The Visual Culture of American Protestantism in the 19th Century

ABSTRACT
The study of Protestant visual culture requires a number of correctives since many scholars and Protestants themselves presume images have played no role in religious practice. This essay begins by identifying misleading assumptions, proposes the importance of a visual culture paradigm for the study of Protestantism, and then traces the history of image use among American Protestants over the course of the nineteenth century. The aim is to show how the traditional association of image and text, tasked to evangelization and education, evolved steadily toward pictorial imagery and sacred portraiture. Eventually, text was all but eliminated in these visual formats, which allowed imagery to focus on the personhood of Jesus, replacing the idea of image as information with image as formation.

Keywords: visual culture; reception; iconoclasm; memorialization; likeness of Jesus; prophetic chart.

RESUMO
O estudo da cultura visual protestante necessita de algumas retificações já que, não raro, acadêmicos e assim como protestantes partem do princípio de que imagens não possuem nenhuma significância nesta prática religiosa. Este artigo dedica-se a identificar suposições falsas sobre a relação entre protestantes e imagens, estabelece a importância do paradigma da cultura visual para o estudo do protestantismo e traça a história do uso de imagens entre os protestantes americanos no curso do século 19. O objetivo é demonstrar como a tradicional associação entre imagem e texto para fins de evangelização e de educação evoluiu na direção das imagens pictóricas e do retrato sagrado. Eventualmente, os textos foram praticamente eliminados nestas formas visuais, o que permitiu que as imagens fossem na pessoa de Jesus, substituindo, assim, a ideia de imagens como um veículo de informação para imagens como veículos de formação.

Palavras-chave: cultura visual; recepção; iconoclastia; memorialização; aparência de Jesus; gráfico profético.

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RESUMEN
El estudio de la cultura visual protestante necesita cierta rectificación ya que, con poca frecuencia, académicos y protestantes asumen que las imágenes no tienen importancia en esta práctica religiosa. Este artículo está dedicado a identificar suposiciones falsas sobre la relación entre protestantes e imágenes, establece la importancia del paradigma de la cultura visual para el estudio del protestantismo y rastrea la historia del uso de imágenes entre los protestantes estadounidenses en el transcurso del siglo XIX. es para demostrar cómo la asociación tradicional entre imagen y texto con fines de evangelización y educación ha evolucionado en la dirección de las imágenes pictóricas y el retrato sagrado. Finalmente, los textos se eliminaron prácticamente en estas formas visuales, lo que permitió que las imágenes se enfocaran en la persona de Jesús, reemplazando así la idea de las imágenes como un vehículo de información para las imágenes como vehículos de entrenamiento.

Palabras clave: cultura visual; recepción; iconoclasia; memorización; aparición de Jesús; carta profética.

During the nineteenth century the United States underwent considerable change, moving from a small set of former British colonies to the scale of a continent with international ambitions by the end of the century. And in this period of development Protestantism likewise made dramatic changes. Modern evangelicalism emerged in the first half of the century along with a spate of new religions during that time or shortly later—Mormonism, Adventism, Christian Science, New Thought, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, to name a few. Measured in terms of the visual culture it spawned, Protestants restlessly experimented with new visual media as a way of surviving in a volatile cultural marketplace. In this essay, I will argue that American Protestantism evinces a series of transformations that went from understanding imagery as a feature of textuality, in which images served as adjuncts that were useless without a textual setting in which to work, to a sovereign form of communication that worked in the minimal presence of text, as an agent whose power to shape thought and feeling came to be recognized and exploited by Protestants.

But in order to demonstrate this, it is first necessary to address several obstacles that readily obstruct the study of images and visual practices among Protestants. It is very common to encounter attitudes that resist serious examination of the visual culture of Protestant devotional, educational, and theological practices. For example, a strong tendency prevails among Protestant clergy and theologians to continue to subordinate image to text, such that images are regarded as symbolic substitutes for the superior value of words. It is also familiar to hear Protestants deny that images play any role whatsoever among them. To prove this claim, they point out that there are no altar paintings in Protestant churches, no saints’ images to be revered, and no theology that gives images a role to play in dispensing grace. Yet in spite of these claims, it will become evident below that images abound in nineteenth-century American Protestantism.
Preliminary problems

In order to recognize the benefit of studying Protestant visual culture, it is necessary to do three things. First, it is helpful to define a ‘visual culture’ approach to the study of images and visual practices; second, it is necessary to recognize the presuppositions that hinder the study of Protestant visuality; and third, one needs to focus attention on where images and visual practices operate in Protestant religious life. I will take up each of these in turn.

Not to be confused with “art” or “iconography” or “images,” visual culture designates any imagery as well as the visual practices and attitudes that put images to work in everyday life. The study of visual culture is the study of how images construct and maintain a culture’s sense of reality. The emphasis is not on images per se, but on what they do. Their reception and circulation is as important as their production since the task is to scrutinize what they do to structure feeling, imagination, and perception, convey attitudes, act as agents, create or reinforce human relationships, and enable the encounter of otherwise intangible realities—from nations and peoples to ancestors, the past, gods, and spirits.

A visual culture approach seeks to integrate the investigation of production, circulation, and reception of images. Since culture is something that continues to exist by virtue of replication, reproducing patterns of activity, a visual culture approach is keenly interested in scrutinizing re-productive practices, or remediation. This is especially relevant in the nineteenth century, when a host of new media came into existence and images circulate far and wide as copies or iterations. Production does not simply mean the image as a bearer of artistic intention. Though the intention of an image’s maker is always of some relevance, images are not limited to original meanings. They acquire new values in the course of their often meandering social lives. Images also exert themselves as independent agents, affecting humans in a variety of ways by virtue of the interaction of imagery and the cultural situation in which it is received. Put simply, the study of visual culture is the study of how people put their worlds together visually and how images work on them as a result. The study of religious visual culture is the study of how religion happens visually. Religion should not be narrowly understood as a set of beliefs or doctrines whose principal medium is words and ideas. Religion is more effectively framed as practices of imagination, ritual work, communal life, and the everyday negotiation with authority, change, and the shifting terrain of human relations.

At least five kinds of bias have predisposed many Protestants and scholars to disregard or minimize Protestant visual culture. These take the form of the following, generally spurious, assertions:
a) Protestantism is fundamentally iconoclastic: images do not exist in this religious culture.

b) When images do appear, they are inappropriate: images should not be there since the Bible teaches they are idols, misleading, useless amusements, or tools of the devil.

c) Images are acceptable only as forms of instruction for children and the uneducated. They are a condescension to those who need them: mature faith has no use for imagery.

d) The images that Protestants have produced and valued exhibit poor taste: Protestants do images badly and there is no good reason to study kitsch because to do so is to endorse it.

e) When Protestant believers and scholars do study images, they often treat them as messages, immaterial devices that deliver intellectual content, and then vanish: images are forms of information, nothing more than symbolic texts.

If we want to understand Protestant imagery and its uses, we need to focus our attention on the terrain of actual Protestant religious life, asking where and how images and visual practices take shape. In the next section, I will trace the development of Protestant visual culture in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century, arguing that the use of images moves from memory and textual adjunct to affective presence, from shaping character to seeing personality. This process unfolded as a gradual diminution of the submission of imagery to textuality—though it never quite meant severing the connection to narrative and discourse since imagery for Protestants always serves the communicative and rhetorical functions of conveying information, even if that information is understood to be essentially affective.

**Protestant visual culture in nineteenth century America**

From the beginning of the Reformation in Germany, Protestantism has made broad use of images in tandem with print. Although Calvin, Zwingli, and Karlstadt expressed grave concern about the use of Christian images, Luther certainly did not. Like Gregory the Great and a broad swath of Catholic thinkers since him, Luther understood images as teaching devices for those who could not read, and as a rhetorical means for working with text, especially the biblical text, but also the many illustrated sermons of his that were published (see also MORGAN, 2015, p. 42-67). As long as
images operated with religious texts, most Protestants made use of them. And images that did not presume to take the place of scripture, such as portraits of clergy such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, or polemical images like German Spottbilder, which attacked Catholic churchmen and criticized Catholic doctrines such as indulgences, were avidly produced and circulated widely as woodcuts working for the political and dogmatic causes of the Reformation. Typically, only images that occupied the altar or other sites within or on the exterior of churches and shrines were targeted for removal and demolition during sporadic bouts of iconoclasm, first in Switzerland and Germany, and somewhat later in Netherlands, France, and England during the sixteenth century.3

From their earliest days in British colonial towns, Puritans valued literacy and achieved it by teaching reading at home. By the middle of the eighteenth century, it has been calculated that 85 percent of the population of Boston was literate. By 1800, estimates indicate that possibly only Scotland surpassed the United States for higher rates of literacy.4 The workhorse of producing literacy from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries was the New England Primer (see also BONOMI, 1993). The format, established from its debut in Boston in 1690, continued to be used the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Primer was replaced by an explosion of new publications that competed for adoption in the rise of public schools in antebellum America. The alphabet pages of the New England Primer (fig. 1) intertwined texts with imagery evoked by the rhyming couplets in the right column. Sound and image were linked to enhance memorization. The imagery helped students decode the texts and associate words with meanings. The alphabet pages also deftly inserted religious and moral instruction into the acquisition of literacy: often the examples selected for illustration and rhyming were biblical subjects or moral topics. Harnessed to the moral and spiritual formation of children, images of religious topics were considered not only safe, but important since they helped assure a Christian citizenry whose development of moral capital was regarded as essential for the success of Christian nationhood—England’s before the Revolutionary War, and the United States’ wellbeing thereafter.

3 See the following for studies of iconoclasm in various sites in the early phases of the Reformation in Europe: Lee Palmer Wandel (1995); R. W. Scribner (1994); Margaret Ashton (1988); Carlos Eire (1986); Charles Garside, Jr. (1966, p. 146-78).

4 For a very helpful overview of scholarly literature on literacy rates in colonial and early national America, see Jack Lynch (2011).
Images have the ability to manage information by densely encoding it in charts and schematic diagrams. These abstract forms of representation appealed to Protestants, who used emblems, allegories, and tabular charts and diagrams to interpret complex scriptural prophetic texts such as the Book of Revelation. One of the earliest examples of the diagram appeared in 1643 in London. It was a diagram that accompanied a treatise on Revelation, seeking to display the process of seven prophetic seals opening to disclose visions of the last times. (see also MORGAN, 2015, p. 92-93). Eschatology and elaborate interpretations of biblical prophecy remained of great interest to Protestants in the coming centuries. During the 1820s, a Vermont farmer and Baptist preacher named William Miller came to believe that Jesus would return to Earth. Miller arrived at this conclusion by integrating several prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, most importantly Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation. To present his ideas, he and his supporters developed a chart (fig. 2) that brought together in abbreviated form the texts, images, and arithmetic that they used to calculate the probable date of the return—about the year 1843 (and when that did not happen, a recalculated date of October 22, 1844). The images were not symbols, but what was described in the biblical texts by the prophetic writers as having appeared to them. The
fact that the images were not arbitrary signifiers, but visions of divine truth meant that they exerted a recalcitrance, holding their own beside the biblical texts that the chart reproduces and the running numerical calculations. In effect, the chart provided Millerite preachers with the three means of divining arcane prophecies for their listeners. The chart was a guide to reading the Bible in a particular way, acting as a template to assemble disparate passages into a coherent message.

The strangeness of the imagery was important because it encouraged Miller to span very different parts of the Bible as a kind of hyper-text or web of links. He would leap from Daniel to Ezekiel to Revelation via the prophetic imagery that each text exhibited. Bothered by rationalist critiques of the obscurity and contradictions of Biblical prophecies, Miller sought to demonstrate that they actually presented an overarching unity and a single message that radically organized human history into a scheme that culminated in the Second Coming of Jesus at the imminent end of time. But doing so meant pressing the plain sense of the biblical text far beyond conventional Protestant hermeneutics, and using visionary imagery to do so (see also MORGAN, 1999, p. 123-58). Whatever else Millerism represents, it produced an enduring influence on prophetic interpretation and introduced a new use of imagery in biblical interpretation. Other home-grown American Protestant groups such as Seventh-Day Adventists, Church of God, and Jehovah’s Witnesses among others adopted the imagery issuing from Millerism.

The career of visual imagery in nineteenth-century American Protestantism plots a trajectory that begins with images nestled firmly in textual constraints but moves steadily away, toward greater sovereignty as devices that increasingly exert an agency of their own. One of the most characteristic practices of Protestantism is evangelism, presenting “the Good News” of salvation to anyone who has not heard it. It would not be a gross overstatement to claim that the Protestant penchant for information lies at the root of all its practices. Thus, evangelism is a matter of communication: it consists of the delivery of “news” or information. Images offered evangelists struggling with illiteracy or different languages a tool that could diminish such challenges to communication.

A particularly apt example of this is Johannes Gossner’s Das Herz des Menschen (The Heart of Man), first published in 1812. The German text was published in Reading, Pennsylvania in 1822 since a large number of German speakers lived there, and in English translation in the same year ([GOSSNER], 1822a; 1822b, 1826). This booklet consisted of ten engravings of the human heart arranged in a series to track the process of conversion from spiritual birth to death. The process begins with “the image of the interior of a man who serves sin and allows the devil to rule in him.”
second plate pictures “the interior of a sinner who does penance and sin begins to flee” ([GOSSNER], 1842, p. 15). This plate (fig. 3) shows seven creatures and the devil leaving the heart—a peacock, billy-goat, pig, turtle, tiger, snake, and toad. The seven correspond to the seven deadly sins (pride, lust, gluttony, sloth, wrath, envy, avarice). The “sparks of grace” (Funken der Gnade) have entered the heart to drive out the power of sin and Satan. The angel in the upper right, holding a skull (death) in one hand and a sword (judgment) in the other, symbolizes the “prevenient” arrival of the grace of God and Christ, showing the sinner the wages of sin before punishing him for it. Although there were versions of this notion of grace in the Catholic tradition, it became a dominant feature of certain traditions of Protestantism such as the Arminian theology that John Wesley embraced. The purpose of the images in The Heart of Man is to trace the path of regeneration, but also to instruct the viewer on key theological features of its understanding. Although each plate was accompanied by a few paragraphs of explanation and a prayer, the images were designed to allow for direct instruction. This proved so effective that The Heart of Man was widely translated for use in Protestant mission fields around the world. There are at least one hundred-fifty translations, which also meant changing out animals from one translation to another since their symbolic value varied in the cultures missionaries entered.

Throughout the colonial era, American homes were quite often the site of cottage industry, serving as workplaces as well as living quarters. Those who occupied the home as living quarters were not uncommonly hired workers or, in cities, lodgers who rented a room or a bed. As industrialization developed and cities grew in size as centers of industrial production and finance, the home became more private. Fathers began to work away from the home more commonly and mothers increasingly came to dominate domestic affairs. Thus, it was not until the nineteenth century that the modern American home began to emerge, and a central feature of it was the parlor or front room. This was the public

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Figure 3. [GOSSNER, Johannes], The Heart of Man, ca. 1842. Detail: emblem “Regeneration of the Sinner”

I have explored this publication history of The Heart of Man in an essay called “Print and Evangelicalism” (MORGAN, 2006).
face of the family, where guests were received and children educated and trained in the social art of manners. The parlor was also where religious devotions were conducted. Currier & Ives captured this very well in a number of lithographs such as Figure 4, issued over the course of many years, from 1838 when Nathaniel Currier began producing lithographs, into the second half of the century, after Merritt Ives had joined him. We see a well-dressed, bourgeois couple, seated in thickly upholstered parlor furniture popular at mid-century, with a fire in the hearth, and an oil lamp on the table, illuminating their reading of a large, folio-sized bible, the sort of item that would be displayed in the parlor. Lithographs had become a popular form of home decoration by mid-century, and Currier & Ives produced a large number of religious subjects for both Catholic and Protestant consumers. Figure 4 would have appealed to Protestants for its endorsement of family devotional reading. The King James Version rendition of John 5:39 appears beneath the title, “Reading the Scriptures,” sounding a central feature of Protestant piety: “Search the scriptures for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me.”

**Figure 4: Currier & Ives, Reading the Scriptures.**

*Hand-tinted lithograph, ca. 1850s.*

Collection of the Author

The nineteenth-century Protestant ideal of the American home regarded it as the matrix for the moral formation of family members. In 1861, Horace Bushnell, a Congregationalist minister in Hartford, Connecticut, published
the second edition of his widely influential book, *Christian Nurture*, in which he stressed the importance of the organic formation of the human being as a member of a social unit. According to Bushnell, this meant that the child’s Christian character was emergent, something that begins to take shape immediately, and not at a later and sudden conversion experience. Children take the shape of the environment in which they are shaped. For Bushnell, the family was the principal force in this formation, which consists of a kind of moral mimesis: “So when a child, during the whole period of impressions, or passive recipiencies, previous to the development of his responsible will, lives in the life and feeling of his parents, and they in the molds of the Spirit, they will, of course, be shaping themselves in him, or him in themselves, and the effects wrought in him will be preparations of what he will by-and-bye do from himself” (BUSHNELL, 1979, p. 238). The implication was that not only parental action, but the home itself might act as a moral agent in forming the Christian character of the child. So images like Currier & Ives religious subjects were regarded by many as exerting a moral influence over members of the family. And in the pairing of images in Figure 5, the frontispiece and title page of the American Tract Society’s *Tract Primer*, published in 1856, we see the mimesis that Bushnell endorsed: in teaching her children to read with Christian products like the Tract Primer, the Protestant mother was imitating the ancient example of Christ blessing the children, pictured on the opposite page. The modern Christ was the Protestant mother, blessing her children with the sober wisdom of faith (note the children have abandoned their playthings in order to learn from their mother, who holds a Tract primer opened to the alphabet page, teaching her daughter to read). Images, Figures 4 and 5 suggest, were becoming able to operate largely without words, working instead in tandem with other images as visual influencers that exert moral effects in the shaping of Christian character.

Fine art had long held this power for Catholic patrons of sculpture and painting. And since the Renaissance, whether religious or not, art was valued for its emotional as well as intellectual influences. And even as many Protestant theologians and clergy in the early Reformation opposed the use of art in churches, it remains the case that landscape painting and portraiture eventually thrived in Protestant nations such as the Netherlands and England in the wake of the Reformation. One reason for this is that each genre of painting contributed importantly to the illustration of bibles. Protestant bible illustration was very common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. And since bibles were too expensive to print in colonial New England, they were imported from England. But in the nineteenth century American bible production found its footing and a steady stream of illustrated
Figure 5: Frontispiece and Title Page, *The Tract Primer*, 1856, wood engravings.

![Frontispiece and Title Page, The Tract Primer, 1856]()

Collection of the Author

Figure 6: John Smillie, *The Voyage of Life - Manhood*, 1850, engraved after Thomas Cole, *Voyage of Life: Manhood*.

![John Smillie, The Voyage of Life - Manhood, 1850]()

Library of Congress, PGA – Smillie (J.)—Voyage of Life – Manhood (D size). USA Public Domain
bibles became standard features of the market, often aiming for use in middle class parlors. Between 1843 and 1846, the New York publisher Harper Brothers issued their massive *Illuminated Bible*, which included over 1,600 wood engravings, consisting of hundreds of landscape scenes and portraits of biblical characters (GUTJAHR, 1999, p. 70-76; MORGAN, 1999, p. 61-65).

Second only to the Bible in colonial American homes was John Bunyan’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, which first appeared in 1678 and, beginning with the second edition issued in the same year, was often illustrated. Illustrated editions of the book continued to be published in the United States during the nineteenth century. Shortly before he painted his series of four paintings comprising *The Voyage of Life* in 1842, the artist Thomas Cole read Bunyan’s book, which can be helpfully compared to Cole’s series of images (KASSON, 1975, p. 45). It begins with Childhood, followed by Youth, then Manhood (fig. 6), and ends with Old Age. But, as Joy Kasson pointed out in an insightful essay on the imagery many years ago, Cole’s figure is propelled by a natural geography that takes him where it will. He rides in the boat without making the many decisions about his path that Christian undertook in *Pilgrim’s Progress* (see also PARRY III, 1988, p. 227-259). Christian exercised greater moral agency than the darker vision of Cole’s persona, who goes where the river takes him. Cole’s four images serialize fate as the irreversible passage of time, not the active formation of the Christian’s soul for Bunyan or for Bushnell’s much more positive idea about the organic shaping of Christian character in the child. Life’s difficulties not only try the soul, but pitiously demonstrate its impotence. A poem entitled “Voyage of Life,” published in *Sartain’s Magazine* in 1849 by the Philadelphia poet and businessman, Francis de Haes Janvier, who was inspired by Byron, and perhaps by Cole, conveys just what we see in Cole’s *Voyage*: life ends with a melancholy sense of youth lost to old age: “But a gray old man, with a furrowed brow/And a trembling hand, guides the vessel now./And toilsomely still he strives to regain, /The river above, but he strives in vain” (JANVIER, 1849, p. 338). In Figure 6, we see a particularly perilous moment as the Christian soul is about to plunge into terrifying rapids. Behind him looks down the face of his Guardian Spirit, watching passively as the soul prays urgently in the face of danger. Above, in dark, swirling clouds, loom monstrous faces of malevolent demons taunting the Christian mariner with dark prospects that are, in Cole’s own description of the image, “the temptations that beset men in their direst trouble,” even as the man looks upward in “dependence on a Superior Power,” an act of faith that Cole wrote would save him from what seems inevitable destruction.6

Art of this sort, infused with a pressing moral message, and preaching in lofty tones about the spiritual gravity and taxing tragedy of life, appealed to

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American Protestants. The series of engravings to which Figure 6 belongs was issued shortly after Thomas Cole’s death and encouraged the role that images could perform in Christian life. In so doing they advanced the range of visual sensibilities among American Protestants. Textuality is certainly embedded in Cole’s series, which is, after all, a visual narrative, and one peppered with allegorical and narrative cues. As Cole himself put it, “in the Picture, the gloomy, eclipse-like tone, the conflicting elements, the trees riven by tempest, are the allegory; and the Ocean, dimly seen, figures the end of life, which the Voyager is now approaching” (NOBLE, 1964, p. 216). As an allegory, Figure 6 was safe for Protestants since it functioned as a visual relay referring the viewer to something else. There was no danger of treating the image as an idol since it was always about an absent signified. This has been a signature feature of Protestant imagery since the sixteenth century. But in addition to allegory, Cole’s imagery operated on viewers as powerful visual media. In the case of Figure 6, for example, the image combined the emotional force of dark and light, spatial depth, towering scale, and impending action. Moreover, for Cole, the art of landscape painting was a way of discerning the spiritual meaning of nature. And this was something that many Americans were engaged in doing by regarding the American landscape as a providential missive about the nation’s mission and future. Cole’s work offered American viewers a sentimental education in the power of visual effects that could perform like a dramatic homily on national identity and Christian life.

**Figure 7:** Reverend Leonard Grimes, carte-de-visit photograph, 1860s. Library of Congress, LOT 14043-2, no. 524.

**Fig. 8.** Our Redeemer, engraving after Guido Reni. In Fleetwood’s *Life of Christ*, ca. 1861.
The hard-won independence of visual means can also be noted in the rise of fine art portraiture during the nineteenth century in America. Portraiture had escaped the sanctions against sacred imagery issued by some Protestants, and has since the days of Luther and Calvin been a constant genre of art produced among Protestants. Figure 7 is a good example of a portrait of a Protestant divine. This is the Reverend Leonard Grimes (1815–1873), photographed at the height of his national fame in the 1860s. Grimes was a Baptist clergyman who was born and grew up in Virginia where, though born a free Black, he witnessed the effects of slavery and assisted fugitive slaves to escape to the North. In 1839, he was caught doing so and spent two years in prison in Richmond, Virginia. It was during this time that he underwent religious conviction and was baptized when he had completed his sentence. Grimes was licensed as a Baptist preacher and moved to Massachusetts, where he became pastor of the Twelfth Street Baptist Church in Boston, remaining there for the rest of his life. In 1854, Grimes received national attention by welcoming an escaped slave into membership in his congregation. When the man was compelled by the court under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 to be jailed, tried, and returned to his owner in Virginia, Grimes led a campaign to raise funds to purchase his freedom (LEDDDY, 2007, p. 50-55). Grimes became a force among Northern Baptists, pressing the church body to take a hard stand against slavery, which it did in 1858. The portrait of Grimes (fig. 7) is a kind of publicity photo, shot in a commercial studio. The photographer has posed him with stock props, dressed in an academic style robe, standing beside a faux-marble balustrade and before a flat screen, both of which float above the floor on casters. The book on which he rests his hand appears to be a generic volume rather a bible. Perhaps it was meant to be a literary reference. As a celebrity, Grimes no doubt encountered a desire among his congregation members and the public for copies of the photograph, which was not a single item, but produced as a carte-de-visite, that is, a multiply reproduced image printed on heavy stock and sold or distributed to admirers as a souvenir, postcard, or relic of meeting the man or hearing him speak. The photograph allowed viewers to see the person of whom they had heard and read about in newspapers.

The presence of accoutrements like the robe and the book served to signal Grimes’ status, profession, and identity. Using such tools of the trade was a standard device in portraiture since the Renaissance. So it is not surprising that we find something comparable in a portrait-like image of Jesus that appeared in an American edition of the Rev. John Fleetwood’s Life

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of Christ, a British book first published in 1767. Although the first edition carried twenty-seven engraved illustrations, the plate reproduced here, and titled simply “Our Redeemer,” did not appear until the book was published in the United States (fig. 8). That began in 1841, but the edition from which Figure 8 draws appeared in the early 1860s. There it did not appear within the narrative, but as a frontispiece to the book. It was, therefore, more than narrative illustration. The position of frontispiece makes the image into something on the order of an author portrait. The edition was framed with a very pious apparatus that included a prayer for the reader in the opening pages of the book. An introduction clearly specified the reliability of the book as a spiritual authority: “Knowing that the substance of the narrative is drawn from sources of indisputable authority, the reader can have no anxiety respecting the truth of the facts recorded” (FLEETWOOD, [1861-64?], p. 3). This sentiment pushed in the opposite direction of contemporary biblical scholarship such as Ernest Renan’s Vie de Jesu (1863), which restricts itself to the proposed historicity of the man. “The life of Jesus, to the historian,” Renan wrote in one of the final chapters, “ends with his last sigh” (RENAN, 1864, p. 356). And in the final chapter, “The Essential Character of the Work of Jesus,” Renan clearly qualifies what he means by “divine”: “This sublime person, who each day still presides over the destinies of the world, we may call divine, not in the sense that Jesus absorbed all divinity, or was equal to it (to employ the scholastic expression), but in this sense that Jesus is that individual who has caused his species to make the greatest advance toward the divine” (RENAN, 1864, p. 375).

American editions of Fleetwood’s Life of Christ appear to have made use of the frontispiece (see fig. 8) precisely to ensure that the figure whose narrative they present is indeed the orthodox God/Man. Jesus is surrounded by a lattice work of thorns and leafage in which the four evangelists of the New Testament and their symbols frame our view of him. In other words, we see what they wrote in their gospel narratives of his life and death. And at the top of the image appear the host and chalice of Holy Communion and above them the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, which affirms the sacramental significance of his suffering and death. It is noteworthy that the picture of Jesus selected is an engraving of a painting by the Italian painter Guido Reni (1575–1642). Because this view of Jesus was a popular among his patrons, Reni produced several of them, and his students and others went on to produce many more copies. Sometimes these are referred to as Man of Sorrows or Ecce Homo. A version that seems very close to figure 8 was painted in 1622 or 1623, and is now in the Art Gallery of Ontario. It
is noteworthy that a Catholic painter whose work was collected by prelates would come to be a paradigm for American Protestants. One reason for this may be the growing recognition of art as a cultural value among nineteenth-century Americans. But an even stronger reason is likely the format: the head-and-shoulders view appealed to Americans in the second half of the century because it seemed familiar to them from the new medium of photography. Seen in a head-and-shoulders format, Jesus fit the visual rhetoric of photographic portraiture. And when that was framed by the theological apparatus that vouched safe the truth of the biblical account of his life, Figure 8 as a frontispiece may have struck Protestants as especially reassuring. American Protestants did not see a Catholic image of Jesus, stressing a bloody sacrifice that remained an essential feature of penitential Catholic practice and the understanding of the Eucharist as a re-sacrifice in accord with the doctrine of transubstantiation. Instead, they saw a close-up portrait of the savior who died for them. Rather than the heroic human recounted by the modern scholarship of Ernest Renan, faithful Protestants beheld the savior whose crucifixion redeemed them.

Whether the portrayal of Jesus was by skeptics of his divinity or staunch defenders of it, in the course of the nineteenth century both came increasingly to focus their attention on the personality of the man as a historical reality, and this helps account for the rising interest in the portrait of Jesus. It is not surprising then that many Protestants took seriously a medieval letter purporting to have been written by a contemporary eyewitness of Jesus. The letter, attributed to a (fictitious) Publius Lentulus, offered readers a first-hand description of the likeness of Jesus. In fact, the description was drawn from a long chain of paintings portraying Jesus according to an ancient visual formula. This tradition was occasionally interwoven with another medieval account of a profile of Christ cut into a gem in the manner of ancient Roman cameos. For example, in 1866 the Philadelphia engraver John Sartain produced a mezzotint that combined the two strands of the letter and the cameo (fig. 9).

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8 The portion of the letter that describes Jesus’ facial features reads as follows: “His hair is of the colour of the ripe hazel-nut, straight down to the ears, but below the ears wavy and curled, with a bluish and bright reflection, flowing over his shoulders. It is parted in two on the top of the head, after the pattern of the Nazarenes. His brow is smooth and very cheerful with a face without wrinkle or spot, embellished by a slightly reddish complexion. His nose and mouth are faultless. His beard is abundant, of the colour of his hair, not long, but divided at the chin. His aspect is simple and mature, his eyes are changeable and bright” (LENTULUS, 2019). The letter, with many variations, was widely reproduced in texts and lithographs. Several images of the Jesus described were issued, including one by Currier & Ives (cf. figure 4) and Morgan (2015, p. 168-170).
He called the image “Our Savior” and appended to it the following caption: “From the only authentic likeness of Our Saviour, cut on an emerald by command of Tiberius Caesar, and given to Pope Innocent VII from the treasury at Constantinople, by the Emperor of the Turks, for the ransom of his brother, then a captive of the Christians,” which was supposed to have occurred in the 1490s. The profile was a format used in Roman cameos, but it was also part of the fifteenth-century tradition in the Netherlands of illustrating the Latin text of the letter of Lentulus for devotional images (see also FINALDI, 2000, p. 94-96). In the early sixteenth-century the story of the profiled incised on the gem and the letter of Lentulus were linked in a well-known woodcut by Hans Burgkmair the Elder, now in the Albertina in Vienna. Sartain himself was familiar with these traditions, and was perhaps, like others in the contemporary art world, inclined to invest some belief in them. In an article in Sartain’s Magazine, published by Sartain and his family, Charles Godfrey Leland compared a bust of Christ by Carl Johann Steinhäuser with the history of images of Christ since the Middle Ages, which he was convinced informed Steinhäuser’s sculpture. Leland recognized that the all images of Jesus had something compelling to do with one another:

The great similarity of feature which we find in all the portraits of our Saviour, of this, and a later period, is, however, too striking to be accounted for by referring them to the spirit of the age, and [Berlin art historian Franz Theodor] Kugler is undoubtedly right, in referring it to certain traditional accounts of his personal appearance, which I candidly believe are not altogether unfounded. The first of these is the celebrated letter of Lentulus, to the Roman senate, given in several authors of the eleventh century, but undoubtedly written about the end of the third” (LELAND, 1849, p. 135).

Leland then quoted the letter’s text describing Jesus. Sartain’s mezzotint is a nineteenth-century version of this Renaissance-era image. But it spoke in a novel way to Americans, who saw images through the lens of the recent advent of photography. The image of Jesus was not presented as an artistic interpretation, but as “the only authentic image” of the historical figure. Protestants were becoming comfortable with the idea of an image of Jesus as well as the Catholic tradition of its authenticity because photography offered them something of the same thing. Note that Sartain’s portrait bears little resemblance to a carved gem. The lighting resembles the dramatic effect of a studio portrait and the strong silhouetting of the face against the dark

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9 Franz Theodor Kugler published his Handbuch der Geschichte der Malerei in 1837 and Handbuch der Kunstdichte in 1841-42. For more on the visual tradition of portraying Jesus in profile on a medallion and with reference to the Lentulus letter, see George Francis Hill (1920).
background recalls the black-and-white silhouettes that became a rage in Europe and the United States around 1800, produced by tracing the contour of the shadow of a sitter projected on a sheet of paper. The process was a transcription of appearance via tracing, and therefore an authentic likeness in a mechanical sense. Photography accomplished the same for mid-century Americans, who began flocking in the 1840s to have their daguerreotypes made when the new process was introduced into the United States. The head-and-shoulders format of Sartain’s image matched the small metal-plate daguerreotypes that were placed in pendants, lockets, watches, and small, compact frames, updating an older tradition of meticulously detailed hand-painted miniatures of loved ones framed in pendants. The factual claim of Figure 9 met Protestant vision with something new to recommend it: the image accommodated the modern idea that human beings are individual persons exhibiting traits that register on their person—in facial expression, posture, and demeanor. If Jesus really existed as a human person, he would have a look, a particular appearance that matched his personality, something more than the symbols of dogma.

**Figure 9**: John Sartain, *Our Saviour*, 1866, engraving/mezzotint. Library of Congress, PGA-Sartain (J.).

Sartain’s portrait dispensed with all such accoutrements. Unlike Figure 8, there is no halo, no symbol or emblematic indication of rank or theology, no reference to divinity of any kind. The image is not an abstract device, but a bald visual claim: *this is Our Saviour—he looked like this*. But of course, likeness is not so simple. Viewers could only recognize that the face belonged to Jesus if they saw in it subtle references to other pictures of Jesus. The image’s likeness to Christ is very much about its participation within a long span of images that the letter of Lentulus was able to conjure with its description, making the two mediums bolster one another in an interweaving pattern of references that was so old that many assumed it originated in antiquity. But for that visual consciousness to take place, Protestants needed to be cognizant of visual traditions far beyond the present. And that is what the print history of bibles and devotional items provided them.

A final image brings us to the end of the century’s visual trek. It began image as mnemonic device, working with text to teach literacy, as we saw in the case of Figure 1, and ends in image as an effective likeness of Jesus. Figure 10 is a photograph produced in 1898 by the artist F. Holland Day as part of his extensive project of imaging the life of Christ. Whereas the publishers of Fleetwood’s *Life of Christ* turned to the history of art to find such an image, settling on Guido Reni’s *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (see fig. 8), Day used himself as the model, though seen through the filter of Baroque portraiture of Jesus of the sort painted by Reni. He prepared for the role by attending the Passion Play at Oberammergau, depriving himself of food in order to lose weight and appear very gaunt, growing out his beard, and dressing in clothing crafted from fabric he imported from Syria. In effect, he himself became the image of Jesus informed by the long visual tradition that shaped not only is imagination, but those of American viewers. The body of images he produced included the seven last utterances of Jesus from the cross, each of which was paired with a close-up image of his face, of which Figure 10 is one, namely, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” Clearly, the image drew on Guido Reni’s prototype, which American viewers would have known through any one of dozens of reproductions, such as Figure 8. The title of the image is an utterance. We are intended to behold the person who made it. Day engages viewers by virtue of visual context and memory. The Jesus he pictures is certainly like the visual tradition, but it is also literally like Day himself, who conformed to the tradition to bring himself into the role.\(^{10}\) By identifying himself as Christ, Day may have offended some viewers for being indecorous, yet his

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\(^{10}\) For a discussion of Day’s project, see Kristin Schwain (2008, p. 75-96).
very assertion of likeness is what centuries of Catholic piety undertook in the spiritual ideal of *imitatio Christi*, in which images often played a powerful role to visualize Christ’s agony as the meeting point of his life and the penitent viewer’s. In his fourteenth-century *Vita Christi*, Ludolph of Saxony urged readers “to picture in your mind’s eye something the Lord Jesus said or did, and simply talk with him so that you might become more familiar with him” (LUDOLPH OF SAXONY, 2018, p. 18). Ludolph especially commended the practice of contemplating the face of Christ. To help his readers do so, he reproduced the text of the letter of Lentulus, in what was one of its earliest manifestations (LUDOLPH OF SAXONY, 2018, p. 20-21).

**Final considerations**

It is striking that Catholic practices of visualization and devotional images of Christ had become appealing to many Protestant Americans. One reason for this may be the allure of a religious competitor that was effective at resisting evangelical inroads. Rather than capitulate to Catholicism, Protestants adapted their means. Thousands of pious American Protestants traveled to Bavaria as Day did to witness the Passion Play, a Catholic production, and thousands admired the film version of the same subject that appeared in 1898 in New York City.11 Passion plays became a popular practice among Protestants in the late nineteenth century and after (MUSSER, 1993, p. 419-456; WILLIAMS, 1970). Seeing Jesus was becoming less an instance of didactic Bible study and more an existential encounter mediated by photography and film. Seeing his story performed live on stage may have helped American Protestants see his still imagery in a new way, tinged with the charisma or presence that they experienced in person in a theatre. The surfeit of images in the age of photography and the technology of mass print transformed the American imagination, seeding it with an expansive lexicon of imagery. The religious result was something like what Renan described when speaking of Christianity: “we acknowledge that Christianity is a work too complex to have been the creation of a single man. In one sense, all humanity worked together upon it” (RENAN, 1864, p. 371). The likeness of Jesus is the product of an entire visual culture.

Protestants are sometimes fond of imagining that their tradition is aniconic. But the power of images to persuade them of Jesus’ likeness

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11 For a consideration of visual media and the portrayal of Jesus in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the US, see David Morgan (2007, 165-183); for discussion of the modern history of the likeness of Jesus, see David Morgan (2015, p. 168-95).
could only operate on them if the contrary is true. In fact, they have been looking at Jesus and the Bible through the lens of imagery for a very long time. Yet it would be a mistake to argue that the lineage of development that I have outlined in this essay leads inexorably to the image’s complete transcendence of text and discourse. In fact, of course, that does not happen. The question of Christ’s visual likeness is meaningful only within a long discourse about what he is “like” such that his appearance speaks to his nature and personhood, which is ultimately inextricable from his religious significance. Protestants always cared about this, but they came by century’s end to consider that images of Jesus could assert a desirable emotional effect directly on viewers. The long chain of images of Jesus transmit something like a family resemblance of his likeness that individual artists interpreted for viewers, who looked at the many variations to find the one that revealed to them what he was like.

Protestantism generally is a religious culture in which word and image work in together in various ways to communicate a religious message, to cultivate pious feeling, and to corroborate one another as intertwined forms of mediation. The pattern of their relationship to one another over the course of the nineteenth-century in the United States was the result of technological development, the demographics of continental expansion and immigration, the American Protestant emphasis on literacy, and the competition among religious groups in a nation in which religious affiliation was a private option, not a state-mandated condition of citizenship. Religions belonged to the marketplace, where they vied with one another for members, often adapting what means their competition found effective.

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