The British Empire was the British state at its most expansive and diverse, though it was far from being as collectivised as the metropolitan British state was becoming by the mid-nineteenth century. The Church of England had moved during the first half of the nineteenth century from a paradigm of partnership with the state with regard to its colonial extension to one of increasing autonomy. This paradigm shift had begun in the 1840s with the establishment of the Colonial Bishoprics Fund in 1841 and was increasingly well-entrenched in church circles by the succeeding decade.

This chapter looks at the interface in the mid-nineteenth century between the Church and England and the imperial state of which it was still nominally the established Church. It does so through the viewpoint of prominent Anglican preachers in England, both from Britain and the colonies. The sermons indicate a more critical distance between church and state in this period with respect to the British Empire, and an engagement with the empire by the Church of England that increasingly left the state out of the reckoning. The chapter focuses on the reasons behind this development, and the ways in which these leading Anglicans configured the empire as the nineteenth century drew closer to its period of high imperialism in British culture.

The rector of a City of London parish, John Harding, preached in 1847 to the Church of England Society for Educating the Poor in Newfoundland and the Colonies, a society founded in 1823 by an evangelical merchant, which attracted substantial government grants in support of its aims during the 1820s. His theme was “The claims of the colonies on the friends of missions to the heathen,” with Harding setting out for his audience his theological understanding of the imperial British state, and portraying an understanding of the Britishness of that empire, which he saw as a major component of the unity of the global imperial state. In doing so he spelled out for them what he considered was the state’s singular failure—to support the extension of the Church and Christianity.

Harding commented on the comparative neglect of colonial Britons by the Churches, in contrast to their great efforts for converting the heathen, although the former had a greater claim than did the latter upon British Churches. In the colonies, because of this neglect, Britons were sliding into heathenish immorality. “They are alienated from the life of God, engrossed in the cares of this world, solicitous only as to what they shall eat, and what they shall drink, and wherewithal they shall be clothed; unanxious on the great question of them all—what must they do to be saved.” But while the heathen had some glimmer of light in the works of the Creator around them, the case of the colonists was the more dire one of being apostate from the divine truth they had been introduced to at home and, therefore, more culpable. Yet the situation of these lapsed colonists was a direct result of the action of the British state, because their emigration was encouraged by the state in the form of parliamentary legislation:

The whole community, as represented by the great council of the nation, has encouraged them by legislative acts to seek their home on other shores. The national conscience, therefore, is implicated in the transaction. And if it is now apparent to us that, by sanctioning colonisation, we have assisted to place millions of our fellow-men in circumstances of great distress and danger, how can we refuse to own, in that very distress and danger, a demand upon us in the sight of God not to be resisted? God holds every nation as collectively answerable for its national acts.

An even greater moral responsibility lay upon the state for its penal colonies, which had created landscapes of moral destitution without the means of redemption:

England’s Australian colonies, so far as they have been thus employed, present at this hour, in the sight of Heaven, one of the darkest spots on the circuit of the habitable world. Thither have we transported crowds of wretched people only to demoralise them still more. There have we poured out the vilest of the filth and scum of our own land, and left it, as it were, to taint with a perpetual plague some of the fairest fields of God’s creation . . . What a mass of depravity have we imported into those regions which cannot now be withdrawn!

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2 John Harding, The Claims of the Colonies on the Friends of Missions to the Heathen. A Sermon preached before the Church of England Society for Educating the Poor in Newfoundland and the Colonies at its Twenty-fourth Anniversary, in the Parish Church of St. Dunstan, Fleet Street, on Monday, April 26, 1847 (1847), p. 6.
3 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
4 Ibid., p. 9.
5 Ibid., p. 10.