I

Picturing Pain

_Evangelicals and the Politics of Pictorial Humanitarianism in an Imperial Age*

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After months of anticipation, the July 1897 edition of _Cosmopolitan_ illustrated monthly, one of the most popular general-interest periodicals in the United States, printed the first installment of a report by the magazine’s “special commissioner to India,” Julian Hawthorne. Hired to “seriously investigate … rumors of famine and plague” in the British colony from the perspective of an impartial eye-witness, the journalist departed on “this dangerous mission” in early February. During his three-month sojourn in the subcontinent, Hawthorne encountered “the saddest and grimmest spectacles known to modern times” – ghastly sights of starvation and disease that defied adequate description. “I can never bring home livingly to others the truth and horror of them,” he confessed. While editor John Brisben Walker had hoped Hawthorne’s “clever literary style” would “enable readers of _The Cosmopolitan_ to see through his eyes,” he agreed in his prefatory note to the series that the author’s words alone were not enough to convey the “inconceivable conditions” of famine-stricken India. Fortunately, Walker wrote, Hawthorne had documented his account with images that brought the dreadful realities of pestilence and pain “vividly to our understandings.” In the photographs illustrating Hawthorne’s reports, the editor averred, “there is told a story of human misery and suffering beyond which nothing more terrible can be pictured.”

* This chapter was originally published in the journal _Material Religion_ 8, no. 2 (2012): 154–83. The editors thank Heather Curtis and Berg, a division of Bloomsbury Publishing, for permission to reprint an edited and condensed version of the original essay.
The images of plague victims, corpses ready for cremation, destitute families at the poorhouse, and “half-naked, wasted creatures” consisting of nothing but “bone and sinew” that supplemented Hawthorne’s articles moved viewers to send “many letters of generous appreciation, accompanied often by contributions of money for the immediate relief of suffering.” This outpouring of “truly Christian” charity surprised Hawthorne. Although he deduced that “fancy pictures” might arouse the feelings of his readers, the writer remained skeptical that images could fully bridge the expanses of space and cultural difference separating starving India from prosperous America. Throughout his report, Hawthorne expressed doubts about his fellow citizens’ ability to grasp “the immensity of [the] disaster” unfolding on the other side of the globe, let alone to respond with heartfelt empathy and financial aid. “It is easy to pity and help the disaster of your neighbor across the street,” he observed, “but to pity with something more than words the calamities of those whom we shall never see; whose ways and habitation are alien and remote; to come with tears in the eyes and purse in hand to succor them – there is something divine in that.”

Hawthorne’s musings on the challenges of cultivating compassion across geographic, social, and religious divides offer an entrée into late nineteenth-century debates about the role of images in the expanding enterprise of American humanitarianism. During the 1890s, a number of overlapping factors – including the development of travel and communication technologies, the ongoing extension of international trade markets, the burgeoning of transnational reform networks, the exponential growth of the foreign missionary movement, and the intensification of imperialism – contributed to “the lowering of international humanitarianism in the United States,” particularly although not exclusively among evangelical Protestants. Alongside ostensibly secular organizations such as the American Red Cross, which claimed to uphold the principle of neutrality enshrined in the first Geneva Convention (1864), religious internationalists belonging to a diverse array of Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant groups actively participated in “promoting a collective culture of humanitarianism.” Although Americans had often aided victims of natural disaster and political upheaval in other nations prior to the 1890s, these earlier charitable efforts were “more episodic and less religiously based” than the organized humanitarian campaigns to assuage the afflictions of distant strangers that emerged during the latter decades of the nineteenth century.
As Hawthorne’s exposé reveals, photography played an integral part in the extension of American philanthropy abroad. When missionaries, moral reformers, and investigative journalists traveled overseas in these years, they carried cameras with them – a feat made easier after George Eastman introduced the first portable Kodak in 1888. By the early 1890s, advances in halftone printing techniques made possible the mass reproduction of original photographs in popular periodicals like the *Cosmopolitan*. While daily and weekly newspapers were slower to integrate photography into their pages, they increasingly included illustrations, engravings, and cartoons in their efforts to attract readers amid the intensifying competition provoked by the advent of “yellow journalism.” As Americans encountered the horrors of plague, pestilence, and oppression during their perambulations in India and elsewhere, they took advantage of these developments in visual culture to document humanitarian crises in distant lands. By combining images of suffering people with graphic narratives of misery, publicists sought to stimulate American spectators to engage in benevolent action on behalf of their fellow beings around the world.

But the proliferation of pictures in print media during the “humanitarian upsurge” of the 1890s also posed problems for aspiring almoners. The sensationalism associated with the yellow press created a climate of suspicion about the credibility of images that undermined attempts to present photographs as incontrovertible evidence of catastrophe in remote regions. Rather than fostering faith, Hawthorne inferred, pictures often provoked doubt. “Photographs are incredible – we don’t believe them,” he remarked. Harrowing scenes of human torment, he also implied, stimulated viewers’ emotions in ways that some found disquieting. Was titillation an effective and moral means of stirring up sympathy for sufferers in far-off places? Did photographs of “utterly destitute and helpless” people cultivate condescension rather than compassion for a “common humanity”?

Hawthorne only hinted at some of these questions in his reports for the *Cosmopolitan*, but a number of his contemporaries raised similar queries more explicitly. Throughout the 1890s, and especially during the devastating India famines of 1896–7 and 1899–1900, the practical imperatives and ethical ambiguities of depicting distant suffering for humanitarian purposes were the subject of frequent comment and sometimes anxious deliberation, especially among American evangelicals actively engaged in relief efforts both at home and abroad. While secular publications such as William Randolph Heart’s *New York Journal* and illustrated monthlies
like the *Cosmopolitan* occasionally included articles on India’s “starving millions” supplemented by images of famine victims, religious periodicals were replete with graphic appeals for help. Pictures of the ongoing crisis were particularly prevalent in interdenominational weeklies like the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* and the *Christian Herald* – the latter by some accounts “the most influential religious paper in America” during the 1890s.

This chapter analyzes the visual culture of American humanitarianism displayed and debated in these evangelical journals. Probing how publications such as the *Christian Herald* and the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* used images to promote American participation in India famine relief campaigns confirms that evangelicals were at the forefront of pictorial humanitarianism in this period. Although Hawthorne’s reports in the *Cosmopolitan* garnered a great deal of publicity during the summer of 1897, articles and photographs depicting India’s affliction had appeared months earlier in both the *Christian Herald* and the *Christian and Missionary Alliance*. Examining the commonalities and contrasts between these two pioneering periodicals advances scholarship on imagery and the development of international philanthropy in several ways.

First, while a growing cadre of historians has recently explored the emergence of the “humanitarian sensibility” in the modern West, most have concentrated on the importance of philosophical ideals associated with the Enlightenment, or on the centrality of attitudes connected with the rise of market capitalism, largely neglecting the influence of evangelical visual culture in “imagining Humanity.”

The few studies that do consider the connections between evangelical pictorial practices and humanitarianism show that antebellum abolitionists employed graphic images of horrific bodily distress in their attempts to establish “slaves as fully sentient beings” who deserved compassion.

The opening section of this essay traces the links between this ethics of “spectatorial sympathy” and late nineteenth-century relief campaigns. When faced with the “dreadful scourge” of famine in India during the 1890s, contributors to both the *Christian Herald* and the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* exploited innovations in print journalism and photography to arouse sympathy for suffering strangers in ways that evoked the visual strategies of evangelical abolitionism.

Second, assessing the specific ways evangelicals employed images to promote empathetic engagement across racial, social, and even religious boundaries in an increasingly modern, “sensationalist,” and imperialist age uncovers substantial tensions underlying attempts to unite American
Protestants in the common cause of international benevolence. While evangelicals associated with the *Christian Herald* and the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* were unified in their conviction that photographs and illustrations could encourage compassion for far-off and culturally different others, their conflicting perspectives on the ethics of yellow journalism, diverging views on the spiritual integrity of American culture, and contrary opinions about the probity of American expansionism produced subtle but significant differences in attitudes toward almsgiving. Careful analysis of how these two evangelical periodicals pictured “humanity” and portrayed the distress of strangers during the India famines exposes incongruent visions and contested definitions of humanitarianism. The “collective culture” of international philanthropy that emerged during the 1890s was, I contend, shot through with tensions and fissures made visible in the diverse ways evangelicals dealt with the challenges of depicting distant suffering.

**Pioneers in Pictorial Journalism: Evangelicals and the Role of Images in Humanitarianism**

Several weeks before Julian Hawthorne set sail for India, the New York–based *Christian Herald* printed a letter from correspondent Benjamin Aitken describing the “appalling destitution” he had witnessed as he traveled through the famine districts at the behest of the periodical’s proprietor. Accompanying Aitken’s report were “photographs taken by his order on the spot specially for THE CHRISTIAN HERALD.” The two pictures of “starving natives” were, the editor claimed, “the first authentic photographs of the suffering people that have ever been published” (Figure 1.1). Similar images of the horrors unfolding throughout the subcontinent appeared in almost every succeeding issue for the next few months alongside impassioned appeals for financial contributions to the *Christian Herald* India Relief Fund. These vivid pictures of “appalling figures” whose “shocking ghastliness” told the “pathetic story of [their] urgent need” for succor from “the Christian people of America,” the paper’s publishers proposed, would induce readers to open their “hearts . . . hands . . . purses . . . and granaries” to “feed the hungry, to send or carry aid to the sick, and to spread the Gospel message everywhere.”

Since his purchase of the *Christian Herald* in 1890, the evangelical philanthropist Louis Klopsch had worked to make the periodical “a chosen channel of individual and collective benevolence for the Lord’s people of all denominations.” As pioneers in the practice of “pictorial journalism,”
Figure 1.1. The “first authentic photographs” of India’s famine sufferers “ever published.” From the Christian Herald, 20 January 1897. Courtesy of the Christian Herald Association, New York.
Klopsch and his editorial partner, the charismatic Brooklyn preacher Thomas de Witt Talmage, took advantage of new photographic and printing processes to publicize humanitarian crises such as the Russian famine of 1892 and the ongoing massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. When news of the dire food shortages in India first reached Klopsch and Talmage in November of 1896, they quickly acted to obtain visual evidence of the catastrophe. The photographs and reports Aitken supplied provided them with the “glimpses of suffering” they needed to “make the pressing need known to the Christians of America” and to enlist their “sympathy and help.”

From the perspective of these evangelicals, vision was a compelling vehicle for provoking Christian compassion. “Dr. Klopsch believed that there was no greater educating influence than good pictures,” his biographer wrote, and throughout his career in journalism, he relied on illustrations as a means of eliciting empathetic engagement with sufferers around the world who were, as one contributor to the *Christian Herald* put it, “part of that human family which Jesus taught us to love.” As several historians have demonstrated, the “concept of spectatorial sympathy” first articulated by late eighteenth-century moral philosophers “steadily broadened the arena within which humanitarian feeling was encouraged to operate, extending compassion to animals and to previously despised types of persons including slaves, criminals, and the insane.” During the abolitionist agitations of the antebellum era, antislavery advocates drew on this visual ethic in their attempts to demonstrate the shared humanity of enslaved Africans.

By the 1890s, evangelicals such as Klopsch and Talmage had fully embraced the assumption that sympathy “was a sentiment stirred primarily through sight” and eagerly employed emerging technologies of visual representation in their efforts to further expand how American Christians imagined humanity. Like their forerunners in the antislavery movement, these crusaders believed that barraging the public with “pictorials” was an effective tactic for compelling viewers “to ‘compassionate’ across barriers of status and race.” Klopsch and Talmage were also confident that images could bridge territorial divides. Newspapers, Talmage preached, were “full of optic nerves” that enabled readers to “look far away” and near, to “take in the next street and the next hemisphere.” The woodcuts, engravings, and photographs published in the *Christian Herald* collapsed the physical distances that separated the victims of floods, earthquakes, plagues, famines, and wars on other parts of the planet from those in the United States who could come to their relief.
Visual depictions also transcended the particularities of place and dialect. “The human race is divided into almost as many languages as there are nations, but the pictures may speak to people of all tongues,” Talmage declared.” Americans who could neither hear nor interpret the cries and groans of the afflicted in Russia or Armenia or India could see the sufferings of distant others vividly displayed in the pages of the periodical that also offered a way to respond.

Finally, evangelical proponents of pictorial humanitarianism claimed that images could help overcome what contemporary theorist Elaine Scarry has called “pain’s inexpressibility” and resistance to “verbal objectification.” Missionaries and other observers of India’s “terrible distress” frequently bemoaned the insufficiency of language to convey the horrors they were encountering firsthand. “I have no faculties for describing the awful sufferings of the poor people,” one witness wrote. During his own investigative tour of the famine fields in 1900, Klopsch repeatedly lamented his inability to depict the “scenes of desolation, of pain, of suffering, of hopeless despair, of heart anguish, of death” with which he came into contact. “Famine in India! How I dread to write about it! What pen can adequately portray the scenes which my eyes have witnessed?” he wondered. “How to describe it, so as to bring it within the grasp of the human mind, I know not.” Despite many attempts to communicate the “abject misery” through detailed and vivid narratives that reported the sensory assaults he experienced (“the heat was intense ... the all-pervading stench from putrefying bodies impregnated clothes, hair and skin”) and his emotional anguish (“my heart almost sank within me”), Klopsch felt that words had failed him. “I was painfully conscious of the paucity of my vocabulary to do justice to the subject, and after I have written the worst, I shall feel that even then I have only faintly indicated the real condition of affairs.” Convinced that no pen could exaggerate the suffering and “word pictures” could only hint at the reality of India’s tragedy, Klopsch and other eyewitnesses hoped that images might more adequately portray the “shocking and revolting” situation and motivate viewers to action.

While Klopsch and Talmage were on the cutting edge of pictorial humanitarianism, other evangelical groups also used images to encourage international almsgiving. During the late 1890s, participants in the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) responded to frequent and fervent pleas for famine relief included in the organization’s weekly illustrated magazine. Founded in 1887 through the leadership of the Reverend A. B. Simpson, the C&MA was an interdenominational association that
aimed to supplement the work of existing churches and mission boards by concentrating primarily on evangelizing “the destitute and unoccupied fields of the heathen world.”

Like Klopsch, Simpson was a pioneer in pictorial journalism, publishing the “first illustrated missionary magazine on the American continent” and continuing to edit the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* until his death in 1919. Although the *Christian Herald* and the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* were both produced in Manhattan and appealed to similar constituencies, the periodicals were mutually supportive rather than competitive. When famine struck in India in 1896 and again in 1900, C&MA missionaries under the leadership of India field superintendent Marcus Fuller were instrumental in coordinating the distribution of aid raised through the *Christian Herald*. In 1900, Fuller was appointed to serve as an executive member of the *Christian Herald*’s Interdenominational Missionary Committee, which was charged with the task of apportioning and dispensing the grain cargoes and sizable financial contributions collected through the periodical’s vigorous humanitarian campaign.

In addition to cooperating closely with Klopsch and the *Christian Herald*, C&MA workers also actively sought to stimulate compassion for famine sufferers among their own supporters through regular reports illustrating the affliction they faced. The front page of the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* for May 12, 1900, for example, featured a display titled “Famine’s Ravages in India” by Marcus Fuller that included photographs of emaciated children, a pile of dead “bodies ready for burning,” and (on the second page) a skeletal form stretched out on a pallet “starved to death.” Accompanying these images was a caption that explained their purpose: “These pictures just received from Mr. Fuller present the awful need of famine stricken India as no words could plead” (Figure 1.2). Photographs, the editor indicated, served as a most effective medium for revealing the realities of distant suffering to Americans who, once they saw the “great and urgent need of these starving millions” would sympathize with them in their affliction and “surely do something for their relief.”

Marcus Fuller’s wife Jennie expressed a similar confidence in the power of sight in a letter to Louis Klopsch. “If your readers could see the things we see daily,” she asserted, “there would be no need for appeals.”

Like Klopsch and Talmage, participants in the C&MA saw images of suffering as powerful tools for the production of sympathetic feelings that would generate a concrete, compassionate response. Having studied at Oberlin College – a center of abolitionist sentiment – both
FAMINE'S RAVAGES IN INDIA
REV. MARK B. FULMER

It seems a pity that intelligent people should need to have their
beliefs stirred by pictures when the fact of sixty millions of people
in the famine districts, with thousands already dead and thousands
dying by inches, walking, crawling, lying by the roadside never to
rise again, dying with cries of agony, or unconscious through the
pain already suffered, when these facts are plainly put, sometimes
vividly put in word pictures. If those facts do not stir people, I am
afraid that pictures will fail too, yet I am willing to do anything
as positively wrong to make the awful sufferings of India real to
the thousands of happy, comfortable homes of God's children in
America, where there is not only plenty, but abundance in many
of the, not only luxury, but awful want.

Many a Christian (7) man's tobacco bill would feed several starv-
ing men; many a Christian (7) woman's superfluous dress and fussy
for one season would save the lives of several of her sisters in India.
The seat of one dinner party would feed scores of children for a
month; and the cost of one church festival, where face-dishes of the
white cloth is often eaten on the spot, would feed fifty orphans at
least once a day per head for a month.

May God pity the starving millions of heathen India, and may He
be merciful upon the indifferent millions of Christians (7) in America.
A few have come to the rescue and have done exceedingly well. A
large number have done well. A still larger number have done a lit-
tle, so to speak, have tossed their penney or nickel, and gone com-
npletely on, while the most of the church members of America have
done nothing, not even given the price of a single meal to save the
perishing millions of India! It is hard to look a starving man or woman
cold in the face and tell them of what Christ has done for the
people of America. If those people knew of the wealth and luxury and
waste in America as I know it, it would be harder still to preach the

Marcus and Jennie Fuller “absorbed the ethical sensibilities that stirred their evangelical predecessors to engage in vigorous and visually vivid crusades to assuage the bodily afflictions of their fellow human beings.”\(^{26}\) Even as they acknowledged the spectatorial nature of sympathy, however, these C&MA workers also expressed some hesitancy about the ethics of pictorial humanitarianism that distinguished them from their colleagues at the *Christian Herald*. Attending to these differences among late nineteenth-century advocates of international almsgiving will show how the emerging visual culture of humanitarianism was beginning to fracture under the pressure of an increasingly sensationalist culture.

**The Camera Cannot Lie? The Integrity of Images in a Sensationalist Age**

Five months after the *Christian Herald* began publishing weekly reports of the suffering in India, a reader posed a profoundly disquieting question: “Are the pictures of emaciated men and children, which from time to time have appeared on the Famine Fund pages of *THE CHRISTIAN HERALD*, overdrawn?” The editors’ reply was concise and clear-cut: “They are not.” Klopsch and Talmage went on to explain that most of the images printed in their periodical were reproduced from photographs sent by missionaries or by the journal’s special correspondent. Unlike wood engravings, lithographs, and illustrations that necessarily involved artistic representation, the editors implied, the invention of halftone technology allowed for the direct and accurate transcription of images captured by the truthful lens. “The camera cannot lie,” they contended. “It will not reduce a well-fed man to a skeleton, any more than it will clothe a skeleton with flesh.” For those who wanted confirmation of this claim, the original exposures were available for viewing at the *Christian Herald* office.\(^{27}\)

During the 1890s, skepticism about the reliability of images intensified as rivalry among newspaper publishers such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer II fueled the practice of “yellow journalism” – a term coined in 1897 to impugn the increasingly sensationalistic stories, dramatic and “imaginative” pictures, and “self-promoting” style that characterized publications like Hearst’s *New York Journal* and Pulitzer’s *The World*. Although critics employed the epithet to censure practitioners of the “new journalism,” the ever-aggressive Hearst “took the insult as a compliment,” asserting that his paper promoted a “journalism of action” which gave readers a way to participate in “solving crime, extending charity, influencing foreign policy, and thwarting what it
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deemed abuses of municipal government.” While Hearst suggested that his publication was at the forefront of this activist mode, the Christian Herald had embraced many of the techniques eventually associated with the “new journalism” several years before Hearst acquired the New York Journal. From the early 1890s on, Klopsch and Talmage never hesitated to include gripping headlines or images of “famine-stricken” sufferers in the service of their explicitly humanitarian agenda. “Dr. Klopsch himself did not object to being called sensational,” his biographer avowed, and considered the “pictorial” press an indispensable instrument for exposing “wrongs that ought be righted” both at home and abroad.

By 1900, however, the furor over sensationalism in the yellow papers prompted some evangelicals to question whether publishing photographs of famine horrors was warranted or wise. Even as Klopsch and Talmage continued to insist that “realistic productions of the camera” provided “ghastly evidence of the fearful pressure of the famine” and “incontrovertible proof” of “the terrible character of the suffering,” others worried that uncertainty about the authenticity of photographs and illustrations would ultimately undermine efforts to cultivate concern for India’s abysmal affliction. As the credibility of pictures within the context of sensationalist journalism became increasingly suspect, commentators also began to express doubts about the ethical implications of pictorial humanitarianism. Participants in the C&MA were particularly ambivalent about the sensory strategies they felt compelled to employ in order to evoke empathy for famine sufferers. “It seems a pity that intelligent people should need to have their feelings stirred by pictures,” Marcus Fuller lamented in the May 1900 article accompanying his photographs of “famine’s awful effects.” Although he did resort to publishing photographs of people “lying by the roadside never to rise again, dying with cries of agony” in order “to make the awful sufferings of India real to … God’s children in America,” Fuller suggested that something was wrong with this method of encouraging almsgiving.

The fact that American Christians appeared to require visual stimulation as a catalyst for compassion troubled Fuller for several reasons. First, the Protestant tradition in which he participated had long harbored a profound antipathy toward images and spectacle. As a missionary working among a people whose religions he described as “grossly idolatrous,” Fuller was constantly confronted with sights that he and his C&MA co-workers found deeply disturbing. “The eye is brought continually in contact with the vilest things,” one C&MA official remarked during a visit to the India mission field. “In the Nepaulese temple we saw a picture so vile
we could not contemplate it, and yet the priest went on to explain it to us as though our salvation depended upon the filthy knowledge contained in the picture.” While the “indecent and obscene” character of “heathen” iconography, devotional practices, and religious festivals was a common complaint among Protestant missionaries, the idea that images should serve as channels of spiritual transformation was especially problematic for evangelicals who exalted preaching above all other means of grace. C&MA missionaries were charged with the decidedly aural task of proclaiming “the whole Gospel to the whole world”: a difficult assignment in contexts that valued ocular, tactile, and even olfactory forms of religious expression. As they struggled to persuade their Indian audiences to listen to “the Word of God alone,” evangelists like Fuller worried when words failed to resonate with their American supporters and stir them to action on behalf of suffering others.32

This insensitivity, Fuller insinuated, was indicative of a serious spiritual problem: a self-indulgent and morally debilitating materialism that undermined the ethical sensibilities required for the practice of Christian charity. Surrounded by plenty and abundance, most Americans had become captives of their own comfort capable of ignoring the “cries of agony … of the perishing millions of India,” he charged. While a few had heeded the call and “come to the rescue … most of the churchmembers of America have done nothing.” Rather than giving even “the price of a single meal,” Fuller lamented, “they go on using the money for the transitory things of this world, its pleasures, its follies, its carnal, soul-destroying indulgences, and leave the heathen to starve and die without Christ.”33 Fuller’s anxieties about American apathy and extravagance were relatively common among his C&MA associates. Jeremiads bewailing the sins of “this so-called Christian country” featured regularly in the Christian and Missionary Alliance. Many of these complaints focused on the gluttonous and greedy spending habits that prevented Americans from adequately funding missionary efforts or extending “practical sympathy” to their suffering fellow-beings.

While C&MA workers like Fuller ultimately concluded that “photographs of living skeletons” might be required to shock selfish Americans out of their indifference, they remained uncomfortable with this tactic of persuasion. Appealing to the public’s appetite for pictures, in this view, was at best a necessary evil that exposed the sorry condition of spirituality in the United States. Unlike Klopsch and Talmage, who commissioned a photographer and eagerly reproduced images depicting “the pinched faces, the bare bones, and the distended stomachs” that told “their sad
story with a force beyond the possibility of contradiction,” editors of the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* hoped to avoid publishing such “vivid and terrible pictures.”

When photographs of “famine-stricken” sufferers did appear in the pages of the *Christian and Missionary Alliance*, the editors insisted that they would “offer no apology for calling attention” to the situation in India – revealing a defensiveness about their decision to include depictions of the “terrible distress” ravaging the region.

The angst C&MA participants expressed about the practice of pictorial humanitarianism arose in part from their aversion to “sensational journalism.” Publishing images of “ghastly scenes” they worried, might expose them to charges of exaggeration like the accusations Klopsch and Talmage were facing. Even more troublesome was the possibility that appealing to the public’s proclivity for images would stimulate, rather than challenge, the sensual decadence they found so unsettling. Recent studies that highlight the intrinsic connection between sensationalism and the development of “the compassionate sensibility” suggest that this fear was not unfounded. Historians such as Karen Haltunnen and Kevin Rozario have persuasively argued that nineteenth-century humanitarianism was “complicit in creating the sensational appetites that sustained the growth of the new mass culture” emerging in this period.

During the 1890s, very few observers recognized this reciprocal relationship and the handful of subtle protests from perceptive critics like Marcus Fuller went largely unheeded. As the United States pursued new forms of economic and territorial power during and after the Spanish-American War, criticisms of sensationalism and the spiritual decay of American culture became increasingly entangled in broader contests over the probity of colonial expansion. Exploring the intersections among the “new journalism,” pictorial humanitarianism, and the escalation of United States imperialism that intensified in and beyond 1898 will help explain why so few American evangelicals had ears to hear dissenting voices like Fuller’s, or eyes to see the ethically distressing implications of spectatorial sympathy.

### Competing Visions of Humanitarianism in an Imperial Era

By early October of 1900, “India’s famine cloud” had lifted. Rains had fallen and all were now “looking hopefully for a harvest.” During the preceding three and a half years, the relief campaigns conducted through the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* and the *Christian Herald* had been
extraordinarily successful in raising funds and material aid for India’s suffering people. “Never before in the history of religious journalism have the readers of a periodical proved so conclusively the power of the religion of Christ over the heart and life as have the readers of the *Christian Herald*,” Klopsch declared with exuberance. The harrowing accounts of physical affliction coupled with dramatic photographs of “living skeletons” had produced their desired effect: “Christian America” had become “the almoner of the world.”

The image bearing this caption that appeared on the cover of the *Christian Herald* on June 26, 1901, exemplified the editors’ convictions about the United States’ relationship to the needy of all nations (Figure 1.3). Surrounded by ragged children, veiled women, and poorly or half-clothed men of varying hues, the regally clad figure of America towers above her pitiable petitioners. In one hand, the solemn lady holds a book (a Bible?) while with the other she drops a measure of grain into the empty baskets at her feet. Sitting there on the ground are a naked child and a gaunt, turbaned man representing the starving people of India. The burlap sacks that fill in the space under America’s outstretched arm are clearly labeled “Christian Herald India Famine Relief Work,” making the source of the nation’s generosity unambiguously apparent.

As historians of visual culture have argued, illustrations like “America, the Almoner of the World” reified the social and racial hierarchies that helped justify the United States’ emergence as an imperial power in the late nineteenth century. While some cartoonists satirized the concept of “the white man’s burden,” many graphic artists and photographers produced pictures that validated American military and cultural expansion as the righteous exercise of Christian moral responsibility on behalf of “inferior” or “uncivilized” races. Throughout the 1890s, the pages of the *Christian Herald* were replete with images that celebrated the United States’ superintending relationship to “destitute,” “persecuted,” and “helpless” people around the globe. Although Klopsch and Talmage preferred famine relief campaigns to armed combat, they did countenance “righteous” wars of “liberation” – such as the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the ensuing conflicts in the Philippines – as expressions of “humanitarianism.” These interventions, they proclaimed, were “God’s way of … giving us what he intends to be our share in the enlightenment and enfranchisement of the whole world.” In addition to the “work of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and saving the dying from death,” the editors insisted, the United States was now called to
Figure 1.3. “America, the Almoner of the World.” Cover page of the Christian Herald for 26 June 1901. Courtesy of the Christian Herald Association, New York.
“redeem,” “civilize,” and “Christianize” the people “brought under [its] protection.” In the months and years following the acquisition of the island territories of Puerto Rico, Guam, Samoa, and the Philippines, the Christian Herald published numerous photographic essays documenting America’s “progress” in its “new colonial possessions.”

For some evangelicals, this vision of American humanitarianism was deeply disconcerting. Missionaries struggling to nurture a sense of compassion for distant sufferers that spanned geographic, social, and ethnic separations were among the most distraught. Jennie Fuller, for example, condemned the notion that God had entrusted the United States with the “trusteeship” of “dependent nations and races.” Although she saw the conflict with Spain as a valiant fight for freedom that “broke forever the yoke of oppression that had so long rested upon the necks of the people,” Fuller criticized the United States’ ongoing intervention in the Philippines. “The world, now that the strain of sympathy is broken, says that [the Filipinos] are not ready for freedom and are only children,” she observed. By contrast, Fuller insisted that the Filipinos had a right to autonomy. Rather than acting as their protectors or stewards, “it is our duty to let time work out their problems for them,” she averred. “Better the mistakes of freedom, a thousand times over, than the cruel wrongs of oppression and degradation.” In keeping with her abolitionist forebears, Fuller believed that authentic Christianity required the ability to exercise moral agency. Subjugating the Filipinos to the rule of the United States against their will was, from this perspective, a form of slavery that violated both American political and Christian theological precepts. By denying the Filipinos’ fitness for self-governance, Fuller implied, the United States forced them into a position of dependency that was unjust and degrading. Images that portrayed America as the protector of an “ignorant” people, as the parent of “misguided” children, or even as the “almoner of the world,” in this view, exacerbated disparities and constituted difference, rather than cultivating the “strain of sympathy” that affirmed the common aspirations and “established rights of humanity.”

Throughout the 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century, missionary critics of American military imperialism engaged in a visual campaign to counteract the hierarchies and subordinations inherent in the practices, rhetoric, and pictorial representations of colonial expansion. Pictures that portrayed indigenous churches as self-reliant, independent, self-propagating entities were particularly popular. The photograph most frequently reproduced in the Christian and Missionary Alliance during this period, for example, celebrated the opening of a new chapel
at the C&MA’s Akola mission station built “almost entirely” through the monetary contributions and physical labor of local believers. While C&MA missionaries were certainly not alone in their attempts to foster a self-supporting, self-governing, and self-extending “native church,” the Fullers and their co-workers were “among the pioneers of Industrial mission work” that provided training in “good trades” such as “carpentry, tinsmithing and weaving” so that converts would “be able to support themselves as Christians.” During the famine years, C&MA missionaries regularly reiterated their commitment to upholding the self-sufficiency of the Christian community and to preserving the autonomy of all sufferers who sought their assistance. Rather than pressuring petitioners to convert or linking aid with spiritual performance, Marcus Fuller explained that C&MA missionaries were “slow to baptize during the famine for fear of getting ‘rice Christians,’” preferring to wait until “the pressure of hunger is past” and thus allowing people to choose Christ “freely.” By providing employment through building and irrigation programs, and selling the grains distributed through the Christian Herald at “cheap rates,” C&MA workers also aimed to relieve the hungry “without taking away their independence, and making paupers of them.” “We wish to give as little gratuitous help as possible,” Jennie Fuller explained. Instead, missionaries would “Help the People to Help Themselves.”

Images highlighting this approach to relief work appeared in evangelical periodicals on a regular basis around the turn of the century. In June of 1901, for example, the Christian and Missionary Alliance reproduced a photograph of the “sewing class” at the Kaira orphanage. The following May, missionary J. P. Rogers contributed an article entitled “Industrial Training of Orphans” which included several pictures of the C&MA’s workshop at Akola and a portrait of the foreman, Kanwadi Mudra Levarni, and his family. This young man had come to the mission as an orphan in 1884 and was now a government-certified mechanic and “steam engineer … of exemplary Christian character.” He was also, Marcus Fuller noted elsewhere, “one of our best preachers.” Photographs of orphans and other famine sufferers who embodied the hopes of their missionary sponsors by converting to Christianity, learning a trade, and contributing their talents to the building up of the local church community were especially compelling for evangelicals of the Fullers’ ilk. Early in 1902, C&MA missionaries sent home a picture of “A Native Convention” which took place at the recently opened Akola chapel (Figure 1.4). Indian preachers featured prominently on the program of this gathering, presiding over several sessions and offering
“very fine” teaching to converts and missionaries alike. Kanwadi Mudra Levarni gave “a most remarkable clear and instructive address” which was, the missionaries reported, “the best of the whole convention.”

Through images and articles that focused on the abilities and agency of indigenous Christians, evangelical missionaries underscored their efforts to bind all tribes and nations into a universal spiritual fellowship in which distinctions of race and status were irrelevant. In the “Lord Jesus Christ,” Jennie Fuller reminded her supporters, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female’ … but all are one.” In order to impress this scriptural principle on their constituents in the United States, Fuller and her co-workers frequently stressed the similarities between American Christians and their “brothers and sisters” and “cousins across the sea” in India. “These children are very much like yourself,” Fuller wrote to members of the Junior Missionary Alliance. Referring to an accompanying photograph, Fuller added this exhortation: “Remember no child in America is any better than these dear children…. In Romans it says, ‘There is no difference; all have sinned.’” In fact, Indian children might even prove an inspiration to their American peers. The picture of “little Taji,” a young
girl who came to the C&MA’s India Berachah Orphanage during the famine of 1897 and was baptized in October of 1900, provided children in the United States with a model for how they could “serve the Savior” and proof that the “mites” they donated to famine relief were bearing fruit (Figure 1.5). “We call her the Little Missionary and she really is,” proclaimed orphanage superintendent Alice Yoder in the letter accompanying Taji’s photograph. Although Yoder worried that the picture did not adequately reflect the “brightness” of Taji’s disposition, she was confident that the image of the young girl holding her Bible would clearly communicate her status as an exemplary proselyte who persistently and patiently preached the Gospel to “the old blind beggar” sitting at her feet.  

Unlike “America, the Almoner of the World,” which placed a dominant United States at the epicenter of the “work of a great international benevolence,” the photograph of “Little Taji and the Blind Man” affirmed the
active and prominent role of Indian Christians in assuaging the spiritual and physical suffering plaguing their people. These two images, which appeared just months apart in their respective publications, illustrate the differences between the Christian Herald’s vision of American humanitarianism and the form of evangelical relief work favored by missionaries like Marcus and Jennie Fuller. “Christian America,” Klopsch and Talmage confidently proclaimed, was “the hope of the nations of the whole earth.” The extension of the United States’ imperial power, they concluded, would help further the reach of its “magnificent generosity” to “the afflicted and suffering throughout the world.” While the Fullers and their missionary associates never disavowed the benefits of American charity, they harbored doubts about the country’s status as an unequivocally Christian nation and worried that its expanding colonial empire threatened the values of self-reliance, independence, and spiritual equality that they believed were essential to the establishment of an authentic, universal community of faith.

Conclusion: The Lure and Legacy of Pictorial Humanitarianism

During the 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century, the illustrations and photographs printed in evangelical periodicals introduced Americans to the “sore plight” of distant others whose distress was “beyond description.” These images offered “glimpses of suffering” that would, their purveyors hoped, “enlist the Christian sympathy, and the response of readers” on behalf of their fellow beings on the other side of the globe. “Let the pages of religious journalism spread out the stories of all such woes, and collect relief, and disburse alms all around our suffering world … until there is no more hunger to be fed, and no more ignorance to be educated, and no more nakedness to be clothed, and no more suffering to assuage,” the editors of the Christian Herald exhorted. According to unabashed almoners like Klopsch and Talmage, “dreadful, shocking” pictures of people “in constant agony” played a vital role in the developing enterprise of American humanitarianism.

Others were uneasy about humanitarian campaigns that relied so heavily on harrowing depictions of horrible affliction. Authors like Julian Hawthorne worried that images had become “incredible” within the increasingly sensationalistic context of yellow journalism. He and other cultural critics, including missionaries such as Marcus Fuller, also suggested that graphic portrayals of gruesome sights might arouse viewers’
appetites for spectacles of suffering – a prospect they found morally and spiritually troubling. As the United States enlarged its territorial empire through acquisition of the Philippines and other island “possessions,” some evangelicals sensed that disseminating images of “living skeletons” reinforced the racial hierarchies and social dependencies they ultimately hoped to subvert.

During the past several decades, critical theorists from a variety of disciplines have affirmed this supposition. Pictures of bodies in pain, political scientist Denis Kennedy has recently shown, often present their subjects as “powerless, helpless” objects “defined not by agency or ability but rather by vulnerability and deficiency.” Rather than eliciting empathy – a form of engagement involving imaginative identification with one’s fellows – these photographs risk promoting pity – a response that entails “the feeling of difference” and perhaps even “antipathy” or “appalling disgust.” Although such sensational images of suffering have succeeded in generating support for humanitarian relief efforts such as those undertaken by the Christian Herald, they have accomplished this goal, some scholars have argued, at the expense of exoticizing distant others, fetishizing affliction, and perpetuating “a set of power relations where the ‘victim’ is a passive recipient of aid from the heroic aid organization.”

In their ardent enthusiasm for America’s emerging role as “the almoner of the world,” evangelical crusaders such as Klopsch and Talmage seem to have been oblivious to this “darker side of humanitarian imagery.” Missionaries who sought to safeguard the autonomy and agency of famine sufferers were more attuned to the moral hazards of American military and moral imperialism, but even the most ambivalent found the persuasive power of pictures hard to resist. Despite his suspicion that spectacles of suffering might damage attempts to establish solidarity, Marcus Fuller sent in the photographs of “famine’s ravages.” By framing these images with a critique of American sensationalism, decadence, and imperial expansion, Fuller hoped to cultivate compassion untainted by condescension, to stimulate sympathy without suggesting superiority, to promote a humble humanitarianism free from haughtiness.

The history of American humanitarianism in the years following the India famines of the 1890s suggests that Fuller’s effort was largely unsuccessful. Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the United States’ emergence as a world power has often been premised on the idea of the nation’s responsibility to liberate the oppressed and advance the rights of humanity. While some American Christians have questioned this ethics of empire and intervention, many evangelicals
have embraced the image of the United States as a Christian nation divinely commissioned to uplift and protect the world’s oppressed and needy people. Within this context, pictures of human misery and affliction designed to stir up sympathy for distant and dependent sufferers have proliferated. The growth of the “aid industry” and the concomitant development of new mass media technologies have fueled the ever-increasing production and circulation of image-based appeals. Recent debates about the “ethics of representation” and the entanglement of humanitarian intervention with American imperialism show that many of the disquieting questions that vexed late nineteenth-century evangelicals like Marcus and Jennie Fuller remain relevant – and unresolved. Shedding light on the tensions that characterized earlier efforts to extend American philanthropy abroad will, I hope, help place the issues that bedevil contemporary humanitarianism in broader historical perspective and provide a wider frame for current deliberations about the politics of depicting distant suffering.

Notes

4 Tyrrell, Reforming the World, 118 and 99.
6 “Our Corn Ship in India,” Christian Herald (hereafter CH), 29 September 1897, cover, 723. Curti, American Philanthropy Abroad refers to the CH as “the most widely read religious newspaper in the world,” 620.
8 Clark, “The Sacred Rights of the Weak.”
9 Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain.”
10 “India’s Starving Millions,” CH, 20 January 1897, 45; “India’s Bitter Cry,” CH, 3 March 97, 167; “Starving India’s Pitiful Cry for Bread,” CH, 4 April 1900, 286.
11 Louis Klopsch, “Seven Fruitful Years,” CH, 1 December 1897, 912.
12 “India’s Crisis,” CH, 7 July 1897, 531–2.
14 Halttunen, “Humanitarianism,” 303–8; Clark, “Sacred Rights.”
19 “India Famine Scenes,” CMA, 9 June 1900, 378.
20 Louis Klopsch, “My Tour through Famine-Stricken India,” parts 1–4, CH, 25 July 1900, 610–11; 1 August 1900, 633–4; 15 August 1900, 672–3; 29 August 1900, 706–7; “Famine Pictures,” CMA, 19 May 1900, 337.
23 “Pioneer of the Famine Fleet,” CH, 18 April 1900, 329.
24 “India Famine Scenes,” Christian Missionary Alliance (hereafter CMA), 9 June 1900, 378.
27 “Famine Inquiries Answered,” CH, 16 June 1897, 477.
29 Pepper, Louis Klopsch, 321–2, 4.
33 Fuller, “Famine’s Ravages,” CMA, 303.
34 “India’s Starving Millions,” CH, 45; “India’s Crisis,” CH, 531–2; “Famine Horrors,” CMA, 23 June 1900, 411–2.
36 “Editorial,” CMA, 18 June 1897, 588.
37 Halttunen, “Humanitarianism,” 304; Rozario, “Delicious Horrors.”
38 “India’s Famine Cloud Lifted,” CH, 3 October 1900, 808; “India Looking Hopefully for a Harvest,” CH, 12 September 1900, 751.
“Feeding India’s Famishing Million,” CH, 9 May 1900, 393, 398.

“America, the Almoner of the World,” CH, 26 June 1901, cover.

“A Righteous War,” CH, 4 May 1898, 392; “What Next after War,” CH, 3 August 1898, 624.


See, for example, “American Progress in the Philippines,” CH, 26 July 1899; 580–1.

Mrs. Marcus B. (Jennie) Fuller, The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1900), 17–21, 200, 292–3. It is important to note that not all participants in the C&MA shared Fuller’s anti-imperialist views. Many were not immune to the pretensions of “Anglo-Saxon” cultural superiority or impervious to the temptations of a United States’ empire. When hostilities broke out with Spain in the spring of 1898, A. B. Simpson welcomed the conflict as a clear part of God’s providential plan: Simpson, “Missionary Outlook of the War,” CMA, 4 May 1898, 411.

William Mosier, “Our Chapel in Akola,” CMA, 7 April 1900, 214–15; the picture is reprinted in the CMA, 2 February 1901; 26 April 1902; 31 May 1902.

Dyer, A Life for God in India, 64–65; “Field Notes,” CMA, 20 July 1901, 41; “A Journey to India,” CMA, 3 March 1900, 142.


Mark B. Fuller, “Our Orphanage Work in India,” CMA, 19 October 1901, 211–12.

Mr. and Mrs. Moyser, “A Native Convention in India,” CMA, 26 April 1902, 228–9.

Fuller, Wrongs of Indian Womanhood, dedication.

Fuller, “What Has Buddhism Done for India?” CMA, 91.


“Our Children’s Bible School,” CMA, 2 November 1901, 247.

“Our Famine Ship on the Ocean,” CH, 16 May 1900, cover.

“Corn for Starving India,” CH, 14 April 1897, 294.

“To Fill the Famine Relief Ships,” CH, 12 May 1897, 386–7; Klopcsch, “Seven Fruitful Years,” CH, 912.

“Feeding India’s Famishing Millions,” 398.


Kennedy, “Selling the Distant Other”; Morgan, “The Look of Sympathy.”

Barnett and Weiss, eds., Humanitarianism in Question. See also the chapters by Henrietta Lidchi and Sanna Nissinen in this volume.