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Review: 'Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid'

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Heather D. Curtis, *Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018, 370 pp., Hdbk. \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-674-73736-5.

As I write, the city of Dayton is digging out from the devastating impact of fifteen tornadoes – four of which carried winds of 150-200 mph – that struck the city and its environs on Memorial Day night. The American Red Cross (ARC) is spearheading community relief efforts, which, on the face of it, is no great surprise. But in *Holy Humanitarians* Heather Curtis makes clear that not only did the ARC (founded in 1881) not enjoy benevolence presumption in the first few decades of its existence, its fiercest competitor was the evangelical periodical, the *Christian Herald*.

In this compelling book, Curtis tells a remarkable and all-but-forgotten story. Louis Klopsch and Thomas DeWitt Talmage bought the magazine in 1890 (a typographical error on p. 7 suggests it was purchased a decade later) and – following the example of the *New York Herald* and other periodicals – turned it into a “channel of benevolence” for suffering peoples. But it was an evangelical channel, and thus requests for contributions referred to biblical admonitions to care for “the least of these” while also playing on hopes that America was the redeemer nation that could save the world and help usher in the millennium. More than this, the *Christian Herald* made great use of vivid language and graphic (even gruesome) images to convey the horrific suffering that evangelical donors could help alleviate.

So it is that the magazine raised money to help those suffering from – just to mention a few – the Russian famine of 1891, the Turkish earthquake of 1894, the Armenian massacres of 1894-1896, the post-Boxer Rebellion famine in China, the Japanese famine of 1906, and – the granddaddy of all *Christian Herald* relief campaigns – the famine in India in 1900. And *Christian Herald* readers responded. By 1910, “the *Christian Herald*’s subscribers had donated over \$3.3 million (equivalent to approximately \$82.4 million in 2017) to . . . humanitarian causes” (11).

One of the great strengths of Curtis' book is that she makes clear that these campaigns of evangelical benevolence had problematic motives and effects. For one thing, and as was quite clear during the Spanish-American and Filipino-American Wars, Klopsch and Talmage connected the call for contributions to the very problematic argument that American military intervention and the imposition of a capitalist economy was the best means to advance the gospel. For another, the sensationalist appeals made by the *Christian Herald* served to dramatically expand the gap between the "beneficent" donor and the "helpless" recipient.

At home, the *Christian Herald* supported the destitute in New York City (an effort that included the Bowery Mission, which the Christian Herald Association still runs today) and funded the building of schools in Appalachia. But then there's the matter of race. In keeping with a long-standing practice among white evangelicals, the *Christian Herald's* concern for people of color only applied to those who lived beyond the borders of the United States. Curtis observes that "as the systematic and violent oppression of African Americans spread across the nation during the closing decade of the nineteenth century, the editors of the *Christian Herald* made almost no mention" of racism at home. This included silence about the spate of lynchings that accompanied the re-establishment of white supremacy in the post-Reconstruction South. By the early 20th century, the magazine was even suggesting that American blacks be resettled in Africa.

This latter proposal was in keeping with the *Christian Herald's* rightward turn in the early twentieth century, which included calls to restrict immigration from southern and eastern Europe as well as "campaigns to combat the presence of Mormons in the federal government, to defend the celebration of Christmas in New York City's schools, and to reinstate the motto 'In God We Trust' on U.S. currency" (215). Here the *Christian Herald* was taking a position squarely on the right side of the rapidly deepening divide within American evangelicalism (a point that Curtis could have made clearer). Talmage (who died in 1902) and Klopsch (who died in 1910)

had hoped that the *Christian Herald's* benevolence work would serve to mute doctrinal divisions within American evangelicalism – almsgiving could serve “as a marker of evangelical identity” (262) – but by the early 20th century the incipient fundamentalist movement was promoting the notion that philanthropic efforts detracted from soulwinning.

One of the most interesting themes in *Holy Humanitarians* is the competition between Klopsch and the *Christian Herald*, and Clara Barton and the American Red Cross, a competition that was both substantive (evangelical v. secular approaches to benevolence), personal, and (so it seems) gendered. But the fracturing of evangelicalism contributed to the *Christian Herald's* inability to remain one of America's leading humanitarian aid organizations. As Curtis observes, by 1920 “evangelical almsgivers were forced to concede leadership of the U.S. overseas humanitarian mission” to the ARC, which “had embraced and benefited from the federalization of foreign aid, the corporatization of philanthropy, the professionalization of relief work, and the secularization of charity” (272). That said, Curtis is also absolutely right to note that the *Christian Herald* approach – in its “grass-roots, volunteer, and unapologetically evangelical approach to relieving suffering” – remains “compelling for a considerable portion of the American population” (5).

In her epilogue, Curtis observes that she has often been asked what sort of people were Talmage and Klopsch. This was precisely my question when I finished *Holy Humanitarians*, especially given that Curtis reveals that these two champions of evangelical philanthropy not only became quite wealthy, but they each left all their money (\$300,000 and \$900,000, respectively) to their heirs, with no charitable bequests. Curtis' response to this question neatly encapsulates her approach in this fascinating book: “Rather than passing judgment on the past or its protagonists, my aim has been to present Klopsch, Talmage, and their many coworkers not as altruistic heroes, nor as unscrupulous villains, but as human beings whose experiences,

achievements, and failures offer opportunities to reflect on the enduring challenges of alleviating affliction, combating poverty, and creating a more just global society” (280).

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