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To, Prof. Brent Plate (splate@hamilton.edu) and David Morgan (david.morgan@duke.edu):
Revised version of essay for publication in *Material Religion* with responses from DJ to DM
and updated biographical information.

The Wordless Book: The Visual and Material Culture of Evangelism in Victorian Britain.

Biography

Dominic Janes's work focuses on themes in religion and sexuality in Britain since the eighteenth century. He is Professor of History and Art History in the School of Humanities at Keele University. His most recent books are *Picturing the Closet: Male Secrecy and Homosexual Visibility in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek Jarman* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Abstract

The Wordless Book is widely used today in programs of Christian teaching and evangelism across the world. It consists of a series of blank pages which are colored in accordance with religious symbolism (black in reference to sin, red in reference to the redeeming blood of Christ, and so forth). It is employed as a way of engaging those who cannot read the words of the gospel, particularly the very young and the illiterate. It was employed by British and American missionaries from the later decades of the nineteenth century in Africa, India, China and elsewhere. This article explores the context of the invention of *The Wordless Book* by Charles Haddon Spurgeon and its popularization by Dwight L. Moody. Firstly, it is explored for what it can tell us about the visual culture of Christian evangelism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Secondly, it is considered as a mass-produced material object that was circulated together with hundreds of thousands of Christian tracts. However, unlike their textually rich companions, the books without words have not been preserved in library collections. The study, therefore, of the appearance and subsequent disappearance of Victorian wordless books also provides us with valuable insights into the perceived importance of texts and abstract images during this period.

Keywords

Charles H. Spurgeon, Dwight L. Moody, Tracts, Baptists, Britain, Nineteenth-Century, Images, Color

Fig. 1. Undated (ca 1878). *The Wordless Book: Black, Sin: Red, the Blood of Jesus: White, Righteousness: Gold, the Glory*, cover. Ipswich: Goldsbury and London: Rouse. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University (Johnson g. 287).

Fig. 2. Metropolitan Tabernacle Colportage Dépôt (: Charles Haddon Spurgeon. 1899. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography: Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records*, eds S. Spurgeon and J. Harrald, vol. 3 (of 4), 163. London: Passmore and Alabaster.

Fig. 3a, 3b and 3c. James Stephens. 1882. *Living Water for Little Pitchers. A Series of Mission Addresses to the Young*: fig. 3a: 36 and facing; fig. 3b: 37 and facing; 3c: 40 and 41. London: John Shaw.

Fig. 4. Thomas Jones Barker ca. 1863. *The Secret of England's Greatness* (Queen Victoria presenting a Bible in the Audience Chamber at Windsor), oil on canvas, 167.6 x 213.8 cm, © National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 4969).

It became fashionable in aesthetic circles at the end of the nineteenth century to design books that featured a small area of text on each page. This enabled the publication of books which, in effect, had words that were few in number but, in theory at least, were all the more precious for that. So extreme did this fashion become that Ada Leveson (1930: 19) quipped that someone should publish a book that was all margin. But if the “Sphinx,” as Leveson had been called by her sometime friend, Oscar Wilde, had moved in evangelical circles, she would have known that they already had. A variety of productions have been referred to as books without words, notably those which tell a story solely through the use of a set of images (Beronä 2008). However, a volume filled solely with blank pages and simply called *The Wordless Book* seems to have first made its appearance in the 1860s.¹ The first mention of it occurs in a sermon delivered on January 11, 1866 by the great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in south London. His inspiration came from Psalm 51:7 “Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” He outlined a book which, he said was made up of pages of different colors (black, red and white) that could be read as a visual catechism of the journey of the soul from sinfulness to salvation. In the following year the American evangelist Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899) visited Spurgeon at the Tabernacle. He shared with the British Baptist minister a passion to save the souls not only of adults, but also of the young. In the following years he adopted *The Wordless Book* and appears to have added a further color, gold, to indicate the glory of heaven. By the 1880s this four-color version was being widely used in orphanages, Sunday-schools and urban missions. Spurgeon had also worked with James Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) who had launched the China Inland Mission, and *The Wordless Book* also came into widespread use in missionary work. In the twenty-first century thousands of copies of the book in various

formats are being published around the world and it remains a well-known tool of evangelical ministry, particularly in work with the young.

This success may, however, be contrasted with the obscurity that has fallen over the nineteenth-century origins of *The Wordless Book*. Although it was in wide use from the 1880s, an initial search through Worldcat revealed only one copy extant in a public library collection. This was an item in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague, Netherlands, which is catalogued as having a blue cover with gold lettering:

Title: *The Wordless Book: Black, Sin: Red, the Blood of Jesus: White, Righteousness:*

Gold, the Glory

Year: [ca. 1860]

Publisher: Ipswich: Goldsbury, London: Rouse.

Even this copy, however, appears to have been mislaid (email from the library, November 1, 2014), although it has been preserved, in a set of scans, as part of the Google book digitization project. I was, however, able to track down one example of this tiny item (it is 4.2 x 6.3 cm) in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian University in Oxford (fig 1). It is printed on card and has a green cover which gives its price (“three halfpence”). The interior of the volume presents four double-page spreads of color: black, red, white and gold. The catalogue attributes it to 1880. Also in this collection is a later edition (4.9 x 6.2 cm), dated to ca. 1915, that was published in London at the Gospel Book Depot. It is striking that so few of these items, which were printed in their thousands, have been preserved. In the nineteenth century religious tracts competed not only with novels, but also with drink and popular entertainments and spectacles for the time, attention and money of the general public (Price 2012: 206). In this article, therefore, I want to explore the

appearance and disappearance of the Victorian wordless book and ask what that trajectory can tell us about the visual and material culture of Christian evangelism in the later nineteenth century.

Spurgeon's Inspirations

When Charles Haddon Spurgeon stood up to preach on Thursday evening of January 11, 1866, he did so as a celebrity. He was entering the years during which he was at the height of his powers and influence. He drew vast crowds who hung on his every word and bought his published sermons in their hundreds of thousands. He began thus:

I daresay you have most of you heard of a little book which an old divine used constantly to study, and when his friends wondered what there was in the book, he told them that he hoped they would all know and understand it, but that there was not a single word in it. When they looked at it, they found that it consisted of only three leaves; the first was black, the second was red, and the third was pure white. The old minister used to gaze upon the black leaf to remind him of his sinful state by nature, upon the red leaf to call to his remembrance the precious blood of Christ, and upon the white leaf to picture to him the perfect righteousness which God has given to believers through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ his Son. I want you, dear friends to read this book this evening, and I desire to read it myself. May God the Holy Spirit graciously help us to do so to our profit! (Spurgeon 1911: 565).

The sermon then took the congregation through a tour of this book without words. The “black leaf” referred to sin as being a blackness that “was of such a peculiar kind that a miracle was needed to cleanse it away” (565). The miracle was that of “the crimson blood of Jesus that can wash out the crimson stain of sin,” as we are taught by the “red leaf” (568). This then brought Spurgeon to the “white leaf:” “What a beautiful sight it was, this morning, when we looked out, and saw the ground all covered with snow!... If we had taken a piece of what we call white paper, and laid it down upon the surface of newly-fallen snow, it would have seemed quite begrimed in comparison with the spotless snow. This morning’s scene at once called the text to my mind: ‘Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow’” (570-571). So just as the black page suggested the far more intense darkness of the sinful soul, and the red page the incomparable brightness of the blood and Jesus Christ, so the white page was simply a lesser, “begrimed” evocation of the transcendent purity of Sanctification achieved through the action of Grace.

In an article on “The book beautiful,” the art historian Michael Hatt outlined two prominent theories of reading at the end of the nineteenth century. According to first of these the text was a resource that encoded information and was to be explored rationally, but according to the second theory reading was an activity that was not simply informational but also transformative such that it was only as the eye transfers the written symbols to the mind that the text and the self “come into being” (Hatt 2010: 174). In the case of Spurgeon’s presentation of *The Wordless Book* the text is that of the Bible and has already been memorized, but it is through the complimentary reading of colors as symbolic that the viewer becomes transformed through faith in the power of Jesus Christ. When considered as a material object, therefore, *The Wordless Book* was potentially as powerful an adjunct to evangelism as its many textual companions - those myriad religious tracts that acted as “silent preachers.”

Since the 1820s, when the Religious Tract Society made a deliberate decision to publish more copies of lower-priced publications, a wide range of churches and other bodies were doing their best to flood Britain with Protestant publications. Some of these were given away, but many more were sold in a strategy that was deliberately designed to crowd competing (and allegedly immoral) literature out of the market-place (Stubenrauch 2011: 548). This phenomenon also provides testimony to an embrace of the logic of the market such that tracts had to become less costly but also more exciting if they were to compete. This occasionally led their publishers into trouble, most notably in the case of a widely circulated tract attributed to “C. B.” and entitled *The Confessional Unmasked: Showing the Depravity of the Priesthood* (1836). This consisted, to a considerable extent, of translations of the sections of Roman Catholic manuals for the confessional that focused on marital and sexual sins. The aim was to show that the Catholic priesthood was being guided in the abuse of personal privacy and trained to be fascinated with moral turpitude. This was but one example of a wide variety of spicy texts available under religious wrappers and it only came to prominence when the obscure Protestant Electoral Union suddenly made itself infamous by proposing to send a copy of a new edition to all the Members of Parliament in 1866. It was the translation of texts on sexual matters from Latin to English that brought the Union a prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act (1857) which established the legal test for obscenity in English law (delivered by Benjamin Hicklin to the Court of Queen’s Bench on April 29, 1868) (Janes 2012, discussing anon. “C. B.” 1866).

It was at this very time, in 1866, that Spurgeon established himself as a major player in the business of the purveyance of religious tracts by establishing a Colportage Association (fig. 2). This was of such importance that an entire chapter (“The men that ‘sell the books’”) of Spurgeon’s posthumously issued “Autobiography” was devoted to the subject. In the United States, the colportage system had developed rapidly since the 1840s when the

American Tract Society (founded in New York in 1825) began to employ salaried officials for these purposes in order to ensure wide distribution of tracts regardless of the ability, or the willingness, of recipients to pay. Baptist colporteurs in the United States, by contrast, supported themselves substantially through commissions earned on their sales (Nord, 2004: 97-98). Spurgeon's Association started slowly, but really got going during the mid-1870s at the time when *The Wordless Book* appears to have first begun to be widely noticed (Spurgeon 1897-1900, vol. 3: 166). In the last year of Spurgeon's life 96 "colporteurs" were employed and we are informed in figures that are illuminating not merely in their scale but also in their precision, that those men and their predecessors had achieved sales of £153,784, 3s 6d through 11,822,637 visits to families (Spurgeon 1897-1900, vol. 4: 336). For Spurgeon these colporteurs, were first and foremost, missionaries but they were also, in effect, door-to-door salesmen who were paid a low basic wage and received the rest of their income on commission (Spurgeon 1897-1900, vol. 3: 164). It was a strategy that turned evangelism into a financially self-sustaining activity and one that undoubtedly made a major contribution not merely to the process of conversions to Christianity but also to the sectarian fight against Catholicism in both its Anglican and Roman guises. Thus Spurgeon himself said that the "Puseyite" descendants of the Oxford Movement for renewed Catholicity within the Church of England were to be combatted through the distribution of "several millions of copies of forcible, Scriptural testimonies" (Spurgeon 1897-1900, vol. 3: 161).

All of this helps to explain why Spurgeon was keen to create innovative forms of tract that expressed a positive message rather than resorting to sensationalistic impropriety.

Moreover it is notable that he appears to have devised a visual alternative to highly aestheticized forms of Catholic visual culture rather than simply denouncing visuality as the handmaid of idolatry. His ambivalent fascination with the visual imagination emerges very clearly from a sermon he delivered on Sunday June 17, 1866 on "The axe at the root: a

testimony against Puseyite idolatry.” For though he abhorred the theological implications of Tractarian ritualism he was attracted by its appearance: “As a sight, I admire the choristers and priests, and the whole show of a grand ceremonial; but do you believe that God is imposed upon by those frocks and gowns of white, and blue, and scarlet, and fine linen? It seems to me as if such a notion brings down God to the level of a silly woman who is fond of finery” (Spurgeon 1867a: 334). Moreover, his objection to what he terms “our Dissenting Gothic” (i.e. the gothic revival style in architecture and design when used by nonconformists) is that the effect is second-rate and “a sort of would be if you could.... But a really splendid place of worship I admire, as a matter of taste” (335).

The search for ways in which to align visual beauty and the virtue of simplicity was not born of the Reformation. The early and medieval churches, alongside elaborate schemes of church decoration, promoted the understanding of pure colors as spiritual allegories (Janes 1998, on gold, and Janes 2000, on red). In the wake of the Reformation certain Calvinists returned to color-symbolism as a way of assuaging their thirst for the visual whilst avoiding the dangers of idolatry. One such was Gervase Babington (1550-1610), who was bishop of Llandaff, then Exeter and finally Worcester. We know that Spurgeon had a copy of the bishop’s writings because it has been preserved in his library (Spurgeon Collection, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Library, Kansas City, Missouri), where there is also a copy of Samuel Clarke, *A Mirror or Looking Glass both for Saints and Sinners, Held Forth in Some Thousands of Examples* (1671). Clarke tells us that

Bishop Babington had a little book, containing only three leaves, which he turned over night and morning. The first leaf was black, to mind him of hell and God’s judgments, due to him for sin: the second red, to mind him of Christ and His Passion:

the third white, to set forth God's mercy to him through the merits of His Son, in his justification and sanctification (Clarke 1671, vol. 1: 540).

Julie Spraggon, in her study *Puritan Iconoclasm during the English Civil War* (2003: 11), has written of the way in which Babington feared the manner in which the mind seethed to create idols and it seems that his “little book” was an aniconic way for him to avoid that temptation. If, as seems probable, Babington was the “old divine” referred to by Spurgeon in his sermon on *The Wordless Book* it is possible that the use of a black page to memorialise the death of Yorick in the first edition of Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) and of a blank page (on which the reader was encouraged to draw the image of another character, Widow Wadman) may also have provided Spurgeon with inspiration, albeit of a less spiritually elevated nature (Fanning, 2009: 130).

It is also important to consider Spurgeon’s championing of the abstract, colored image in relation to another Christian tradition: that of seeing the evidences of God in nature as His creation. Thus, also in 1866, and referencing Psalm 146:6, he wrote that “The book of nature has three leaves, heaven, earth and sea,” and averred that the world could be read as a “Natural Bible” (Spurgeon 1866a: 323, footnote 1). In this he built on well-established Calvinist precedent, as in the guidance offered by John Willison, an evangelical minister of the Church of Scotland, in his *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctification of the Lord’s Day* (first edition, 1712-13): “Natural things may be spiritualized, and common things may afford us grounds for spiritual instructions” when read from the “three leaves” of the “book of nature” (Willison 1820: 149-150). Spurgeon was well-known for making use of examples (which he referred to as “illustrations”) from everyday life in his preaching but he stood out from many of his predecessors in his enthusiasm for referencing not simply natural productions but also those of modern, industrial society (Ellison 1998: 69). For instance he

made spiritual use of the bright tones of the newly invented, color-fast dyes, of which “mauveine,” or aniline purple, was the first to be discovered in 1856 (Austin 2007: 90). This chemical came to social prominence in 1862 when Queen Victoria appeared in public in a dress made from silk that had been dyed with it. On February 26, 1871, Spurgeon, when preaching on “I lay my sins on Jesus, the spotless lamb of God” (the title of a hymn written in 1843 by Horatius Bonar when newly ordained in the Free Church of Scotland) addressed “some of you, who are growing into young men and young women.” He said that they might recollect that he had, a few years back, brought in some bright red cloth that, despite much washing by his wife, would never fade. This had been used to teach them that only Jesus can get out every stain (Spurgeon 1897-1900, vol. 3: 92). In relation to contemporary inspiration it is also important to emphasise that the development of cheap, color-printing techniques was crucial to the practical development of *The Wordless Book*. Despite a number of experiments time-consuming, and therefore expensive, hand-coloring remained the key practice before the 1830s. It was only in the 1840s that technological innovation enabled reductions in costs such that the ‘massive circulation’ of books with colour plates could become a reality (Twyman, 2009: 133).

Another thing that is striking about Spurgeon, the man of so many words, is that he was far from certain that worship based on text was a sure way to avoid the perils of idolatry. As he said in 1866, “Our service is so much words, words, words, that I am almost afraid you get to think as much of words as other people do of banners, and flags, and so on. Now, to sit still, to get right away from words, if so your heart keeps to God, is better even than preaching and singing” (Spurgeon 1867a: 335). Wordless prayer was a regular theme in his thought, as when in 1857 he said he did not care about fine language since God can hear “a wordless prayer, or a prayer in broken English, ungrammatical and harsh to the ear” (Spurgeon 1857: 155). Or when, in 1871, he said that for some it was quite natural to ask

blessings from God in “brief, wordless, prayers” (Spurgeon 1872: 208). The visual beauty of natural light as a spiritual symbol strongly appealed to him (Spurgeon 1866b: 638). And he returned repeatedly to imagery relating to light, windows and stained glass in the lectures he delivered late in his life on *The Art of Illustration* to students at his Pastor’s College. “The best light,” he said, “comes in through the clearest glass: too much paint keeps out the sun” (Spurgeon 1894: 25). This helps us to understand the appeal not simply of the aniconic nature of *The Wordless Book* but of its journey from dark taint, to bright pigment, to absence of color.

Unlike many others Spurgeon did not look down on and pity the illiterate for their inability to read the words of the Gospel. This attitude may spring from his conversion experience. This seems to have come about as a result of the impromptu preaching of an illiterate man, Samuel Nightingale, one cold January day in 1850, when the primitive Methodist minister, Robert Eaglen, had been delayed by snow on his journey from Ipswich (Drummond 1992: 130). It was on that night that, as Spurgeon later testified, his “eyes were opened” (Spurgeon 1867b: 161). He spoke to his students of the process of inventing textual examples and metaphors as if they were the work of artists embarking on paintings: “I earnestly hope you will practise the art of making illustrations” (Spurgeon 1894: 133). And although he placed great weight on tradition - ‘No examples will have greater weight with you than those taken from among the Puritans, in whose steps it is our desire to walk’ (41) – he was, as has been seen, open to modernity and the sciences as the source of such word-art (137). Yet he still feared that the visual world might prove a source of distraction in which the eye becomes “dazzled with fancies” (Spurgeon 1866b: 638). What better way, therefore, to train and discipline the eye than through a book of colors?

Moody, Schools and Missions

Although Spurgeon seems, initially at least, to have understood *The Wordless Book* as being of benefit to all, it was as an aid to the evangelization of the illiterate, children and heathens that it achieved wide circulation by the end of the nineteenth century. It seems likely, although no examples appear to have survived, that Spurgeon, the sometime Sunday-school teacher, had copies made to hand out at the Orphanage that he opened in Stockwell in south London in 1867. But it was another event of that year that was to be of vital importance in the story of the book. This was the visit to the Metropolitan Tabernacle of the great American evangelist Dwight L. Moody and it led to the consolidation of an ongoing friendship between the two men. Either then, or subsequently, Moody adopted *The Wordless Book* in his missions to children. The first published account to survive of his use of the book was during his visit to Liverpool in the company of Ira D. Sankey (1840-1908). In 1900, William R. Moody, the preacher's oldest son, published the following account in the biography of his father:

One of the most interesting meetings at Liverpool [February 1875] was the children's service, where Mr. Moody and Mr. Sankey were both present. Some of the papers put down the number in Victoria Hall [a temporary, wooden structure] at twelve thousand with an overflow meeting of about two thousand in Hengler's Circus. Mr. Moody gave an address founded on a book with four leaves, black, red, white and gold (Moody 1900: 220; and see Dorset 1997: 211-212).

The wording of this passage, however, closely copies that of an anonymous correspondent published in *The Christian* on March 4, 1875, who, however, states that Moody's address was

on “the book with three leaves, black, red and white” (anon. “A Correspondent” 1875: 152; reprinted in anon. 1875a: 9). It is, therefore, not entirely clear when the fourth color, gold, was added, but this development was widely attributed to Moody. Moreover, it was the four-color version that was referenced in 1876 by William E. Axon (1846–1913), an antiquarian and a journalist for *The Manchester Guardian*, who wrote in a piece widely syndicated in the popular press that “there is a curiosity of literature in England... called ‘The Wordless Book,’ so called because, after the title-page, it contains not a single word. It is a religious allegory, devised it is said by an evangelical enthusiast” (Axon 1875: 266). Moreover, it is notable that it was from this time that other references to *The Wordless Book* suddenly started to appear in a range of magazines and newspapers. To give one such example, it was announced in *The Bradford Observer* on December 11, 1875, that “Mr. Tom Jones, late engine driver” will preach the gospel at Pullan’s Theatre of Varieties, Brunswick Place (a music hall in Bradford) on the theme of “A Wordless Book” (anon. 1875c: 1).

The enthusiasm with which *The Wordless Book* was adopted in certain quarters can partly be put down to the fact that momentum in the use of visual aids in teaching had been building steadily both in Britain and the United States in the course of the nineteenth century. By the end of Victoria’s reign a wide variety of manuals were available on the subject such as R. W. Sindall’s, *Eye-Teaching in the Sunday School* (1896) published in London by the Sunday School Union. In an earlier example, *Through the Eye to the Heart; or, Plain Uses of the Blackboard, and other Visible and Verbal Illustrations in the Sunday School and Home* (1880), Wilbur F. Crafts argued that “By a thorough study of character, customs, and geography, in Bible dictionaries and in commentaries, the teacher’s mind may become a stereopticon, and then throw out the *picture of the lesson* [original emphasis] from his own mind as a vivid scene in real life, as is so often done by D. L. Moody” (Crafts 1880: 17). And he clearly shared Spurgeon’s enthusiasm for the art of textual illustration for he argued that

‘The Sunday-school teacher is to be an artist, not only in the sense that he is sculpting human beings into a Christ-like image, but he should also be an artist in presenting vividly the truth he teaches’ (18). It is notable, however, that he felt he had to expend some energy defending the practice as being based squarely upon Christ’s own use of similes and metaphors. Moreover, he said that it was surprising that such methods were not more widely used bearing in mind that “our parlours are full of Bible *pictures* [original emphasis]” (38).

This provides eloquent testimony to the deeply ingrained nature of Protestant iconophobia. Nevertheless, as David Morgan (1999: 203) has pointed out, there were substantial moves toward not merely the didactic but also the devotional role of pictures in the course of the nineteenth century. Evangelical leadership in the Sunday school movement on both sides of the Atlantic fostered an emphasis not simply on the memorization of knowledge but on conversion (Boylan 1988: 138 and Morgan 1999: 206). It was in this atmosphere that mid-century text and image primers for children “raised the image to the status of a visual text that did not suffer inferiority to the biblical scriptures as a conduit for evangelical truth” (Morgan 1999: 214). The use of the blackboard made the characteristic combination of text and image the center of the learning experience (240). Elizabeth Mayo had pioneered the advocacy in Britain of teaching with material objects, notably in her book *Lessons on Objects* (1830) which emphasised that her inspiration had come from the work of the Swiss educational reformer Johann Pestalozzi (Carter, 2010). Moreover, “object preaching”, as in George V. Reichel’s *What Shall I Tell the Children?: Object Sermons and Teachings* (1897) and Charles Herbert Tyndall’s, *Object Sermons in Outline* (1897), advocated the use of material props, including pieces of scientific equipment, as vital adjuncts when expatiating on Scripture.

Whilst there is evidence that *The Wordless Book* was employed not only in British schools but also in missions to British sailors, as recorded for instance in S. G. Wintz [“An

Eye Witness”], *Our Blue Jackets: A Narrative of Miss [Agnes Elizabeth] Weston’s Life and Work Among our Sailors* (1878), it was to be in the “Orient” that the book appears to have been most frequently employed. It is tempting to speculate that there was something appealing about the book of colors to those engaged in orientalist viewing of the exotic, bright and yet sinful panoramas of the east. And they might well have turned from the supposedly dark sins of dusky peoples to the bright light of God’s creation; much as Cuthbert Collingwood, the author of *Rambles of a Naturalist on the Shores and Waters of the China Sea* (1868), wrote - in his poem *A Vision of Creation* (1875: 198) - that progress will “draw fresh lessons from a virgin page / Of Nature’s wordless book.” Austin Alvyn (2007: 4-10) has explained how it was Spurgeon’s support for James Hudson Taylor’s China Inland Mission, announced in 1865, that led to the adoption of *The Wordless Book* in missionary work in the Far East. In 1877 James Read was also employing it in his work with the Yoruba in Nigeria (Peel 2003: 168-9). The concept of a sequence of colors seems to have been peculiarly useful in the missionary context. Books without words could be an aid not only to those who could not read English, or any other language for that matter, but also to missionaries with limited knowledge of local dialects. They could be tiny objects that were cheap to print and easy to transport or they could be expanded, physically and conceptually, to form giant banners (Fallon 1894: 263 and Kent 2002: 204-5). Amy Wilson-Carmichael (1895: 177), working in Japan, employed the colors as inspirational strips that she pasted into her Bible. And it was sometimes used on its own and at other times in tandem with “Scripture pictures” (Marshall 1896: 89).

Some women appear to have been keen to create fabric versions of *The Wordless Book* such as the artifact mentioned by David Hill of the Wesleyan Missionary Society at a meeting held in 1881 and reported in *China’s Millions*, the periodical of the China Inland Mission: a silk object with “leaves of different colors, such as a lady would use to put needle

and thread” (Anon. 1881: 91). Such local improvisation, on occasion, left Spurgeon’s original iconic inspiration well behind, as in the advice offered by Charlotte Maria Tucker (‘A.L.O.E.’), in *Seven Perils Passed* (1882: 26) concerning her practice in India of placing a “trinket” on a card which she then covered by a set of five curtains (“pardahs”) representing ignorance, unbelief, other sin, fear of men as dangerous humans, and love of the world. This last took the form of the image of “a beautiful child, a rose in one hand, a poison dart in the other.” The final trinket took the place of Moody’s sheet of gold since an item of jewelry would be better appreciated by this “jewel-loving people.” Other missionaries identified wordless books as found objects as when E. C. Milliard (1891: 78) recounted the sight of “coolies” slouching outside a church with umbrellas, one black, one red and one white. This was “a ‘wordless book’ ready to hand” and inspired an impromptu sermon on laziness.

The flexibility of *The Wordless Book* was, however, not simply a strength but also a danger, as becomes apparent from a mention in the letters of James Gilmour of the London Missionary Society who worked in Mongolia. On July 30, 1890, he wrote to a friend in Edinburgh that, “The little *Wordless Book* that you sent soon fell into the hands of a Chinese convert, who asked to be allowed to carry it off. He wanted to speak from it. He likes it because it gives him *carte blanche*, and lets him say just what he likes...” (Gilmour 1892: 272). This highlights a fact that was potentially problematic in the missionary context: the *The Wordless Book* was rooted not simply in Protestant Christianity but also in western color symbolism (Kent 2005: 73). And it is important, above all, to recall that Spurgeon intended the book to be an *adjunct* to didactic exposition. This can be seen from the account (expanded from that which he had given in his sermon of 1866) that he included in *Feathers for Arrows; or, Illustrations for Preachers and Teachers* (1870). In this he explained that that “certain divine” used to look on the book all the time, but only eventually told the secret of what it meant:

He said, "Here is the black leaf, that is my sin, and the wrath of God which my sin deserves; I look, and look, and think it is not black enough to represent my guilt, though it is as black as black can be. The red leaf reminds me of the atoning sacrifice, and the precious blood; and I delight to look at it, and weep, and look again. The white leaf represents my soul, as it is washed in Jesus' blood and made white as snow." The little book was fuller of meaning than many a learned folio (Spurgeon 1870: 208).

Missionary literature from the later nineteenth century tends to include mentions of *The Wordless Book* in passing as if it were something that was too familiar to require explanation. However, luckily, a couple of detailed expositions addressed to those working with British children have been preserved. Perhaps the most striking example is provided by the chapter, "Whiter than snow," which was included by James Stephens (1847-1923), a children's missionary on the staff of the Church of England Parochial Mission Society, in his *Living Water for Little Pitchers: A Series of Mission Addresses to the Young* (1882). This piece essentially repeats the schema given by Spurgeon but is remarkable for its physical inclusion of pages from *The Wordless Book* (credited to its publisher, Mackie, of Ipswich: Stephens 1882: 36). What is most notable is that the young are instructed to regard *The Wordless Book* as analogous to their own bodies and souls which can be read by God. He describes the life of a ten-year old as being like a half-read book, "thumb-marked, blotted, torn, dog eared" (32). Would, he asks, you leave the book of your life around the house where your mother would read it? "Look at that page," he orders, and see how black it is: that is you and your life (36). Similarly, the red page represents you who must be washed, not simply your sins (38). Then comes the white page (Stephens does not employ the four-color, Moody

variant) which uses the same paper as the rest of the volume and, hence, unlike the black and red pages, does not register as a startling material insertion: “how lovely it looks after the others” (40) (figs. 3a, 3b and 3c).

The firm of Mackie published its own explication of Spurgeon’s invention in the form of *A Key to the Wordless Book, Showing God’s Plan of Salvation from his own Word* (1882) by John Blucher Wheeler, the evangelical rector of Eastling, near Faversham in Kent. A work of his published the previous year makes it clear that he, like Spurgeon, was dismissive of Roman and Anglican Catholic liturgies since ‘we should be aware of the danger of deceiving ourselves with earthly services and an outward show of religion’ (Wheeler 1881: 60). Like Spurgeon he did not attribute the invention of the (in this case, four-color) book to a specific, and recent, time and place and so avoided potential attacks on it as a reckless innovation. Rather he retells a story given in one of the books of *Plain Words* written by William Walsham How (1823-1897). This volume is undated but probably dates from the mid- or late 1870s. How was famous in his day for his urban mission work as a suffragan bishop in the East End of London and then in Wakefield. In this story a deaf, illiterate woman tells a puzzled clergyman who is new to her parish how to use the book:

“We begin our Service, you know, with confession of sins, so open your book at the black page, and tell God of the blackness of your sins. Then we tell you of God’s pardon through Jesus Christ; so turn next to the red page, and thank God for ‘the blood of Jesus Christ which cleanseth from all sin.’ Then, as we go on with the Service, we pray for the many graces and virtues, so turn to the white page, and pray God for purity, and holiness and grace to keep you from every stain of sin. And lastly when we are praising God, you can turn to the golden page, and think of ‘Jerusalem

the Golden,' and the crown of glory which is in store for you in heaven" (How ca.1875: 43, quoted in Wheeler 1882: 4-5).

Wheeler then makes the key point that "inability to read will not shut anyone out of Heaven if his sins do not" (Wheeler 1882: 6). The illiterate sinner may learn that black equals Condemnation, red is Justification, white is Sanctification and gold, Glorification. Thus these "coloured leaves may be said to represent the *Experience* [original emphasis] of one who is under God's teaching" (7). Such teaching speaks to those in their own particular context. For instance, in an "Industrial School" in Portsmouth for delinquent youths the colors could be seen to represent progress from incarceration to freedom (9). Elsewhere they could also speak to "blind idolators in foreign lands, and the baptized heathen in our own nation." They will both yearn for the aid of the Holy Spirit and, likewise, "the golden leaf will encourage the toiling missionary" in his or her work (12).

This flags up one further resonance of *The Wordless Book*, and that is its racial connotations. Whilst these were not directly referred to in his writings on the book, it is clear that Spurgeon did, throughout his career, make connections between racial blackness and sin. Thus, in 1857 we find him saying 'You have been the slave of sin... you are not going to serve that black master of your's [sic] any more" (Spurgeon 1857: 154). And in the preparatory notes for a sermon delivered on June 17, 1877, he argued that "When a man has taken up sin into him, till it is as much himself as his black skin is part and parcel of the Ethiopian, yet the Lord can put the sin away as thoroughly as if the negro became a fair Caucasian" (Spurgeon 1990: 99; compare Spurgeon 1903). Missionary work in the British Empire, try as it might to embrace at least some aspects of racial and cultural diversity, was riddled with such lazily unpleasant thinking. Yet such prejudice does not, of course, imply the acceptance of racial limitations to the spiritual efficacy of the blood of Christ. Therefore,

it may be best to conclude that Spurgeon's invention, if not created as an adjunct to imperial superiority, could be employed in ways that fitted well with projects that depicted the color "black" and people who were "black" as dirty and in particular need of regimes of moral sanitation (Heath 2010).

Conclusion: Appearance and Disappearance

In Thomas Jones Barker's monumental painting *The Secret of England's Greatness* of ca. 1863, Queen Victoria, wearing a striking mauve train, hands a large Bible to a kneeling African chieftain (fig. 4). This work has been widely received as a clear statement of British racial superiority, although recent research has indicated that, as in the case of Spurgeon's thinking, the religious implications of the scene make things less clear-cut. Lynda Nead (2014), for instance, has recently argued the case for seeing this work as being about imperial connections and intermingling. That interpretation fits well with Christian attitudes to sin in which all are implicated as a result of the Fall of Man. What is also notable is the presence of the Bible, not simply as a text, but as a weighty, material object. As has been pointed out by Colleen McDannell (1995: 99) and Paul Gutjahr (1999: 33), with reference to the United States (but the same appears to be true of Britain), the nineteenth century saw a substantial rise in the production and sale of Bibles as popular commodities. Having looked at the origins, development and use of *The Wordless Book*, I now wish, in this final section, to turn to the issue of its production.

We can deduce that substantial numbers must have been printed, but their appearance can only be gauged from a single survival (fig. 1). The suggested date for the lost copy in the Netherlands ("ca. 1860") is, moreover, likely to be incorrect because this is a four-color

version such as only seems to have made its appearance in or after 1875. That Goldsbury, the publishers of The Hague and Oxford examples, was an otherwise obscure firm from Ipswich is significant. Spurgeon was from East Anglia and, as also mentioned above, the minister on the occasion of his conversion in January 1850 lived in Ipswich. The story can then be picked up from the pages of *The Ipswich Journal*. This tells us that Spurgeon preached for the first time in the city in December 1863 and drew a large crowd both of dissenters and of members of the Established Church (anon. 1863). Alfred Goldsbury was born in Ipswich, Suffolk, in 1849. Starting in 1875 he appears as one of the organizers of an annual Christmas dinner for poor and destitute children (anon. 1875b). This appears to have taken place in the context of an agricultural depression which saw many workers emigrate, as did Goldsbury himself (anon. [“John Lott”] 1878). He was given an emotional send-off by the Ipswich Young Men’s Christian Association on September 30, 1879 prior to setting sail for Auckland, after which he took up a career in teaching (anon 1879a and *Cyclopedia Company* 1897, vol. 1: 1464). In the process he transferred his business to F. S. Mackie who thus became the new depot holder of the Ipswich and Suffolk Religious Tract Society, founded 1855, which was a scion of the Religious Tract Society, founded 1799. The firm of Mackie was also the depot of the “Ipswich auxiliary” of the British and Foreign Bible Society. And if, under his auspices, sales were less strong than they once had been, nevertheless, it was reported that evangelism continued apace since “the tracts were spread by the children of Sunday Schools carrying them to their homes” (anon. 1881 and anon. 1884).

Wheeler’s aforementioned volume of explication included an advertisement for Mackie which reveals that he sold *The Wordless Book* in two sizes as follows:

2[unreadable] x 4 and 1 5/8 x 2 3/8 at 3d and 1 1/2d each

Black, sin,

Isaiah 64, 6

Romans 3, 10

Romans 5, 12

Red, blood of Jesus

9 Hebrews 11-22

1 Peter 1, 18-19

Revelation 5, 9

White, righteousness

2 Corinthians 5, 21

Romans 3, 22-22

Romans 10, 4

Gold, the glory

Colossians 3, 4

Revelation 21, 18

Revelation 21, 22-23 (Wheeler 1882: 14).

Since this text appears to correspond closely to that on the cover of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek and Bodleian Library copies, as does the price, it seems clear, therefore, that this was simply a republication by Mackie of the edition by Goldsbury (Wheeler 1882: 14). At around the same time a four-color edition of *The Wordless Book* was on sale at the Willard Tract Repository in New York which was run by Charles Cullis, an Episcopalian in the

Methodist tradition; although this version was seemingly not identical to that from Ipswich since it came equipped with a different set of biblical references (black, Isa. 64.6; red, Rev. 1.5.; white, Psa. 51.7, and gold, Col. 8. 4) (anon. 1879b: 254; Stall 1894: 184, and Balmer 2004: 199). A wider, archival search may lead to the discovery of further early examples of *The Wordless Book* and thus enable a more detailed production history of its editions to be extrapolated.

The widespread adoption of illustrations in Protestant publications during the nineteenth century is well recognized, as is the role of widely distributed tracts that brought the Word of God to huge numbers of people who never went to hear a minister speak. *The Wordless Book*, by contrast, made use of abstract, illustrative content that required careful guidance to ensure its correct employment. It was, therefore, a specialized item but one which by the end of the century had become a familiar tool in evangelical pedagogy because of the advocacy of Charles Spurgeon and his influence on figures such as Hudson Taylor and Dwight Moody. Its production and employment can tell us a considerable amount about the attitude of Spurgeon and his admirers not only to the use of visual aids in teaching but also about how they felt about the spiritual importance of engagement with abstract images. When considered as a mass-produced object it can also be studied as an item of the material culture of evangelism. However, in that regard it is notable, and regrettable, that these items have not been preserved in libraries. Whilst James Stephens (1882: 36) was careful to credit Mackie when incorporating pages of *The Wordless Book* into his own work it seems that librarians did not see it so much as a book as merely an item of ephemera. The story of the appearance and subsequent disappearance of the various nineteenth-century editions of the book can, therefore, also tell us about the limitations, as well as the potential, of aniconic symbolism in the Victorian heyday of the mass-production of devotional tracts. *The Wordless Book* was intended to act as an adjunct or supplement to the spoken and written word. It was cheaply

produced and appears to have been discarded when it was no longer needed. It was sometimes incorporated into sacred material culture in the missionary context but this does not appear to have happened in Britain or the United States. This helps to explain why so few have survived.

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