



Global Faith
and Worldly Power



**Global Faith and Worldly Power:
Evangelical Encounters with American Empire**

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Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies
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CONFERENCE DESCRIPTION

Scholars of religion and American foreign policy have in recent decades used transnational perspectives to challenge standard nation-centered narratives in the history of both evangelicalism and U.S. international relations. On the one hand, research on the global engagement of American evangelicals has highlighted the political diversity, cultural complexities, and sociocultural contestations within the movement as it became more and more embroiled with the world outside of the United States. It has thus shifted the focus away from the rise of the religious Right and the politics of the "backlash". On the other hand, the new diplomatic history has destabilized the facile binaries of isolationism/internationalism, realism/idealism and secular/religious in foreign policy scholarship. It has shown that international experiences, including missionary and professional assignments, military deployment and educational sojourns, have generated multiple global visions for U.S. international engagement.

While this research has significantly revised understandings of both American evangelicalism and U.S. foreign policy, however, it has largely been isolated on separate tracks. As religious scholar Sylvester Johnson put it in 2013, "of the hundreds of studies of US empire that have emerged over the past decade, a only mere handful examine the intersection with religion." Likewise, "for the vast

majority of scholars of US religion, it seems to matter little if at all that the US is an empire."

This conference addresses these lacunae by exploring the intersection of American evangelicalism with the consolidation as well as the contestation of America global political, economic, and cultural power in the twentieth century. It brings into conversation researchers who in recent years have used innovative transnational perspectives to challenge established tenets in both religious history and foreign policy. In mapping the dynamics of global religious engagement onto the contested terrain of American international involvement the meeting explores how the "transnational turn" opens up new ways of understanding the relationship between religion and foreign policy in general, and between evangelicals and empire in particular.

For this purpose the panels and a roundtable discussion explore key areas where religious dynamics and foreign policy imperatives intersected at home and abroad:

1. Evangelicals and Decolonization

The ascent of the US as a global power went hand in hand with the rise of anticolonial movements across the globe, primarily because both world wars had weakened the established imperialist rulers and opened up opportunities for movements for self-determination, especially in Asia and Africa. In terms of US foreign policy, this posed a particular challenge to empire-building by a nation that was shaped by the dual legacy of settler-colonialism on the one hand, and a sense of itself as an anti-imperialist "empire of liberty" on the other. In terms of evangelical religion, it revealed conservative Protestantism as a pluralistic, multi-directional enterprise characterized by both collusion with imperialist aspirations and instances of indigenization, anti-colonial resistance, and "reverse missions". What is more, the tension between global hegemony and anticolonial impulses intersected with the race and class divides within conservative Protestantism. After all, evangelicalism is not only a powerful faith tradition among whites, but the dominant religion of African American. Among the themes the panel explores is how evangelicals – both black and white – navigated and negotiated these multiple divisions, particularly in the context of their own global outreach and expansion. At the same time this provides us with a different perspective on the simultaneous domestic mobilization of the Christian Right and the Civil Rights movement.

2. Global Evangelicalism and Global Capitalism (Political Economy)

This panel explores the ways modern evangelicalism is aligned with, intersects with, shores up and contests global capitalism in the context of the assertion of American global power. In the course of the twentieth century, evangelical critiques of capitalism increasingly gave way to an evangelical sacralizing of free market economics. As historian Darren Dochuk concludes, evangelicals effectively constructed cultural agencies to match the capitalist system of the Sunbelt and its military-industrial power base. Nonetheless, the global engagement and diversity of evangelicals also facilitated witnessing against the patterns of exploitation, resources depletion, and global corporate control within and beyond the United States. What is the relationship between the domestic "business turn" in American religion (including corporate ties, the rise of Christian corporations, the notion of religious marketplaces, and the sacralization of capitalism) and global engagement? In what ways did this clash with critiques of market capitalism that emanated from the movement's growing ethnic diversity as a result of conversions in Latin America, Asia, or Africa? And how does the relationship with capitalism shape evangelical views of empire and the colonized?

3. Evangelical Religion, "Territoriality", and U.S. Foreign Policy

How evangelicalism interacted and intersected with the formation and unravelling of "bounded" national space in the "long" twentieth century is the focus of the third panel. The key characteristic of this "coherent epoch of world development" was, according to Charles Maier, the rise of "administratively and territorially cohesive regimes". The concept of "territoriality" not only includes strong central government, continuous military mobilization, industrial policy, workplace security, and the penetration of national and colonized spaces via railroads, telegraphs, and bureaucracies. It also includes what Maier calls an "obsession with social enclosures", i.e. the drawing of clear physical, cultural, and bureaucratic lines between nations, races, ethnicities, and classes. The Gilded Age marked the inception of this "bounded" national space; the late 1970s signified its demise, as national governments struggled with the economic fallout of processes of globalization. How does evangelicalism fit into these processes? Do religious forms have the capacity to subvert established power structures, or do their moments of insurgency fold back into reproducing patterns of oppression? Does empire require a level of sacralization of the established social order that does not allow for the fundamental criticism necessary for sustaining radical alternative visions? Are religions within empires so bound up with the assertion and maintenance of power that they cannot see beyond hierarchies, consolidation of control, and material interests? In short,

this panel studies the role of religious nationalism and internationalism in supporting and critiquing empire. It explores how conservative Protestants understood, fought, accommodated, and shaped American internationalism; how their international experiences since the late nineteenth century were central in shaping foreign policy-relevant insights and lessons, and how they participated in divisive debates powered by conflicting conceptions of the nation's role in the world.

4. Global Missions and "Holy Humanitarianism"

The confluence of government efforts to mobilize the missionary and humanitarian resources of religion with the newly energized and zealous evangelicalism are key to shaping the relationship between religion and empire. Missions and humanitarian activism became a central area of contact, cooperation, collusion, or contestation. Africa in particular was a continent where an established evangelical missionary presence rather suddenly coalesced with government interests, and evangelical missionaries became a key link between religious and diplomatic circles. From the viewpoint of policy makers, missionaries engaged in long-term and intimate ties with foreign cultures, were fluent in their languages, interacted closely with native populations, and were present in areas that were initially peripheral to US interests. This raises questions about the ways in which the global, voluntarist enterprise of American evangelicalism was constitutive of United States influence in the world. As Heather Curtis maintains, evangelicals built upon concepts of America's redemptive mission to link humanitarian aid with American nationalism and to shape a particular way in which global poverty, need, and relief were choreographed in American culture and connected to economic and military expansion. Another issue is how the multiple linkages between administrators and missionaries bureaucratized and professionalized religious organizations, leading to a merger of "metrics" and "mysticism". In addition, the panel looks at the ways in which missions and humanitarian organizations sometimes became fertile sites of spiritual and cultural exchange.

5. Evangelical Media, Outreach, and Communication Technology

Particularly in a faith tradition that is organizationally pluralist while theologically centralizing, the "labour of representation" in the form of religious media becomes crucial in creating that which evangelicals speak of. Periodicals, radio programs, newsletters etc. construct knowledge that can be reproduced and marshalled by different people and in different contexts. There are plenty of studies on the evangelical media, but few have explored systematically the issue of who could be regarded as belonging or admissible to the evangelical fellowship. Here research needs to center, for example, on the politics of

affection as a facet of US evangelical relations with the outside world. This includes conscious attempts to generate and choreograph enthusiasm, emotion, and empathy; to shrink the distance between home and abroad; and to shape and sustain patterns of engagement, association and authority across the global evangelical movement. In what ways does evangelical media structure these attachments, and how do they link these with issues of empire, power, the military, heroism, national mission etc.?

6. Roundtable

The concluding discussion reflects on the way transnational perspectives have changed our understanding of religion and foreign policy. It revisits larger historiographical and theoretical issues in the intersection of both fields, such as:

- The significance of global religious transfers, connections, and networks, agencies in the formulation and contestation of foreign policies.
- The influence of empire-building on constituting or disrupting the beliefs, practices, and institutions of American religion.
- The intersection of religious mobilization and empire-building with globalizing trajectories in politics, business, culture and the media.
- The co-constitution of religion and empire.