Adventists and Pictures

Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production. By David Morgan. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Reviewed by Terrie Dopp Aamodt

Protestants in general, and Seventh-day Adventists in particular, have long been troubled by the uneasy tension between the pitfalls of visual images and their potential as faith-affirming, even proselytic devices. Frequently, the pitfalls have received the most attention: Martin Luther's admonishing counsel to the iconoclasts about the difference between images and the veneration of images; American Puritans' preference for the plain style in religious architecture; nineteenth-century Adventists' suspicion of "worthless" Currier and Ives prints when they cropped up in Christian households. Much of the unease, of course, is related to drawing a Reformation-inspired distinction between Protestant practices and Roman Catholicism. Yet Protestants themselves, including Seventh-day Adventists, have developed a remarkable range of pedagogical, rationalistic, or devotional visual devices.

The crucial developing ground for Protestant religious imagery was nineteenth-century America, the context for David Morgan's scintillating book, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production.* Morgan, an associate professor of art at Valparaiso University, brings to his expertise in art history and iconography a dazzling array of material on American history and culture, religious history, theology, rhetorical analysis, psychology, marketing theory, and the history of book and printing techniques. His work represents what the best art histories do so well: they treat visual material with aesthetic sensitivity while broadly contextualizing it within the culture that produced it. In an earlier age Morgan might have focused on the cultural mainstream represented by major Protestant denominations; in the more complex, nuanced world of postmodern scholarship, however, he makes a convincing argument for the significance of the visual productions of Millerites and their Adventist descendants, despite their relative numerical insignificance. In doing so, Morgan has raised enough issues, possibilities, and questions to keep Seventh-day Adventists buzzing for a long time.

How much do beliefs and ideas depend upon the media that communicate them? This question is a surprisingly significant one and leads to some intriguing conclusions. As a point of departure, Morgan refers to the seminal 1936 Marxist essay by Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in which Benjamin argued that mechanical reproduction of images (that is, lithography, film) made them less iconic, less fetishized, and more democratic. Morgan, however, argues that the "aura" Benjamin identified in venerated images never vanished from mechanically reproduced images because it is at least as dependent upon audience reception as upon artist fabrication (an insight indebted to postmodernism). In fact, Morgan says, the aura of Protestant imagery was actually magnified by mechanical reproduction, and Protestants made it "graphically transmissible" (8).

The possibilities for Protestant incorporation of visual images were constrained only by the inherent limitations of available technology, Morgan points out. The growth of Protestantism after the Second Great

Thomas Moran, *Christ, The Way of Life*, engraving, 1883.

Awakening generated a wave of printed materials directed toward a popular audience, overseen by such organizations as the American Tract Society (ATS). The ATS presided over the transformation of American Protestantism from a local, oral culture to a national, mass culture that was "fundamentally visual" (24). In other words, the press became an evangelistic tool, utilizing the wood engraving to make visual images relatively cheap and accessible. The ATS and related organizations worked to achieve unity among Protestants by bringing denominations together to work toward their united postmillennialist goal: the continual refinement and religious edification of America's citizens as they anticipated the millennium. These goals tended to mesh smoothly with the American Republic's sense of manifest destiny and divinely sanctioned expansionism. The process of spreading this vision via pamphlets and almanacs evolved so quietly that printed visual images seemed intrinsic to this outlook:

> The plain style positioned the image and text in such a way that corresponded fully to one another, leaving nothing to explain. The image and the text faithfully interpreted one another, implying that the image seamlessly joined the world of things it depicted to the words it illustrated. (73)

As the possibilities for transmitting more and more sophisticated visual images increased, Protestants became increasingly comfortable with them; there was always an evangelistic application, the possibility of reaching a wider audience.

Protestants differentiated between what they did with images and the way Catholicism had used them by noting that Protestants kept their pictures tied to the reassuring solidity of the printed word. Morgan points out that the Protestant preference for "pictures that acted like texts" and for images anchored by "words, doctrines, or authoritative texts" avoided the alarming possibility of floating away into subjectivism or idolatry (217). Morgan sees Protestant image/text unions fitting into four categories: image substituted for text (hieroglyphic Bibles); image and text corresponding to each other point by point (illustrated books and tracts); images and words generating meaning for each other ("specimen books," the forerunners of clip art, contained images that could be interpreted variously according to the accompanying text); and, finally, image and text transforming each other in the "visual magic" of the blackboard illustration or chalk talk (236-40).

Although Morgan's book represents the cutting edge of scholarship in his field, it is remarkably clearly written and jargon free. A reminder of its theoretical underpinnings, however, occurs as he introduces his chapter on the rhetoric of Northern evangelicals:

> The mass-mediated images produced by the ATS envisioned a national ideology that configured a border advancing against aliens in order to expand the heartland. The two—border and heartland—were constructed as parts of a single culture system, positing one another in the politics of representation. The border was coded male and consisted of the conquest of such others on the advancing borders of the American republic, the heartland was visualized in tract Society publications as the sphere of the nurturing mother, ensconced in her domestic space caring for children. The two iconographies were part of a single ideology and

intermingled on occasion, as I will show. (75)

Morgan proceeds to describe how expansionism into the world of the other–whether Negro slaves or native Americans–was matched by corresponding-ing emphasis on cultivating the domestic sphere of women and children. With great care Morgan examines the images relevant to each of these endeavors.

The incorporation of lithographic, later chromolithographic (color), and finally halftone screen reproductions into the printing process set off an explosion of possibilities for American Protestants. As Morgan points out, "the visual coding of tones as the linear patterns of the wood engraving was exchanged for the continuous tonalities of the photograph, a form of representation that approxi-mated human vision much more closely than the gauze of engraved lines in a wood engraving." This change resulted in "imagery that seemed inseparable from what one saw with one's own eyes" (301). This era coincided with the appearance of subtle psychological portrayals of Christ, which included beloved portraits by Alexander Bida, Ary Scheffer, and Heinrich Hofmann (whose *Christ in Gethsemane* appears on the cover of a popular edition of Ellen White's *Desire of Ages*). It is remarkable to trace how Protes-tants got to this point and to wonder how much distance there was between the beholders of these printed images and the beholders of carved crucifixes and stained glass scenes in medieval cathedrals.

Morgan closes his study by looking at the ways mainstream postmillennial Protestantism adapted to modernity while fundamentalists distinguished themselves from historical-critical biblical scholars. He traces liberal Protestantism's adoption of scientific religious education, its embrace of evolutionary ideas about personal spiritual formation, and its increasingly warm embrace of the fine arts. "No longer content with the didactic visual piety of an earlier day," Morgan concludes, "liberal Protestants (in particular) came to see mass-produced examples of fine art as the basis for recovering a devotional visual piety lost to the austerity of Puritanism." Protestants had used

Uriah Smith, *A Pictorial Illustration of the Visions of Daniel & John*, wood engraving, from *Review and Herald*, vol. 47, no. 1, Jan. 6, 1876, 5. Courtesy of Adventist Heritage Center, Andrews University.

mechanical means to create "icons of modern mass culture" with aura intact (337).

How could Millerism and Adventism find their way into this seamless discussion of postmillennial Protes-tantism? According to Morgan, they provide a crucial, even innovative counter example. While the middle-class, solid citizens of the ATS were exploiting wood engraving technology to illustrate tracts and alma-nacs, those "radical evangelical egalitarians," the Millerites, were developing a new medium—the prophetic chart—which "amounted to a counterappropriation of the Enlightenment's visual pedagogy in the attempt to signal the end of the

world rather than its culmination in a progressive utopia or millennial bliss" (125).

Morgan describes how William Miller retained the rationalist habits of mind he acquired in his deist days to turn deism inside out; following Thomas Paine's insistence that the Bible had to be either entirely true or a pack of lies, Miller set out to prove that "the Bible was utterly without contradiction or inconsistency," a chain of perfectly linked texts that functioned in absolute harmony (126). Miller's prophetic chart, published in 1842, provided visual emphasis to this insistence:

> Visualizing this chain was the rhetorical function of the Adventist chart. As a visual form, a chart was able to demonstrate the simplicity and unity of (the Adventist reading of) the Bible. . . . The Millerites anchored the meaning of very elusive, polyvalent prophetic symbols by investing them within a synchronic scheme of similitudes and a diachronic series of historical references. The resulting interplay of graphic, alphabetic, and numeric signs reduced the range of the symbols' meanings to "one undeviating path." The chart accomplished visually what the Millerite hermeneutic sought to achieve: the transformation of the connotative character of the symbol into a singular denotative operation. The viewer was meant to see in the chart a systematic reading of prophecy across image and text as if the two merged seamlessly into a self-evident act of scripture reading itself. . . . Fundamentally rationalist in spirit, biblical literalism presumed a single message plainly encoded in scripture. Meaning was thought to reside solely in the text where God placed it. . . . Literalism, in other words, was a hermeneutic strategy that helped assure the apparent autonomy of scripture in order to assure the authenticity of what the Millerites found there. As such, literalism masked or naturalized the host of presuppositions that Miller, like any reader, brought to his reading of the Bible. Thus, the Millerites implied that their own interpretations of scriptural prophecies were not "private" or willful but methodical, systematic, and harmonious—that they replicated the structure of scripture. The chart effectively aestheticized biblical interpretation by appealing to an aesthetic sense of organization—what I call the coherence theory of truth. (133)

Stated another way, "the chart therefore brings together in a single visual field diverse moments in scriptural prophecy, visualizing the conservative Christian view that all of scripture is a unified, homogenous text revealed by God. This interweaving of texts and images effectively visualized the manner in which many Christians read the Bible" (153). Thus, for Morgan, the prophetic chart becomes much more than a quirky historical artifact: it embodies the Millerite hermeneutic and sets the direction for subsequent Adventist scriptural interpretation. Furthermore, says Morgan, the chart embodied a new way of seeing: "At the heart of Millerite visual culture was a semiotic interactivity, an interdependence of word and image, seeing and hearing, reading and looking" (152).

It is striking, and perhaps a little disconcerting, to see the "plain truth" of Millerism discussed with such theoretical sophistication. In the nineteenth century, the best Millerites could hope from the intellectual community was a kind of chummy condescension from figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne as they described their encounters with Miller's followers. It is unlikely that Millerites, in their rush to warn America of Christ's impending return, paused to contemplate the cultural significance of their visual techniques. The complexity and subtlety of their semiotic choices seem much easier to see from a cultural distance.

Morgan's analysis becomes even more interesting in the next chapter, which traces the fate of the prophetic chart after Millerism waned. Adventists retained their charts as a mark of their cultural difference from other Protestants and as a reminder of the historical coherence of biblical prophetic interpretation. Ellen White had a vision supporting the need

for such charts in 1850, and James White spent decades refining and marketing Adventist charts, first to Adventist preachers and later to Adventist families as suitable decorations for their homes. Uriah Smith provided a link to Miller's rationalism with his emphasis on God's law, and his "law tree" appeared in several Adventist visual images. Adventists illustrated their separateness from postmillennial, patriotic Protestantism by including the two-horned beast of Revelation 13:11 and identifying it as the United States. After the Seventh-day Adventist denomination was formed in 1863, its adherents used charts to prove their status as God's true remnant church: other Adventist groups did not include a depiction of the heavenly sanctuary in their charts.

In 1873, however, the primacy of the chart came into question when Merritt Gardner Kellogg, an older brother of John Harvey Kellogg, produced a pictorial, allegorical print titled *The Way of Life from Paradise Lost to Paradise Restored*. Kellogg believed his lithograph, like the earlier charts, truthfully described Adventists' distinctive doctrines. Also, as Morgan notes, "Kellogg's highly allegorical picture demonstrated to White that pictorialism, the use of illusionistic space in the tradition of fine art, was a visual prospect for Adventism. It was a momentous discovery, for it signaled a fundamental shift in the visual production of the church" (185). In addition, Kellogg suspected that this print would find the same position in Adventist parlors that Currier and Ives prints held in most American homes. (Morgan's point here suggests another avenue of interest to scholars of Adventism: the extent to which Adventists have created a subculture that emulates certain aspects of mainstream culture while remaining oppositional to it.)

Such prominent Adventists as Uriah Smith, John Nevins Andrews, and J. N. Loughborough quickly endorsed Kellog's print. James White, although he still planned to issue copies of his charts, saw intriguing possibilities for the new medium; he designed a revised version of Kellogg's print in 1876. Both White and

James White, *The Way of Life from Paradise Lost to Paradise Restored*, lithograph, 1876.

Kellogg recognized the new medium's effectiveness and realized it was the most effective response to the popularity of Currier and Ives prints. In addition to its importance in a changing culture, however, the print also signaled an important development in Adventist theology, maintains Morgan. The chart reflects the rationalism that William Miller inherited from Thomas Paine, similar to the emphasis Uriah Smith, with his focus on the law, brought to Adventism. It suggests that mankind's fundamental religious problem is ignorance, which can be dispelled with correct information. The print, though, shifts the problem to a state of being, a breach in the relationship between God and man that can be healed by regeneration through Christ. The image of Christ on the cross, which seems almost marginal in the charts, becomes central in Kellogg's print, although overshadowed by Uriah Smith's enormous law tree that looms up behind the cross.

Although James White essentially approved of Kellogg's choice of medium and imagery, he saw further potential, both evangelistic and economic, for more refined pictorialism. His 1876 revision of Kellogg's print similarly juxtaposes the law tree and cross but is somewhat more sophisticated in design. He was not satisfied, however. Within a few years White hired Thomas Moran, arguably the most prominent American landscape painter of the late nineteenth century (White called him "the best artist in the world") to produce an engraving that would transform Adventist pictorialism and dogma into fine art. The final product did not appear until 1883, two years after James White's death, but it appears to carry

out his intentions. (See illustration on page 11) The law tree is gone. An enormous image of Christ on the cross soars up the center of the picture near the front of the picture plane. Morgan sees vast significance in this shift in visual imagery:

> The unprecedented centrality of Jesus is a significant indication of a debate that would emerge among Adventists in the years following James White's death: the preponderance of the Law versus the role of grace procured through Christ's sacrifice. James and Ellen White took the cause of the latter, which was eventually to prevail. White's [1883] redesign of the 1876 print visually documents the shift in Seventh-Day Adventist [*sic*] theology. (192)

It might be more accurate to say that the image anticipates the shift, because the ultimate direction of Adventist theology on this issue was not a foregone conclusion in 1883.

Morgan suggests that the Adventist shift to pictorialism followed a larger cultural trend: "The vocabulary and rhetoric of pictorialism transformed the visual piety of Adventism in order to appeal to the theatrical illusionism so much a part of twentieth-century popular culture—from magazine advertisements to Hollywood movies and secular book and poster illustration" (197-98). Adventism would never be the same.

Seventh-day Adventists will have a lively time discussing how strongly they see the connection between choices of visual imagery and the development of denominational theology. Morgan makes a strong connection between Miller's imagery and his hermeneutics; by implication, an equally strong connection could be attempted between James White's 1883 image and Adventist reading of Scripture after 1888. In addition, the entire question of the relationship between Seventh-day Adventists and mainstream popular culture ought to be examined. What Morgan did for Protestants in general could be attempted for Adventists throughout their history: Adventist relationship to motion pictures and television; incorporation of black light into the chalk illustrations that accompanied many evangelistic sermons in the twentieth century; Adventist bestiaries (visual interpretations of biblical beasts) from 1850 to the present; Adventist use of the apocalyptic sublime in evangelism; backdrop art for major evangelistic campaigns (a tie to panorama painting, perhaps?); satellite evangelism; the use of Power Point and other media in contemporary Adventist evangelism; use of visual material on the Internet; the relationship between evangelistic art and the art of Adventist acculturation (art designed especially for Adventists, especially children).

Looking ahead from the nineteenth into the twentieth century, Morgan mentions the influence of late-nineteenth-century religious painters on artists such as Warner Sallman and Harry Anderson. David Morgan has already written a monograph on Sallman (Yale 1996), but the monograph on Harry Anderson remains to be done. The work of other prominent Adventists artists such as Vernon Nye also needs to be examined. Regardless of the degree of synchronicity Adventists achieve with Morgan's interpretations, after the pictures are examined Adventism will never be quite the same.

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