

# Mission and Submission: Presbyterianism in Indo-Trinidadian Communities, 1968-2012

Meghan Cleghorn

*Department of Literary, Cultural and Communication Studies, The University of The West Indies, St. Augustine*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the impacts of Presbyterianism on Indo-Trinidadian communities in Trinidad. Through interviews with notable figures in the Church's history, surveys within Presbyterian congregations, and in-depth research into Presbyterianism's history in Trinidad, an analysis was conducted on how this history has shaped the Church from the twentieth to twenty-first century. General observations were also made in Presbyterian Church settings. The findings suggest that many contemporary Presbyterian practices mirror those of colonial times, albeit in a neocolonial context. Historical evidence supports the hypothesis that ideologies of Eurocentrism and elitism existed within the Presbyterian Church in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Trinidad, and aspects of these ideologies persist today. Additionally, both youth and adults within the Church express a need to address prevalent societal issues such as homosexuality, traditionally a taboo topic. Consequently, this research paper examines the concepts of "mission" and "submission," aiming to understand the Church's past reality, present state, and future implications within the Trinidadian Presbyterian context.

**KEYWORDS:** Presbyterianism; Indo-Trinidadian communities; Trinidad; Eurocentrism; homosexuality

## Introduction

Like other Christian denominations of the Caribbean, the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad has its roots in the European evangelization mission of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The pushes and pulls of the various eras of political domination within the Caribbean have had significant impacts on the Presbyterian Church itself. Written material produced by prominent Presbyterians depict all aspects of the colonial history of the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad; Brinsley Samaroo, Idris Hamid, Kenneth Kalloo, and Jerome Teelucksingh are among the most well-known in this self-critical project. In conversation with this literature, I aim to extend this project of self-critical church historiography into the realm of gender and queer politics. In 1968, the first female Presbyterian minister was ordained in the United States, in the state of Georgia.

This event marks a time of change within the post-war Presbyterian Church which I argue repre-

sents the beginning of a gradual transition from the powers of colonial authority that still govern the Church to an extent today. The step towards gender inclusiveness was one that would go on to affect other types of inclusions, such as the ordaining of the first openly homosexual minister in the Presbyterian Church of Madison, Wisconsin, in 2011, which set the precedent for more widespread inclusiveness. All these changes would then spark conversation and debate within the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad. That said, despite good efforts, elements of colonialism remain encoded into the Church as an institution and are reproduced by authorities and the congregation. It is the intention of this body of work to demonstrate the effects of the history of a European mission within a Caribbean setting, show which traditional practices are still lingering within the Presbyterian Church, and which ones are changing in the twenty-first century.

The first section provides a historical overview of the links between the practices of the Christian mission of Europe within India to the Canadian Presbyterian mission in Trinidad. It outlines how these practices contributed to the loss of culture and identity experienced by the East Indians in India as well as the East Indian indentured laborers of Trinidad. The section illustrates how this loss of culture and identity has impacted and continues to impact the Trinidadian Presbyterian Church of the twentieth to twenty-first century.

The second section deals with the controversial impact of racial and religious divide caused by certain aspects of the political agenda of the Presbyterian missionaries as well as by certain ideologies that arose from the Eurocentric viewpoint brought with the missionaries to Trinidad. It goes on to examine the extent to which this divide still impacts the Church today and how it reflects neo-colonialism within the Presbyterian Church. The final section focuses on legacies within the contemporary Church: the practices and beliefs of the congregation. It addresses contentious issues faced by the Church and outlines what institutional and extra-institutional steps are being taken and have been taken to address issues like elitism and the taboo subject of homosexuality.

Given that the Indo-Trinidadian Presbyterian Community is small, at roughly 40,000 members, I interviewed key role-players like Presbyterian ministers and senior church members. Given the largely negative view of homosexuality and same-sex marriages within Trinidad and the Presbyterian Church, few Church members were willing to have on-the-record interviews. To supplement this data, I conducted a targeted survey of youth groups of the Presbyterian Church. Finally, I used archival visits to review the monthly magazine publications by the Presbyterian Church, church periodicals, as well as other similar material.

To situate myself, I come from a family of Presbyterians and have attended Presbyterian church services since birth up until the age of twenty-five. I was also a long-standing member of the Presbyterian Church's Youth Movement in Trinidad, in which I held the roles of secretary, treasurer, and president, as well as assistant youth coordinator at various times.

I no longer attend church services, but most of the collected information and analysis on the church come from my internal relations with the Church during my formative years and young adulthood. There is much silencing surrounding taboo issues in the Presbyterian Church. Yet, in its own way, the Presbyterian Church is adapting to changing social values. Moreover, Presbyterians are willing to voice open, positive opinions about homosexuality. While social life is indeterminate, presently, the conservative tradition of the Presbyterian Church is on the wane. This paper is an attempt to document and theorize the change of beliefs in Trinidad and Tobago.

### **The English Book and the Loss of Identity**

Within the well-trodden topic of the evangelization of Caribbean people by European missionaries is the theme of the loss of identity, culture, and original religion, meaning the religion of their ancestors, which indisputably took place as a direct result of this "fortuitous discovery of the English book," as Homi Bhabha sarcastically puts it. In a stimulating and somewhat satirical essay, he delves into "the wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa [and] the Caribbean" (Bhabha 1985, 144). Bhabha examines the phenomenon of the Bible being adapted into Eastern cultures and the de-culturalization that followed. He refers to the Bible as "the English book," effectively stripping it of the awe and reverence which is typically associated with its mention. Bhabha describes an interaction in 1817 between an Indian catechist, Anund Messeh, and some Indian men and women who were reading the Bible and attempting to adopt its practices. He effectively illustrates the mystic awe which the "white man" held in the Indians' eyes when Messeh asks the people where they obtained the Bible, they easily respond "Angel from heaven gave it us, at Hurdwar fair" (Bhabha 1985,145). When Messeh questions this statement, again they respond with certainty, "Yes, to us he was God's Angel; but he was a man, a learned Pundit" (Bhabha 1985,145).

This mystical and revered view of the "white man" as an angelic being has been taken by some to

demonstrate the “childlike innocence” of the eastern people. The question that can be presented here, as to whether this depiction of ultimate innocence is accurate or not, is not as significant as the clear, documented evidence that the white missionaries of the Caribbean had a quite antonymous view of the Indo-Trinidadian people they converted to Presbyterianism, and of African-Trinidadian inhabitants of Trinidad. In *John Morton of Trinidad*, a unique collection of the memoirs of Rev. John Morton, the Canadian missionary who is credited with the most evangelical work in Presbyterianism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, his wife Sarah E. Morton recounts many telling instances which depict Morton’s attitude towards the indentured laborers and slaves. The following extracted passage from the memoir (Morton 1916, 23) is a good example of that attitude:

Feb 6th, 1868. – Saw a place where the Hindus sacrifice. There was a pole with a small flag flying, a small altar of mud, and near it two stakes a few inches apart driven firmly into the ground. Two small bars passed through these stakes, one near the ground, the other a few inches up, forming a sort of yoke into which the neck of the goat to be sacrificed is placed and its head severed with one blow. The blood is burned on the altar and the body made a feast of. On the altar lay a little heap of ashes. The sight awoke very peculiar feelings. There is meaning in all this; there is a man’s conscious sinfulness; the idea of propitiation by sacrifice – by blood – and the blood consumed; also, a feast of joy on the victims’ flesh. Right ideas but blindly expressed.

Although neglecting to note whether this was an account of a Hindu or Islamic ritual, it obviously awoke a sense of spirituality and meaning within Morton. Nevertheless, the account ends with an unabashed criticism of the East Indian’s belief system. Morton condescendingly brushes off any idea that the East Indians’ faith could have some basis in truth or validity, or even that there is any spiritual intelligence in its expression. This type of dismissal of the Indian as animalistic or uncivilized and needing saving and spiritual cleansing is a continuous theme in missionary writing but is skillfully hidden beneath feelings of affection for the “coolie.” Morton goes on to lament,

further down in another passage taken from his journal, that it is a shame the “coolie,” which chooses to return to his motherland, India, after the five years of indentureship will be lost to the fires of hell as he would not have converted to Christianity and saved his soul.

A major trademark of the Presbyterian tradition is its impact on education in Trinidad. Scholarly reviews on the immense contribution to the education of the original East Indian converts to Presbyterianism in many ways show that the education drive of the Presbyterian Church has contributed to the de-culturalization of the East Indians. Historian Jerome Teelucksingh writes, “Despite the perceived benefits of offering education to East Indian children, it was given at a price. Islam and Hinduism, and their accompanying beliefs, rites and customs, were often denigrated to win converts to Christianity” (Teelucksingh 2007, 132). Teelucksingh goes on to describe the incidence of East Indians having to change their names to have any hope of upward social mobility. He recounts, “Niamat Khan, a mullah (Muslim priest) from India was baptized and converted to Presbyterianism ... and upon conversion, had his name changed to Paul Niamat” (Teelucksingh 2007, 133). The evangelization of the East Indians meant a total renouncement of their previous “heathen” culture and ways, inclusive of their most basic form of identity, their names.

This type of phenomenon is the basis for Bhabha’s theory on the “hybridization” caused by the European mission of conversion. Bhabha’s reference to hybridism is not biological but refers to a type of schizophrenia caused by the splitting of two cultures. In fact, the ripping away of one culture and the immediate joining of a next, of which so many colonial workers were victims. Kenneth K. Kalloo (1970, 43) elucidates this point in his research:

In order to secure jobs many had to accept baptism, and too often a schizophrenic personality was the end result. An outer pose of Christianity to escape the cane fields, but an inner barrenness that could not express Christianity as taught by the Church.

Teelucksingh quotes Brinsley Samaroo in his article as saying, “Morton condemned East Indians as worshippers of false gods in that Brahma was a liar,

Vishnu an adulterer and Shiva a drunkard” (quoted in 2007, 133). The history of the Caribbean has always and will always inspire questions, among the newer generations, of “Who are we?,” “How do we define ourselves?” Amongst twentieth to twenty-first century Presbyterian Indo-Trinidadians these questions may always be the cause of some distress due to the social order established by the European missionaries of the past. Third- and fourth-generation Hindu Trinidadians no longer neither have substantial knowledge of Hindi nor of original, traditional Hindu practices. For the Presbyterian, this ordeal is far worse, for they are twice removed from their spiritual origins; removed once from India in the nineteenth century, and now almost completely removed from Hinduism through time and Presbyterian tradition.

The impacts of the aforementioned loss of culture and identity continue to affect the Trinidadian Presbyterian Church of the twenty-first century. Whereas from the beginning of the evangelization mission, the churches were named in Hindustani and retained these names to today, they are no longer used to identify the church, especially by the newer generations of Presbyterians. Additionally, whereas *bhajan*<sup>1</sup> have been a staple hymn type in the Presbyterian churches and schools since the beginning of the evangelization mission to the late nineteenth century, this tradition has gradually diminished in the twenty-first century. From the inception of Indian Arrival Day in 1945, the members of the Presbyterian Church have celebrated this holiday by wearing traditional wear for the Sunday morning service in the week of this holiday. There would also be a topical sermon, surmising the influence of the Hindu heritage on the Presbyterian Church. In recent years, this tradition has noticeably faded within the Church, suggesting that as time passes, Indo-Trinidadian Presbyterians are beginning to experience a form of “amnesia” of the cultures, traditions, languages, and religions of their motherland. These are all signs of the fading of schizophrenia referred to by Bhabha and Kalloo.

However, as with all things, with change comes challenge. As Presbyterians begin to define them-

selves as wholly Presbyterian, forgetting their Hindu backgrounds and the trauma of identity faced by their forefathers due to the Presbyterian mission, a generation of more rigid and unaccepting Presbyterians has emerged. This generation has created rules of use for the Presbyterian Church, which were not in existence during the days of Morton. This theme will be developed more in the coming sections.

## Racial and Religious Divides

Evidence supporting the interlocking of cultures between Africans and Indians in colonial Trinidad can be found in the collective memory around the Jahagee Massacre of 1884 (Teelucksingh 2007).<sup>2</sup> Informed by popular historical accounts of the event in the 1950’s, Teelucksingh’s article details the circumstances of the massacre along with reports of European rulers’ attempts to counteract racial unity. As described by Teelucksingh, the Indian Muslims and Hindus, Africans and even Chinese and Portuguese all came together during this historical occasion in the streets of Trinidad for a celebratory procession for the Muslim festival of Hosay. Teelucksingh expounds that Hosay, being from inception a Muslim tradition, was interestingly celebrated by most Hindus in Trinidad. The reason for this is not explicitly stated in the article; however, one can infer that the melding of cultures was due to the concept of brotherhood which formed from mutual suffering on the plantations. Teelucksingh states, “Hindus constituted the majority of the jahaajees, perhaps because it was plantation-based, and the majority of estate workers were Hindus ... The concept of brotherhood was clearly growing around these Hosay processions” (Teelucksingh 2007, 3).

The East Indians who celebrated Hosay were joined by “free Indians who had completed their indentured contracts,” and “working class Africans” (Teelucksingh 2007, 3). He continues, “Other smaller groups connected to the plantations – Chinese and Portuguese ... would have also been witnesses

<sup>2</sup> According to Teelucksingh, although the event has been named “The Coolie Massacre” and “the Hosein Calamity,” he prefers the “Jahaajee Massacre” as it is the better-known name. “Jahaajee” essentially means “brotherhood” in Hindi.

<sup>1</sup> Hymns in Hindi.

to the Hosay preparations” (Teelucksingh 2007, 5). Each would contribute something to the celebrations in the festive spirit that would have pervaded the atmosphere of that time. Whilst the Hindus assisted in the construction of the *tazias*<sup>3</sup>, the Africans helped to carry them during the procession. The Chinese and Portuguese provided food from their shops. Teelucksingh states, “Indeed, Hosay was attracting a wide cross-section of the population” (5). Not only was Hosay a melting pot of races but also, Teelucksingh notes, of religions. He states

this occasion was a crucible for religious and working class unity. Hindus of all castes including Brahmins and untouchables were present. There were some Indo-Christians, including Presbyterians, Anglicans and Romans Catholics ... [The] Africans who assisted ... belonged to various Christian denominations – Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists and Roman Catholics. Ironically, a festival which was symbolic of a schism in Islam ... exerted a unifying influence defying religious boundaries. (2009, 5)

This festival was a great display of Caribbean unity, and Teelucksingh even notes that “gender and age barriers were also transcended” (2009, 5).

Yet, the colonial authorities began to feel threatened by this public display of unity amongst the races. According to Teelucksingh, “Any form of solidarity among the working class at that time, created fear among colonial government officials in Trinidad” (Teelucksingh 2007, 4). Thus, when their unwritten policy of “divide and conquer” was disobeyed, the colonial officials implemented official laws prohibiting the procession of Hosay in certain areas of Trinidad, areas which had been the traditional routes for many years. The laws also prohibited any free citizens, those who did not reside on plantations and were no longer contracted to work on the plantations, from participating in Hosay. Yet, in a display of undaunted unity, the celebrators of Hosay all marched united in the streets towards the city of San Fernando, although it was against the law. Sixteen people were ruthlessly murdered by colonial police on that day; many more were injured.

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3 Or creolized *tadjahs* – multi-colored mausoleums which were paraded, then ritually offered up to the sea, or any body of water.

What is even more shocking about this attempt to keep the races separate were the remarks by Christian missionary, Rev. John Morton. Teelucksingh records that while testifying before the Norman Commission, Morton said, “Nothing would have stopped the procession but actual force, and firing was absolutely necessary. I think the government was quite right in issuing the orders concerning the regulation of the Hosay procession” (Teelucksingh 2007, 8). Thus, in his quite un-Christian-like support of the brutal murder of innocent people, Rev. John Morton contributed to the racial, political, and religious divide of Trinidad. As one of the founders of the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad, his example would have necessarily impacted upon the Church and its newly recruited followers. Teelucksingh (2009, 9) ascribes reasons for Rev. Morton’s words. “It may well be,” he writes,

that Morton saw the need to play along with the farce of the Commission, because the government provided financial assistance to Presbyterian churches and Canadian Mission Indian (CMI) schools and – more importantly – allowed Canadian missionaries to enter the colony. Also, the planters allowed the missionaries to visit the barracks and preach to the Indians. Morton’s view may have well been a self-interested and self-serving view.

Whilst these reasons might be true, they do not seem enough to justify the public support of murder that was displayed by Morton. It is a decidedly un-Christian-like trait to participate in political corruption for personal gain. Teelucksingh affirms, “It is true that Morton would have felt some revulsion to know that recent Presbyterian converts were participating in this non-Christian festival” (9). In research on the topic, Kenneth Kalloo (1970, 43) notes

the conversion of Hindus and Moslems led to a certain amount of disintegration in what was a fairly stable and traditional society. The efforts of the Canadian Mission can also be seen as a factor in perpetuating the rift between the Negro and the Indian. With separate schools for the children it is almost inevitable that there would appear suspicion and jealousy. Too often Presbyterian schools are wholly staffed and populated by East Indians.

The Presbyterian Church in Trinidad still maintains many of these features in the twenty-first century. It is still populated mainly by the descendants of the East Indians. It still carries a great focus on education and is indeed biased towards those who are educated, elevating them to positions of admiration and praise within the congregations.

Another passage taken from John Morton's journal is notable for the linguistic level of interpretation it adds to this discourse. The following is the excerpt (Morton 1916, 22–23):

*First Recorded Visits to Sugar Estates*

Jan. 20th. – Visited *Union Hall* and *Les Efforts* with Mr. Lambert. At *Les Efforts* fell in with two Babujees, one a fine looking Brahman about twenty years of age and only nine months in the Island. Men of all castes crowded around us. One boasted that he ate beef and pork and everything, on the principle that God made all – beef and rice and rum. My teetotal friend playfully told him: “No – Devil make ‘em rum.” His ready answer was: “Then, I devil’s man.” One of the Babujees argued against eating beef in this style: “When I little picknie mumma give me milk; no kill and eat mumma; no kill and eat cow.” I replied: “No[t] all cow give milk.” And my friend: “Why no eat bull-calf?” He replied: “He come from cow. Milk come from cow.” He then proceeded by a subtle process of reasoning to show that the animals were of the same nature and that it would never do.

What is remarkable about this extract is that the racial divide concerns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are packed neatly into one simple paragraph of dialogue in the nineteenth century. Firstly, we see a mixture of all different types of Hindu castes coming together in one setting. Secondly, the linguistic sharing and code mixing is significant as the white missionaries, Brahmin Hindu, and lower caste Hindus all share the same linguistic code in this one exchange to mutually understand one other. Even more interesting, though, is the use of the word “picknie.” This word is typically known in the twenty-first century as a Jamaican word used to represent children. It has even become a sort of trademark of the Jamaican language and culture. Therefore, to stumble across the word being used in nineteenth-century text

and in a context which suggests it was an ordinarily used word by the East Indians of the Caribbean is indeed significant. A twenty-first century reader is left to wonder whether the word was borrowed from the African population of the Caribbean or was a mutually shared innovation of the Caribbean people. That the *babujee* who used the word had only been on the Island for a period of nine months may suggest that the word had an Indian origin.

Regardless, this revelation makes it clear that East Indians and Africans partook in a common linguistic culture on the island. The fact that “picknie has been extinct from the lexicon of Trinidad for at least a century is further testament to the racial divide not only in Trinidad, but within the Caribbean islands, which resulted from colonial presence and influence. As we have seen, the Canadian missionaries were culpable in the perpetuation of this racial divide as they existed in mutual partnership with the colonial government.

The Penal Presbyterian Youth Movement is a group of young people of varied religions and races. These youths participate equally in all the activities of the group, except on “Youth Sunday” – a common occurrence within Presbyterian churches. On these specific Sundays, the youth group conducts the Sunday morning service. Each youth is allocated a task, and only Presbyterian youths are allowed to use the pulpit, while the Hindu members of the group must use the secondary podium. The irony of this practice is seen as a parallel of the superior behavior of the white missionaries which is mirrored in the superior behavior of the Presbyterian Indians over Hindu Indians. The mainly East Indian Church has now begun to divide and categorize one group of East Indians from the next, labeling the group from which they originated as not suitable for the use of their Christian altar. This manifest discrimination in the twenty-first century, almost two-hundred years into the Presbyterian tradition, is a classic sign of neo-colonialism within the Church. The acceptance of this practice by both the members of the youth group and the members of the congregation leads one to question whether Trinidadian society has become so immune to discrimination and segregation that such unconcealed prejudice goes unnoticed and unchallenged as the Presbyterian Church continues to contribute to a cul-

tural and religious divide, much like other Christian denominations within Trinidad.

## The Presbyterian Church of the Twenty-First Century

### Race, Worth, and Selective Inclusion

This section explores how the Presbyterian Church may be considered to exhibit elitist traits, such as selective inclusion based on the belief in superiority of certain races, and how the traditional practices of exclusivity which originated with the missionary evangelists have remained within the Church throughout the centuries and are still in existence in the twenty-first century. The Presbyterian Church has its roots in elitism and superiority as can be seen throughout history in the reasons given by the missionaries for their evangelization mission. According to Christopher Hutton, the Indians of East India were part of the Aryan race. In his paper *The Concept 'Aryan Race'*, Hutton states “Aryanism became the key to a powerful justification for the British colonial presence in India” (Hutton, 2012). Hutton points out the elitist trait of selective inclusion that informed the British evangelization of Indians when he states that the reason for the widespread intent to evangelize Indians came from a deeply ingrained view that the Indians were indeed a branch of the “superior white gene pool.” He states:

a former Aryan dominion was now being restored to its former glory. A younger, more vigorous branch of the Aryan family had returned to restore and reanimate the older. But the exact nature of the hypothetical Aryan kinship was unclear, and the rise of racial understanding of identity suggested that the modern Indians were at best the racially-fallen remnants of a lost superior race.

Drawing from this view, one can infer links of a similar line of thought between British missionaries and Canadian ones. A logical conclusion can be drawn that the Canadian missionaries came to the West Indies to evangelize the Indians in the Caribbean based on their (the Indians) “superiority of race” or “closeness to the white Caucasian gene pool.” Sarah Morton writes in *John Morton of Trinidad*, “The people to whom the Canadian Mission was to be di-

rected were natives of India” (1916, 19). This direct statement of exclusivity of race may seem unorthodox because the Christian mission is renowned for its intent to evangelize the world and not a select few members of it.

However, it is important to note that this type of Eurocentric view was not uncommon in the nineteenth century, the era of which Canadian white missionaries were a part. As Herbert Spencer’s ideas of Social Darwinism illustrate, this era had contenting views around the desirability of eugenics, mono-culturalism, and racial superiority, all of which sought to justify existing social hierarchies. This is not to say that Christian missionaries were themselves strict Social Darwinists; rather it is that they were shaped by these ideas.

Although Rev. John Morton stated many times in his records of his time in Trinidad that his main reason for choosing to evangelize the East Indians of Trinidad was that he saw their plights on the island, including lack of education and indignity suffered, there is evidence to support the concept of Aryanism in the Canadian mission. In a letter to a friend in 1868, Morton wrote, “The Indians are small in figure, but graceful. Their features are much like those of Europeans. For they belong to the same race” (Morton 1916, 50).

Idris Hamid in his book *A History of the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad 1868-1968: The struggles of a Church in Colonial Captivity*, captures this same line of thought in the Canadian mission when he writes (1989, 197):

Morton’s original reason for working among the East Indians was that they were not reached by other churches and that the returning ones presented a new opportunity to evangelize India. But more than once he and Grant mentioned the similarities between the Europeans and the Indians.

The “Grant” referred to in the above passage is Kenneth James Grant, another Presbyterian Canadian missionary credited with great success in the evangelization of the East Indian people in Trinidad. In Grant’s record of his time in Trinidad, entitled *My Missionary Memories*, he states of the East Indian Hindus, “The humblest knows the story of the Ramayana, which

depicts the piety, endurance and devotion of Rama their Aryan king” (71). Here is seen a direct reference to the Aryan descent of the East Indians.

Presbyterian churches have names in English and Hindi. Despite these naming conventions, there is a notable social divide between Hindus and Presbyterians. Exclusions continue to exist in the Presbyterian Church today. Postcolonial theorists have pointed to the reproduction of inequality despite new leadership following political decolonization. Regarding the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad, in the previous church hierarchy, Indians were considered inferior to Whites. The current Indo-Trinidadian Presbyterians church leadership now consider themselves superior to Hindu Indo-Trinidadians. In an interview in 2012 with the late Rev. Rawle Sukhu, then minister to the Penal/Siparia Pastoral region of the Presbyterian Church, he confirmed that there is an unofficial policy in the Presbyterian Church that Hindus are not allowed to occupy the minister’s pulpit. In an interview I conducted with the chairman of the Local Board of the Penal Presbyterian Church, he confirmed this practice. It is in accepted practices like these, whether official or unofficial, that we see the exclusion and assumed superiority continuing within the contemporary Presbyterian Church of Trinidad. As Rev. Elahie, former moderator of the synod of the Trinidadian Presbyterian Church put it in the September 2008 issue of the *Trinidad Presbyterian* magazine, “There is the exclusivist position that justifies Christian absolutism and treats everything outside Christ or the Church as that which is in need of Salvation” (2008, 2).

### Elitism in Education

Since the inception of the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad, there has been an emphasis on education. The original emphasis on education and academia within the Presbyterian Church has not only remained intact throughout the centuries but has taken a step further in the twenty-first century. The contemporary Trinidadian Presbyterian Church holds an attendance register at the back of each church which is intended solely for use by Presbyterian school teachers. As with many other denominational schools, scope for promotion is only available to teachers who are active participants of their respective faiths. However, the Presbyterian Church is the only Church noted to

have taken the extra step to *ensure* a record of teachers’ attendance at Sunday morning services. This recent development is a demonstration of the new and radical steps taken by the Presbyterian Church in the department of education, which safeguards Presbyterian schools from the inclusion of any “outside” religious influence.

Emulating the values of the white mission, Indo-Trinidadians have repeated the elitist attitude of the missionaries, which has always been associated with education in the Presbyterian setting. Whereas East Indians in missionary times had to convert to Christianity as well as change their names to Christian names to attain teaching jobs, the descendants of these Indians who are already Presbyterian and carry Christian names must now make a further commitment to the Church through closely monitored attendance to attain promotions. However, there is a limitation to the purpose of the teachers’ attendance register, which is to be proof that the teacher is a practicing Presbyterian. In the same way East Indians of the past would have pretended to accept the Christian faith to attain upward social mobility, the newer generation of Presbyterian educators may use the attendance register to attain career advancement without fully committing to the prescribed Presbyterian lifestyle. There are instances where practices occur that undermine the purpose of the attendance register, such as teachers showing up before the Sunday morning service, signing the register and not staying for the remainder of the service, as well as teachers joining the last five minutes of the service to sign the register. There are Presbyterians who view practices like the signing of the teachers’ attendance register as not necessarily assisting in promoting stronger faith amongst attendees. According to Rev. Rawle Sukhu, “Attendance at church is simply not enough to judge a practicing Presbyterian by [sic]. Other factors such as interpersonal relationships should be more important than church attendance in the educational forum.” (Rawle Sukhu, telephonic interview with the author, April 3, 2012)

Therefore, there are differing views within the contemporary Presbyterian Church on new practices which have been adopted. Whereas some may choose to adhere to neo-colonial practices, others may rally



for transformation and revolution. As with all new ontological phenomena, religious or otherwise, there are those who will accept and those who will reject or oppose certain practices, and this is necessary for change and improvement.

### Gender Inequalities in the Presbyterian Church

Typically, gender inequality within a religious organization reflects the period and society within which that organization is located. The gender inequality within the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad has not been very different to the other denominational organizations of the island. Yet, there is evidence that the Presbyterian Church has taken further steps than some of the other Christian denominations in Trinidad to combat gender inequality. These steps will be explored against the gender inequality of the past in this section.

Whereas the Roman Catholic Church has made no attempt, internationally or locally, to install female priests, archbishops, or other heads of authority positions which are traditionally filled by males, the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad ordained its first female minister, Mary Naimool, a Canadian, in 1968. Since this inauguration, many more women have been inducted into the stewardship of the Presbyterian Church. Rev. Joy Abdul was the first local woman to achieve this title in 1989 and subsequently became the principal of the St. Andrew's Theological College (SATC – the only Presbyterian theological college on the island) in 2002. Many more female Presbyterian ministers followed throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Presently, the moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad is the Right Rev. Brenda Bullock, the first local woman to hold this position in the history of the Presbyterian Church. In 1966, Rev. Geraldine Reid, a Canadian woman, held this position. Although the number of ordained male ministers still outweighs the number of female ordained ministers, there still has been significant progress, and women who wish to join the clergy of the Presbyterian Church can now feel confident that the opportunity exists for them.

The liberty enjoyed by women today to become leaders of the Church if they so choose has, of course, come with the progression of society when it comes

to women's rights, and is a recent development. Historian Idris Hamid is of the view that women suffered a "double indentureship" in his analysis of the female East Indian indentured laborer. He writes, "the East Indian woman in Trinidad ... laboured on the plantation but was paid lower wages than her male counterpart. She shared his indignities and suffered some additional ones as well" (1980, 213). The plight of the East Indian woman continued, if even to less physical suffering, in a different setting when she was converted to Presbyterianism. This disregard for women's rights traveled with the European missionaries to Trinidad as we can see when Hamid (1980, 218) notes

the Canadian women workers suffered discouragements and discrimination. Their salaries were lower than those of male single missionaries. They did not have voting rights at Mission Council. Morton was quick to remind them that they were first teachers.

Of the twentieth century Hamid comments, "there was not enough effort to pass on leadership to the local women. If some attempt was made, it involved too few and consequently a group of national women trained for such work did not emerge" (226).

Although the Presbyterian Church has taken steps to rectify gender inequality, there remain patriarchal views that persist from the tradition of patriarchy, which preceded the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These views affect different sub-sections of the Presbyterian Church. For instance, in the "National Youth Policy of the PCTT"<sup>4</sup>, under the section "Dress Code," is explicitly stated:

Our female youths are the ones who should be most aware of their manner of dress ... We want to cultivate a Church environment that does not add any extra pressure on the youths, especially pressure of a sexual nature, which may be increased based on the body parts highlighted by certain types of clothing. As such, young ladies should observe and choose the appropriate types of clothing to wear within the Church. (National Youth Policy of the PCTT, n.d. 19)

This overt prescribed feminine dress is followed by a quote from the Bible in bold italics, "You do

<sup>4</sup> PCTT – Presbyterian Church of Trinidad and Tobago

not want to be the cause of anyone's fall away from Christ! (Romans 14:13)" (National Youth Policy of the PCTT, n.d. 19). We see here in play Idris Hamid's "double-indentureship": the woman's body not only being "owned" by the Presbyterian Church by way of belonging to their system of belief, but brazenly policed from as early an age as possible. Through the "National Youth Policy of the PCTT" an attempt is made to condition the young women of the Presbyterian Church into a system of neo-colonial patriarchy. The notion of neo-colonialism amongst Presbyterian youths will be further explored in section three of this chapter.

Given the evidence of female leadership in the Presbyterian Church, it is evident that the Presbyterian Church has taken considerable progressive steps to remain relevant within twenty-first century Trinidadian society. It is noteworthy that Hamid's study of the Presbyterian Church covered up until 1968, the year in which the first female Presbyterian minister was ordained and two years after the first female moderator of the synod was inducted. As both women were Canadian, it should be noted that the local female ministry began with Joy Abdul in 1989, with others joining her since.

### **Presbyterian Youth and Neo-Colonialism**

Each Presbyterian church in Trinidad allocates time and space for a functioning Youth Group as a necessary arm of the Church. The "National Youth Policy of the PCTT" defines the youth group as "a gathering of youth within the Presbyterian Churches at an appointed date and time" (5). It defines the function of a youth group as "to have activities such as fun sports, praise and worship, games, Bible studies, discussions on pertinent topics and so on" (5). There are currently seventy-one functioning youth groups out of one hundred and seven Presbyterian churches. This section seeks to discuss how a neo-colonial attitude has been adopted within the youth groups of the Presbyterian Church.

As mentioned in an early section, the youth groups hold members of different religions within them. The youth policy explicitly states, however, that all executive members of the group must be Presbyterians and communicant members. Many of

the Hindu members of these groups, apart from not being allowed the same privileges of the Presbyterian members of the group, do gain certain socially mobilizing benefits from their participation in the groups. Amongst these are social and oratory skills as well as letters of recommendation from the youth coordinator to append to their resumes. Some of these youths have chosen to convert to Presbyterianism and as such have gained even more benefits. One previously Hindu youth who has converted in the recent past qualified almost immediately for an educational scholarship awarded by the Presbyterian Church. In this way the Presbyterian Church still carries its tradition of introduction into the Presbyterian Church by means of the educational benefits which can be gained through conversion.

This type of scenario can be viewed in two ways: mission and submission. The mission to evangelize Hindus seems to still be a neo-colonial practice within the Presbyterian Church. The above-described scenario is evidence that the Presbyterian Church is enacting methods of evangelization, previously used by the initial missionary assembly. Coincidentally, a subsection of Hindus is submitting to the Presbyterian Church in the same way, and for the same reasons, as colonial Hindus did. Hamid posits, "the Presbyterian Church ... allowed itself to become a tool of colonialism to such an extent that it must be asked whether it was more a servant to colonialism than it was to its Lord" (244). Hamid (1989, 244–245) goes on to express what some might consider a controversial view of the exchange of educational benefits for conversion to Christianity. He states:

The Church by its identification with colonialism and by lending its teaching and institutions to it, became an accomplice in creating a colonial society, a colonial church and worse of all a colonial man and mentality. Those who did not join the church nor become enmeshed in its institutions, however illiterate they might have been, often demonstrated greater freedom of mind and spirit, greater initiative in struggling against the forces of exploitation and de-personalization.

Hamid's view reflects the discussion in an earlier section of this article based on Homi Bhabha's study of colonial mimicry and hybridization. Bhabha explains:

the discriminatory effects of the discourse of cultural colonialism ... do not simply or singly refer to a “person,” or to a dialectal power struggle between the self and Other, or to a discrimination between mother culture and alien cultures. Produced through the strategy of disavowal, the *reference* of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different* – a mutation, a hybrid. (1985, 153)

The neo-colonial practices that have been adopted within and adapted to the systems of the youth groups of the Church emulate Bhabha’s hybridism. The youths of the Presbyterian Church are repeating the historic practices which lead to the schizophrenia of cultures of which Bhabha speaks. The neo-colonialism practiced by the youth groups of the Presbyterian Church has not stemmed from the youths themselves, but from a pre-established colonial order that remains within the Church up to today.

### Homosexuality and the Presbyterian Church

Although the topic of homosexuality has remained taboo within the Church for a very long time and is still so today, there have been noteworthy steps taken to address the topic in twenty-first century Trinidad. Whereas other Christian denominations have published clear views on the topic, which remain traditionally in the negative, the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad has not yet taken any definitive position on the matter. The Canadian Presbyterian Church has demonstrated an affirmative view of the homosexual community by inaugurating gay and lesbian ministers, as well as homosexual deacons, deaconesses, and elders. Within the Trinidadian Presbyterian Church, however, forums which address the subject have been few and far between.

In 2011, following the new allowance of gays into leadership roles within the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, the then moderator in Trinidad, Rev. Elvis Elahie, published an article in *The Trinidad Presbyterian*, a monthly magazine published by the St. Andrew’s Theological College, that addressed this new development. He quite sim-

ply stated that due to the changing times and progression of society, whether for or against, it is time that the discussion on homosexuality and same-sex marriages began within the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad. Earlier, in August 2010, a guest editorial by Felix Rampersad in *The Trinidad Presbyterian* was one of the first to address the churchgoers’ perspective on homosexuality. Entitled “Same-sex relationships?” the article effectively tackled the changing times of the twenty-first century, the fact that many countries are now legalizing same-sex marriages and that the Trinidadian Presbyterian Church is behind the times on the issue. “There is no clear theological position on the issue,” states Rampersad, “There are many persons, who are of the opinion that we should accept people who are in these relationships and that these people should be respected although they have different psychological persuasions” (3). Rampersad’s article conveys the mixed feelings and conceptions and/or misconceptions that many twenty-first century Presbyterians have about homosexuality. It conveys the Presbyterian’s need for clarification on the matter. He continues:

The purpose of this article is simply to raise the issue and not “sweep it under the carpet.” It is an issue which our Church must deal with – sooner or later! There are many persons, here and now in Trinidad and Tobago who have preferences for same-sex marriages. Should we accept them? How do we deal with them? Do we look at these individuals with prejudicial eyes and minds? (Rampersad, 2010, 3)

Rev. Rawle Sukhu reiterated in his interview for this project (April 3, 2012) that the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad still has not taken an official view on the matter of homosexuality. When asked to render his opinion, however, he stated, “The Church will eventually have to take a position on the matter. The Church ought to be ready to deal with the issue. Society is changing and the Church must address what society calls for in order to stay relevant.” The minister went on to recommend that an open forum be held with the members of the congregations of the churches of his current pastoral region, the Penal/Siparia region, where the subject of homosexuality be introduced for discussion. He also suggested that the

youth arm of the Church begin a debate on the topic, encouraging education and awareness on the matter.

When interviewed, Rev. Elahie expressed progressive views on homosexuality that can prove to be revolutionary for the Presbyterian Church of Trinidad and Tobago if implemented. When asked why in his opinion the Trinidadian Presbyterian Church has not yet taken an official stance on homosexuality, Rev. Elahie answered that a “deep psycho-social fear of the topic” is prominent within Trinidadian society. He defined different types of fears that may affect the objective discussion of this topic, including the Church having a “fear to confront reality” and a “fear to become unpopular in any way.” He continued by saying that, for a long time, the Church has suffered from an “inability or refusal to look at what might be critical and necessary issues to consider” and that the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad comes from a “culture which prefers to keep certain things secret” (Elvis Elahie, personal interview with the author, April 10, 2012).

In an anonymous survey conducted by this researcher in the Penal Youth Movement, asking the youths to state concerns that they wanted addressed by the Church, fifteen out of thirty youths proffered questions on the topic of homosexuality. This is evidence that the more open social atmosphere of the twenty-first century with respect to issues of sexuality, which has its beginnings in the sexual liberation movement, also known as the sexual revolution of the 1960's, has impacted Presbyterian youths in Trinidad. In addition to this, the mass media, social media, and other readily available technological sources have educated youths on matters that the Church has failed to satisfactorily address. Therefore, the beginning steps that are about to be taken by the Church to address homosexuality will be welcomed by its youths. Although it would be inaccurate to say that all youths are in consensus on their views of homosexuality, this researcher has found that the majority are willing to discuss it. In the words of Rev. Elahie, “This is the beginning of creating an honest generation. What is wrong if we understand our humanity and deal with it in an honest way?” (Elvis Elahie, personal interview with the author, April 10, 2012).

Additionally, some older members of the Church have expressed positive views on opening a discussion

on homosexuality in the Presbyterian Church. In a personal interview with the late Rudolph Sitahal, an 84-year-old musician and organist within the Presbyterian Church at the time, he stated, “There are many homosexuals within our society, and they have existed since Biblical times. The time has come for the Church to address this matter. The Presbyterian Church must be a place where all are welcome, regardless of sexual orientation” (March 29, 2012). These remarks are suggestive that the Trinidad Presbyterian Church of the twenty-first century, though remaining submissive to the pre-established colonial order in many ways, may be open to mild reforms.

## Conclusion

As is the case with most Christian denominational organizations of Trinidad, the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad is a product of its evangelical and colonial history. The impacts of this history on the Trinidadian Presbyterian Church of today have been examined and discussed through this study. From the concept of Aryanism to the educational practices and elitist attitudes of the Presbyterian Church, the relevant and most controversial issues have been covered. It has been found that certain colonial ideologies remain within the twenty-first century Presbyterian Church, but also that contemporary and innovative ideologies are being formed within the modern-day Church, yet, these are severely inhibited by neocolonial attitudes and political persuasions. The Presbyterian Church of Trinidad, whilst maintaining certain neo-colonial practices such as patriarchy and exclusivity, is simultaneously taking baby steps towards inclusiveness as can be seen with the move toward discussions on homosexuality.

Scholarly writings by Presbyterians and postcolonial critics have been studied. Of these writings, some critique the means of evangelization used by the Canadian missionaries, others attempt to point out the flawed ambiguity of the missionary plan, whilst yet others discuss the racism and Euro-centricity which came with Presbyterianism. This critical study of the impact of Presbyterianism on East Indian descendants in Trinidad has sought to address these writings and analyze them with a fresh perspective in a contemporary world. I hope that studies like this

one will be used by the new and future generations of Presbyterians to create a more inclusive and anti-colonial Trinidadian Presbyterian Church.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Geraldine Skeete, Rev. Kenneth Kalloo, Rev. Elvis Elahie, the late Rev. Rawle Sukhu, Jerome Teelucksingh, and Scott Timcke for their support and contributions to this project.

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