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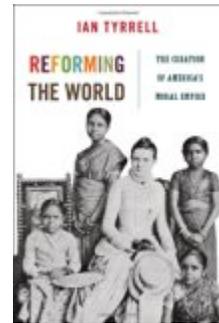
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ian Tyrrell. *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. x + 322 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-14521-1.

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Toward a New World Moral Order

The subject of American Protestants as reformers is not exactly a new one in social and religious history, and American imperialism in its various manifestations has been the focus of an enormous amount of scholarly attention in recent years. Attempts to tie the two themes together, however, have not abounded. Foreign missions have of late begun to attract the attention of scholars outside the rather constricted circle of missiology, but they still remain somewhat rare in the history of American evangelicalism.

Australian scholar Ian Tyrrell attempts to bridge this hiatus in *Reforming the World*. Influenced by Jürgen Habermas, Tyrrell argues that American Protestant reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped to create a “transnational public space” that correlated with rapidly spreading American global influence but could not be reduced to a simple reflection of political and economic hegemony. The agendas and means of these reformers had their origins in earlier Anglo-American moral crusades, especially that against slavery, but were now projected into a grander spatial dimension through the rapid development of the technology of transportation and communication. In parallel with international congresses that began to convene to coordinate national interests on a global scale, international voluntary associations also began to proliferate, growing out of the matrix of religiously motivated moral reform already firmly established in the United States. The result was an explosion of information, brought to the United States both by returning missionaries as well as

indigenous visitors from mission lands who sought support for Christian causes or, on occasion, served as reverse missionaries of traditional Asian religions. Tyrrell argues that this complex give-and-take among Americans, fellow evangelicals in Europe and the British Commonwealth, and residents of “heathen” realms was more than simply an attempted imposition of Western Protestant religion and culture on benighted “others.” Rather, he argues that American innocents abroad were capable of learning from their international experience and viewing uninformed attempts at unilateral moral export with a critical eye.

In succeeding chapters, Tyrrell traces the development of these international campaigns for moral reform led by interdenominational voluntary groups based in the United States in what might be called the Benevolent Empire abroad. He begins with the missionary sisters Mary and Margaret Leith of Vermont, who began as agents for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in what was then Ceylon, and expanded the concern of their mission from converting the heathen into a broader campaign for humanitarian forms, including campaigns against opium and alcohol. Tyrrell cites their ability to transcend their American identity through cooperation with their British counterparts as pointing toward the emergence of a transnational sphere of evangelical Christian identity, which could be sharply critical of the policies of the religious groups and governments of their home countries. Subsequent topics include—among many others—the Young Men’s Chris-

tian Association (YMCA) and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the student volunteer movement, the King's Daughters, and the World's Women Christian Temperance Union, all of which became involved—not always smoothly—with like-minded Protestant reformers abroad.

One focus of Tyrrell's book is the issues raised by the U.S. imperial experience that arose from the outcome of the war with Spain in 1898, especially in the Philippines. Here Episcopal missionary bishop Charles Henry Brent became involved in disagreements with the federal government, represented by fellow Episcopalian Elihu Root, over a pragmatic versus a morally absolutist position on such issues as the opium trade and the availability of alcohol to American servicemen. Although Brent was a Washington insider who shared an ideology of paternalistic expansionism with Root and his circle, he nevertheless represented a moral idealism at odds with the realpolitik that regarded religion as a means to achieving American policy rather than a standard by which secular ends were to be judged. Interestingly, sea-power advocate Alfred Thayer Mahan, yet another Episcopalian, was the author of a book entitled *The Harvest Within: Thoughts on the Life of the Christian* (1909), in which he justified American imperial policy on the grounds of the divine mission of the American nation.

Tyrrell traces the decline of the movement of transnational moral reform to the split that increasingly rent evangelical Protestantism into liberal and fundamentalist camps during the early twentieth century and the failure

of the Prohibition movement in the United States, which was even less successful abroad because of the absolutism of the American approach and its leaders' failure to appreciate more nuanced attitudes toward alcohol in European cultures. International reform efforts did not disappear in the 1930s. Instead, they took more worldly forms in such groups as the YMCA, which emphasized social service over conversion and newer movements, and the Rotary Clubs, which had no traditional religious agenda at all. Although U.S. cultural imperialism by no means disappeared, it would no longer take the form primarily of efforts to transform the world on an American evangelical model through the work of international volunteer efforts.

Tyrrell's thesis is largely persuasive and significant, and is based on exhaustive documentary evidence. His narrative and argument occasionally become difficult to follow, partially because of the proliferation of examples of similar agencies and movements that he adduces. Perhaps the least successful aspect is his suggestion that considerable reciprocity took place between American and other Western moral reformers and the indigenous peoples they attempted to redeem. Although he does provide a few examples of Asians visiting the United States, he does not provide sufficient examples of cultural hybridity to justify this exchange as a major theme. Nevertheless, his is an important work in its demonstration of the complexity of the reform impulse of the era and its equally complex relationship with the emergence of the American imperial enterprise.

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