

H-Diplo Review Essay 589

Katherine D. Moran. *The Imperial Church: Catholic Founding Fathers and United States Empire*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781501748813.

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Rather than burying the lede, which is unfortunately common in academic book reviews, I will begin by noting simply that Katherine D. Moran’s *The Imperial Church: Catholic Founding Fathers and United States Empire* is one of the most wholly original pieces of scholarship on American religious history I have read. It should be regarded as a benchmark for future work on religion, race, and empire and will surely be an indispensable resource for scholars trying to make sense of the dynamic interactions between Catholics and Protestants in the forging of American imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Considering the depth and breadth of research and considerable historical ground covered by *The Imperial Church*, Moran’s argument is refreshingly elegant. American Protestants, who were often the self-appointed arbiters of US nation-building, frequently found an unlikely source of inspiration in their imperial campaigns in the Great Plains, California, and the Philippines. As might be supposed by the book’s title, this surprising imperial model was Catholicism. It has been a common assumption in much of US religious historiography that Protestants often distanced themselves from or even reviled the rapidly growing Catholic communities of the nineteenth-century United States.¹ Moran resets this longstanding narrative, demonstrating convincingly that, as she puts it, Americans of many religious identities “thought with Catholicism” as they expanded their nation-state first across the American continent and then across the globe on the eve of the so-called American Century (12). In so doing, she argues that Protestants rendered “Catholic imperial pasts” as indelible influences on, and perhaps even progenitors of, their country’s destiny (3).

Moran’s “reclamation project” makes a brilliant intervention into the intertwined historiographies of religion, race, and imperialism by “requir[ing] that historians reconsider some of their key operating assumptions” (7).² The author does this namely by encouraging readers to consider how an image of

¹ For example, see Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Cassandra L. Yacovazzi, *Escaped Nuns: True Womanhood and the Campaign against Convents in Antebellum America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

² Relevant works on this subject include Susan K. Harris, *God’s Arbiters: Americans and the Philippines, 1898–1902* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012); Matthew McCullough, *The Cross of War: Christian Nationalism and U.S. Expansion in the Spanish-American War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014); Benjamin J. Wetzel, *American Crusade: Christianity, Warfare, and National Identity, 1860–1920* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

Catholicism as an “Imperial Church” served “as a complementary and intersecting allegory” to the more traditional portrayal of Gilded-Age and Progressive-Era Catholicism as an “Immigrant Church” (17). Moran crafts this innovative, intellectual recasting of Catholic-Protestant imperialism by way of a chronological narrative that takes readers through Protestant conceptions of Catholic imperial forebears in three key areas: the Upper Midwest, southern California, and the Philippines. In these three regions, Moran focuses respectively on the positive Protestant commemoration of French Catholic missionary Jacques Marquette, the blending of capitalism and Franciscan missions, and the approbation by Protestant commentators of Spanish friars as effective imperial administrators. Page | 2

While some of the major narrative events may be familiar to readers, the individuals and episodes Moran renders as evidence of Catholic influence on American imperialism and the author’s interpretive lens strike me as highly novel. In Moran’s careful handling, Marquette becomes a veritable Catholic founding father of the United States, held up by Protestants as an exemplar of the whitening of the American nation by way of a “cross-confessional Christianity” (26). The book’s effective first two chapters on the commemoration of Marquette present a striking illustration of one of the book’s principal argumentative thrusts: whiteness, multiethnic activism, and Christian ecumenism were three foundations of post-Civil War American nationalism. Marquette and Catholicism became symbols and justifications even for non-Catholic Americans of their country’s supposedly “peaceful conqu[er]” of the Great Plains (68).

The book’s next two chapters highlight the portrayal into the early twentieth century of Spanish Franciscan missionaries as “co-founding fathers” of the American nation (82). Moran explores California’s history of mission commemorations and argues that figures such as Spanish Catholic missionary Junípero Serra, much like Marquette, became for later California tourism and business boosters the instruments by which they could “naturalize” a Christian, continental, civilizing force that was spreading across the United States (85). These business leaders, Moran argues, portrayed themselves and their economic activity in the making of modern California as successors to Serra and his fellow missionaries. American industry, then, became Catholicized.

The final two chapters of Moran’s book shift its geographical setting to the Philippines, which was the most significant American imperial acquisition from the Spanish-American War. Following the example of their compatriots in the Upper Midwest and California, US Protestant supporters of Philippine colonization at the turn of the twentieth century similarly saw their newest colony’s resident Spanish friars less as examples of Catholic corruption, authoritarianism, and “Old World elegance” and more as precursors to their own country’s civilizing mission (158). Moran’s book makes a signal contribution to the literature here by demonstrating how these American imperialists “created their own usable friar past” (143). Contrary to the usual currents of historical scholarship, which have so often focused on anti-Catholicism, Moran proves that a more cooperative Catholic-Protestant relationship existed in the aftermath of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars.³ Anti-Catholicism certainly existed and indeed served as a powerful

³ Leading examples of scholarship on anti-Catholicism in the United States in the long nineteenth century include John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003); Justin Nordstrom, *Danger on the Doorstep: Anti-Catholicism and American Print Culture in the Progressive Era* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Elizabeth Fenton, *Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) Jon Gjerde, *Catholicism and*

political and cultural force well into the twentieth century, but it was not the only story of American nationalism in this era. Protestants, Moran points out, just as frequently pointed to the Catholic Church as a stabilizing colonial force, which brought civilization to supposedly inferior Filipinos. As an unusual consequence, the author explains, American Protestants oftentimes found themselves acting as defenders of Catholicism, which surely played an appreciable role in the increasing acceptance of Catholics and rise to prominence of Catholicism in American life after World War II, or what Kevin M. Schultz has described as the emergence of “Tri-Faith America.”⁴

Moran’s book is a triumph of historical scholarship. The archival research is stellar; the historiographical contribution is strong; and the prose is impeccable. It is a piece of scholarship that should be held up in graduate seminars as a model of what a monograph can and should be. It deserves widespread readership and engagement with its arguments, and I anticipate it being regarded by future scholars as a turning point in the study of Catholicism’s leading role in the development of the modern American nation.

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the Shaping of Nineteenth-Century America, ed. S. Deborah Kang (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); William B. Kurtz, *Excommunicated from the Union: How the Civil War Created a Separate Catholic America* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Maura Jane Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America, 1620–1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁴ Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).