

Imperial Critics: Moravian Missionaries in the British Colonial World

Felicity Jensz

In the age of imperial Britain, when British flags were raised in foreign lands all over the globe, missionaries – including German-speaking Moravian missionaries – were aiding the British colonisers by ‘civilising and Christianising’ the ‘native heathen’ in the British domains. The writings of missionaries often provide an alternative reading to narratives written by colonial employees. As interlopers in a foreign environment, with foreign languages, laws and customs to navigate – those both of the coloniser and the colonised – missionaries’ writings provide an insight into the frameworks of the colonial Governments amongst which they worked. Furthermore, the German-speaking Moravian missionaries examined here provide material for a comparative analysis of common issues they faced in various locations across their global mission. This chapter will examine some of the writings the Moravian missionaries in the British colony of Victoria and concentrate on the writings of one Moravian missionary of importance in colonial politics, Br F.A. Hagenauer. Drawing on the Australian material, this chapter argues that Moravian identity forged in Germany was of great importance to the missionaries, even if their life’s work was within a British-colonial environment. The chapter concludes that the major tenets of self-identification for the missionaries were their Moravian faith combined with their German identity, and it was through these prisms that they critiqued the colonial structures within which they worked.

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IMPERIAL CRITICS: MORAVIAN MISSIONARIES IN THE BRITISH COLONIAL WORLD

Felicity Jensz

In 1866, the Moravian missionary the Reverend Freidrich August Hagenauer, who worked at the Ramahyuck mission station in Victoria, wrote to the administrative body of the Moravian Church in Germany:

You dear Brothers in dear Bethelsdorf are probably thinking, 'there was no end to committees in Australia, and that they grow like mushrooms'. Indeed the whole entangled affair should soon be clear to us ... and in the meantime we must, of course, intimately follow the whole committee plan.¹

Hagenauer's comments reflect the fact that the Moravian Church instructed its missionaries to follow the laws and directions of the governments under which they worked. They also highlight the difficulties that missionaries often encountered when dealing with colonial governments. In the age of imperial Britain, when British flags were raised in foreign lands all over the globe, missionaries – including German-speaking Moravian missionaries – were aiding the British colonisers by 'civilising and Christianising' the 'native heathen' in the British domains. The writings of missionaries often provide an alternative reading to narratives written by colonial employees. As interlopers in a foreign environment, with foreign languages, laws and customs to navigate – those both of the coloniser and the colonised – missionaries' writings provide an insight into the frameworks of the colonial Governments amongst which they worked.

Furthermore, the German-speaking Moravian missionaries examined here provide material for a comparative analysis of common issues they faced in various locations across their global mission. This chapter will particularly examine some of the writings of Hagenauer, as well as other Moravian missionaries stationed in Victoria. Drawing on the Australian material, the paper provides evidence that Moravian identity forged in Germany was of great importance to the missionaries, even if their life's work was within a British-colonial environment. The chapter suggests that the major tenets of self-identification for the missionaries were their Moravian faith combined with their German identity, and it was through these prisms that they critiqued the colonial structures within which they worked. This is especially so for the Moravian missionaries' contributions towards the so-called 'Half-Caste' Act of 1886, which bore the full name of *An Act to amend an Act intituled*

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[sic] *'An Act to provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria'* (No. DCCCCXII), which passed through Parliament in December 1886. This Act was to have a profoundly devastating effect on Aboriginal people.

Throughout the world, the relationship between colonialism and the Christian missionary was a complex one. This is a matter which Jane Samson has noted in her caution to historians of missions not to 'marginalize human spirituality and the role of religious belief in influencing attitudes and actions'.² By contemplating how the belief systems of the missionaries impacted upon their work within colonial frameworks, the relationship between missionaries and the state can begin to be disentangled. Within the nineteenth-century colonial period there were differences between colonial officers, traders, settlers, and missionaries, and these groups cannot be unambiguously lumped together. Andrew Porter has noted that missionaries often 'saw themselves much of the times as "anti-imperialist"', and their relationship with empire as deeply ambiguous at best.³ Relationships between imperialism, colonialism, and the Christian missionary outreach were just as complex as those between different groups within the colonial world mentioned above. In spite of the complex nexus between imperialism and Christianity, there were common aims held by both government and missionaries, such as the 'civilization' and control of the 'native'. The rationales behind these aims, however, were often based on different assumptions. Thus, to understand the motives for the missionaries in entering into Aboriginal affairs, their cultural heritage, relationships with government, and above all, their faith in providence, must be considered. Yet, there were also differences between various missionary organisations. The historian Timothy Keegan has broadly argued that there existed a fundamental difference between British and German missionaries, with British missionaries more likely to mirror the contemporary discourses of imperialism in matters such as race, whereas German Moravian missionaries, distanced from imperialism, were more inclined to relegate decisions to providence.⁴ For example, British missionaries were more likely to ascribe social Darwinian aspects to ethnographic descriptions of 'heathen' people who had failed to convert to Christianity, whereas Moravian missionaries were more inclined to ascribe events to providence, such that it was not yet God's will.⁵

Such differences between missionary organisations are steeped in history, and the self-perceptions of the Churches. The Moravians saw themselves as a Missionary Church. The Church had been re-established in the early eighteenth century from a group of religious refugees who were remnants of a group of followers of the sixteenth-century martyr Jan Hus.⁶ These refugees settled in eastern Germany on the estate of Count Nikolas von Zinzendorf, who had been inspired by the Halle Pietist movement. Zinzendorf took a great interest in the religious refugees who appeared on his estate, and helped to re-establish the ancient Church to which they belonged, impressing upon it his belief in personal piety and a simplistic belief in God. The German Pietist movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries itself changed the focus of Lutheranism from ritual and church government to personal piety.⁷ In helping to reform the Church, Zinzendorf imparted many of his own belief systems on the newly reformed Brüder-Unität, which was known as the 'Moravian Church' in the English speaking world.⁸ They were deeply inspired by the Pietist tradition of

profound personal devotion, and as evangelical missionaries had a great impact on the English evangelical revival, and also influenced John Wesley, and thus the establishment of the Methodist Church.⁹

Soon after their re-establishment in Germany, the Moravians began to send out missionaries. The first two missionaries were sent to work amongst the African slaves of the Danish West Indies in 1732. This was the beginning of a long missionary tradition, which touched almost all continents. Moravian missionary activities expanded to many places over the globe and they made it their goal to go to the most remote and, as Europeans termed it, most difficult of missionary fields. The Moravian Church soon became known as a missionary church, insofar as a large minority of their membership became missionaries, and almost everyone within the Church contributed in some form to the missionary movement. The proportion of missionaries within the Church was extraordinarily high, at one in sixty (for the rest of Protestant world the proportion was around one in five thousand).¹⁰

The Church was very focused on the incorporation of all members into supporting its large mission field, as they needed both financial support and personnel to sustain the missions. The Moravian Church saw itself as a missionary church intent on sending out missionaries to heathen peoples around the world, especially those judged to be 'the lowest of the low'.¹¹ Over the decades, the Moravians gained a reputation for being successful missionaries through their substantial missionary activity, with many 'heathen' converting to the Christian faith, and many Christian communities formed. The Church was not afraid, according to the mission historian Stephen Neill, to send out missionaries to the 'most remote, unfavourable, and neglected parts of the surface of the earth', including mission fields where other denominations had failed.¹²

By the end of the nineteenth century, there were over ninety Moravian mission stations in fifteen mission districts around the globe.¹³ Although the main seat of the Moravian Church was in Germany, there were a number of Moravians in England and also the Americas, with these areas forming their own provinces. However, the general direction of the Church, and control of missionary activities, came through the German-based Missionsdepartement.¹⁴ The Moravians' mission stations included those in the colonies of Victoria, South Australia, and Queensland, as well as Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Asia, in areas controlled by the Danish, English, Russians, Americans, and Dutch. Working under so many various governing bodies allowed the Moravians to compare the colonial rules of different countries, and Hagenauer's comments provide a glimpse into how Australia fared comparatively, as expanded upon below.

With so many missionaries scattered across the globe, the Moravian administration kept abreast of developments through prolific communications sent to and from the mission fields. The Moravians also regulated relationships through various instructions applicable to different situations, including booklets of instructions to be used by missionaries in the field, booklets of general regulations with regard to the temporal position of the missionaries, and booklets of instructions for congregational members in different lands.

It took some fifty years after the first missionaries had been sent out for the missionary instructions to be published. In 1782, the first German-language edition appeared, with a second and updated German version printed in 1837. English-language versions (*Instructions for the Members of the Unitas Fratrum, who Minister in the Gospel among the Heathen*) appeared in 1784 and 1840. The booklet of instructions was a template for how missions should be established and conducted across the globe, with the generic instructions expected to be applicable to all situations and peoples. Such expectations were obviously unrealistic given the multitude of different peoples with different religious and cultural heritages amongst whom they worked, and also the various colonial regimes under which they lived.

The booklet of Instructions consisted of advice including: preparation in becoming a missionary (§9), establishing schools for the children (§39), writing detailed accounts for the missionary board (§54), why not to tempt converts away from other missionary societies (§59), and how to behave amongst 'heathen' of the opposite sex (§41). It also advised the missionaries on how to interact with the government:

[§61] The Brethren ... demean themselves as loyal and obedient subjects, and strive to act in such a manner, under the difficult relations in which they are often placed, as may evince, that they have no desire to intermeddle with the politics of the country in which they labour, but are solely intent on the fulfilment of their official duties.¹⁵

This was a particularly important instruction, for, as the Moravian historian J.C.S. Mason argues, the Moravian church's development during the latter part of the eighteenth century was 'highly dependent on the attitude of governments and officials who needed to be satisfied that Moravians were neither sectarian at home nor seditious overseas'.¹⁶ Mason further argues that: 'In order to be as amenable to local situations as possible, they stated their objectives in inter-confessional terms, and their members were taught to hold the laws of whatever land they were in profound respect.'¹⁷

Sometimes, however, local governments did not hold the Moravians, or any other missionary society, in great respect. For example, in 1823 Governor Gass of Ohio reclaimed land that the Moravians had used for missionary purposes, demonstrating his desire to give primacy to commercial farming over mission stations in his statement that, 'this valuable land will before long be brought into market'.¹⁸ Five years later, in the state of Georgia, a similar situation occurred, demonstrating the government's disrespect of missionaries and their use of land for missionary purposes. The shift in attitude resulted from the fact that European settlers coveted Cherokee land, and with the government's backing were able to lay claim to it. The Cherokee were seen as 'savages' not 'able to meet the standards required for equal citizenship'.¹⁹ Laws were passed in Georgia that took away all native title, abolished tribal government, and denied the Cherokee the right to testify in court – much the same treatment Australian Aborigines were subjected to under colonial rule.²⁰ The Cherokee were effectively turned into second-class citizens. This governmental stance was a difficult one for the missionaries to respond to. As Moravians were in-

structed not to meddle in state politics (Instructions, §61, 1837), they turned to their own governing body for further instructions, which, in turn, told them to vacate the mission field if they could not pursue missionary labours peacefully. They complied.²¹

Conversely, where governments did support missionary fields, they were often seen to be successful. For example, the British government's support of the Moravian mission to the Inuit resulted in effective and successful missions in both far North America as well as in Greenland. Moreover, in Labrador the Moravian success was seen to be due to the British government's support for the mission, as a way to secure the landmass for the British crown; the inhospitable landscape also deterred any competing interests for the land.²² The success of the Labrador mission stations was aided by the fact that they had exclusive, crown-granted trading rights on the lands surrounding their mission stations.²³

Another example of the symbiotic relationship between Moravians and colonial government was the South African mission field where the Moravians were invited to establish a mission by the Acting Governor in the 1820s. As they were well aware of their 'status as aliens on sufferance in a British colony', they acted in a deferential and politically conservative way, winning them the support of the Government in the early nineteenth century to expand their missionary activity.²⁴

In relation to the Australian mission field, the Moravians had responded to a request in 1841 to send missionaries to colonial Victoria, which had come through the Secretary of the British arm of the Church, Brother Peter La Trobe, who himself was brother of the first Lieutenant Governor of the Colony of Victoria, Charles Joseph.²⁵ Peter La Trobe put forward three reasons as to why a mission field should be established in Australia. The first was that it was the Church's desire to bring the word of God to such 'poor, despised creatures, who are on the lowest level', a statement reflecting the Church's self-perception.²⁶ The second reason was that current opinion amongst the English, and even of the Archbishop of Dublin, was that only the Moravian Church could be successful amongst the 'degraded' Aborigines.²⁷ The third reason was that:

so many favourable conditions for the Mission concern come together and that is; that the Colonial government in England and besides from that, 3 of the 4 Colonial Governors of [Australia] are completely interested and they are using their influence.²⁸

Thus, the three reasons related to internal perceptions, external perceptions, and perceived material and governmental support. After much discussion and time, two Moravian missionaries arrived in Australia in 1850 to establish a station that they named Lake Boga, almost ten years after La Trobe's initial suggestion. The mission closed in 1856, without converting a single Aborigine to Christianity, with the failure being blamed by both the missionaries and their supporters in Australia on the government's lack of support.²⁹

This was not the only instance of Moravian criticism being levelled at the government of the Australian colonies. In 1882, the German Moravian historian H.G.

Schneider in his book on the Moravian mission work in Australia wrote critically of English colonial rule:

England came into the possession of the continent of Australia in a very cheap way. Cook travelled there and declared it property of the English crown; with that it belonged to the same. That he did not ask the male Papus [Aborigines] their opinion, or their agreement, one will not find astonishing. In any case no other country would have considered to do the same, if they were in possession of the power which England had. One is also not allowed to trust in any of our modern states, such ... charity, that he for the sake of the unhappy, heathen Aborigines wishes to take on the colonisation of strange lands, and it is indeed the civilisation and order, which a Christian state carries along, is a blessing for heathen tribes, which tear each other to pieces and eat each other. We want, however, to keep it a little in mind, that the Papus were the actual masters and owners of New Holland, and that the land was taken from them by the white strangers, and not bought, as happened to the Indians of America from the first settlers.³⁰

Schneider viewed English acts of colonisation as more devastating than those of other colonial powers. This was despite many other atrocities that European powers committed towards Indigenous peoples across the globe – the Spanish in Mexico being only one bloody example – and the fact that Germany's own oppressive colonial history had not yet been fully played out.³¹ Schneider also deems Indigenous peoples in need of Christianisation, and thus assumes their own spiritual beliefs to be inferior to European Christian beliefs. Furthermore, Schneider states that Australian Aborigines were treated worse than other Indigenous peoples, such as Indigenous North Americans, despite the Moravian's own negative attitudes within that country. Thus, not only Moravian missionaries, but the Church's official historians found occasion to contradict the Church's general stance through criticising colonial governments.

After the Lake Boga failure, the Moravians returned to Australia in 1859 to establish the Ebenezer Mission Station in the north-west of Victoria, followed by the Ramahyuck Mission Station in 1862. Although they had lost confidence in the colonial government, they nevertheless needed to work within the confines of governmental regulations as directed by their Instructions. The missionaries were, however, free to raise criticisms of the government in letters back to Germany.

One aspect of government policy that the missionaries particularly complained about was the 'un-Christian' stance of the government in relation to Aboriginal affairs. This became more apparent in the later years of the mission stations, when the Moravian missionaries compared their work and success in converting Aborigines to Christianity on the missions with the work in the cultivation of souls on the government reserves. In the eyes of the Moravian missionaries, and particularly in the eyes of Hagenauer, the government stations were inadequate in teaching the Christian word. He argued that 'there should be only Mission Stations in the colony,' as

they 'had been far better managed than the Government Station, and had cost nothing to the state', and that Christianity much better served Aborigines than the government.³²

Hagenauer himself was drawn into the politics of other Christian denominations in Victoria as he became an employee of the Presbyterian Church, which conferred on him 'the full status of a minister of [the] Church' in 1869.³³ In accepting the appointment, however, he made it clear to the Moravian Elders that he only did so to further his missionary work, and that '*er wollt nur der Brüderkirche angehören, u. sie nicht verlassen*' (he wanted only to belong to the Moravian Church, and not to leave them), demonstrating his strong commitment to the Moravian faith.³⁴ His association with the Presbyterian Church was in line with the Moravian Church seeing themselves as the 'handmaid of the other larger Churches',³⁵ which also supports Porter's notion that 'missionaries viewed their world first of all with the eyes of faith and then through theological lenses'.³⁶ In 1871, Hagenauer was further honoured by the Church of England through becoming the Superintendent of their Aboriginal Mission Station at Lake Tyers. He commented to the Missionsdepartement that this was 'proof of the appreciation and love that the Church of England has towards the dear Moravian Church', deferring any personal recognition on his behalf.³⁷ Through these contacts, he became responsible to the administrative bodies of both the Presbyterian Church and the Church of England, as well as to the government through the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines (BPA). Through all this, however, he remained beholden to the Moravian Church's administrative bodies, and, through his fervent beliefs, ultimately to God.

The BPA itself was formed in 1869 through an Act of Parliament, with the Chief Secretary of Victoria as its Chairman.³⁸ It was the government's third attempt at finding a suitable body for the administration of Indigenous affairs. After the first attempt - the Protectorate System (1838-48) - had failed, the government retreated from running Aboriginal stations, and invited missionaries to fill the role. Yet even in exiting from the groundwork, the government maintained firm control over the administration and funding of mission stations. In 1860, a second body to administer Indigenous affairs, in the form of the Central Board to Watch Over the Interests of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria (Central Board), was established after much public pressure and concern for the surviving Aborigines of the colony.³⁹

The Central Board, in its 'benevolence', suggested to Parliament that Aborigines should 'be confined as closely as possible to reserves; and, for their better management and control, that the Act relating to the Aborigines should be amended giving to Your Excellency full power to order as to their residence and maintenance'.⁴⁰ Thus, the government's stance on Aboriginal affairs was explicitly about 'management and control' of Aborigines and, within Victoria, religious organisations saw the government as being 'indifferent' to Aboriginal affairs.⁴¹

By the 1880s, however, it was firm Christian beliefs above and beyond politics which led Hagenauer to sanction the government's controversial 'Half-Caste' Act of 1886. This Act resulted in Aboriginal people being classified in racial terms. Those of mixed-decent under the age of 35 were ejected from mission and government stations, and had their access to rations curtailed over a seven-year period, after which

they were completely stopped. These actions broke up Indigenous families and forced many into abject poverty.

For Hagenauer, the more pressing pragmatic question that the 1886 Act dealt with was that of what to do once all the 'full Blacks' had died, and the healthy, strong, educated 'half-castes' were left living on the mission stations. It became a question of logistics and funding, rather than pontificating about the consequences of the Act. Once the Act had been approved he lamented that, although he had done his best for the 'half-castes', he was sceptical of the Government's ability to deal with the question, and thought it 'would probably be put to the side'.⁴²

Hagenauer not only sanctioned the Act, but claimed to the Presbyterian Church in Victoria that he was asked to submit to the BPA a 'plea how these people would be dealt with justly and kindly', and that he made 'out the plan, like one used before in South America', which 'was adopted by the Board with very few omissions'.⁴³ He was subsequently appointed to the BPA as their General Inspector and Secretary. Thus, Hagenauer became part of the colonial government, which he was often fond of criticising. However, to his administration in Germany, he diminished his own input into the Act by deferring responsibility onto God, believing that if God pleased, God would do the best for the 'poor people' - thus underscoring his belief in providence above all else.⁴⁴

Within the global Moravian context, the uniqueness of the Victorian situation lay in the fact that the missionaries found themselves compelled to work within a secular capacity under the mushrooming committees. This was, on the surface, at odds with the history and practices of the Church. Furthermore, their responses to this situation had resounding consequences for the control of Indigenous affairs in colonial Australia far beyond the borders of a single mission organisation. Despite Hagenauer's movement into secular administration and the development of policy for Indigenous affairs, his religious world-view remained the dominant paradigm that guided and shaped all aspects of his life, including his approaches to the control of Aboriginal secular affairs.

Hagenauer had been acculturated into the Victorian colonial scene more than his contemporaries, and this affected the ways in which he interacted with the colonial government, as well as his input into secular affairs. Following the protocols of the Church, his wife was a Moravian and followed him in his religious beliefs. Hagenauer, however, did not send his children back to Germany, but sent his boys to be educated at the Presbyterian Scotch College, and his daughters to the (Presbyterian) Ladies College in Melbourne, thus entangling himself within colonial society much more than most Moravian missionaries.⁴⁵ By the end of the nineteenth century, from being a 'stranger in a strange land', he had become intimately connected with many influential people, as well as closely involved in Indigenous affairs. His role on governmental boards may have contradicted the Instructions, but it also reflected his desire that a religious voice should be heard in relation to Indigenous affairs.

As the Moravian representative in Australia, as the Secretary and General Inspector of the BPA, as the sole missionary at Ramahyuck, and as the Superintendent of the Lake Tyers Mission station, he reported to the Missionsdepartement, the UAC, the BPA, the Presbyterian Church, the Church of England, and various other boards

and committees. In all of his roles, however, he believed that he served God by looking after the welfare of Indigenous peoples, whether spiritual or secular, and thus fulfilled his duty as a servant of God and missionary to mankind. With his unflinching belief in God and Christian morality, he believed that his own work had been very successful. In 1884, he stated that of the three hundred 'heathen' who had been in the area when he arrived, all but sixteen were Christians, and even some of these were under Christian instruction.⁴⁶

Hagenauer approached the 'Half-Caste' Act with predominantly spiritual outcomes in mind. He conceded to headquarters, when writing about the beginning of the end of the Victorian mission stations, that 'to speak about it in human terms, it almost seems as God does whatever pleases him'.⁴⁷ He thereby deflected attention from his own agency in shaping a draconian and destructive piece of legislation by attributing it to God, whose attested omnipotence rendered redundant the powers of mortal believers. As a mortal believer, Hagenauer saw himself as nothing other than an instrument of God; he therefore could not conceive of the destructive consequences of his actions for the people affected by the 1886 Act. His negative attitude towards the government was one which the Moravian Church itself had held since the beginning of the mission work in Australia, when it believed that not enough was being done for these 'depraved' people. In his own eyes, Hagenauer did everything he could for the 'poor people', including becoming a member of a church other than his own so that he could further his missionary work. He also stated however, that 'he wanted only to belong to the Moravian Church, and not to leave them' demonstrating his attachment to the Moravian ideals forged from the Pietist Halle tradition in Germany.

Hagenauer's situation reflects the difficulties that missionaries faced. As men and women with devout faith and strong attachment to the Church, they were party to the Moravian Church's grand narrative of how a mission should be established, and how missionaries should behave. Yet, once in the field, the missionaries had to grapple with situations outside the realms of Moravian experience. Even in such novel situations, however, they perceived themselves as little other than servants of God, intent on collecting souls for Christ. Thus, the religious world-view of the Moravians, which itself was formed through German religious history, was the defining aspect of Moravian missionaries' lives. Within Australia, Hagenauer's own attachment to the Moravian Church profoundly influenced his work in colonial politics and thereby the ways by which Aboriginal secular affairs were controlled. Above and beyond politics however, Hagenauer's belief in providence reigned supreme, and it was this lens through which he viewed and measured the colonial government. Although many contemporaries of Hagenauer saw the government as inadequate, he saw their inadequacies as spiritual not secular concerns, thus reflecting his German based Moravian heritage and strong belief in God rather than his contemporary geo-political status.

Endnotes

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