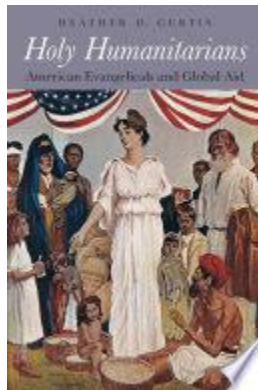


## BOOK REVIEW

# Holy Humanitarians: American Evangelicals and Global Aid

By Heather D. Curtiss

Reviewed by Rebekah R.S. Clapp



Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.  
\$29.95

Heather Curtiss' *Holy Humanitarians* analyzes the impact of American Evangelicals on global aid during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the lens of a Christian periodical and the efforts of its founders. Her work focuses on Louis Klopsch and Rev. Thomas De Witt Talmage who, together, founded the *Christian Herald* in an effort to establish Evangelical Christians as the preeminent source of American philanthropy, especially globally. Curtiss' telling of the *Christian Herald*'s history demonstrates the ways in which power and privilege are intertwined with development efforts, as these wealthy, white, American men decided how and to whom aid should be given, influencing the perspectives of the American Evangelical community through their newspaper.

Curtiss expresses how the *Christian Herald* rallied theologically and socioeconomically diverse communities to support a common cause, championing a unified American Christian identity that uplifts the needy around the globe. She cites the ways in which the *Christian Herald*'s processes for distribution of aid were ahead of their time, as they worked closely with local leaders in the contexts they were seeking to help; this was in contrast to the methodology of the Red Cross at

the time, who sent their own employees to distribute aid in foreign locations (141). Curtiss also notes the progressive nature of the arguments made by the periodical to encourage Americans to extend generosity to non-Christian, non-American, and potentially even the "unworthy" poor (45). At the same time, she recognizes that the *Christian Herald*'s convictions were subject to change with the shifting political climate.

Curtiss highlights the ways in which self-interest and politicking influenced the work of the *Christian Herald*. Throughout her work there is an unfolding narrative of Klopsch's contentious relationship with Clara Barton and the Red Cross. Rather than being effective in working together, Klopsch fought for control so that the *Christian Herald* and therefore the Evangelical movement would be central and foremost in American global aid. Also, in an effort to maintain unity among their constituents, Klopsch and Talmage did little to address the racial contentions in the United States, especially in regard to the practice of lynching occurring in communities across the Southern United States. So, while the *Christian Herald* did address racism on a global scale, encouraging Evangelicals to send financial support around the world by citing the parable of the Good Samaritan to indicate the borderless nature of Christian love, this charitable attitude was not extended internally to the African American community (149). Klopsch and Talmage's arguments for diversity as a part of the American ideal, encouragement of accepting immigrants, and rejection of exclusively aiding the deserving and the Christian, were supported by Biblical arguments. However, the Herald's arguments shifted with the country's changing political or social perspectives.

Curtiss' stated purpose in writing *Holy Humanitarians* was to offer a corrective of the historical scholarship which indicates that the early twentieth century philanthropic efforts were marked by secularization (5). It is clear in Curtiss' narrative of the *Christian Herald* that a faith-based organization was not only successful, but led the nation's efforts in philanthropy during this time. Yet, Curtiss shares the Herald's story alongside of other contemporary efforts

in global aid by wealthy donors and the government-funded Red Cross. These secular forms of aid continued to increase in the early twentieth century, even as the *Christian Herald* moved from the center of American foreign aid efforts and transitioned to focusing on evangelistic efforts (267). Rather than a corrective against the narrative of secularization, *Holy Humanitarians* offers important insight into the influence of American Evangelicals in the history of global aid.

Demonstrating the influence of Evangelicals in twentieth century global aid is one of Curtiss' stated purposes (293). She is explicit in outlining the theological and religious commitments that contributed to the push for charitable giving by the *Christian Herald*. However, Curtiss' definition of "evangelical" is less explicit. Curtiss is diligent in connecting The *Christian Herald's* narrative within the broader religious movements in the United States at the time, such as Christian socialism, biblical criticism, Darwinian evolution, fundamentalism, and the charismatic revivals. While Curtiss makes note of the influence of these movements or ideas on Klopsch and Talmage, she is less clear on how Evangelical identity changed as a result of them. While she recognizes that the rifts in Evangelicalism that occurred during this time period led to the question of whether Christian charity was central to Evangelical faith and identity, she nevertheless concludes her book by demonstrating that grassroots Evangelical charity continues to have a significant influence around the world (262, 282).

Curtiss is successful in demonstrating the important historical link between American global aid and Christian charity. Her choice of Klopsch and Talmage's newspaper as the subject of her narrative is key in detailing the Christian influence and centrality in American philanthropic history. This historical account also provides historical and theological foundations for Christian development work today. Curtiss is careful to highlight the *Herald's* forward-thinking in areas such as valuing global diversity, addressing structural issues, and uplifting indigenous leadership, while also drawing attention to their blind-spots such as the shifting of their commitments based on social perspectives, ignoring the plight of African Americans, and vying for position and power within American philanthropic efforts. Though providing an American-centric narrative, Curtiss is intentional in giving space to the work of Pandita Ramabai, whose efforts offer a contrasting philanthropic and developmental approach to that of Klopsch and Talmage. Overall, Curtiss offers a well-balanced narrative, refusing to shy away from the competing motivators of compassion and self-interest, politics and generosity.

---

**Rebekah R.S. Clapp** is a United Methodist minister and Coordinator of the Center for Hispanic/Latino Ministries at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, OH. She is also a PhD Student at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY.

Author email: [rebekah.clapp@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:rebekah.clapp@asburyseminary.edu)

---