

Conroy-Krutz, Emily. *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early Republic*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015, 5 b&w illus., xvii + 244 pp., \$45.00 cloth.

In *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic*, American religious historian Emily Conroy-Krutz argues that the United States became an empire in the early nineteenth century through the work of missionaries. Through their missions, evangelicals spread American cultural, political, and religious values to Africa, Hawaii, Palestine, India, and around the world. Conroy-Krutz offers a chronological intervention by suggesting that the United States became an empire earlier than historians previously thought, while also illuminating an integral relationship between church and state during the early republic. Although a secular democratic polity limited evangelicals' influence domestically, evangelical missionaries exerted more influence abroad by transforming the American state into an empire.

Conroy-Krutz's term "Christian imperialism" refers to missionaries' efforts to spread Christianity and democracy. Evangelicals sincerely hoped to convert the world, believing that "Christianity was not just a theology; it was a religion that brought with it a superior culture" (p. 213). Yet they remained skeptical of traditional imperialistic pursuits. Conroy-Krutz explains that these missionaries supported "empire in theory, encouraging their countrymen to see it as an opportunity for improving the world, while still being quite critical of many imperial practices that they felt did not live up to this possibility" (p. 8). For example, missionaries' faith-based approach rejected imperial practices of enslaving native peoples and exploiting natural resources. Despite these misgivings, evangelicals had helped lay the groundwork for American imperialism by the late nineteenth century through their efforts to convert the cultures of the world.

While missionaries strengthened American influence around the world, they were less influential close to home. This paradox must have been frustrating because missionaries' limited influence on Native American affairs was not from lack of effort. They protested President Jackson's Indian Removal Act, which contradicted their values because they wanted to convert the Native Americans instead of relocating them (p. 211).

For Conroy-Krutz, missionaries expanded the American empire, and as a result, the state. In this way, *Christian Imperialism* advances the historiography on the problem of church and state.<sup>1</sup> In 1954, Protestant minister and scholar John R. Bodo published *The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues, 1812-1848*, contending that the Protestant clergy coped with their lack of influence in the new state by attempting to create an American theocracy. For Bodo, missionaries' experience with Native American affairs epitomizes the church's decline of authority in the early

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<sup>1</sup> This problem in the early republic refers to the challenge of structuring public authority without religious foundation.

republic.<sup>2</sup> While Conroy-Krutz reaffirms religion's decline in authority, her interpretation of missionaries' global impact is new.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is difficult actually to measure the influence of the American state in the world. Conroy-Krutz successfully argues that American influence expanded. Her account serves as a useful lens for analysis. Still, growing international influence is difficult to quantify. Four maps depict the expansion of Americans' presence around the world. But presence does not necessarily constitute influence, especially when native populations resisted. Her argument is mainly useful for an academic audience. It contributes meaningfully to the historiography of imperialism and of church-state relations, despite this inherent shortcoming of the argument.

In a gripping narrative, Conroy-Krutz situates American empire in the early nineteenth century and illuminates an evolving relationship between church and state. Missionary work abroad expanded and transformed the American state. A major strength of Conroy-Krutz's work is that she draws her argument from careful analysis of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions' correspondence. Her masterful use of these letters reveals the "ways that missionaries attempted to work out what it meant to be a missionary in an imperial context" (p. 17). For example, Rufus Anderson explained the reasoning behind mission locations, such as "heathen countries" and "condition of the people" in his "Instructions of the Prudential Committee to the Reverend John Leighton Wilson" (p. 29). *Christian Imperialism* is an essential account of evangelical missionaries' role in elevating the United States to global significance.

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<sup>2</sup> John R. Bodo, *The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues, 1812-1848* (Princeton University Press, 1954).

<sup>3</sup> Conroy-Krutz is not the only historian who recently revisited Bodo's questions with a new framework. Kyle Volk's *Moral Minorities and the Making of American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2014), for example, reevaluates moral minorities' profound influence on American democracy in the early republic.