Seeing Need and Defining ‘Christian Civilization:’ American Methodist Missions and the use of Photography

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In the summer of 1919 Maynard Owen Williams, a foreign correspondent from the National Geographic Society, told reporters from the *Columbus Evening Dispatch* that he was visiting the Methodist Mission Centenary to “study the way that pictures and exhibits are used to inform stay-at-homes of conditions [around the world]... and to get as many pictures as I can get from missionaries and others who are in a position best to know the other races of the world.” In addition to his lofty opinion of missionaries and their unique position as researchers in foreign lands, he held a high view of the power of the visual, arguing that photographic pictures are more effective with the general public than lectures or printed words alone. Adding his two-cents about missionary practice, he advised that “the missionary” should own the best camera available, and then “ought to use it as much as his Bible.”

The planners of the massive, summer-long Methodist World Fair certainly agreed with most of that assessment. Many Methodist leaders in the mission movement in the United States had begun to recognize the power of new visual media to grab people’s attention and leave strong and convincing images in their minds. So much so, that the Centenary celebration featured the newest and most dramatic visual technology as an integral part of many of the exhibits. This included the world’s largest projection screen, and the world’s largest lantern slide projector, onto which would be projected images of missionaries, mission work, mission fields, and native peoples in mission lands, at the height of 105 feet. The use of visual media at the Centenary was the culmination of several years of work by the Board of Foreign Missions and the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church. By the time of the Centenary, in the summer of 1919, the church had already put together a vast collection of photographs and lantern slides made from

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1 "Explains Why Centenary is Great Success: Noted visitor says Exposition Visualized what People Want to Know. Urges Use of Camera." *(Columbus Evening Dispatch, July 8, 1919)*, 6.
photographs. Already there were 20 depositories around North America for slides and projectors which could be used by churches for educating their congregations about the mission work of the church.²

By this account, we can surmise that the photography project of the MEC, from its vast scope to investment in equipment to the creativity of its methods, was at the leading edge of the increasingly visual culture in the United States. Clearly, at the least, many in the mission boards of the MEC were convinced that spoken and written words alone were insufficient to the task of convincing American Methodists that they needed to support the mission work of the church. This was the basic point of the investment in visual media: to better educate Americans about the broader world, and to convince them that other people in the world, both at home and abroad, needed the mission work of the MEC.

What remains of their great investment in photographic representation is a collection at the United Methodist Archives in Madison, New Jersey. The collection consists of approximately 250,000 photographs from 50 countries on every continent but Australia. The range of dates for the photographs is approximately the late 1860's through the 1930's, though most of the photographs seem to date from the early 20th century through the 1920's. The photographs were "lost" for several decades, and uncovered in a warehouse on 125th Street in Manhattan in storage for the Board of Missions. When found, they were housed in albums, organized according to geographic region or theme. Unfortunately, the detailed records of their creation, and the provenance up until their discovery in the warehouse, are lost. Our best guess, from clues in the albums themselves and in the few records that have been uncovered, is that the albums were created by the staffs of the Foreign and Home mission boards.

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both to be used for public display and to store images that were put together into
lantern slide lectures, with prepared lecture texts. The images were also accessed by
the publishing arms of the denomination for use in such publications as *World
Outlook*. As the larger multi-denominational mission energy waned in the 1930’s,
the albums were at some point no longer used and eventually forgotten. It is possible
that the message, tone, and content of the albums began to feel dated, as there is a
rather explicit imperialist tone to many of the photographs (see Figure 1, “The
Church, State, and Commerce”3).

Most of photographs are in albums identified by nation or continent: “China”
(of which there are 17), or “Africa.” But there are also albums of the work in the
United states, and these go by titles such as “Cities” or “Southern Mountains” or
“Negroes.” Most of the images are accompanied by captions. The captions are
mostly handwritten. Many of the images are arranged sequentially, and have a kind
of narrative flow. The images are often identified by a lecture number, suggesting
that at one time there were standard lectures that accompanied the albums or lantern
slide collections. From the albums I’ve seen – and I’ve probably looked closely
through 2/5ths of the albums over the years, and more quickly through most of the
rest of the albums – most of the images were taken by missionaries or photographers
who accompanied the missionaries. There are also clear examples of professional
photographs that were purchased by the mission board to supplement the lectures and
presentations.

The albums address some of the basic questions of mission: who are those “in
need,” and who are those who ought to address that need? What is it that they need?
And how are those not in need to recognize it in others? Considering these basic

3 “Africa One,” #3217, Mission Photograph Albums Collection, General Commission on Archives and
History of the United Methodist Church, Madison, New Jersey, USA.
questions in the context of the photographs, I also ask: How were pictures a better way to convey a fairly simple message and plea? What could pictures do that words alone could not?

What we gain by asking these questions of these photographs is a fresh understanding of how the message of a need for Methodist mission work was conveyed, and a more nuanced comprehension of that complex mix of charity, sincerity, practical aid to those who were suffering, and the colonialist and imperialist dynamics that plagued much mission work and colors common perceptions of it now. In the longer term, by attending closely to the multiple modes of communication to which Methodists turned to do the work they felt called to do, we will allow ourselves to see more fully, and with a much finer grain, the way Methodists from North America began to imagine the world outside their own country, their role in shaping that world, and, perhaps just as importantly, how the images of the world beyond their first-hand knowledge shaped American Methodists’ own identity.

What I want to accomplish in this presentation, which is a part of a much larger research project, is to talk about the images themselves, and, rather than address the process of their creation, offer a few broad observations about the photographs as a coherent body of work produced by the MEC. A few basic points at the outset: first, the photographs were intended primarily to convince audiences of white and fairly affluent American Methodists that there was a tremendous amount of need that they were best equipped to address. In order for those needs to be addressed by Methodist missionaries, Methodists needed to give money. Second, that need was described in the photographs and accompanying texts not just as a need for the Christian gospel, but a need for “American Christian civilization.” This is one of the
main themes of the photographs, both when seen as a larger collection and in many of the captions that accompany the photographs.

In looking at the photographs I have asked several basic questions: what did they choose to take pictures of? What kinds of pictures show up in repetition? Who are in the pictures? How are the pictures taken? What style is used? What tone is employed? What do the captions say? How are images and texts combined to make arguments? What arguments are explicit, and which ones implicit? What do the photographers and creators of the albums assume about their audiences' opinion or theory about photographs? In other words, what do viewers think photographs are? Are they documentary or artistic? Subjective or true?4

What I assume about these photographs and the way they were viewed is that implicit in the photographs is a fairly common, but continually evolving, visual grammar. By this I simply mean that like texts which use only words, there were certain cues in the emerging visual culture of North America that audiences were learning to recognize, and these are not as available to us as they were during the time. We can, though, begin to recognize aspects of the visual cues and learn how so many Methodists in the early twentieth century began picturing the world outside their own.

One image in the collection helps us understand this point more clearly. It is one of the very few images that I've found accompanied by a caption that explicitly names what is assumed that viewers will see in the picture (see Figure 2)5. The relevant section of the caption reads:

4 We won't have time in this presentation to discuss more thoroughly the denotative and connotative aspects of photographs. The most useful piece I've found on this, especially in regards to the way the Methodists employed a text and photo combination is chapter nine, "The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies," in W.T. Mitchell Picture Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 281-328.

5 "Africa One," image #2571, Mission Photograph Album Collection.
One of them—you can guess which—is a Christian. He was educated in a Methodist School. He has come in touch, to however small an extent, with the currents of world progress. Notice the awakened eyes, the more intense expression, the more alert bearing. Notice, on the other hand, the heaviness that weighs like a black cloud upon his brother’s forehead.

This photo and caption give us a mere glimpse of an entire visual lexicon to which we likely only have a partial knowledge, and in which the creators of the albums and their intended audiences were able—or willing—to communicate or articulate things which they could not—or would not—communicate in spoken or written word.

**Seeing Need**

The albums attempted to establish, first and foremost, evidence of races, ethnic or regional groups, cultures, and nations in need. Five major forms of need are presented in the photographs: poverty, devastation from war and natural disasters, disease, crime, and—slightly more difficult to convey—spiritual and cultural depravity. The most commonly presented need in all the albums is poverty, as many of the other conditions of need addressed were either caused by poverty or had caused poverty. Children, in particular, figure prominently. There are images of children in unsanitary housing, suffering from malnutrition, clothed inadequately. There are images of orphans without proper supervision, and images of children in refugee camps. For the most part, the images convey the presence of a broken culture and economy, and thus the message was that missions to these people needed to address broad societal change. But there were also particular disasters for which Methodists were raising emergency funds. Some of these include floods in China in 1919, war in the Balkans and “western Asia,” and the refugee crisis in Europe caused by what Europeans call the first World War.
The most dramatic and effective way to convey need was first to establish differences between the audience and those in the pictures. By this I mean that many of the albums of missions outside of North America made generous use of the exotic, which, above all, highlights differences between people at the expense of commonalities. To understand how the use of the exotic works we must first admit to the rather subjective experience of looking at pictures. To view a picture of any kind is, like any human interaction, a process of both gathering information about the other person, and an attempt to recognize oneself in the other person. When a viewer doesn’t recognize much of themselves in another person or place then the interaction plays a part in the construction of the viewer’s sense of self. When the Methodist audiences saw the images of “typical savages” or “pagan temples,” for instance, they were not only learning about someone else but adding layers onto who they understood themselves to be—or more precisely, who they understood themselves not to be. So while the photographs might sometimes play to similarities—for instance, the universal concerns about the vulnerability of children, mother’s without enough food for their children, the social leveling that is often the product of natural disaster or war—they more often favor an emphasis on the exotic. In this way, they consistently remind the audiences of vast differences between the viewers and subjects of the photographs. But not every group in need is presented equally as exotic or dramatically different. The albums on European peoples, for instance, contain far fewer images that would stress difference than albums for places like Africa, or the Philippines. Take, for instance, the following two images for comparison. Their differences are illustrative of broader patterns in the albums (see
The first thing to notice is the difference in the tone of the captions. The first, of the "typical savage," takes an objective or distant tone and accesses an emerging academic or scientific discourse quite common in many of the albums; that is, the language of "type." The language of "type" or "typology" is pervasive in the albums from Africa and the "Negro" albums, especially. The photographs take on a more documentary style as well, with people framed, as in Figure One, in a profile, usually full-length, often with implements or ceremonial clothing or elaborate hairstyles. Often the subjects of these images are photographed in a series, showing front, side, and rear views. These "type" photos offer the viewers the feeling of objectivity, inviting them to view people from an emotional distance and understand them better through the sense of distance created by the composition and framing. The "type" photos presume one particular view of photographs: the view, quite common at this point in the development of photography, that photographs are "true" and can serve objective scientific documentary purposes. Photographs, and their uses, were seen to be instruments for education that allowed the recorder to show the viewers the "facts" of the person or place, without the far more subjective results from the process of choosing words.

The second photograph, Figure 4, conveys a tone visually and in the caption that is substantively different, and indicative of a general tone through the albums of Europe. The image, like many images in the album, is not framed from the standpoint

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6 "Africa One," image # 2109.
7 "Europe Three," image #60883
8 Joel Snyder provides a good overview of the history of perceptions of photography in his useful essay "Territorial Photography," in Landscape and Power, ed. W.T. Mitchell [page #s]. Snyder writes that by the late nineteenth century, despite the early use of photography by artists who tried to emulate painting and followed the conventions of painting, photographs were thought to be "free of all convention ... always honest; truthful ... disinterested." 182.
of a disinterested observer. Rather, the image is soft, and carefully, artfully composed to evoke sympathy for its subjects. The widows are not presented as "types," nor is the image intended to educate the audience about something they don't know. The image is instead about people with whom the album creators assume the audience has some affinity. The plight of widows, described in the poetic language of the caption, is intended to remind the viewer of commonality, not emphasize differences.

These two strategies—emphasizing either difference or commonality—were employed in all the albums. The album creators seemed to regard both of them as equally useful strategies. So as in the former two images, people could be convinced to support mission work either because they saw someone with whom they felt sympathy, as in the French widows, or, because they saw images of people like the "typical savage" who they saw living a deplorable and degenerate—"uncivilized"—existence. And at this point in the history of the MEC, North American Methodists felt compelled to take Christian civilization wherever in the world they saw it was lacking.

But how best to convey spiritual need? One obvious way was to show images of specific non-Christian religious practice, or the effects of non-Christian practice on people and their culture. Showing temples or other religious buildings, for instance, with text that tells briefly what religious practice took place there, is common throughout the albums (see Figure 5, "Sacred tank in Madura..."). In the caption for this temple, in India, the audience learns that the native religion there has a view of salvation clearly in opposition to a Christian one, by noting that at the temple the faithful "bathe away their sins." Also common are images of religious practice that appear exotic to North American eyes, such as so-called "witch doctors," or, in the

9 "India One," image #1365.
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case of the next photograph, Indian ascetics lying on a bed of nails (see Figure 6, "Devotee seated on a bed of spikes."\textsuperscript{10}). Other images seem to have been added to induce shock or horror at cultural and religious practice. In the albums from China, in particular, there is a consistent theme of death connecting many of the images. Differences in traditions surrounding burial practices and views of the afterlife are highlighted by images of missionaries digging up graveyards in order to build mission buildings on the high ground, where many Chinese traditionally buried their dead.

**Defining “Christian Civilization”**

As we noted above, viewing these photographs that established “need” among so many of the world’s people was simultaneously an act of defining

Two subjects dominate the content albums: buildings and people. While I haven’t done a formal count in all 204 of the albums, buildings built by Methodist missions are clearly one of the most common images in all the albums. At the most obvious level, pictures of buildings built by Methodists showed audiences where their money was going in the most tangible kind of ways. Pictures of churches, schools, and hospitals dominate, as those were the projects at the heart of most Methodist mission ventures. Also included were pictures of missionary residences, and pictures of foreign cities and towns, and especially buildings devoted to non-Christian religious practice. In the albums that covered North America, images of churches and colleges are the most dominant, as there is an entire album devoted to U.S. colleges.

Pictures of Methodist churches, hospitals, and schools told a story more dramatic than simply evidence of money well-spent. Since the overwhelming majority of these buildings were built in western architectural styles, the photos of

\textsuperscript{10} "India One," image #1706.
Methodist buildings gave audiences a visual impression of a more sweeping, cultural presence in the foreign land or, in the case of home missions, evidence of social and cultural "progress." Many pictures improved upon the architectural style with more explicit presence of America, as in the photo of a college in Kinkiang, China, with a U.S. flag on top (See Figure 7, "Main Building—William Nast College, Kinkiang"11).

A common choice for presentation of buildings in the albums was to juxtapose the new Methodist building with a native one. Often this would include a picture of a "pagan" temple with a new Methodist chapel. Another more dramatic technique allowed the audience to visualize the new Christian civilization replacing, or taking over, the old. There are numerous examples of new Methodist buildings built either on top of the ruins of a previous building, or a native building converted to Christian uses. This next image is of a new Methodist school in China built directly on top of the ruins of the old Confucian examination building (See Figure 8, "'China Old and New'..."12). In another example, a former "Mohammedan" tomb in Lucknow, India, has been converted to a residence for the Women's Foreign Missionary Service (See Figure 9: "Former Mohammedan tomb..."13).

The photographs of people appear in several primary categories: images of "types," as we have seen, for educational purposes; images of missionaries; images of non-christians, especially engaging in non-Christian practices; images of daily lives and home environments; and "success," or "after" pictures (as in "before and after"). This last category is perhaps the most instructive, because, as in the "Two Brothers" image (Figure 2), we see the full power of the visual medium and what it can do differently than simple words or texts. We get to see how Methodists in the early 20th century might imagine the visual clues to a conversion. How might the converted

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11 "China One," image #313.
12 China One," image #352.
13 "India One," image #1040.
Another two of the repeated scenes you see in many of the albums might be called “non-Christians in chaos” and “new Christians in order,” and these can provided us an example of how people are presented in a group. The albums are full of pictures of large masses of non-Christians in public scenes. The people in these photographs are faceless, the crowds without order. The pictures often have a menacing, chaotic quality. In stark contrast, photographs of new converts, or groups of Christians, are almost without fail intimate and ordered. The converts are seen standing in lines, often stiffly, and staring directly at the camera. Many, as you might guess, wear western style clothing. Two images give us a sense of this: Figures 10 and 11, “Kodambakam Festival Multitudes waiting for the golden idol,” and “Coming out of chapel, Baroda.” Each of these is from an India album. Notice the juxtapositions and the visual argument being made. In each are religious buildings—an Indian temple and a Christian chapel. In each are worshippers. The worshippers at the temple are faceless, standing without any apparent order or purpose. Many are standing in the water. There appears to be no order or guiding principle to the event taking place. There is no evidence of a leader in the picture. The Christians in the other photo, though, are proceeding out of the chapel in two single file lines. The photograph has been carefully composed to show both the larger scene yet also give a close enough view for faces. Many, if not all, the people have a book in their hands. They are neatly dressed. There is even one figure standing apart on the far right of the photo who might be a leader, lending more evidence of order to the lives of the newly converted Christian Indians. In the photo of the temple, the

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14 “India One,” image #2747.
15 “India One,” image #1763.
people are presented as aimless, lost, moving in a mass, without purpose or direction. The Methodists who viewed this image and many others like it did not see themselves or their world. The photograph of the Christians and the familiar architecture of their chapel would show Methodist viewers back at home that the strange, exotic, pagan world of India could be saved, and that American Christian civilization could be spread.

**Defining “Christian Civilization” at Home**

Trying to parse the distinction between “home” and “foreign” missions in the albums is sometimes difficult. The “foreign” and “home” mission albums share the same themes and emphases, despite the identification of missions in North America as “home.” The “home” missions are represented in albums named “Negro,” “Southern Mountains,” “Indians,” and “Cities” “which are primarily about poverty among recent immigrants). All the albums take great care in identifying racial and ethnic groups, and through that, defining differences in those terms. What is most striking about these presentations of domestic missionary activity is the vast differences between the presentation of the causes of need among “Negroes” and other racial and ethnic groups. The needs of African Americans, throughout the albums, are presented as a product of their racial characteristics. Their poverty and lack of social and cultural “progress” is blamed on innate tendencies and deficiencies in “the race.” In contrast, the people of the “Southern Mountains,” by which they mean the Appalachian mountains of the eastern United States, are characterized as poor and “backward” and in need of “Christian Civilization” as “Negroes,” but the source of those needs is described as environmental. The causes of their need, in other words, could be eliminated with progressive reforms such as more and better education and greater
economic development. "Negroes," on the other hand, would have to develop as a race over time in order to escape their biological tendencies for laziness, ignorance, crime, and moral laxity.

One way this striking difference can be seen is in the repetition of certain scenes. One image that appears over and over in the Negro albums is African Americans eating watermelon. The multiplicity of these images seems ridiculous at first (see Figure 12, in particular, which describes the way white people talk about of "Negroes" eating watermelon). But they fit in neatly with other choices in the album, particularly multiple pictures of African Americans who are, we are told, "loafing" or "standing around" (see Figure 13, "'Jiffy,' a typical lazy negro wast about"). Even in images of African Americans working, there are often sly or cutting comments in the captions, such as in Figure 14, where a photograph of a dining car porter supposedly has "a plea for a tip in every move." Images of work among African Americans are also in presented in the context of other photos that comment on how "negroes" spend their money, such as a comment on one photo of men playing games at a carnival, which reads "The Negro will always take a chance."

In Figure 13 we see an intriguing clue about the way these photos were read. So strong were the stereotypes about "Negroes" among white American audiences that the captions will sometimes describe something in the image that ignores evidence in the supposedly objective photograph itself that contradicts the claim of the caption. Notice in that photograph that there is a young white boy also standing idly in the photo, yet it is the young "negro" boy who is "typically" lazy. The presence of the white boy goes unremarked.

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16 "Negro One," image #h3936.
17 "Negro One," image #h7531.
18 "Negro One," image #10202.
The Southern Mountain albums, by contrast, are remarkably free of comment. There are numerous images of men and women and children simply standing for a photograph, but no captions that describe their standing or sitting as "lazy" or "loafing" or "standing around." In one photograph two men are seen playing checkers, which might seem to invite some kind of comment about work, but the caption reads simply "men playing checkers." The larger message of the Southern Mountain albums is that there is hope for these people, because their lives could be changed by greater access to resources and education. The view of the "Negro" albums, on the other hand, is far more ambivalent. They are at once hopeful and resigned to the "facts" of race. They are pleading for help in order to help "the negro," but also trapped in a racial determinism that makes the problems depicted also seem hopeless.

Conclusions

While the mission albums give contemporary viewers a treasure trove of information on life around the world another century ago, they also provide us the opportunity to see how the white organizers of missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church understood the world around them, and understood their own nation and culture, through the way they presented that world to Methodist church people all over North America. They saw a world in need, a world suffering, and they saw their own world in the position to help. Much of the structure for understanding that world came from a sharply racialized view of humanity, a view that provided a certain level of coherence and simplicity in answer to the difficult questions about why some people suffer from tragedy and poverty and war while others do not. This view also allowed mission agencies and missionaries to participate with, or at least work
alongside of, the colonial aspects of westward expansion. For contemporary viewers like ourselves, the mission albums help us understand the ways a global Methodism emerged, and how that global expansion reflected the culture of Methodist missionaries and, in turn, shaped that culture by reflecting that culture back to itself.
Figure 1: "The Church, State and Commerce"
Two Brothers. Bishop Hartnell says positively the figure on the left is a boy.

Here is a striking instance of what Christian training will accomplish. These boys are brothers. One of them—you can guess which—was a Christian. He was educated in a Methodist school. It has come in touch to however small an extent with the currents of world progress. Notice the awakened eyes, the more intense expression, the more alert bearing. Notice on the other hand the slowness that weighs like a black cloud upon his brother's forehead. If the progress of the Christian boy continues there will be a marked difference between the two brothers at the age of forty or fifty.
Figure 3: "Typical Lower Congo Savage"
Figure 4: "There passes on the streets of Lyons, a terrible constant procession of Widows. Lyons, France"

Figure 5: "Main Building--William Nast College, Kinkiang"
Figure 6: "'China Old and New:' New School building in midst of Old Examination Hall Ruins--Nanchang [sp?]"
Figure 7: "Former Mohammedan tomb, now W.F.M.S. residence, Lucknow"

Figure 8: "Kodambakam Festival Multitudes waiting for the golden idol. South India"
Figure 9: "Coming out of chapel, Baroda"
Figure 10: "Sacred tank in great temple where the faithful bathe and wash away their sins. Madura"

Figure 11: "Devotee seated on bed of spikes"
Figure 12: "Two souls but with a single thought and that of a watermelon."

Figure 13: "'Jiffy,' a typical lazy young negro was about [sic]"
Figure 14: "Dining room porter with a plea for a tip in every move"