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SPECIAL WORSHIP IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE:
FROM THE SEVENTEENTH TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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Across the British empire, public worship was important for sustaining a sense of community and connectedness. This was most evident in special acts of worship, when the peoples of imperial territories, and sometimes of the whole empire, were asked at times of crisis and celebration to join together in special days or prayers of petition or thanksgiving to God. These occasions, ordered by a variety of civil and ecclesiastical authorities, were an enduring feature of all colonial societies from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Although these special acts of worship have considerable potential for deepening our understanding of various themes in the history of the British empire, they have yet to receive sustained analysis from scholars. This article is concerned with the fundamental task of considering why and how special prayers and days of fasting, humiliation, intercession and thanksgiving were appointed across the empire. By focusing on the causes of, and orders for, these occasions, it indicates reasons for the longevity of this practice, as well as its varied and changing purposes.

The British empire was linked in worship. Across the overseas colonies, protectorates, dominions and in India, churches of various denominations followed the weekly patterns of worship originating from the parent churches in Britain. The links were especially evident in *special* acts of worship. From the first settlements in North America during the early

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seventeenth century to the worldwide commonwealth and empire at the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, the peoples of particular overseas territories – or more strikingly still, those of the whole empire – were asked at times of exceptional crisis or celebration to join together in prayer and praise to God. These acts of special worship took different forms. *Special prayers*, either of petition or thanksgiving, might be added to the usual church services. More often, *days of prayer* were ‘set apart’ on specified dates, for attendance at special services and sermons and for private devotions. During periods of anxiety or crisis, days of fasting, ‘humiliation’, intercession or national prayer¹ were observed to implore God’s intervention, or to seek better understanding of the divine purposes. At times of relief or celebration, days of thanksgiving were ordered to thank God for blessings received or for his guidance in the achievement of righteous aims. Until the late nineteenth century, these special days of prayer were normally ordered by governments, and were appointed for days in the middle of the week, requiring the closure of public offices and the stoppage of business and employment.

Special acts of worship might be *imperial* in one of several senses. Some special days or prayers initiated in Britain were ordered or recommended for observance throughout the empire, and later the commonwealth. Others were initiated by authorities in the overseas territories in order to associate their colonies or dominions with special worship that had been appointed in Britain, or to mark events that they regarded as having imperial significance. Councils, governors or churches in the colonies also ordered special worship for causes which were specific just to their particular region.

¹ A ‘day of humiliation’ was an alternative term for ‘fast day’, commonly used in government and church orders. The nomenclature of special days of worship changed over the centuries; for definitions, see the introductions to the three volumes of Philip Williamson, Alasdair Raffe, Natalie Mears and Stephen Taylor ., eds, *National Prayers: Special Worship since the Reformation*, Church of England Record Society 20, 22 and forthcoming (Woodbridge, 2013 onwards).

Studies of these special acts of worship have considerable potential for deepening understanding of various themes in the religious, political and cultural history of empire. They provide a register of what the authorities in colonies considered, or judged that their peoples considered, to be matters of such exceptional importance as to require, and to be remediable by, divine intervention or guidance. They reveal how notions of collective sin and God's active providence persisted well into the twentieth century. They offer new perspectives on religious authority, on relationships between civil and ecclesiastical authorities, and on relations between different churches and faith groups. Studies of special days and prayers might also draw attention to varied senses of community, and to the sense of identification that colonial peoples developed with their colonies, with new colonial nations and with the empire. They emphasize that among the elements that held together a heterogeneous empire were shared religious beliefs and emotional responses, a common monarchical culture and a language of British 'subjecthood'.²

Studies of these occasions might use a range of sources. The religious meanings that individuals attached to the great events marked by special worship can be found in devotional diaries and especially in the fast and thanksgiving sermons which have so far been the main means by which special worship has attracted historical attention.³ The proclamations that appointed days of prayer and special services, as well as the forms of prayer issued for use in

² Hannah Weiss Muller, 'Bonds of Belonging: Subjecthood and the British Empire', *JBS* 53 (2014), 29–58.

³ Published sermons are a leading source for studies of religious and political ideas in colonial America and early-modern Britain; these were commonly delivered on fast or thanksgiving days. For comments on the imperial visions and tensions in these sermons, see Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States 1607–1876* (Cambridge, 2007), chs 1–3. For similar sermons in the nineteenth-century empire, see Joanna Cruickshank, 'The Sermon in the British Colonies', in Keith Francis and William Gibson, eds, *Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon, 1689–1901* (Oxford, 2012), 513–29.

Anglican churches on these occasions, reveal much about changing conceptions of divine providence and of the higher purposes claimed for the empire. As the stated expectation was that all adult inhabitants should participate in these special acts of worship, newspaper reports of these occasions also provide valuable indications of the extent of popular religious observances.

These are just some indications of an agenda for future research. The purpose of this article is the preliminary but fundamental task of outlining the patterns in the appointment and causes of acts of special worship across the empire.⁴ It will establish the main chronological phases of this practice, consider the complications caused by religious pluralism, and direct attention to significant shifts that began during the late nineteenth century. It will also reflect upon the reasons for the longevity of the practice.

PHASES OF IMPERIAL SPECIAL WORSHIP

Special worship in the British empire can be divided into three phases: first, from the beginnings of colonial settlement in America to 1776; second, from the American Revolution through the period of the expanding ‘second empire’ in Asia, Australasia and Africa; and third, from the 1850s to decolonization in the 1950s.

The practice of observing fast and thanksgiving days was carried across the Atlantic by English settlers during the early seventeenth century. In the plantation colonies of Virginia and the West Indies, both special and annual fasts and thanksgivings were soon ordered for regional causes and, with the Church of England as the dominant Church, from the 1660s the English annual religious commemorations (thanksgivings for the failure of the Gunpowder

⁴ Existing scholarship on imperial special worship focuses on particular colonies, rather than the empire as a whole. See Joseph Hardwick, ‘Special Days of Worship and National Religion in the Australian Colonies, 1790–c.1914’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 45 (2017), 365–90; idem, ‘Fasts, Thanksgivings and Senses of Community in Nineteenth-Century Canada and the British Empire’, *Canadian Historical Review* 98 (2017), 675–703

Plot on 5 November and for the restoration of the monarchy on 29 May, and a fast day for Charles I's execution on 30 January) became official public observances.⁵ Days of special worship proliferated among the Puritan colonies of New England, with their keen sense of providential governance and freedom from the constraints of the crown and the Church of England, which also meant that they rejected the English anniversary commemorations. But by the time that royal government became established in the late seventeenth century, the New England colonies had their own entrenched customs of seasonal fast days early in the year and thanksgiving days in the autumn, as well as special days for exceptional events.⁶ These customs later spread through the other North American colonies, with the days of prayer now ordered by the royal governors and councils.⁷

The first special worship across the whole empire was in 1688, when during June the Roman Catholic King James II ordered that thanksgiving days for the birth of the Prince of Wales should be observed not only in England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland, but also in the nine colonies in America and the West Indies. Colonial governors duly proclaimed thanksgiving days once the orders reached them, for various dates from July to December. Even Congregationalist churches in New England obeyed the order, sharing the incongruity

⁵ George Maclaren Brydon, *Virginia's Mother Church* (Richmond, VA, 1947), 141, 176, 238–40, 434, 447, 461–2, 471–2; Nicholas M. Beasley, *Christian Ritual and the Creation of British Slave Societies, 1650–1780* (Athens, GA, 2009), 39, 48–51; Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean 1624–1783* (Baltimore, MD, 2008), 38–9, 46–9, 56–7.

⁶ See the large number of occasions recorded in William DeLoss Love, *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Boston, MA, 1895); Melissa Weinbrenner, 'Public Days in Massachusetts Bay, 1630–1685', *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 26 (1998), 73–94.

⁷ See the fast and thanksgiving proclamations included or reported in *Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639–1800*, the printed records of the colonies published from the 1850s onwards, and the *Calendars of State Papers Colonial*. For publication details, see Williamson et al., eds, *National Prayers*, 2: xlv–li.

of Protestant churches thanking God for the birth of a Catholic heir to the throne.⁸ From 1702 to 1706 the governors of what were now fourteen colonies similarly acted on orders to proclaim colonial versions of the thanksgiving days already arranged in Britain for the early military victories during the War of the Spanish Succession.⁹

Colonial observances of these orders from London – which enclosed copies of the English thanksgiving proclamation – were striking demonstrations of imperial authority, yet the issue of such orders did not become a settled practice. Numerous thanksgiving days were appointed in Britain between 1706 and 1759, but no orders were sent for colonial observances during this period, although they were resumed for the military victories of 1759 and the Peace of Paris in 1763.¹⁰ Why imperial orders for thanksgivings were interrupted is unclear; but it may well be that governments in London – which received regular reports from each colony – understood that the colonial authorities would themselves order special worship to mark significant events in Britain. From the 1640s to the 1760s, assemblies, councils and governors in colonial America independently proclaimed special fast or thanksgiving days for such episodes as the English Civil War, the Restoration, the Popish and Rye House plots, the 1688 revolution, the war of 1689–91 in Ireland and the Jacobite rebellions, as well as for the campaigns against, victories over, and peace treaties with other European powers. Sometimes these colonial proclamations were prompted by reports of British fasts or thanksgivings; just as often the colonial authorities acted simply on news of crises or causes for celebration in

⁸ See *ibid.* 1: 1688–EIr2 (occasions are coded in the edition for ease of cross-reference: 1688–EIr2 is the second joint occasion for England & Wales (E) and Ireland (Ir) in 1688. Where an occasion refers to all three kingdoms, including Scotland (S), only a number is used: e.g., 1763–1.). The *National Prayers* volumes include texts or summaries of the orders sent from London to colonial governors.

⁹ *Ibid.* 2: 1702–EIr2, 1704–EIr2, 1705–EIr2, 1706–EIr1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 2: 1759–2, 1763–1. For the first of these, the governor of New Hampshire even included the text of the English proclamation – complete with references to archbishops and bishops – as part of his own proclamation (see Fig. 1).

Britain.¹¹ References to British events and military campaigns and to the royal family were also regularly added to the fast and thanksgiving proclamations which they issued chiefly for causes that were specific to their own colony.¹²

From the texts of these proclamations and from the prayers and sermons heard on the fast and thanksgiving days, the inhabitants of the American colonies were encouraged to regard the British empire as a single spiritual body under divine providence.¹³ Yet special worship could also become a means to claim divine sanction during disputes over imperial policies, as became evident with the American fasts and thanksgivings appointed during the Stamp Act crisis in 1765–6, and the fast days ordered by colonial assemblies, ‘patriot’ provincial congresses and then the Continental Congress after the Boston ‘Tea Party’ in 1774. During 1776 rival fast days were proclaimed by the Continental Congress for all the American colonies and by the British crown for the British Isles, in a competition for the favour of God as political disputes escalated into war.¹⁴

During the second phase, from 1776 to the 1850s, the appointment of special worship in the newer areas of British control in Canada, Australasia, India and Africa was left to governors and executives; the Colonial Office files for this period contain no imperial orders for thanksgivings. Colonial governments nevertheless tended to take their lead from reports of

¹¹ For examples, see *ibid.* 2: cxlii–cxliii; Jonathan Hawkins, ‘Imperial ’45: The Jacobite Rebellion in Transatlantic Context’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24 (1996), 24–47.

¹² E.g. *Early American Imprints I*, no. 141, Massachusetts, 10 March 1668; no. 760, New York, 27 February 1696; no. 1672, Connecticut, 16 August 1714; no. 6361, Massachusetts, 27 February 1750; no. 41468, New Hampshire, 31 March 1764; no. 12734, Connecticut, 16 October 1773.

¹³ See comments on sermons in Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, chs 1–2.

¹⁴ John Berens, “‘Good news from a far country’: A Note on Divine Providence and the Stamp Act Crisis”, *ChH* 45 (1976), 308–15; Philip Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution 1763–1783* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1941), 92–6; Henry Ippel, ‘Blow the Trumpet, Sanctify the Fast’, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 44 (1980–1), 43–60; Williamson et al., eds, *National Prayers*, 2: cxliv–cxlv, 1776–

proclamations or acts of special worship in Britain, and to do so more regularly than had been the case earlier in colonial America. In the Canadian colonies from 1789 to 1816 the acts of special worship were, with few exceptions, repeats or anticipations of those arranged in Britain: special prayers during the illness of George III in 1788–9 and thanksgivings for his recovery, annual fast days during the wars with France from 1793 to 1815, and thanksgivings for peace treaties in 1802 and 1815–16. In Nova Scotia and the other Atlantic provinces, the governors’ proclamations often stated explicitly that the purpose was ‘to extend the effect’ of the king’s proclamations in Britain.¹⁵ Similar patterns developed later in the Australian colonies and elsewhere.¹⁶ In these ways, appointments of special worship matched the conservatism of British authorities in the early second empire; it may also have contributed to a broader policy that sought to align colonies with the social structure and values of the mother country.¹⁷

The appointment of Anglican bishops in the colonies from 1787 helped to connect colonial special worship with its British counterpart. As the first of these bishops, Charles Inglis of Nova Scotia and Jacob Mountain of Quebec, regarded the colonies as integral parts of the British nation and the Church of England, they routinely and successfully asked the governors of the Atlantic Canadian colonies and of Upper and Lower Canada to emulate British fasts and thanksgivings by the issue of proclamations for their own territories.¹⁸ The

¹⁵ Hardwick, ‘Fasts, Thanksgivings and Senses of Community’.

¹⁶ Hardwick, ‘Special Days’, 371.

¹⁷ Christopher Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), ch. 7.

¹⁸ Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada [hereafter: LAC], MG23–C6/C–2227/3, Inglis to governors, 13 May 1799, fol. 30; Mountain in *The Correspondence of the Honourable Peter Russell*, 3, ed. E. A. Cruikshank and A. F. Hunter (Toronto, ON, 1936), 65, 111. For the conservatism of early Canadian Anglicanism, see Peter W. Williams, ‘Anglicanism in North America and the Caribbean in the

Canadian bishops also initiated days of prayer for regional causes, notably during the cholera epidemics of the early 1830s.¹⁹ Although Anglican monopoly over special worship collapsed after the 1830s, as the model of a single privileged religious establishment was abandoned in the colonial world,²⁰ governors continued to repeat British acts of worship. In 1842, even the news of thanksgiving prayers in Britain for a good harvest prompted proclamations of days of thanksgiving in Canadian Maritime provinces.²¹ Special prayers for the births of Queen Victoria's children and her escape from attempted 'assassinations' were marked in various overseas territories, and special days of prayer were also called in the colonies for the Irish famine, the Crimean War, and the Indian 'Mutiny'.²² Colonial observances of British acts of special worship were intended to remind colonists that they were British subjects, living in an extended British nation. Colonial proclamations addressed colonists as the 'loving subjects' of the crown, and preachers told churchgoers on imperial fast days that great calamities, like the famine and 'Mutiny', resulted from the collective sins of a far-flung British people.²³ This imperial nation was a 'virtual' one, held together by ties of belief and sentiment and not by a

Nineteenth Century', in Rowan Strong, ed., *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, 3: Partisan Anglicanism and its Global Expansion, 1829–c.1914* (Oxford, 2017), 232–52, at 240.

¹⁹ LAC, RG5–A1/C–6875/115, Bishop Stewart of Quebec to Lieutenant-Governor Colborne, 31 March 1832, fols 64739–41.

²⁰ Stewart J. Brown, 'Anglicanism in the British Empire, 1829–1910', in Strong, ed., *Oxford History of Anglicanism* 3, 45–68, at 52–3.

²¹ *Nova Scotian* [Halifax], 20, 27 October, 17 November 1842.

²² See the commentaries in Williamson et al., eds, *National Prayers*, 2: 1840–1, 1840–2, 1841–1, 1847–2, 1854–1, 1855–1, 1856–2, 1857–2.

²³ For examples of the language of subjecthood, see the proclamations in *Canada Gazette*, 7 April 1855, 7 November 1857. For the messages communicated on days of prayer, see Hardwick, 'Special Days' and 'Fasts, Thanksgivings and Senses of Community'.

formal political union, nor by an overarching imperial state that ordered worship in its territories.²⁴

The third phase, from the 1850s to the 1950s, was marked by improvements in communication, and by more direct and frequent actions by authorities in the imperial centre to evoke colonial attachment to the empire. Until the mid-nineteenth century, colonial observances of British acts of special worship had taken place weeks later than the date of the observance in Britain. Now faster ships and the spread of telegraph cables made it possible for these occasions to be observed simultaneously in Britain and the colonies. The first arrangements to bind the empire in this way were made for royal events. In 1872 governors and churches in many territories spontaneously arranged thanksgiving days for the Prince of Wales's recovery from illness.²⁵ For Queen Victoria's jubilees in 1887 and 1897, the Colonial Office took an active part, despatching copies of the English orders and forms of prayer to governors for their 'information', accurately assuming that governors and churches would act upon these by organizing public holidays and thanksgiving services. Messages from the queen were telegraphed to the governors for communication to their communities: in 1887 asking that her thanks to God should be expressed during the special services in the churches and chapels of the empire, in 1897 asking God to bless her 'beloved people'.²⁶ Similar arrangements were now made to mark the funerals and coronations of sovereigns, and the thanksgivings for George V's recovery from illness in 1929 and for his silver jubilee in 1935. The Dominion and Colonial Offices sent the governors increasingly detailed information on the arrangements for these occasions.²⁷

²⁴ Eliga Gould, 'A Virtual Nation: Greater Britain and the Imperial Legacy of the American Revolution', *AHR* 104 (1999), 476–89, at 485–9.

²⁵ Williamson et al., eds, *National Prayers*, 3: 1872–2.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 3: 1887–1, 1897–1.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 3: 1901–1, 1902–2, 1910–1, 1911–1, 1929–1, 1935–2, 1936–1, 1937–1, 1952–1, 1953–1.

Still more urgent efforts to nurture imperial patriotism by acts of special worship were made in wartime. In February 1900, during the South African War, a day of intercession arranged by the Church of England was imitated by colonial bishops and some non-Anglican churches in the overseas empire.²⁸ During the First World War, a new type of ‘national day of prayer’ was created. These were initiated by consultation among the leaders of all the main churches in Britain (including the Roman Catholic Church), announced with the king’s personal support, and then proclaimed or encouraged by governors in the colonies, dominions and India. By stages, this type of occasion became not only more ecumenical, but also still more ‘imperial’, with increased participation of the crown and government. Uniquely, for the peace treaty in July 1919 a single royal proclamation ordered religious thanksgivings for both the United Kingdom and the overseas empire. During the Second World War, government ministers in London became directly involved, taking the decisions on appointment of national days of prayer and asking governors to ensure that, wherever possible, religious services took place everywhere in the empire on the same day.²⁹ [Fig. 2]

All this demonstrates the importance of the monarchy and war for ‘Greater Britain’. But special worship during this third phase also reveals the empire’s centrifugal tendencies. Colonial governors in the ‘second empire’ had continued to appoint special days of prayer for regional causes, such as natural calamities,³⁰ emancipation from slavery in the West Indies,³¹

²⁸ For Canada, see Gordon Heath, *War with a Silver Lining: Canadian Protestant Churches and the South African War, 1899–1902* (Montreal, ON, 2009), 65–9. For services elsewhere, see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February 1900; *Auckland Star*, 12 February 1900.

²⁹ Philip Williamson, ‘National Days of Prayer: The Churches, the State and Public Worship in Britain, 1899–1957’, *EHR* 128 (2013), 324–66, at 329–30, 333.

³⁰ See Hardwick, ‘Special Days’, 370–1.

³¹ *Papers ... in Explanation of the Measures ... for giving Effect to the Abolition of Slavery, II*, in *Parliamentary Papers*, 1835 (278–II), [part A] 70, [part B], 21, 22, 24, 72–3, 220, 277

and wars with indigenous peoples, notably in India and southern Africa.³² But during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the appointment of regional fast, humiliation or thanksgiving days multiplied in many parts of the empire. Canadian provinces regularly observed seasonal thanksgivings after 1859, and on twenty-three occasions between 1866 and 1914 Australian governments marked droughts by setting aside days of humiliation and thanksgiving.³³ Moreover, as the following section explains, an increasing number of these occasions came to be organized by churches rather than by governments.

THE EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Until the mid-Victorian period, the orders issued by the crown for special worship in the British Isles assumed that everyone was a member of an established Church. Instructions for services or prayers were addressed to the clergy of the Church of England, the Church of Ireland³⁴ and the Church of Scotland, although by the nineteenth century most other religious communities also observed these occasions, on their own terms.³⁵ The realities of religious pluralism were accepted much earlier in the colonies and in India. This was often inescapable. Some imperial territories had originally been settled by critics of or separatists from the established Churches, and many contained populations of mixed religious and ethnic composition. From the seventeenth century, governors in several colonies in New England

³² See, for example, *Calcutta Gazette*, 20 June 1799; *Bombay Times*, 21 February 1846; Charles Gray, *Life of Robert Gray, Bishop of Cape Town*, 2 vols. (London, 1876), 1: 163, 328; 2: 233.

³³ Peter Stevens, "'Righteousness exalteth the nation': Religion, Nationalism, and Thanksgiving Day in Ontario, 1859–1914', in Matthew Hayday and Raymond Blake, eds, *Celebrating Canada*, 1: *Holidays, National Days, and the Crafting of Identities* (Toronto, ON, 2016), 54–82; Hardwick, 'Special Days', appendix.

³⁴ From 1801 to 1871, the United Church of England and Ireland.

³⁵ Philip Williamson, 'State Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgivings: Public Worship in Britain 1830–1897', *P&P* 200 (2008), 121–74, at 161–2.

issued a distinctive style of proclamation. These were addressed in non-denominational terms to all ‘ministers and people’, and often consisted less of an order than an encouragement or exhortation to observe the fast or thanksgiving.³⁶ Elsewhere, in colonies where the Church of England was dominant, governors used the traditional language of English proclamations, with their assertions of royal supremacy in matters of religion. Accordingly, proclamations in the Canadian Atlantic colonies from the 1790s ‘charged’ and ‘commanded’ inhabitants to observe fasts and thanksgivings, with threats of God’s ‘wrath and indignation’ for non-observance.³⁷ This wording suited a counter-revolutionary empire, and in some territories was retained for a surprisingly long time,³⁸ but it became increasingly outmoded as the empire came to include more peoples not of British origin, and as religious toleration was widened in overseas territories. The emergence of an atheistic revolutionary regime in France after 1789 may also have encouraged the adoption of more inclusive forms of special worship. For fasts and thanksgivings in Upper and Lower Canada from the 1790s, governors issued proclamations that embraced Catholics as well as Protestants.³⁹ The Catholic archbishops of Québec ordered special masses on these days, as did the Catholic bishops in Ireland and the vicars-apostolic in England and Wales.⁴⁰

³⁶ See the examples in n. 12.

³⁷ For a Nova Scotian example, see *Royal Gazette* [Halifax], 25 March 1794.

³⁸ For example, a Newfoundland proclamation of 18 May 1847 ordering a fast day for 9 June 1847: St John’s, The Rooms Archives, Office of the Colonial Secretary Fonds, Original Proclamations, Series GN 2.8.

³⁹ See Lower Canadian proclamations in *Report of the Public Archives for the Year 1921* (Ottawa, ON, 1922), 58, 76–7, 93, 156, 169–70, 183, 187–8, 192–3.

⁴⁰ Henri Têtu and Charles-Octave Gagnon, eds, *Mandements, lettres pastorales et circulaires des évêques de Québec*, 2 (Québec, 1888), 516–17, 531–3, 536–7, *ibid.* 3 (Québec, 1888) 105–8, 111–14, 121–3, 123–4, 132–4. For Britain, see Williamson et al., eds, *National Prayers*, 2: lxxxix–xc.

Religious pluralism was belatedly acknowledged in Britain; the last use of the traditional style of proclamation was in 1857.⁴¹ The arrangements for the 1887 and 1897 jubilees were clearly intended to appeal to all Christian communities across the empire. In India from the 1850s governors-general had gone still further, issuing proclamations that were addressed simply to ‘all loyal subjects’, encompassing not only the numerous missionary churches but also, by avoiding Christian references, encouraging observances among the Indian religions.⁴² Governments across the empire became more sensitive to the varying beliefs and interests within their colonies. The development and extension of representative forms of government during the 1830s and 1840s prompted the replacement of orders for special worship with official encouragement to observe these occasions. The clergy of New South Wales were ‘invited’ to hold divine services for an 1838 fast, and after 1850 Canadian governments would ‘earnestly exhort’ their inhabitants to observe days of prayer.⁴³ Given the increasing religious pluralism in areas of British settlement, governments were wary of privileging the Church of England, and from the late 1840s applications for special days of prayer that came from its clergy alone might be declined. In 1847, for example, the governor of the province of Canada refused to mark the Irish famine with a fast because the request was made without Roman Catholic support.⁴⁴

Increasingly, government initiatives gave way to arrangements made by other authorities. In Canada during the 1850s, town mayors ordered days of fasting and humiliation.

⁴¹ Williamson, ‘State Prayers’, 161–3.

⁴² See Williamson et al., eds, *National Prayers*, 2: 1857–2. Jewish communities usually observed special occasions ordered by governments, and from the 1840s the chief rabbi in London issued forms of prayer for the ‘united congregations of the British Empire’: *ibid.* 3: appendix.

⁴³ *Sydney Herald*, 19 October 1838; *Canada Gazette*, 22 December 1849.

⁴⁴ See correspondence in LAC, RG4–C1/H–2585/198/1267, 2387.

Australian mayors did the same during times of drought.⁴⁵ More generally, Churches either arranged special days of prayer or special prayers for their own denominations, or – more significantly – leaders of various churches co-operated in organizing multi-denominational days of prayer, sometimes with the same effect as the earlier orders by civil authorities. In 1872, for example, a thanksgiving day arranged by Montreal’s Protestant churches resulted in the closure of businesses and offices.⁴⁶ The popularity of church-appointed days of prayer, even those appointed on weekdays, reveals much about the public authority wielded by institutional Churches in the colonial world.⁴⁷

For some churches, the practice of setting aside special days of prayer was an extension of their historical independence from the state: for example, in Presbyterian churches in Australia, synods appointed days for fasting or thanksgiving.⁴⁸ The appointment of these colonial Presbyterian occasions mirrored developments in Scotland, where from the 1820s more members of the Church of Scotland (as well as the Free Church after the Disruption of 1843) came to insist that appointment of acts of worship was a matter for the Church itself, not the state. Anglicans, by contrast, were unfamiliar with days of prayer appointed on church authority alone. In England and Wales, the archbishops only began to make their own ‘national’ appointments of special worship, independently of the crown,

⁴⁵ Hamilton, Ontario, observed a fast after an 1857 railway disaster: *Globe* [Toronto], 17 March 1857; for a drought that led to a municipal day of prayer in Australia, see *Warwick Examiner* [Queensland], 2 July 1881.

⁴⁶ *Montreal Gazette*, 15 November 1872.

⁴⁷ The confidence of the institutional Churches in late Victorian Canada is described in Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, eds, *The Christian Churches and Their Peoples, 1840–1965: A Social History of Religion in Canada* (Toronto, ON, 2010), 57–9.

⁴⁸ For example, a fast in eastern Australia during drought: *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 1865.

during the 1870s.⁴⁹ By then, Anglican bishops in the colonies and in India had been issuing forms of prayer on their own authority for several decades. And by mid-century colonial bishops, among them John Strachan of Toronto, were arguing that they could appoint days of prayer in their own dioceses, as these were free from colonial government control and independent of the Church at home.⁵⁰

Although no count has yet been undertaken of the special days of worship appointed independently by Churches across the empire, they appear to have multiplied after 1850. For Strachan and other Anglican bishops, such occasions were a means to stiffen denominational identities in a competitive religious environment. But often Churches had no choice but to arrange their own occasions, as after 1850 governments were wary of appointing special days of prayer for many types of cause. To understand this shift, more comment is needed on how the causes for special worship changed over time.

CAUSES OF SPECIAL WORSHIP

Special days of prayer survived into the twentieth century because the colonial authorities continued to sanction, in some form, the doctrine of ‘national providentialism’.⁵¹ Everything in the human and natural worlds was believed to be subject to God’s superintendence, and so the hand of God could be read in the fortunes and misfortunes of communities, nations and empires. God’s dealings with ancient Israel showed how misbehaving ‘nations’ were punished for their ‘national sins’ by ‘special providences’, such as epidemics, storms and

⁴⁹ Williamson, ‘State Prayers’, 164–6.

⁵⁰ Toronto, Archives of Ontario, Strachan Papers, F983–2/ MS35/12, Letterbook 1854–1862, fol. 61, Strachan to Mountain of Quebec, 26 March 1855. For colonial Anglican independence, see Brown, ‘Anglicanism in the British Empire’, 53–5, Rowan Strong, ‘Anglicanism and the State’, in idem, ed., *Oxford History of Anglicanism* 3, 108–14; Williams, ‘Anglicanism in North America’, 241.

⁵¹ The term is taken from Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, 5.

famines.⁵² Belief in national providentialism took more positive forms too. Britain's victory over Napoleon and escape from revolution revived the idea that Britain had been providentially favoured to improve and Christianize the world.⁵³ Such themes remained important elements in the fasts and thanksgivings observed across imperial territories during the nineteenth century, but colonists also developed readings of divine providence that worked independently of the grander imperial narrative. Days of prayer set aside for regional occurrences nurtured the view that God treated colonial communities differently from those elsewhere.⁵⁴ Not every colonial community conceived of itself as distinctly 'favoured' or 'special',⁵⁵ but days of humiliation and thanksgiving called by colonies could deepen community attachments, as well as a sense of separation and distinctiveness.

Special worship was ordered for a variety of causes, though their range gradually shrank during the nineteenth century. In colonial America, proclamations for fasts and thanksgivings tended to gather several causes together: these could include regional causes relating to the particular colony and more general causes that also affected British subjects elsewhere or all inhabitants of a 'Protestant Christendom' that reached into continental Europe.⁵⁶ During the 'second empire' orders issued by colonial governors usually followed the English style of single or few causes. From 1789, royal occasions and war came to dominate empire-wide special worship. Few other causes outside particular colonies now

⁵² For the persistence of providential beliefs, see Williamson, 'State Prayers', 132–4.

⁵³ Rowan Strong, *Anglicanism and the British Empire, c.1700–1850* (Oxford, 2007), 60, 106–8, 125.

⁵⁴ For the Australian context, see Hardwick, 'Special Days', 376–8.

⁵⁵ For the concept of providential election in the Canadian context, see S. F. Wise, 'God's Peculiar Peoples', in A. B. McKillop and Paul Romney, eds, *God's Peculiar Peoples: Essays on Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Ottawa, ON, 1993), 19–43.

⁵⁶ See the examples in n. 12; Tony Claydon, *Europe and the Making of England, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 2007), 168–71.

attracted special worship, with the notable exception of the ‘Mutiny’ in 1857, and later support of relief funds during famines.⁵⁷

After 1850 a larger number of special days or prayers in colonies were arranged for causes that related only to their particular regions. In the late nineteenth century, governments in Australia and South Africa responded to requests from church delegations by setting aside midweek days of prayer for drought, plague and cattle disease.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, however, the civil authorities became more hesitant. Some requests were too controversial. Canadian governments, for instance, refused requests for special thanksgiving prayers after the North-West Rebellion of 1885. Other causes were too parochial. Until 1879 the Canadian Dominion government would not appoint a harvest thanksgiving for the whole of Canada, because the crop yields were unlikely to be good everywhere.⁵⁹ Colonial authorities were also increasingly alert to public opinion. The appointment of days of prayer might be ignored; days might lead to levity rather than penitence and humility; they might open up divisions in colonial societies. In late nineteenth-century Australia requests for special days of prayer were sometimes turned down, as state authorities feared that a proclamation would anger workers who would lose a day’s wages.⁶⁰ Civil authorities in Canada increasingly left it to Churches to appoint special prayers and days of prayer for calamities, such as the 1885 smallpox epidemic

⁵⁷ Williamson et al., eds, *National Prayers*, 3: 1877–E, 1897–E. Congregational churches of Western Australia organized prayers for famine sufferers in 1900: *Southern Times* [Western Australia], 20 March 1900.

⁵⁸ Special days of worship were called by Australian civil authorities in times of drought in 1895, 1897, 1898, 1902, 1903, 1904 and 1912. An 1896 rinderpest outbreak and a 1912 drought prompted the appointment of days of humiliation in South Africa.

⁵⁹ Hardwick, ‘Fasts, Thanksgivings and Senses of Community’.

⁶⁰ President of the Council of Churches to editor, *The Argus* [Melbourne], 16 May 1893.

which killed 3,000 people in Montreal.⁶¹ In Australia, the ecumenical Evangelical Alliance and Councils of Churches appointed days of prayer in times of drought and economic depression.⁶²

While the civil authorities were attuned to the divisive potential of special worship, Churches and other colonial organizations were free to appoint days of prayer that reflected their particular interests and agendas. The range of causes of church-appointed special days and prayers remained much broader than for state occasions, and included famines, natural disasters, overseas missions and financial crises. In the early twentieth century disenfranchised colonial communities organized special days of prayer as a means of protest. In South Africa, 'Vigilance Associations', formed to defend and extend the rights of Black and Coloured communities, organized days of 'humiliation and prayer' to petition God to 'deliver' them from their 'difficulties, oppressions and disabilities'. The circulars for these days of prayer appealed to all the oppressed 'sons of Africa', and suggested plans for prayer meetings. Non-Whites observed 31 May 1910 – the day the four South African colonies were brought into union – as a day of humiliation, mourning and prayer.⁶³ In these ways, special worship expressed the diverse and disparate nature of the empire.

Changes in the causes of special worship were not just a result of political developments. A decline in days of humiliation appointed for natural disasters reflected gradual shifts in religious belief. Such occasions became increasingly controversial as the old theology of fear gave way to a new religiosity that placed less emphasis on judgements, 'special providences' and a vengeful deity. Increasingly, God tended to be regarded as a benevolent figure who had created the human abilities to understand the operations of 'general providence' and take measures to avoid or remedy natural disasters. Developments in

⁶¹ *Form of Thanksgiving to Almighty God for Deliverance from the Epidemic with which the City of Montreal has lately been Visited* (n.pl., 1886).

⁶² *South Australian Advertiser*, 14 May 1870; *Bowral Free Press* [New South Wales], 17 June 1893.

⁶³ *Izwi Labantu* [East London], 19 May 1908; *Indian Opinion* [Durban], 11 June 1910.

natural science also had an effect, particularly in relation to disease. As a greater range of occurrences were ascribed to a general providence that worked through natural laws, and as less scope was allowed to unpredictable special providences, the justification for days of religious humiliation for these causes was weakened.

The long history of special worship ordered by the British crown during natural disasters ended in 1866,⁶⁴ yet such occasions continued into the twentieth century in some parts of the empire. Australian states and the Union of South Africa appointed midweek days of prayer in times of drought and insect infestation during the 1920s.⁶⁵ In these places natural disasters were far-reaching and often had more serious effects than in Britain. However, here too there was an important change of emphasis, towards a stronger sense of human agency beyond acts of worship. For example, during the 1900 bubonic plague outbreak in New South Wales, congregations were asked to pray not for divine intervention, but that ‘wisdom and insight’ would be provided to ‘experts’, and that everyone would learn to live by ‘the lessons taught by science’.⁶⁶ By the late nineteenth century, the traditional idea, taken from the Old Testament, that judgements were visited on communities for their ‘collective’, ‘accumulated’ or ‘national sins’ was hard to maintain as colonial societies became more diverse, both ethnically and religiously. During droughts, Australian town dwellers wrote to newspapers saying they had no reason to observe days of humiliation because the visitation had been sent to punish sinful farmers, not innocent townspeople.⁶⁷

The proliferation of days of prayer appointed for regional causes and the occasions observed by particular Churches and communities indicate the growing strength of centrifugal

⁶⁴ Alasdair Raffe, ‘Nature’s Scourges: The Natural World and Special Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgivings, 1543–1866’, in Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon, eds, *God’s Bounty? The Churches and the Natural World*, SCH 46 (Woodbridge, 2010), 237–47.

⁶⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 1923; for the South African occasion, see *ibid.*, 29 July 1924.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 April 1900.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11, 12 February 1869; *Australasian* [Melbourne], 22 April 1876.

tendencies in the empire. They also suggest the extent to which imperial inhabitants identified with regions, discrete communities and faith groups that, in the case of the episcopal Churches, were now organised into metropolises, provinces and dioceses. Yet observances for these regional and sectional events continued to coexist with days of prayer or special prayers for more far-reaching purposes. These layers of imperial special worship demonstrate that the inhabitants of empire were capable of holding multiple identities and several loyalties simultaneously.⁶⁸

THE PERSISTENCE OF IMPERIAL SPECIAL WORSHIP

Paradoxically, despite greater degrees of self-government, wider acceptance of religious diversity and the increased independence of the various Churches, from the late nineteenth century to the coronation of 1953 acts of special worship organized in London for observance across the empire were more common than they had been during earlier periods. The imperial days of prayer of the late Victorian period possibly expressed in part the anxieties about empire and British geopolitical vulnerability that lay behind the contemporary appeals to a 'Greater Britain'.⁶⁹ Some late Victorian Anglican leaders assumed that the Church of England could be recast as an imperial Church, with a special role in spreading an 'imperial Christianity' across the empire.⁷⁰ These ambitions were manifested in the more active role of

⁶⁸ Phillip Buckner, "'Limited Identities' Revisited: Regionalism and Nationalism in Canadian History', *Acadiensis* 30 (2000), 4–15, at 12.

⁶⁹ Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of the World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), 35–40.

⁷⁰ Steven Maughan, 'Imperial Christianity? Bishop Montgomery and the Foreign Missions of the Church of England, 1895–1915', in Andrew Porter, ed., *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880–1914* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2003), 32–57; Brown, 'Anglicanism in the British Empire', 66–7. For Anglicanism's enduring association with empire in the twentieth century, see Matthew Grimley, 'The State, Nationalism, and Anglican Identities', in Jeremy Morris, ed., *The Oxford History*

the Church in arranging imperial acts of special worship. Since the 1790s, some colonial bishops had borrowed the text of the special forms of prayer issued by the Church in England for use in their own dioceses, using copies sent to them by the archbishop of Canterbury or the government printers.⁷¹ For Victoria's jubilee in 1887, the arrangement became more centralized: not only did Archbishop Benson and the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge distribute the English form to the colonial bishops, but the Colonial Office sent copies to the colonial governors. For Edward VII's coronation in 1902, Archbishop Temple composed and circulated a *Form and Order of Service recommended for Use in the Churches of the Church of England throughout His Majesty's Empire*. The formulation in Temple's title turned out to be unique to this occasion, but it became usual for the chief occasions of special worship arranged by the Church in England to be observed also by colonial dioceses, often using the services or particular prayers issued by the English archbishops. Other churches – including Scottish Presbyterian, the various Free Churches, and Roman Catholic – organized their own services in response to calls for special prayer from London. Even more impressively, the national days of prayer organized during wartime by consultation among the leaders of the main British Churches became imperial days of prayer, much assisted by the public support of successive kings.⁷²

The sense of a unified and righteous empire under God remained strong. During the two world wars, this was because imperial peoples were drawn into the war effort, with great numbers of dominion, colonial and Indian troops serving in the imperial armed forces. The

of Anglicanism, 4: *Global Western Anglicanism, c.1910–present* (Oxford, 2017), 117–36, at 120, 128–9.

⁷¹ Williamson et al., eds, *National Prayers*, 2: cxlvii, cxlviii.

⁷² See commentaries and notices sent to the dominions and colonies for 1914–18 and 1939–45 in Williamson et al., eds, *National Prayers*, 3. Even the day of national prayer called by the king for July 1947 because of post-war crises in Britain was observed in parts of the commonwealth and empire: see *ibid.* 1947–1.

popularity of the royal occasions indicates that monarchy remained the empire's key integrative force. Indeed, the evidence from observances of special worship suggests that loyalty and attachment to monarchy were intensified by distance.⁷³ For instance, for Victoria's jubilees colonies set aside thanksgiving *days* when only thanksgiving *services* had been ordered in Britain. Unlike other causes that had led to special worship in the past, royal occasions had broad appeal and appeared uncontroversial. For coronations and royal funerals, governments appointed civil holidays, and ministers of religion organized the religious observances. These occasions suggested that the empire was – as its advocates liked to think – an empire of voluntary action and religious liberty. Irish Catholics in Canada branded the 1887 jubilee for 'Evictoria' a 'mockery and a fraud',⁷⁴ but elsewhere royal occasions attracted observances from the varied colonial publics. The monarchy was an integrative force because the inhabitants of empire had varied reasons to identify with it, as a protector of indigenous communities, defender of Protestant liberties, focus for imperial unity, and symbol of Christian values in the struggles against paganism, barbarism, communism and fascism.

Fig. 1. Proclamation for a thanksgiving day by Benning Wentworth, Governor of New Hampshire, 28 February 1760, containing the English proclamation of 23 October 1759 for the military victories in Canada. Library of Congress, Printed Ephemera Collection, portfolio 87, folder 9. Reproduced by permission of the Library of Congress.

Fig. 2: Proclamation for the day of thanksgiving for the peace treaty of Versailles, 1919, to be observed throughout the empire, as printed in *The South Australian Government Gazette*, 4 July 1919. Reproduced by permission of the Government of South Australia.

⁷³ Mark McKenna, 'Monarchy: From Reverence to Indifference', in Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward, eds, *Australia's Empire* (Oxford, 2008), 261–87, at 262.

⁷⁴ *True Witness and Catholic Chronicle* [Montreal], 15 June 1887.