

A Collision of Influences: Rationalizing the Use of Religious Images in *The New England Primer's Pictorial Alphabet*

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Abstract

Much of the existing research on The New England Primer fails to account for the wide range of influences that contributed to this watershed American textbook's creation. In this essay, I consider the Primer alphabet's corresponding images from a variety of perspectives, including educational, artistic, and theological. After exploring the critical work of Patricia Crain, Charles Carpenter, and Henry Pitz (among others), I combine these critical lenses together instead to provide a greater understanding of the forces that allowed an iconoclastic Puritan society to include religious images as a means of educational instruction

As an educational schoolbook, *The New England Primer* is a watershed text that has provided a foundation for much of what American schooling looks like today. However, *The New England Primer* is a much more complex document than a simple textbook. The use of images in *The New England Primer*'s alphabet poses an intriguing problem for those familiar with Calvinist theology. To the lay reader, these crude woodcuts pose no issue whatsoever. But these seemingly innocent inclusions are at direct opposition with the prevailing Reformed theology at the time, which expressly forbade the use of representational imagery in religious contexts. In order to discuss such an intricate topic clearly and effectively, I must make some distinct initial clarifications. Throughout this essay, I will be using the terms "Reformed" and "Calvinist" interchangeably, as is commonly done in contemporary theological contexts. I will be using "Puritan" to refer specifically to the group of American colonists who settled in the New England area and who adhered to Calvinist doctrines.

Much of the prior literary scholarship on the use of images in the *New England Primer*'s alphabet has reduced the complexity of influences to a simple causal relationship. *The New England Primer* represents conventions of printing, graphics, theology, history, and education colliding at once. Each of these factors plays a key role in the use of images as a whole and in understanding the controversial nature of their use. I am proposing that a complex variety of influences—theological, educational, historical, and artistic—combined to allow for the use of images in the *New England Primer*.

The initial question of images in *The New England Primer* arises from its seemingly antithetical relationship to the Reformed theology present at the time of its initial publication in 1690. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin spends several chapters discussing the dangers of using images as exclusive forms of learning. Calvin calls into question Pope Gregory's assertion that "images are the books of the unlearned," countering with biblical examples that scriptural doctrine maintains "every thing respecting God which is learned from images is futile and false" (53). John Calvin's distrust of imagery was explicit, strong, and universally accepted amongst Reformed denominations for centuries, well into the Enlightenment.

Many contemporary literature scholars have reduced Calvin's views about images to mere anti-Catholic rhetoric rather than examining the underlying theology behind them. For Calvin and other Reformation theologians, this issue of images was not necessarily a denominational issue, but chiefly one of salvation: "For many reformers, it was not merely impossible to create an image of God (who by His very nature was beyond depiction); it was also blasphemous to try, as the biblical prohibition on 'graven images' made clear" ("Reformation and Iconoclasm"). Additionally, "according to Calvin, every time a person misunderstood God even in the slightest way, the incorrect idea of God became an idol[;] Calvinists had to avoid creating these incorrect ideas of God as much as possible" (Schnorbus 256). Puritans and other Calvinists at this time viewed a reliance on secular and even religious educational images as a dangerous gateway to possible sin and idolatry. To them, words and their precise, controlled usage were clear, so the lack of a specified context con-

tained in images left far too much up to personal interpretation and manipulation. Understanding these theological tenets while reading *The New England Primer* only seems to emphasize the contradictory nature of the images themselves. If the Puritans felt so strongly against the use of images as educational tools, then why are they so predominantly featured in *The New England Primer's* alphabet?

London printer Benjamin Harris first printed *The New England Primer* in around 1690. *The New England Primer* was not a collection of completely original literary content; in fact, Harris adapted much of the material in *The New England Primer* from an earlier work of his, *The Protestant Tutor*. Like *The New England Primer*, *The Protestant Tutor* has been referred to by some writers as a 'religious primer,' but it can properly be called a school primer. *The Protestant Tutor* was strongly anti-Catholic, and had more religious than secular matter in it; but many of the elementary schoolbooks of the time...could equally well be designated as religious texts. (Carpenter 23)

The *Tutor's* success allowed Harris then to create *The New England Primer*, a volume that avoided its predecessor's "savage political attacks on Catholicism but retain[ed] a Protestant emphasis that was attractive to New England's Puritan audience" (Zipes 87). Like its predecessor, the *Primer* was a wildly successful publication, selling an estimated six million copies between 1690 and 1830 (Griswold 120). Patricia Crain adds how much of the *Primer's* success was due to its timely publication: "When Benjamin Harris began publishing [*The New England Primer*] there, arguably in about 1690, the spiritual fate of the colonists, especially the young, was a growing concern" (39). Puritan doctrine centered on the idea of "Sola Scriptura," or scripture as the sole authority, so learning to read served a practical, yet important purpose—it enabled children to read and understand the Bible. In the Puritans' eyes, literacy was merely a means to obtain salvation, and finding the means to foster this ability in their children was of paramount importance.

To this end, the Puritans produced texts for children that served both educational and theological purposes. These included *The New England Primer*, whose earliest extant copy of *The New England Primer* dates to 1727, but scholarship has suggested that images were included with the alphabet in printings prior to the 1727 issue. To this effect, Charles Carpenter states in his *History of American Schoolbooks*, "The majority of the early issues of *The New England Primer* were similar in having an illustrated alphabet at the beginning...In the earliest issues the alphabet rhymes were of a religious nature" (26). This use of religious images in *The New England Primer* from the very start further complicates this issue. While *The New England Primer* is known more today for its contributions to American education, the word "primer" itself lacked secular connotations in 17th- and 18th-century New England. Strictly speaking, a "primer" merely referred to a devotional or prayer book rather than a secular educational text. And while *The New England Primer* is the most well-known colonial primer today, E. Jennifer Monaghan, in her book *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*, points out that nearly every Christian denomination at this time had its own associated primer, and distrusted the authority of all others, regardless of theological similarities (84).

From an educational standpoint, the *Primer* as a complete text “draws upon the horn-book and primer traditions of early print culture” (Crain 38). In terms of connecting words with pictures in order to foster meaning, the *Primer*’s picture alphabet “follows the tradition of emblem books, in which a picture illustrates the literal aspects of some metaphorical point” (Monaghan 99). These emblem books, which were popular educational texts in the 16th and 17th centuries, paired various pictures (or “emblems”) together with explanatory type, a didactic strategy mirrored in the *Primer*. Monaghan mentions one interesting source of inspiration for many of the alphabet’s images—tavern signs and street signs. These signs served as a visual reference for both secular and religious rhymes in *The New England Primer*’s alphabet. However, these less-than-highbrow muses did not go unnoticed for long. Monaghan notes how by the mid-18th century, “evangelicals found these images so crude that they were banished from later versions of the primer and replaced by clearly religious pictures and rhymes” (99). Street signs may have served as an influence for some *Primer* printings, but the overwhelming majority of the images present in the alphabet lack such low-brow inspiration.

In many ways, *The New England Primer*’s use of images in its alphabet was groundbreaking, both in terms of associating images with Reformed doctrine as well as including images in locally-produced educational texts. Monaghan states, “*The New England Primer* had always woodcuts illustrating its introductory alphabet...No locally printed spelling book up to this point, however, including the *Youth’s Instructor* (which also included fables) had ever had illustrations” (231). The Puritans’ pairings of text and image was, from the start, an intentional choice and an innovative addition to the educational text genre.

With *The New England Primer*, when direct and overt rationales for image inclusion are hard to come by, something as simple as the arrangement of the images themselves can reveal much about their intentionality. David Watters notes how the specific order of the images and text on the page signify an inherent power structure within the pictorial alphabet (197). Since the images and text are placed in a left-to-right arrangement, thus mimicking the natural English language reading tendency, the emphasis and initial gaze of the reader both lie on the image, not the text. The image instead of the rhyme is the initial holder of significance. Watters further postulates how the alphabet’s images, when paired with the accompanying rhyme impact the overall meaning:

Emblems often employ a middle term, a prose gloss, that relates poetic text and image, and acts as the voice of the community of interpreters. In this case of the parent who drills the child in memorization of the text can provide this gloss or point to a place in the catechism or the Bible which does so. (197)

Also asserting the necessity of images in *The New England Primer*’s alphabet in order to aid reading instruction, Patricia Crain asserts that “[t]he verbal and visual tropes that surround the alphabet cloak the fact that the unit of textual meaning—the letter—lacks meaning itself” (18). Without the help of images as a referencing tool, learning basic literacy skills is a much more difficult task.

While the illustrated image is the first portion of the page to be processed, its function

and meaning lie in partnership with the corresponding rhyme. A crude woodcut of a cross on a hilltop holds more meaning when paired with the rhyme "Crift crucify'd/ For finners dy'd" than it would by simply existing alone (Zipes 93). Also, the simplistic nature of the images themselves helps deemphasize and diminish any other possible interpretations than that provided in the associated rhyme. By directly pairing the images together with doctrinally based rhymes, Harris leaves little room open for alternative interpretation of these images, thus easing the Calvinist anxiety and hesitance about the use of religious imagery.

The connection between image and rhyme as holders of meaning is significant in light of other scholarship pertaining to Puritan educational materials. An interesting perspective on this rationale for included images lies in the history of illustrating children's books. Illustrator and scholar Henry Pitz notes multiple instances where Puritan writers had intentionally included images so as to increase their circulation and to better target their books to children. Pitz states that not only did the Puritans write numerous texts intended for children, but "the Calvinists knew the value of pictures as long as they served their own creed" (23). To this end, Patricia Crain remarks, "[l]ike the rest of American Puritan teaching, the *Primer* seems to take an any-means-necessary approach to its task" (39). For these Reformed printers and writers, it seems that the end goal of teaching children to read in order to learn the Bible justifies the use of images as educational accessories, even when they must overcome potential sacerdotal objections.

This concept of the end justifying the means corresponds well with Schnorbus' hypothesis of the influence of philosopher John Locke's educational ideas being a reason for these images. In her article "Calvin and Locke: Dueling Epistemologies in *The New England Primer*," Schnorbus notes how "the Lockean approach sought to engage the child as an active partner who would respond to the text, evaluate text and image together, and compare written information with past experience. Thus, the child would absorb the content and the technique of learning in general" (253). Later in the same article, Schnorbus points out how by Harris' yielding on the issue of images, "Lockean epistemology sparked a reaffirmation of key Calvinist doctrines...instead of secularizing *The New England Primer*" (254). In relation to *The New England Primer*, it seems that by conceding on this one aspect of Calvinist doctrine, Harris enabled thousands of Puritan children to better their visual literacy skills without sacrificing the ideological end goal of learning the Bible. Tracy Fessenden, in her book *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Culture*, echoes this rationale by noting the connections with "the prevalence of religious imagery in the alphabet with the *Primer's* textual purpose" (Donegan 3). She reinforces this idea by noting the established "Puritanical belief of education as a way 'to introduce literacy as a means to spiritual maturity' and notes that *The New England Primer's* linking literacy to theology enabled children to learn the 'anxious lessons of Puritan theology along with the basic information they needed to participate in the social world'" (qtd. in Donegan 3).

Another fascinating aspect of this question of images in *The New England Primer* is the artistic nature of the images themselves. The images are crude and amateurish, which could be written off as a reflection of the time period. However, this lack of detail is more

of a reflection of the individual artists who created them and not an accurate reflection of the quality of woodcuts that were created at this time. David Bland, in his *A History of Book Illustration*, notes how other Christian religious texts that were produced around the same time as the *Primer* had woodcuts and engravings of a much higher technical quality and that contained much more artistic merit. An example Bland provides of such religious artistic merit is the 1663 printing of the *Cambridge Bible*, which contains “some incredibly fine and delicate work...Many of the original engravings, notably those for the Apocalypse, show a high order of imagination” (191). Bland’s specification of engravings, rather than the more antiquated woodcuts, is significant, as it indicates a change in the printing technology. With an illustrated religious work like this pre-dating the first publication of *The New England Primer*, it is clear that the images used in the *Primer* are both sub-standard in their quality and outdated in terms of their mode of creation. For example, the “B” rhyme, “Thy Life to mend/ This Book attend,” is paired with a picture of an open book, but the book lacks any discernable text on the pages (Zipes 93.) Perhaps this begrudging acceptance of the image as an educational tool can account for the quality of the woodcuts themselves. The woodcuts that accompany *The New England Primer’s* alphabet are, at best, a crude attempt to represent and signify meaning. The images themselves serve a pragmatic function, not an aesthetically pleasing one. They are simply meant to aid a child in learning enough literacy to read the Bible—no more, no less, and certainly without any attempt at artistic flair.

By intentionally including these substandard images, the Puritans are permitting the existence of representational imagery, as long as the aesthetic appeal is minimized to avoid any traces of popery or of possible idolatry. In subsequent reprints of *The New England Primer*, various artists upheld this same commitment to rustic imagery. To this effect, Monaghan notes that with *Primer*: “The fidelity of an American reprint to its original was such that American printers felt obligated to find someone who could create woodcuts to reproduce the pictures—something that was much harder to do than merely copying the text” (231). Given that Benjamin Harris was an established and successful publisher by the time of the *Primer’s* first printing, it can be assumed that he could have afforded to commission higher-quality images. However, this use of poor quality images seems intentional, especially in light of Fessenden’s comments on the growing Puritan society’s emphasis on literacy. She also notes that in a growing Puritan society, illiteracy was a greater evil than the possible means used to achieve it:

Reading represented a movement away from potentially enslaving dependence on images for children, who confronted the *Primer’s* woodcuts and then moved beyond them to master the letters they prompted. [...] The form of the *Primer* severs images...and fixes them as unassimilable, ‘earthly’ residue of the language-acquisition process. (50)

Within this context, the rudimentary nature of the images essentially marks them as educationally singular—since these woodcuts do not provide any aesthetic value or personal enjoyment to a child, they can easily be disposed of and forgotten once the task of learning

to read is complete. Moreover, by intending for these images to be temporary educational tools rather than permanent fixtures in a child's life, a Puritan reading and educational public further downgrades the value of and place for religious representational imagery.

David Watters begins his "I Spake As A Child—Authority, Metaphor and *The New England Primer*" by lamenting on how few works of literary criticism exist on the primer, despite its clear historical, educational, and literary influence on American culture. He mentions how one reason for this lack of critical texts is likely a prevailing contemporary aversion to the doctrine of original sin. Many scholars, he states, are turned off by this theological idea and avoid the critical opportunities that *The New England Primer* contains.

However, another reason Watters gives for this hole in scholarship is the lack of complete primer manuscripts. Indeed, this lack of primary documents does make any form of analysis difficult. Charles Carpenter attributes this absence of complete editions of the *Primer* to two main factors: 18th-century higher academia's attitude towards the *Primer* and the nature of library and print culture in this period. He states:

The fact that there are no known copies of printings [of *The New England Primer*] between 1727 and 1735 indicates how little attention was paid to the preservation of schoolbooks from a biographical standpoint prior to the 19th century, since it is probable that copies were issued during this period. (25)

Additionally, Carpenter maintains that "[i]t is well known that university libraries in the early days did not consider the various issues of *The New England Primer* worthy of preservation" (25). At this point in history, libraries found little value in preserving older editions of books in general. Carpenter even notes how even the Bodleian Library would get rid of older versions of books once newer editions were published rather than preserve the older copies (Carpenter 25).

But even with the fragments and extant copies of the *Primer* still accessible today, there is much left to sift through, to question, and to discover. What appears to be a common schoolbook is much more than that. These rough, unpolished woodcuts that appear next to alphabet rhymes hold much more significance than their crude forms may initially suggest. Their very inclusion represents a variety of intellectual influences combining at once, which is something much more remarkable than a simple causal relationship could produce. While none of these factors individually comprises an earth-shattering ideological shift, collectively, they provide enough of a philosophical push to merit the presence of images in *The New England Primer*. This collision of intellectual forces offers great opportunities for scholars from a variety of disciplines—composition studies, linguistics, and even the educational field—to take a turn pouring over the *Primer* and searching for meaning through its overlooked pages.

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