

# **The Lure of Images**

A history of religion and visual media  
in America

**David Morgan**

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# The Lure of Images

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This fascinating history of the relationship between mass-produced visual media and religion in America takes the reader on a journey from the 1780s to the present: from early evangelical tracts to teenage witches and televangelists, and from illustrated books to contemporary cinema.

David Morgan explores the cultural marketplace of public representation, showing how American religionists have made special use of visual media to instruct the public, to practice devotion and ritual, and to form children and converts. Along the way, he views Jesus as an American idol, Jewish kitchens and Christian parlors, Billy Sunday and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the anti-slavery movement. This unique perspective reveals the importance of visual media to the construction and practice of sectarian and national community in a nation of immigrants old and new, and the tensions between the assimilation and the preservation of ethnic and racial identities. As well as the contribution of visual media to the religious life of Christians and Jews, Morgan shows how images have informed the perceptions and practices of other religions in America, including New Age, Buddhist and Hindu spirituality, and Mormonism, Native American religions and the Occult.

David Morgan is Professor of Humanities and Art History at Valparaiso University. He is the author of several books including *Visual Piety* (1998) and *The Sacred Gaze* (2005), and the co-founder and editor of *Material Religion*.

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## Religion, Media and Culture series

Edited by Stewart M. Hoover, Jolyon Mitchell and David Morgan

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**Religion, Media and Culture** is an exciting series which analyzes the role of media in the history of contemporary practice of religious belief. Books in this series explore the importance of a variety of media in religious practice and highlight the significance of the culture, social and religious setting of such media.

### **Religion in the Media Age**

*Stewart M. Hoover*

### **The Lure of Images**

A history of religion and visual media in America

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David Morgan

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## Series editors' preface

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Media, Religion and Culture is a series of interdisciplinary volumes which analyze the role of media in the history and contemporary practice of religious belief. Books in this series scrutinize the importance of a variety of media in religious practice: from lithographs and film to television and the internet. Studies from all over the world highlight the significance of the cultural, social and religious setting of such media.

Rather than thinking of media purely as instruments for information delivery, volumes in this series contribute in various ways to a new paradigm of understanding media as an integral part of lived religion. Employing a variety of methods, authors investigate how practices of belief take shape in the production, distribution, and reception of mediated communication.

Stewart M. Hoover, University of Colorado  
Jolyon Mitchell, University of Edinburgh  
David Morgan, Valparaiso University

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# Introduction

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This is a book about the history of mass-produced, popular images from tract illustrations to feature films, and how American believers of one sort and another have seen and used them. The interest that drives it aims at popular visual media rather than fine art. *Popular* means what large numbers of people have spent their time looking at for the purpose of uplift, instruction, amusement, devotion, or propaganda; *media* refers not only to mass-produced imagery such as lithographs, postcards, lantern slides, or videos, but also to hand-made media like panoramas and performative imagery such as tableaux vivants, which travel to large audiences.

But for all the talk of visual media and imagery, the space in front of the image, occupied by viewers, is as important as the object itself. That is because images are social phenomena. They are never viewed in a vacuum. Rather than presenting information to a passive audience they are better understood as cultural dynamos that configure social relations in what may be called visual fields or gazes. If we wish to understand the cultural work of images, religious or otherwise, we need to scrutinize how they enable vision, which is at least as much a cultural and social process as it is a biological one. The aim of this book from beginning to end is to explore how religious imagery operates as part of different ways of seeing.

In regard to religious belief it is important to say at the outset that this study does not approach images as ancillary illustrations to the “real” nature of religion as theology, creed, sermon, or clergy. Instead, images and the manner in which they are used are primary forms of evidence – visual evidence; they are, materially speaking, religion at work. The purpose of the book, then, is to examine major themes in American cultural history and religion in tandem with the ways that images and visual practices have constituted the medium of belief. The operative question, which I consider the informing principle of the study of religious visual culture, is: How does religion happen visually?

The book is entitled *The Lure of Images* in order to signal this substantive approach to the study of image and visual practice. The lure of images lies in the promises they make. By definition, they begin their work at a distance when viewers first see them. Vision is a sense that oscillates between scanning and

concentrated focus. To see means skimming the surfaces of things in a broad range in search of what one wishes to hone in on and inspect more closely. When an image arrests our attention, we move closer. Another way of saying this is that we look in order to behold, and behold with the prospect of holding. Vision leads inexorably to touch, and taste, even when it does not actually end in tactile experience. Seeing also runs in the opposite direction – rushing toward us rather than only streaming from our eyes. The image on the cover of this book is a striking example. A store owner (who is also a street preacher) had the image of a large eye painted on the metal shutter he lowered each night over the window of his Laundromat along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in Jersey City. The gaze of this eye of God fixes itself on passersby in a steadiness that the proprietor felt would be daunting, arresting any impulse to vandalize or rob the establishment. The lure of images includes their power over us, the bodily impact of a piercing gaze that refuses us invisibility, placing us under surveillance and thereby evincing certain forms of behavior. Bearing the embodied nature of seeing in mind helps to register the spatial reality of seeing, that it takes place within a physical setting and always under the power of desire. That is where the promise of images comes in. They offer us something we seek – happiness, nourishment, desirability, glamour, security, power, love, fellowship, social status, health, divine presence, refuge from the muddle of daily life, a lost past, a better future.

Such promises make images all but irresistible, empowering them to shape human experience in ways that are often almost invisible. If the power of images is to be understood, their construction of visibility must be made visible. This book is organized under three broad headings in order to explore the power of images and ways of seeing in the history of American religions. I have structured the book more or less in chronological order from the early republic to the present day, but chapters overlap, backtrack, and wander where certain historical issues and themes may take them. A straightforward chronological march through two hundred years of national history in a metered search for narrative continuity and uniform coverage quickly becomes dull. I have tried, therefore, to let the themes drive the discussion. Their selection is keyed to what I understand to be the social life of images: the circulation of imagery, the cultural politics of visual representation, and the many practices that put images to use. In all of this, religion is not something hermetically sealed off, the singular domain of clergy, bound up within sacred edifices. Nor are images merely self-contained bearers of artistic intent. It is the social career of images that receives attention here. Commerce, entertainment, the public sphere, and the private home are the circumstances in which the social life of religious images and ways of seeing take place.

In the first part of the book, “Print media in antebellum America,” the lure of images consists of their ability in the case of illustrated books and tracts to corroborate and build upon text and utterance in order to make their claims more fetching, authoritative, or trustworthy. In the book’s second part, “New

visual media and the marketplace,” the lure of images is their promise to consumers of an ethos that accompanies the acquisition of a commodity, which is often an image itself such as a lithograph. The lure also resides in providing the occasion for many people to see the same thing together and in doing so to experience a sense of community. Finally, under the rubric of “The power and menace of images,” discussion fixes on how images have exerted a fascination and appeal by conveying the charisma of a leader, on the one hand, and by envisioning the promise of the American landscape, on the other.

This brief sketch offers only a few of the ways in which images command attention. Rather than summarize any further, I’ll let the chapters speak for themselves. It may be worth pointing out, however, that this is a history of religion *and* visual media, which means that it is not simply a history of images per se. There is as much religion here as there is imagery. As I wrote the book, it occurred to me that one might go about combining images and the history of religion in several ways. One is the “illustrated history” – a densely visual text in which images trump words, reducing them to brief paragraphs or long captions. Another model is the more common academic style of “history with illustrations,” which reverses the coffee table style of the illustrated history by featuring a long text with a few images added as an afterthought, gathered in a clump or scattered in the text without comment. A third option is the conventional art historical approach, which selects a certain set of images and their makers to investigate, treating religion only where it casts light on understanding them better. Each of these has its place, but none is able to demonstrate how images may serve as visual evidence in the study of religion; and none takes a robustly interdisciplinary approach.

In this book I have tried to write a visually driven study of the history of many religions in the United States. The intention is to show how visual media and ways of seeing are a fundamental part of that history. I hope that the book’s success will be determined by the case it makes for integrating the study of American visual culture and the history of religion since the late eighteenth century. I could spend another paragraph apologizing for everything I have left out, but I’d rather end by inviting others to regard such absences as the opportunity to make their own contributions to a large and emerging field that will continue to welcome new work for some time to come.



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Part I

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# Print media in antebellum America

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# The aura of print

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As the American Revolutionary War drew to a close with the Battle of Yorktown in the autumn of 1781, the young Noah Webster was teaching school in Sharon, Connecticut. The recent Yale graduate was appalled at the gross variations in spoken English among his pupils and had become convinced that the success of the emerging nation depended on fixing the proper rules of spelling and speaking *American* English. Much would depend, he insisted, on securing the practice of what he called a “federal language,” which meant teaching children to read, write, and spell a version of English that was both purged of regional differences and distinct from its British origin. And so he set about producing an “American Speller,” which first appeared in 1783.<sup>1</sup> Language would serve as the savior, not *saviour*, of the national soul.<sup>2</sup> The genius of a people was invested in its language and bequeathed to the future through the proper education of the young. This held with particular force, according to Webster and his contemporaries, for the new republic, a polity whose power to cohere depended on good will, on a shared national vision, on electoral good sense, and therefore on a degree of public literacy that could not be left to cultivate itself.

Common or public schools were an indispensable institution for promoting public good through the acquisition of cultural no less than academic literacy. And Webster, whose livelihood was producing school books and dictionaries, never ceased insisting that Americans needed to speak, read, and write as Americans, which they were to learn by reading his books in school. A print culture that would educate and inform students and the broader public to that end was essential. Certainly this was the view of another early vendor of popular print, the Rev. Mason Locke Weems, an Episcopal clergyman best remembered for his biography and apocrypha of George Washington. But Weems spent much of his time hawking books as the agent for Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey. In 1811, Weems shared with his employer and investor a publication project, which, like many of his ventures, was never realized. But the project registers the Republican ideology of Federalists and later Whigs as they regarded the nation and devised ways to bind it up in a unity, which they faulted the vices of aristocratic luxury and the teeming mob alike for resisting. For Weems, as for others, the term “Christian” was synonymous with

“Republican.”<sup>3</sup> After spending years planning many bible editions with Carey, and then selling them throughout the North and South, Weems urged upon him a tract that might be inserted in the bibles that Weems sold for Carey:

I contemplate a noble addition to the Bible. Kingly governments you know are the curse of the Human Race. The Bible, you also know, is point blank against Kingly governments. The People of America enjoy a REPUBLIC, which, next to a Theocracy, must be the most perfect form that can be. But they don't know its value. And therefore like Esau they may sell it for a song. To set their own form of Government before them in all its Amplitude & brightness of Blessings must in my opinion at least be one of the most patriotic services that any man can do to this Country. Now what book so proper as a vehicle (to print it in) as the book which in consequence of the universal veneration attached to it, finds a ready admission into every house?<sup>4</sup>

The significance of literacy and print had been recognized and celebrated by Protestants in colonial America since the early seventeenth century. Puritans and Pilgrims both stressed the reading of the bible and provided for the education of the young no less than the preparation of young men for teaching and the pulpit. The size and number of personal libraries in colonial America is striking. Literacy rates in colonial America generally exceeded contemporary rates in England and Europe. Yet book production was considerably less, long yoked to London. The first bible published in America did not appear until 1777.<sup>5</sup> The largest-selling books published after the founding of the new nation were not, however, religious in the institutional sense. Webster and his competitors in the textbook trade issued spellers and readers that went through multiple editions and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. But if they were not religious in a narrowly sectarian sense, books such as Webster's *American Speller* and Caleb Bingham's *American Preceptor* (1794) and *Columbian Orator* (1797) did promote a piety of the republic, a civil religion that was unmistakably Christian. Bingham stocked the *Columbian Orator*, a collection of passages for learning eloquence, with texts that promoted the importance of religion for the success of republicanism, including poetic passages that were explicitly Christian. Although a Jeffersonian rather than a Federalist like Webster, Bingham nevertheless believed that the American republic required the Christian practice of virtue in order to resist the corruptions of luxury and wealth that led to tyranny. Webster and Bingham made sure they included texts promoting the value of religion in American society because they believed it was the most powerful avenue for the inculcation of virtue. And the religion was Protestant Christianity. The unity of religion and republic was considered fundamental. Religion and eloquence each kept vice in check – the one by instilling the practice of virtue, the other by championing liberty in the public life of government, press, and law.

Bingham's *Columbian Orator* was dedicated to teaching American students the art of oratory. "Eloquence," to quote the opening oration of the book's selections, "can flourish only on the soil of liberty."<sup>6</sup> The book serves to remind us that the practice of public speaking not only remained a fundamental feature of political life during the early republic, but also was regarded as a cornerstone of education and an indispensable component of making American citizens. In fact, the character of print that Protestants developed in tracts and printed sermons was deeply shaped by the oral culture of early national life. The concept of the American republic in the early national period drew importantly from what might be called the oratorical imagination, that is, the power of eloquence to evoke an ideal communicative situation in which a republican speaker moved citizen-listeners with the sublimity of speech, persuading them to endorse the speaker's point of view. The result was a public sphere in which republican justice prevailed. Print was the actual substitute for the forensic practice of oratory – print in the form of newspapers, books, and pamphlets, which constituted what Bingham, echoing an eighteenth-century tradition, proudly called the "republic of letters."<sup>7</sup>

As the official oral culture of the day, oratory as Bingham presented it helped usher in a momentous shift toward imagery in print culture. In the introduction to his volume, Bingham framed his definition of eloquence with a theory of the passions, which understood language as their vehicle of expression. He asserted that the ancient orators of Greece and Rome "did not think language of itself sufficient to express the height of their passions, unless enforced by uncommon motions and gestures."<sup>8</sup> Bingham noted that authorities of eloquence were conflicted on the rank of speech and gesture, but for his part he believed gesture to work more directly on the mind of listeners since it operated by sight, which was "the quickest of all our senses."<sup>9</sup> The sublime style, which operated by sweeping listeners away with emotional gestures and powerful diction, relied less on abstraction and more on the appeal to feeling. As a result, its use of visual signifiers of feeling – gesture and facial expression – magnified the effect of words and fostered greater sympathy for the visuality of speech. This interdependence of word and image in oratory was paralleled in print by the growing use of illustrations. Oratorical practice argued that seeing and saying were importantly linked. It did not take textbook publishers long to agree.

The capacity of oratorical gesture to paint the passions had long been a vital interest among history painters in the European academic tradition, which provided the visual template for American painters who described the patriotic heroism of the Revolutionary War. In 1851, the Pennsylvania-born Peter Frederick Rothermel, who studied painting in Paris, produced his large canvas *Patrick Henry in the House of Burgesses*, delivering the famous speech against the Stamp Act of 1765, in which he warned King George III of the republican lesson of an autocrat's demise. Two years later an engraving offered a more widely available reproduction of Rothermel's painting to Americans (Figure 1). Rothermel observed the physiognomy of the grand style, showing



PATRICK HENRY DELIVERING HIS CELEBRATED SPEECH  
IN THE HOUSE OF BURGESSES, VIRGINIA, A.D. 1765.

*From the first Edition—Painted by Philip James de Loutherbourg—Engraved by J. Smith—Engraved from the original  
by the artist—Engraved for the subscribers to the Art Union of Philadelphia for 1852, 1853.*

ENGRAVED FOR PRESENTATION TO THE SUBSCRIBERS TO THE ART UNION OF PHILADELPHIA 1852.

Figure 1 Engraving after Peter Frederick Rothenmel, Patrick Henry delivering his celebrated speech in the House of Burgesses, Virginia, AD 1765, for presentation to subscribers to the Art Union of Philadelphia for 1852, 1853. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

the animated speaker gesturing dramatically, which is echoed in a forceful diagonal that moves upward through the audience, visualizing the effect of his speech. In the balcony above, women seem to flee the thrust of his diction; below them a British officer rises to unsheathe his sword, as if to defend England against the orator's treasonous attack. Tories and Loyalists in the audience grimace at the effect of Henry's words. As an early moment in the sacred narrative of American nationhood, the scene seems to ground the genesis of national consciousness in the daring act of speech. The power of the speaker is registered everywhere in this iconic moment of incipient democratic spirit.<sup>10</sup>

The cooperation of word and image was a lesson not lost on Evangelical publishers. The need to develop persuasive oratory during the early republic was intensified for Evangelical Christians by the new political culture of democracy, particularly democracy in which state religion was eliminated. Tract societies conceived of an ideal homiletic situation that bore close resemblance to the practice of eloquence. An illustration by Alexander Anderson on the cover of the American Tract Society's *Christian Almanac* from 1836 (Figure 2) models the ultimate form of evangelism: a preacher commanding the rapt attention of the world's populace as he announced the Word of God. In the same way that Rothermel would use gesture to demonstrate the homology of seeing and saying, Anderson uses the body to deliver the message of the preacher's words. The gesture of his hand visualizes the spoken word and deftly converts the printed word of scripture into spoken as well as visual language. An image like this – and there were many in Evangelical tracts, almanacs, and magazines – visualized the transparency of scripture and the authority of the text it adorned, fashioning it as the printed version of what the preacher proclaimed. Such images helped craft a transition from the oratorical tradition of preaching to the illustrated print culture of the nineteenth century, tutoring Americans to regard print as a faithful conveyance of scriptural truth and illustrations as an affirmation of the authority and reliability of print. Illustrations endorsed the iconicity of texts by showing the object of the preacher's speech, authorizing tracts and other print as equal to preaching or an even more effective means of disseminating scripture. Illustrations like Figure 2 assured Protestants that printed texts worked like spoken discourse, encouraging them to imagine everyone in the nation as an extended gathering waiting to "hear" the message of Christianity.

If a republican understanding of oratory stressed the importance of public speaking and the cooperation of seeing and speech in the creation of an ideal form of discourse, the disestablishment of religion created a new condition for the relevance of imagery, particularly illustrations that accompanied texts. Protestants had made use of print imagery from the very beginning of the Reformation. Even the most stringently iconophobic Puritans in England found certain kinds of illustrative imagery acceptable. American Protestants illustrated versions of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, broadsides, New England primers, and almanacs among other standard texts. Bibles even appeared in the

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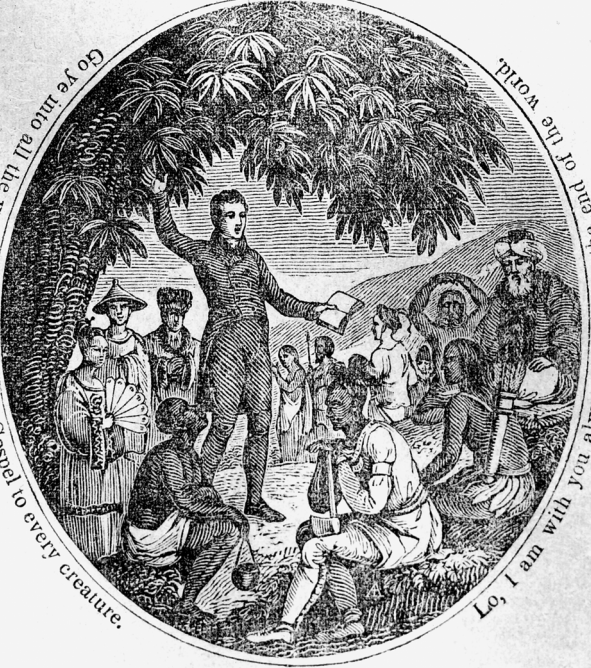
THE  
**CHRISTIAN ALMANAC,**  
FOR  
**NEW-YORK, CONNECTICUT, AND  
NEW-JERSEY.**

For the year of our Lord and Savior JESUS CHRIST,  
**1836:**

*Being Bissextile, and the Sixtieth year of the Independence of  
the United States.*

Containing a fund of religious and instructive anecdote, with a Topical  
Verse System for 1836 on page 48.  
ADAPTED TO EQUAL OR CLOCK TIME.

Calculated for the Horizon and Meridian of New-York City.  
Lat. 40° 42' 40" N. Long. 71° 1' West.

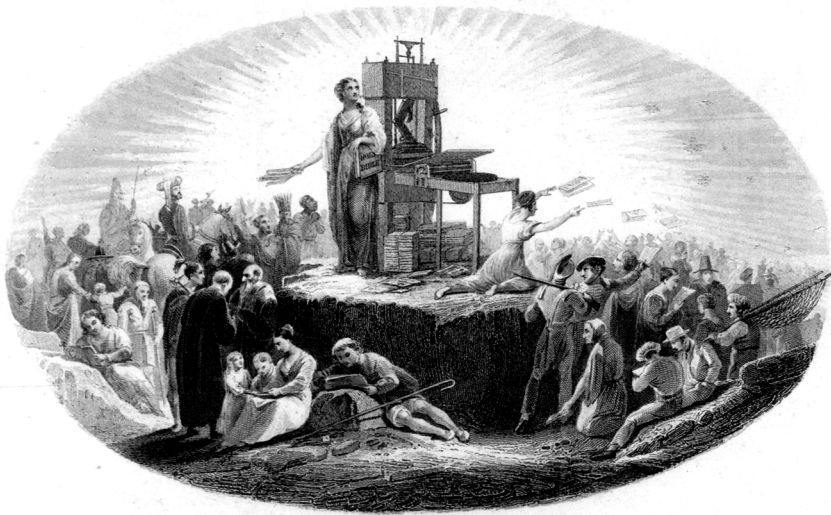


Published by the American Tract Society, and sold at their Depo-  
sitary, No. 150 Nassau-street, opposite the City Hall. Price 64  
cents single. Considerable reduction to Booksellers and others  
purchasing by the quantity.

Figure 2 Alexander Anderson, engraver, Missionary preaching, *Christian Almanac for 1836*. New York: American Tract Society, 1835. Photo author.

later part of the eighteenth century with a scattering of engraved plates. But the new nation consisted of many audiences for whose attention zealous Protestants competed: unchurched immigrants, growing urban neighborhoods of laborers, passengers aboard steam ships and railroads, passersby in the street, and most especially, the children of frontier towns and eastern cities. Conservative Protestants found it necessary to enhance the appearance of their religion and to teach its precepts to consumers whose loyalties were increasingly drawn toward secular print and its sometimes lurid forms of entertainment. Accordingly, the purveyors of Protestant print had remarkably little difficulty recognizing the desirability of illustrated publications and often spared little expense investing in them. Evangelical publishing associations often engaged in hard-hitting rivalry with secular printers and book sellers for the patronage of the American consumer. Illustrating books and tracts made very good commercial sense. The lure of images was unmistakable.

There was another reason for Protestants to use images in the publications of tract and mission societies. The image of the printing press reproduced here (Figure 3) is a good example. Placed on a certificate of contribution to the American Tract Society (ATS) that was presented to those who offered a financial gift to the Society, the image visualizes the ideology of Evangelical print.



THIS IS TO CERTIFY

that *Eliza Loomis*

Figure 3 Printing press, American Tract Society Membership Certificate, 1840s. Courtesy of Billy Graham Center Museum.

Appearing on a mound, a printing press radiates light over a dense crowd of people whose costume indicates they come from far reaches of the globe. Dressed in full-length drapery that recalls allegorical personifications populating emblematic imagery as well as neoclassical art of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, two female figures distribute the produce of the press to the people about the mound. One of the figures looks heavenward, as if responding to a divine commission to disseminate the pamphlets and books. Beneath her left arm appears a conspicuously labeled "Holy Bible." The central arrangement of the press on the mound surrounded by a quiet gathering recalls contemporary portrayals of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or the discursive situation pictured in Figure 2.<sup>11</sup> If the association is correct, the mechanism of the printing press replaces the preaching Christ and missionary, substituting printed text for oral discourse, and directing the printed word to all peoples, who gather about the radiant epiphany of print as a kind of millennial assembly whose many languages no longer separate them, as if the spread of the printed Gospel reverses the effect of Babel in a latter-day Pentecost of pages and ink. The shift from oral discourse to print as the primary medium of evangelism did not mean the loss of orality or oratory eloquence, but the switch to a visual register that sought to incorporate orality into print. As we shall see, the tendency was to animate print. Images helped endow print with an aura that rooted the visual in the spoken, serving to authorize imagery as well as to enliven print.

In the left foreground of the image sit a mother and two children, who share a book passed to them from the Evangelical press. About the group appear a shepherd, two soldiers, a kneeling old woman, a fisherman holding his net, businessmen, a mounted figure in a turban, and an old man on crutches. Behind the press stand a Native American in a headdress and a black figure with prayerfully clasped hands. Most figures in the crowd are engaged in reading newspapers, books, tracts, or broadsides. It is striking that no missionary or preacher appears in this image of global evangelism. Two bald and enrobed men in the left foreground stand beside an Indian brave who holds a tomahawk. The two figures in robes do not preach to the Indian; one of them appears to be engrossed in reading a book. Judging from their dress, they may represent judges or academics; or they may be Catholic clergy or monastics humbly consuming sacred print.

The absence of preachers in the image suggests their redundancy. Print triumphantly and universally replaces the spoken word. The message of the Good News proceeds in print that is generated with divine blessing and finds its way into the world under the imprimatur of the bible itself. The message of the image was that the flurry of print put into circulation by the Tract Society issued as the purity of biblical truth. The tracts were, as an annual report of the Religious Tract Society of Baltimore put it, "silent witnesses for Jesus." Tracts were reliable "epitomes" of scripture: "Any one of them, falling into the hands of a person who had never heard of the gospel before, and might never hear of

it again, would teach him truths by which his soul might be saved.”<sup>12</sup> Although some Evangelical Protestants of the antebellum era were anxious about or even adamantly opposed to images of Christ or his saints, they were not at all against using images to underscore the iconicity of their texts, the Evangelical tracts which they were convinced were “the most efficient instruments of extending the Redeemer’s Kingdom,” to cite the Baltimore report again. Tract advocates needed to assure their fellow Christians that tracts were authorized and reliable bearers of biblical truth. Images like Figure 3 helped make this case for them by showing the tract as a material version of the Word, sacred information to be strewn in the manner of the biblical parable of the sower of seed. Accordingly, one of the figures atop the mound casts the printed sheets widely as the other holds scripture in one hand and printed folios in the other.

### **Voluntarism and the system of Evangelical print**

Most colonies throughout the British territories in America operated after the British model of state-sanctioned religion. This arrangement was widely accepted as a necessary condition for the public good. Morality needed to be enforced by the governing power in order to maintain order and decorum, and organized religion was generally accepted as the best way to do that: not only organized, but also Christian and sponsored by the state, even written into the charters of the colonies and the constitutions of most of the states of the new nation. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison offered an alternative model in their state constitution for Virginia. Eventually, this won the day at the federal level in the Bill of Rights, but not without bitter disagreement. Jefferson was forever criticized by many of his opponents as the impious product of the secularizing, free-thinking, atheistic French Revolution and Enlightenment. For many American Protestants of Calvinist persuasion, human nature was far too grim to be entrusted to the sunny disposition of democracy. Virtue would inevitably give way to vice, the true nature of the human soul in its state of innate depravity. Consequently, strong moral authority was required to instill in children and adults the proper respect for law and deity. State-sanctioned Christianity was considered by conservative Whigs as the best means for securing the commonwealth.<sup>13</sup>

Calvinists expected little good from human nature. When disestablishment finally emerged as the law of the land, they lamented it as a dark day indeed. But not for long. Already underway in the United States was a new system of Evangelical activism that had been imported from Calvinist Protestants in Britain. In 1799, the Religious Tract Society (RTS) was founded in London. Chief among its promoters was the Rev. David Bogue, a Congregationalist minister, author, and mission seminary founder. On May 18, 1800, the occasion of the first anniversary of the Tract Society, he addressed the company assembled in London on the topic of “The Diffusion of Divine Truth.” Bogue began by acknowledging that the oldest method of disseminating truth was

the act of preaching. "But there is another method of diffusing truth," he insisted, one

which can plead in its favour divine example and command. Man has a hand to write, as well as a tongue to speak; and God has employed the pen of the ready writer, as well as the tongue of the learned, to convey a word in season to him that is weary.<sup>14</sup>

Bogue went on to list a host of biblical writers from Moses to the Apostles, naming them all composers of "Religious Tracts for the benefit of mankind." If that were not persuasive enough, even "God himself becomes the author of a short Religious Tract: with his own hands he wrote the Ten Commandments of the law."<sup>15</sup>

Bogue also authored the RTS's first tract, issued in 1799, which argued for the timely, compelling, efficacious resource of tracts as an Evangelical method. The tract was a primer in tract production, distribution, and use. Its clarity and systematic counsel were apparently so fetching that the tract was republished in the United States as early as 1802.<sup>16</sup> In 1813, the recently formed Virginia Religious Tract Society issued the Address again, bound in its first volume of tracts. Seventeen of the volume's eighteen tracts were lifted directly from the publications of the RTS in London.<sup>17</sup> Writing, Bogue proclaimed, "is God's chief way of making himself known to the human race from age to age."<sup>18</sup> Many of those in heaven today, he said, were doubtless there by virtue of having read God's word. "What is a religious tract, but a select portion of divine truth designed and adapted to make the reader wise unto salvation?"<sup>19</sup> As a small reproduction of Scripture, a tract was launched into the world bearing the full authority of its original. Print, the implication seems clear, ensured no loss of the truth of the prototype. Mechanical reproduction suffered no fading of aura.

## **The context of Evangelical print culture in the United States**

How was Bogue's rationale received in the United States? What social and theological matrix did it enter, which in turn shaped its application to the American scene? The first annual report of the Virginia Religious Tract Society carried a brief preface and a sermon preached by the organization's new president, Andrew Davidson, before the assembly of members in the autumn of 1812, even as British forces were sacking Washington in a brief renewal of armed conflict between Britain and the United States. The preface and Davidson's sermon make only slight references to the British campaign. It may have been a bit embarrassing for the Tract Society to inaugurate its effort on the model of the London RTS in the midst of British attacks. Or perhaps not. British Dissenters were generally pro-American. Moreover, British and

American Evangelicals shared a millennial sensibility that regarded wars less in geopolitical than in theological terms.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a distinct apocalyptic mood surcharges the preface as well as Davidson's sermon as the framework for the new society's print enterprise. The preface opens the volume with a gloomy notice of the troubled condition of the modern age: "The present state of the world presents to the pious, and reflecting mind, a picture truly alarming. Confusion, disorder, and bloodshed seem universally to prevail. Kingdoms and Empires have become cankered with iniquity, and are tumbling into ruins."<sup>20</sup> Davidson sounded the same note in his sermon, but with more direct allusion to present circumstances: "The whole world is in arms . . . and even our own once happy land has not escaped the general conflict."<sup>21</sup> But if the reader expected the Tract Society to train its scorn on the British, the preface confounded the expectation by doing something remarkably familiar: if this country is in travail, it has got no one to blame but itself. The opening address slipped quickly into the standard Evangelical device of the jeremiad: "in our own country," the speaker lamented, the "morbid affection" for corruption "daily increases." A list of national offenses followed:

Vice stalks abroad unmasked. The tongue of Infidelity, which for some years past has been palsied by the powerful attacks of the friends of Christianity, begins again to lift up its voice in a thousand mutilated forms. False Prophets and Teachers, vain and filthy Dreamers, are labouring to unsettle the faith of many, and to lead them astray.<sup>22</sup>

What did all this mean? The signs were clear to the Evangelical leadership as well as the membership of Tract societies from Virginia to New York – as the preface put it: "we are drawing near to the last days . . . Antichrist is now in the full vigour of his strength." Rev. Davidson contended that

it is not at all improbable but that we are now entering upon those dark and dismal days spoken of by the Prophet Daniel, when "there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation."<sup>23</sup>

But as the forces of Satan and the age of cosmic battle and millennium drew nigh, there was no time for despair or flagging zeal. True, the preface conceded, there was an insufficient number of clergy to circulate among the nation's peoples and preach the redeeming Word of God. But there was a remedy for that inadequacy: "a Society for distributing religious Tracts." The advantage was that

at a very cheap rate, saving instruction can be disseminated through every part of our country: and will afford an opportunity to superannuated and disabled Preachers, as well as Lay-members of both sexes, to render

essential service to the cause of Christ, by carrying the precious truths of the Gospel, to the houses of their ignorant neighbours.<sup>24</sup>

Tract distribution could activate a dormant labor pool of retired clergy and lay men and women to counteract the paucity of clergy.

But the expediency of print addressed more than the shortage of clergy. It promised to tackle the “corruption of manners” that afflicted the day’s youth, who lacked “proper instruction and restraint.”<sup>25</sup> Evangelicals like Davidson and the membership of the Tract Society looked to print as an effective means of waging war in the new nation’s most important public institution: the public school. They urged the use of the bible as a text book in the schools and resented its withdrawal from the curriculum: “The Bible, the fountain of all light and knowledge, is cautiously kept out of their hands, in schools, while they are learning the first rudiments of knowledge.” But it wasn’t only that the bible was increasingly absent, it was the substitution of secular print that alarmed Evangelicals:

In the place of this book of God, are substituted fabulous stories of heathen deities, novels, plays and romances. Thus the youthful mind is filled with mere trash, or what is worse, poisoned with the principles of infidelity, which are interwoven with the stories of most novels.

To this end, the American Tract Society in Boston, celebrating its tenth anniversary in the summer of 1824, announced in the inaugural issue of its *American Tract Magazine* that it had improved the quality of paper used for its tracts, was beginning to trim the edges of its publications, had begun to use stereotype plates, and had “ornamented about fifty of [its] Tracts with cuts,” or illustrations.<sup>26</sup> These were all significant improvements in the material form of the Society’s product. Rag had been used for paper hitherto, which created a rough surface for printing and varying coloration. Pulp paper became available in the mid-1820s, providing a smoother, more easily trimmed, brighter, and more uniform printing surface. With the opening of the Erie Canal, pulp supply was also much more consistent than rag. By trimming the edges of the published pages, the Society enhanced the visual appearance of its publications, especially the bound volumes of books that were major sellers. Stereotyping lowered printing costs dramatically by freeing up letter press and keeping plates on hand for subsequent reprinting on demand, allowing the Society much greater flexibility in responding to consumer desire.<sup>27</sup> The effect of the Tract Society’s initiative to beautify its publications was beneficial. A decade later, Robert Baird, a Presbyterian minister, supporter of the ATS, and general agent for the American Sunday School Union (ASSU), complained to Frederick Packard, editor and corresponding secretary of the ASSU, that

the bindings of our books should be more attractive. Our books are as ugly in their appearance as old German books. Why do the Committee keep to the yellow edges? It may be cheap, but it is abominable. Our hymn book is too bad. I would rather have none, than retain it. It is not well selected, arranged, or any thing else, in my opinion.<sup>28</sup>

Baird obviously had marketing in mind. The look of literary products mattered if they were to be competitive.

Publishers and vendors of religious print had found this to be true since the late eighteenth century in the United States. Weems had not spared Carey comparable complaints regarding the paper, engravings, and bindings of his bibles. "I am not unhappy," he wrote in his typically florid style, "lest you ponder not sufficiently the importance of giving Plates to Public Admiration. The Engravings are the wings of that very Costly Work. Elegantly woven and webbed they will bear it up."<sup>29</sup> Weems based his confidence of the appeal of engravings on his experience in the street. In order to encourage subscriptions for a quarto illustrated edition of the bible planned by Carey, Weems had created a prospectus including specimen prints of the bible, which included an engraving. "My Bible business," he wrote Carey in the fall of 1800 from his native Dumfries, Virginia,

goes on as favorably, perhaps, more so, than I could have expected. Immense numbers of the Cuts [used to illustrate the forthcoming edition] may be sold separately. At what can you let the whole set go? I mean the 17 cuts? The question is often put to me, and at what could you put them in plain neat frames? . . . I have good reason to believe that elegant engravings will sell admirably here. One Gentleman in this town, Lawyer Harrison, who has seen the Bible proposals, not only takes a bible but wants a full set of the engravings neatly framed.<sup>30</sup>

Several years later, Weems summarized in another letter to the publisher the appeal of illustrations for children in justification for another, far more extensively illustrated bible, which would retail for \$15.00 and carry seventy engravings.

Historical Engravings are excellently calculated for the Good of Children. They excite a vehement desire to read the passage illustrated by the picture. And by doing this from picture to picture, and with that lively interest which accompanies Juvenile curiosity, young People are apt to acquire both a knowledge & a veneration for the Holy Scriptures that may do Immortal Service.<sup>31</sup>

Children, Weems knew very well, were becoming an engine powering the consumption of print.

The Tract Society's use of "cuts" or illustrations, typically wood engravings, followed the same logic that Weems had advised. Images adorned its publications for the purpose of appealing to adults, but were especially present in its items aimed at children. Tract Society members and supporters cared about the appeal of Christian publications to children. In 1825 a mother from Connecticut wrote to the ATS publishing committee to declare her belief in the benefit of religious books for children, and offered the following recommendation, which seconded the claim of a contemporary moralist and educator:

Will you allow me to make a suggestion as to the character of the Engravings which may be employed? Miss Edgeworth says, and my observation abundantly confirms her remark, "Prints will be entertaining to children at a very early age. They should be chosen with great care, should represent objects which are familiar, and the resemblances should be accurate. Perhaps the first ideas of grace, beauty, and propriety are considerably influenced by the first pictures which please children."<sup>32</sup>

The correspondent acknowledged that an improvement of the quality of engravings would likely increase the cost of children's books, but urged the Tract Society to consider that "the subject of education is constantly increasing in importance in the estimation of parents in our country, and such a consideration as this ought not, I presume would not, diminish sales." A shrewd argument based on demographics supported her claim: the number of white children under the age of 16 in the 1820s was greater than the number of white adults over the age of 20. The national population was growing not only because of immigration, but also by virtue of increased births. Moreover, a new understanding of children and child-rearing was beginning to regard the development of children, including their religious formation, as not only beginning early in life, but also as disproportionately important during early years. Parents and educators found that pictures were a sure means of engaging children in study and edifying conversation.

The largest number of illustrated publications during the 1820s and 1830s by the Tract Society were children's books, though many tracts aimed at adults were also illustrated. The ASSU, under the leadership of Frederick Packard, encouraged the use of illustrations in its literature, most of which was directed at children of varying ages, either to be used in Sunday schools or as domestic reading. Many of its volumes were installed in Sunday school libraries, from which children borrowed. Illustrated volumes and tracts were also given as gifts and rewards for attendance, exemplary performance in class such as the recitation of memory work, or as allurements to attend Sunday school. Packard's correspondence includes many exchanges with authors concerning illustrations. One of these, the Rev. James Alexander, who taught rhetoric at the College of New Jersey at Princeton and the Theological Seminary, was author of many articles in the *Princeton Review* as well as over thirty tracts and books