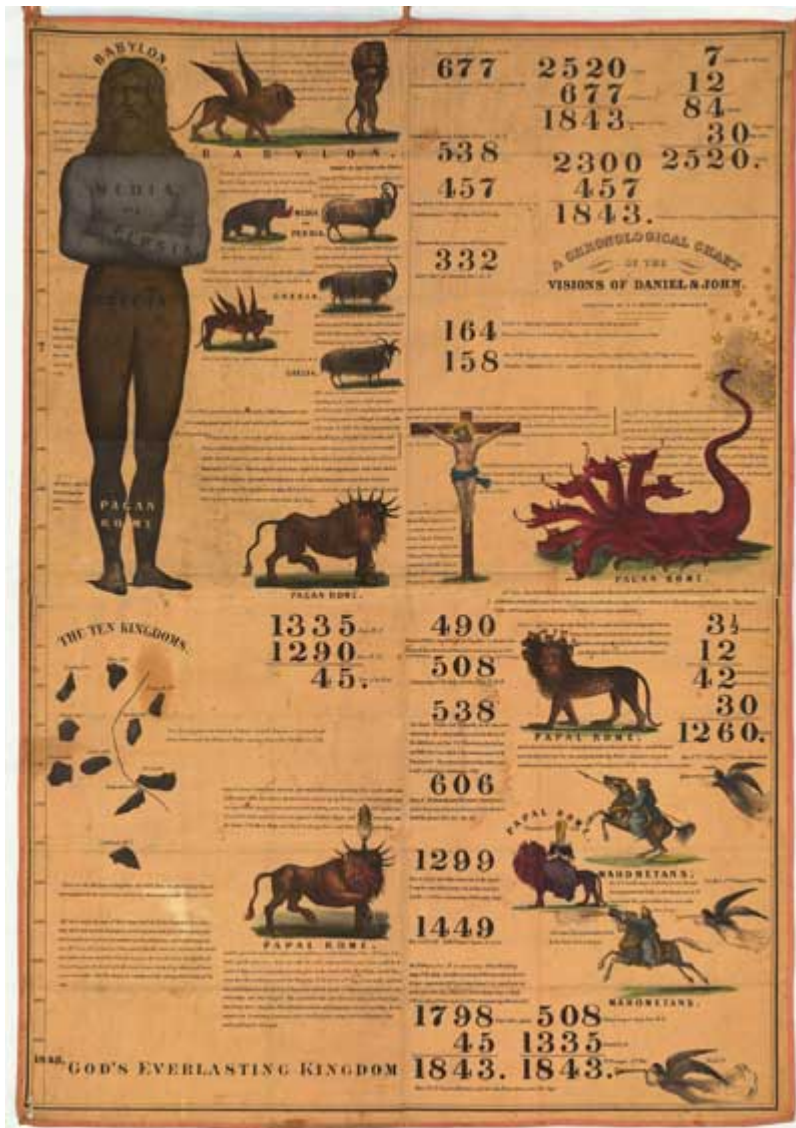


Print and Evangelicalism



Notes on the religious tract

Several years ago, while researching a book on nineteenth-century American religious print and visual culture at the New-York Historical Society, I came across *An Address to Christians* that was bound with a sermon by Bishop Beilby Porteus. I had never heard of him. But his address, or what I took to be his address, made a powerful case for the use of evangelical tracts (usually eight- or twelve-page pamphlets that addressed the reader in a familiar tone about the need for repentance), arguing for their distribution on the familiar byways of everyday life, where people would be likely to pick them up in passing. When I checked biographical information on the author, I found that he wasn't American but was the bishop of London at the end of the eighteenth century and was important for, among other things, his opposition to Britain's involvement in the slave trade. I was intrigued by the British connection because I'd naively assumed that American Protestants had written the tracts they enthusiastically

disseminated. In fact, as I looked into the matter, I found that the Americans imported British tracts and emulated the London Religious Tract Society (RTS), founded in 1799. At the time of my discovery, my attention was trained exclusively on American print and image production, but I noted the British debt and hoped one day to pursue it.

That day came half a dozen years later in the shape of a book on the history of the tract in Europe and North America. As a fellow at the Library Company of Philadelphia, I was able to trace out the fuller debts of the Americans to their British counterparts. Two people at the Library Company, Connie King and Holly Phelps, had spent several years while at the Free Library of Philadelphia cataloguing the collection of books of the American Sunday School Union (ASSU). The collection included a large number of books published by the RTS, which had allowed the ASSU to republish its materials. Dozens and dozens of RTS books in Philadelphia (now at the Free Library) display editorial blue lines indicating the portions that the ASSU's editors had determined were to be used in American editions of the British publications.

During the course of my research for this book, I discovered that American tract publishers were not indebted only to British Protestant authors and publishers. For example, Johannes Gossner's *The Heart of Man*, was published in Pennsylvania in 1822, translated from Gossner's original German text first published in 1812. Gossner had been a Catholic priest who converted to Lutheranism and became an advocate of missions. His *Heart* book drew from Catholic as well as Protestant sources; in fact, he derived the illustrations from an eighteenth-century Catholic work entitled *Spiritual Mirror of Morality* (1732). I was struck by the thin pamphlet's integration of word and image: in ten engravings, the booklet plotted out the life of the Christian soul. It begins with the soul's subordination to the forces of evil (fig. 1), shown as animal symbols of the seven deadly sins inside the sinful heart. At the heart's center is the grisly figure of Satan, derived from the ancient deity Pan—half-goat and half-man—whose powers included fertility and whose behavior was suitably libidinous. Ensuing pages portray the soul's conversion, sanctification (picturing the animals outside the regenerated heart), momentary backsliding, and the soul's final salvation in death. The emblematic imagery applied the Pietist theology of conversion and the sanctified life to a series of images that plotted the lived religion of Evangelical Protestantism. But with nowhere to locate the *Heart* book in the narrative that was taking shape in my mind, I decided to file it away in memory as something to return to when the time was right.

I read a good deal by Bogue and his colleagues, especially a fascinating journal that Bogue helped edit, *The Evangelical Magazine*, which was begun in 1793 and ran until the second half of the following century. The publication was the clearing house for such Evangelical print efforts in England as the Missionary Society, the RTS, village preaching, Sunday school formation and operation, and Bible production and distribution. The two or three dozen editors were true believers in the power of print to spread the word.

One of the familiar problems facing historians is to get behind institutional rhetoric and glimpse the day-to-day operations of an organization like the RTS. That is hard to do, unless one has access to such records as committee meeting minutes, financial records, memos, and incoming and outgoing correspondence. Fortuna frowned when I looked for such documents for the RTS. In 1941, a German bomb destroyed the London storage house where most of the RTS documents were kept. Some items stored off-site survived the war and now make up the spotty but still valuable records housed in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. History, even though written by the winners, still rides on the whims of fortune.

The British Evangelicals behind the tract movement were anxious to get mission work under way because they believed that they could hasten Christ's second coming by universal evangelism: if every person on the face of the earth heard the Word preached to them, Jesus would come and bring with him the end of time. Yet setting the time, as it was called, was risky. On the one hand, it generated enormous expectations and interests. If the end is coming, it's awfully nice to know when and under what conditions and how one can avoid the worst of it. On the other hand, if one has the time wrong, disaster ensues, as it has repeatedly done. Putting all of one's eggs in a single basket tempts fate. The Millerites had it wrong in the United States in 1843. With the aid of an arcane biblical calculus derived from hermetic books of the Bible, this millenarian sect believed it had solved the riddle of Christ's return (fig. 2). But the secret to any prophetic utterance is an elastic method of interpretation to back it up. A handful of faithful Millerites, who eventually became known as the Seventh-Day Adventists, recalculated their reading of scripture in 1844, when Jesus failed to appear a second time. They concluded that he had never intended to appear but to do something in heaven that would lay the groundwork for his final return.

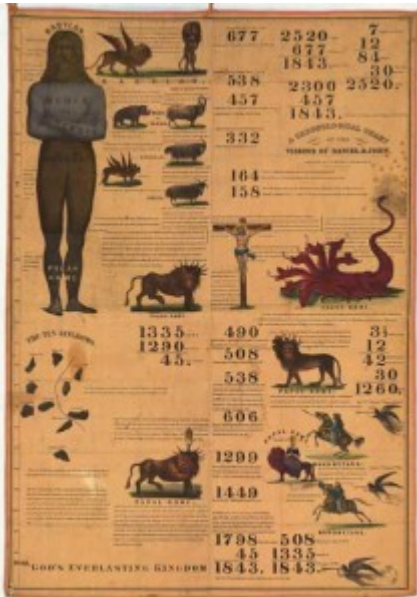


Fig. 2. A Chronological chart of the visions of Daniel and John. Click image for large (512K) version in new window. Lithograph; One Sheet. Devised by Charles Fitch with the assistance of Apollos Hale; lithographer, B.W. Thayer & Co., Boston, 1842. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Many of the British Evangelicals entertained their own notions of the final date, but the group that made aggressive use of print to hasten the end generally avoided setting dates. They felt sure that the general time had arrived, however. The Evangelicals were reeling from decades of intense sectarian infighting and ongoing scrimmages with the Church of England. So in the early 1790s, a group of Dissenters (Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists)—denominating themselves Evangelicals—directed their energies toward the global stage on which the British Empire had already taken its place. The Reverend David Bogue was a leader among this group. Bogue and his fellow Evangelicals saw in the launch of the Empire in India and East Asia a providential event and a grand opportunity for Evangelicals. In order to take this step, which meant facing a stark numerical inequality (one contemporary account estimated that there was one Christian for thirty non-Christians in the world), the Evangelicals looked to print. They reasoned that they might counter their small size and modest resources by exploiting the technology of print. Missionaries with printing presses strategically located throughout Asia, Africa, and the South Pacific could disseminate tracts in mass quantity. But the Evangelicals needed an energetic network of cooperation to make this happen.

The further I looked, the more widely spread I discovered the network of mission organizations. In Edinburgh, where the Centre for the Study of Non-Western Christianity offered a wealth of Protestant journals, newspapers, and mission literature, the stock of my historical sources was greatly enriched. I was also delighted to learn from archivist Margaret Acton that next door to the Centre, in New College Library at the University of Edinburgh, were the papers of none other than David Bogue. There I found sermons, diaries, and letters by

Bogue. I also discovered that Bogue had written a political tract in the 1790 battle with the Church of England over political rights for Dissenters. But when Parliament decided against the Dissenters, he threw his considerable energy into the cause of Evangelical print. In addition to cofounding the monthly journal *Evangelical Magazine*, which became a mouthpiece for the new mission and tract societies (Bogue was a leading advocate of the London Missionary Society [LMS], founded in 1796, and the RTS), he founded and operated for years the Missionary Society's leading seminary for training missionaries. The LMS built on several antecedents such as the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), Die deutsche Christentumsgesellschaft (The German Christianity Society) in Basel, the Moravian Unitas Fratrum, and a Lutheran Pietist organization in Halle, which had supplied missionaries to the SPCK in India for over a generation. What emerged was a global network of print, a vast web of colonies bound together by the circulation of printed evangelical information (and the British penchant for tidy bureaucracy). From London to Madras, Malacca, and Macao, print was transforming Christendom from the continental fortress of medieval Europe to a decentered, ever-expanding global network.

From Edinburgh it became clear that I needed to travel to Basel to consult the stupendous archives of the Basel Mission House in order to sort out the German language connection of Anglican and Dissenter missions in India, Malaysia, and Africa. While in Basel, I was shown something I hadn't seen since visiting the Library Company: the *Heart* book. This time, however, what I found with the assistance of archivists Paul Jenkins and Guy Thomas were versions of it translated into Indian and African languages. The imagery had also been modified to accommodate cultural differences. Gossner's symbolizing of the seven deadly sins as European animals didn't work so well in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (figs. 3 and 4). Important substitutions had to be made in order to translate the moral theology of the New Testament for new cultures. To this end, the Caucasian face atop the heart was replaced by Indian and African physiognomies. A Malayalam version published in 1848 at Tellicherry (on the southwestern coast of India) showed a light-skinned Indian man with a proud lion replacing the peacock, a rat replacing the indolent turtle, an avaricious elephant in place of the European toad, a vicious looking dog in lieu of an angry leopard, and a vulture substituted for the snake of envy. Another edition, published in Tshi or Twi by the Reverend Asante of the Gold Coast in West Africa (now part of Ghana) in 1874, put an African man's head above the heart, while keeping nearly all of Gossner's animals in place. The only other difference was to make Satan a horned, dark human male with wings and pitchfork, perhaps because the creature derived from the original Greco-Roman satyr would have been unintelligible to African readers (a later version of the Indian edition even placed a loin cloth about the winged devil).

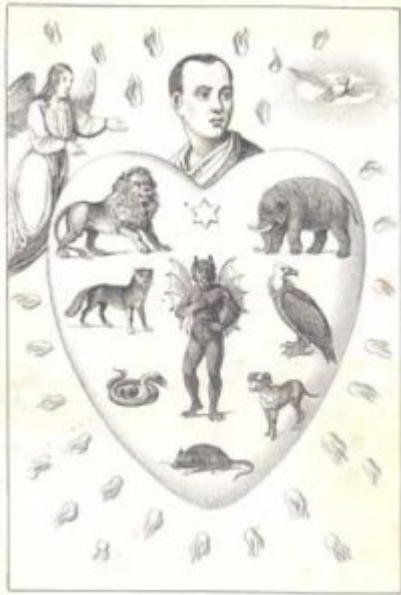


Fig. 3. "Heart ruled by the seven deadly sins," from *Book of the Heart*, printed for Tellicherry Mission Press (Tellicherry, India, 1848). Courtesy of Mission 21 Archives, Basel.

The role of images in mission history led me to further institutions in Europe. From Basel I went to Rome to consult one of the finest collections of objects gathered by Christian missionaries—the Museo missionare etnologico in the Vatican Museums. I also took the opportunity to visit the Haus Völker und Kulturen (Museum of Peoples and Cultures) and the library of Monumenta Serica, both operated by the Society of the Divine Word in Sankt Augustin, Germany, where I was delighted to find more materials on the London Missionary Society and its early nineteenth-century East Asian projects. What I found there suggested that a visit to Asia was going to be important. So I scheduled a trip to Korea, where Protestant missionaries had arrived in the nineteenth century. At Soongsil University's Korean Christian Museum in Seoul, I consulted the collection handbook. There I found listed a Korean version of Gossner's *Heart* book, translated in 1918 by an American missionary in Seoul. In the end, I learned that Gossner's book has been translated into at least twenty-six languages and constitutes a kind of meandering trail of global missionary efforts at acculturating Christianity.

If British missionaries and their supporters back home felt that evangelism would spread the faith from its Anglo center, the result was more than they imagined. Today, Asian and African Christianity has replaced European Christianity as the vital engine of outreach and global activity. Korean and African missionaries are now at work around the world, including North America, Europe, and Great Britain! The Associated Press recently reported that one Nigerian group, The Redeemed Church, which has opened over two hundred churches in the United States, seeks to save the nation from demonic forces. Their task is to achieve, through "spiritual warfare," what Gossner envisioned in his pamphlet circulated in the United States over 180 years ago: the exorcism of evil from the heart. The new missionaries have not proceeded without taking a

page from their British forebears: media are key aspects of their outreach. Satellite links, Internet, film, radio, television, and print are their diverse means of communication. For example, the Redeemed Church works through a satellite-television network that is operated in the United States by Dove Media Group, a firm based in Texas and run by Nigerians.

The tract genre has even migrated to the Internet. Not only are tracts available from vendors online, the very medium has gone virtual. [Cyber-tracts](#) may be selected from [depository Websites](#) and sent to individuals with the tailored sense of purpose that tracts, chosen from categories listed in catalogues, have had since the early nineteenth century. The ATS catalogue of tracts listed dozens of categories among the several hundred tracts in print by 1850. Every problem, every kind of personality corresponded to a class of tracts. Today the categories have changed from rubrics such as “intemperance,” “infidelity,” and “papist” to “substance abuse,” “doubt,” and “other faiths.” But the idea is the same: use media to fashion a compelling connection between message, sender, and receiver.



Fig. 4. “Heart ruled by the seven deadly sins,” from *Man’s Heart*, Reverend David Asante, trans., printed for the Basel Missionary Society (Basel, 1874). Courtesy of Mission 21 Archives, Basel.

British missionaries helped forge modern practice by taking printing presses with them wherever they went, learning vernacular languages, often creating the first alphabets for scores of languages, creating schools and charitable institutions, recording oral culture to create the basis for national literatures, producing thousands of ethnographic records, and distributing almost unimaginable numbers of tracts, books, and bibles. The workhorse of this evangelical enterprise was the humble tract, invented in the 1790s by British evangelicals such as Bogue.

Further Reading:

The text I first encountered at the New-York Historical Society was *An Address to Christians, recommending the distribution of cheap tracts: with an extract from a sermon by Bishop Porteus. Before the Yearly Meeting of the Charity Schools, London* (Charleston, Mass., 1802). David Bogue's important tract is *An Address to Christians, on the Distribution of Religious Tracts* (London, 1799). I quoted from his sermon *The Diffusion of Divine Truth. A Sermon preached before the Religious Tract Society, on Lord's Day, May 18, 1800* (London, 1800), pages 10-11 and 41. I have examined the fascinating iconography of the Millerites and Seventh-Day Adventists in *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of Mass Production* (New York, 1999). Citations for the many translated editions of Johannes Gossner's book include: *The Heart of Man either a Temple of God or a Habitation of Satan* (Reading, Pa., 1822); *Book of the Heart* (Tellicherry, India, 1848); [Johannes Gossner], *Man's Heart, either God's Temple or Satan's Abode*, Rev. D. Asante, trans. (Basel, 1874); and *The Human Heart*, W. M. Baird, trans. (Chong No, Seoul, 1918). An illustration appears in *The Korean Christian Museum at Soongsil University* (Seoul, 2004), 260. For a study of the Korean edition, see a forthcoming study by Jae-Hyun Kim, "The Heart of Man [The Myeong-Sim-Do]," *KIATS Theological Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2005): 148-64. I have relied on Ingetraut Ludolph's biographical entry on Gossner, "Gossner, Johannes Evangelista," in *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, 3 vols., Julius Bodensieck, ed. (Minneapolis, 1965), vol. 2: 944-45. For a news account on Nigerian evangelists in the United States, see Rachel Zoll, "African Christianity boom spills over," Associated Press, March 27, 2006.

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