

The Visual Culture of Chick Tracts and Its Problems with Communication

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## I. Introduction

In the 1960s, a group of comic artists began to differentiate their comic books from those that were prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century. Although many chroniclers of what came to be called the Underground Comics Movement have dated the beginnings of the movement to Robert Crumb's *Zap Comix* in 1968 (Figure 1), it is readily admitted that there had been traces of the movement's ideas before. In any case, from Crumb's series the movement spread widely, notably including Harvey Kurtzmann of *MAD Magazine*, and later including Art Spiegelman, won the Pulitzer Prize for *Maus*. The earliest works in the movement display a deliberate disregard for taboos on portraying sexual scenes, exploring drug use, and challenging political assumptions (see Figure 2). Likewise, some artists of the movement used the comic book medium to satirize religion. Most notably, Frank Stack under the pseudonym Foolbert Sturgeon wrote *The New Adventures of Jesus*, a series of comics exploring how ridiculous it would be were Jesus in modern culture (see Figure 3). These themes attracted an adult crowd interested in defining themselves against the contemporary norm.

While these comic artists were not the first to use comics for discourse among adults, their comics marked the first time that a widely-recognized, sustained subculture would emerge around adult-comics. Matthew Pustz observes that the comic artists' willingness to portray drug use "worked to reinforce the community between the creators and their audience by emphasizing their shared experience."<sup>1</sup> Reveling in their otherness defined against the prim and proper façade of the 1960s, a family of collectors and creators formed around these comic books that would play a role in the progressive movements of the coming decades. Their comics transformed a medium that had been limited to children to one that included the adults of the emerging counterculture of the late 1960s. Comic books, which had been largely nationalistic and expressive only of the status quo, now challenged social taboos, religious customs, and laws.<sup>2</sup>

While these comic artists were calling people away from prevalent conservative ideals, Jack Chick, a contemporary comic artist, was calling all people to repentance. A self-described born-again Christian, Chick criticized the modern church and society through twenty-four page religious tracts filled with comics that are reminiscent of the comic books of the Underground Comics Movement. Just as underground artists drew nude people in illicit sexual acts, so Chick

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<sup>1</sup> Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 63.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

drew them nude before the thrown of God on judgment day; as artists displayed drug culture graphically, so Chick drew drug users and had the unrepentant cast into hell.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Chick had similarities to other underground artists as he shocked his audience by presenting scenes from hell and war in graphic detail (see Figures 4-5). As Frank Stack and the other religious underground artists did, so Chick “directed [his work] against people who pervert[ed] religion for their own personal gain.”<sup>4</sup> While not mentioned by most chroniclers of the movement, Jack Chick’s comic career clearly shows the influence of contemporary underground artists, despite his ideological differences.

Robert Fowler’s recent book on Chick’s works warns his readers: “Whether you are atheist or fundamentalist, Catholic or protestant, white or black or yellow, right wing or left, young or old, get ready to be insulted and offended by Jack T Chick, the no-punches-pulled Prophet of the Last Days.”<sup>5</sup> Chick, like the other underground artists, rejoiced when some found

<sup>2</sup> For more on the history of this movement see Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book*, 140ff and Sabin, *Adult Comics*, 36ff.

<sup>3</sup> It is slightly misleading to speak of Chick drawing all the scenes in his tracts, as Fred Carter, a pastor and artist from California, has sketched a large portion of Chick tracts. All future references to Chick’s drawings must be considered with the realization that Carter may be the artist in fact. However, it is the influences of the underground comic artists on Chick Tracts, not on the tracts’ artists, that are important for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Estren, *A History of Underground Comics*, 164; Frank Stack under the pseudonym Foolbert Sturgeon wrote the most recognizable religious tracts during this movement, named *The Adventures of Jesus*. These parodied religion by exploring how modern society would respond to Jesus if he were to have come in the twentieth century (see Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions*, 23-24).



Figure 4

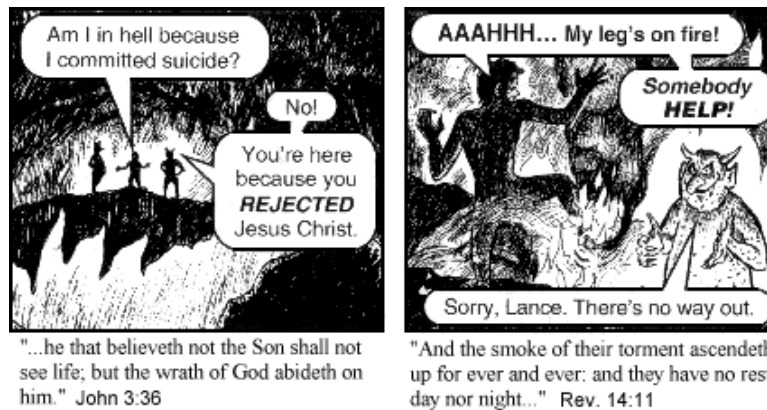


Figure 5

his tracts offensive as evidenced by the opening page of his first published tract, *Why No Revival?* (1961), which states: "Many things [in this tract] will make you angry and upset (I hope so), but I pray it will lead you to repentance and revival."<sup>6</sup> This forewarning reveals his connection to the other underground comic artists: his use of shock and offense to lead readers to a radical change in their understanding of the world. Likewise, it reveals his separation from them: his desire to convert people to his own form of zealous Christianity.<sup>7</sup> This, his quest and life mission, has kept Chick going for more than forty years, as he has continued to rise in popularity and produce more Chick Tracts for his fans, distributors, and the "unsaved."

While there are many tract companies that try to convert their readers to their specific forms of Christianity, Chick Publications is distinct in that a multifaceted culture has emerged around its tracts, just as one did around the other underground artists. This culture involves not only those who distribute them and those who destroy them, but also those who collect them. Chick's consistent use of the medium of comics seems like it could explain why his tracts have

<sup>5</sup> Fowler, *The World of Chick*, 1-1.

<sup>6</sup> Chick, *Why No Revival?*, 2.

enticed some to collect them, despite disagreeing with the worldview they express. On the other hand, the iconoclastic efforts Chick Tracts have incited are unparalleled in both volume and form. The medium of comics has given him tools to express his position that other tract producers do not have or utilize in the same way. This, in part, explains this intricate culture's emergence. Through an examination of how Chick uses these comic conventions and how he constructs them, we will see how Chick Tracts elicit responses out of their readers and how these responses form this culture.

By examining readers' responses to these tracts, we will also see how the practices associated with these tracts—distribution, iconoclasm, and collection—play a significant role in the religious practice of those who perform them. A symptom of the significance these practices hold for the three groups is that each, in its own way, has grown obstinate towards the others. The distributors have failed to recognize that while their tracts are effective at encouraging people to convert to their beliefs, they also deter others. The iconoclastic critics, while defining themselves against the beliefs of the distributors, have rarely stopped to consider what actually has influenced the way Chick makes his tracts and his distributors disseminate them. The collectors have proven obstinate in their refusal to acknowledge that they too are a part of this culture as their opinions and remarks cannot always be disinterested. If this situation is to be reconciled, an analysis of the motivations and purposes associated with each of the practices will aid in giving each group a perspective on the others. Additionally, it will help each group to recognize their role in this emerging part of American popular religious culture.

## II. Chick Tracts

### A. *Chick Tracts as Comics*

In most contemporary religious tracts and pamphlets, words and images work together to communicate to the reader the intended message. In both the simple illustrations used in the tract *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (Figure 6) to the shocking picture of a bullet used in *School Shootings* (Figure 7), words and images are the necessary elements by which tracts can convey their messages concisely and effectively. While *Four Spiritual Laws* uses simple illustrations in a subordinate role to clarify the text, the picture of the bullet in *School Shootings* is the mechanism by which tract distributors grab potential readers' attention. Chick Tracts use

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<sup>7</sup> Contrast this with Stack's indifference: "I wasn't necessarily trying to get people not to believe in a religion. It was all right with me if that happened, but that's not what I was trying to do" (Frank Stack, quoted in Rosenkranz, *Rebel*

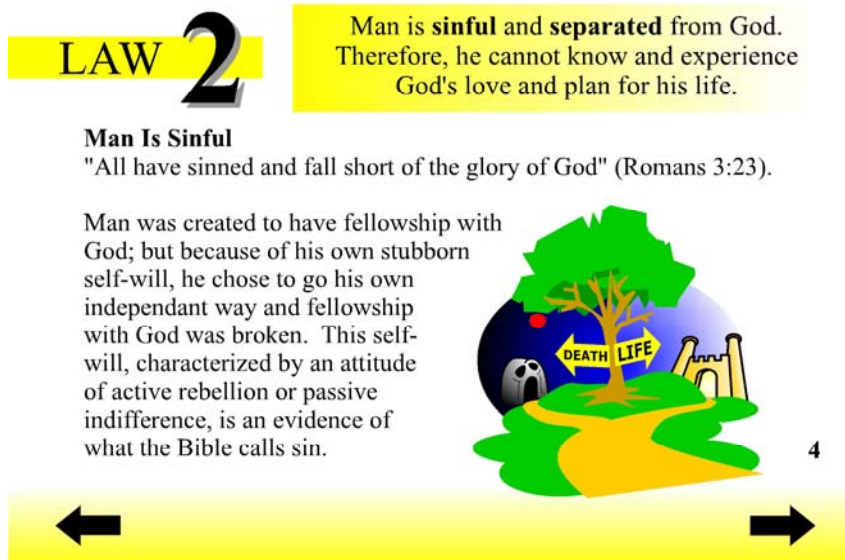


Figure 6

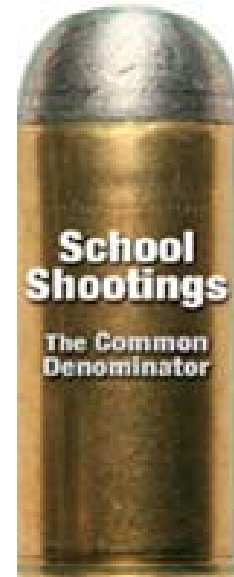


Figure 7

images in both ways, although the medium of comics allows Chick to communicate more through his images and words than either of the extremes discussed above do.

Comics enable Chick, as they did other underground comic artists, the ability to question social conventions through a medium often equated with humor. Unfortunately for Chick, because of this equation, many comic artists themselves have often been skeptical of the medium's potential to portray real art or serious issues.<sup>8</sup> As mentioned above, the underground movement battled this criticism by portraying serious matters in comic form. Likewise, Chick uses many of the unique communicative abilities of comics not available in other media. A brief comparison of his work to other tract companies that have attempted to use comics will demonstrate how he is aware of comics' potential.

The American Tract Society publishes a great diversity of tracts ranging from prayer cards to detailed explanations of theological issues to short comics. There are a comparable number of these comics intended for children as for adults. Most of them conform to a standard of eight pages, with the last page containing a form to fill out if one has a desire to grow in his or her faith. These eight-pagers do not allow for quite as much plot development as do Chick Tracts, which perhaps reveals itself most in the dependence these tracts seem to have on words

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*Visions*, 23).



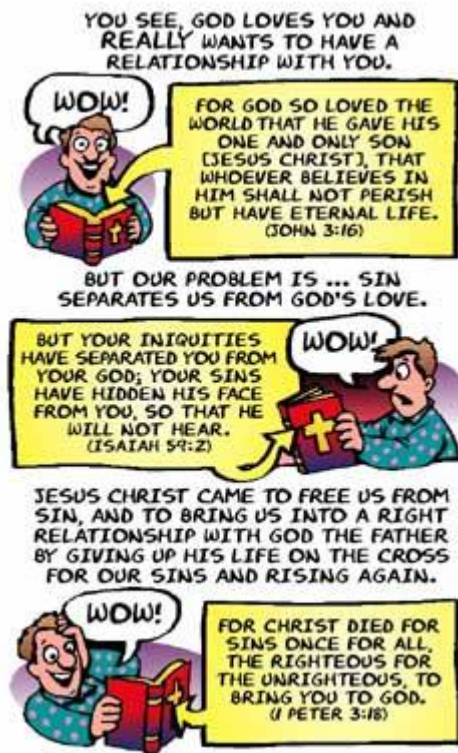


Figure 8

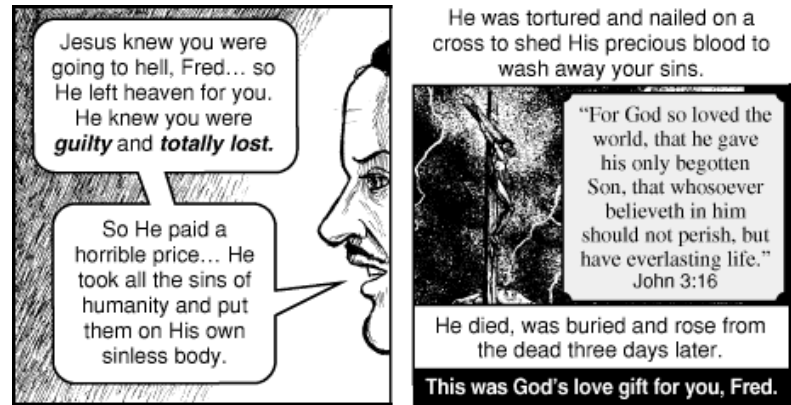


Figure 9

rather than a balance of words and images.<sup>9</sup> Take, for example, a page in the tract *Heaven's Gate* in which the tract's unnamed main character finds out both about his problem of sin and God's message of salvation (Figure 8). Here the emphasis is clearly on the words of the bible. The comic conventions that help the reader to understand include the coloring of the biblical quotations, with the arrow indicating their origin, the three times the character exclaims, "Wow!" after reading the bible verses, and the cross on the bible to remind the reader of its message. The message of *Heaven's Gate* relies almost entirely on the words, as the images only seem to provide a reason for these words to appear.

Chick Tracts deliver the same message that *Heaven's Gate* does in a way that exploits the medium of comics more fully. Figure 9 is a representative example of how Chick renders this message: the first panel is more dependent on the text as Chick's character explains the problem of sin, emphasizing the words "guilty" and "totally lost", whereas the second panel frames a visual representation of Christ dying on the cross with a corresponding biblical verse. This example demonstrates how Chick uses images not only to provide a reason for the words to be

<sup>9</sup> McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*, 26-27.

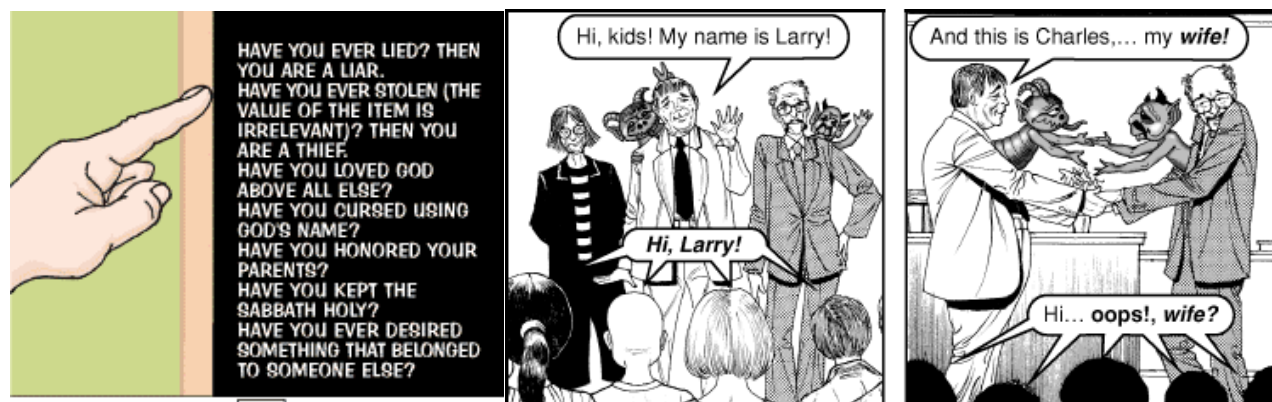


Figure 11



Figure 10

there, as in the first frame, but also as the focus of his frames, as in the second frame where the words help to expand upon and explain the image of Christ's suffering. This demonstrates one characteristic that distinguishes Chick Tracts from other comic tracts: the words and images depend on each other to explain their messages in a relationship that is often equal.

Another prolific tract company, Living Waters Publications, puts out tracts ranging from coins with the Ten Commandments on them to tracts that explain, with words and a few images, the four laws that lead to eternal life. They too have a few different tracts that resemble comic strips, but, unlike the American Tract Society, they do not seem to target either adults or children in particular. One of these, *The Bible is Full of Mistakes*, like *Heaven's Gate*, does not have much interaction between the words and images, especially when it quotes the bible, for, in those frames, the setting of the tract fades away and only the speaker and the listener are visible alongside the words.<sup>10</sup> However, *The Bible is Full of Mistakes* does display a phenomenon that is both characteristic of comics and Chick Tracts. On one page (Figure 10), an old teacher, who on the previous pages set out to prove that the bible has mistakes, first points to the chalkboard on

<sup>9</sup> Some Chick Tracts do seem to rely primarily on words rather than utilizing both; however, they are by far the minority, and those which do will receive special attention in section II.C.



which he has written many of the Ten Commandments. Then in the second frame, he explains Jesus' interpretation of one of the commandments not listed above, explaining how one should not lust after a woman for that is committing adultery. The reader at this point might notice the magazine sticking out of the teacher's back pocket, which partially displays a word beginning with "Play". A careful reader at this point might link this title to the teacher's recent statement, and connect the two to realize that the man has an adult magazine in his back pocket—clearly an indication that he is violating the commandment just stated. His violation of this principle, which is deducible only through both the visual and verbal clues together, is the first indication that he is not faithful to the bible and as such, someone or something may soon challenge the mistakes he claims are found in the bible. The necessity of both visual and verbal clues to deduce the meaning from this frame demonstrates how an inferential contribution of the reader is necessary for understanding.<sup>11</sup>

Chick Tracts rely on visual and verbal clues to an even greater extent than the previous example. One of the most common ways in which Chick does this is by putting either demonic or angelic forces behind or on a character while they are speaking to communicate to the reader the nature of the characters and their comments. For example, Figure 11, taken from *Birds and the Bees*, displays two men with demons crawling all over them. In this tract, the two previous pages introduce these two men as dentists and special guests to a children's classroom. The second frame on page two displays them standing in front of the class with demons crawling all over them, but it is not until one reads the second frame on page three (Figure 11) that he or she realizes the reason why these men have demons crawling all over them: because they are homosexuals. Thus, within the first four frames of this tract, an alert reader can discern the tract's subject and Chick's position on it.

Another convention of comics that Chick uses is the concept that Robert Harvey calls the graphic center of a frame. This concept states that an artist uses a variety of graphic devices to direct the viewer's attention to something in particular in a frame in order that the plot of the story may move along more effectively. Harvey also notes that most artists make sure that this happens in nearly every frame of their comics, and thus it is not too important to discuss when

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<sup>10</sup> Clarkson, *The Bible is Full of Mistakes*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Watts, "Comic Strips," 176.

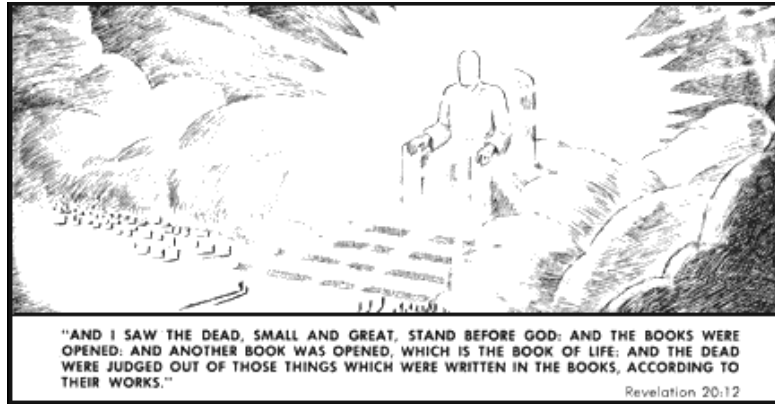


Figure 12

this happens.<sup>12</sup> However, in Chick Tracts, this convention is of particular importance in the way the images construct the sacred. In many Chick Tracts, a character will come before the judgment throne of God and face his or her fate. Chick places this faceless, white God on a throne at the top of a set of stairs, and draws the reader's attention to this area by making the brilliance of the white protrude from God and stand out from the sketched lines that make everything else (Figure 12). This image of God, then, demands the attention of the reader, and by seeing this image first, the reader realizes the character's lowly position in comparison to God, as this God dominates the miniature humans coming to God's throne. Chick uses other images similarly to construct the horrors of hell, the power of Satan, and the pain of Christ on the cross (see Figure 9).

Just as Chick uses images to clarify and emphasize the words, he uses words to communicate the meanings of the images and the messages of the tracts. Given the limited amount of space Chick has to enter his reader into a narrative and then conclude it, he attempts to keep the amount of frames he devotes to developing his characters to a minimum. The insertion of images, such as the angels or demons, is one way in which he does this, and another is the use of the thought balloon, which is an exclusive convention of comics. David Carrier writes about them: "These thoughts are revealed, not to any character within the strip, but only to us viewers who stand outside."<sup>13</sup> Thus, this custom allows Chick to describe his characters without having them engage in long conversations. Chick uses this in *The Assignment* by setting up a conflict between a husband and wife through thought bubbles, in which he draws attention to the man's intention of giving a tract to his boss and his wife's intent to stop this (Figures 13-14). In

<sup>12</sup> Harvey, *The Art of the Funnies*, 17-18.



Figures 13 - 14

addition to characterization, Chick also uses thought bubbles to foreshadow the decisions characters will have to make later on in the story. Chick did this in one of his earliest tracts, *Holy Joe*, where he had the captain who had heard about Jesus from Joe questioning in his mind whether Joe had been telling the truth (Figure 15). The captain later makes a decision on this matter when Joe is killed (Figure 16). These thought bubbles communicate necessary information to the reader through these thought bubbles, as they assign meanings, which are essential to the narrative, to the images of the characters.

Chick also uses words to clarify ambiguous subjects in his tracts. For example, he often clarifies his position on theological issues in his anti-Catholic tracts, so that his readers are not lead astray by doctrine of which he does not approve. In *Is There Another Christ?*, Chick claims: "The BIBLE IS [GOD'S] HOLY WORD," using a footnote on this statement, which clarifies: "The written Word of God, without apocrypha, commentaries and council decrees" (Figure 17). This simple clarification plays a role in Chick's ability to make concise tracts, for without these

<sup>13</sup> Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 30.



Figures 15 - 16

clarifying words, he would need to take extra frames to explain graphically what he expressed quickly through words.

Other ways he uses words are to explain what is happening in the text and to assign values or meanings to certain actions that one might simply glance over. The tract *War Zone* contains both of these uses of words. It tells the story of a school bully named the Moose, who beats up Randy, a Christian, making Randy drop several Chick Tracts he was carrying around him. The Moose picks one of these tracts up, reads it, and then comes to Randy and asks him about its content. The Moose then decides that he wants to pray for his salvation after realizing that God still loves him. At this point, Randy and the Moose pray, and then the Moose feels like a new person (Figure 18). The first frame has a biblical verse underneath it, which explains exactly what is happening in the verse: the Moose, by calling on the name of the Lord, is being saved. The verse under the second frame draws attention to the fact that the Moose feels like a new person, and explains that he now is in Christ; the reader through this explanatory verse can understand why the Moose had this particular reaction to praying such a prayer. Through these

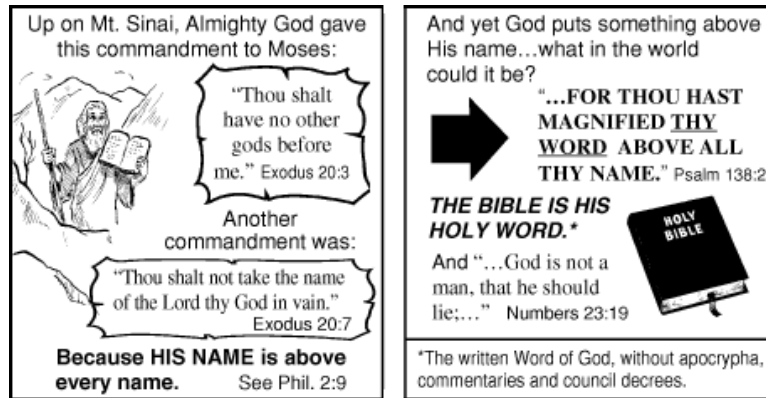


Figure 17



Figure 18

biblical citations, Chick both confirms what is happening in the frame and explains what otherwise would have been ambiguous.

As one can see, Chick Tracts exploit the possibilities of the medium of comics by using both the words and images to explain each other and to move along the narrative. They fully support J.R. Davey's claim about the use of words and images: "[I]n so far as both can articulate the same subject-matter in different ways, writing and making [images] together can bring a work to a realization beyond the scope of what just one practice might achieve."<sup>14</sup> However, this explains only part of Chick's use of this medium, as he also takes advantage of its other possibilities, and chief among them humor. *The Bull* even ends with a statement asserting the tract's intent on making its readers laugh: "If you find yourself laughing at this story, think about this: where will you spend eternity? In heaven? Or in the lake of fire?"<sup>15</sup> The duality of this statement suggests some of the reasons why Chick uses humor in spite of the fact that many underground comics made about religion have profaned it or made light of it.<sup>16</sup> It seems that he,

<sup>14</sup> Davey, "Writing and the In-Between," 386.

<sup>15</sup> Chick, *The Bull*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Heeren and Lindsey, "Where the Sacred Meets the Profane," 75-76.



rather than profaning religion, employs humor and the medium of comics in order to make his message accessible and attractive to more people. Just as stand-up comedians are able to address social issues through humor and can obtain a larger audience because of it, so does Chick achieve a larger audience by using comedy as a tool to present his ideas that might seem too radical to much of his audience.

### ***B. How Chick Tracts Work***

At this point, we have seen that Chick utilizes many conventions of comics to make his message clear, and from this we might question how he structures this message. A brief recourse to Chick's history will shed light on how he approached the original construction of these tracts. Having converted to a fundamentalist protestant form of Christianity, Chick's primary motivation to make tracts was his desire to be obedient to the bible's Great Commission: "And [Jesus] said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature"(Mk 16.15 *KJV*).<sup>17</sup> Thus, Chick looked for a way that he, and others who were shy, could fulfill this commission. The idea for comics, Daniel Raeburn claims, came to Chick after giving an illustrated gospel presentation to eleven prison inmates, nine of whom converted after the presentation. Based on the success of this experience, Chick understood how the medium of comics could be an effective tool for presenting the gospel.<sup>18</sup> Then, having heard of the success of tracts in China in spreading Mao's ideas of communism, Chick decided to mimic them and see if his tracts could yield similar results in spreading the gospel.<sup>19</sup> These events and observations led Chick to make his tracts both amusing and convincing, all for the sake of circulating his message.

Chick does not present his message in each tract in the same way, but rather each one seems to have an intended readership and thus he appropriates his presentation to whichever group of people he thinks will read it. He even aims some of his tracts at those Christians that have become lax in fulfilling the Great Commission. These tracts often are promotional, as they attempt to convince Christians that distributing Chick Tracts is a way of fulfilling the Great Commission. In addition to those who do not know the Christian message, and lazy Christians, Chick directs his tracts at people of "false" religions, people of other denominations of

<sup>17</sup> Cf Mt 28.19-20. See Chick Publications, "Chick Tracts Make Witnessing Easy!,"

<http://www.chick.com/ads/oneway.asp?wpp=a> (accessed 27 July 2008) where Chick cites this passage in Mark.

<sup>18</sup> The illustrations used during this presentation were the foundation for Chick's tract *This Is Your Life!*, Raeburn, *The Imp*, 2; 16.

Christianity, children, and a few for people participating in holidays or special events.<sup>20</sup> While these demographic groups assume an important role in how Chick shapes each of his tracts (see section II.C), each adheres to a formulaic succession of events through which Chick attempts to catch readers' attentions and then bring them to a point where they must respond to the text.

One of the most distinctive features of Chick Tracts is their title page, which both demands attention and gives a little information about the plot of the tract. The format for these, with few exceptions, has been for the first two fifths of the tract (from left to right) to have a black and white image overlaying a background with a monochromatic color scheme, and for the rest to have a black background with simple bold white letters giving the tract's title. This simple, uniform design is the very means by which many people recognize these tracts, and in some cases has become a design to which they have assigned a meaning regardless of what the tract itself says.<sup>21</sup> For those unfamiliar with the tracts, a consideration of the relationship between the image and the words often is enough to captivate one's curiosity.

One of the most apparent of Chick's methods to capture the reader's attention is to portray something from pop culture or a historical event on the cover. He does this either by naming the tract after one of them, as is the case with the tracts *Superman?* and *Titanic*, or by depicting them in the picture, as is the case with *Who Cares?* (Figure 19). This example brings up another vehicle Chick uses to grab the reader's attention: the upsetting of what one would expect, often by offending. A viewer of this title page would first see the attack on the World Trade Center, an image saturated in the American media with which many associate emotions of sorrow and fear, but then read the title invoking a reaction to this disruptive, if not offensive, contrast. A less offensive example is *The Wall* (Figure 20), which displays a racecar driver with sweat flying from his face. The words and image here work together to provoke the reader to make an inference as to what the normal association of a wall and a race car driver is and thus the subject of the tract, which might intrigue the reader to look inside in order to find out how such a horrific event could be portrayed visually. Other tracts rely less on such gimmicks to draw the reader's attention, as Chick appropriates them to different interest groups such as athletes, children, trick-or-treaters, and, of course, those who are looking for a laugh.

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<sup>19</sup> Chick, *Who, Me?*, 10-13.

<sup>20</sup> Chick Publications advertises their tracts according to these classifications (see Chick Publications, *Chick Publications Catalog*, 6, 16, 21).

<sup>21</sup> Raeburn, *The Imp*, 9.



Figure 19



Figure 20

Once a reader opens up a tract, within the first few pages, Chick will attempt to introduce the narrative quickly and situate the reader as a character participating in the story.<sup>22</sup> While one has already seen how Chick is able to introduce his characters through words and images by using some of the conventions unique to comics, his characters also possess traits that one can easily recognize. Indeed many of them do fit certain stereotypes, take, for example, the Moose from *War Zone*, whom Chick characterizes within the first few pages by having him slash the tires of a car and challenge a teacher's authority, while a worried new student receives the news that this school is hell. The reader can easily associate the Moose with the stereotypical bully, and more importantly situate the whole plot of the tract in a typical American story. The plot from this point on seems obvious to the reader, as he or she will recall the general paradigm for such stories, where someone discovers that the "tough guy" has a soft spot and by the end of the narrative will turn out to be a "gentle giant." This paradigm is just one of many that Chick uses to introduce the narrative, and through which readers can situate themselves in the plot by

<sup>22</sup> A possible exception to this general rule is the twenty-one bible tracts, which Chick released between 1985 and 1992 that only introduce the story by citing the bible passages on which Chick based the tract.

considering the place in which they would fall if this paradigm were applied to their life. These paradigms allow Chick to sell his religious message without the distraction of a complex plot.

Another way that he helps his readers to situate themselves within the story is to provide characters that draw on some of the foremost desires and goals of modern society. *The Superstar* serves as an example of this as its main character, a famous soccer player named Roberto Cordoba, lives a life of luxury having just signed two contracts totaling twenty-five million dollars.<sup>23</sup> While few readers could relate to the situation in which Roberto finds himself, readers most likely can relate to his desire to be wealthy and live luxuriously. In this way, Chick encourages his readers to formulate their own thoughts about an issue. Aside from the desires of modern society, he introduces common religious thoughts, controversial subjects, or historical events to involve the readers in a dialogue with the tract that will continue for the rest of the story.

Once Chick has involved the reader in the story by one of the aforementioned devices, he then attempts to challenge common opinions on the presented issue. Chick Tracts claim in different tracts that the common thought (i.e. that wealth equals happiness, etc.) is not valuable at all, that the common religious thought or opinion on a controversial issue is invalid, or even that the readers have been deceived in their understandings of a historical event. This happens in *The Superstar*, when an old man named Juan, claims that Roberto has nothing, after he has just bragged about all that he can now buy and how famous he has become. The two argue about this for a few frames until Roberto finally rejects Juan and gradually grows bitter towards him.<sup>24</sup> At this point, readers may be growing bitter at the tract and its author. Thus, as Roberto did, they too might utterly reject the challenging thought and discard the tract and its message. However, another response, which it seems Chick desires, is for the angered reader to continue reading so that he or she may see the opposing viewpoint and understand the rationale for the challenge.

The foundations for challenging the readers' preconceived opinions on these issues come in a variety of forms, with a special emphasis placed on the authority behind them. In Chick's second bible series (2000 to 2003), the tracts follow a similar pattern in which he first introduces an issue, and then has a character challenge the readers' thoughts. The tracts then move into a biblical story that establishes the authority of the challenge based on its origin in the bible. Other

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<sup>23</sup> Chick, *The Superstar*, 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> Chick, *The Superstar*, 5; 6-10.

tracts similarly rely on the bible for these challenges, but in these situations merely quote the bible rather than recite entire stories. In many of his tracts aimed at those of other faiths, Chick uses the testimonies of his characters to establish this authority. For example, in the anti-Catholic tract *Murph*, the policer officer Joe reveals that he was once a Catholic until he realized it was a dead religion. At this point, Joe's partner Murph, who is also a Catholic, understands through Joe's testimony the errors of Catholicism and decides to convert to Joe's form of Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

The final foundation Chick uses to establish authority is by citing the bible on issues to explain how something happened in history contrary to the normal understanding. Often Chick will invoke and cite situations in which supernatural forces bring events about in the challenging of this standard, "incorrect" understanding. For example, one topic Chick has championed with biblical arguments is creationism, where all of the scientific arguments can either be disproved or attributed to divine action. Chick, like many other creationists claims ultimate authority for the origin of the earth in a literal reading of the creation story with which the Old Testament begins.<sup>26</sup> Although many tracts do contain such rationales for the challenge, the ultimate authority rests in what comes after these explanations.

Some Chick Tracts forgo establishing authority by a character's testimony or a biblical passage and move right to the judgment throne of God. These tracts move the reader into the position of the one being judged before God if they have agreed with the position that the tract has challenged. In this case, a reader will realize to what end his or her current position leads by seeing the final destination of the character that either agreed or disagreed with his or her position. As such, Chick establishes the authority of the challenge—for the final time—by showing the readers the ultimate end of their thoughts.

After showing readers the end of their thoughts, Chick calls them to make a decision for or against their current thoughts. In showing the conversion of a character in a tract, Chick again establishes the authority of the challenge by showing the reader the destiny of those who believe as he or she does. Some Chick Tracts, on the last pages, directly refer to the reader and call him or her to make a decision. Figure 21 displays one such example, where the tract tells the reader that he or she has "just been warned." In this case, the tract leaves the reader in a position where he or she cannot claim before the judgment throne of God that he or she has not received

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<sup>25</sup> Chick, *Murph*, 16-21.

<sup>26</sup> See Chick, *In The Beginning* and Chick, *Big Daddy?*.



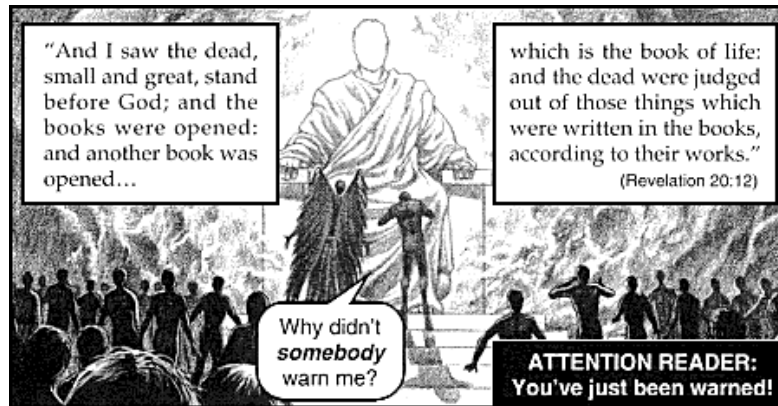


Figure 21

warning, as the character in the comic does. The last page before the back cover offers the reader a way to come clean and to avoid the punishment to which his or her current thoughts will lead them. On this page, Chick provides the reader with a four-step process to receive God's salvation, and then a model prayer that goes through all four of these steps. In many, the tract then asks the reader to indicate whether he or she received Christ as savior, and then concludes with four ways he or she should change to begin a new life.

One can now see that the whole of a Chick Tract works to draw a response out of its readers by causing them to question the thoughts they had before they read it. Each tract does this first by causing them to recall their thoughts on a certain subject, then challenging these thoughts, showing the end to which they lead, and finally calling them to make a decision on the last few pages. It does not seem that Chick expects that everyone who reads his tracts will make a decision to change their ways, but rather that he expects them to respond. This response, as indicated by the following testimony, is enough for Chick to rest assured that some good has come out of someone reading the tract: "I was handed some of your tracts. At first, I rejected the message as being too naïve and simplistic! But I could not bring myself to throw them away, [*sic*] instead keeping them and bringing them out a few times a year just to have a good laugh. But six years ago, I received Jesus as Lord and Savior, your tracts having played a big part!"<sup>27</sup>

### *C. The Variety of Chick Tracts*

In the middle of the twentieth century, one man reflected: "Whatever the need, some thoughtful man or woman has tried to write a tract to meet!"<sup>28</sup> Certainly not much has changed

<sup>27</sup> Chick Publications, "Here's Why Christians Say Chick Tracts Get Read," <http://www.chick.com/testimonies.asp?wpc=testimonies.asp&wpp=b>.

<sup>28</sup> Brooks, "Tracts," 22.

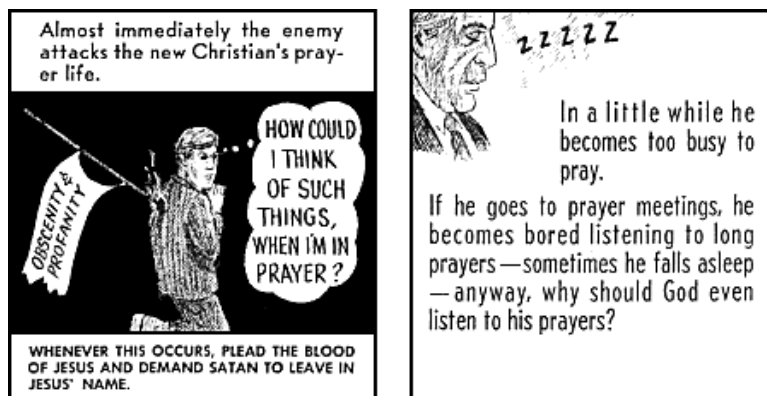


Figure 22

since then, as many contemporary tract societies make and claim their tracts reach a variety of people. In fact, many tract societies now classify their tracts, not just on the content or form of the tract, but according to their intended audience. Chick Tracts are no exception as Chick Publications promotes its own tracts as having intended audiences, as one could see by flipping through its catalog. Michael Colton claimed that a clue for Chick's intended audience could be best understood by looking at a painting of a trucker reading *This Was Your Life!* in Chick's office.<sup>29</sup> Although truckers and other members of the working class probably do compose a significant portion of Chick's intended audience, one cannot reduce it to so few people. Aside from Chick Publication's self-categorization, one can discern and describe the different ways in which Chick constructs tracts for different audiences. Each of these categories has its own unique style, intended result, target audience, and relations between the words and images (see Appendix A).

The tracts that are most dependent on words for the construction of their meaning are those which it seems Chick designated primarily for people who are already Christians. Two tracts that he labeled specifically for this purpose are the two in the Christian Growth Series: *Don't Read That Book!* and *The Secret of Prayer*. Images do appear in these tracts, but the primary difference between them and other tracts is that they do not contain a story and are almost entirely dependent on the words for successful communication (Figure 22). Rather than beginning with a familiar setting, both tracts begin by relating a brief history of their subjects, and then showing the readers what will happen if they do not read the bible or pray: be ashamed when they get to heaven due to their lack of biblical knowledge or force God to ignore their

<sup>29</sup> Colton, "Cartooning for Christ," 52.

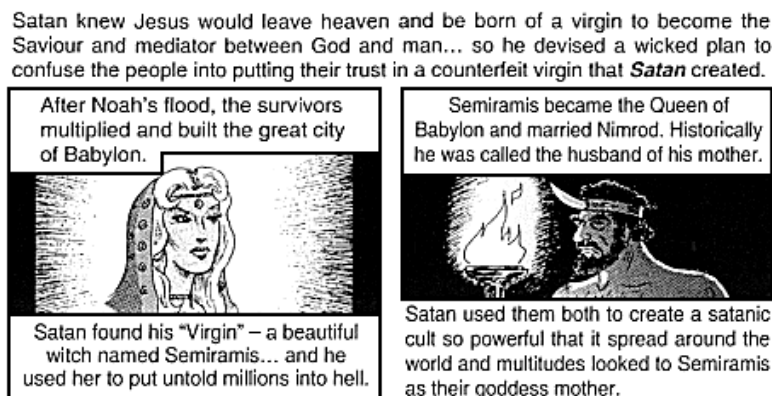


Figure 23

prayers, respectively.<sup>30</sup> The tracts then provide ways in which they can practice more regularly or enhance these Christian disciplines. The images in these tracts serve to illustrate what the words say, rather than add meaning to them.

Other tracts that Chick aimed at Christians possess similar relationships between words and images and point to the logic of this particular usage for this group. Chick's self-promotional tracts, like the Christian Growth Series, introduce the act of evangelization as an act that many Christians often forget in their practice. To correct this, the tracts display the testimonies of many different characters to communicate how tracts are effective tools for evangelization. These too are not primarily story-based and thus use words to communicate their message.

A final category of tracts that is dependent on words rather than images includes tracts that try to expose conspiracy theories. The main conspiracy that Chick tries to expose is that of the Catholic Church, which he views as the creator of many false Christian practices and beliefs, as well as the Islamic religion. In *Why Is Mary Crying?*, Chick claims that, in order to incorporate the pagans into the Roman Catholic religion, Catholics replaced the worship of the (pagan) mother goddess with Mary (Figure 23). The information leading up to this claim would need several graphical frames—far more than Chick has room for—to say what Chick says with words in two frames. Since these three examples show that Chick primarily targets tracts that are word-dependent at people who are already religious, albeit in his opinion in both true and false religions, one might conjecture that Chick feels free to construct these tracts in this way as this type of person presumably would be willing to read a religious document for more than the minute or two that an image-based tract takes to read. In addition, the subject matters he explains

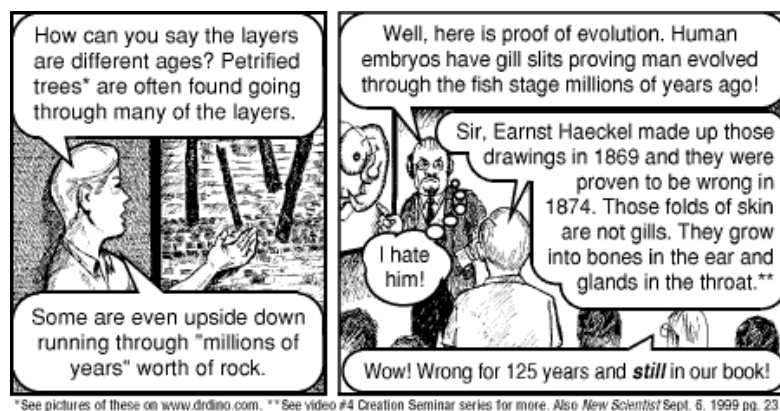


Figure 24

in them require much more detail to be both convincing and sufficiently thorough to the religious audience's satisfaction.

The associations between the words and images in Chick's first bible series (1985-1992) are most similar to those displayed in the tracts targeted at Christians. These tracts illustrate what happens in the text without adding to them except for a comment or two made by the characters. These tracts do not seem to have a definite audience, as they neither begin with something to situate the reader nor challenge the reader's thoughts. In fact, the only indication that Chick did have an audience in mind is that most of them end with a gospel presentation, which tries to link the biblical story to Jesus' life. Perhaps the little importance that these tracts place on presenting the gospel is indicative of Chick's desire to communicate these biblical stories without a target audience, but to anyone who might read them.<sup>31</sup>

Chick's strategy for communicating his message on controversial issues stands out from the rest of his tracts, while still depending slightly on words. Since these issues are contemporary, Chick finds at his disposal many images from which he can choose to initiate the narrative and situate the reader. Cynthia Burack points out that Chick copied an image from a 1971 issue of *Life Magazine* for the first image on the inside cover of his tract *The Gay Blade*, which he first published in 1972.<sup>32</sup> Through the manipulation of this image, he is able to begin his challenge of progressive perspectives on homosexuality. For other issues, this often necessitates using more words than pictures, or at least using the pictures to describe in detail what exactly is happening in the images. Take, for example, a page from the tract *Big Daddy?* in

<sup>30</sup> Chick, *Don't Read That Book!*, 12; Chick, *The Secret of Prayer*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> See, for representative examples, Chick, *Cats*; Chick, *The Outsider*.

<sup>32</sup> Burack, "From Doom Town to Sin City," 14; 15.

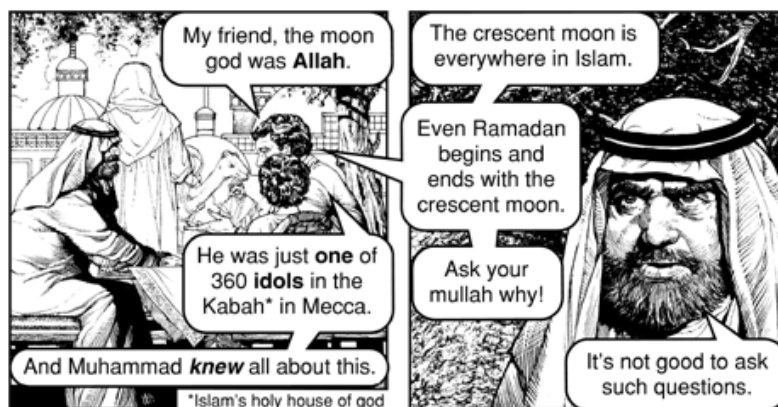


Figure 25

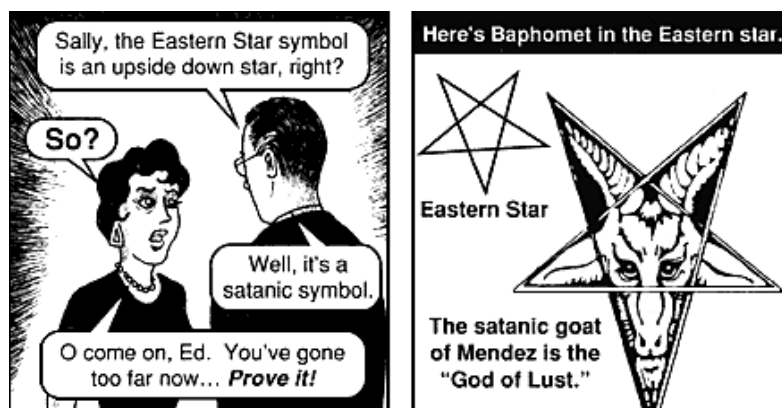


Figure 26

which a student questions his professor's belief of evolution (Figure 24). The teacher responds to the student's question, and he in turn responds with a detailed counterargument, with citations at the bottom of the page where the reader can get more information. Such dialogue and references are common in these types of tracts, which perhaps is due both to how Chick wants to articulate his challenge and present it with authority. Burack points out how well-suited Chick Tracts are for commenting on such controversial issues: "In reality, it is the intimacy of the medium that lends itself to a particular kind of indirect political pedagogy, delivered by Godly characters in the context of personal relations with which the reader can identify."<sup>33</sup>

Chick's tracts about other religions are similar to those about controversial issues in their use of images, text, and presentation. The symbols of the various religions take the place of the pictures taken and altered from pop culture in this genre of tracts. The tracts often point to the various features of the symbols and offer etiological reasons for why they came to represent their religions. For example, in *Allah Had No Son*, an American tourist challenges a Muslim's understanding of Allah and claims that they are really worshipping the moon god, whose image

<sup>33</sup> Burack, "From Doom Town to Sin City," 9.



pervades over Islamic practice (Figure 25). Likewise, in *The Curse of Baphomet*, Chick traces the origins of the Masonic Lodge's eastern star back to Baphomet, the satanic goat of Mendez (Figure 26). Thus, the challenge Chick places on the reader's interpretation of these images draws them into the narrative. He then proceeds to cite various sources for his claims as well as give elaborate explanations for how these religions developed out of ancient pagan religions. It seems that medium's traditional role of entertaining first and criticizing second offers a unique opportunity for Chick to challenge common views on other religions. His use of words over image in these tracts is necessary to legitimate his radical claims.

The majority of Chick Tracts falls into the next category, which receives the broad title of story tracts. These tracts are just simple everyday stories that have a religious tenor and end in the conversion and blessing or damnation and cursing of a character. Chick involves the reader in two different but similar ways. The first is by introducing a well-known book, movie, or historical event, either in the title page of tract or within the tract itself. Chick then offers his own interpretation of the story, as one can see in *Humbug!*, a tract which retells Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. In this tract, Cratchit's sly placement of a paper telling Scrooge to "receive Jesus as [his] personal Saviour" marks the character's redemption rather than his response to the ghastly foreshadowing of his death (Figure 27-28).<sup>34</sup> The second method Chick uses to incorporate his reader is to tell a typical American story. We have explored this idea already in *War Zone?*, where the Moose represents the typical "tough guy" that has a "soft spot" that will change him by the end of the tract. Such stories are so commonplace in American society that the reader will note the unique addition of the gospel message to the tract. Chick's transformation of secular stories into Christian witnessing tools points to the intended readership of story tracts: the non-believer, or marginally religious person. Story tracts have a balance of words and images that work together to communicate their messages and incorporate the reader into the story.

While most story tracts rely on paradigmatic stories to communicate their messages, a large group employs analogy as well, and thus they require their own subcategory. In Chick Tracts, needy characters mourn their pitiful lives and then find hope when other characters situate their circumstances in the context of an analogous biblical passage. The analogy in *The Execution* represents one common analogy Chick uses. In the tract, a death row inmate wakes up on the day of his execution to find out that his mother has already chosen to stand in his place.

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<sup>34</sup> Chick, *Humbug!*, 16-18.



Figures 27 - 28

The tract then communicates to the reader that Christ has done the same thing for him or her by dying on the cross.<sup>35</sup> Analogies pervade nearly all of the second bible series (2000-2003), even though the tracts communicate the biblical story to the character in the comic rather than to the reader. Such analogies fit the general structure of the story tracts, but differ in the way in which they situate the reader in the story.

While one might say that Chick targets the general category of story tracts at adults, he designates a subcategory of these story tracts for children. These tracts, as one might suspect, rely heavily on images because of the limited capacity of their intended audience to comprehend longer words and hard concepts. In addition, they stick primarily to the construction of the story tract genre, but cover issues ranging from homosexuality, to evolution, to Islam. Besides their necessary simplicity, one thing that separates these tracts from others is the large amount of images unrelated to the story line. In particular, one often sees a variety of animals chasing and playing with each other in the frames that provide enough space to permit such activity. In *Best*

<sup>35</sup> Chick, *The Execution*, 16-18.

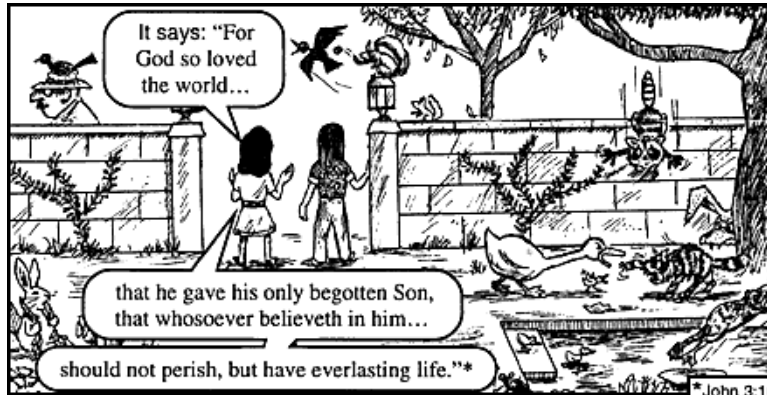


Figure 29

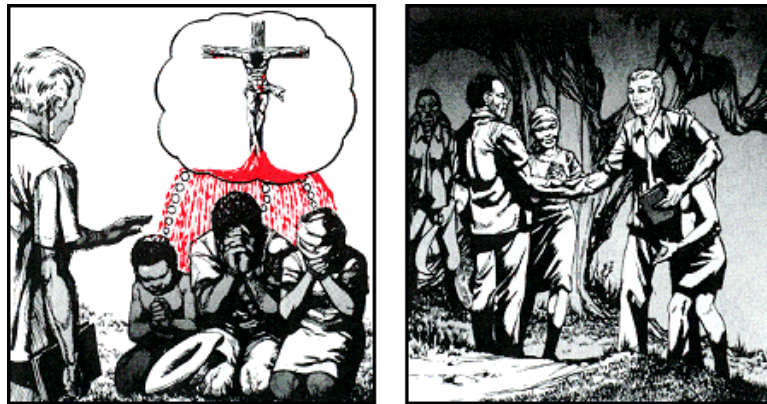


Figure 30

*Friend*, one can see over ten animals playing with each other in just one frame (Figure 29).

While such external action does happen outside of the subcategory of children's story tracts, this action is ubiquitous in children's tracts. Chick likely adds these animals to children's tracts because of the entertainment value they will hold for children. While they might distract from the message the tract is presenting, keeping the children's attention by relying on the images rather than the words is perhaps the first step towards Chick's goal of converting them.

The final category of tracts is unique from all the rest in that it has little to no dependence on words, for these tracts contain little to no words. Each of them is a simple presentation of the gospel message. Although an occasional word appears in the background or out of the mouth of one of the characters, these tracts rely on nonverbal communication. One convention that Chick has used in its place is color, which one rarely finds outside of tracts' titles or back pages. In some of these tracts, the blood that comes out of Jesus' body is red, and likewise the blood that pours from him onto those praying to him. This communicates, without words, that he is dying a painful death, and that this blood has significance for those on whom it pours (Figure 30). The *Wordless Gospel* does contain color with its images, and brings up another distinctive factor about its own tract and about Chick Tracts in general: Chick has acculturated this tract's images

to many different people groups in an attempt to make it relevant to their lives. Thus, if one were to go to Haiti, a tract curtailed specifically to the Haitians would be easily accessible, and would be able, much more than a Caucasian tract would, to involve readers in a dialogue that seems culturally relevant through the changes made to the images.<sup>36</sup>

By classifying Chick Tracts one can understand how distributors must strategically place them in locations where the majority of people whom they are targeting will come. Each different type of tract presents its message in a unique way fitted to the intended readership. The reactions that one person has to a certain kind of tract do not necessarily correspond to how that person would respond to all Chick Tracts. These tracts, however, do all possess a common theme, as Raeburn observes: “The propaganda comprising that simple general message is of course customized in each tract to cater to the particular obsession and susceptibilities of its target audience, but the foundation of Chick’s message is based on the pen of blood sacrifice.”<sup>37</sup> Despite their differences, all of these tracts aim at the common goal of eliciting a response out of the reader, whether it is one that leads them to distribute, destroy, or collect them.

### **III. Chick Tract Culture**

#### ***A. The Distributors***

Without a large faithful group of people to distribute his tracts, Chick’s controversial message would reach few people. However, Chick and Chick Publications have marketed an intricate network of products designed to nurture and maintain their distributors. True to his personal conviction on the value of a tract ministry, Chick purports his works primarily as an evangelical tool that allows the distributor to fulfill his or her obligation to the Great Commission. Thus, their practice of placing and handing out these tracts becomes a religious practice in their lives. For Chick’s distributors, tracts are gifts of love that spread the message they have found to be vital in their own lives. An examination of the meanings Chick assign to the act of distributing his tracts and the corresponding meaning it then develops in distributors’ lives reveals how these meanings helped create and continue to maintain the culture that has emerged around Chick Tracts. In addition, this examination calls into question the claims that

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<sup>36</sup> Chick has appropriated his tracts to many different people groups, with at least one tract appearing in over one hundred languages. Additionally, in May 2006, Chick came out with a tract series for African Americans, which compliments the tract he made for Native Americans, thus offering a diverse group of tracts for people distributing to people in the United States of a non-Caucasian race.



Figure 31

many have made about the act of distributing these tracts as a hate crime by revealing Chick's and his distributors' motivations.

Alongside Chick Tracts' primary goal of evangelization, tracts have a central role in convincing people of the value of having a tract-distribution ministry. As discussed above, the self-promotional tracts introduce the value of having a personal tract-based evangelistic ministry. Christian book store owners distribute these tracts for free to the curious Christian, encouraging them to pick one up as their title pages often read: "FREE Take One!" (Figure 31) The self-promotional tract *Who, Me?* opens up the subject of a personal ministry stating: "If you want a personal ministry... you'll find this VERY exciting!"<sup>38</sup> *Who, Me?* thereby frames the practice of distributing tracts (described in the rest of the tract) as a valid and thrilling personal Christian ministry.<sup>39</sup> The second half of this tract then encourages readers to begin their own tract distribution ministries by offering suggestions on places where they could plant tracts and by discussing how it is far easier to lay a tract somewhere than speak to someone in person about the gospel. *Who, Me?* ends by claiming that one person could reach over one thousand people within a year through tracts and by quoting people who have converted because of someone's tract ministry.<sup>40</sup> Chick designs these promotional tracts to convince doubters that a Chick Tract ministry is a valid way to evangelize by describing people for whom it has been effective.

<sup>37</sup> Raeburn, *The Imp*, 9-10.

<sup>38</sup> Chick, *Who, Me?*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> The other main self-promotional tract currently in circulation, *He Never Told Us!*, does not begin by introducing the tract as a guide to having a personal ministry, but rather introduces this concept after first describing what the consequences of not having one are before describing tract distribution as a personal ministry (2-8).

<sup>40</sup> Chick, *Who, Me?*, 18-19; 21-22.





Figure 32

Although the self-promotional tracts are the most thorough of the Chick Tracts at describing the value of a tract ministry, many of the standard evangelical tracts contain hints for the Christian at the worth of such a ministry. In several tracts, one of the main characters converts to Christianity because he or she has received a tract from another. In *The Little Princess*, for example, the main character Heidi, a young girl who is approaching her death, receives the tract *Happy Halloween* while trick-or-treating (see Figure 32).<sup>41</sup> Having returned from trick-or-treating, Heidi reads the tract, prays to be forgiven for her sins, and then begs her parents to invite over the couple who gave her the tract. The couple rejoices at the news of her conversion, explains to her parents what she has done, and encourages them to do the same. That evening, Heidi's parents convert just before Heidi dies and goes to heaven.<sup>42</sup> Thus, although this tract is primarily a tool for evangelization, it self-referentially emphasizes the effectiveness of having a tract ministry. Not only does it show how one person can convert as a result of receiving a tract, but shows how that person may then subsequently try to convert others. Hence, tracts like this have a dual purpose of converting non-Christians and demonstrating the success of a tract ministry.

Chick Tracts themselves encourage the curious to begin their own tract ministry by advertising on the back of every tract. After presenting its message, Chick Tracts link their readers with one of several resources where he or she may gain additional information on how to pursue this ministry. The website address on the back of the tract provides the easiest way for

<sup>41</sup> Chick, *The Little Princess*, 8. Although *Happy Halloween* is a real Chick Tract, sometimes the tract displayed within the scenes is not actually a real tract, but rather seems to convey what the character understands on account of reading the tract. For example, in *The Bull*, page 11, the eponymous character reads a tract named *Somebody Loves Me*, which is not a real tract but describes what he now understands that encourages him to convert (see Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 166-167 for a comprehensive listing of both types of appearances up to 2004).

one to get in contact with the publishing company itself.<sup>43</sup> If one readers visit the website, they will immediately be greeted with a stock of information that reminds them of their ability to distribute tracts also. One tool the website provides its visitors is a link to an online catalog of Chick Tracts, where one can view all of the tracts that they might wish to use. Another link provides suggestions on where to place tracts and details for how one might do this in different circumstances. Another connects doubters of the abilities of Chick Tracts for evangelistic purposes to testimonies of people that Chicks tracts have affected. In addition, the website links visitors to several different books and articles that defend the theology and stance on social issues that Chick Tracts promote in case the distributors have to defend their convictions. Often these books and articles link visitors back to tracts that correspond to the issues at hand, thus continuing to emphasize visitors' abilities to confront these issues through the medium of tracts.<sup>44</sup> All of these resources make the Chick Publications' website a foundation and resource for personal tract ministries.

Another way that Chick neophytes may connect themselves to a resource base for their new ministry is through the distributing church, which often is advertised on the back of a tract. Some of the churches that do put their name on the back of tracts, make distributing them a vital evangelistic practice for their entire church body. Take, for example, this description of how one church used Chick Tracts:

Our chruch [*sic*] recently had the opportunity to rent a booth at the local country fair. We distributed about 15,000 tracts in five evenings, and 3 people got saved. We also passed out tracts and comic books to most of the fair employees.... They read voraciously! We plan to attend the fair every year. It was also a great chruch [*sic*] experience, sharing the unity of Jesus Christ, as we labored together for our Saviour.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, people can find entire church bodies to support them in their newfound desire to distribute Chick Tracts, making it not only a part of their personal practice of Christianity, but also a

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<sup>42</sup> Chick, *The Little Princess*, 9-21.

<sup>43</sup> The tracts also provide a phone number at which one may reach the company, but due to simplicity of the information that one may receive from the company and its parallels with the other paths to beginning a tract ministry, the author has chosen to forgo describing it.

<sup>44</sup> For example, the Halloween subcategory provides one with more testimonies about people who have received Chick Tracts on Halloween, what tracts would be appropriate for distribution, a history of Halloween, an argument against Christians celebrating it, and how exactly to give them out (Chick Publications, "Make Halloween a Soul-winning Event," <http://www.chick.com/seasonal/halloween/>).

<sup>45</sup> P. & M. K., quoted in Mountain Data, "Tract Passing Tips," <http://www.ggcg.org/tractips.htm>.

practice in which they feel united with a community. Hence, Chick Tracts can be part of both one's personal and ecclesiastical practice of the faith.<sup>46</sup>

Aside from having many different methods of encouraging his readers to begin distributing tracts, Chick also has a network of publications that enable him to keep in contact with his current distributors. Six times a year Chick will mail or e-mail all of his distributors his newsletter entitled *Battle Cry*. Each issue is filled with information on world affairs viewed from Chick's perspective, hints on distributing tracts, testimonies, and a brief catalog of books that Chick Publications publishes. One article entitled "Event Evangelism: Taking the Gospel Where the Crowds Are," encourages readers to begin to target large group events in their personal ministries.<sup>47</sup> Other articles describe ways in which whole churches can participate in evangelizing, as shown in the article "Church Finds Advantages to Using Tracts to Reach Community," which describes the ways that a church in Dayton, Ohio has used Chick Tracts in its church's ministry.<sup>48</sup> In addition, *Battle Cry* sometimes will include the personal testimony of another distributor, who sometimes appears to be a hero of his or her practice. The *Battle Cry* from March and April 2006 describes one such hero as the "million tract man," and then proceeds to describe some of his heroic acts of distributing the tracts.<sup>49</sup> These newsletters encourage Chick Tract distributors to continue distributing by reinforcing the effect that tracts can have on readers.

Chick has one more way of keeping in touch with his distributing audience, which allows them to view themselves as part of a larger movement through an intimate connection with Chick. Along with *Battle Cry*, every two months Chick's mailing list receives a letter to the readers in which Chick personally addresses his supporters. These letters construct a sense of imminence for the importance of distributing tracts, as they often have an eschatological tone. In February 2006, Chick wrote: "In these last days, we must earnestly contend for the faith with the true gospel.... When the rapture hits and we're gone, aren't there others you know who you would like to see in heaven, but you didn't talk to them?"<sup>50</sup> Statements such as this make the practice of distributing tracts vital as he makes it seem as if there may not be much time left to let

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<sup>46</sup> Ironically, Chick himself does not regularly attend church (Raeburn, *The Imp*, 29), although he does promote others going to it in his book *The Last Call*, and has congenial relations with many churches that distribute his tracts.

<sup>47</sup> Chick Publications, "Event Evangelism," <http://www.chick.com/bc/1999/event.asp>.

<sup>48</sup> Chick Publications, "Church Finds Advantages," <http://www.chick.com/bc/2004/tractwork.asp>.

<sup>49</sup> Chick Publications, "Veteran Missionary," 12-13.

<sup>50</sup> Chick, Open Letter to Customers, 25 February 2006.

others know about the gospel. In that way, the individual's practice becomes not just a way to fulfill the Great Commission but something that has eternal significance in others' lives as well.

Chick Tract distributors, like Chick, take their ministry very seriously recognizing both that it fulfills the Great Commission and that they are part of something greater. Someone from Ohio commented on his experience with the tracts: "My prayers have been answered! For so long I have been praying for a way to witness and now I have found one. You are exactly right about people being afraid of witnessing for Christ in front of crowds. I surely am!"<sup>51</sup> This demonstrates exactly the type of statement Chick wishes his distributors to be able to make: through these tracts, this person was able to fulfill his or her duty to God, which he or she otherwise might not have done. Thus, just as the tracts act as a means of appeasing God by obeying his commandments for Chick, so do they for distributors. One person from Pennsylvania conjectured: "If every Christian put a tract in all bills, when they pay the bill, the message of Jesus would be in almost every business in America."<sup>52</sup> Although this does not reflect the apocalypticism found in Chick's letters to his readers, it does show that some of his distributors realize that tracts have a potential beyond what one individual distributor can do. Through these tracts, people are able to practice their own faith and imagine how they might share it even further through others.

That the comments Chick's distributors make do not exactly correspond to Chick's own, reflects something central to the success of Chick Tracts. Due to the wide variety of tracts aimed at many different audiences, distributors are able to choose which beliefs they will endorse and to whom they will distribute the tracts. A heated debate on an online Baptist bulletin board drew out the following post: "Q. Are people getting saved through the Chick ministry? A. Yes Q. Are the doctrinal and/or KJV issues serious enough to boycott the Chick ministry? A. No."<sup>53</sup> The discussion up to this point focused on the various problems that other posters had with Chick's doctrine, especially in relation to the King James Version of the bible. This post demonstrates what common practice is: distributors choose the tracts they think are effective, and ignore those that either do not meet their needs or fit in with their theology. Hence, when people distribute

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Christ the Way, *Christ the Way*, <http://www.christtheway.ca/chick.asp>.

<sup>52</sup> D.L., quoted in Mountain Data, "Tract Passing Tips," <http://www.ggcg.org/tractips.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> Sounddoctrine04 in BaptistBoard.com, "Is Chick Publications Baptist?," <http://www.baptistboard.com/ubb/ultimatebb.php/topic/16/413/2.html>.

tracts, they most likely know what message they promote and believe that these tracts display truth that is important enough to share with others.

The tract *This Was Your Life!* serves as a model for what implications there are if the distributors believe what the tract states is true. *This Was Your Life!* starts with the unexpected death of an average man. Taken from his grave by an angel, this man goes before the judgment throne of God. There God reviews his life on a screen, and tells him to depart to the everlasting lake of fire because of the sins the man has committed. The tract then shows the alternative to this man's fate by showing how it could have been if he had repented: he could have received forgiveness in life and gone to heaven after death. If distributors believe that what the tract says is true, then they do not merely possess a tract that communicates their opinions on some issue, but knowledge of something that is crucial to everyone's life. The tract then comes to represent something far more important than a normal comic does; it becomes a holy object for it possesses a truth that is central to distributors' lives and, from their perspectives, to every life. The act of giving this to another then is not meant to be an attack on people who believe differently, but a warning to others that if the distributors are indeed correct about the way the world works, they have granted the reader an opportunity to accept salvation.

The tract, for distributors, is not a simple twenty-four-page pamphlet, but a gift of mercy they wish to bestow on the recipients. Mark Osteen claims that an object may be considered sacred "if it is inextricably connected with some spiritual practice or moral quality."<sup>54</sup> Chick Tracts, for the distributor, each possess at least one of those qualities, and thus the act of handing them out is an act in which distributors give away something that is sacred. One should, however, note a distinction from a Chick Tract and other sacred objects, in that it is easily reproducible, and thus the act of giving it to another is not the same as if one were to give away a unique sacred object.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, from their perspectives, distributors possess a knowledge that others do not, and in giving away these tracts, they give away that with which God has entrusted them. Maurice Godelier explains: "To be sure, they are the support for and the sign of the relationships of dependence, indebtedness, and gratitude that humans entertain with the imaginary beings, 'true owners of the objects and goods of the world,' who shared their use with

<sup>54</sup> Osteen, "Gift or Commodity?," 241.

<sup>55</sup> One could compare the way that the Gideon society distributes bibles to Chick Tract distribution. The Gideon bibles similarly are reproducible, but this does not detract from the meaning that the Gideons assign to them, as they view distributing these mass-produced items as their ministry.

men and who, when they gave these sacred objects, also gave men some of their own powers.”<sup>56</sup> In giving away these tracts, distributors give thanks to God for the knowledge with which God has blessed them, as they understand it.

Even though many distributors attempt, as best they can, to love those around them by distributing these tracts, many have labeled Chick Tracts as hate literature. If the distributors are right, and all who do not believe as they do truly will suffer eternal damnation in the lake of fire, then their attempts to warn others about the result of their lifestyle truly are an act of love. However, the label that Chick Tracts often receive of hate literature is not unfounded. While distributors may think they love those around them by distributing these tracts, they fail to distinguish between offending proactively from offending destructively. An example of a proactive offense is what Chick meant at the start of *Why No Revival?* (see page 4), where he hoped that offending people through this tract would lead people to revival. On the other hand, offending destructively happens at events like the one mentioned above where a church distributed 15,000 tracts and saw three converts. From those other 14,997 tracts, more than three people were not led to revival who were offended. While both Chick and his distributors revel in being counterculture to the point where offending is desirable, their tract ministries could benefit by considering in what ways they offend others and changing their practices accordingly.

From this discussion, it is evident that the love shown in Chick Tracts does not appear as it does in most Christian tracts or in any recognizable form to the ordinary viewer. However, as Frederica Mathewes-Green claims: “Chick comics don’t beat around the bush. How could they? Your eternal soul is at stake.”<sup>57</sup> Perhaps refusing to beat around bush is one reason that Chick Tracts have received so much criticism for looking hateful. On the contrary, the distributors themselves might be at fault for not presenting the tracts as gifts whose primary purpose is to warn but rather leaving the understanding of the tract’s purpose up to the readers. On the other hand, it could be the very presentation of this message of love within the tracts themselves that has obscured what their distributors intend. Whatever the case might be, for their distributors, Chick Tracts are the way they have chosen to show their love for both God and others by spreading the message entrusted to them.

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<sup>56</sup> Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, 175. Here the author departs slightly from the definition under which Godelier was making this statement, as just after the quote above he claimed that a sacred object would not be given away. The author recognizes this, but Godelier’s description of what happens still seems apt although it may be less true than it would be with an object that one could not give away.

### ***B. The Iconoclasts***

As mentioned above, many people often describe Chick Tracts as forms of hate literature, accusing Chick and his distributors of being bigots.<sup>58</sup> Their aversion to these tracts has given birth to a wide variety of different iconoclastic practices in an attempt to eradicate their messages from the rest of the world. One reason that they may have elicited such a strong response is the strong sense of satire present in most of the tracts. There are few who are in complete concordance with all the methods Chick uses to satirize his opponents through seemingly unfounded hypotheses and conspiracy theories. His satirizing of common religious and societal beliefs and his intolerance for dissenters has provoked different forms of iconoclasm ranging from the simple destruction of the images, to the development of theological arguments against his theology, to an abundance of parodies. The iconoclasts, in general, are comprised of liberal Protestants, Roman Catholics, atheists, and members of religions that Chick criticizes. Oddly, it seems that Chick desires their negative response to his tracts—it actually appears to reassure him that he is doing the will of God. This peculiarity points to a new way of thinking about these acts of iconoclasm by questioning the way Chick Tract iconoclasts approach them.

From their very outset, Chick designed his tracts to satirize others whom he did not think were acting correctly. In *Why No Revival?*, he depicted some members of his church within the tract as lazy Christians, which subsequently enraged many of them.<sup>59</sup> This has continued in more extreme forms in the tracts he draws today. The most prominent example of these concern the Pope; he makes claims that the beast of the book of Revelation will rule from the Vatican, that Satan created the Pope as his blaspheming anti-Christ, and that the Pope is “the man of sin.”<sup>60</sup> Other times he does not target specific individuals but generic categories of people that represent the hopes and desires of the culture he is satirizing—for example, Roberto in *The Superstar* fits the stereotypical desire to lead a life of luxury. Chick then unmask these heroes as people who are not what they seem to be. The Pope is the anti-Christ, Roberto does not possess anything worthwhile, the anti-creationism science teacher is unscientific, the church-going Christian is not right in God’s eyes, etc. Leonard Feinberg describes how this unmasking usually functions in satire: “Satire frequently ‘unmasks’ somebody or something. That people get pleasure out of

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<sup>57</sup> Mathewes-Green, “Shunning Nuance,” [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/33/story\\_3388.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/33/story_3388.html).

<sup>58</sup> Chick first heard these words used against his tracts when Chick Publications printed *The Gay Blade* in 1972 (see Chick, *Open Letter to Customers*, 23 May 1996).

<sup>59</sup> Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 9.

such exposés is unquestionable.... Much of the pleasure presumably comes from our consciousness of our own imperfections; it is gratifying to learn that others are also guilty of inadequacy or hypocrisy.”<sup>61</sup> Although, for the outsider, such parodies surely may provide pleasure and draw them to the tract, for those whom he is unmasking, it both offends and encourages a strong negative response as even though Chick’s aim may be conversion, it still injures the personas of these heroes.<sup>62</sup>

Just as unmasking societal and religious heroes invokes a negative response, so do Chick’s controversial views and critiques of other belief systems and ideologies provoke much ridicule. This mockery comes because he targets many of his tracts at specific religious, societal, political, or scientific beliefs and often justifies his claims against them through different sources than those which they themselves would use (see section II.B). *Ivan the Terrible*, one of Chick’s early tracts, attacks both communism and Roman Catholicism in an attempt to discredit both belief systems. The main character, Ivan, is a proponent of communism and gets into a discussion about it with a Christian man, in which the communist reveals his distaste for religion. The Christian man responds to this by revealing the secret origins of communism in the Roman Catholic Church, and then challenges Ivan to renounce his allegiance to communism and turn it over to God. Chick’s use of satire here seems to fit the description E. V. Knox gives of satire as scorn: “[T]his word surely implies, whether in language or literature, the combined notions of ridicule and reproof.”<sup>63</sup> Chick reproves communists simply by stating that they are wrong, and ridicules them by linking their belief to something that they would not have expected, to a previously unknown origin. He seems to poke fun at them here by claiming that they have been “played the fool;” indeed even they do not seem to know from where their beliefs come. It seems that this ridicule may elude a larger response than would just the reproof by itself. Chick’s mocking of what they hold dear by what appears to be exaggerated stories draws out the belligerent reactions of his iconoclasts.

Both the act of unmasking heroes and ridiculing one’s most fundamental belief achieve Chick’s desired effect on his readers. “In the formation of any kind of satire,” David Worcester asserts, “there are two steps. The author first evolves a criticism of conduct—ordinarily human

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<sup>60</sup> See Chick, *The Beast*, 10; Chick, *Man in Black*, 15; Chick, *Who’s Missing*, 14.

<sup>61</sup> Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire*, 212.

<sup>62</sup> Gombrich, “Magic, Myth, and Metaphor,” 193.

<sup>63</sup> Knox, “The Mechanism of Satire,” 1.



conduct, but occasionally divine. Then he contrives ways of making his readers remember that criticism and adopt it as their own.”<sup>64</sup> Chick’s goal does seem to be a change in the minds of his readers, as he encourages them to make a decision both within and at the end of the tracts. This encouragement sets him (or his character) up as the one who possesses the truth, whereas the readers who disagree with him he declares wrong. From the readers’ perspectives, as he “passes a succession of absolute moral judgments on his fellow men, he inevitably becomes an egoistic monster bursting with his own righteousness and completely devoid of any sympathy for his victims or doubts about his own moral status.”<sup>65</sup> That he expects them to change to his view of the world because he negates theirs seems to be the reason why his tracts have extracted so much negative criticism.

Perhaps the most common iconoclastic act done against Chick Tracts has been to throw them away whenever one sees them. Oftentimes, people will not even read the tract before discarding it; in this case, the tract itself has become a threatening icon against the iconoclast’s belief system.<sup>66</sup> This seemingly simple act has elevated into acts of group iconoclasm, where people will mobilize to eradicate all Chick Tracts from an area. For example, one college student, who discards tracts whenever he can, mobilized several others to destroy the tracts where could not go when he saw them in one building on his campus. He described his rationale for his actions as follows: “The reason I make it a campaign of sorts to remove the tracts from campus is that I’m concerned about the people who encounter Christianity through them.”<sup>67</sup> His response to the presence of Chick Tracts on his campus demonstrates how individuals’ views of these tracts can lead them to encourage others to destroy the tracts because they view them as threatening to the way they wish to present their belief system.

In some situations, it seems that those who encourage this type of behavior view it as a reaffirmation of one’s faith, as has become common with iconoclasm.<sup>68</sup> A letter from Karl Keating, the president of Catholic Answers, demonstrates how destroying these tracts becomes a part of affirming one’s personal faith. In this letter, he warns fellow Catholics that at the “World

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<sup>64</sup> Worcester, “Selection from *The Art of Satire*,” 180. Although many analysts of satire think that encouraging change is a definitive part of the satirist’s motive, Feinberg disagrees and claims that entertainment is its primary function (see Feinberg, *An Introduction to Satire*, 8).

<sup>65</sup> Kernan, “A Theory of Satire,” 175.

<sup>66</sup> See Raeburn, *The Imp*, 9 for a description of how the tracts have become iconic of something else for certain people.

<sup>67</sup> Valparaiso University Student, interview with author, 1 May 2006.

<sup>68</sup> Latour, “What is Iconoclasm?,” 14.

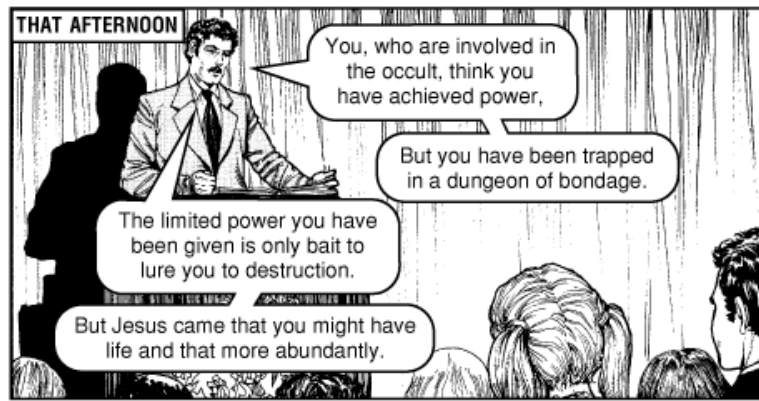


Figure 33

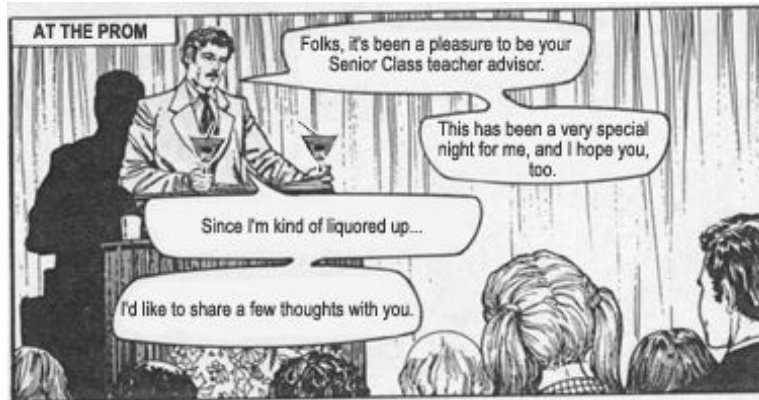


Figure 34

Youth Day” thousands of anti-Catholic Chick Tracts will find their way into the hands of unsuspecting believers. Thus, he explains the propaganda in the tracts themselves, and demands that the readers destroy the tracts (provided as examples within the letter) as soon as they finish reading.<sup>69</sup> This first act of iconoclasm presumably would generate many more if the reader were to run into more tracts at the “World Youth Day” or elsewhere. Hence, Keating’s command to destroy this tract is a command to practice one’s faith in a certain way: by destroying that which is against it.

Another type of iconoclastic act commonly practiced against Chick Tracts is parody. These parodies have ranged from simple changes made to the words of the tracts to entirely original creations with topics ranging from a simple critique of Chick’s art to a systematic rebuttal of what his theology suggests. Chick Publications has even demanded that several of the parodies be taken off the Internet because they violated copyright laws by using some of Chick’s artwork (see Figures 33-34). However, the practice of making these parodies has not diminished, but rather has evolved to take on more elaborate and creative forms. For example, many newer ones will use new artwork to satirize the original tract (see Figures 35-36), oftentimes reworking



Figure 35



Figure 36

his plotline even more than was possible before. Others have simply imitated Chick's drawing style and created completely original plotlines. This culture of parodies remains an elaborate part of the iconoclastic practices associated with Chick Tracts.

There have been two predominant ways of approaching these parodies, one of which criticizes Chick's religious beliefs, while the other merely scrutinizes its aesthetic features. While the former type reveals much about the role that this practice plays in the lives of their creators, the latter does not and therefore only needs a brief mention for the purposes of this paper. These aesthetic criticisms often focus on some of the repeated motifs in the tracts, such as the faceless God, or the inconsistencies in the dialogue—neither of which seems to be unique to Chick Tracts.<sup>69</sup> The religious parodies, on the other hand, directly attack Chick's theology, thereby communicating their creators' beliefs. Oftentimes these come from religious communities with which Chick disagrees. For example, the Aquarian Tabernacle Church, a Wiccan community, produces two tracts—both online and in print—that they intended

to be serious educational religious material, and to at the same time parody some of the hate literature that is published under the guise of 'religious' literature by others,

<sup>69</sup> Keating, Letter to Catholics, <http://members.aol.com/monsterwax/chick.html>.

<sup>70</sup> For example see Psycho Dave, *God Meat*, <http://www.weirdcrap.com/chick/meat/meat.html> or *Mystery Science Theatre*, <http://www.humpin.org/mst3kdd/>.

literature that often attacks the faith of just about everyone else except, of course, that particularly narrow brand of ‘religion’ followed by the publisher.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the parodies become a medium through which the creators communicate their individual beliefs and distance from those of Chick.

Parodies, by necessity, often must renew the norms they are trying to destroy before they go on to criticize them.<sup>72</sup> There are clear examples of Chick Tracts that must do this very thing, exemplified by those which use Chick’s ideas and apply them to the religion they advocate—for example, Jim Huger’s atheistic parody *This is Your Death* shows how there will be no judgment awaiting people after they die.<sup>73</sup> The active reader will then remember the alternative that exists to this atheistic understanding of life after death. In this way, the parodies ironically preserve what they are trying to destroy. Making parodies, like the act of throwing Chick Tracts away, communicates the iconoclasts’ self-perception of superiority. Surely, making parodies of tracts and then distributing them creates a sense of identity among the participants: they all join in their struggle against this harmful medium. However, just as one might be critical of Chick Tract distributors for claiming to have some sort of special knowledge that no one else possesses, so the iconoclasts communicate their superiority over Chick Tract distributors. E. H. Gombrich expands this thought: “What is described nowadays as a sense of identity is always buttressed by an assumption of superiority over those who do not belong.”<sup>74</sup> In this way, the iconoclasts say no to those who do not believe as they do. “To say ‘no’ is at once to communicate rejection and to reject communication,” Joseph Koerner observes.<sup>75</sup> This allows both Chick Publications and the parody-makers to continue what they are doing without ever communicating, thus preserving both varieties.

Chick himself actually seems to gain inspiration from all of these negative reactions to his tracts. He claimed in an interview: “I routinely ask my secretary if we are getting hate mail. If she says no, I get upset because I think I’m ‘doing something wrong.’”<sup>76</sup> In one of his more

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<sup>71</sup> Aquarian Tabernacle Church, “Anti-Tracts,” <http://www.aquatabch.org/afwe/antitracts.php>. For examples of atheistic tracts that attempt to do the same see Psycho Dave, *The Jack T. Chick Parody Archive*, <http://www.weirdcrap.com/chick/index.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Rose, *Parody*, 82.

<sup>73</sup> Jim Huger, *This is Your Death*, in Psycho Dave, *The Jack T. Chick Parody Archive*, <http://www.weirdcrap.com/chick/tyd/tyd.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Gombrich, “Magic, Myth and Metaphor,” 195.

<sup>75</sup> Koerner, “The Icon as Iconoclasm,” 188.



Figure 37

recent tracts, an iconoclast even made an appearance (see Figure 37)—he later reveals that this character is the devil. In Chick’s view of the world, he receives ridicule and persecution because he is doing the work of God, and therefore he can rejoice in it. This also resembles the view of the iconoclasts who commit acts of iconoclasm with a religious or ideological purpose—given that the atheists would not refer to God, but rather might claim they were exposing the misguided religious worldview. Here again, the two sides reject communication by asserting that they alone are right.

One type of criticism, however, has opened certain levels of communication between the two groups. This type is represented by a number of articles, essays, and books that attempt to discredit certain portions of Chick’s theology. The most well known argument against which people argued was Chick’s portrayal of Alberto, someone he claimed was a former Jesuit. Based on Alberto’s stories, he wrote many of the Catholic conspiracy tracts and a few full-length comic books. He claimed that Alberto’s claims about the Roman Catholic Church were real even to the point where he would defend this character’s legitimacy by reproducing his identification papers (Figure 38).<sup>76</sup> However, the media was highly critical of this story, and many started to publish articles questioning Alberto.<sup>77</sup> Although Chick never denied Alberto’s existence nor that he was a former Jesuit, Alberto’s story is no longer the focus of Chick’s anti-Catholicism, even if his influence remains. An informed, scholarly deconstruction of an aspect of Chick’s works has

<sup>76</sup> Chick, *Open Letter to Customers*, 1983.

<sup>77</sup> Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 27.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Metz, “Jack Chick’s Anti-Catholic Alberto Comic”; Ewin, *Comic book publisher Jack Chick and Alberto Rivera*. Pagan Kennedy reports how a certain Catholic newspaper offered a ten-thousand dollar reward for proving Alberto’s existence, no one came forward (“All About Evil,” 27).



the tracts when considering their messages.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Kerr Cuhulain, a member of the Wiccan community, wrote a lengthy article briefing the members of his community on and deconstructing Chick's tracts against the Wiccan religion.<sup>80</sup> The communities that produce informative documents on Chick Tracts for their members realize that it is impractical to think that their constituents will go through life without encountering some of these tracts and thus they provide them with a way to cope with the situation if it is to arise. Although sometimes articles and books like this do seem to encourage the destruction of all Chick Tracts, one should note the difference between defaming the tracts in this way and those from which Chick draws inspiration. This type of response tends to possess well-thought-out critiques of Chick Tracts, and has not incited a strong reaction out of Chick.

Many of the iconoclastic practices associated with Chick Tracts produce a sense of meaning in their enactors' lives. One of the primary reasons that these tracts have inspired such a negative response is that they are a highly critical form of satire with which very few people agree. The acts of destroying and making parodies of these tracts are the two most common ways in which people express their disgust with them. However, these practices close communication between the two sides and thereby allow both sides to continue unchanged. On the other hand, the well-thought-out critiques and guides on how to deal with Chick Tracts have either changed the subjects of the tracts or incited little to no response out of Chick. Nonetheless, the iconoclastic responses that these tracts have inspired have contributed significantly to the preservation of the culture that has formed around them.

### *C. The Collectors*

While all enduring tract companies have distributors and usually iconoclastic critics if the tracts are controversial, Chick Tracts are unique because a substantial culture of collecting has developed around them. Part of this results from the ways in which Chick has exploited the medium of comics. Other sources of attraction and attention come from their controversial nature and shocking claims. Whatever the exact source of interest that has led people to collect them, the collectors have been able to use these tracts to express how they feel about religion. Many collect them because they find them humorous, others because they distribute them, and others

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<sup>79</sup> Catholic Answers, "The Nightmare World," [http://www.catholic.com/library/sr\\_chick\\_tracts.asp](http://www.catholic.com/library/sr_chick_tracts.asp). Note that although Catholic Answers have this well-thought out critique, their president's, Karl Keating's, letter is much more rash and encourages acts of iconoclasm before encouraging readers to understand the tracts.

<sup>80</sup> Cuhulain, "Jack Chick," [http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt\\_va.html?a=cabc&c=whs&id=4638](http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=cabc&c=whs&id=4638).

because they dislike them. These varied responses indicate how the practice of collecting allows one to strip the object of its value and assign it value based only on one's personal experience with the medium. The religious nature of these tracts, however, does have an impact on what these tracts mean to the collectors, and thus, the meanings assigned usually correspond to the person's experience with religion as well. Through this practice, Chick Tracts are able to construct meaning in collectors' lives.

Collecting Chick Tracts is a fairly new phenomenon, but has grown to offer collectors a wide variety of different options for their collections. The two authors of the only books published on Chick Tracts primarily wrote these books for the collecting community. The first, Fowler's *The World of Jack T. Chick*, attempted to record the history of the world as Chick sees it by systematically recording what Chick's tracts and comics say. Fowler also included a cataloguing system of all the tracts, which "analyzes numerous problems involved in [cataloguing the tracts], and proposes a system of tract codes to enable to discuss and catalog the tracts."<sup>81</sup> The second major book, Kurt Kuersteiner's *The Unofficial Guide to The Art of Jack T. Chick* also includes basic information about Chick and the tracts, but then offers a comprehensive price guide for collectors who are selling or buying.<sup>82</sup> These books offer a basic guide for any serious collector to assess their collection and a guide on how they might trade with others.

A companion website to Kuersteiner's book, the *Jack T. Chick Museum of Fine Art*, acts as the hub for collectors by connecting them with others and providing advice on how they can improve their collections. Perhaps the greatest contribution the website has made to the community is *The Jack Chick Club*, a club for collectors that promotes the tracts, distributes news about them, facilitates a community for the collectors to trade and sell, and combines to support the first amendment right to prevent censorship, especially in regard to Chick Tracts.<sup>83</sup> The site encourages collectors to join by offering a rare tract that was originally not available in English to anyone who subscribes, along with a free Chick Tract club button (see Figure 39). The primary website has sponsored various contests on the best place to put tracts and provides a forum to share memories, up-to-date news, information on Chick Tract motifs, links to all tracts

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<sup>81</sup> Fowler, *The World of Jack T. Chick*, 1-4.

<sup>82</sup> Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 36-139.





Figure 39

that are online, etc. This website allows Chick fanatics to connect with other collectors, learn about the history behind some of the tracts, and, in general, assist them in their hobby.

An examination of what collectors say about the tracts reveals that much of their interest in collecting comes from Chick's uses of the conventions of comics. Bob Williams, the character who appears in all twenty-five tracts of the second bible series, has attracted much interest among collectors. In most of these tracts, Bob will show up at a crucial moment in someone's life, tell him or her a biblical story that parallels his or her life, and then ask him or her to convert. The narrative, although not always beginning with Bob, always seems to come back to his life *in medias res*, as is characteristic of most heroes of comics.<sup>84</sup> Readers have given Bob much attention, musing on many of his attributes, including his bank account and how he manages to work despite always seeming to be available to others. One collector claims: "[H]e's who every script evangelist wishes he could be."<sup>85</sup> Other characters such as Susy, the child heroine of a five-part children's series, her teacher Mrs. Henn, a character based on one of Chick's long-time distributors Chaplain Dann, and Fang, a dog that regularly appears in random places, have also attracted attention.<sup>86</sup> These recurring characters keep collectors rereading the tracts as they maintain their interest by providing new avenues that fans can investigate.

Another area of interest in Chick Tracts, which perhaps has stirred up the most controversy, is the conspiracy theories that Chick uses to explain why he disagrees with other religions or denominations. Some collectors enjoy these theories because they find it amusing

<sup>83</sup> Monsterwax, "Who We Are and What We Want!," <http://members.aol.com/chickclub/goals.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 56.

<sup>85</sup> Monsterwax, "Bob's Bank Account," <http://members.tripod.com/monsterwax/bobsbank.html>; White, "Jack Chick Archives," 17 April 2005, [http://www.websnark.com/archives/jack\\_chick/](http://www.websnark.com/archives/jack_chick/).

<sup>86</sup> Fang's elusiveness has even inspired many to go searching through Chick Tracts just to find more sightings of him (see Monsterwax, "Fang's A lot!," <http://members.tripod.com/monsterwax/fang.html>).

that anyone might actually believe what to them appear to be fabrications. One reviewer of the tract *The Attack* commented that although there was too much text in this tract, the conspiracy theories on the “Satanic” Catholic Church’s involvement with the eradication of the King James Version of the bible made the tract worthwhile.<sup>87</sup> The radical nature of these conspiracy theories points to a larger category of characteristics that collector’s find so endearing: they are appealing because of their kitsch nature. One fan commented: “Jack Chick's [web]site...totally blows my mind. It is so outrageous it takes me to kitsch nirvana.”<sup>88</sup> For these collectors, Chick’s intricate weavings of theories to explain his worldview provide entertainment as they have a “subversive, ironic capacity which is innate in [their] cultural awfulness.”<sup>89</sup>

The kitsch nature of Chick Tracts provides nonbelievers and those who disagree with Chick with a way to enjoy these tracts, and reinforces the way they approach religion. David Futrelle expands on the ways he experiences Chick Tracts:

Part of the charm (at least for us unbelievers) comes from Chick's simple ineptitude. Though he's been producing tracts for decades he remains a true naif. His language is as awkward as his art, and the logic of his arguments are as twisted as his contorted plots. Most endearingly, the tracts are rife with bizarre anachronisms—much of the stock is left over from Chick's early years, and these early tracts feature long-haired, bell-bottomed youths railing against the "establishment.”<sup>90</sup>

Atheists, like Futrelle, have a way of experiencing these tracts aside from responding to them religiously; they can appreciate them as they might appreciate other bizarre cultural artifacts. However, given the religious purposes of Chick Tracts, collectors also communicate their feelings toward Chick’s narrow view of religion: they take it very light-heartedly, finding humor in its radical claims. Psycho Dave, the owner of *The Jack T. Chick Parody Archive*, asserts: “Jack T. Chick's world view... is so extreme and unbelievable that no *sane* individual would ever believe it.”<sup>91</sup> Their enjoyment of these tracts rests on the presumption that the views of their distributors and Chick himself are wrong. Thus, the collectors who often find interest in the kitsch nature of Chick Tracts can find meaning in these tracts as they juxtapose themselves in relation to what they are not, by laughing at the absurdity of these tracts’ claims.

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<sup>87</sup> Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 39.

<sup>88</sup> Mr. Nice Guy, quoted in Walker, “Fair Use,” [http://www.reason.com/hitandrun/2004/03/fair\\_use\\_will\\_b.shtml](http://www.reason.com/hitandrun/2004/03/fair_use_will_b.shtml).

<sup>89</sup> Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*, 37.

<sup>90</sup> Futrelle, “Reading: The Gospel According to Jack,” 10.

<sup>91</sup> Psycho Dave, “Introduction,” <http://www.weirdcrap.com/chick/intro.html>.

Chick's supporters collect his tracts much less than do his opponents, but those who do collect them have others in mind when they do. For a tract distributor, the only real purpose to having these tracts is to spread the message they purport, and thus there are very few example of Chick Tract supporters who collect them. However, those who do collect them often use their collection for evangelical purposes as well as personal. For example, one Chick Tract collector describes his draw to collecting:

Back in 1976 we moved from Massachusetts to Maine. My dad joined World of Christ Ministries. The Pastor gave me a stack of Chick tracts and boy I loved them. The whole collection. In the mid-1980s, I started to collect the tracts I cherished. (I received Christ through Chick tracts.) I got really excited when others were searching these tracts.<sup>92</sup>

This collector holds a personal attachment to his collection seemingly because he "received Christ through Chick tracts." Additionally, however, his collection is evangelical, as he gets excited when others read them. His conversion story might convince him that others who read the tracts similarly would convert as well. Thus, his collection acts as both a reminder of his faith and a tool that he can use to lead others to this faith.

The distributors of Chick Tracts, although they themselves might not have a collection, support others who do, as this is another way that the message they wish to communicate gets out. Collectors often claim that one of the reasons they are so attracted to collecting Chick Tracts is that they are inexpensive, as they often get them free from distributors.<sup>93</sup> One distributor named Doug saw an article about a man who had recently gotten in trouble for inadvertently causing the death of his neighbor's two dogs. Doug then started sending the man one Chick Tract a week for five months, he became discouraged because he had not heard from the man, but then because of his job he had to enter the man's house: "The job required me to enter his house, where I saw every one of the Chick Tracts prominently displayed in his living room. I didn't mention to him that I sent them, but I took this as a sign that my efforts were not in vain, and am now passing out more Chicks than ever."<sup>94</sup> Doug was overjoyed to see that the man had begun a collection and that these tracts were placed around the man's room. Presumably, the man was reading the tracts, and thus Doug could rejoice because the message he wished to spread was at least getting some attention. Stories like Doug's demonstrate how distributors are content to have

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<sup>92</sup> Michael, quoted in Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 146.

<sup>93</sup> Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 33.

<sup>94</sup> Doug W., quoted in Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 149.

people read the tracts no matter how they are read, for at least the message has not gone unnoticed.

The different meanings Chick Tract collectors assign to their tracts, either a representation of what happened in one's life or a declaration of that with which one disagrees, show how the practice of collecting can suggest very different things about the collectors. Collectors usually associate religious meanings with their collection because of the nature of the tracts, but the particular meaning seems to be contingent entirely upon the individual. Jean Baudrillard describes how collected objects lose their meanings: "Once the object stops being defined by its function, its meaning is entirely up to the subject. The result is that all objects in a collection become equivalent, thanks to that process of passionate abstraction we call possession."<sup>95</sup> Such is the case with Chick Tracts, as they lose their functional purpose for which Chick intended them and assume the one the collector desires. One thing all collections of these tracts do have is that they rebel against the norms of society. "The collections of popular culture provide [a] subversive commentary upon 'normal' culture. The same kinds of equivocation surround collections which strip the familiar away from things, treating the discarded or the disregarded as important in ways which tend to illuminate or subvert received significances," Susan Pearce observes.<sup>96</sup> Collectors of these tracts, like their distributors and iconoclasts, certainly do contribute to a culture that goes against the general trends in society: they care about something that most people disregard and assign it the meaning that is appropriate in their own lives.

#### IV. Conclusion

Ubiquitous, controversial, and provocative perhaps best describe the presence of Chick Tracts in contemporary American society. Chick's use of the medium of comics has allowed him to communicate more clearly and concisely his messages to readers. He structures them in such a way that readers will have their presuppositions about the tracts' subjects challenged and then be offered a chance to repent. The varieties of tracts he produces target different audiences and thereby allow distributors to choose the tracts that best correspond to those to whom they wish to give them. All of these factors combine to elicit a response out of the readers, whether it is

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<sup>95</sup> Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," 8.

<sup>96</sup> Pearce, *On Collecting*, 323.

positive or negative. The response that the tracts demand has encouraged the various practices associated with them to develop beyond the cultures surrounding other tracts.

The different practices that have emerged around these tracts have developed into a culture comprised of distributors, iconoclasts, and collectors all of whom contribute to preserve the presence of these tracts. Their distributors find personal significance in distributing them, as it is one of the practices of their faith life. It also connects them to others that distribute tracts and joins them together in preparation for the end times according to Chick's apocalyptic view. The iconoclasts define themselves in opposition to the messages of the tracts, but ironically preserve them by making a commotion about them. The collectors preserve them by enjoying their kitsch nature and assigning them meaning in response to their own life experiences. Collecting becomes religious when collectors express their feelings towards religion either by defining themselves against Chick Tracts or by expressing their indifference towards them and towards religion. These practices correspond to a practice in popular religion that draws many of its resources from the media rather than the scholarly, intellectual, and text-based ways of the past.<sup>97</sup>

An examination of these tracts and the practices that have emerged around them call into question the way people view them. Although they represent many controversial views and indeed are designed to offend people, they have become an integral part of many Americans' lives. In addition, the dialogue that their proponents and opponents are having does not contribute to a better understanding of what each of the practices means in their doers' lives. The groups often do not communicate at all, which allows each of them to continue in their own way without considering the other, thus leading to more conflict. To fix this, the distributors should try to live in accordance with the gift of love that these tracts should be to the recipients, and take seriously the ways in which they present them. The iconoclasts should consider that what they receive is intended as a gift of love and not a form of hate literature no matter how much it may offend them. Finally, the collectors should recognize that their collections do in fact reflect their faith life, and that they too might need to respect the provisions given to the other two groups. Marcel Mauss' description of cultures that do not value reason but give into their emotions seems an apt description of the culture around Chick Tracts as it currently is: they substitute

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<sup>97</sup> Hoover, "Visual Religion in Media Culture," 153. Chick of course would desire a return to a completely text-based religion with the bible at its center; however, the practices that have emerged around his tracts have taken a much different form.

“alliance, gift and commerce for war, isolation and stagnation.”<sup>98</sup> Perhaps a way to begin this process of reconciliation is to recognize their importance in American culture, as one Chick Tract fan states: “[E]ven when one \*knows\* that Mr. Chick is way out there in ‘left field,’ those tracts still manage to catch and hold one’s attention. If nothing else, they are a valuable piece of American culture.”<sup>99</sup> Until the unforeseeable future, these tracts will be a part of American culture, and thus considering and fixing the problems with the culture that has emerged around them is of imminent concern.

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<sup>98</sup> Mauss, *The Gift*, 80.

<sup>99</sup> Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 145.

## Appendix A

Type of tract	Intended Audience	Intended Result	Word/Image Relationship	Representative Tract
Christian Growth	Lazy Christians	Obedient Christians	Dependent on Words	<i>The Secret of Prayer</i>
Self-Promotional	Lazy/Shy Christians	More Distributors	Dependent on Words	<i>Who, Me?</i>
Conspiracy Theory	The Deceived	Conversion	Dependent on Words	<i>Fat Cats</i>
First Bible Series (1985 to 1992)	Teens/Adults	Biblical Knowledge	Dependent on Words	<i>The First Jaws</i>
Controversial Issues	Liberals	Conservatives	Slightly Word-Dependent	<i>Big Daddy?</i>
Other Religions	Deceived Religious People	Conversion	Slightly Word-Dependent	<i>The Curse of Baphomet</i>
Story	Unfaithful/Anyone	Conversion	Even Balance	<i>Fatal Decision</i>
Second Bible Series (2000 to 2003)	Teens/Adults	Biblical Knowledge/ Conversion	Even Balance	<i>In The Beginning</i>
Children	Children	Conversion	Slightly Image-Dependent	<i>Lil' Susy</i>
Wordless	Illiterate/Anyone	Conversion	Dependent on Images	<i>Wordless Gospel</i>

## Figures

- Figure 1: Robert Crumb, *Zap Comix #1* (San Francisco: Charles Plymell, 1968), 1.
- Figure 2: Will Elder and Harvey Kurtzmann, "Goodman, Tarzan and Jane" (1961, 1962) in *Help!*  
[http://deniskitchen.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Product\\_Code=A\\_HK.WE.GB41&Category\\_Code=A\\_HK](http://deniskitchen.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Product_Code=A_HK.WE.GB41&Category_Code=A_HK), 41 (accessed 7 August 2008).
- Figure 3: Frank Stack, *Jesus Joins the Academic Community* (1972).
- Figure 4: Jack Chick, *Holy Joe* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2002), 17.
- Figure 5: Jack Chick, *No Fear* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1997), 8.
- Figure 6: Campus Crusade for Christ, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws*,  
<http://www.campuscrusade.com/fourlawsflash.htm>, 4 (accessed 27 July 2008).
- Figure 7: Living Waters, *School Shootings: The Common Denominator* (Bellflower, CA: Living Waters Publications, n.d.).
- Figure 8: Ron Wheeler, *Heaven's Gate*, NIV ed. (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1999), 7.
- Figure 9: Jack Chick, *Scream!* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2002), 19.
- Figure 10: Paul Clarkson, *The Bible is Full of Mistakes* (Bellflower, CA: Living Waters Publications), 6.
- Figure 11: Jack Chick, *Birds and the Bees* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2004), 3.
- Figure 12: Jack Chick, *This Was Your Life!* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2002 [1964]), 9.
- Figure 13: Jack Chick, *The Assignment* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1972), 8.
- Figure 14: Jack Chick, *The Assignment* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1972), 9.
- Figure 15: Jack Chick, *Holy Joe*, (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2002 [1964]), 9.
- Figure 16: Jack Chick, *Holy Joe*, (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2002 [1964]), 15.
- Figure 17: Jack Chick, *Is There Another Christ?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1983), 4.
- Figure 18: Jack Chick, *War Zone* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2000 [1999]), 18.
- Figure 19: Jack Chick, *Who Cares?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2002), 1.
- Figure 20: Jack Chick, *The Wall* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2005), 1.
- Figure 21: Jack Chick, *Going to the Dogs* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1992), 21.
- Figure 22: Jack Chick, *The Secret of Prayer* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1972), 14.
- Figure 23: Jack Chick, *Why Is Mary Crying?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1987), 14.
- Figure 24: Jack Chick, *Big Daddy?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2000 [1972]), 15.



- Figure 25: Jack Chick, *Allah Had No Son* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1994), 9.
- Figure 26: Jack Chick, *The Curse of Baphomet* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1991), 10.
- Figure 27: Jack Chick, *Humbug!* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1995 [1975]), 16.
- Figure 28: Jack Chick, *Humbug!* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1995 [1975]), 17.
- Figure 29: Jack Chick, *Best Friend* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1996), 12.
- Figure 30: Jack Chick, *Wordless Gospel (Haitian Version)* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1975), 16.
- Figure 31: Jack Chick, *Who, Me?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1998 [1969]), 1.
- Figure 32: Jack Chick, *The Little Princess* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1998), 8.
- Figure 33: Jack Chick, *Dark Dungeons* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1984), 18.
- Figure 34: Chyx Publications, *Dork Dungeons*, <http://www.unhelpful.org/chyx/> (accessed 27 April 2006).
- Figure 35: Jack Chick, *Last Rites* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1994), 1.
- Figure 36: Jim Huger, *Dead to Rights*, in “Jhuger – Dead to Rights,” *Jhuger – A Project*, <http://www.jhuger.com/tract/dtr/index> (accessed 29 April 2006).
- Figure 37: Jack Chick, *Somebody Goofed* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2002 [1969]), 13.
- Figure 38: Jack Chick, *Alberto* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1979), 27.
- Figure 39: Monsterwax, *The Jack Chick Club*, 7 January 2005, <http://members.aol.com/chickclub/> (accessed 19 April 2006).

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\* A brief note on the publication dates for the tracts: Chick has revised many of his tracts over the years, although their content has not changed significantly (except in rare cases of downsizing, for which the author has attempted to account). Thus, the date given reflects the tract read in researching for the paper, while the author has chosen to refer to several of them throughout the paper by the publishing order. The date of some original version of the tracts has been given in brackets if the date of the tract used in research was not the original (see Kuersteiner, *The Unofficial Guide*, 36-139).

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