


## [Wetzel on Moran, 'The Imperial Church: Catholic Founding Fathers and United States Empire'](#)

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**Katherine D. Moran.** *The Imperial Church: Catholic Founding Fathers and United States Empire.* The United States in the World. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. xiv + 311 pp. \$48.95 (cloth),

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**Commissioned by** William S. Cossen (The Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science, and Technology)

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In this engaging and well-written book, Katherine D. Moran puts forth a complex and mostly well-substantiated argument about how “Catholic founding fathers” were remembered by empire-builders during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (GAPE). Moran maintains that figures such as Jacques Marquette, Junípero Serra, and Spanish friars serving in the Philippines became idealized founding fathers during the GAPE: memorialized, celebrated, and invoked on a variety of occasions, they took their place in the pantheon of America’s founding fathers, which had hitherto consisted only of East Coast Protestants. These newly celebrated heroes, in turn, helped justify America’s empire, both domestic and international.

The structure and organization of *The Imperial Church* is clear. Chapters 1, 3, and 5 provide background and context for Marquette, Serra, and the Spanish friars, respectively. They then show how, in contrast to the more well-known anti-Catholicism of the GAPE, these figures became honorary founding fathers for the Midwest, California, and the Philippines. Although Catholic priests in general were not normally seen as fully American during this period, authorities ranging from President William Howard Taft to novelist Helen Hunt Jackson began to conceive of these “Catholic founding fathers” as partaking in a civilizing, Christian mission on the colonial frontier that was not very different from what the Puritans or other Protestant pioneers had done. In extending colonial authority, spreading Christianity, and keeping order, these Catholics became honorary American founders. Recognition spread to Marquette, for example, who appeared on a postage stamp in 1898, and to Serra, who was commemorated in a 1912 play in San Gabriel that broke a record for consecutive showings.

Moran suggests that it was no coincidence that Marquette, Serra, and the Spanish friars became popular when they did. In chapters 2, 4, and 6, she explores the usefulness of these men for American imperial ambitions both for previous domestic colonialism and for America’s nascent international empire at the turn of the century. For example, in 1901 the liberal Protestant weekly *Independent*—not normally supportive of Catholicism—recommended that Catholic influence continue in the Philippines. The editors stipulated that the “best” kind of Catholicism could be an aid to the United States government there (p. 171). Specifically, they meant an Americanist Catholicism

that respected the separation of church and state. In the broader picture, influential American writers and colonial officials spoke highly of the sixteenth-century Spanish friars, lamented the scandals into which some of the nineteenth-century friars had fallen, and promoted modernist Catholic influence in the Philippines.

Moran is also clear about the historiographical implications for this research. First, she rejects an interpretation that would see the GAPE celebration of these “Catholic founding fathers” as merely an episode in a simplistic “rise-and-fall-of-anti-Catholicism” narrative (p. 16). Instead, she proposes that turn-of-the-century positive representations of Catholicism fit into a longer story in which American Protestants have always been attracted by elements of Catholicism and have formed some of their own beliefs in dialogue with it. Second, she wisely shows how the “rise-and-fall-of-anti-Catholicism” story tends to focus on the Euro-centric “immigrant church” of the Northeast at the expense of African American, Mexican-American, and other Catholic groups for whom the narrative is not as applicable. Moran insightfully suggests that historians need to “recognize that Los Angeles and Manila are as important to the history of American Catholicism as are Boston and New York” (p. 17).

*The Imperial Church* has quite a few strengths. First, the structure and organization are very clear. The use of the odd-numbered chapters to explain how the Catholic founders were remembered and the even-numbered chapters to show how they were put to the service of American empire works very well. Moran also does an excellent job of reiterating each chapter’s argument at key points. Second, the book is mostly convincing in its argument and offers a significant historiographical intervention. Given the substantial and long-lasting anti-Catholicism in American culture, it is truly surprising and worthy of explanation to see Marquette, Serra, and especially Spanish friars honored by Protestant elites. In its explanation, the book also reminds us of the dominant forces of whiteness, civilization, and Christianity as unifying factors among elites in GAPE society. All of Moran’s conclusions are based on exceptionally deep archival research. Finally, the book is engaging and well written. Analysis rightly retains pride of place, but a welcome number of anecdotes and humorous episodes keep the pace lively and lighten the mood.

No book is without some problems, and this one is no exception. This reviewer found the odd-numbered chapters more convincing as a rule. While the evidence for the even-numbered chapters is certainly there, it appears a bit thinner overall. For example, in chapter 2 the popularity of the poem *Hiawatha* (with its featuring of Marquette) is made to bear quite a bit of evidentiary weight. Likewise, the empire that the Catholic founding fathers were enlisted to support is mostly the American domestic empire (the conquering of native peoples). Chapter 6 certainly deals with the nation’s foreign empire after 1898, but readers expecting to see Marquette or Serra’s colonialism trotted out to justify US occupation of the Philippines or Puerto Rico will not find many examples here. In light of the book’s many achievements, however, these are minor critiques.

In the main, this is an excellent study of an important, if underappreciated or misunderstood, topic. Advanced undergraduates in an American religious history or Gilded Age/Progressive Era course might profit from the book; graduate students in history, religious studies, or American studies definitely would.

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