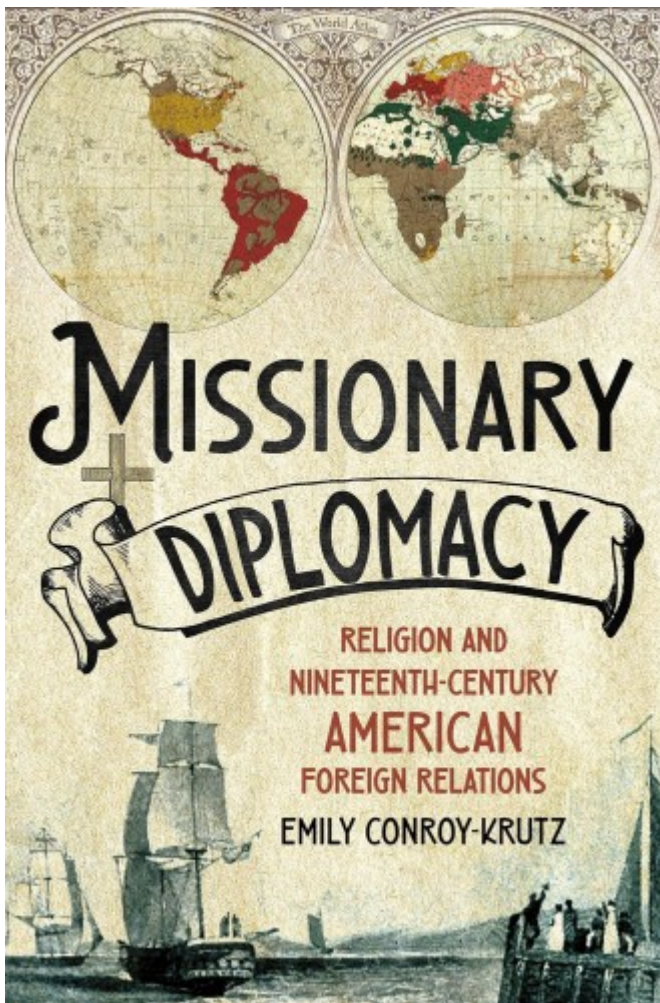


Diplomatic evangelism

Emily Conroy-Krutz chronicles the complex relationship between Protestant missionaries and the US Foreign Service in the 19th century.

by [Robert Shaffer](#) in the [January 2025](#) issue
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In Review



Missionary Diplomacy

Religion and Nineteenth-Century American Foreign Relations

By Emily Conroy-Krutz
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

The name of this magazine denotes its founders' enthusiasm at the dawn of the 20th century for the Protestant missionary enterprise, which, the theory went, would soon convert whole sections of the world's peoples to Christianity, ushering in not only a distinctive but a self-evidently superior historical era. This overly optimistic view became subject to self-examination in the Century beginning in the 1920s and then with greater force in the 1930s. Not only were rates of conversion abroad disappointingly meager, but serious questions arose in the wake of World War I's intra-Christian slaughter—along with the continuation of colonialism, global racism, and gunboat diplomacy—about whether Western and Christian societies were, indeed, superior. Harvard's William Ernest Hocking led a large-scale inquiry that recommended, in *Re-Thinking Missions* (1932), that missionaries downplay proselytizing and serve more as ambassadors between cultures. Unlike many other Protestant periodicals and against pushback by some readers, this magazine, which at the time ran missionary dispatches in every issue, endorsed this revised approach.

These aspects of the century's past came to mind while reading *Missionary Diplomacy*, the engaging account by Michigan State University historian Emily Conroy-Krutz of the manifold interconnections between Protestant American missionaries and the US government from roughly the 1840s to the 1910s. Conroy-Krutz's basic thesis is that Protestant missionary work in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Pacific Islands impelled the United States to increase its diplomatic activities in these regions, especially through the creation of new consulates. Simultaneously, the growth of a more robust US state apparatus protected and extended the reach of missionary activities. Drawing on a wealth of sources—diplomatic correspondence, records of such organizations as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and of individual missionaries, and contemporary Christian and secular periodicals—Conroy-Krutz demonstrates that one cannot understand the growth of US diplomacy beyond Europe and Latin America without reference to the missionary enterprise.

Much of this interconnection was prosaic. In the mid-1800s it was not unusual for missionaries to staff consulates and embassies, not least because they were already

stationed nearby and were likely the only Americans with the requisite language skills. More broadly, their reports, which went to politicians and general American audiences alike, often constituted the earliest firsthand accounts of the geography, cultures, and social and political structures of non-Western regions, thus serving—albeit sometimes with pronounced ethnocentric spin—as the kind of ambassadors for which Hocking would later call. And just as growing trade led to the opening of consulates, so did missions, whose staff might be subject to brigandage and other crimes and whose work might offend local authorities.

Conroy-Krutz recounts case after case in which missionaries relied on US government institutions, including the navy, in ways which support the long-standing interpretation by many historians (and some repentant Christians) that this enterprise dovetailed with American imperialist expansion. There was the not-atypical attitude of William Henry Rankin, a second-generation missionary, who supported Western colonial control over India and the Philippines as necessary for the flourishing of Christianity and who called the work of missionaries and the US government “entirely at one.” As Conroy-Krutz summarizes: “the cross followed the flag and provided the justification for violence and colonialism.”

But the author is attentive to the wide—even divergent—range of interactions between missionaries and diplomats. Among her favorite words in parsing the evidence are *complicated* and *complications*. There were consuls who considered missionaries to be troublemakers, as they sought US protection not only for themselves but for local converts. There were missionaries who warned that relying on US government protection would, as one wrote, “lead the Chinese to look upon our religion and great guns as inseparable.” Missionaries in Korea earned rebukes from US consuls for advising royal factions there, and diplomats at times feared missionary activity would jeopardize trade. (Some missionaries, in return, criticized the United States for elevating greed over creed.)

By the end of the 19th century, few missionaries served as consuls, partly because of increased professionalism in the diplomatic service and partly because some missionary organizations became wary of serving two masters. Similarly, former secretary of state William Seward suggested that missionaries must accept dangers abroad and that “doing God’s work,” in Conroy-Krutz’s paraphrase, “did not guarantee them the backing of the US government.”

At the same time, readers today will likely sympathize with missionaries (including William Sheppard, who was Black) who for years sought US diplomatic backing as they exposed horrific atrocities and exploitation by Belgian authorities in the Congo and suffered arrests and lawsuits for doing so. Readers will also look favorably upon the humanitarian collaboration between missionaries and ambassador Henry Morgenthau in publicizing Ottoman attacks on Armenians (who were Christians) during World War I. (Puzzlingly, Conroy-Krutz does not mention that Morgenthau was the first American Jewish ambassador.)

In addition to providing the backdrop for the internal reexamination of missionary activity in the 1920s and 1930s, *Missionary Diplomacy* tangentially raises the issue of Christian nationalism, as numerous missionaries and diplomats conflated Protestantism with the American state. Addressing a missionary convocation in 1925, President Calvin Coolidge, for example, counted the US as among the world's "Christian nations," "charged with a great trust for civilization" which these missionaries were carrying out.

But Conroy-Krutz also cites the 1796 Treaty of Tripoli, which stipulated that the US was "not in any sense founded on the Christian religion," and she shows how some diplomats took care to avoid mixing government with religion. As one top American diplomat stated, the US must not "bring the power of the state actively into the advocacy of the Christian system." While there is no evidence that the US was founded constitutionally on Christianity, some readers may seize on certain passages here to purport to show that historically and culturally the US was a Christian nation.

There are a few missteps. Conroy-Krutz strains to fit some of the evidence into her overall paradigm, in which change is the main theme in missionary-state relations from the 1820s to the 1910s. Her epilogue on the 1920s feels rushed, and she fails to mention the Hocking Commission.

Still, with its clear writing and parade of fascinating and pertinent incidents and ideas from widely varying locales, *Missionary Diplomacy* will make an excellent text in courses on US religious history and on US global interconnections. It deserves a place in Sunday school classes for churches that sponsor mission work, and it will help century readers understand this magazine's worldview over a century ago.