

## BOOK REVIEW

*Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid*, by Heather D. Curtis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 2018; pp. 370. £23.95).

In this book, Heather D. Curtis uses the *Christian Herald*, which was ‘the most widely read religious newspaper in the world’, to tell the story of three decades of humanitarianism by American Protestants (p. 2). Her nuanced and sympathetic account details relief campaigns on behalf of those suffering in the Ottoman Empire, Russia, China, India, Japan, Cuba and the United States. Based on her belief that existing scholarship has framed American humanitarianism in terms that are too secular, she sets out to offer an ‘alternative account of American humanitarianism’ (p. 3). Curtis’s work fits into an emerging literature by scholars such as Andrew Preston, Lauren Turek and Melani McAlister on the influence of evangelicals on US foreign relations; she takes the lead in moving the chronology of evangelicals’ impact earlier, into the Progressive Era.

Curtis maps the transformation of the *Christian Herald* from purely a journalistic endeavour to a vehicle for fundraising to address the humanitarian crises it catalogued. The principal figures in her account are Thomas De Witt Talmage and Louis Klopsch, the newspaper’s publishers. Curtis’s account emphasises Talmage and Klopsch’s tactics in drawing American evangelicals’ attention to humanitarian crises. Specifically, they published ‘riveting accounts’ of those, for example, starving in Russia (p. 28). They also used ‘pictorial humanitarianism’, some examples of which Curtis includes as illustrations in the book (p. 283). Its approach enabled the *Christian Herald* to raise millions of dollars, an amount which in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was surpassed only by the American Red Cross (ARC). In addition to excelling at fundraising, the *Christian Herald* also effectively distributed aid through local volunteers. By relying largely upon American missionaries, Talmage and Klopsch ensured that the assistance would convey a religious message about the ‘love and kindness’ of Christianity (p. 141). At times, the newspaper’s tactics could complicate American missionaries’ relations with the host government, particularly the Ottoman Empire, but its leadership believed that framing the violence in the Ottoman Empire in religious terms aided their fundraising efforts. They were, therefore, unwilling to adopt the more neutral tone taken by the ARC and the US government.

Over time, the *Christian Herald*’s agenda shifted, in some cases, beyond supporting those suffering calamity to arguing for humanitarian intervention—for example, against the Ottoman sultan in the late nineteenth century. The newspaper’s work also extended into a campaign to welcome immigrants to the United States, particularly those such as the Armenians who fled religious persecution. Eventually the *Christian Herald*’s focus on domestic poverty led the newspaper to embrace reform of the US economic system to alleviate its ill effects. Klopsch and others were asking how best to uplift Americans and safeguard the nation, and this crusade sought to mobilise readers’ activism

rather than just their wallets. The results, however, demonstrated that the *Christian Herald* was more adept at philanthropy than political organising.

In some instances, such as the Central Cuban Relief Committee, which was intended to alleviate the conditions of Cubans as they fought against the Spanish in the late 1890s, leaders at the *Christian Herald* forged a mutually beneficial relationship with US government officials. For example, working closely with humanitarian efforts enabled US leaders such as President William McKinley to signal that the United States pursued 'a humane foreign policy' (p. 88). Similarly, a close relationship with the government aided the *Christian Herald's* news gathering and aid distribution. At a time when the United States' role in the world was evolving, Klopsch, Talmage and others believed that Americans' humanitarian activity would bolster the country's rising international profile. Through their humanitarian work, they hoped to have a more significant role in shaping US foreign policy.

The *Christian Herald's* co-operation with the government was not enough to supplant the ARC as its favoured humanitarian organisation. The competition for this role is a dominant theme in Curtis's work. At the root of the early 'rift' between the two parties was ARC founder Clara Barton's commitment to neutrality, with which Klopsch and others disagreed (p. 59). The 'rift' became an all-out rivalry in the context of efforts to deliver relief to Cubans in the 1890s. This battle was a proxy for who would lead the United States' international humanitarian work and if that leadership should be secular or religious. In the early 1900s, the *Christian Herald* appeared to be ascendant over the ARC, which was beset by problems, including financial irregularities. Yet, despite these challenges and the newspaper's superior record in fundraising, it could not usurp the role of the ARC.

With an already lengthy book, one hesitates to make too many pleas for expansion. But race and reception each warranted more sustained discussion by Curtis. Nonetheless, this important new book should be read, at least, by historians of religion, humanitarianism, journalism, and the United States.

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