

Introduction

GOD, GOLD, AND GLORY. This is the trio of “G’s” that many a history student has memorized to understand the motives for European imperialism. The same student would also learn that the 1890s witnessed an upsurge in American overseas “expansion,” marking the emergence of the United States as a world power. Not literally for gold did they go overseas, but Americans traded abroad, looking for markets and resources. They also sent missionaries on behalf of the Christian God. In the name of humanitarian intervention, they even acquired colonies across the seas.¹ Rudyard Kipling called on Americans to take up the white man’s burden, and for a time they did. Republican Party politicians promised benevolent tutelage and improvement as the destiny for the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the other islands that fell into the American grasp after the Spanish-American War of 1898. Glory was not absent either. American foreign policy took on a more vigorous tone, and the Caribbean became effectively an American lake in which military intervention was promised—if European powers failed to heed the Monroe Doctrine. Soon Cuba, then Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, Haiti, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and other places felt the American military footprint. A pattern of controlling other peoples through military and financial power had been set. All this appeared to be the product of a restless, expansionist economy and culture.

At the time, prominent historians had no trouble conceiving of this activity as empire, nor did many politicians. Those who supported and those who opposed the colonial acquisitions of 1898 tended not to argue over whether the United States was an empire but whether imperialism was a good thing. Yet for decades thereafter, empire came to be a dirty word in the American lexicon. When Admiral George Dewey, the “hero of Manila,” returned in 1899 triumphant from the defeat of the Spanish navy in the Philippines in July 1898, the proud citizens of New York raised a victory arch modeled on the precedents of classical Rome. The Beaux-Arts edifice told in its sculptures and inscriptions of an American fleet triumphant, uniting the East and West Indies in one world. But, in 1900, efforts to raise money for a permanent version of the hastily constructed monument faltered, and the original plaster of Paris and cement structure soon had to be removed because the elements had taken their toll.² Americans had begun to forget their empire. When the Wilson administration came to power in 1913 it initiated moves for Philippinization of the colonial government. The United States withdrew its occupy-

ing force from Cuba in 1902 and Congress affirmed in 1903 the terms of that nation's "independence," though with restrictions that smacked of informal American control, and Hawaii was admitted as a territory in 1898. Distant Samoa, tiny Guam in the Pacific, and Puerto Rico joined the Philippines under American rule, but Americans swept their island empire under the rug with the euphemism of the "insular possessions," and a Bureau of Insular Affairs, not a "colonial office," to run them. Though intermittently raised as an issue or made central to analysis of American history by intrepid scholars in the 1920s and 1930s, the expansionism of the 1890s to 1914 characteristically appeared thereafter in history books as an aberration. Many believed that Americans did not "do" or "seek" empire, as Donald Rumsfeld put it so pithily.³ A great many books have recently been written about American empire,⁴ but scholarly and public debate still struggles over the terms of the discussion, because the American experience did not seem to fit classical European imperialism. This comparative approach tends to treat American expansion overseas and other empires as self-contained entities to be contrasted.⁵ The approach falsely creates an ideal type of empire based on formal acquisition of territories, an established imperial ruling class, hostility to decolonization, and the treatment of colonial peoples as dependents.

Whatever the terminological quibbles over the course of empire in American history as a whole, it is clear that the United States did have an empire in the years before World War I. That the formal colonies were limited in scope should not hide that fact; nor should terminology obscure the extensive informal empire that the United States developed through both economic techniques and military intervention. American actions encompassed a "conscious" (if often temporary) "desire to conquer" and a persistent pattern of political and economic domination that arguably conforms to commonsense definitions of informal empire.⁶ Nor should the exercise of moral and cultural influence be ignored, where directed toward supporting either formal or informal imperial control. These efforts might simply be ideological, but they may also be material ones in providing support for the colonial state in the contracting out of social and cultural services.

In this book I wish to broaden the context of the drive toward American imperialism—situating it within wider patterns of informal American expansion and the transnational networks implicated in those patterns. While the informal empire of free trade and the Open Door policy is a concept extensively explored by others,⁷ nineteenth-century moral reform as another and arguably important part of informal and formal U.S. empire has not been the subject of much analysis beyond a few individual case studies.⁸ Americans exported a wide variety of organizations designed for moral uplift, from the well-known and influential

Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Young Men's (and Women's) Christian Association to the less well-known or totally obscure, such as the King's Daughters, the International Anti-Cigarette League, and the World's Good Habits Society.⁹ Collectively, I call such groups "moral reformers." In their enterprise to improve both morally and materially the countries to which they went, they were joined by an immense array of missionary forces, including the boards of the denominational churches that administered overseas work, raised money, and kept the faithful at home informed. These groups were not identical in aims, structures, pet causes, or impacts, but they networked and overlapped extensively in their strategies, tactics, and ideologies. They also cooperated and lobbied within the United States to promote moral reform abroad. However, none of this activity was exclusively an American domain. Some of these societies had key foreign organizers and supporters and some were first created in other countries though later adapted or transformed in the United States. Their work exhibited transnational influences upon the United States, even as the tendency over time was for the work to become more American centered and the transnational influence less reciprocal.

All of these groups were part of a larger universe of American cultural expansion that included tourists, popular culture, and sporting groups. Though often of considerable importance, these activities rarely took organizational form or became closely connected with American empire. When they did, as with the export of baseball to the Caribbean, the Pacific, and East Asia, these aspects of the spread of American culture often either occurred through the work of missionaries or mimicked the missionaries. Albert G. Spalding, the promoter who undertook a world tour in 1888–89 to spread the influence of baseball, followed in the tracks of the moral reformers and explicitly called his players "Base Ball missionaries."¹⁰

American cultural expansion abroad may be analyzed using the terminology of "soft power," but there are better approaches. Coined to describe the cultural and social influences exerted by the United States abroad in recent decades, the term lacks precision, the boundaries between soft and "hard" power are difficult to establish, and little agency can be given to the people subject to this power. More preferable for the study of moral reform is an older term. Cultural hegemony means not "domination" as raw power but the exercise of power under a shared moral and political order in which that power is the subject of multi-lateral contestation among nations and classes.¹¹ Power is the product of ruled as well as rulers, of subordinate as well as dominant nations. This power is reciprocal in its practices. Effects do not simply proceed outward but flow inward as events, circumstances, and people abroad influence the United States.

The focus here is not the larger patterns of American economic and cultural integration with the wider world¹² but the organizational and cultural changes in American voluntary reform abroad from the 1880s to the 1920s. Nor does this book concentrate on the reception of American reform ideas outside the United States. That would require not just one study but many, dealing with the complexities and specifics of very diverse societies to which Americans pitched their missionary messages. This is, however, a book about moral reformers exporting their ideas, interacting with one another in the process, and responding to stimuli from abroad in shaping their programs.

Moral reform groups and missionaries often thought of their work as analogous to empire—but a kind of Christian moral empire that rose above “nation,” and one nobler in aspiration than the grubby motives of gold and glory.¹³ Catholics were not part of this movement. Evangelical missionaries did not regard Rome as an ally abroad, but eyed Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians as sources of potential converts to a purer form of faith. And the Catholic Church saw the United States itself as a mission field, not a source of missionary enterprise.¹⁴ The relationship between Protestant reformers’ aspiration to create a more Christian and moral world on the one hand and the emergence of American imperialism and colonialism beginning in 1898 on the other is at the heart of what follows. Cultural expansion in the form of missionaries and moral reform enlarged what could be termed the external “footprint” of the United States in the 1880s and 1890s, creating conditions wherein a more vigorous economic and political expansion could be seriously considered. American reformers fashioned their own version of a non-territorial “empire” grounded in networks of moral reform organizations that pursued innovative policies and sought a hegemonic position within the world of voluntary, non-government action across the Euro-American world and its colonies. In the process, American reformers articulated a vision that was global. The emergence of American formal empire in 1898 posed a challenge to this distinctive configuration, and moral reform organizations met formal imperialism’s growth by developing a loose coalition of Christian groups that lobbied for changes to the United States’ relationships with its colonies and the wider world. This informal coalition settled for a time after 1898 around the work of Wilbur F. Crafts and the American-based International Reform Bureau. The groups associated with his work conceded that American empire did include colonies that provided opportunities for Christian proselytizing, but formal empire was not to be their major focus. The larger project of moral reformers to remake the world in terms of Protestant cultural values was vigorously reasserted by the moral coalition. In the era of World War I and its aftermath, this approach grew stronger and displaced as

much as complemented reform of the formal empire. Throughout I argue that the boundaries between Christian evangelical networks operating on a transnational level and formal empire were blurred, with the latter phenomenon essentially embedded within the former.

While talk of networks is now becoming popular in theorizing about transnational political movements in the contemporary world,¹⁵ the deeper pedigree of such movements has rarely been studied and still more rarely theorized. The practical way that networks operated in the history of American empire is imperfectly understood.¹⁶ This book considers the analytical framework of these networks and provides the empirical detail required to trace their operation and impacts. In the process it outlines the fascinating broader context of American moral expansionism from the 1870s to the 1920s. Building up a picture of such networks requires more than theory. Political scientists interested in transnational social movements consider a range of characteristics including denseness of communication, patterns of agenda setting, and lobbying, among other things, but such concepts are essentially empirical and descriptive.¹⁷ Studying networks requires patient documentation of how people across different fields got to know and support one another. These networks depended on the life histories, aspirations, and cultural heritage of moral reformers. This book tells the stories of such people.

Historians are beginning to reassess religion's role in American life, and a key element in this reassessment must be the role of evangelical missionary and moral reform institutions during the era of high European imperialism.¹⁸ "Cultural imperialism" is, as we shall see, too blunt an instrument to fully comprehend these relationships, but connections with the power of colonialism and imperialism there certainly were.¹⁹ The association between religion and Protestant morality on the one hand and American expansion on the other might seem far from new. After all, Manifest Destiny, popularized as a phrase during the annexation of Texas and the subsequent war with Mexico, had an explicit religious justification. The moral movement of the 1880s to the 1920s was not, however, one of rhetorical justification for expansion but intrinsic to that process. It concerned the shaping of expansion and often the criticism of expansion that did not conform to evangelical morals; it was far from simply being a gloss on power. Along a similar vein, it might be argued that the Christian mobilization beginning in the 1880s was merely a continuation of the missions to the Indians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. No doubt the memory of Puritan heroes and heroines of that time spurred missionary zeal into new efforts to carry the Gospel into "heathen lands." Yet the first turn toward overseas missionary work came in the 1810s and 1820s—long before the 1880s, when external stimuli proved more important.²⁰ Nor is the more general argument valid that

Americans sought an alternative to the “closing” of the frontier of the American West in the 1890s. The sequence of events does not fit. In 1893, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared on the basis of Bureau of the Census data that the frontier period ended in 1890, but a good deal of frontier development occurred after this, and the pattern of moral mobilization for expansion revealed in this book began earlier, in the 1880s.²¹ Moreover, Christian reformers did not cite the role of the frontier’s end as the reason to turn abroad. Their motives almost always raised the external crisis that the global spread of imperialism posed and did not call for acquisition of more land.²² The connecting thread in what follows is, therefore, not internal imperatives or the logic of evangelistic campaigns but the transnational organizing of American Protestant Christians seeking to change the world.

These campaigns forged in reform what sociologists call transnational spaces. The latter grew on the foundations of the accelerating velocity of international non-governmental organizations in the Euro-American world and the greater cooperation between nations that emerged in the late nineteenth century.²³ Transnational work influenced the United States as much as it did the colonial and quasi-colonial peoples that Americans touched and shaped the architecture of American dealings with the larger world of empires through to the era of Woodrow Wilson. In the process, transnational organizing established strong assumptions and even institutions and practices that survived to become part of the foundations of American global power in the twentieth century.

A word on the use of “transnational” and competitor terms is in order here. The term “international” refers to the formal, political interactions of nation-state institutions. “Internationalism,” a concept common at the time, is used here to mean the practice and promotion of interstate cooperation, whereas “the transnational” includes the broader field of non-governmental social, cultural, and economic activities. This more modern term describes the movement of peoples, goods, ideas, and institutions across national boundaries in the era of nation-state building. One common application, used in this study, focuses on the transnational “production” of the nation, in this case the relationship between the United States and the wider world. For the United States, the late nineteenth century to the end of World War I was a crucial period for the growth of the federal state. Through recent historiography, the state’s links with overseas empire and war in those years are becoming ever more obvious.²⁴ Transnational influences helped shape the American nation-state, but transnational history also includes study of the transnational spaces—both mental and material—that individuals and groups created outside of nation. Though culturally influenced by their American roots and newfound national power, Protestant missionaries and moral reform-

ers forged spaces that engaged foreign influences in ways that had their own integrity, yet also fed back to the United States. The complicated dialectic between the national and the transnational is the key theme in this book.²⁵

The international and missionary context for the development of American moral reform abroad was the development of communications networks. If the 1840s represented a communications and transport revolution nationally, the 1870s and 1880s saw a global revolution of equally profound proportions. The quickening pace of technological and social change facilitated the expansionist aims of missionaries and moral reformers. These matters are the themes of part 1. Patterns of trade, tourism, transport, and communications highlighted American awareness of the nation's growing international interdependency. As the external connections of Americans grew, the nation became enmeshed in new transnational flows that were global rather than merely transatlantic. In these ways, as chapter 1 shows, the nation's people became increasingly interested in and influenced by circumstances beyond national borders. American missionary work was both transformed by these changes and contributed to them. Two women missionaries, Mary and Margaret Leitch, touched so much of the American project for moral reform that their story helps construct a model for the development of transnational networks and for the impact of experience abroad on the design and practice of cultural expansion undertaken by missionary groups and moral reformers in the era of a global communications revolution (chapter 2). While the material networks that allowed the ideas of missionaries to flourish must be taken seriously, so too must these missionaries' intense enthusiasms rooted in ideology and religious belief.

Within this context of transnational connections and networks, part 2 locates the origins of American empire in the phenomenal growth of Protestant missionary groups and moral reformers in the 1880s and 1890s, starting with the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions. Rather than dynamic internal development spilling beyond American borders, external stimuli drew Americans abroad, encouraging in the process innovative policies and organizational forms for the missionary endeavor. The experience of missionary outreach (charted in chapter 3) required rethinking the entire organizational basis of the Christian reform enterprises. This process spurred attempts to galvanize the faithful into new practices of systematic giving, lay leadership, non-denominational cooperation, business-church alliances, and departmental specialization.

Reflecting the ferment of missionary enthusiasm, distinctive reform groups arose in the 1880s to extend the American moral reach and provide support for it. They shared tactics, methods, and personnel to

produce a matrix of moral reform that pushed an American way of organizing Protestant religion abroad (chapter 4). Christian Endeavor, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union (World's WCTU) were representative organizations that campaigned for social, economic, and political assistance for missionaries and their subjects. These groups reveal a relatively equal balance of gender contributions to reform, yet unequal experience and power relations. The efforts of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) paralleled on a smaller scale those of the YMCA and took organizational forms from the latter. Both were products of the evangelicalism stirring manifest in the Student Volunteers, an organization that strongly reasserted the role of men within the mission field. Nevertheless the YWCA, along with the King's Daughters, WCTU, and other organizations revealed the complex gender dynamics at work in the missionary impulse. The tensions inherent in an attempted masculinization of a crusade where women as missionaries were increasingly vital bearers of faith acted as a spur to continual innovation in the structures of organized moral reform.²⁶

Chapter 5 develops the theme of "humanitarianism" as a central principle of the reformers' work in the 1890s. From the Russian famine of 1892 to the military intervention in Cuba in 1898, American humanitarianism flourished through relief campaigns undertaken by the *Christian Herald* and its charismatic editor, Louis Klopsch, the WCTU, Clara Barton and the American Red Cross, and missionaries. Historians have mostly ignored these pioneer relief efforts and their connections with the pattern of economic and political expansion.²⁷ Yet the ideological and practical functions of humanitarian gestures show how reformers developed a culture encouraging intervention in the affairs of other countries that brought the United States to the threshold of the Spanish-American War, and yet how humanitarianism championed the United States as an anti-imperial force.²⁸

The acquisition of a formal empire in 1898 cut across the objectives of transnational organizing and further stimulated the moral reform organizations, encouraging them to direct efforts toward a more nation-centered Christian coalition that would reshape the American empire (documented in part 3). These challenges centered on the struggles over the military canteen, the regulation of prostitution, and the licensing of opium in the new American possessions abroad (chapters 6 and 7). American administrators proposed to mimic other empires and adapt morals and manners to the circumstances of colonial peoples. As reformers fought back against what they regarded as errant policies, their work became further interconnected as a moral coalition. Lobbying the national government to achieve transnational objectives became paramount

because it was in Washington that the power to effect change lay. These moral lobbyists linked the crusades against “vice” to the creation of a new and more moral kind of empire.

While the main organizations discussed in this book compromised with empire far enough to seek improvement in the institutions of the American colonial enterprise, some individuals challenged the attachment of reformers to the colonial state and the international order of European imperial domination. Intrepid reformers championed the interests of oppressed groups, including the colonial peoples themselves. Some of the challenges that radicals posed were connected to broader Anglo-American imperial networks and drew on patterns of indigenous nationalist reform. The agitation of Ida Wells on lynching, using the anti-racist and anti-imperial platforms provided by Englishwoman Catherine Impey, was one such campaign, discussed in chapter 8. Other dissenters included missionaries whose colonial experience reshaped their later radicalism in the United States. These activists did not shake the foundations of American empire. Nevertheless, their voices registered significant capacity for moral dissent within the reform tradition and exposed mainstream reform’s sometimes feeble acquiescence in conventional power structures in the underdeveloped world. Radical agitation also revealed how the reciprocal effects of empire could be felt upon the United States through the experiences of transnational reformers.

Did moral reformers have any influence over the reconstruction of American statecraft brought about by the rise of empire? Part 4 addresses this question. Opportunities there were, but the relationships were complicated. Leading politicians and strategists often expressed moral and Christian convictions comparable to those of missionaries and reformers, yet this is not to say that American imperial adventures were in any sense caused by moral reform entanglements. As chapter 9 shows, presidents and their advisors might be on friendly terms with such people, but the practical politics of government remained paramount. Nevertheless, moral reform organizations subtly contributed to the broader sociopolitical context of American power abroad and aimed at the creation of a Christian state to effect this goal. World War I reinforced this growing allegiance between state and moral reform, and promoted nationalism and American exceptionalism in the process.

The hopes of the Wilsonian new world order affected and expressed the external pattern of evangelical activism after World War I. Though American moral reformers still advocated the movement of ideas, institutions, and personnel across national boundaries, the flow of transnational information became more lopsided. Unmistakably, a flexing of American moral muscle occurred, especially through the World League Against Alcoholism of the 1920s and its ill-fated attempt to apply national prohibi-

tion to other countries (chapter 10). In keeping with the American wartime experience, reformers now sought to remake Europe in the image of the United States as a solution to the evils of the world. The strategy struck at the heart of European empire, while ironically contributing to an American alternative. U.S.-style alcohol reform became intertwined with debates over Americanization, anti-Americanism, and the drive for international hegemony in a turbulent world.

History never ends. Change is ceaseless though not unidirectional; continuity is always part of the story, and so too here. The conclusion surveys the broader landscape of the 1920s and analyzes the forces that brought about an apparent decline in missionary enthusiasm. It also explores the dreams and reflects on the achievements of a number of reformers and missionaries from the perspective of the 1920s, starting with the Misses Leitch. Though their overt goals had not been fully realized and, indeed, dreams had failed to materialize, moral reformers had stamped their own imprint upon conceptions of the nation's global role, and attitudes toward a distinctive form of American empire had been substantially reshaped.