Exploring the Global History of American Evangelicalism

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Introduction

Abstract:

This introduction embeds the special issue "Exploring the Global History of American Evangelicalism" into current historiographical debates in the field of US evangelicalism and globalization. It lays out the methodological framework and thematic scope of the special issue.

His room was a microcosm; all the toxins, estrangements, and disintegrations of the world outside were present in antic compression. It was Liberia, late July 2014, and the Ebola epidemic had the country in its teeth. A few miles south of Monrovia, the Liberian capital, resided the mission hospital of Eternal Love Winning Africa (ELWA), one of the few medical centres that had not entirely collapsed as the Ebola contagion, in the course of its advance, felled physicians and patients alike. And there at the mission, confined to his room after contracting the disease, lay Kent Brantly, an American missionary doctor. Brantly had lost control of his bodily functions. To avoid infection, those caring for him wore full protective hazmat suits; Brantly could see only their eyes. Trying “to rest and not die,” Brantly listened as his laptop played passages of scripture set to music. He found particular solace in a reading from Romans 8, in which the apostle Paul declared the availability, across “whole creation,” of the redeeming power of Jesus Christ and the promise that, despite all the dangers and evils of the world, no one who loved Christ would ever be sundered from Him:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Although hundreds of West Africans had already perished in the epidemic, it was the body of Kent Brantly - a fragile vessel in which were combined both a national aspiration to do good in the world and a virus with the potential to make a millennial waste of human society - that first prompted the American public to direct concerted attention to the problem of Ebola. Brantly worked for Samaritan’s Purse, the humanitarian arm of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and one of the largest evangelical relief organizations in the United States. When Samaritan’s Purse chartered a private plane to airlift Brantly back home for treatment, his arrival in Atlanta was carried live on American television news channels, with helicopters tracking his ambulance from airport to hospital.[[2]](#footnote-2) Within weeks, Brantly recovered from the disease; he was subsequently featured on the front cover of *Time* and named as its 2014 Person of the Year, along with four other ‘Ebola fighters’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We might consider this a kind of parable. Liberia – more than any other country aside from the United States itself – has a history of entanglement with the anxieties and ambitions of American evangelicals. It traces its origins as a nation to an original 1820s experiment in American overseas mission, to the shared hope of abolitionists and slave interests that the goal of Christianizing Africa might sublimate the conflict between their motives as they collaborated in the venture to establish a colony of free blacks on the continent’s western shore.[[4]](#footnote-4) But the colony produced few inspiring narratives of large-scale native conversion to distract its sponsors from the deepening controversies over the future of black slavery in the United States.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the late nineteenth century, in the context of the imperial ‘scramble for Africa,’ the revival of African-American enthusiasm for Liberian emigration in response to the starching of southern racial structures, and, under the influence of ‘holiness’ teachings, the renewed confidence of evangelicals in the power of God to harvest souls in hitherto unreached regions of the world, American churches – black and white - placed fresh emphasis upon West Africa as a mission field; but their project of penetrating its interior and converting the peoples there again yielded only modest returns.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Another wave of American mission activity occurred in the post-war era, this time carried atop a swell of US corporate investment in Liberian rubber plantations and subventions from the US national security budget for the purpose of establishing navy, air force, intelligence and propaganda installations in the country.[[7]](#footnote-7) For Americo-Liberian elites, conservative evangelicalism, with its habitual deference to government authority and insistence that the solution to human suffering lay in conversion, not radical reform, offered a welcome theo-cultural endorsement of their continued monopoly of political power.[[8]](#footnote-8) ELWA’s 130-acre campus, constructed on land donated by the Liberian government, dates from this period; by the late 1950s, it was home to a short-wave Christian radio station, missionary school and chapel, with the hospital opening to patients in 1965.[[9]](#footnote-9) It also served as an organizational hub for Billy Graham’s 1960 African crusade.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the 1990s, ELWA’s ministry was profoundly disrupted by Liberia’s civil wars, which frequently forced the evacuation of American mission personnel.[[11]](#footnote-11) When the campus returned to full operation in 2003, however, it was well-placed to benefit from the maturation of American evangelicalism’s movement into international humanitarian work. Samaritan’s Purse, which supported the ELWA hospital with funds, medical supplies and clinicians, had a growing reputation for efficiency and professionalism as a relief organization, allowing it to supplement its own substantial contribution base with grants and contracts from USAID, the US government’s overseas aid agency.[[12]](#footnote-12) In 2015, Samaritan’s Purse received $7.8 million dollars from USAID to carry out Ebola awareness and prevention programs in Liberia.[[13]](#footnote-13)

For nearly two hundred years, across four distinct generations of engagement, Liberia has been an important laboratory for American evangelicals’ experiments in global mission. In the course of those experiments, US evangelicalism has cultivated a talent for moving through the modern material, and increasingly transnational, realms of public policy, technology and culture, realms where prominence and impact are measured in *Time* front covers. But the global adventures of American evangelicalism have also expressed a yearning for a very different kingdom - of the kind imagined by Kent Brantly as he lay sick in his room at the ELWA campus: a kingdom of eternal union with God, when *Time* shall be no more. It was to prepare the world for this kingdom that American evangelicals made their journeys to Liberia and other mission fields abroad. At the ELWA hospital, doctors and chaplains work in concert: to repair the bodies of Liberian patients and then to save their souls. The number of converts is as carefully recorded as the number of operations performed.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Explorations of the global history of US evangelicalism promise to enrich and enlarge our existing understandings of the development of American power in the world. Defined at least in part by their commitment to spiritual activism and confidence in the human capacity for transformation, US evangelicals in the nineteenth century readily aligned themselves with a republican ideology that imagined societies across the continent – and, progressively, beyond it too - as plastic to an American remaking.[[15]](#footnote-15) Evangelicals enjoyed a similar romance with national consensus during the Cold War, when their defensive interest in the principle of religious liberty – which had hitherto enforced a sectarian emphasis on the threat posed by Catholic authoritarianism – was folded into the broader ideological cause of containing the Soviet Union, whose atheist totalitarianism could be construed as an existential menace to all American faiths.[[16]](#footnote-16) Over the past two hundred years, US evangelicals have often moved across the world in slipstreams generated by other American actors, official and non-official, as those actors sought to establish mercantile connections, colonial governments, political alliances, military bases, communication networks and charitable or humanitarian ventures. Although the missionary expeditions to Liberia in the 1820s were themselves funded from private sources, the larger colonial undertaking of which they were part was dependent upon appropriations made by Congress to facilitate the repatriation of captive Africans taken into U.S. custody in the course of efforts to combat the now-illegal slave trade.[[17]](#footnote-17) As it extended its diplomatic presence through Asia and the Middle East, the State Department worked to secure rights of entry for U.S. missionaries, along with a commitment that they would be permitted to seek converts to Christianity under the full protection of the law.[[18]](#footnote-18)

But evangelicals were more than just camp followers, hustling to set up overseas franchises under the multiplying canopies of American global power. At the end of the nineteenth century, there were many more US missionaries stationed beyond America’s shores than there were overseas employees of the State Department or foreign correspondents for US newspapers and press agencies.[[19]](#footnote-19) Their writings from the mission field, or their presentations upon returning home, were often the only resource readily available to ordinary Americans who wished to make sense of the non-western world.[[20]](#footnote-20) On occasion, missionaries could mobilize public constituencies deferential to their experience and expertise in order to influence U.S. policy towards particular countries on issues other than simply the freedom of missions.[[21]](#footnote-21) In the early-to-mid twentieth century, it was not unusual to find former missionaries, and the children of missionaries, occupying positions of influence in the U.S. diplomatic corps.[[22]](#footnote-22) Moreover, well before the terms “cultural diplomacy” and “soft power” entered the lexicon of international relations, U.S. missionaries were engaged in the practice of both, founding educational institutions and hospitals as well as churches, disseminating an American Protestant creed of salvation and moral reform through personal ministry, publications and, come the 1930s, radio broadcasts as well.[[23]](#footnote-23) Modern U.S. evangelicals continue to export a gospel bound in trademark American leather, directly in the form of missions, parachurch ministries, crusades, worship music and television programming, indirectly through the indigenous adaptation of the mega-church model and church-growth techniques.[[24]](#footnote-24) It was not always possible for those on the receiving end to distinguish between the book and its cover, between its core religious content and the ideological values embodied in the means of its transference. As Robert Wuthnow has observed, “It becomes hard to disentangle the Christian message from images of U.S. wealth and power.”[[25]](#footnote-25) In such overseas contexts, American evangelicals have played an important role in sanctifying a vision of socio-political order friendly to the ethic of economic individualism and to their country’s broader interests. Constrained by its tradition of anti-statism in matters of religion and society, the U.S. government, left to its own devices, could not have achieved the same effect. The global, voluntarist enterprise of American evangelicalism was constitutive of United States influence in the world.

But though U.S. evangelicals have frequently enlisted as auxiliaries in the expansion and consolidation of the Pax Americana, their loyalty to that project has not been immutable and unconflicted. Evangelicalism insists on the need to nurture and sustain a personal commitment to Christ, whose sacrifice on the Cross made possible the salvation of mankind. Not every American evangelical at large in the world has endorsed the earthly practices and ambitions of their nation as embodying the transcendental ethic of Christian love. As British evangelicals also discovered, the operations of empire often seemed sinewed with moral corruption: colonial soldiers liked to drink liquor and consort with native prostitutes; colonial governments appreciated the tax revenues that they could skim from the opium trade.[[26]](#footnote-26) Even the features of colonial rule which attracted the enthusiastic participation of many American missionaries – the establishment of schools, colleges and hospitals, along with more general educational initiatives directed towards improving literacy, hygiene and agricultural and industrial efficiency – were not without their evangelical critics. By the start of the twentieth century, American evangelicalism was a house divided: between those (labelled liberals or progressives) who, believing that the millennium had already occurred, were working to accomplish the geographic completion and social perfection of Christ’s kingdom on earth so that it was fit for his eventual return, and those who subscribed to the moral pessimism of premillennial theology, judging that the world was too deep into sin for it to be much reformed prior to the Second Coming, which they expected imminently.[[27]](#footnote-27) The postmillennial project of condensing a global Christian civilization from the disparate social and moral uplift programmes of secular empires was therefore futile - literally, a waste of time. Overseas missions, according to premillennial evangelicals, should hasten instead to salvage as many souls as they could in the months and years remaining before the Rapture. Their conviction that the clock was rapidly counting down to the hour of Christ’s return was expressed in the extemporization of new independent mission agencies to supersede what they regarded as the obstructive bureaucracies and fuzzy social service priorities of denominational boards.[[28]](#footnote-28)

To husband patiently the early shoots of civilization or to hurry all encounters towards a decision for Christ: despite their dispute over the essential task of mission, premillennial and postmillennial evangelicals at the turn of the century shared in the conviction that their Christian faith commanded them to advance the work of God amongst the inhabitants of foreign lands. American missionaries, like other agents of empire, could be aggressively ethnocentric, assuming the priority of western models of culture and conversion and insisting that native peoples should be swayed into conformity with these.[[29]](#footnote-29) Even when they declared a desire to seed indigenous ministries, they were not necessarily promising a substantive concession of control. Rather, such ministries would take the form of a franchise: salary costs and overheads would be markedly reduced and the culturally frictive presence of the foreign missionary erased; but the mandates of the U.S. mission board, through the indoctrination of native pastors, would continue to be fulfilled.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Yet mission work was distinct amongst sectors of imperial activity in that its ultimate concern was with the souls of others, not their incorporation into a secular order of power. American evangelicals often conceived of their overseas missions as part of a transnational enterprise, sustained in particular by denominational ties to British churches and the expediency of interdenominational co-operation in the mission field itself.[[31]](#footnote-31) But their encounters with mission subjects also could stimulate new circuits of empathetic identification, the interest in the soul stirring an interest in the individual, a realization of social circumstances (such as gender and racial hierarchies) experienced in common, and a fledging respect for facets of the native culture.[[32]](#footnote-32) Against the intentions of their sponsors, who assumed that missionaries would teach and mission subjects learn, missions sometimes became fertile sites of spiritual and cultural exchange, propagating what would be classed by post-colonial theory as “hybridities” of identity, creed and worship practice. The insistence of evangelicals that their faith was grounded in the authority of scripture inspired mission boards and missions to translate the Bible into local vernaculars; though the translations themselves were consciously keyed to native linguistic traditions, they also enabled indigenous pastors and congregants to make their own interpretation of the word of God.[[33]](#footnote-33) In addition, the value placed by evangelicals on personal experience of the Holy Spirit, enhanced by holiness teachings and further enriched by the ferments of healing and glossolalia that accompanied the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century, licensed claims of authenticity for indigenous and anti-formalist innovations in spiritual practice that at least some American missionaries were unwilling to disavow as either heresy or inane enthusiasm.[[34]](#footnote-34) Not every American evangelical mission, and hardly any Pentecostal ones, strained to curb the revivalist pulse of native Christianity in order to maintain their own control. As Jay Riley Case has noted, it was usually the missions that embraced local religious improvisations, straying from the routines imagined for them at the imperial metropole, which proved most effective at winning souls.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The interwar period witnessed the start of a marked and sustained retreat from organized mission activity on the part of mainline Protestant churches, as the ethic of interdenominational co-operation which had hitherto nourished their hopes for the imminent evangelization of the world evolved into an ecumenism that attested to the integrity of all major religions: on the basis of what objective standard could they profess their own spiritual superiority and the right to seek converts amongst the adherents of other faiths? Many mainline Protestants continued to be compelled by conscience to engage in service overseas, but increasingly the roles they sought were in transnational organizations with a secular educational or humanitarian purpose, not evangelical missions.[[36]](#footnote-36) The task of dispensing salvation to the world defaulted to conservative evangelicals and their brothers and sisters in the Pentecostal movement, for whom the Great Commission of Matthew 28 – “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations” - remained an inspirational text, warranting substantial investments of money, personnel and creative energy. Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and into the next, the overseas activities of conservative evangelicals, whether they occurred under the sponsorship of denominational mission boards or the proliferating host of independent faith missions like ELWA in Liberia, continued to expand and diversify.[[37]](#footnote-37) In 2005, the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention had an annual budget of $283 million and managed more than 5,000 full-time foreign missionaries, up from around 400 in 1936 and a thousand in 1955. The Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination, sponsored 230 overseas missionaries in 1936, 626 in 1952, and over 2,500 in 2004.[[38]](#footnote-38)

It is easier, however, to quantify what resources American evangelicals invested in the enterprise of converting the world to Christ than to ascertain whether those investments produced the anticipated returns. Certainly, between the early nineteenth century, when it was largely confined to the rim of the North Atlantic, and the present day, evangelical Christianity has emerged as a global religious phenomenon, with about 12 percent of the world’s population affiliated with evangelical or Pentecostal churches. There are major concentrations of adherents in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America – to the point indeed that the evangelical movement is now numerically dominated by the “majority world” or “global South”.[[39]](#footnote-39) Is this evidence of the effects of American hegemony, as pervasive and enduring in matters of religion as in the fields of political economy, technology and popular culture? Or, as in studies that interrogate the association between secular processes of Americanization and globalization, must we be careful not to assume that influence actually issued from the effort to influence? To notice a rough correlation between the expansion of American evangelical missions, in time and across global space, and the embrace of evangelical Christianity by substantial populations on all six inhabited continents is not necessarily to determine a causal connection. Explorations of the global history of American evangelicalism involve risks similar to those incurred by accounts of America’s political, material and cultural relations with the world, even after the much-heralded ‘transnational’ turn. The historian has to be alert to instances when American models were contested or regarded with indifference, when indigenous actors either seized the initiative for themselves or subverted the administration of American dominance into a genuinely transactional exchange, or when the nation’s experiences on foreign shores washed back to reform identities and social practices at home in the United States. These are the questions and challenges that stimulate and structure the contributions to this special issue.

The studies of the global history of American evangelicalism published here stand at the intersection of three distinct literatures, each of which is of relatively recent vintage. Ever since 2004, when Jon Butler diagnosed a “religion problem” – rooted in a shortage of substantial research monographs - afflicting the historiography of the United States for the post-Civil War period, the field of modern American religious history has hummed with remedial activity.[[40]](#footnote-40) There has been an especially notable boom in accounts of American evangelicalism from the inter-war period on, many written with the intent of explaining the phenomenon which most powerfully reveals the continued salience of religion in the nation’s public life: the emergence, by the last two decades of the twentieth century, of conservative evangelicals as a formidable political force. These accounts have revealed the lengthy organizational gestation of the New Christian Right, exploring what it owed to processes of regional modernization in the American South and South-West, to the patronage of business elites opposed to New Deal liberalism and to the transformation of the state in the conditions of the Cold War.[[41]](#footnote-41) According to Steven Miller, the march of evangelicalism upon and through the corridors of power, in tandem with its appropriation of mass media platforms to advertise the virtues of “born-again” spirituality, has been so successful that it qualifies now as a majority cultural phenomenon.[[42]](#footnote-42) That Billy Graham attracted the sobriquet “America’s Pastor,” originally coined by President George H.W. Bush and adopted by Grant Wacker as the title for his recent study of Graham’s life and work, offers confirmation of the point.[[43]](#footnote-43) But though this “evangelical turn” has erased the grim, gothic caricature of back-country fundamentalists raging uselessly against modernity and disclosed the often muscular effectiveness of evangelical efforts to enlarge their churches and reform society, it has so far only sporadically explored the application of its themes beyond the borders of the United States. Aside from their obvious interest in evangelical readings of the Cold War, the current generation of scholars of twentieth-century American evangelicalism has tended to confine its discussion of how the movement understood and sought to fulfil its role in the wider world to an unsynthesized assortment of chapter-length excursions and one-off journal essays.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Otherwise, the most thorough accounts of the activities of American evangelicals abroad have their origins in earlier imperial, gender and cultural turns in US historical scholarship, and focus primarily on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when missions, increasing rapidly in number, were being established across the far horizons of the globe. In many of these accounts, missions were presented as both epiphenomena and instruments of American imperial power; the function of the missionary was to convert the social order of their host communities into a form compliant with U.S. political and economic interests.[[45]](#footnote-45) There was often an acknowledgment in such studies that missionaries were not uncritical of their own culture and that, for women and African-Americans, participation in the colonial project of bringing Protestant civilization to the world was shadowed by an awareness that what they wanted from a life of religious service overseas was the opportunity to make a difference – the sort of opportunity actually denied to them at home, in the metropolitan crucible of mission values, by embedded gender norms and racial apartheid.[[46]](#footnote-46) These works revealed some of the ambivalences at the heart of the mission enterprise, ambivalences that made it possible, in fugitive instances, for missionaries to discern their own subaltern subjectivity within a universalizing modern order and also to re-conceive themselves as participants in a cosmopolitan commerce of cultures rather than as the apostles of civilizational advance.[[47]](#footnote-47) But in general, as Jane Hunter has observed, scholars of this generation were preoccupied with the moral problem of American power as embodied in the figure of the evangelical operating in a colonial mission field; they found it difficult to determine the peripheries of missionary influence and, like many of the missionaries they studied, to reliably read the agency of indigenous actors and native responses to mission through the filters and beyond the horizons of American archival sources.[[48]](#footnote-48)

An alternative perspective on the international career of U.S. evangelicalism is offered in the rapidly growing literature on global, or world, Christianity, effectively synthesized for a popular readership by Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*.[[49]](#footnote-49) The scholars who have elaborated the concept of Christianity as a global religion – other than Jenkins, they include Andrew Walls, Brian Stanley, Dana Robert, Lamin Sanneh and a recruit from the field of U.S. evangelical history, Mark Noll – usually emphasize statistical measures that suggest a substantial shift occurred in the distribution of Christian believers from the North Atlantic world to the “global south” over the course of the twentieth century, with the fastest rates of growth registered by Pentecostal, charismatic or independent Protestant churches.[[50]](#footnote-50) But their explanations for the “global diffusion” of evangelical Christianity assign only a modest, subsidiary role to the prodigious efforts of American and British missionaries to bring that diffusion about. According to Sanneh, the most important contribution that western missionaries made was the translation of scripture into local vernaculars, which thereupon empowered indigenous pastors, who were untainted by colonial associations and more attuned to the spiritual and cultural traditions of their audiences, to supplant the mission churches, vitalizing and shepherding flocks of their own.[[51]](#footnote-51) Recent accounts of the origins of global Pentecostalism have similarly drawn attention to the scattered geography of Holy Spirit revivalism in the early twentieth century: not every Pentecostal church in every country owed its planting to American missionaries enthused by the 1906-09 Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles.[[52]](#footnote-52)

According to this view, evangelical and Pentecostal churches across the world prospered best when they were able to slip free from the mantles of foreign patronage and power, either through translation and the indigenization of ministry or as a consequence of broader processes of decolonization.[[53]](#footnote-53) Whereas scholars of the domestic U.S. evangelical movement have often pathologized its indifference to the life of the mind and its habit of anointing impresarios of populist Christian prophecy as its leaders rather than philosopher-kings versed in reasoned apologetics, studies of the global movement see its advance into new territories as facilitated by the relative weightlessness of evangelical intellectual tradition: in these territories, just as in the United States, local religious entrepreneurs had the freedom to adapt evangelical biblical teachings and spiritual practices to suit local customs and meet local needs.[[54]](#footnote-54) Sometimes, in accounts of the rise of global Christianity, there is no clear discrimination between the theory of a readily translatable faith, which could attract adherents almost anywhere irrespective of earthly conformations of power, and the providential view that evangelicalism appealed to people because it was true. “As a believer,” Mark Noll has written, “I ascribe both the spread and vitality of Christianity around the world to forces intrinsic to the faith itself.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

The literature advancing and exploring the concept of a global Christianity reminds those studying the overseas work of American evangelicals that measures of mission activity are not necessarily predictors of mission effectiveness, and that the successful transmission of faith usually involves a complex, dialogic process of translation: of scripture, meaning, emotion and experience. Yet that literature, in the interests of establishing the world-wide diffusion of Christianity as a phenomenon sustained by the integral properties of Christian faith, especially its potential for indigenization, is not itself always comprehensive in its evaluations of the extrinsic forces which have also intervened to support the spreading of God’s word. Its arguments are better served by emphasizing evidence of the growth of evangelical churches in the global South after the end of the age of empire than by reflecting at length on the myriad channels through which the North Atlantic nations – and their religious institutions – continued to exert influence across post-colonial societies throughout the post-war period.[[56]](#footnote-56) Scholars who describe the globalization of evangelical Christianity as a largely self-determined process seldom completely disavow the particular appeal of American example, whether it took the modernist form embodied by Billy Graham in the 1950s and 1960s – middle-class, media-friendly and at ease in the presence of power - or the more exuberant and protean, but still highly Americanized, prosperity gospel of contemporary Pentecostalism. But their respect for the historic attraction and influence of U.S. evangelicalism is subdued by the conviction that the numerical growth of the global movement must be grounded in causal forces that are both more organic and transcendent than any earthly hegemonic order: the spiritual needs of ordinary people and the truth of the Word.

For Mark Noll, then, the mission programmes of American evangelicals arced, as if by design, towards their own obsolescence. In contrast to the missions established by European churches, which often matured into projections of metropolitan ecclesiastical authority, American evangelical missions were infused with an ethos of voluntarism, licensing independent entrepreneurs, lay as well as ordained, to contribute to the task of ministering to the world. In time, according to Noll, this same participatory, “can-do” spirit came also to infuse foreign mission fields, producing a “take-off” effect in the local religious economies; it was well-suited to the “shape of life” in the globalizing South, where indigenous churches represented both a symbol of native initiative and a site of spiritual anchorage in conditions of rapid socio-structural change.[[57]](#footnote-57) The success of the American voluntarist template cancelled the need for American mission. Yet most U.S. churches, as Robert Wuthnow has shown, continue to sponsor overseas missions, with the democratization of air travel making it feasible for thousands of ordinary American believers, through short-term excursions, to participate in such missions themselves.[[58]](#footnote-58) American evangelicals do not appear to have become reconciled to the redundancy of their ministry programmes abroad; and, even if Noll is correct that the fate of global Christianity lies no longer in American hands, those programmes still do some significant work in the world, symbolizing American resources and amplifying American ideas certainly, but also establishing nodes of communication through which the world can proclaim its own versions of the Word.

Recent scholarship on American evangelicalism, then, has presented American evangelicals as at home, if not entirely at ease, in the American century, but we still await comprehensive accounts – some forthcoming from contributors to this special issue – of their prodigious efforts to carry the gospel to all the peoples of the earth. Studies that, in contrast, begin with the present-day phenomenon of a globalized Christianity and then work backwards to determine its causes often evince a scepticism that such efforts made much of a difference at all, instead identifying the translatability of the Christian message and the alacrity of local churches as the most essential factors. However, the disjuncture between an American-centric and a post-American approach to the history of global evangelicalism has been partially bridged by the transnational turn. Though it is as much theorized as actually practised, the transnational turn has invited historians of the United States to situate that country’s past and present in a perspective broader and deeper than those provided by comparative and borderlands studies or by traditional international history with its primary interest in relations between states. Its proponents promise that the development of the American nation will be more fully explained if historians pay closer attention to transnational flows - sometimes but not always global in reach - of people, capital, technology and ideas.[[59]](#footnote-59) That the evangelical movement in the United States has been shaped by its overseas encounters is evident from a number of recent studies, with Alan Scot Willis, for example, exploring how the Southern Baptist Convention moved in the post-war period to desegregate its institutions and encourage its members to adopt progressive racial attitudes when it became evident that southern racism was affecting the reception of its mission work in Africa.[[60]](#footnote-60)

These kinds of “feedback effects,” along with evidence of the modest achievements of western missions as measured in terms of actual conversions and the apparent flowering of “reverse missions”, whereby preachers from the global South visit churches in Northern countries or indeed establish their own ministries amongst immigrant communities there, have received particular attention in studies that conjecture the decentring of the international evangelical movement. In such studies, transnational relations work to flatten the world, with evangelicals in the United States presented as no more or less implicated or influential than evangelicals elsewhere in the now multi-directional global commerce of Christian ideas, practices and personnel, clerical and lay.[[61]](#footnote-61) But the transnational turn, whether conceived as a means to enrich national history or as a more granular approach to global history, is not incompatible with a recognition that American resources, interests and ambitions have shaped, and continue to shape, the modern world in decisive, if not always mindful and intended, ways.[[62]](#footnote-62) Many of the modern components of transnational spatiality – its global or “relational” cities, its other nodes of migration and exchange and the channels of passage and communication between these nodes – owes a debt of some sort to American power: to the stimulus of American investment capital or the servicing of American markets, to the allure of an Americanized modernity, or to the apparatus of “hard power,” with its occupying forces and military installations.[[63]](#footnote-63) The “middle grounds” and hybridities celebrated in post-colonial theory, along with other forms of resistance, have to encompass an experience of imperial power before they can confuse, subvert or mediate that power. The transnational world, as Frederick Cooper and Daniel Rodgers have noted, is actually lumpy, sticky, and frictive; only in dreams of transcendence does it appear to be flat.[[64]](#footnote-64) And so there is more to the global history of American evangelicalism than a trickle of conversions, the translation and indigenization of the Word, and then rapid supersession, in the enactment of the Great Commission, by the autonomous work of faith. As the essays in this special issue make clear, the commitment of American evangelicals to the task of conveying the Good News to all the ends of the earth is deeply embedded in their traditions and still endures. In their efforts to fulfil that commitment, they have been dogmatic but also innovative, visionary but also pragmatic, arrogant but also responsive. They have cast themselves both as leaders of a global cause and as its servants – and sometimes also as subalterns in a struggle with mighty satanic forces. They have enjoyed and employed all the privileges of their country’s hegemonic status even as they have identified downwards with the meek and the poor. In short, American evangelicals, in their wrestling with its convolutions, have expressed the very essence of U.S. power in the world.

This special issue features nine substantial research articles illuminating significant dimensions of and/or critical junctures in the global history of American evangelicalism since the late nineteenth century; they also illuminate the influence of the overseas activities of American evangelicals on the development of evangelicalism at home and as a global movement, and the mutually constitutive relation between ostensibly secular, state-led projections of national power abroad and the voluntarist ethic of foreign religious missions. In particular, the objective of the special issue is to offer new definition to the emerging corpus of work in the field through the exploration of four important, interlinked themes.

Firstly, the essays in the issue collectively explore the changes over time in American evangelical conceptions of the ‘global’. Although it was not impossible for early mission enterprises to admit an apprehension of a universalized humanity, such apprehensions were often ephemeral. When missions failed, as they frequently did, to produce the hoped-for battalions of new Christian converts, explanations for the failure tended to default to the assumed backwardness of the indigenous peoples concerned. Backwardness, in an age when popular theories of human history incorporated deterministic biology, might be judged intractable, a permanent barrier to membership in the world Christian community; alternatively, it was a condition that could be ameliorated through programmes of civilizational uplift which would at length qualify their subjects to receive the message of the Gospel. Either way, whether it was considered an ineradicable marker of heathen primitivity or as a vernacular style of thought and action to be abandoned prior to entering the church universal, ‘otherness’ disfigured evangelical dreams of a world carried unto Christ in fulfilment of the Great Commission.

By the late nineteenth century, however, cultural difference was itself being imagined differently. In the representation of human variety, worldly governments and religious missions alike could express and measure their own influence, the challenge of the ‘other’ sublimated by the literary and visual modes of the colonial picturesque. Heather Curtis describes how, in this period, evangelicals embraced the format of the popular illustrated periodical, for it promised, through pictures and stories, to bring overseas missions and their subjects closer to home, folding the domestic space of its readers into the global mission field, and tying them into a Christian fellowship that seemed now to encompass all the corners of the earth. But the attraction of evangelicals to distance-shrinking technologies and interventions across unbounded space spoke of an American romance with reach and scale that was also discernible in secular expansionist experiments. 1898 saw them move towards explicit endorsement of the new “large policy” of their nation as an instrument for the advance of Christian civilization, distilling their hopes for a world converted into the will that it be accomplished through American means and on American terms. Evangelicals might now express an appreciation of human diversity, as long as the field of difference was enclosed by an allegiance to their own order of faith.

In the wake of the Second World War, the Holocaust and the stimulus provided by moral competition with Soviet and Chinese communism, US policy institutions came – albeit fitfully – to align themselves behind the causes of racial equality and global human rights. As Axel Schäfer observes, US evangelicals also moved – again, in a fitful fashion, attended by vigorous internal debate. Softening their own sectarianism, they carved out a place for themselves in their nation’s project to construct a global civil society which blended a broad defence of economic liberty with commitments to welfare at home and aid and development programmes overseas. They established their own international relief organizations, which over time became increasingly reconciled to receiving supplies and funding from the federal government; they exchanged a tradition of anti-semitism for the modish concept of Judeo-Christianity and support for the state of Israel; and they identified causes in common even with the Roman Catholic Church.

There were still imperfections in the global body of Christ: U.S. missionaries, as David Swartz reveals, were frequently challenged by those they sought to convert to reconcile their invocations of the liberating power of God’s love with the persistence of racist structures in the American south; churches were emptying across Western Europe; Islam seemed to be both unassimilable and entrenched in its strongholds; and, as Uta Balbier notes, the evangelical movement fretted at the differential between its own linear rate of growth and the exponential increase in the overall population of the earth. But the hope persisted that these imperfections might yet be made good through civil rights progress at home and, as Melani McAlister explains, sensitive, smart and diligent mission work abroad; God would withhold himself from no one encouraged to seek Him, whatever their ethnicity or cultural background. And so the “shock of the global”, as experienced by American evangelicals in the 1970s, involved a painful realization that what they had conceived as an open-armed embrace of the world could feel to those enfolded within it like an oxygen-denying paternalism, and that the same filters that had made them colour-blind in their efforts to harvest souls had also obscured their view of the injustices and material deprivations that were desolating human existence across much of the earth. As the essays by McAlister, Kendrick Oliver and John Maiden indicate, the response of U.S. evangelicals to these arresting new perspectives expressed the diversity of commitments within their own coalition. There were innovations in national and international ministry integrating social concern with care for the soul. Many American evangelicals, operating in global settings, sought to exercise leadership in a more transactional mode, and sometimes they checked their privilege with sufficient assiduity to permit the emergence of a genuine ethos of mutuality and partnership across cultures. But others appropriated the rights and victim discourses of the 1970s in order to revalidate U.S.-directed programs of global evangelization: the opportunity to hear the gospel, and the freedom thereafter to make a decision for Christ, should be denied to no-one. American mission work overseas did not just subsist into the late decades of the twentieth century; it expanded and intensified.

Secondly, the contributions to this special issue document the diversity of means used by American evangelicals in their efforts to make the world one in Christ. Mission, as a term, contains multitudes, from the lone evangelist traversing a circuit of remote villages to large urban campuses with schools, clinics, publishing operations and radio stations fructifying out from the mission church. The model of missionary service most esteemed in the nineteenth century – involving protracted terms of labour in distant mission fields – is not yet an anachronism, but it has become over time entwined by new mobilities of bodies, information and money. By the late 1890s, the *Christian Herald* was being read in mission stations throughout the world; by the mid-1950s, as Tim Stoneman observes, American evangelical radio broadcasts could be heard across the global south; and by the 1980s, many U.S. evangelicals were becoming accustomed to the departure of their leaders abroad for meetings and congresses, to the participation of their churches in international sister-church partnerships and short-term missions, to tithing for the support of faith-based agencies engaged in overseas humanitarian work, and to their own incorporation within transnational fellowship networks. These new mobilities represented more than a multiplication of the channels by which the world could be brought into the evangelical fold. They offered a modern, material realization of the promise expressed in already long-practiced routines of synchronizing prayer and other rites of devotion: of the defeat of geographical distance and profane human time, anticipating the final gathering of the saved within the eternal presence of God.

Thirdly, reflecting the increasing commerce between the fields of religious history and history of the emotions as well as the broader shift within evangelicalism from a modernist concern with the authority of scripture to a postmodern insistence on the priority of experience, the special issue examines the role played by the politics of affection in relations between American evangelicals and the outside world. The movement’s reservoirs of empathy and social conscience have often appeared exhausted by the breadth of its own conversionist ambitions; restrictions rooted in ethnocentrism, gender bias or heteronormativity, as well as in doctrinal conviction, have – as Hans Krabbendam notes - shaped the selection of evangelical leaders, the staffing of evangelical missions and the targeting of mission activity. Although American evangelicals have been long enchanted by the vision of a boundless Christendom, they have also frequently defaulted to narrowcast ministry techniques that rely on audience differentiation and the manipulation of closed space. From the conference hall and megachurch down to the parlour or prison cell, walls enhance the management of mood and enforce the urgency of the message: Christ will come soon; He wants you; the time to commit is now. The arrangement of the room and the bodies within it – eyes shut, hands joined – have remained as important to evangelical outreach as the missiologist’s map, the radio transmitter or the translation of the Bible into all the tongues of the world.

Finally, the special issue identifies the overseas work of U.S. evangelicals as making an integral contribution to the expansion and perpetuation of their nation’s influence as exercised across a global horizon through the long twentieth century. Influence, of course, did not just flow in one direction. Essays in the issue describe the various ways in which American evangelicalism has been itself reformed by its encounters with the world. U.S. evangelicals were often ready to adapt their message and their ministry practices to reflect conditions in the mission field; they began to consciously police their own language and conduct to avoid complaints about American paternalism; and they were sometimes brought to new critical perspectives concerning national policy and the social structures prevailing at home by their failure to satisfy audiences abroad that the justice of God was to be attained only in heaven, not on earth. But the essays also demonstrate the continued significance of U.S. capital and technological example to the development of the global evangelical movement. When the mood of that movement became querulous in the wake of the wider crisis of American legitimacy embodied by Vietnam and Watergate, U.S. evangelicals responded by adjusting their styles of leadership; there was no wholesale recanting of the assumption that their role was to lead. Moreover, they could convert the challenge to their own predominance into a species of endorsement by casting it as a testament to the spread of their own anti-hierarchical traditions. It is this ability of American evangelicals to combine the repertoires of the state-aligned agent of empire and the anti-statist radical – to be simultaneously hegemonic and subaltern - which has allowed them to maintain their place at the vital centre of global evangelicalism. Through the adventure of mission work in hazardous and often hostile locations across the earth, as the case of Kent Brantly suggests, they could communize the wounds they came to heal, claiming them as their own. In the image of Christ, American evangelicals have sought to partake of the pain of the world, for it was only by so doing that they could prove, before all nations, the transcendent power of their gospel.

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51. Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 122-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 11-50; Joe Creech, “Visions of Glory: The Place of the Azusa Street Revival in Pentecostal History,” *Church History*, 65 (1996), 405-24; Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-23; Gary B. McGee, “’Latter Rain’ Falling in the East: Early-Twentieth-Century Pentecostalism in India and the Debate over Speaking in Tongues,” *Church History*, 68 (1999), 649-65. For a reassertion of Azusa Street’s significance, see Gastón Espinosa, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism: A Biography and Documentary History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Robert, *Christian Mission*, 67-9. For a thoughtful discussion of this theme, which acknowledges that the experiences of evangelical churches across post-colonial Africa and Asia were not uniform, see Brian Stanley, “Twentieth Century World Christianity: A Perspective from the History of Missions,” in Donald M. Lewis, ed., *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 52-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. On U.S. evangelicals, see Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*. On the indigenization of evangelicalism, see David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); Jenkins, 134-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Noll, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Jenkins, 69-71; Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdsmans, 2003), 35-37. For the argument that there were significant continuities between the subaltern encounter with “civilizing mission” during the colonial epoch and post-colonial experiences of western cultural hegemony, see John L. and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume Two: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Noll, 91-3, 109-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Wuthnow, 140-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006); David Thelen, “The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History,” *Journal of American History* 86 (1999), 965-75; Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review* 96 (1991), 1031-55; Ian Tyrrell, “Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Global History* 4 (2009), 454-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Alan Scot Willis, *All According to God’s Plan: Southern Baptist Missions and Race 1945-1970* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005). See also Bays and Wacker, *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home*; Case, *An Unpredictable Gospel*; Sarah E. Ruble, *The Gospel of Freedom and Power: Protestant Missionaries in American Culture after World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Seat, “*Providence Has Freed Our Hands”*. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Jenkins, 237-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. For a valuable recent study illustrating the point, see Heather J. Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Tyrrell, “Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History”. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 91-112; Daniel T. Rodgers, “Introduction”, in Daniel T. Rodgers, Bhavani Raman & Heimut Reimitz, eds., *Cultures in Motion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)