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## Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire

Heather J. Sharkey

University of Pennsylvania, [hsharkey@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:hsharkey@sas.upenn.edu)

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## Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire

### Disciplines

Ethics in Religion | History of Christianity | Missions and World Christianity | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

***Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire.* By Ian Tyrrell.**  
America in the World. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. xiv + 322 pp.  
\$35.00 cloth.

A diverse group of Protestant voluntary societies and activists endeavored to create an American “moral empire” at home and abroad in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ian Tyrrell tells their story in *Reforming the World*, a book that is kaleidoscopic in its complex and colorful detail. He draws upon several archives and an enormous range of printed works to consider several organizations, some still flourishing, like the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), and others now defunct, like the King’s Daughters and Ramabai Circles. He also examines several individuals who represented different strands of the reformist movement.

Two events frame this story. On one end, in 1876, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) formed an International Women’s Temperance Union in conjunction with the Philadelphia Centennial International Exhibition. On the other end, in 1933, the U.S. Congress repealed the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, thereby overturning the ban on the making, selling, and transporting of “intoxicating liquors”, which had prevailed in the country since 1920. Prohibition in the United States was the “one last extension of the moral reform networks” of the era that Tyrrell studies; he sees its failure as a lesson in the “daring and sheer overreaching” of American Protestant activists (pp. 208-9).

Through study of “the ideological and practical functions of humanitarian gestures”, manifest in efforts to remedy alcoholism, prostitution, opium addiction, ethnic persecution, and other perceived social ills, Tyrrell contends that American Protestant “reformers developed a culture encouraging intervention in the affairs of other countries”. It was this culture “that brought the United States to the threshold of the Spanish-American war” in 1898 and enabled Americans to take control of the Philippines (p. 8). Yet while Tyrrell acknowledges that growing U.S. might on the international stage facilitated the work of American Protestants abroad, tracing the tangled threads between missionaries and imperialism is not his primary concern. Rather, his argument is that the “transnational organizing of American Protestant Christians seeking to change the world” (p. 6) decisively marked American international policies while also informing domestic American debates on issues like women’s suffrage.

The 1886 debut of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) for foreign missions, with its emphasis on worldwide evangelization, holds an important place in this story, even if most of the activists whom Tyrrell considers never became missionaries in the conventional sense of the term. International connections were critical to establishing the SVM, he argues, but these came not only from the “transatlantic evangelical exchange” that acquainted Americans with like-minded Protestants in Britain, Sweden, and Germany. Rather, a powerful catalyst also came from American Protestants who were working on “the edges of European expansion.” Indeed, he argues, the SVM’s foundational meetings from 1886 to 1888

“were peppered with the speeches of young students or returning missionaries from the field in Asia” (p. 55), notably India and China.

The liveliest portions of the book consider the anxieties that connected – and divided – American reformers. Three anxieties stand out. The first anxiety concerned what John D. Rockefeller, Jr. called “Christian manhood”. Under the leadership of men like John Mott, the SVM “made the issue of masculinity critical” (p. 64) at a time when women were outnumbering men in foreign missions. The SVM “remained an organization in which the assertion of masculine leadership and identity was a central ideological claim.” In Tyrrell’s view, it undervalued women’s work in missions even though “female-driven growth underpinned the SVM’s achievements” (pp. 65-66).

The second anxiety involved race. One of the most dynamic figures in this book is Ida B. Wells, who in the 1890s traveled to Britain to publicize the lynching of African-American men in southern U.S. states. Wells drew connections between the oppression of African-Americans within the United States and the projection of U.S. power abroad; with a few other activists of her age, she managed to “unsettle a self-congratulatory humanitarian consensus” (p. 187). Wells also revealed rifts among reformers. Notably, her speeches in Britain prompted rejoinders from the American Frances Willard, president of the WCTU and a leader among temperance reformers, who insinuated that “African-American men were, indeed, responsible for the moral outrages of interracial sex that led to their lynching” (p. 173).

The third anxiety besetting these reformers arose from fears of secularism. The SVM was born in 1886 in order to “renew a missionary effort perceived to be flagging. According to supporters of missions, one cause of the decline was a secularism that relativized faiths and proclaimed them spiritually equal” (p. 58). These fears had both domestic and foreign grounds. In 1886, leaders of the Christian Endeavor organization claimed that only seventy-five percent of young American men had ever seen the inside of a church, while only fifteen percent attended church regularly (p. 79). From mission fields in South Asia, other fears arose. Notably, there were concerns about Buddhist and Hindu revivals occurring in India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in direct response to Christian missions. The “resurgence of competitors faiths”, argues Tyrrell, was a “vital context” against which the SVM emerged (p. 59).

Why did this surge of Protestant activity fizzle during the interwar era? The rise of new philanthropies, like the Rockefeller Foundation, and of new organizations, like Rotary International (which placed its faith in American business and capitalism) played some role. Tyrrell attributes it also to the overzealousness of temperance activists who propelled Prohibition. “Reforming the world seemed to have come to an end at the hands of a particularly quixotic, wrongheaded crusade.” He adds, “the moral reform movement also suffered from longer term, adverse trends, including growing secularization that affected the religiously minded as much as it did the wider society” (p. 227).

Fear of the secular – commonly interpreted as a loss of religious faith and commitment – haunted Protestant activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But was this secularization real or chimerical? The subsequent social history of the United States and the resurgence of religion in the public sphere suggest another complex story that remains to be told.

**Heather J. Sharkey**

University of Pennsylvania