

Photography, God and the Devil

Religious attitudes to photography in the 19 century

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A bishop dies and approaches the Pearly Gates. St. Peter checks his identity, hands him a pass and directs him to his heavenly abode: take a no.11 bus, transfer to the underground, get off at the end of the line, walk to the sixth traffic light and your apartment is on the sixth floor of 16 Drukker Street. As he is leaving for the bus stop a photographer approaches the Pearly Gates. Immediately St. Peter becomes deferential, rolls out the red carpet, and says: welcome, sir, your limousine will take you to your mansion overlooking the ocean where your servants are waiting. The bishop is a little chagrined. He turns to St. Peter and says: I'm not complaining, mind, but - well - it does seem a bit odd. I have served my church, administered the sacraments and obeyed the commandments, yet I get a cold-water flat and this...photographer! is given special treatment. St. Peter replied: Ah, you see, he's special. He's the first photographer we've had here. (1)

The story is told, with embellishments (add your own) as an illustration of the reprobate habits of the typical photographer. Not ourselves, of course, but everyone else we know. Yet it is little appreciated that in the early years of photography the medium itself was often associated with unholy practices, and many critics of the new art objected to its practice on religious grounds. A particularly succinct, and nationalistic, attack on photography originated in Germany:

The wish to capture evanescent reflections is not only impossible, as has been shown by thorough German investigation, but the mere desire alone, the will to do so, is blasphemy. God created man in His own image, and no man-made machine may fix the image of God. Is it possible that God should have abandoned His eternal principles, and allowed a Frenchman in Paris to give to the world an invention of the Devil? (2)

All of us are deluged daily with the ubiquitous photograph and it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine the shock of the Victorian on first seeing a

daguerreotype. Its delineation of detail and its uncanny reproduction of reality led not only to delight but also to outrage. One enterprising shopkeeper in the first years of photography thought to drum up business by placing a daguerreotype in his window. The scheme was too successful. So many people crowded the street that a major traffic jam ensued. The shopkeeper was prosecuted - for obscenity. The subject of the daguerreotype was people eating in a restaurant!

If such commonplace acts were considered "obscene," due to the shocking nature of photographic reality, the effect on the viewer of a nude can be imagined, especially in an age when an exposed ankle was considered an erotic encounter. Today's plethora of images has robbed us of the medium's potency. But in the light of this fact, the early objections to photographs on religious grounds seem more understandable. As the popularity of photography increased, so the complaints about the medium broadened in scope - it was destroying the reputations of painters, interfering with the class system, encouraging vanity, and so on. Writing from the Old Vicarage, Shinfield, a Reverend gentleman complained to a newspaper in 1851:

Sir, - I beg to bring to your notice the serious harm likely to come from the increasing popularity of photography. Since Mr. Talbot and M. Daguerre perfected their processes for fixing a living image on paper a few years ago, there has been an alarming increase in the popularity of this unnatural pastime. The stage has now been reached when permanent damage is likely to be inflicted not only on painting, engraving, and the arts in general, but upon industry, manners, and the home itself.

Already, I am informed, the fascinations of the photograph album have had their effect on the thousands of children who would be better employed in pit or mill; already the reputations of Landseer, Turner, and even Martin and Westall are believed to be suffering; and I can myself vouch unhappily from my own family circle that idleness and vanity are encouraged by the constant posing for portraits, and the subsequent poring over them in unhealthy crouching attitudes. This day, alas, I have been obliged to call five of my daughters before me for reproof... (3)

The opposition to photography by organised religion continued. In 1861 the Cardinal Vicar of Rome issued an official edict which banned photography without authorisation from the Rev. Master of the Sacred Palace, from the Cardinal Vicar, and from the police, under penalty of a 50 dollar fine. Producers and distributors of indecent photographs, and the models, were punished by

confiscation of their equipment, a 100 dollar fine, and one year in the galleys. (4) In fairness it should be pointed out that there was some justification for the latter charge. The church and establishment had been provoked by the whole-sale distribution of scandalous photo-montages which depicted erotic, sacrilegious and irreverent groupings on which had been added the recognisable portraits of the Pope, Cardinals and the Queen of Naples, and other dignitaries, "in such a skillful manner as to deceive any spectator, and with such a disregard not only of delicacy, but also to decency...."

Such outrageous montages were not the prerogative of Italian photographers; vast quantities of these salacious (then) and hilarious (now) photographs were available in every major city in Europe. It is not surprising that the law would have its revenge at every opportunity. Take the case of W. Lorando Jones, for example. He had been a photographer for 15 years and was "gentlemanly in his habits, a sculptor, and a man of some literary attainments." He was delivering a lecture, illustrated with lantern slides, when he made reference, in passing, concerning the morality of some passages in the Old Testament. He was prosecuted for blasphemy, fined 100 pounds and sentenced to two years hard labour. (5)

Even photographic apparatus was associated with unholy acts. For example, the origin of the tripod seems to have perplexed early photographers because no one could say for sure who had invented it, or first used it as a camera stand. After 1874, there was no doubt. E. L. Wilson solved the problem, in a dream:

The Devil, who had heard that Vesuvius not only rivalled him in the overpowering influence of its sulphurous fumes, but also that the crater was ten times more to be feared than his most heated chambers, one day at dusk paid it a visit. He walked proudly up to the crater, tail in air, to the very verge, when, beholding its awful depths, he fainted, dropped his tail to the earth, fell back on it for support, and thus supplied the missing idea for the third leg of the tripod. (6)

Incidentally, The British Journal of Photography in 1896 reported a controversy in Germany over whether or not a signature claimed to have been made by the devil was genuine. A Roman Catholic newspaper claimed that it was impossible to secure a genuine signature of his Satanic majesty; the Catholic Director of Feldburg stated that such opinions were untrue to Catholic teaching and traditions. The journal did not take sides in the dispute but recommended to photographers that a picture of the signature would be good business. (7)

From our late 20 century attitudes to religion it is amazing how easily photographers gave offense to the church. Frank Sutcliffe was reprimanded for titling one of his prints "Manure" in an 1890 exhibition. A magazine recommended that for this offense "he should study Hymns Ancient and Modern." (8) Another unwitting *faux pas* was committed by a photographer in a portrait of Mrs. Brown Potter. He had pictured her against the light and "the glory round her head is giving great offense." The critic, writing in a society journal in 1887, continued:

It is easy to believe that Mrs. Brown Potter and her photographer were innocent of intending anything blasphemous...but the fact remains that a great many people have fancied that the American actress is aping, if not the Virgin Mary herself, at least the pictures of her. (9)

Sacred subject matter in photography would be a matter of concern and debate for many years. In 1901, a photographer had taken pictures of the actors playing the roles of Jesus and Mary during a performance of the Oberammergau Passion Play. One photograph was reproduced, in half-tone, in the November issue of Photo-Era. A rival journal declared: "we do not like photography of such sacred subjects" and continued: we "cannot help thinking that to the pious and reverent mind there is and should be something shocking in the representation by photography of the Saviour of the world." The magazine ended on a pompous note: "nor can we help expressing a wish that none of our readers, for whom we have a kind of fatherly feeling, will venture on such debatable ground." (10)

Surprisingly, the most blatant disregard of this injunction received very little antagonism. In the summer of 1898 F. Holland Day produced approximately 250 negatives depicting the Crucifixion of Jesus. Even more inflammatory was the fact that he himself posed as Jesus. For a year he let his beard and hair grow, manufactured the crosses and imported costumes from the East, before he was ready to act out and photograph the events of Calvary on a hill about 20 miles from Boston. Perhaps it was the pictorial "painterly" treatment of the photographs which dispelled hostility; for whatever reasons the pictures were well received. One critic "felt an instinctive prejudice" against the subject matter but that, as soon as he saw Day's prints "my prejudice...was at once dispelled, so greatly was I impressed by the solemnity and earnestness of Day's work." (11)

The Amateur Photographer thought that "at the portrayal of the Crucifixion by such a dispassionate and irresponsible means as photography nearly every right-

mindful person, whether of orthodox religious sympathies or not, will feel an instinctive revulsion, and none more so than ourselves." "Yet," it continued, "we are bound to admit that in this remarkable Boston artist's productions we find it necessary to readjust our ideas." (12)

As the reaction to F. Holland Day's Crucifixion series indicates, the church's reaction to photography was not wholly negative. In fact, many ministers used the new art of photography as part of their teachings. The church hall was regularly used for lantern slide shows even though the projector and its gas-light set fire to, or blew up, the building with disconcerting frequency. Others used the lantern slide in place of the sermon, but not without some reactionary criticism. A. W. Steele affirmed that "when an eccentric clergyman takes to showing pretty pictures to a congregation of adults you may take it for granted that his own powers of word-painting are at a low ebb." (13) Yet the power of the picture was acknowledged by many missionaries. A good example of this fact is revealed by an advertisement in a trade journal:

Rare chance - illness - A missionary must sell his splendid lantern outfit and 200 special slides for preaching "Cross of Christ" and "Soul Winning," original designs; most effective for conversion ever designed; price 30 [pounds], easy terms arranged, cost 55 [pounds]; up-to-date, as new; bargain rarely met with - Missionary, etc. (14)

Some ministers saw in the process of photography a fitting metaphor for spiritual truths. The Rev. Octavius Perinchief issued a volume of sermons in 1875 which make frequent reference to photography as a moral teacher ("the moral effect of a photograph is good. It makes us feel humble") (15). I remember finding in The British Museum a book entitled Sunday-School Photographs and anxiously waiting for its delivery and examining pictures of 19 century children at their studies. The book, however, did not contain a single photograph and the text made no reference to photography - it was a religious tract.

The word "Photographs" was used as a metaphor for truth about reality, a not uncommon occurrence in the 19 century. I particularly like the following quotation which makes an analogy between photography and Saving Grace, even though the minister had trouble with his "H"s and "acid":

As is acid in the world of matter, so is grace in the world of mind. The photographer takes the glass plate, that is your heart; he cleans the dirt off, that is sin. If there is an old picture on it, he removes it by acids; so

must you remove the old Adam by grace. Well, when the plate is clean it is ready for receiving the new picture, but it must first be made sensitive by the use of acids, that is quickening grace; he then puts it into a camera-box - that means your closet - meditation and prayer; then he lets the light in through a glass upon the plate, that is the Word, 'we see through a glass darkly.' He must again put the plate in acids to develop the picture; in like manner the Christian character is developed, that is made visible by grace. Last of all, the picture is fixed with acids; so with the believer, who is fixed and kept firm and steadfast in his faith by the acid of restraining grace. When the photographer's work is done, he expects his reward; so when a believer's work is done, he also gets his reward. But without acids the photographer cannot take the portrait. Acid! acid! must be his cry; acid, acid, is his Alpha and Omega. So with a believer, whose battle-cry must be Grace! grace! (16)

Photography had a more direct role to play in the moral life of the nation. In 1889, the Rev. A. J. L. Gliddon suggested that "if a number of skilful photographers were to go with secret cameras and to take instantaneous portraits of drunkards in various stages of inebriety, of drunkards' homes, of drunkards' children suffering as victims of their parents' cruelty and neglect, and if a series of 100 of these photographs from life were to be exhibited to the public by the aid of a good magic-lantern, a very powerful impression of the awfulness of the evil with which we have to contend would be produced in the minds of the public." (17)

By 1897, the Church of England Temperance Society had taken hundreds of snapshots in the slums of Liverpool showing how children were supplied with liquor. The photographs were reproduced as lantern slides and over 4,000 distributed for showing all over the country. (18) The License Amendment League had already suggested, in 1870, that photographs of confirmed drunkards should be taken and posted in public houses and that landlords serving these people would be fined. (19)

Throughout the 19 century photographers were also harassed, fined and physically assaulted for opening their businesses on a Sunday - or even taking a picture in public on the Sabbath day. This was particularly true in Scotland where many unsuspecting amateurs were waylaid, and their cameras smashed, by irate locals. (20) But these were isolated incidents. On the whole, photography and religion gradually made an uneasy truce during the 19 century, and only the extreme attitudes were publicised. Perhaps nothing better illustrates the changing *zeitgeist* than the fact that the Pope, 25 years after the edict

banishing photography from Rome, issued a volume of hymns and poems which contained two stanzas entitled "Ars Photographica." A translation from the Latin reads:

O brilliant image which burst forth under the rays of the sun, how life-like is the face thou bringest before us, how flashing the eyes, how beautiful the expression! What a marvellous power of genius, a veritable new miracle! Apelles, who painted nature so faithfully, could never reproduce so close a resemblance! (21)

The Pope may not have been a great poet but at least he wished photography well, and the sacrilegious art had become sanctioned. The faithful could now practise photography without fear of retribution. But not all devoured photographs as literally as some French nuns. They put small photographs "of the heart of Jesus" into their soup and eat them! (22)

References:

1. With thanks to Eddie Adams, the photographer, who was fond of telling the tale with his own inimitable embellishments at the opening of a lecture.
2. The quotation is in my files without a reference. I should be grateful if any reader could supply the source.
3. This letter first appeared in an unnamed newspaper of 9 January 1851. It was subsequently reprinted in Country Life on 11 February 1954 and requoted in The Photographic Journal, October 1974, p. 486.
4. Punch, 21 December 1861; The Photographic Journal, 15 January 1862, p. 360.
5. The British Journal of Photography, 19 May 1871, pp. 228-229.
6. The Photographic News, 11 September 1874, p. 444.
7. The British Journal of Photography, 4 December 1896, p. 771.
8. Photography, 23 October 1890, p. 678.
9. The Photographic News, 5 August 1887, p. 488.
10. The American Amateur Photographer, Vol. XIII, 1901, p. 20.
11. The Amateur Photographer, 27 October 1899, p. 331.
12. The Amateur Photographer, 27 October 1899, p. 329.
13. The British Journal of Photography, 7 August 1874, p. 382.
14. Quoted in The Amateur Photographer, 19 November 1895.
15. The Photographic News, 12 November 1875, p. 551.
16. The Philadelphia Photographer, Vol. VI, 1869, p. 322.
17. Christian Commonwealth. Quoted in The Amateur Photographer, 20 September 1889, p. 190.

18. The Amateur Photographer, 8 January 1897, p. 36.
19. The Photographic News, 25 February 1870, p. 86; 4 March 1870, p.107.
20. For example, see The Photographic Review of Reviews, Vol. 3, 1894, p. 268.
21. The Photographic News, 29 January 1886, pp. 71-72.
22. The Photographic News, 29 August 1890, p. 671.

Published in The British Journal of Photography, 14 May 1982.