
**Providence, prayer and empire: Special worship in the British
world, 1783-1919**

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1: Calls to prayer

I. Focus

This subject is large and complex, and there is a need to define a start and end point for the study, as well as geographical focus. Special worship is itself a complicated phenomenon and requires explanation, as such acts took different forms and performed various functions. The acts of worship studied in this book were 'special' in the sense that they were exceptional responses to sudden emergencies, like internal rebellions, or welcome deliverances, such as the cessation of disease. The important point is that acts of special worship stood outside the rhythm of the yearly calendar and represented a departure from regular church services and, in the case of some religious denominations, from the forms of worship prescribed in prayer books. The book is primarily interested in 'national' occasions appointed by the highest authorities in church and state for observance by the whole community, in all parts of a colonial territory.ⁱ These general comments only partly capture the rich diversity of the numerous different types of occasion appointed by authorities in Britain and the colonies. Arrangements for the appointment of acts of special worship, debates over the selection of appropriate causes and the evolution of new styles of special worship are considered in chapter one.

Another issue that enlarges the subject is that calls to prayer elicited responses from a wide range of faith groups. All the Christian churches – as well as Jewish communities – accepted the doctrines and rationale that underlay special occasions of worship. The example of Old Testament Israel was the source of the idea that God intervened in the human and natural worlds through unusual and direct 'special providences', and that it was incumbent on individuals to join together as a moral community to implore God's protection, or to give thanks for blessings received. The notion that far-reaching calamities, such as war and pestilence, represented divine punishments for the 'general' or 'accumulated' sins of national communities was one shared by all the main Christian churches, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic.ⁱⁱ

While there was a common basis for special worship, not every church responded to state orders in the same way: styles of worship varied, churches had differing views on whether states

should order worship, and some denominations had strong traditions of independent action. For a time in the early nineteenth century the two churches that enjoyed 'established' status in the British Isles – the United Church of England and Ireland and the Church of Scotland – occupied special roles in corporate worship in the colonies. Privileged colonial establishments did not, however, last long in the colonial world: the balances between denominations in overseas territories often differed markedly from those found in the British Isles, and nowhere did the established churches have the numerical dominance that they did in England and Scotland.ⁱⁱⁱ A striking feature of colonial worship is that churches that occupied marginal presences in the British Isles helped shape distinctive styles of special worship in Britain's overseas territories. Many church traditions of special worship migrated overseas, and the customs that flourished were usually those that best reflected the demography of that part of the empire (there was the occasional exception to this rule, such as Nova Scotia). This book describes and explains these differences between the main Christian and Jewish communities in detail. But it also recognises that for many of the empire's inhabitants, such as the forty-nine percent of the Cape Colony public that the 1891 census recorded as 'no religion' (most were people of African descent),^{iv} Christian calls to prayer were alien and could be ignored.

The empire was of course very big and made up of a variety of Crown colonies, settler territories, dominions and zones of informal influence. Each developed traditions of special worship that persist to the present, though in places where Europeans formed a minority of the population, such as the Indian 'presidencies' and the Caribbean colonies, occasions tended to be imposed on populations by governors and councils. Dramatic natural calamities, such as hurricanes, were the main cause of special worship in the British West Indies, and from the 1790s governors in the East India Company's territories appointed thanksgivings for victories in wars against Indian states.^v This book concentrates on the colonies of British settlement in the 'second', post-American Revolution, empire, as it was in such settler societies that the persistence of state-appointed acts of national worship and special prayer was most noticeable. These societies also regularly observed occasions communicated from the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in the British Isles. (Though further research might present

a different picture, the West Indian colonies seem to have observed British occasions of special worship very fitfully, possibly because the abolition of slavery in 1834 nurtured feelings of anger and betrayal among white planters.)^{vi} Another striking feature of the settler colonies is that the pressure for the appointment of special acts of worship often came from the general public. A key question asked in this book is why occasions with British Protestant origins in the sixteenth century became numerous in the democratic, pluralistic and oftentimes secularised conditions found in settler societies.

More specifically, the book focuses on the traditions of special worship that developed in Canada, Australia and South Africa from the late eighteenth century to the Great War. 'Canada', 'Australia' and 'South Africa' are anachronistic terms, and until the formation of confederations, commonwealths and unions in 1867 (Canada), 1901 (Australia) and 1910 (South Africa), there was a multiplicity of independent colonies in each region. These settler societies had common features that make comparisons worthwhile. Each region had histories of rapid, invasive and violent settlement that resulted in the dispossession of indigenous peoples. The inhabitants of southern Africa and south-eastern Australia contended with arid soils and frequent and contemporaneous droughts – some of them resulting from the same recurring climate pattern of global heating and cooling known today as the 'El Niño-Southern Oscillation'.^{vii} The appointment of special acts of worship remained a conventional response to collective trauma and celebration across the three regions (the appendix lists the occasions appointed by state authorities to give a sense of frequency and pattern). That said, special worship took different forms in different contexts. The relatively benign environment faced by nineteenth-century North American colonists, and the lack of what one scholar calls 'a common and unifying traumatic experience',^{viii} meant that Canadian special worship, which largely revolved around yearly thanksgivings for good harvests, had an optimistic and positive character, one that reflected the Canadian belief that their cold climate was virtuous and the west was uniquely favoured.^{ix}

A principal reason why the Canadian, Australian and South African colonies require study is that they had rich histories of state-appointed special worship. Indeed, it is striking that governments

in these regions continued to appoint and encourage acts of worship much more often than the British state. In the United Kingdom after 1860 the Crown authorities largely ceased to issue formal orders for special days of prayer, save for occasional monarchical thanksgivings and one, unique, day of thanksgiving after the Great War. This significant development had many causes, but important was what Philip Williamson calls the ‘increased political sensitivity’ shown towards religious pluralism. As the electorate grew in size and diversity, as parliament was opened to non-Anglicans and as liberal attitudes spread, so the state authorities adopted neutral positions, and withdrew from events – such as orders for national prayers – that might generate ‘friction’ between religious groups.^x Though new forms of national worship would emerge in the twentieth century, the implications of the state’s withdrawal from special worship were huge, not least because it undermined the traditional idea that the nation existed as a corporate moral entity.^{xi}

A contrary set of processes played out in those parts of the colonial world studied in this book. Democracy and political recognition of religious diversity began earlier in the settler colonies than in the British Isles, but in many colonies, governors, as the representatives of royal authority, continued to call colonial communities to prayer through an old style of royal proclamation. Furthermore, liberalisation in the colonies strengthened the idea that colonial communities might be regarded as moral unities and as spiritual communities that possessed what historians call a ‘national conscience’.^{xii} This book charts the fortunes of this ‘national conscience’ idea in the colonial world. There was, it is true, much debate about whether particular ecclesiastical or state institutions could provide religious leadership or express this colonial conscience, and rarely did the national conscience represent or reflect the interests and views of marginalised, persecuted and indigenous peoples.

Another reason for comparing special worship in the three settler societies is that traditional styles of worship that disappeared in Britain thrived in the colonial world. Acts of collective contrition – contemporaries called such occasions days of ‘fasting’ and (from the 1850s) ‘humiliation’ – had been common in the British Isles as they sat well with the sense of crisis, unease and insecurity that

characterised pre-1850 British culture. However, such occasions appeared old-fashioned in the more optimistic and imperialistic climate of later century.^{xiii} Crises caused by 'natural' events – such as epidemics and failed harvests – would be best resolved through scientific remedies, rather than by united and public prayers ordered or organised by states.^{xiv} By contrast, social, political and environmental disturbances frequently threatened colonial territories, particularly those in Australia and South Africa, and the feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability and insecurity engendered by these crises might explain why providential explanations for these natural causes still had power and appeal, and why governments and churches in southern Africa and Australia continued to set aside days of contrition for regional causes, such as drought and disease. This book, then, explains why traditional forms of special worship, reinvented to suit new conditions, proliferated in many colonial societies. The continued use of the royal proclamation to summon people to prayer had much to do with the appeal of monarchy in the colonial context. And the idea of spiritual community and the national conscience had purchase because many colonial elites were preoccupied with the idea of colonial unity and believed that Christianity should form the bedrock of settler societies: new territories required 'national' ideas, symbols and events around which the population could gather.

A final reason for selecting these regions is that they reveal how far collective worship encompassed and engaged diverse communities of Dutch Afrikaners, Catholic Irish and French Canadians, among others. The settler presence in the two British southern African colonies included large communities of Dutch descent, and in parts of British North America – most notably Quebec, but also parts of Maritime Canada and Newfoundland – French-speakers predominated. Australian colonies were less cosmopolitan and more ethnically homogenous than African and American societies, though the arrival of Asian and southern European migrants after 1850 diversified the settler presence. The focus on the three regions also allows consideration of observances among varied indigenous communities, as well as Chinese and Jewish populations. As was the case with marginalised communities in the British Isles, those who encountered discrimination and suffered at the hands of

white settler society found opportunities in special occasions of worship to express a sense of loyalty, as well as to make demands.

New Zealand, another important component of the empire of white settlement, is not considered, even though the colony is not easily separated from the Australian context. Special acts of thanksgiving and fasting in one New Zealand province have been well-studied.^{xv} New Zealand was also a special case in the history of colonial special worship. Colonial and provincial governments in the region routinely proclaimed repeats of British events, and its churches often appointed occasions for their members, most notably after good harvests. Yet in contrast to the other colonies of British settlement, its civil authorities only occasionally called their populations to pray in response to local calamities and celebrations, and ceased to do so entirely after the late 1860s (a fast day, appointed in the province of New Munster in October 1848, followed the Wellington earthquake, and Otago's provincial superintendent proclaimed a 'day of humiliation' in February 1868 after a storm).^{xvi} Disasters that happened after this period, such as the droughts that harmed parts of North Otago in the 1890s and early 1900s, prompted special acts of worship, but churches, not governments, appointed these. The strongly voluntary and church-led character of special worship in New Zealand had much to do with the powerful Scottish and Presbyterian influences in the region, though New Zealand governments may also have followed the British example, and avoided special worship for political reasons, particularly a desire to minimise the risk of religious controversies.^{xvii}

Identifying a start date is easier than determining when to end, as special worship is still very much a feature of Britain and its former colonies. The book starts and ends in periods when the sense of unity in colonial special worship was most evident. In the aftermath of the American Revolution the governors of Britain's remaining overseas territories regularly repeated special acts of worship that had earlier been observed in Britain and other parts of the empire. The end date, 1919, needs more explanation. This was one of the last moments when colonies appointed occasions that belonged to an old style of special worship. Twice that year the governor of NSW, Walter Davidson, revived a tradition of days of contrition when he set aside days so that his people could 'unite in humiliation

and prayer' and seek 'the mitigation or removal' of drought and influenza.^{xviii} In other ways 1919 pointed towards a new phase of special worship. A thanksgiving for the Versailles peace treaty proclaimed for the whole empire and held in July that year was unique, and the culmination of a long trend towards coordinated and simultaneous acts of special worship in the whole British world, including the new dominions as well as the colonies. This thanksgiving, like the days of prayer that came before it during the Great War, established a precedent for future events that embraced all the empire and all faith groups and more clearly involved the British monarch.^{xix}

The years from the 1780s to 1919 are, then, a discrete period in colonial special worship, in two divergent senses. One was the trend towards increased imperial consciousness. But the second was a growth of greater diversity. Regions and colonies developed their own traditions of special worship. The customs and traditions that emanated from the British Isles interacted with other national traditions, most notably a French one in Quebec, and a Dutch in southern Africa, to produce new and distinctively colonial forms. Special worship in Canada was, for instance, much influenced by the New England tradition of seasonal fasts and thanksgivings.^{xx} Another significant development, one that encouraged the further proliferation of special acts of worship, was that churches increasingly took responsibility for 'national' worship and appointed special days and prayers on their own authority. This, the book suggests, reveals much about the public status of institutional churches in the colonies.

ⁱ The term 'national' can confuse: the 'nation' might refer to England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain (from 1800, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland), the empire as a whole, or, as was increasingly common in the nineteenth century, individual colonies. In most cases, the terms 'colony-wide' and 'community-wide' are used in place of 'national' to capture this sense of comprehension and to avoid confusion.

ⁱⁱ F. Deconinck-Brossard, 'Acts of God, acts of men: providence in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and France', *SCH*, 41 (2005), 356-75.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ For statistics on the principal religious denominations of the settler colonies, see H. Carey, *God's Empire: religion and colonialism in the British world, c. 1801-1908* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 32-7.
- ^{iv} *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, as on the Night of Sunday, the 5th April, 1891* (Cape Town, 1892), p. 111.
- ^v *NP*, II, p. cxlvi.
- ^{vi} C. Petley, "'Devoted Islands" and "That Madman Wilberforce": British pro-slavery patriotism during the age of abolition', *JICH*, 39:3 (2011), 393-415.
- ^{vii} M. Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño famines and the making of the third world* (London, 2001).
- ^{viii} J. Bumsted, 'The cultural landscape of early Canada', in B. Bailyn and P. Morgan (eds), *Strangers within the Realm: cultural margins of the first British Empire* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991), p. 392.
- ^{ix} C. Berger, 'The True North, Strong and Free', in P. Russell (ed.), *Nationalism in Canada* (Toronto, 1966), pp. 3-26.
- ^x P. Williamson, 'State prayers, fasts and thanksgivings: public worship in Britain 1830-1897', *Past & Present*, 200:1 (2008), 163-4, 166-7.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, 160. Also, Williamson, 'National days of prayer: the churches, the state and public worship in Britain, 1899-1957', *EHR*, 128:531 (2013), 323-66, for the evolution of national acts of worship.
- ^{xii} A. Atkinson, 'How do we live with ourselves? The Australian national conscience', www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2016/185-september-2016-no-384/3531-how-do-we-live-with-ourselves-the-australian-national-conscience-by-alan-atkinson, accessed 4 August 2019. Also, M. Lake, *The Bible in Australia: a cultural history* (Sydney, 2018).

^{xiii} B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: the influence of evangelicalism on social and economic thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 182, 268; Williamson, 'State prayers', 155-6.

^{xiv} 1866 was the last time a British government authorised a national act of special worship for an event with 'natural' causes, in this case cattle disease: A. Raffe, 'Nature's scourges: the natural world and special prayers, fasts and thanksgivings, 1543-1866', *SCH*, 46 (2010), 237-47.

^{xv} A. Clarke, 'Feasts and fasts: holidays, religion and ethnicity in nineteenth-century Otago' (PhD dissertation, University of Otago, 2003); Clarke, "'With one accord rejoice on this glad day": celebrating the monarchy in nineteenth-century Otago', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 36 (2002), 137-69.

^{xvi} Clarke, 'Feasts and fasts', chapter four.

^{xvii} J. Beattie, 'Science, religion, and drought: rainmaking experiments and prayers in North Otago, 1889-1911', in J. Beattie et al. (eds), *Climate, Science, and Colonization: histories from Australia and New Zealand* (New York, NY, 2014), pp. 137-56. Clarke, 'Feasts and fasts', pp. 219, 221.

^{xviii} *Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales*, 19 February and 21 August 1919.

^{xix} *NP*, III, pp. lxvii, cxxv, cxxvii.

^{xx} W. DeLoss Love, *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Boston, MA, 1895).