enterprise and community benevolence.[29] In terms of social theology, Chalmers's missionary experiments have therefore been characterised by later scholarship as backward-looking attempts to adapt to urban Glasgow the parish institutions of eighteenth-century rural Scotland, in spite of the impracticality of treating a mobile and religiously diverse city population with no natural sense of urban community identity as if it were an eighteenth-century rural community.[30] In short, the St John's and West Port missionary experiments encouraged a natural christian morality as a basis for the self-sufficient independence of the poor in a conservative and paternalistic rural mode of Scottish communitarian benevolence which failed to address the underlying structural dynamics that created poverty and exploitation.[31] As a template for domestic and foreign mission, Chalmers's theological and moralistic perspective limited the value of the practical missionary techniques and strategic missionary impetus which he initiated.

In combination with this backward-looking mode of rural Scottish paternalism and communitarianism, Brown, Cage and Checkland, Smith, MacLeod and Hillis have also emphasised an emergent element of urban middle-class conservatism in the missionary means that Chalmers outlined as a plan for the Godly Commonwealth in St John's Parish.[32] The blame for limitations of his projects that Chalmers

[28] Betchaku, 'The Scottish Evangelicals' Programme for Working-Class Education', 39–42. For Chalmers's views on state assistance, see Checkland, 'Chalmers and William Pulteney Alison', 131–2.

[29] Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 118–20; Cage and Checkland, 'Thomas Chalmers and urban poverty', 39.

[30] Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 91–151; A. C. Cheyne 'Thomas Chalmers: Then and now', in Cheyne (ed.), *The Practical and the Pious*, 9–30; Cage and Checkland, 'Thomas Chalmers and urban poverty', 37–56; D. C. Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest: Social criticism in the Scottish church, 1830–1945* (New York, 1987), 102–7; McCaffrey, 'Thomas Chalmers and social change', 32–60. Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 125; Audrey Paterson, 'The Poor Law in nineteenth-century Scotland', in Derek Fraser (ed.), *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1976), 171–93.

[31] See the debate between W. P. Alison, *Observations on the Management of the Poor in Scotland and its Effects upon the Health of Great Towns* (Edinburgh, 1840) and Thomas Chalmers, *On the Sufficiency of the Parochial System without a Poor Rate for the Right Management of the Poor* (Glasgow, 1841); Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 99–116; Checkland, 'Chalmers and William Pulteney Alison', 130–9; R. A. Cage, *The Scottish Poor Law 1745–1845* (Edinburgh, 1981), 91–2.

[32] Thomas Chalmers, 'The connection between the extension of the Church and the extinction of pauperism', *Edinburgh Review* 18 (March 1817) 1–31. For example, a middle-class inhumanity in ending extra-parochial relief from the General Session

placed on administrative difficulties in particular epitomised his inability to understand and empathise with the economic problems of the industrial working classes. Cage and Checkland have therefore concluded that the St John's project did not validate Chalmers's premise that poor relief could be refused to the able-bodied poor on grounds of middle-class moral support and encouragement to self-reliance, mutual support or community benevolence.[33] Donald Smith has attributed such lack of social awareness to the Church of Scotland's coalescence of the laws of political economy with natural theology which led first to a middle-class belief that the evils of society were due to the moral weaknesses of individuals, and secondly to a false confidence in the power of individual moral conduct to create just social structures. By equating the invisible hand of political economy with natural theology in the context of middle-class moral values—namely that none but the working classes were to be blamed for their poverty—Chalmers ultimately failed to produce an adequate christian social critique of the economic individualism of James Mill, Jeremy Bentham or Adam Smith.[34]

Ultimately, a tension must be identified in Chalmers's missionary views between the communitarian ideals identified by Stewart Brown or community family values noted by Betchaku, and Chalmers's individualistic middle-class attitude to socio-moral development of the poor emphasised by Cage and Checkland, Smith, and MacLeod.[35] In terms of Evangelical theology, Boyd Hilton has also pointed to this tension between, on the one hand, conservative Evangelicals who thought that God's interventionist providence equated with a similar measure of control over society for those whom he placed in positions of rank and authority, and on the other hand, moderate Evangelicals who matched their laissez-faire or neutral conception of providence with a similar individualist approach to social reform. Chalmers's

[32] (*Continued*) and Glasgow Town Hospital; limitation of poor relief from parochial collections to the morally deserving who lacked support from family or neighbours; middle-class lay-deacons giving poor relief in association with preaching in St John's Parish or the West Port District Saving Bank scheme where poor relief focused on funds saved by the poor themselves; the empowerment of parish-based, middle-class clergy over charity. See Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 120–1; Cage and Checkland, 'Thomas Chalmers and urban poverty', 39; Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 120; Donald MacLeod, 'Thomas Chalmers and pauperism', in S. J. Brown and Michael Fry (eds), *Scotland in the Age of Disruption* (Edinburgh, 1993), 63–76; Peter Hillis, 'Education and evangelisation, presbyterian missions in mid-nineteenth-century Glasgow', *SHR* 66 (1987) 46–62; Brown, 'The Disruption and urban poverty', 65–89.

[33] Cage and Checkland, 'Thomas Chalmers and urban poverty', 37–56; Roxborogh, *Thomas Chalmers*, 122–3; Cage, *The Scottish Poor Law*, 92–105.

[34] Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 8, 84–91.

[35] Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The influence of evangelicalism on social and economic thought 1795–1865* (Oxford, 1988), 15–17; Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 121; Betchaku, 'The Scottish Evangelicals' Programme for Working-Class Education', 38–42; Cage and Checkland, 'Thomas Chalmers and urban poverty', 39; Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 120; MacLeod, 'Thomas Chalmers and pauperism', 63–76.

strategic initiation of foreign missions in India and his practical legacy of techniques were overshadowed by this tension and his limited appreciation of the structural factors which conditioned missionary work. His model of a Godly Commonwealth did not provide a viable long-term social theology for mission, either in the context of an industrial and christian society like urban Scotland or in an under-developed colonial economy and non-christian society like rural or urban India. The Godly Commonwealth's transitional importance rests much more on its focusing attention on the need for a new social theology of mission at home and abroad that engaged with the wider structural problems of poverty as part of missionary process.

Godly Commonwealth to Kingdom of God at the Periphery of Empire

Like other late nineteenth and early twentieth-century reformers in Australia, New Zealand, the West Indies, Japan and the United States, the Reverend Alexander Robertson in India was fulsome in his praise of Thomas Chalmers's domestic missionary practice.[36] Robertson hailed Chalmers as 'that prince among Scottish theologians and ecclesiastics'.[37] Moreover, in contrast to the views of recent historians, Robertson also believed that Chalmers's missionary techniques had reduced the cost of poor law relief in Scotland without impairing the efficacy of that relief.[38] Beyond a legacy of practical but important missionary techniques and strategies, Alexander Robertson and other Free Church of Scotland missionaries in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century western India no longer however shared Chalmers's admixture of paternalistic communitarian benevolence and self-help middle-class conservatism towards the poor in terms of a Godly Commonwealth. By the time of Robertson's education in Scotland in the 1890s and posting to western India in 1902, Stewart Brown has perceived the relevance of the Godly Commonwealth to have waned in Scotland, and

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[36] Betchaku 'The Scottish Evangelicals' Programme for Working-class Education', 257–308, has studied the rise in moral education in Meiji Japan (1868–1912) under Nishimura Tei (1854–1904) who was influenced by Chalmers's deacon David Stow (1793–1864) and John Gill's *Introductory Textbook to School Education, Method and School Management* (London, 1877) which had spread Stow's ideas to England. Chalmers's ideas on de-pauperisation were also introduced to late Meiji and early Taisho Japan (1900–18). Betchaku notes the extension of Stow's teacher training system to Australia in the 1840s and to the West Indies where the Mico Charity (founded 1835) trained ex-slaves as school teachers. See in this context C. Campbell, 'Denominalisation and the Mico Charity schools in Jamaica, 1835–43' *Caribbean Studies* 10 (1971) 152–72. Bernard Aspinwall, *Portable Utopia: Glasgow and the United States, 1820–1920* (Aberdeen, 1984), 43–85, 151–84 has demonstrated that Stow's and Chalmers's ideas on moral education and Glaswegian civic ideals had impact in the United States over the period 1820–1920; see, for example, S. L. Loomis, *Modern Cities and their Religious Problems* (New York, 1887) and Washington Gladden *The Christian Pastor and the Working Church* (New York, 1898).

[37] Alexander Robertson, 'Ethics and the social sciences', *The Indian Interpreter* (October 1911) 126.

[38] Alexander Robertson, 'Ethics and religion', *The Indian Interpreter* (July 1910) 85–93.

Donald Smith, Callum Brown, and Irene Maver have noted how the oligarchic, rural-originating ideals of the Godly Commonwealth had converted into newer civic forms in the hands of the Scottish middle classes of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods.[39] Smith and Brown in particular have argued that this took the shape of a middle-class civic Gospel and vision of a City of God. This City of God was projected as a well governed, socially harmonious, religiously pluralist, and spiritually rooted urban community that was based, not on the Established Church and a providentially appointed status quo, but on Evangelical voluntary organisations working with municipal agencies in pursuit of material civic improvement as an essential concomitant of moral development.[40] It is this civic, middle-class and urban model that John McCaffrey has identified as an attractive export to Edwardian England and Bernard Aspinwall has perceived as a 'portable utopia' for the United States before 1920.[41]

In the case of western India, however, the rise of proto-socialist ideas and working-class politics in late nineteenth-century Scotland contributed more substantively to radical, experimental and hybrid forms of portable utopia. In the Scottish context, Donald Smith has indicated how the early nineteenth-century 'passive obedience' that Chalmers seemed to epitomise gave way in late nineteenth-century Scotland to 'prophetic social criticism' focused on biblical and theological justifications of a Kingdom of God in which socio-economic justice was the mark of human relationships.[42] This concept of a Kingdom of God became a primary ethical criterion for judging human society in place of a social order conceptualised as an ordination of

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[39] Brown, *Thomas Chalmers*, 350–74; Stewart Brown, 'The ten-years' conflict and the Disruption of 1843', in Brown and Fry (eds), *Scotland in the Age of Disruption*, 2.

[40] Callum Brown, 'To be aglow with civic ardours': The Godly Commonwealth in Glasgow, 1843–1914', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 26 (1996) 169–95; Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh, 1997), 97–117; Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 248–57; Irene Maver, 'The Municipal Administration of Glasgow 1833–1912: Public Service and Scottish Civic Identity', unpublished Ph.D thesis (University of Strathclyde, 1990).

[41] John McCaffrey, 'The Life of Thomas Chalmers' in Cheyne (ed.), *The Practical and the Pious*, 53–5. For example, Grace Chalmers Wood, N. Masterman and Helen Bosanquet of the Charity Organisation Society in England and Scotland, and Henry Hunter, president of the Society of Poor Law Officials in Scotland, see George Kerr and Grace Chalmers Wood (eds), *Dr Chalmers and the Poor Law: A comparison of Scottish and English pauperism* (Edinburgh, 1911); Grace Chalmers Wood (ed.), *The Opinions of Dr Chalmers concerning Political Economy and Social Reform* (Edinburgh, 1912); N. Masterman (ed.), *Chalmers On Charity* (London, 1900); N. Masterman, *On Poverty* (London, 1912); Helen Bosanquet, *The Strength of People: A study in social economics* (London, 1902); Bernard Bosanquet, 'The meaning of social work', *International Journal of Ethics* 11 (1901) 299–300; Henry Hunter, *Problems of Poverty: Selections from the economic and social writings of Thomas Chalmers* (London, 1912); Aspinwall, *Portable Utopia*, xi–xvii, see for example James McCosh, *The Religious Aspect of Evolution* (London, 1898); James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (London, 1884); John Bascom, *Sociology* (New York, 1887).

[42] Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 3–10.

God's will or a providentially-ordained status quo.[43] A. C. Cheyne has also identified how the emergence of a liberal social theology between the 1880s and First World War focused around a rediscovery of the social message of the Old Testament prophets and the historical Jesus as a basis for the teaching of the Kingdom of God.[44] S. J. Brown too has noted the rise of christian social progressive thought in Scotland from the 1880s to the end of the First World War in 1918 when, like Cheyne, he perceives such social concern in promoting the Kingdom of God to have become submerged by a focus on ecclesiastical re-unification of the Scottish churches.[45] Johnston Mackay has demonstrated how this later nineteenth-century conceptualisation of a Kingdom of God had been established and developed as a paradigm for socio-religious change by Revd Robert Flint (1838–1910), minister of East Church in Aberdeen, in a series of sermons in 1859 and subsequently developed across the later nineteenth century, for example in the work of Reverends Donald MacLeod (1831–1916), Alexander Balmain Bruce (1831–99), Alexander Scott Matheson and David Watson (1859–1943).[46] By the second decade of the twentieth century when Robertson began to publish his work, this social re-awakening expressed in terms of a Kingdom of God had taken root in the United Free Church and in the Scottish Christian Union which was established in 1901 by Watson. Along with social reformers from other Scottish churches, Watson in particular through the Scottish Christian Union sought to use investigative socio-economic analysis to support the promotion of christian values in terms of the development of a Kingdom of God.[47] The momentum of the Scottish Christian Union contributed to the United Free Church's decision in 1908 to investigate socio-economic problems and apply christian solutions which emphasised Jesus's favour for oppressed and out-cast groups, condemnation of priestly and wealthy classes for their disregard of socio-economic exploitation, and the establishment of a Kingdom of God on earth in social and spiritual

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[43] *Ibid.*, 256.

[44] A. C. Cheyne, *The Transformation of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's religious revolution* (Edinburgh, 1983) 122–56.

[45] S. J. Brown, 'Reform, reconstruction, reaction: The social vision of Scottish presbyterianism *c.*1830–1930' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991) 489–517.

[46] Johnston McKay, *The Kirk and the Kingdom: A century of tension in Scottish social theology* (Edinburgh, 2012), 26–42; see Robert Flint, *Christ's Kingdom on Earth* (Edinburgh, 1865); Robert Flint, *Sermons and Addresses* (Edinburgh, 1899); Robert Flint, *On Theological, Biblical and Other Subjects* (Edinburgh, 1905). McKay argues that Flint gave focus to earlier critiques of Revds Robert Burns, *A Plea for the Poor of Scotland* (Paisley, 1841), Robert Buchanan, *The Spiritual Destitution of the Masses in Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1851), and Patrick Brewster, *The Seven Chartist and Military Discourse Ordered by the General Assembly to be Libeled by the Presbytery of Paisley* (Glasgow, 1842).

[47] Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 330; Brown, 'To be aglow with civic ardours', 188; David Watson, *Social Problems and the Church's Duty* (Edinburgh, 1908); David Watson *The Social Christian Union and How It Came to be Formed* (Glasgow, 1901); David Watson, *Social Advance: Its meaning, method and goal* (London, 1911); David Watson, *The Social Expression of Christianity* (London, 1919).

terms.[48] For Robertson who sought the conversion of out-caste hindus to christianity in western India, such a general assembly statement in 1908 was effectively a call to arms.

The biblical concept of a Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew) was itself a central characteristic of the teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament, especially the synoptic Gospels, Acts of the Apostles and St Paul's letters, where it was used to signify the relationship between God and humankind in terms of God's authority to rule and sovereignty of kingship. Drawing historical context from the Old Testament Hebrew sense of kingdom, which generally referred to authority to reign or sovereignty rather than a defined realm, the Kingdom of God in the New Testament was deployed to express the essence of Jesus Christ's teachings in terms of the development of an attitude of mind or the ideals that must be sovereign in human minds if they were to be a communion or congregation of saints with God.[49] To the extent that this sovereignty was identified with the church meant that the church also became represented at times as the Kingdom of God, especially in St Paul's epistles. The Kingdom of God therefore as an expression of human endeavour under the guidance of the sovereign ruling of God was a powerful conceptual framework from the Old and New Testaments for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Free Church ministers and academics who wished to move away from perceptions of a providentially or naturally-determined social order and invest the church with human means to bring about this-worldly material change as a basis for christian spiritual development.

Flint, for example, saw the Kingdom of God in terms of the nature parables of the New Testament as an ideal that germinated with Jesus Christ, but gradually developed in the form of a leaven and inspired individuals to transform society on more equal and just principles, especially with regard to poverty.[50] Bruce (1831–99), like Flint, looked to the advance of the Kingdom of God on earth and sought to include all those individuals and agencies beyond the confines of the church that expressed concern for the poor and oppressed.[51] MacLeod likewise believed that society, science and religion were expressions of evolutionary progress brought about by individuals' realisation of the Kingdom of God on earth, and he detailed how secular agencies, as well as the church, had important roles to play in remedying problems

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[48] *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland*, 1908, 264–76; *Reports to the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland*, 1909, *Report of the Committee on Church Life and Work*, 'The social ideals of our Lord', 1909, 15–16.

[49] See for example from the Old Testament, Exodus 19, 3–5; 1 Samuel 8, 4–19; 7, 8–16; Isaiah 37, 14–20; and from the New Testament, Matthew 5; 11, 11–15; Luke 17, 20–21; Mark 4, 26–32; 14, 22–5; 21, 42–5; Colossians, 11–14; 1 Thessalonians, 2, 11–12; Revelations 1, 6–9; 5, 9–11; 21, 1–2. The doctrine of the communion or congregation of saints is based on 1 Corinthians, 12.

[50] Flint, *Sermons and Addresses*; Flint, *Theological, Biblical and Other Subjects*, 243–74.

[51] A. B. Bruce, *The Kingdom of God* (Edinburgh, 1889).

of poverty which limited progress.[52] In his interrelation of duties of state citizenship and church membership, Matheson also found a civic ideal in the Kingdom of God based on justice, social brother/sisterhood and societal cohesion which he expressed in a range of municipal measures for schools, housing and sanitation.[53] Watson, like MacLeod, saw the Kingdom of God as an evolutionary process to which science and secular agencies contributed, but he especially emphasised the type of social order promoted by the Last Supper, Lord's Prayer, Apostles' Creed and Pentecost in the New Testament where the fatherhood and kingship of God set the parameter for human social progress, a just social order, and social duty expressed in a communion of saints.[54] Combined with the legacy of Chalmers's practical missionary techniques, it was the influence of this progressive social theology of a Kingdom of God, rather than the middle-class civic theology discussed by Brown, Maver and Aspinwall, or the popular Orientalist discourse on heathenism and ethnicity that Breitenbach has identified at home in Scotland, which provided the parameters for Robertson's missionary endeavours for the United Free Church of Scotland in western India in the early twentieth century.[55]

Alexander Robertson, Mahar Folk and the Kingdom of God in Western India

Revd Alexander Robertson was born on 28 March 1877 at Dingwell, the son of William Robertson and Margaret Urquhart. He received his early education at Teanassie Primary School, Kilmorack, followed by Raining's School in Inverness, George Watson's College in Edinburgh, and the Free Church College and University of Aberdeen, where he secured a first-class M.A. degree in Philosophy in 1898. He subsequently served from 1899 to 1901 as a student assistant at the Rutherford Church in Aberdeen. On 5 May 1902, he was licensed by the Presbytery of Aberdeen, ordained for foreign missionary service on 8 June 1902, and served as a missionary for the United Free Church of Scotland and its successor the Church of Scotland for thirty-five years in western India from 1902 to 1937.[56] Robertson married Agnes Skene in India on 17 November 1903, soon after he was posted to Pune where he lived for the first two decades of his career, working among the christian Mahar congregations in Pune district on the Deccan plateau south-east of Mumbai. He also worked at times among christian Mahar congregations in nearby Kolaba and Ahmednagar districts. During the First World

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[52] Donald MacLeod, *Christ and Society* (London, 1893); Donald MacLeod (ed.), *Good Works* (London, 1872–1916).

[53] A. S. Matheson, *The Church and Social Problems* (Edinburgh, 1893); A. S. Matheson, *The Gospel and Modern Substitutes* (Edinburgh, 1890); A. S. Matheson, *The City of Man* (London, 1910).

[54] Watson, *Social Advance*, 6–10, 291–8; Watson, *The Social Expression of Christianity*, 25–7, 71–83, 90–5, 104–8.

[55] Breitenbach, *Empire and Scottish Society*, 96–118.

[56] J. A. Lamb, *The Fasti of the United Free Church of Scotland, 1900–29* (Edinburgh, 1956), 54.

War, he served in the Pune Volunteer Rifles and was appointed in 1926 until retirement to teach as professor of philosophy in Hislop College, Nagpur, in central western India.[57]

Robertson's activities formed part of a wider Scottish missionary network in Pune, Ahmednagar and Nagpur which sought to spread protestant christianity in western India and to address issues of poverty and socio-economic discrimination against out-caste Mahar hindus. Spanning a period of Mahar political mobilisation against conservative hindu nationalism in early twentieth-century India, Robertson's career in Pune in the 1900s to early 1920s brought him into close association with a network of Mahar religious and civil rights leaders, especially Manohar Uzgare and Revd Sumitra Thorat in the Pune church, Shivram Janba Kamble who was a Mahar military activist in Pune, and Martandrao Master who was a teacher and activist in nearby Saswad. He also had close contact with Revd Vinyakrao Uzgare through his work with the large Mahar christian congregations of Ahmednagar district.[58] Adapting Chalmers's legacy of practical techniques, Robertson's missionary contact with Mahar congregations and information gathered through Mahar christian ministers, elders and political leaders provided him with a detailed insight into Mahar society of the time. Such Mahar christian contacts and networks radicalised Robertson's socio-religious thought, for which contemporaneous Scottish presbyterian social theology of a Kingdom of God became a conceptual framework.

It was not, however, until after 1907–08 and his association with the British colonial official Harold H. Mann, who also became involved in promoting Mahar social reform during his tenure as Agricultural Chemist of the Bombay Presidency (1907–18) and Director of Agriculture for the Bombay Presidency in Pune (1918–27), that Robertson began to collate his missionary insights in anthropological terms and publish on areas of interest to him in social research and philosophy. Although his research on Mahar society seems to have been completed and written by the early 1930s, it was only after his retirement as minister of Kilmallie, Corpach, Fort William in 1937, that he published an anthropological handbook entitled *The Mahar Folk: A Study of Untouchables in Maharashtra* (1938).[59] Robertson's book remains an early investigative source on Mahar anthropology, literature and culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was also a timely christian contribution in light of the decision of the Mahar leader Dr B. R. Ambedkar to lead a mass conversionary movement for Mahars out of hinduism from 1935. Robertson's book was therefore not merely intended as an anthropological survey built on years of family visitation,

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[57] Alexander Robertson, *The Mahar Folk: A study of untouchables in Maharashtra* (Calcutta, 1938), vii, xii; Lamb, *The Fasti of the United Free Church of Scotland, 1900–29*, 540–1.

[58] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, p. vii. H. H. Mann was also an associate of the Mahar leader S. J. Kamble.

[59] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, vii-viii.

local knowledge, and neighbourhood activities. It was a text written with the purpose of Mahar conversion in mind and invested in particular with Scottish presbyterian beliefs through which Mahar and hindu society might be reformed. As John McKenzie, principal of Wilson College, Mumbai, noted in his preface to the book, Robertson 'presents the Mahar to us not as a mere object of scientific interest, but as a man; and as a man possessing all the worth and dignity, and all the intellectual and spiritual attainment, that are found in other members of God's great family'.[60]

Robertson's Investigation of the Moral and Material Causes of Poverty in India

In line with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century changes in Scottish church attitudes, Robertson became particularly interested in the 1900s and 1910s in the scientific investigation of society and the relevance of material factors like history, social practices, poor health, housing and sanitation, as well as spiritual belief in conditioning people's lives. As early as the mid-1870s in Scotland, John Caird (1820–98), principal of Glasgow University (1873–98) had been suggesting that religion had to promote material improvements in life, especially where destitution and vice were preventable through investigation of the living conditions of the working classes and amelioration of social arrangements.[61] From the mid-1880s, such early views had taken root and the Free Church's Home Mission, Life and Work committees and local parish meetings were discussing the relevance of socio-economic development to the Free Church mission.[62] This disaggregation of Free Church views as a result of an emergent emphasis on socio-economic investigation and engagement with historical causes was driven by ministers and academics in later nineteenth-century Scotland, such as Alexander B. Bruce (1831–99), Thomas M. Lindsay (1843–1914), George Adam Smith (1856–1942), Marcus Dods (1834–1909) and George Murray Reith (1863–1948) in the Free Church, and others like John Marshall Lang (1834–1909), Donald MacLeod (1831–1916) and David Watson (1859–1943) in the Church of Scotland. Their liberal and proto-socialist thought gave context and were to find expression in Robertson's missionary thought and practice in early twentieth-century western India.

In terms of investigation of the material causes of poverty, Robertson sought to adapt Chalmers's technical missionary methods to his more radical socio-religious purposes. He used their emphasis on knowledge of locality and congregations, regular visits to families by missionaries and church elders, gathering information to understand social practices, and the use of education to raise social consciousness,

[60] *Ibid.*, xii.
[61] J. Caird, *Religion in Common Life* (London, 1855) and *The Christian Treasury*, February, 1875, 79 cited in Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 250.
[62] Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 266–73.

as vehicles not just for moral and religious improvement, but also as a means of social and material regeneration of Mahars in Pune.[63] Such an investigative approach to reform and development led Robertson into philanthropic collaboration between 1908 and 1926, as well as methodological debate in the Scottish missionary journal *The Indian Interpreter* in the late 1910s with the British colonial official Harold H. Mann. Robertson was one of the editors of the journal. In terms of their activities, both Robertson and Mann supported the reformist work of the Mahar leader S. J. Kamble in Pune, especially for Mahar re-admittance to the British-Indian army in 1910.[64] In this sense the two men shared much reform practice in common. Moreover they also shared common ground in investigative terms. Where Robertson developed investigative methods from Chalmers, Mann used B. S. Rowntree's social science methods to understand Indian social life. Mann argued that all explanation and solutions for social reform in India had to be empirically substantiated by detailed observation and experiment, rather than based on received notions of authority and wisdom, such as caste, race and village.[65] In this sense, both men sought to secure evidence to challenge preconceived notions of wisdom and authority, especially hindu caste stereotypes.

In this challenge of hindu caste stereotypes, Robertson found after 1903 in his missionary visits and contact with Mahar society that Mahars' hand-to-mouth existence was generated by caste discrimination on grounds of their perceived socio-religious defilement due to physically unclean occupations and dietary habits. As Robertson indicated, the Mahar quarters *(vada)* were outside the eastern village wall downwind at the lower end of the drainage system and regarded as a disgusting place of dirt and defilement. It was known as *hadoli* or the 'place of bones', as a result of bovine carcasses that it was the Mahars' job to remove from village streets or fields when such animals died. The fact that Mahars were known to eat this carrion out of starvation and even poison cattle for this purpose ('drabbing of the baulor' as Robertson termed it), as well as consume other left-over food from villagers, only added a sense of outrage to that of disgust among high-caste hindus,

[63] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, vii-viii, xi; Robertson, 'Ethics and Religion', 93.

[64] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 59.

[65] H. H. Mann, 'The philosophy of a man of science', *Indian Interpreter* (April 1911) 3; H. H. Mann, 'The social study of a people', *Indian Interpreter* (July 1911) 79–83: Mann's response to the insistence of Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (London, 1873, 2nd edition) on understanding the complexity of social life was to use B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty: A study of town life* (London, 1901), especially Rowntree's non-moralist social science methodology and identification of the causes of poverty to implement practical change. Mann was particularly sceptical of colonial caste, race and village paradigms in H. S. Maine, *Ancient Law: Its connection with the early history of society and its relation to modern ideas* (London, 1861); H. S. Maine, *Village Communities in the East and West* (London, 1871); B. H. Baden-Powell, *The Indian Village Community* (London, 1896); B. H. Baden-Powell, *The Origin and Growth of Village Communities in India* (London, 1899). For an analysis of such paradigms, see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990).

who viewed the cow as sacred.[66] In controversion of such generalised stereotypes, however, Robertson found through visiting Mahar homes that many Mahars with hereditary land (*maharki*) often owned large, tidy, stone-built houses, like their higher-caste hindu village neighbours, especially in districts like Nagpur where Mahars were more affluent as spinners, weavers and builders. Robertson's investigation and local knowledge revealed that Mahars' socio-moral status was misguidedly judged in hindu ritual terms of employment or dietary hygiene, rather than reflecting Mahars' actual lifestyle or moral character. Mann, too, in his investigations of Deccani village society found that Mahar village families and landholdings (*vatan*) were often the backbone of village survival across centuries.[67] In their investigative outlook, Robertson and Mann found common purpose in understanding and challenging stereotypical caste pre-conceptions of British-Indian colonial society.

Mann however extended his scepticism of received wisdom and authority to the influence of religion, because religion could not for Mann be subjected to scientific and investigative enquiry.[68] Robertson found it hard to accept such a positivistic scepticism about the primary importance of ethical criteria with roots in religion for social research methodology and understanding Mahar society.[69] It was from this difference in perspective that a debate emerged in articles between Robertson and Mann in *The Indian Interpreter* in the late 1910s. For Robertson, in methodological terms, ethical principles underwrote social science in its investigation of human group relations, because while social science established facts, causal connections and common laws of activity, religious ethics were the guide to what should be done in consequence of such findings.[70] Hence in Robertson's opinion, Chalmers had investigated the socio-economic conditions of Glasgow, but used religious ethics to direct him in what reform was needed in order to alleviate the poverty identified by such investigations.[71] Likewise Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), whose laissez-faire individualism Chalmers had criticised, was obliged to take into account the needs of individual justice and ethical distinctions in determining the profit and advantage of a nation. For example, child labour, which was necessary for mechanised spinning and weaving of cheap cotton in both Britain and India, raised ethical questions related to physical

[66] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 3, 7–8, 33–35.

[67] H. H. Mann and N. V. Kanitkar, 'A Deccan Village under the Peshvas', *Indian Journal of Economics* 4 (1923) 1–17.

[68] Mann, 'The philosophy of a man of science', 18–19. Mann's scepticism was based on a critique of the view on science and religion of the Free Church of Scotland evangelist Henry Drummond (1851–97), namely that there was a continuity of principle between natural/physical and spiritual worlds, see Henry Drummond *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* (London, 1883) and G. A. Smith, *The Life of Henry Drummond* (London, 1898).

[69] Robertson, 'Ethics and Social Science', 122.

[70] *Ibid.*, 123–4.

[71] *Ibid.*, 126.

under-development, lack of education, and high death-rates which conditioned economic laws and limited national profit in the interest of human welfare.[72] Social science as a means of understanding modern society had to be guided by a system of ethics which insisted on the value of the individual while also recognising wider social ideals.[73] As Robertson explained using biblical terms, just as the Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ for the redemption of human kind, ethical religious principles needed to be embodied in interpretation of human practice in the material world to bring about its transformation and regeneration.[74]

Robertson also sought to refute the naturalism and agnosticism which seemed to him to be inherent in Mann's viewpoint of social phenomena.[75] In relation to mechanical or biological evolutionary theories and in particular the extent to which the natural world could be explained in purely material terms of mechanical or biological laws, Robertson cited in 1912 the biologist Thomas Huxley's (1825–95) scepticism by the early 1890s of 'the gradual banishment from all regions of human thought of what we call spirit and spontaneity'.[76] Moreover the biologist and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), whom Mann also cited in support of his position, allowed in Robertson's opinion that 'knowledge though limited goes beyond phenomena and retains God though He be unknowable as a necessary presupposition of consciousness.'[77] For Robertson, even agnostics such as Huxley and Spencer recognised some form of idealist spirit or consciousness in their naturalist or materialist systems.

More categorically, however, Robertson was influenced by the philosophy of James Ward (1843–1925) and Josiah Royce (1855–1916), who had both lectured at the university of Aberdeen between 1896

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[72] *Ibid.*, 126–7. Robertson derived this example from John Dewey and James Tuft, *Ethics* (New York, 1908).

[73] Robertson drew on William Sorley (1855–1935) 'The philosophical attitude', *International Journal of Ethics*, 20 (January 1910) 152–68; and more widely *The Ethics of Naturalism: A criticism* (Edinburgh, 1901). Sorley was a member of the Free Church, professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, and a British Idealist in philosophical terms.

[74] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 129.

[75] Mann, 'The philosophy of a man of science' 24–8.

[76] Alexander Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 1' *Indian Interpreter* (October, 1912) 138–39; Thomas Huxley, *Collected Essays: Methods and results* (London, 1893–94), vol. 1, 159. T. H. Huxley and Julian Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics 1893–43* (London, 1947) emphasised that mental and emotional features play as much a part in evolution as physical development. Huxley was however agnostic and rejected religion as a source of moral authority.

[77] Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 1', 137–41; Herbert Spencer, *System of Synthetic Philosophy: The Principles of Ethics* (London, 1892) sought to demonstrate that the law of evolution applied to ethics, psychology and sociology as well as biology in determining development from undifferentiated homogeneity to a complex integrated heterogeneity, but he was agnostic in his belief that it was only possible to have knowledge of phenomena and not 'the Unknowable' reality as the source of laws of nature underlying phenomena.

and 1900 during Robertson's residence. In terms of the pluralist Idealism of the English philosopher James Ward, Robertson noted that naturalist or materialist explanations of reality could not account for the contingent emergence of conscious life from inorganic matter. Robertson also recognised however that the prevalent absolute Idealist philosophy of the time, such as in the early work of American philosopher Josiah Royce (which perceived reality in monistic terms of a single all-encompassing consciousness), also failed to explain why and how one cosmic consciousness became contingently manifested in multiple forms.[78] Metaphysically, Robertson argued that contingency in human development had to be explained, not as Liebniz (1646–1716) suggested by preformation—the unfolding of what was present in the beginning—but by epigenesist—the coming into being of contingent facts—as a result of 'an in-dwelling life and mind' which invested objects with their changing worth as a means to life.[79] Thus society, like material objects, was a structured conglomerate the interaction of whose constituent social elements created a reality and consciousness that existed independently of itself. This reality could be explained by changing natural laws. They were not however immutable or eternal laws, but finite human generalisations that were determined by the evolution of the habitual behaviour of constituent social elements in terms of their self-preservation and self-realisation.[80] In contrast, naturalist or materialist explanations were limited by their failure to recognize such an Idealist spirit and evolutionary consciousness. In reply Mann did not generally disagree with Robertson on the limits of positivist materialism, stating that 'materialism seems to me to be a very partial knowledge, perhaps the least part of knowledge'. Nonetheless he found it difficult to accept Robertson's 'subjective knowledge' and conjectural alternatives about the evolution of consciousness without verifiable scientific evidence.[81]

Apart from Ward, Robertson sought further corroboration of his philosophical perspective in 1913–14 in the work of the Finnish philosopher and agnostic critic of christianity Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939), who argued that ethical laws were based on group

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[78] See James Ward, *Naturalism and Agnosticism* (Gifford Lectures, University of Aberdeen, 1896–98) (London, 1899), and *The Realm of Ends or Pluralism and Theism* (Gifford Lectures, University of St Andrews, 1907–10) (Cambridge, 1920). On Royce, see Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual* (Gifford Lectures, University of Aberdeen, 1899–90) (London, 1899–1901). Royce's later work *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago, 1913) replaced absolute Idealism with the concept of an Infinite Mind constituted by a community of interpretations directed by a search for truth.

[79] Robertson reflected a form of pluralist Idealism which he derived from Ward's pluralist critique of G. W. F. Hegel's monistic Idealism in *Science of Logic* (Cambridge, 2010) and Gottfried Leibniz, *Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings* (London, 1985), see Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 2', *Indian Interpreter* (January 1913), 180.

[80] Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 2', 180–4; Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 1', 140–2.

[81] Mann, 'The philosophy of a man of science', 28.

emotional approval or disapproval which was best changed by persuasive toleration, and hence such laws were not absolute, but finite evolutionary expressions of human behaviour.[82] Like Ward, Robertson however argued that a philosophy of interacting constituent elements as the basis for the generation of consciousness could not be sustained in its evolutionary progress without the spiritual direction provided by a supreme agent or theism.[83] Complemented further by the (pluralist and theist) personal Idealism of the American philosopher George Howison (1834–1916)—namely, that evolution was driven by the spiritual nature, personality and noumenal being of mind rather than deterministic materialism—Robertson expressed an Idealist conception of theism in terms of a free society of interactive persons extending to God in which a 'kingdom [of interactive persons] would take the place of the ideal king; there would be a perfect commonwealth, but strictly no monarch, other than 'the objective mind' sovereign in every breast'.[84] Many individual but interactive minds would contribute to the evolution of a sovereign consciousness and form of reason, which progressively realised the will and Kingdom of God and thereby rendered the naturalist or materialist explanation, on which Mann's social science seemed based, at best partial in its interpretation of human social life.[85] Mann's agnostic retort in the debate was that this was a philosophical hypothesis which had to be investigated and proven by experiment before it could be accepted, although Mann conceded that there existed an 'intuitive world' and metaphysical domain which 'at present' remained beyond scientific investigation.[86]

Robertson's Investigation of Mahar Life and Mind

In any empirical understanding of Mahar society, qualitative investigation of Mahar 'indwelling life and mind' was therefore fundamental to Robertson's investigation in contrast to Mann's

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[82] Alexander Robertson, 'Eclecticism and the spirit of compromise 2', *Indian Interpreter* (October 1914) 108. See Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939) *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas* (London, 1906, 1908).

[83] Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 1', 142. Ward, unlike Robertson, indicated that the existence of God cannot be proved.

[84] Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 2', 181: see Ward, *The Realm of Ends*, 136–7; Robertson, 'Christian Mysticism' 2, *Indian Interpreter* (October 1907) 114: Howison's work was published during Robertson's time at the university of Aberdeen; see G. H. Howison, *The Limits of Evolution Illustrating the Metaphysical Theory of Personal Idealism* (London, 1901) and 'The City of God and the True God as its Head' in G. H. Howison (ed.), *The Conception of God* (New York, Macmillan, 1897), 79–132. Howison made developmental distinctions between western and eastern civilisations which Robertson did not emphasise, see Howison, *Conception of God*, 92–4.

[85] Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 1', 141–2, and Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 2', 181–2.

[86] Mann, 'The philosophy of a man of science', 24–5. Mann and Robertson were debating one issue of Howison's discussion with Royce, see G. H. Howison 'The City of God, and the True God as its Head' in Howison (ed.), *The Conception of God*, 126–7.

secular and statistical analyses based on Rowntree's methodology.[87] Consequently, Robertson's investigations looked hard at Mahar households for ethical and moral principles within Mahar personal conduct which might rehabilitate their persona. This analysis took him into a detailed scrutiny of Mahar family customs of birth, sexual mores, marriage and death with the aim of demonstrating morality and similarity of lifestyle with many higher caste hindus. In structural terms, he speculated that the Mahar caste was an ancient, indigenous people focused around Nagpur in central western India on whom the hierarchy and ritual distinctions of high-caste hinduism had been superimposed.[88] For example, Mahar social structure had become divided in hindu terms into twelve endogamous sub-castes and one half caste, each of which incorporated what he conceptualised in Scottish Highland terms as exogamous 'clans' (*kula*).[89] These sub-castes and clans were distributed in a diaspora across the villages of western India with different regions populated with different concentrations of Mahar sub-castes and their clans. The super-imposed hindu hierarchy of these sub-castes was rendered apparent in their inter-dining restrictions and preserved by their marriage arrangements, which occurred within sub-castes, but outside the clan within that sub-caste.[90] Like Mann, Robertson rejected colonial theorisation that hindu caste society was created by Aryan high-caste hindu (*brahman*) invasion and racial subjection of indigenous Dravidian (Mahar) inhabitants.[91] He argued largely in sociological terms that Mahar culture had been overwritten or subsumed by a hindu system which was based on an external and ritualised socio-religious identity, rather than internal moral norms.

In individual terms, Robertson noted the negativity of popular caste hindu stereotypes of Mahar society, especially caste hindu views of Mahar individual sexual mores, namely that many Mahar hereditary village servants were the illegitimate offspring of Mahar women and caste hindu village headmen (*patel*). Likewise he criticised colonial anthropometric interpretations like R. E. Enthoven's cranial and nasal measurements which were seen to add weight to popular stereotypes that Mahars were genetically related to high-caste hindu *brahman* as a

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[87] See Mann's village studies (1913–15 and 1917–18), H. H. Mann, *Land and Labour in a Deccan Village* (London and Bombay, 1917); H. H. Mann, *Land and Labour in a Deccan Village* (London and Bombay, 1921).

[88] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 44–7, 51–3, 55. The highest Mahar concentrations were around Bhandara, Nagpur and Amroati in central India (12–18% of the population) thinning out westwards through Khandesh, Aurangabad, Ahmednagar, Sholapur, Satara, Pune and Ratnagiri (5–9% of the population) in the areas where Robertson worked. Total population was about 3–3.5 million in the 1891 to 1931 censuses by Robertson's calculations.

[89] *Ibid.*, 49–50. The half-caste was in Robertson's opinion made up of offspring of inter-sub-caste marriages.

[90] *Ibid.*, 53–4.

[91] This racial explanation of caste is epitomized by H. H. Risley, *Census of India* (1901) and re-printed in H. H. Risley, *People of India* (Calcutta, 1908).

result of Mahar female promiscuity.[92] Robertson dismissed an origin for Mahars in illegitimacy and promiscuity as being a popularisation of derogatory ideas on miscegenation from caste-hindu religious texts like the *Manusmriti*. He ascribed such anthropometric similarities to hereditary in that Mahars, high-caste hindu *brahman* and upper-caste Maratha hindus all must have originally belonged to similar or interactive groups in the more distant past. He nonetheless censured the widespread polygamy which he found among Mahars, while recognising that it was at times structurally motivated by economic reasons. He also questioned the substantial number of unmarried Mahar women between twenty and forty years old, but he could not decide whether to attribute this statistic to a surplus Mahar female-male ratio or 'something very abnormal in the sexual life of the Mahar people'. In spite of its illegality, child marriage, of which Robertson further disapproved, also prevailed among many Mahar families with by his reckoning one out of four girls being married by the age of fifteen. In mitigation Robertson speculated that such early marriage may have been an attempt by parents to provide security for daughters. Although Robertson also mentioned *murali* or young Mahar girls devoted at puberty as temple servants to the god Khandoba at Jejuri, he shied away in his rehabilitative narrative from describing their general sexual abuse for purposes of ritual worship by high-caste hindu devotees of the god. Divorce for reasons of adultery, violence or disease was a practice that he further admonished for its facility and commonplaceness.[93] Overall, Robertson found it difficult to controvert from his investigations what, he also felt, might be lax individual sexual mores that undermined the regenerative moral image of Mahar folk that he sought to convey. At times, in terms of ethical family values, he struggled to disengage himself fully from an earlier nineteenth-century christian attitude that individual immorality rather than socio-economic circumstance was a contributory cause in Mahar degradation.

Nonetheless Robertson concluded overall that Mahar society had an 'indwelling moral life and mind' which had been rendered ambivalent by the structural socio-economic inequalities of the caste system, high-caste hindu stereotyping, and stigmatisation in terms of untouchability. In this sense Robertson's investigative research in India found its wider context in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Scottish social theology, like that of Thomas Lindsay, George Adam Smith, Marcus Dods and David Watson with its emphasis on God's favour for the downtrodden, criticism of structural exploitation of the poor, and the holistic construction of a material as well as spiritual Kingdom of God. Indeed his conceptualisation of Mahars' 'indwelling (moral) life

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[92] R. E. Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay* (Bombay, 1920), 1. xiv-xvi, cited in Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 55–6.

[93] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 39, 47–9, 55–7, 70.

and mind' and their potential for a composite human constitution and realisation of divine consciousness in a Kingdom of God in western India (in terms of Ward's and Howison's work) seemed to radicalise further Scottish social theology. Robertson's social theology also contested, not so much the Liberal aims, but the achievement of ethical social reform by means of the secular approach of Mann, the Bombay government, and concomitantly the British colonial metropole. Originating from the Scottish periphery of the British Empire, such presbyterian missionary perspectives challenged secular views of reform originating in substantial part from the colonial metropole, and drove for more radical socio-religious solutions to caste discrimination in western India than the British-Indian colonial establishment was willing to encounter.

Robertson, Natural Law and Scottish Social Theology

In adapting a late nineteenth-century Scottish critique of natural law to India, Robertson's social theology also challenged hindu belief that caste hierarchy was based on a divinely-ordained principle or immutable natural law, rather than being a socio-economic structure that was founded on group interest and hence susceptible to ethical intervention in the interest of promoting a more just society. In Scotland by the late nineteenth century, a number of ministers in both the Free Church and Church of Scotland had already developed liberal and proto-socialist critiques of the socio-economic system that natural law had authorised. Marcus Dods (1834–1909), for example, who was minister of Renfield Free Church in Glasgow from 1864 to 1889 and subsequently professor of New Testament Exegesis and principal of New College in Edinburgh, criticised the Free Church for its historical ignorance of the systemic exploitation and alienation of the working classes.[94] Robertson was particularly inspired by Dods's emphasis on how the conscience of a community could be changed by men of principle who preferred social disgrace or even death, rather than accept morally misguided structures and practices which damaged society.[95] For Robertson, apart from Christ, St Paul represented this model for the modern christian church and he drew eclectically on the writings in social theology between 1904 and 1914 of Percy Gardner (1846–1937), Francis Peabody (1847–1936), Henry Gwatkin (1844–1916) and the earlier work of Fenton Hort (1828–92) to elaborate this social vision. In general terms, Gardner provided insight into St Paul as this historical

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[94] Marcus Dods, *Post-exilian Prophets: Handbook on Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi with introduction and notes by Marcus Dods* (Edinburgh, 1879); Marcus Dods, *The Gospel of Saint John* (London, 1897); Marcus Dods (trans.) *The Works of Aurelius Augustine of Hippo: A new translation* (Edinburgh, 1871–76).

[95] See Marcus Dods, *How to Become like Christ* (London, 1897); Robertson, 'Eclecticism and the spirit of compromise 2', 41–115. Dods was summoned before the Free Church General Assembly for an unorthodox sermon on inspiration in 1878.

role model.[96] From Hort, who similarly emphasised Christ's apostolic legacy based on the Gospel of St John, Robertson noted an on-going need to understand and continually translate the divine into human practice.[97] From Gwatkin, Robertson deduced that mystical communion with the divine was important because it provided revelation that was the obverse but complement of human activity in historical context.[98] Ultimately from Peabody, Robertson developed the idea that the christian ethics, which derived from Jesus Christ's character and ethical authority as invested in his disciples, should be a driving force for a new theology of social service.[99] Robertson's composite vision was of an apostolic agency which was motivated in social service by Christ's example and ethical authority and sought not to accept natural law and order, but actively to change society for the better. Hence 'Christian ethics may come to be recognized, not as a stepchild of the faith of the past, but as a parent of the faith of the future.'[100]

Moreover, in the years after 1905, India moved into a Liberal era of political compromise under secretary of state John Morley (1838–1923)—whom Robertson respected—and in Scotland George Reith (1863–1948) became Moderator of the United Free Church Assembly in 1914, and critiqued a capitalist system based on competitive individualism within which men struggled to be moral and christian. In this context, Robertson likewise condemned in terms of caste forms in India what others were criticising in different class forms at home in Scotland, namely a social system which damaged society by structural subjection and exploitation of its lower ranks.[101] He wrote in 1914 that there was:

> a dual doctrine—one thing may be true for the vulgar in the sense that while it is really in the long run false, it is useful … either by way of pleasing them or by way of keeping them in subjection, while quite another doctrine is true for the upper ten thousand. Thus many politicians to whom the idea of God has no meaning, continue to endow religious institutions because these help to restrain the dragon

[96] Alexander Robertson, 'Eclecticism and compromise 1', *Indian Interpreter* (1914) 48: The classical archaeologist and numismatist Percy Gardner, *The Religious Experience of St Paul* (London, 1911).

[97] Alexander Robertson, 'Christian Mysticism 1, *Indian Interpreter* (July 1907) 80–8: Fenton Hort, *The Way, the Truth and the Light (Hulsean Lectures, 1871)* (London, 1893).

[98] Robertson, 'Christian Mysticism 1', 89: H. M. Gwatkin, *The Knowledge of God (Gifford Lectures, 1904–05)* (Edinburgh, 1906).

[99] Robertson, 'Ethics and Religion', 93; F. G. Peabody, *Jesus Christ and the Christian Character (Lyman Beecher Lectures, Yale University, 1904)* (London, 1905), see also Jorgen Herbst, 'Francis Greenwood Peabody: Harvard's Theologian of the Social Gospel', *Harvard Theological Review* 54 (1961) 45–69.

[100] Peabody, *Jesus Christ and the Christian Character*, 38, cited in Robertson, 'Ethics and Religion', 93.

[101] See John Morley, *On Compromise* (London, 1886); George Reith, *Proceedings and Debates of the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland*, 1914, 43–5; George Reith, *Reminiscences of the United Free Church General Assembly 1900–29* (Edinburgh, 1933); George Reith, *The Gospel according to Saint John* (Edinburgh, 1889); see also W. M. Clow, *Dr George Reith: A Scottish ministry* (London, 1928).

of democracy. And thus, too—especially in India—superstitions and evil practices [like untouchability] are allowed to continue among the vulgar because those who see that they are false and wrong belong to a privileged class, many of whose members derive prestige and patrimony from the continuance of such beliefs and practices.[102]

As investigative research by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree in London and York respectively after the 1890s also gave statistical evidence from England which served further to disaggregate Free Church Evangelical attitudes to the class hierarchy and structural exploitations of Scottish society, Robertson's own views were likewise further engaged by the socio-ethical dimensions of Rowntree's investigative approach as revealed in his debate with Harold Mann in 1910–11.[103] As Donald Smith indicates, while a mostly middle-class clergy themselves did not embrace socialist ideals, nonetheless socialist humanitarian aims, moral protest against socio-economic exploitation, and the need of social justice for the working classes increasingly influenced the missionary vision of a radical group of Free Church ministers between the 1890s and 1910s in Scotland.[104] This social theology also seemed to have assumed a radical and proto-socialist dimension in Robertson's missionary critiques of hindu socio-religious structures in western India.

In adapting such radical Scottish perspectives to western India, Robertson's investigative study noted that the Mahars' material condition was authorised by a range of natural laws which instituted discriminatory prohibitions on Mahars known as untouchability. Robertson found from *The Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* that defilement by Mahars' touch, presence, and shadow existed in varied forms in late nineteenth-century western India.[105] Moreover from his own investigations in the early twentieth century, he found that such defilement continued to form the basis for Mahar exclusion from hindu temples, from use of village wells for fear of transmitting moral pollution through the water, and led to the separation of Mahar children on verandahs outside school buildings or more commonly their exclusion from village schools altogether. Robertson disregarded

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[102] Robertson, 'Eclecticism and the spirit of compromise, 2', 111.

[103] Charles Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, (London, 1890); B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty: A study of town life* (London, 1901); Brown, 'To be aglow with civic ardours', 188–93. For a contrast of Chalmers with Booth, see MacLeod, 'Thomas Chalmers and pauperism', 63–76.

[104] Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 304; A similar if less prominent development occurred within the Church of Scotland in John Marshall Lang's (1834–1909) work as minister of Barony Church (1873–1900) and principal of Aberdeen University from 1900–09, and Donald MacLeod (1831–1916), minister of Park Church, Glasgow, see J. M. Lang, *The Church and its Social Mission: The Baird Lectures for 1901* (Edinburgh, 1902); Donald MacLeod, *Christ and Society* (London, 1892).

[105] *The Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* (Bombay 1884–85), v. 333; vii. 174, cited in Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 16.

the fact that high-caste hindu *brahman* gave this social discrimination a divine sanction on the basis of Sanskrit texts like the *Manusmriti* which ascribed the structure of hindu caste society and untouchability to birth from the hierarchised body parts of a primeval religious being or *purusha*.[106] In an application of Free Church social theology that critiqued natural law for being an instrument of working-class exploitation, Robertson turned instead in the 1910s and 1920s to historical explanations which challenged such hindu conceptions of Mahars' low status defined in terms of natural law or divinely-ordained structure.[107]

On the basis of historical evidence from the Marathi religious biographer Mahipati (1715–90), Robertson sought to re-appreciate the Mahars' historical role within village society. The fourteenth-century Mahar poet-saint Chokhamela recorded in his poetry many of the defiling characteristics and discrimination elaborated by Robertson towards contemporary Mahar society. Other iconoclastic high-caste *brahman* poet-saints, like Dnyaneshvar and Eknath, and the lower-caste poet-saint Tukaram, had nonetheless emphasised the importance of Mahars in rural village life during the thirteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively. In this characterisation, Mahars had worked as village officers for caste-hindu village headmen *(patel)*, organising their village jurisdiction, ensuring land boundaries and tax payments, and providing village security. In return for this village service, the Mahars were given certain perquisites, including not only the right to village carrion and left-over food, but more importantly, a small hereditary and tax-free plot of arable land *(maharki)* and a moderate share in the harvest *(baluta)*. In this empirically-based re-valorisation of the Mahar village role, Robertson emphasised Mahar importance and rights as a historical development based on their village utility, rather than them being stereotyped as a despised group whose status was determined by divinely-ordained natural order and caste-hindu stereotypes of immorality and low status.[108]

For Robertson, many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British colonial sources corroborated this historical perspective of Mahars. The *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, for example, indicated that the Mahar 'was considered the most trustworthy man in the village, and though his caste was low, he held a highly respected position among the village servants, which led the British colonial government

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[106] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 2–3, 8–9. High-caste *brahman* priests were believed to be born from the head of the primeval *purusha;* high-caste *kshatriya* warriors/landowners from the arms; middle-caste *vaisya* traders from the thighs; and low-caste *shudra* menial workers from the feet. As the last-born from the feet of the *purusha,* Mahars were considered to be *atishudra or* sub-human, near-animals at the lowest caste levels.

[107] *Ibid.,* viii.

[108] *Ibid.,* 10–14, 16–19, see Mahipati, *Bhaktavijaya: Stories of Indian Saints,* trans. Justin Abbott and N. R. Godbole (Poet-Saints of Maharashtra, 9 and 10) (Pune, 1933 and 1934).

to maintain many of their perquisites'.[109] This local village importance was also replicated in substantial Mahar numbers and achievements in the Maratha, East India Company and British-Indian armies. In the pre-British Maratha armies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Robertson noted that the Mahar role as official servant of the Maratha village headman had been complemented in military service as their foot-soldiers (*paik*) who attended to the horse of their village headmen and fought beside them on foot. In Robertson's estimation, it was the barbarity of Maratha caste-hindu treatment of their own foot-soldiers on grounds of their untouchability which led many Mahars to fight with the East India Company against the Maratha rulers of eighteenth-century western India. During British rule, Mahar sepoys achieved heroic military feats, such as at the Battle of Koregaon in January 1818 or in the 19th Bombay Infantry at Dubrai in Afghanistan in 1880.[110] As high-caste hindu prejudice rose in the British-Indian army in the late nineteenth century, however, Mahar sepoys had been disbanded from the army in 1891 for their perceived untouchability. Writing retrospectively in the 1920s, Robertson saw such disbandment as a decline in British dominion in India resulting from an uncritical submission to caste-hindu stereotypes and hindu belief in hindu natural law, in much the same way that British governance in India had declined in terms of its toleration of discrimination against Mahars in rural village society.[111] Robertson's delineation of the historical evolution of Mahar untouchability thereby became not only a challenge to belief in natural law conceived in hindu terms, but a criticism of the failure of British colonial governance to deal ethically with the socio-economic discrimination that hindu natural law and all that its moral stereotypes entailed.

Voices of Old and New Testament Prophets for a Kingdom of God in Western India

In the context of a decline in earlier nineteenth-century pietistic moralism in the Free Church of Scotland, revised Old and New Testament exegeses were also increasingly deployed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to verify new demands for social justice.[112] This trend was particularly apparent in terms of new emphases on the Old Testament prophets and the humanity of the historical Jesus in the synoptic Gospels and Acts of the Apostles with

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[109] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 19–21.

[110] Robertson noted the Governor of Bombay, John Malcolm's (1819–27) observations on the effectiveness of the East India Company's non-commissioned Mahar officers when there had been subordination of caste prejudice to military discipline, see John Malcolm, *The Political History of India from 1784–1823* (London, 1826), 489, 510. On Malcolm, see Martha McLaren, *British India and British Scotland 1780–1830* (Akkron, 2001); Fry, *Scottish Empire*, 83–95.

[111] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 59–66.

[112] Cheyne, *The Transformation of the Kirk*, 136–7.

their social message of bringing about a society that would meet the human need of both material and spiritual development.[113] At the time of Robertson's engagement with Mahar society, for example, George Adam Smith (1856–1942)—who was professor of Old Testament at Free Church College in Glasgow (1892–1909) and subsequently principal of the University of Aberdeen until 1935—was using historical analysis from the Old Testament to critique the association of the natural laws of political economy with divine will and to challenge Free Church neglect of working-class parishioners. As a basis for such a critique, he re-iterated the emphasis of the Hebrew prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah on community righteousness and the need of justice and equity in social relations for the poor and enslaved.[114] Similarly Alexander Balmain Bruce (1831–99), who was professor of Apologetic and New Testament Exegesis at the Free Church Hall in Glasgow (1875–99) and editor of *The Modern Church* (1891–92), also sought to demonstrate the importance of the historical Jesus in the New Testament for contemporary social issues.[115] As S. J. Brown has indicated, such an approach reflected a clear shift from an emphasis on atonement and individual salvation to Christ's community message to suffering humanity.[116] In the contemporaneous Indian missionary context of christian liberation from hindu caste and untouchability, the historical relevance of the Old and New Testaments as a manual for justice and equity for the downtrodden was not lost on Robertson.

Like George Adam Smith, with a focus on the Old Testament, Robertson wrote that:

> the protests of the Hebrew prophets against the oppression of the poor and the heartlessness shown by the rich and powerful are more modern in language and spirit than any of the books of antiquity.[117]

In particular, the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel's (37, 10) narrative of God's reincarnation of men in the valley/place of bones as a presentiment of Christ's resurrection in the New Testament promised moral and social redemption of Mahars, so that 'the breath came into them and they lived and stood up on their feet, an exceedingly great army.'[118] For Robertson, the contribution of Hebrew literature

[113] *Ibid.*, 37–59 on reinterpretation of scripture and Rolf Sjolinder, *Presbyterian Reunion in Scotland, 1907–21* (Uppsala, 1962) on the liberal reinvention of reformation Calvinism.

[114] G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets* (London, 1896, 1898); G. A. Smith, *The Preaching of the Old Testament to the Age* (London, 1893); G. A. Smith, *The Book of Isaiah* (London, 1888, 1890); G. A. Smith, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament* (London, 1901); see also L. A. Smith, *George Adam Smith* (London, 1943); I. D. Campbell, *Fixing the Indemnity: The Life and Work of Sir George Adam Smith* (Carlyle, 2004); I. D. Campbell, 'Fact not Dogma: George Adam Smith, Evangelism and Biblical Criticism', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 18 (2000) 3–20.

[115] A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Edinburgh, 1871); A. B. Bruce, *The Kingdom of God or Christ's Christian Teachings according to the Synoptic Gospels* (Edinburgh, 1899).

[116] Brown, 'Reform, reconstruction and reaction', 498.

[117] Robertson, 'Ethics and Social Science', 132.

[118] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 92.

was its emphasis on a law of righteousness that had to be obeyed by nations, societies and individuals alike. In his opinion, this law of righteousness was as pertinent, if neglected in Jerusalem, in the eighth century before Christ as in his own time, when laws of individual morality and righteousness seemed to exert limited influence over impersonal corporate organisations or colonial structures. Robertson further argued that the historical legacy in Jesus of this line of Old Testament prophets had been a critical challenge to similar oppression within the context of the Roman Empire and subsequently in a continuous historical conflict in different periods of western civilisation between 'an ethical force which insists that institutions are made for man and not man for institutions, and a tendency on the part of the privileged classes to maintain their possessions on the pleas that custom and time have sanctified them.'[119] According to Robertson, the Old Testament prophets' emphasis on righteousness and subsequently the historical Jesus's ethical teachings:

> [set each] person in a kingdom, and a society, namely the church, was founded to care on the one hand for the individual and to establish on the other the kingdom of God. Here surely is the Ethics which modern industrialism needs, a system which insists on the eternal value of the individual, and at the same time sets before the world a social ideal.[120]

The voices of the Old Testament prophets—like Moses and Ezekiel—also spoke to other enslaved people in the modern world, not least for Robertson the exploited out-caste Mahar folk of western India. By contrast, the Old Testament equivalent in hindu scriptural texts like the *Veda* had little prophetic social theology to provide for the modern age in Robertson's opinion.[121] On the contrary, they seemed to bequeath the ritualistic socio-religious elements of hinduism which led to the caste exploitation and degradation of Mahars.

With Old and New Testaments as templates for a modern society based on social justice and equity, Robertson recognised the relevance of the concept of the Kingdom of God in addressing the material and thereby remedying the moral difficulties of the poor that were created in substantial degree by structural circumstances beyond their control. He explained that 'the redemption of the body carries with it the redemption of the world to which it belongs' and hence 'to deny the redemption of the body is to deny Christ and to relapse into heathen despair'.[122] His activities in the late 1910s and early 1920s to secure better living conditions, education and military employment for

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[119] Robertson, 'Ethics and Social Science', 133.

[120] *Ibid.*, 134.

[121] Robertson had an understanding of Sanskrit texts including the *Veda, Brahmana* and *Bhagavad Gita* through their modern Hindu and Orientalist critiques, including the works of Vivekananda, Max Muller, John Muir, Arthur MacDonald, James Hastings (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh, 1908–26) and British-Indian historians, like V. A. Smith, *Early History of India from 600 B.C. to the Muhammadan Conquest* (Oxford, 1902).

[122] Robertson, 'Ethics and the social sciences', 129.

Mahars in Pune and Nagpur constituted, in his estimation, the material elements of a missionary strategy with the moral aim of creating a Kingdom of God in western India. In particular, within this Kingdom of God, Robertson, like Watson, looked to Calvinist interpretation of a communion of saints based on Pauline scripture (especially 1 Corinthians, 12 which referred to christians as a single, mutually supportive body) and promoted the social duty of a communion of saints as the agency for moral improvement in society. In theological terms, his Calvinist interpretation of a communion of saints, namely the church militant (christians alive on earth) and the church triumphant (the saints in heaven), defined a congregation of believers who were united through one faith in Christ and whose fellowship was established by mutually communicating to each other the benefits that God bestowed with the aim of realising the Kingdom of God. Like Flint, Macleod and Watson, Robertson held an evolutionary understanding of the Kingdom of God, whereby, just as human existence should be a process of an individual 'becoming' one with God, so individuals should also strive to become one with other citizens in the development of the Kingdom of God which would only ever reach its perfect state in the heavenly City of God.[123] As Robertson explained:

> each person in the city of God seeks not his own welfare, but that of all the others and ... no knowledge is true unless it issues in right action, and such action is determined by the welfare of society, by the joy and satisfaction of all its members.[124]

Social service therefore lay at the centre of his early twentieth-century theology with its aim of putting into practice the ethical ideals of the Kingdom of God proposed by Jesus Christ in the Gospels and enacted through a communion of saints in the Acts of the Apostles and epistles.[125] In this sense, Robertson's Kingdom of God expressed in proto-socialist vein that 'humanity [would be] animated by a single wise and righteous will; every citizen would work harmoniously with every other, each one doing the highest and best of which he is capable. The will of the Many and the will of the One would accord completely'.[126]

Robertson also believed that a communion of saints as an instrument of a Kingdom of God worked in complementary association with the paradigm of the Trinity, in which the relationship of God the Son with God the Father and Holy Spirit provided a divine model of social interaction (of the many) through which the Kingdom of God

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[123] Robertson, 'Christian mysticism, 1', 85–7, 91. Robertson's interpretation is based on Mark 12, 31.
[124] Robertson, 'Christian mysticism, 2', 115.
[125] Robertson, 'Ethics and religion', 91–3.
[126] Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 2', 181.

evolved.[127] For Robertson, 'God like man is a personal, yes social being'.[128] As he clarified:

> the assumption is not that one transcendent Being exists above and beyond the whole series of the Many, however extended; but it assumes further that this One Being is related to them in a way in which none of them is related to the rest; they do not simply co-exist along with it, they exist somehow in it and through it.[129]

Moreover, drawing on Ward, he indicated that 'the world as created is entirely dependent upon God and He limits Himself through His creation. God is not thus the absolute. He and the world together make up the absolute'.[130] In this way, Robertson's communion of saints as the agent of a Kingdom of God on earth turned it back on nineteenth-century presbyterian belief in natural law, a primary focus on individual morality, the ordained nature of social hierarchy, and the unlimited nature of divine power, in favour of a radical pluralist and proto-socialist theology emphasising human moral will and the sovereign reason of the many within a theistic framework. It was a social theology which was more radical and experimental than most contemporary social theologians in Scotland.

Robertson's views, like the social theology of Flint, MacLeod, Matheson and Watson, also accepted the role of secular state agencies beyond the church militant as instruments of a communion of saints in developing the Kingdom of God. In this context, Robertson was critical of the British-Indian colonial government for its failure to lay the basis of the Kingdom of God in India. He argued that on grounds of Mahar origins in an ancient culture over-written by hinduism, their warrior tradition, and loyal village and military service, India's British colonial government had a duty to rehabilitate such 'ancient Mahar dynasts' by assisting them in developing out of the colonisation of their identity and the material degradation brought about by an external morality imposed by caste hinduism. In marked contrast to Mann, Robertson's opinion was that the Kingdom of God provided the template for Mahar moral and material regeneration, as well as for the wider colonial hindu society that British administration in India appeared to validate. In indirect analogy with British rule in India, Robertson returned to the Old Testament to note the modern relevance of early Jerusalem, which at first 'was the centre of the struggle of great world empires', but disregarded 'the protests of the Hebrew prophets against the oppression of the poor' and became 'a great world empire knock-kneed for lack of religious and ethical nourishment, that crucified the greatest of

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[127] Robertson, 'Christian Mysticism, 1', 86; Robertson, 'Christian Mysticism, 2', 114–15
[128] Robertson, 'Christian Mysticism, 2', 113.
[129] Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 2', 183. Quotation from James Ward, *The Realm of Ends* (Gifford Lectures, University of St Andrews, 1907–10) (Cambridge, 1920), 231. Robertson's interpretation is based on 1 John, 1, 3.
[130] Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 2', 184.

the world's prophets.'[131] During the Roman Empire, christianity had emerged from the line of Old Testament prophets to inspire liberation and challenge 'the exploitation of a helot population by the spirit of militarism'.[132] Likewise but more recently as King James VI of Scotland (1566–1625)/James I of England (1603–25) began to expand the first British Empire, Andrew Melville had opposed a similar subjection and loss of religious freedom in Scotland, with his outspoken words:

> there are two kings and kingdoms in Scotland, there is King James, the head of this commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus, the King of the church, whose subject James the sixth is, and of whose kingdom he is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member.[133]

Robertson perceived the development of a Kingdom of God as a means by which the socio-religiously subjected or oppressed within empire could have their rights to moral and material development recognised and promoted. The solution in India, as elsewhere, lay in application of the ethical principles laid down by Christ in the New Testament leading to the development of a communion of saints that would implement a Kingdom of God. The British Empire in India with its socio-religious foundations in caste-hindu hierarchy and privilege, like Jerusalem, the Roman Empire and Scotland under early Stuart governance, did not appear to Robertson to be such a kingdom.

A 'Protestant' Hindu Communion of Saints in Western India

Robertson's views also expanded radically beyond conventional christian interpretation of the communion of saints by the inclusion of devotees of *bhakti* or devotional hinduism. For Robertson, like the christian protestant reformation in Europe, many hindus in western India from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries had followed 'the spirit of true heart religion' and a similar 'effervescence' of ethical devotional religion which led to the creation of a communion of saints. This hindu communion of saints had been expressed through the religious poetry of poet-saints Dnyaneshvar, Namdev, Eknath, Tukaram, and especially Mahar saint Chokhamela to the god Vithoba (an avatar of Vishnu) at Pandharpur.[134] The devotion of these hindu saints emphasised the love between God and devotee in terms of a *dvaita* or 'separate but identified' relationship between God (mother) and the individual devotee (child) and was for Robertson a devotional religious bond that was to some extent replicated between believers in ethical and social terms, and thereby created a communion of saints in western India.[135] In Robertson's view, such a 'separate but identified'

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[131] Robertson, 'Ethics and the social sciences', 132.
[132] *Ibid.*, 133.
[133] *Ibid.*, 134.
[134] Robertson, 'Ethics and religion', 87–8.
[135] Robertson, 'Christian mysticism, 2', 107–16; Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 91

relationship as the basis for a communion of saints was fundamentally important for both devotional hinduism and christianity. Any religious philosophy, like monist *brahman advaita*, was inadequate as a religious faith because it did not allow a 'separate but identified' relationship of devotees with God and did not thereby recognise the role of the many in the creation of a moral community or communion of saints which led its members 'to preach to the ignorant, to care for the weak, to uplift the fallen, to hate bitterly all impurity, all selfishness and oppression of the poor' as a basis for the Kingdom of God.[136]

Robertson drew on the vernacular Marathi poems *(abhang)* of the Mahar saint Chokhamela to indicate that Mahars' devotional faith lay at the heart of the hindu communion of saints in western India. In general terms, he related this hindu socio-religious analysis to a framework from the Idealist 'philosophy of loyalty'—of the American philosopher Josiah Royce—to provide a general structure for his understanding of the fourteenth- to seventeenth-century hindu devotional movement of western India and its hindu communion of saints.[137] Royce had argued that in ethical terms it was not enough for individuals to conform to conventional moral norms, but they had to commit and contribute actively with other individuals to the realisation of an improving moral cause or purpose. In this sense individuals became co-associated as a community which pursued the same cause, and their moral commitment or 'loyalty' to the cause formed the basis of community identity. The degree of moral validity of any action was determined by whether an individual was 'loyal' in achieving community aims. In line with Royce, which Robertson read between 1908 and 1910, Robertson broadly argued that the most substantial moral achievements in history—for example the protestant reformation in Europe or the comparable rise of a Maratha people around a 'protestant' devotional hinduism in western India—were based on such commitment to the purpose of a 'living heart religion' that generated a community of loyalty.[138] For Robertson, the hindu communion of saints therefore suggested a parallel or nascent protestant christian form and the Mahar saint Chokhamela might be seen as a conversionary bridge by which such hindu beliefs could be fulfilled in protestant christianity.

From this perspective on devotional hinduism in western India, Robertson commented approvingly in *Mahar Folk* on the devotee relationship of Mahar saint Chokhamela with the god Vithoba.[139] The

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[136] Robertson, 'Christian mysticism 2', 116. Monist and non-dualist *advaita vedanta* proposed that the *atman* or soul in all sentient beings is identical with the Supreme Soul or *Brahman* and hence there is only one real Self, which is distinct from the transitory illusory world/self or *maya*.

[137] Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (New York, 1908). Robertson had also read the American philosopher William James (1842–1910), *Pragmatism: A New Way for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (London, 1907) whose radical empiricism had led to debate with and influence on Royce.

[138] Robertson, 'Ethics and Religion', 87–90.

[139] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 86.

intrinsic loyalty in this devotee-God relationship was an exemplar for the relations of an inclusive hindu communion of saints which gave protection and favour to the poor and lowly. Robertson cited the importance of Chokhamela's poem describing this relationship with the god Vithoba and concomitantly with the communion of saints:

> The orphan's advocate, the poor man's friend, the burden bearer of all helpless folk,
> He, the Great King on Chandrabhaga's sands abides to render service to his saints.
> In very truth, he ne'er forgets the man, who takes him at his word.[140]

In return for the devotion and communion of the saints, the god Vithoba thrived so much on human love that he was limited by his own creation and bound to reciprocate by entering human life to bestow his grace on Chokhamela and the communion of saints:

> Replete is he [Vithoba] with great desire and longing for the faith of men.
> He stands and waits at Pandhari in love surpassing human ken.
> Immersed in faith my heart is glad. Idle, I stand, my will distraught.
> 'Tis faith that gives him sweetest joy; Yea, pride and colour please him naught.[141]

Supported generally by the pluralist Idealist perspective from Ward, Robertson suggested that, like his own sense of christian theism, the god Vithoba as a transcendent being did not exist above and beyond human kind. He was related to his communion of saints in a way that was not merely co-existence, but an interactive relationship which created moral values as a result of the world not being entirely dependent upon God and God himself being limited by the evolution and the multiplicity of creation.[142]

As with Robertson's own protestant faith, a *brahman* priesthood, which was bound by conventional norms, scriptural ritualism, laws of untouchability and an elitist intellectual rather than emotional relationship with the divine, was the antithesis of such a devotional and inclusive communion of saints. So Robertson indicated from Chokhamela's poetry:

> Behold how great a wonder is this truth, hidden from Brahman and the other gods.
> Hari the mighty stands at Pandhrapur, though all the glory of the world be his.
> A mother's house to all the humble folk is Pandhari upon the Bhima's shore.[143]

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[140] *Ibid.*, 84.
[141] *Ibid.*, 88.
[142] Robertson, 'The realm of nature and the realm of ends 2', 183–4.
[143] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 86.

Throughout the religious poetry of the saints, Robertson argued, there recurred the notion that the salvation which Chokhamela enunciated was only achievable through the replication of Chokhamela's devotional relationship with the god Vithoba in the socio-moral relations and practices of a communion of saints, which exclusive loyalties like that of high-caste hindu *brahman* only served to destroy.[144]

Ultimately, therefore, Robertson felt that Chokhamela and Mahar devotion to Vithoba in the communion of the saints was predominantly a cry for spiritual and material help in a world that treated Mahars with socio-religious exclusion and inhuman exploitation. This cry for help had three aspects in Robertson's estimation. First, it was an attempt to comprehend the cruelty of the *brahman* ritual morality of *karma*, which as Robertson put it, enjoined every Mahar 'to dree his weird'.[145] Robertson noted the 'dark night of the soul' that *karma* brought to Chokhamela and a true communion of saints, because it engendered passive obedience to so-called divinely-ordained natural laws, rather than empowering the saints to work out God's will in human terms for the benefit of all. Secondly, in spite of his devotion, Chokhamela's cry for relief involved an interrogation of the god Vithoba as to why he allowed the Mahars' inhuman lot and socio-religious oppression to persist. Chokhamela found consolation, but not explanation, in his devotional relationship with the god Vithoba.[146] Finally, Robertson believed that Chokhamela in particular and Mahars in general, were not only worn down by ritual laws and religious oppression, but by the burden of sin. Robertson interpreted the following verse as a misdirected cry for deliverance from sin which he believed a hindu communion of saints could not answer:

> I ran a fugitive to God, driving all doubt from out my breast
> My deeds a load upon my back, I nowhere got me any rest.
> To none can I apportion blame, my foes have caught me in their net.
> In miry clay, so Chokha saith, all unawares my feet I set.
> O Thou who dwellest at Pandhari [Vithoba] 'Tis only thou can set me free.[147]

For Robertson, this was 'the spirit of a people crying for salvation', but salvation from sin could not for Robertson be attained by a hindu communion of saints because *brahman* ritual, natural laws and exclusive loyalty constrained and undermined it. It could only be achieved by the redemption that a christian communion of saints could bring through a devotional relationship with Christ, because the christian God had proved his love for mankind, not only by incarnation, but also by dying in loyalty to God and community to save sinners and open the

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[144] *Ibid.*, 15.
[145] *Ibid.*, 89.
[146] *Ibid.*, 91.
[147] *Ibid.*, 87.

gates of heaven.[148] A christian communion of saints alone would fulfil the Mahars' spiritual sojourn out of the bondage of *brahman* ritual hinduism through devotional *bhakti* hinduism to 'an abiding place in the Father's home' in the Kingdom of God.[149] In this latter sense, Robertson argued that devotional *bhakti* hinduism was a 'protestant' form of hinduism or transitional bridge from hinduism into protestant christianity for out-caste hindus like Mahars.[150] Robertson's radical re-construction of the Mahar folk's spiritual fellowship as a communion of saints had the purpose of consummating their socio-religious trajectory in a protestant christian communion of saints, of which, it appeared to him, their hindu communion of saints had nascent but unfulfilled forms.[151] Like the prophet Ezekiel's Hebrew people, Mahar folk were yet to be fully delivered or converted into, what Royce would have termed, a 'community of grace'. Nor could they be delivered by the formulation of a socio-economic programme like Mann's secular and agnostic creed which aimed to return Mahar folk to an honourable position in society. Ultimately, Robertson wrote, 'the way of salvation and the end thereof is one; it is the fellowship in Holy Spirit, the fellowship which is the very Godhead'.[152]

Robertson, Scottish Social Theology and the Kingdom of God in Western India

In terms of investigative methods, Alexander Robertson's work among the Mahar folk of western India was determined by a legacy of the missionary techniques first developed by Thomas Chalmers in early to mid nineteenth-century Scotland. This practical legacy incorporated the importance of principles of locality and the poor being helped at the local level by using family, neighbours, church elders, networks of identity and community who were familiar with and had direct experience of their moral and material needs. It emphasised the collection of information to inform such social work with recognition of the investigative advances made by Scottish Church social reformers, like G. S. Smith, Matheson and Watson, as well as English reformers like Booth and Rowntree. It used ordinary Marathi language in preaching, visiting of parishioners and propagation of the gospel to deliver its message through practical means. Robertson also sought to raise social consciousness, particularly through the legacy of Stow's and Welsh's methods in education in the form of primary and Sabbath schools

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[148] *Ibid.*, 92–5.
[149] *Ibid.*, 91.
[150] See also John Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (New Delhi, 1913); J. F. Edwards, *Tukaramabovancha Setu (Tukaram's Bridge)* (Pune, 1932).
[151] Alexander Robertson, 'The Ramakrishna school 1–2' *Indian Interpreter* (1906) 118–22, and *Indian Interpreter* (1907) 166–74; Robertson, 'Eclecticism and compromise 1', 41–9; Robertson, 'Eclecticism and the spirit of compromise 2', 108–15; Alexander Robertson, 'Indian eclecticism' *Indian Interpreter* (1916) 80–90; Alexander Robertson, 'Eclecticism in Indian mythology' *Indian Interpreter* (1918) 43–51.
[152] Robertson, *Mahar Folk*, 96.

which were still seen in early twentieth-century India as one of the best means for empowering the family over its children's moral upbringing and future economic circumstances. The knowledge which enabled Robertson to write *Mahar Folk* was a result of these methods of direct contact and investigative understanding of the customs and practice of Mahars in the early twentieth century.

In terms of his socio-religious outlook, however, Robertson differed from the earlier nineteenth-century vision of Chalmers's Godly Commonwealth. Robertson's purpose in *Mahar Folk* was to emphasise and rehabilitate the moral and religious strengths of the Mahar communion of saints in Pune and Nagpur in the face of their social abjection, hindu socio-religious discrimination, economic exploitation and poverty. For Robertson, in line with later Scottish social theology like that of Marcus Dods, labouring Mahars were certainly responsible for their individual moral conduct, but their condition had to be understood not in terms of a tradition of divinely-ordained hindu ritual principles or immutable natural laws, but within a context of socio-religious subjection and structural economic exploitation by wealthier caste-hindu villagers and the limited intervention of the British colonial administration. In line with other late nineteenth-century Scottish biblical commentators like George Adam Smith and Alexander Bruce, Robertson perceived a new value in the social message of the Old Testament prophets with its focus on community righteousness and justice for the enslaved poor (*viz.* Mahars), as well as the value of Jesus Christ in this line of prophets with his ethical christian emphasis on the value of every individual within the wider social ideals promoted by a communion of saints. While there were identifiable parallels with the Old Testament concept of a covenant or special relationship of the god Vithoba with his chosen Mahar people, Mahars in association with the Free Church, might elevate themselves by means of a devotional faith, at first hindu and later protestant christian, and seek in New Testament terms to promote the development of socio-economic and moral life by establishing the common welfare of a communion of saints as a basis for the Kingdom of God in western India.

The concept of a communion of saints as a mutually-beneficial brother and sisterhood within a Kingdom of God was therefore a primary ethical criterion for judging human society for Robertson. Like other contemporary Scottish social theologians—Flint, MacLeod, Bruce and Matheson in their paradigms of a Kingdom of God and particularly Watson's Pauline interpretation of a communion of saints—Robertson perceived a model for society based on a mutually supportive community of members who were motivated by social duty and justice for fellow individuals under the fatherhood of God as expressed through the relational and social model of the Trinity with Christ and the Holy Spirit. Robertson's interpretation, however, went beyond conventional christian interpretations of the Free Church in his inclusion of devotees of 'protestant' hindu devotionalism or *bhakti*.

He believed that believers, like Mahars, also expressed the ethical principles of a devotional religion, but yearned for a liberation from the super-imposed hindu ritual law of *karma*, which could be achieved by membership of a protestant christian communion of saints and Kingdom of God.

The philosophical framework which Robertson used to conceptualise a communion of saints in general and by extension a Mahar communion of saints in particular also extended the radical outlook of contemporary Scottish social theology by drawing eclectically on a range of European and American philosophical sources, most notably British and American Idealist philosophy of his time. While he agreed with Harold Mann in terms of investigative research and his critique of colonial/Orientalist stereotypes in terms of race and caste, he rejected Mann's secular and agnostic empiricism, which he saw as understated in ethical terms, and argued for an Idealist and theistic underpinning for his experimental application of Scottish social theology to India. Drawing in particular on the pluralist Idealism of James Ward and George Howison, Robertson argued eclectically for 'an in-dwelling life and mind' which invested society with its changing worth. Society was a structured conglomerate the interaction of whose constituent social elements generated a reality and consciousness that existed independently of itself and was explained by mutable natural laws and finite human generalisations that were determined by the evolution of the habitual behaviour of its constituent social elements. In line with Ward and Howison, Robertson also argued that such a philosophy of interacting constituent elements as the basis for the generation of consciousness could not be sustained in its evolutionary progress without the spiritual direction provided by a supreme theistic agent. Many individual and interactive minds contributed to the evolution of a universal form of consciousness, which simultaneously limited but progressively realised the will of God and thereby rendered the naturalist or materialist explanation of Mann restrictive in its interpretation of human life.

Thus it might be said with Donald Smith, Johnston McKay, S. J. Brown and Callum Brown that the earlier nineteenth-century conservative and moralistic missionary outlook of Chalmers's legacy turned into newer prophetic and proto-socialist forms of social theology by the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.[153] This was not however a change solely initiated in Scotland. In fact the missionary experiences and experimental theological analyses of United Free Church missionaries like Robertson in colonial peripheries like India, played an important role in driving forward new forms of Scottish social theology by the end of the Victorian and in the

[153] Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 248–57; McKay, *The Kirk and the Kingdom*, 65–83; Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland*, 97–117; Brown, 'Reform, Reconstruction and Reaction', 489–517.

Edwardian periods. In India, the ideal of a communion of saints and the vision of a Kingdom of God was projected as a socially equal, pluralist, and religiously rooted community based on Evangelical churches working with the colonial state in pursuit of christian material and moral values. It was however an inclusive inter-religious communion of saints and Kingdom of God which contentiously did not recognise or at least down-played boundaries between protestant hindu and christian religions as a *modus vivendi* for conversion. Although colonial officials like Harold Mann contributed much developmental work for the improvement of the Mahar poor in western India and Robertson concurred with him in his criticisms of the racial and Orientalist stereotypes of British colonial India, Robertson's Scottish social theology promoted radical ideals which the British colonial administration generally did not share.[154] It was Scottish Free Church missionaries, like Robertson in western India, who stood in the vanguard with Dalit leaders for socio-religious mobilisation of the rural working poor like Mahars against poverty and exploitation using a legacy of Chalmers's investigative methods and the liberational development in spiritual and material terms of a protestant christian communion of saints within a christian Kingdom of God. Such missionary and theological views as those of Robertson not only stood in radical contrast to the secular reformism of the British colonial administration of which Mann was a progressive example, but they were more radical than most Free Church social theologians at home in Scotland, and also stood in stark contrast to the popular, middle-class Orientalist critiques of non-christian religions and ethnicities which were prevalent in Free Church domestic literature and Scottish church congregations at large.

In the final analysis, this radical Scottish missionary sense of empire in India cannot be described solely in terms of the uni-directional imposition of 'metropolitan' Scottish socio-religious ideas and practices on societies like India and/or recognition of India as an 'other' against which to counter-define domestic Scottish society, economy and nationhood. A Scottish sense of empire must be understood in terms of the Scottish-Indian forms (in this case the socio-religious radicalism of Robertson in India) which emerged from the cultural interaction of these two imperial peripheries, while also interacting with and defining itself in relation to the values (such as those of Mann) produced by the English-Indian colonial encounter. This interactive Scottish engagement with empire is represented in Robertson's theological and philosophical experiment with hindu devotional religious forms and ethical (rather than ritual) morality among the Mahar labouring caste of western India as a means of developing and radicalising his own and

[154] For example, see British colonial promotion of secular moral education: E. E. MacDonald, 'English education and social reform in late nineteenth-century Bombay', *Journal of Asian Studies* 25 (1966), 453–70; Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (London, 1989).

United Free Church social theology. This was an interactive engagement with empire which simultaneously exported Scottish socio-economic paradigms of reform to western India and in turn modified them and re-imported Indian experience, experiment and missionary re-workings back to Scotland in the hope of informing debate and practice there. A Scottish sense of empire and nationhood should therefore be perceived to emerge as a dynamic expression of a nexus of interrelating peripheries and the cross-cultural exchanges to which their interactions gave rise. The 'British' empire too must be seen as a composite construct or conglomerate empire that was determined by such multiple interchanges between networks of its interactive 'peripheries' and their sense of empire (Scottish and Indian, as well as American and African), among which the 'metropolitan' identity or centric authority of British imperial thought and practice was important, but as the radicalism of Scottish presbyterian missionaries like Robertson in western India shows, often overstated.