

## NEWS & OPINIONS

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# The Anthropologist in the Evangelical Cinematic Gaze

Naomi Haynes

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In this insightful history, Timothy Larsen ably demonstrates that anthropologists' historic disdain for Christian missionaries was occasioned by more than just the belief that missionaries were engaged in what Jean and John Comaroff (1992, 251) have called "the colonization of consciousness." Beyond charges of "cultural imperialism" (2024, 1), Larsen shows that anthropologists routinely denounced missionaries in an effort to solidify their professional status; by dismissing missionary knowledge and skill, anthropologists could argue that they alone were the rightful producers of ethnographic data and theoretical insight. While in practice the twentieth-century British anthropologists in Larsen's analysis were often kinder to specific missionaries—hosting them in their homes and occasionally bestowing on them scholarly honors—the professional imperative to draw a hard line between themselves and missionaries in general remained.

In reading Larsen's piece, I was reminded of a film that I first saw as an undergraduate at Wheaton College in the early 2000s. *Beyond the Next Mountain* (Forsberg 1981) is a Christian biopic exploring the life of Rochunga Pudaite, a member of the indigenous Hmar people of northeast India. Pudaite's father converted to Christianity after a brief period of contact with the Welsh missionary Watkin Roberts, and encouraged his son to pursue western education so that he could translate the Bible into the Hmar language. The film outlines Pudaite's journey from India's University of Allahabad to the Glasgow Bible Training Institute to Wheaton College, where he completes his Hmar-language translation. Pudaite eventually went on to found Bibles for the World, an international organization that distributed Bibles across the globe, often through the mail. *Beyond the Next Mountain* was directed by two luminaries of twentieth-century

Christian filmmaking, James Collier, who did extensive work for Billy Graham's World Wide Pictures, including an adaptation of Corrie ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*, and Rolf Forsberg, who also wrote the film, in addition to other Christian cinema classics, most notably *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

Near the end of *Beyond the Next Mountain*, after Pudiate has returned to India from Wheaton, he has an encounter with an anthropologist. Pudiate has been offered a position in the Indian civil service, a good job with a high salary and plenty of perks. He interviews for the post with a regional officer, Dr. Alan Montforce, played by the British actor Barry Foster. Montforce's wife Ruth is played by the British-American actor Madhur Jaffrey. The interview takes place in Montforce's home. Seated in his comfortable living room, Pudiate declines Montforce's offer of a whisky, gratefully accepting fruit juice as an alternative. Ruth brings the juice and the three sit down together as Montforce pages through Pudaite's resumé. Noting his international education, Montforce remarks that such training is "remarkable" for someone from a "tribal" background. Pudiate, in response, says simply, "Prayers are answered." At this reply a shadow crosses Montforce's face, but he presses on. "Did you read anthropology by any chance?" he asks, "That's my field." Pudiate replies that he concentrated his studies on Greek and Hebrew so that he could translate the Bible. On hearing this, Montforce's face falls, and he asks his wife to refill his whisky glass.

Pudiate recounts the details of his translation project to the scowling Montforce, who can hardly wait for his guest to finish before launching into a fierce rebuke:

Well, Mr. Pudiate. Of course, I should have suspected from the way you came here dressed

tonight. But it seems, it seems that in my enthusiasm to enlist qualified personnel I am guilty of overlooking certain things about [you]. I am most certainly. Well, it comes as a great disappointment to me to discover that you are a mission native. Some ill-informed, short-sighted white missionaries have ruined you!

Here Pudiate breaks in to insist that Montforce is mistaken, that only one missionary ever came to the Hmar, and that before he was born. “Well,” replies Montforce, “he’s turned you out looking like something out of Ball Street or Saville Row!” Pudiate defends Watkin Roberts, insisting that the missionary lived with the Hmar “like a brother” until the British Raj drove him out. But Montforce rejects Pudiate’s claims while simultaneously repudiating British colonial rule. “Guns and gospels!” he cries, “The British overtook this land with guns and gospels! Happily, at least the guns have been withdrawn!” At this point, Ruth steps in, reminding her husband that there is freedom of religion in newly independent India, but Montforce replies that this is “not the issue.” Taking Ruth aside, he tells her that he cannot approve Pudiate’s appointment. “I must consider what the missionaries have done to these tribals,” Montforce insists. “While failing to consider what they may have done for them!” Ruth retorts. They return to the living room, Ruth in the lead, but Pudiate has already gone, leaving behind the opportunity that had initially been so tempting.

There are two things I’d like to take away from this brief moment in American Evangelical cinema, both of which follow from Larsen’s treatment of British anthropologists. The first is what this film told Christians about anthropology. This is a movie made for Evangelical audiences in the days before the internet, and likely screened primarily in churches. (I remember watching *China Cry*, another film by James Collier, in a darkened Baptist sanctuary in my tiny Minnesota hometown sometime in the early 1990s). Most people who saw *Beyond the Next Mountain*—like most Americans then and now—would not have known what it was that anthropologists did. We can therefore safely assume that *Beyond the Next Mountain* was for many viewers the first impression they had of anthropology. In that impression, they saw the discipline’s contempt for missionaries represented back to them in Dr. Montforce’s ire toward the hero of the film, a fellow Christian. There’s no way to determine the ultimate impact of this representation,

but I’m tempted to see in this brief scene a warning to Evangelicals about anthropology: this is a discipline in which stories like Rochunga Pudiate’s (and yours) are scoffed at, rather than celebrated.

But beyond the simple reproduction for an Evangelical audience of anthropology’s disdain for missions, *Beyond the Next Mountain* also offers something of a rejoinder to this position. The film portrays the anthropologist as arrogant and godless, appalled at what missionaries had “done to” people like the Hmar. Most of the foreigners in the film are painted in a similar light. There’s the British colonial officer, who in the opening scene tells missionary Watkin Roberts, “Colonial policy absolutely prohibits you mucking about with the tribals!” Later, Rochunga Pudiate’s father meets an American missionary who wants to build a church for the “tribal” people down in the valley, away from their home. When the elder Pudiate refuses, insisting that his people can worship where they are, he is beaten for his insubordination with the missionary’s consent. Even at Wheaton Rochunga Pudiate is met with some skepticism, responding to a professor’s question about his denominational affiliation to say that the Hmar people have “only Jesus.” The only real exception to this paternalistic rule is Watkin Roberts, who ignores the injunction against “mucking about” and enters Hmar territory alone, striking out over the hills with a pith helmet and a pack mule, “Guide me, Oh thou Great Jehovah!” on his lips.

Roberts and the Pudiate men are the clear heroes of *Beyond the Next Mountain*, mainly because of their shared resistance to earthly authority, whether that of the British Raj, the Indian government, or denominational structures. This characterization is partly a reflection of American Evangelicalism’s strong anti-institutional bent. But we might also consider what the film reveals about anthropology. When Christians tell the story of an anthropologist they have known or imagined, what do they say? In the case of *Beyond the Next Mountain*, the decision to include anthropological disdain for missions alongside other forms of western paternalism clearly categorizes the former as an instance of the latter. In other words, the anthropologist Dr. Montforce is no different than the imperial officer or indeed his colonial missionary counterpart in his insistence that he knew what was best for the Hmar people. This view echoes the “colonization of consciousness” arguments popular at the time the film was written, which described indigenous converts as having been “enticed, *often*

*unwittingly*, into conversation with Christianity,” a conversation “whose terms they *could not but* internalize” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1986, 16, emphasis mine).

Of course, both *Beyond the Next Mountain* and the Comaroffs’ critique of missionization are now decades old. Larsen’s analysis also leaves off around the same time. In the intervening years, anthropology has changed a great deal. Most relevant for our discussion is the establishment of a robust anthropology of Christianity that includes an anthropology of Christian missions (e.g. Handman 2014; Vilaça 2016; Wintrup 2021). Alongside this more expansive study of Christian practice, anthropology has also come to reconsider its secularist assumptions, and appeals to the possibility of a post- or nonsecular anthropology as a site of political and theoretical insight are increasingly common (e.g. Fountain 2013; Oliphant 2021; McAllister and Napolitano 2021).

In the light of these developments, it is possible to argue that the experience of Christian missionization exposes anthropological paternalism with particular efficacy. Anthropologist Nathaniel Roberts has written about Pentecostalism in Chennai in the broader context of Indian anti-conversion laws, which are aimed at both outcaste Hindus and ethnic minorities like the Hmar. Through a careful discussion of the colonization of consciousness argument, Roberts (2012) has shown that anti-missionary sentiment in anthropology turns on ideas about the nature of religion and of human will that follow from the discipline’s liberal and secularist underpinnings. Ironically, his analysis demonstrates that these ideas are shared by the Hindu nationalists who advocate conversion bans, but not the Christian converts he studies. In presenting this argument, Roberts makes a move that compliments Larsen’s observations. Like Larsen, Roberts doesn’t want to reduce anthropological critiques of mission to mere prejudice against Christians. Instead, he shows that the problem missionization presents anthropologists is a result of some of the discipline’s grounding assumptions. Querying these assumptions allows Roberts to both more closely represent the experiences of his Christian informants, and to expand the theoretical boundaries of anthropology. As a piece that does similar work, Larsen’s analysis represents a contribution to anthropological theory as much as to historical study of the discipline, revealing some of the background to our background assumptions and helping us to see them in new ways.

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**Naomi Haynes** is Senior Lecturer and Chancellor's Fellow in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. As an anthropologist working at the intersection of religion and public life, her research interests include Christianity, political economy, and theology. Haynes' first monograph, *Moving by the Spirit*, explored the impact of the prosperity gospel on the social life of Pentecostal congregations in urban Zambia. Haynes is currently completing her second monograph, *A Divine Season*, which explores Zambian Christian nationalist activism during the recent presidency of Edgar Lungu. Research for this project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) and the British Academy.

*Author email:* [Naomi.Haynes@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Naomi.Haynes@ed.ac.uk)

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