

Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic. By Emily Conroy-Krutz. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. Pp. 264. Hardcover, \$48.00. ISBN: 0801453534

*Book Review by Curtis Keltner**

Abstract: Christian Imperialism, by Emily Conroy-Krutz, knits together a captivating story of the men and women who passionately obeyed the words once spoken by Jesus, who said, “go ye into the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” In her first book Conroy-Krutz argues that “American missionaries sought to determine how the American foreign mission movement should relate to empire and political institutions.” From 1810 and throughout the nineteenth century brave men and women left everything behind to preach the Gospel to those they called heathens. These missionaries were exceedingly in support of empires in theory, but critical of many imperial principles in practice. Evangelical missionaries imagined communities beyond the shores of the nascent American republic, as they traveled mostly to Asia by the hundreds, then thousands, to spread their faith. They suffered numerous setbacks, but their faith and determination kept them going strong throughout the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Christian, imperialism, American, Evangelical, missionary, history.

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In her first book *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* Emily Conroy-Krutz knits together a captivating story of the men and women who passionately obeyed the words once spoken by Jesus, who said, “go ye into the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” Two years before the United States declared war on England in 1812, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) convened for the first time to discuss how American Evangelical missionaries could spread Christianity to the far reaches of the globe.¹ Conroy-Krutz argues that “American missionaries sought to determine how the American foreign mission movement should relate to empire and political institutions.”² The men and women who were willing to leave everything behind to preach the Gospel to those they called heathens, exceedingly supported empires in theory, yet were critical of many

1 Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), xv, <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501725098/christian-imperialism/>.

2 Conroy-Krutz, 17.

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imperial principles in practice.³ Evangelical missionaries imagined communities beyond the shores of the nascent American republic, as they traveled mostly to Asia by the hundreds, then thousands, to spread their faith. They suffered many setbacks, but their faith and determination kept them going strong.

Christian Imperialism is thematic and, as Conroy-Krutz points out, looks at different types of missions and their relation to various types of British and American imperialism.⁴ The structure of the book helps compartmentalize how the ABCFM viewed the various missions they had set up throughout the world, aiding the reader in a greater understanding of how the board viewed their professed role in making the world a better place. Despite a prodigious number of topics discussed, the book flows well and is easy to read; nonetheless, the constant comparison of overseas missions to American Indian missions is distracting and convolutes the overall premise of the book, which is to discuss imperialism. The scope of *Christian Imperialism* is broad, Conroy-Krutz jumps between overseas missions in India, Liberia, Hawaii, Singapore, and then she comes back to the Cherokee Nation. Conroy-Krutz demonstrates how Americans viewed themselves on the world stage after the American Revolution, and she shines new light on a topic that is often not given much thought in secular literature.

In the Early Republic era, while most Americans looked westward and thought about the vastness of the North American continent, some Evangelical Protestants looked East, and by 1860, the ABCFM had sent out around thirteen hundred missionaries worldwide.⁵ With the assistance of the British Empire, American missionaries were able to gain a foothold in India and branch out to different locations in Asia and beyond. Conroy-Krutz points out the difficulty in converting some cultures to Christianity and how the ABCFM created a “hierarchy of heathenism” to determine which locations were best suited for missions.⁶ *Christian Imperialism* is useful in demonstrating how the hierarchy of heathenism worked, stating that “in the early period, the civilized status of a location, or its potential for eventual civilization, was central to missionary decision making.”⁷ Conroy-Krutz continues, saying, “civilization, they believed, could lead to Christianization.”⁸ Using mostly secondary sources, letters, correspondence, and the ABCFM annual report, *Christian Imperialism* offers a well-rounded view of how nineteenth-century evangelical missionaries viewed themselves and the world they sought to civilize.

Leaving their homes, potentially never to see them again, hundreds of men and women set out by ship to remote areas of the world. Some of these people certainly kept diaries or maintained other relics that could fill the gaps in Conroy-Krutz’s research. The notable

3 Conroy-Krutz, 7.

4 Conroy-Krutz, 16.

5 Conroy-Krutz, xvii.

6 Conroy-Krutz, 16.

7 Conroy-Krutz, 29.

8 Conroy-Krutz, 30.

lack of first-person accounts, save for letters and reports, is a missed opportunity by the author to add more depth to her argument. Moreover, in a country ripe with slavery, the author misses another opportunity to speak about the evangelization of slaves; although she mentions missionaries in Liberia, there is minimal mention of them working in the United States. It is odd that the author mentions evangelizing Native Americans, but not African Americans. Conroy-Krutz could have expanded the scope of *Christian Imperialism* slightly to include diary entries from missionaries and accounts of Protestant evangelization efforts towards African American slaves. Despite the lack of diary entries, the book is well researched and written. Some aspects were overlooked; nevertheless, it is understandable for a first-time author. The thesis for this book works because Conroy-Krutz adheres to how the ABCFM viewed its mission as it relates to imperialism on a geopolitical scale. The success of their overseas missions is another story altogether.

At the beginning of the book, Conroy-Krutz asks the question, “how did Evangelical Americans envision their role in the world?”⁹ She spends the rest of the book answering this straightforward yet overwhelmingly complex question. Invariably the role of empires and imperialism was uppermost in the minds of missionaries as they thought about where they would go to accomplish their high commission. The period between America’s colonial era and 1898 is where *Christian Imperialism*’s historical focus lies.¹⁰ It is this stage that lays the groundwork for American imperialism, which started on the work of British imperialism, by way of Protestant missionaries. The book is short, just over two hundred pages, which makes it excellent for an undergraduate or graduate-level class. *Christian Imperialism* is multifaceted, which, in a classroom setting, could be used to talk about religion, early America, empires, and to an extent, interaction with Native Americans. Determining the proper equilibrium between doing God’s work and dealing with imperial powers is where the missionaries often found themselves. In *Christian Imperialism*, the reader will come to understand and appreciate the men and women who went out into the world to spread the Gospel message. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in American, religious, or imperial history.

9 Conroy-Krutz, 7.

10 Conroy-Krutz, 6.