



**Ian Tyrrell.** *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 336 S. ISBN 978-661263955-5; ISBN 978-1-4008-3663-5.

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## I. Tyrrell: Reforming the World

For the past two decades, Ian Tyrrell has engaged in a wide-ranging scholarship to delineate the contours of American empire. Maintaining that an exclusive focus on territorial empire is misplaced, he has argued consistently that historians need to enlarge the conceptual framework through which they explore American imperialism. He looks beyond military, political, and economic interventions to emphasize patterns of cultural and ideological expansion. In his latest book, *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire*, Tyrrell redeploys Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony to examine the moral reform movements of evangelical American Protestants from 1880 to 1930. Although evangelical reformers envisioned a Christian empire, that empire was imbued with Anglo-American energy. In this richly researched work, Tyrrell demonstrates convincingly that a diverse army of interlocking transnational reform groups shaped a vision of American global power by seeking a leadership role for Americans in voluntary associations across the world.

Tyrrell employs the term cultural hegemony not in the spirit of dominance and subjugation but as the exercise of power under a shared moral and political order in which that power is the subject of multilateral contestation among nations and classes (p. 3). This clarification rejects a unilateral, unidirectional perspective on American transnational activities and opens them up to the possibilities of cooperation, challenge and negotiation. Tyrrell emphasizes the many examples of Anglo-American collaboration across organizations, highlights

the moments when American leadership in transnational movements was disrupted, describes situations in which movements adapted to local contingencies, and points to instances when the activities of moral reformers intersected with or prompted action by the state.

The expansive surge in transnational Protestant organizations occurred within a context of technological developments that facilitated global transportation and communication and within the steady rise of the United States to a position of global power. Historians familiar with Tyrrell's earlier work will not be surprised to see the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU) feature prominently in this book as an organization that intersected with the state to promote its visions of moral reform. In addition to the WWCTU, Tyrrell includes such well known organizations as the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) as well as lesser-known associations such as the World League Against Alcoholism (WLAA), the King's Daughters and the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor.

These American-led transnational groups promoted Protestant Christianity; but in the 1890s in the face of humanitarian disasters they interlocked to probe untapped sources of charitable giving and create new relief organizations. They worked to relieve famines in India and Russia and support refugees from the Armenian massacres in the Ottoman Empire. In these ef-

forts they were greatly assisted by prominent individuals from those countries such as Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, Tatyana Tolstoy, and Herant Kiretchjian. Tyrrell argues that evangelical-humanitarian movements for international relief contributed to shaping U.S. foreign policy in the era and anticipated the beginning of U.S. foreign aid.

The relief efforts of evangelical reformers sensitized Americans to Spanish actions in Cuba and contributed to a set of circumstances that brought the United States to war in 1898. When the United States acquired colonial possessions in the aftermath of that war, however, many evangelical reformers found themselves championing anticolonial causes and distancing themselves from the power of formal empire. In the process they shaped a global Christian vision that coexisted with, supported, and at times challenged U.S. colonial authorities. Reformers worked diligently to oppose the licensing of alcohol, opium, and prostitution in the Philippines. For them, the whole point of American empire was to combat oppression, engage in moral uplift, and offer a superior example of empire to European imperial powers. Here was the essence of American exceptionalism, which was reinforced during the era of Wilsonian progressivism.

Individuals acting at the periphery of transnational organizations also enjoyed occasional successes at forcing evangelical reformers into more radical positions. Tyrrell describes the Anglo-American collaboration of anti-lynching activists Catherine Impey and Ida Wells-Barnett. Their efforts to raise awareness about pernicious racism and lynching in the American South prompted British temperance women to force an apparently reluctant WWCTU to take a strong stand against lynching in 1895. In a very different example, British temperance workers were able to thwart radical attempts by the WLAA to promote prohibition in Europe, arguing instead for less austere local solutions to the problem of alcoholism.

Tyrrell offers a particularly compelling account of the ways in which individual Americans participated in multiple overlapping transnational networks of moral reform in a biographical sketch of Mary and Margaret Leitch. Born in Vermont, the sisters quite literally wandered the world in the service of moral reform. They began their

joint career with a commission from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1879 to work in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) where they were also associated with the WWCTU, the YMCA, and the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor. In 1887 they engaged in fundraising work in Glasgow and by 1890 they were in London working for the Zenana Medical and Bible Mission. Journeying to the United States, they joined fundraising organizations for various missionary activities before heading back to Ceylon in 1893 where they labored on behalf of an anti-opium campaign. Returning finally to the United States, they lobbied American politicians on behalf of humanitarian aid for Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, famine relief for India, and anti-alcohol and anti-opium policies in American colonies. They continued their transnational lobbying efforts even through their bleak retirement years of genteel poverty.

Tracing individual lives through transnational networks, Tyrrell is able to show how reformers moved among organizations, across national boundaries, and between voluntary movements and state power in a large number of countries to achieve their objectives. It is precisely this interconnectedness that created the networks of empire that for Tyrrell lie at the heart of American imperialism, even if reformers did not always meet their goals. Those networks were nonetheless challenged by events in the United States in the early twentieth century. The repeal of Prohibition and the split between liberals and fundamentalists struck at the core of the moral reform movement. Competing networks emerged in the formation of new transnational groups such as Rotary International and well-heeled agencies such as the Rockefeller Foundation. As Tyrrell shows in his conclusion, some moral reformers adjusted easily to this new world of cultural hegemony; others did not.

*Reforming the World* is a highly readable, sophisticated analysis of transnational American reform networks that draws on a wide range of primary sources. The book makes a powerful argument about the contributions of interconnected evangelical reformers to the shaping of American empire. It is now for others to deliver on the promise of the transnational turn by researching the responses of the very diverse societies across the world where Americans promoted their programs.

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