Review of Michael Thompson's *For God and Globe*
This is part of an ongoing series of reviews written by Temple graduate students of new books considering the study of force, diplomacy, and international history. These reviews will be posted on an ongoing basis throughout the year. The books you'll see reviewed here are brand new -- they often haven't made it into the pages of major scholarly journals yet, allowing our reviewers to get their say in before the dust has settled. If you would like to participate as a reviewer, or have a book to suggest, please contact Brian McNamara, CENFAD's Thomas J. Davis Fellow, at brian.mcnamara@temple.edu.

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In *For God and Globe*, Michael Thompson makes an important contribution to the growing literature on religion and foreign relations in the United States. In contrast to prevailing assumptions within the scholarship, the early decades of the twentieth century witnesed a debate among Protestants over America's role in the world—and in particular Christian support for the nation's imperialist and militarist interventionism. In fact, as Thompson ably shows in this lucidly written monograph, the Protestant foundations of American foreign policy underwent vigorous contestation between World War I and the 1950s. While many Great War Protestants praised President Wilson and his “war for righteousness,” and while many more Cold War mainliners and evangelicals accepted Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’ anticommmunist rhetoric and imperialist designs, interwar Protestants imagined a different framework. This framework— which Thompson calls “Christian internationalism”—is the focus of his study.

At the center of Christian internationalism, according to Thompson, was a counterdiscourse against the rhetoric of Christian nationalism that predominated in the early twentieth-century United States. U.S. Christians have long framed their understanding of their place in the world by imagining America as a “Christian nation.” This discourse—preached from pulpits, circulated in periodicals, and propounded by ideologues on both sides of the aisle—has had real political import throughout the twentieth century, continuing to our present moment. But in the early decades of the twentieth century, Thompson contends, such a framework was less asserted than taken for granted: “When Americans were engaging with the world through missionaries, bankers, and marines . . . the notion that the world was divided into ‘Christian nations,’ such as America, and pagan nations, such as those to whom missionaries were sent, was so ‘obvious,’ so given, that it formed part of a pretheoretical background, the deep basis of practice” (13). Amid the carnage of the First World War and a growing consciousness of the mistreatment of indigenous groups by Western missionaries, some Protestants came to question this notion of a “Christian nation.” Could America truly be baptized in such overt religious overtones, given the atrocities it allowed or perpetrated around the globe? This epiphantic realization produced interwar Christian internationalism as a counter to the dominant discourse of Christian nationalism. Thompson particularly stresses the missionary roots of this phenomenon, in contrast to other scholars that have located it in an ebullient enthusiasm about Wilson’s League of Nations proposal (15-20).

Thompson locates the genesis of interwar Christian internationalism in other factors as well, including the rise of numerous institutions dedicated to promoting Christian ethical reflection on foreign relations as well as the cooperation between Christian pacifists and realists in crafting a radical political ideology that stood over against mainline Protestant institutionalism. He underscores the ways in which this Christian internationalism explicitly broke with mainstream liberal internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in its refusal to view the world exclusively through the lens of international law and its stress on “the importance of nonstate, person-to-person international relations” (5). By emphasizing the interpersonal dimensions of interwar Christian internationalism, Thompson resurrects an understanding of internationalism first articulated by the scholar Sandra R. Herman in 1969. Herman distinguished between “political” and “community” approaches to international relations. The political approach stressed the development of a legal instrument by which to achieve peaceful, nonrevolutionary world order, especially one that might open opportunities for the expansion of American interests and power; the community approach, by contrast, emerged from the work of radicals and intellectuals and stressed, in Herman’s words, “the development of a more organic world consciousness, a sense of international community among the peoples of different nations” (quoted in 8). This search for an “organic,” communal internationalism characterized the work of many interwar Protestants.
To explore the ways in which this interwar Christian internationalism germinated, expanded, and eventually dissolved, Thompson focuses on two “sites of collective deliberation”: a radical magazine and a series of global ecumenical conferences. His first three chapters consider *The World Tomorrow*, the premiere Christian internationalist periodical of the 1920s and 1930s. According to Thompson, the magazine—edited for many years by a former Protestant missionary-turned-socialist named Kirby Page—constituted a foreign relations “counterpublic” (10): an alternative voice to the American mainstream discourses on internationalism, an intellectual community that critiqued American militarism, racism, and imperialism. Circulated throughout the U.S. and around the world, it drew into conversation and cooperation a broad swath of organizations and interests: “Christian socialists, Christian pacifists, advocates for third-party politics, black interracial activists from the NAACP and National Urban League, Quakers, YMCA and YWCA leaders, revisionist history professors, Women’s International League figures, Socialist Party leaders, modernist clergy, and emerging Marxist-‘realist’ theologians, to name a few” (11). The magazine also provided the theologian and public intellectual Reinhold Niebuhr (its editor in the 1930s) with a venue in which to work out the implications of Christian realism, a philosophy that decisively influenced mainline Protestant social thought during the Second World War by excoriating pacifism for its naïveté and advocating war as a necessary evil in a sinful world.

The second half of the book explores the numerous Christian ecumenical conferences held around the world during the interwar years, and the impact they made on foreign relations at home. These conferences brought together scholars, missionaries, and church leaders from the U.S. and United Kingdom, as well as participants from elsewhere in Europe, from Southeast Asia, from Africa, and from other parts of the world. Intellectually, they created opportunities for the exchange of ideologies: postliberal theology emerging from German and Swiss universities, anti-imperialist critiques emanating from Korea and the Philippines. Thompson pays special attention to the Universal Christian Conference on Church, Community, and State, convened at Oxford University in 1937 and shorthanded as “Oxford 1937.” He contends that Oxford 1937 was more “than just a formal series of speeches and panels over a fortnight, ... [but rather an event that entailed] the practice of vast scholarly exchanges of papers over years in the lead-up, the experience of shared living and shared prayer, the exoticism and *communitas* of travel, and elaborate follow-up campaigns” (10). For Thompson, Oxford 1937 and other, similar conferences functioned as “important expressions of supranational Christian solidarity in a world ridden by nationalisms” (10).

Throughout the book, Thompson underscores the ways in which interwar Christian internationalism consistently critiqued American imperialism, militarism, and racism. Yet he also describes the gradual decline and collapse of the movement. *The World Tomorrow* ceased production in 1934, and the “Oxford consensus” gradually became Americanized by two of its most prominent proponents: Niebuhr, who advanced the conference’s anti-nationalist stance in his classroom teaching but did little to build up the world church, and John Foster Dulles, a longtime supporter and participant in the Oxford conferences whose turn as Secretary of State for the Eisenhower administration prompted him to betray the spirit of those conferences when he tried to enlist the ecumenical movement in his anticommunist crusade. One wonders why Thompson stopped his study before the rise of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which formed in 1948 in the wake of the Oxford conferences and became during the Cold War era an important counterbalance to the anticommunist screeds of many mainline and evangelical Protestant institutions. Undoubtedly elements of interwar Christian internationalism remained alive, though transformed, in the WCC.

Nevertheless, Thompson has provided one of the most important studies of interwar mainline Protestantism to appear in several years. For historians of American religions, Thompson’s book contributes to a revival of scholarship on mainline Protestants and their significance to twentieth-century American culture, a revisionist turn led by David A. Hollinger, Margaret Bendroth, Elisha Coffman, Kip Kosek, and others. Moreover, for historians of American foreign relations, Thompson’s book matters because it takes religion seriously as an analytical category—a recent move in the field led by Andrew Preston, Gene Zubovich, Cara Burnidge, and others. Thompson ably situates the role of American religion and theology against a contextual backdrop informed by the recent historiography of foreign relations, citing scholars such as Paul Kramer, Glenda Sluga, Mark Mazower, and others. Most importantly, he emphasizes the importance of Protestant Christians in American diplomacy not only to the extent that
they influenced actual policymaking, but also because they forged relationships with religious and nonreligious actors outside the parameters of state-sponsored diplomacy in an effort to create a world order that transcended nation-state rivalries. *For God and Globe* represents an important contribution to the still-emerging but much-needed religious turn within foreign relations history.