

“The Promised Land:  
Notions of Faith, Persuasion, and Belief in Patent Medicine Advertising”

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Nineteenth century popular American magazines document the dazzling array of medical treatments available to the general public — and the insistent pressures to choose from among them. Homeopaths, allopathes, chiropractors, apothecaries, various kinds of physicians, and a long line of ingenious quacks competed aggressively with the ubiquitous — and aggressive — purveyors of patent medicines and sundry other medical messiahs for the attention, business, and loyalty of a population generally ill-informed about the state of its health and spiritual welfare.

Striving to manage, and **pre/scribe** — the behavior of more consumers, these proselytes often depicted the public as either on the verge of collapse or on death’s doorstep. They observed no limits on verbal extravagance or legerdemain. And, as the advertisement below for Prof. Hart’s “medicine” underscores (See Fig. 1 below: “Look Here, Friend”), advertising cast its verbal net so widely and so frighteningly that few could escape its reach or the anxiety it provoked.

# LOOK HERE, FRIEND. Are you Sick?

Do you have pains about the chest and sides, and sometimes in the back? Do you feel dull and sleepy? Does your mouth have a bad taste, especially in the morning? Is there a sort of sticky slime collects about the teeth? Is your appetite poor? Is there a feeling like a heavy load on the stomach, sometimes a faint, all-gone sensation at the pit of the stomach, which food does not satisfy?

Are your eyes sunken? Do your hands and feet become cold and feel clammy? Have you a dry cough? Do you expectorate greenish colored matter? Are you hawking and spitting all or part of the time? Do you feel tired all the while? Are you nervous, irritable and gloomy? Do you have evil forebodings? Is there a giddiness, a sort of whirling sensation in the head when rising up suddenly? Do your bowels become costive? Is your skin dry and hot at times? Is your blood thick and stagnant? Are the whites of your eyes tinged with yellow? Is your urine scanty and high colored? Does it deposit a sediment after standing? Do you frequently spit up your food, sometimes with a sour taste and sometimes with a sweet? Is this frequently attended with palpitation of the heart? Has your vision become impaired? Are there spots before the eyes? Is there a feeling of great prostration and weakness? If you suffer from any of these symptoms, send me your name and I will send you, by mail,

## One Bottle of Medicine FREE

Send your address on postal card to-day, as you may not see this notice again.

Address, naming this paper, Prof. HART, 210 E. 9th St., N. Y.

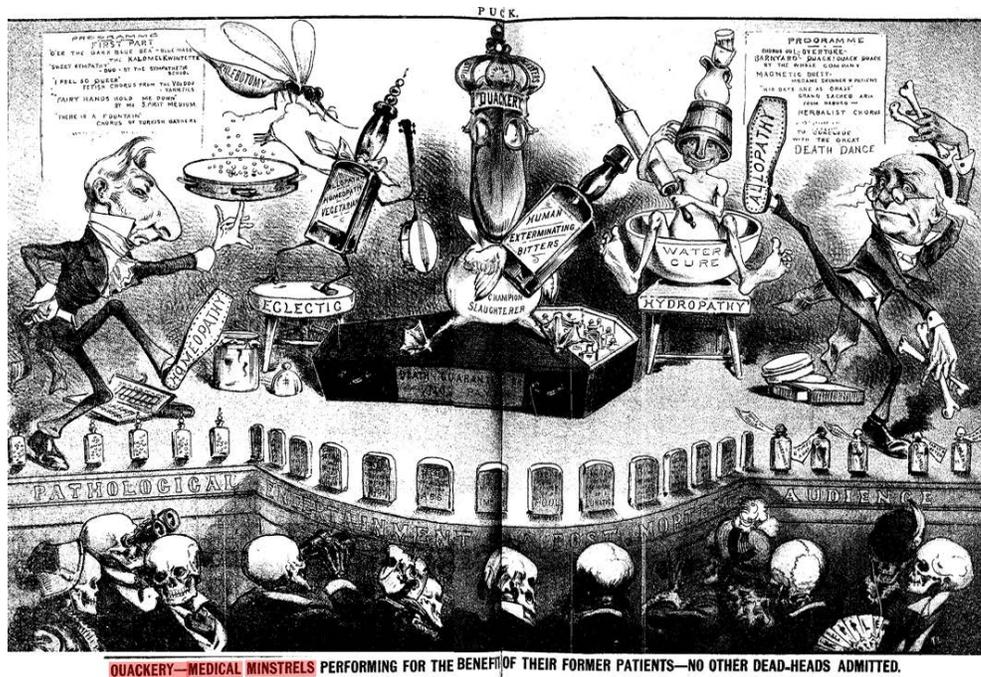
The syntactical pace, the dramatic intonation, the vivid imagery, and the unrelenting pressure exerted on the reader in this ad might evoke — for those inclined to be only slightly irreverent — the unrelenting pressures and urgency of Jonathan Edwards’ preaching about the just wrath of God during the First Great Awakening in his extraordinarily powerful and ominous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God” — or, for a 20<sup>th</sup>-century version: Father Arnall’s sermon in James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

Saturated with the visual and verbal forcefulness of advertising appeals for such exotic nostrums as Dr. Morse’s Indian Root Pills, Clark Stanley’s Snake Oil Liniment, William Radam’s Microbe Killer, Dr. Kilmer’s Swamp Root, Fletcher’s Castoria, and Carter’s Little Liver Pills, consumers gradually came to treat such ads with some immunity and skepticism. As the ad for Prof. Hart expresses, advertisers responded by turning up the volume on their claims and on the tropes they invoked to sell their products and services.

The editorial content and commentary of several well-established magazines and newspapers began to reflect this skepticism, however cautiously, given that advertising constituted — and remain — one of their most important sources of income.

Puck, one of the first American magazines to feature color illustrated advertising and the first to successfully adopt full-color lithography printing to a weekly publication, provides several notable examples.

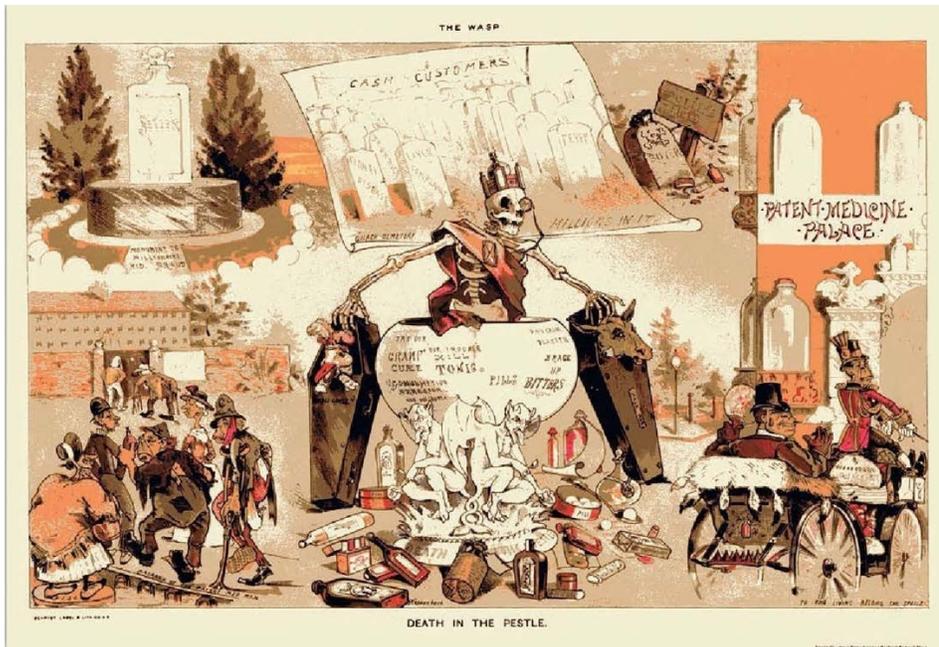
Puck took frequent and direct satiric aim at the outlandish claims of patent medicines and the proliferating number of major medical “sects.” The November 19, 1879 issue prominently featured, for example, an illustration entitled “Quackery — Medical Minstrels,” showcasing “Pathological Entertainment” in front of a “Post-Mortem Audience.”



**Figure 2: Quackery / Medical Minstrals**

On stage, Quackery, crowned with pills and medicinal plasters, choreographs a “Great Death Dance” featuring the major medical hucksters of the time: Homeopathy, Eclectic, Hydropathy [water, steam baths], Allopathy as well as Phlebotomy [bloodletting] and various Spiritualists — all for the exclusive benefit of their former patients whose names are inscribed on the headstones lining the front of the stage: “idiots,” “asses,” “imbeciles,” “fools,” “lunatics,” “noodles” and “flatheads,” along with the prescient warning “No Other Dead-Heads Admitted.”

By the turn into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such critiques of patent medicines took on an even-more dire look and a more strident tone. Consider, for example, the following lithograph, entitled “Death in the Pestle” and dated 1889.



*Figure 3: Death in the Pestle*

A casket gripping skeleton emerges from a pestle of tonics, pills, bitters, plaster, and various other “cure-alls.” On the left side of the image, a motley band identified as “patrons of the patent medicine man” stumble down the road to the “poor house.” In the right corner, the patent medicine man rides in luxury toward the “Patent Medicine Palace.”

The headstone in the Potters Field depicted on the top right bears an inscription to “buyers” of patent remedies, while the graves of “millions” of “cash customers” are marked only by a large piece of paper. The tenuous nature of this “quack cemetery” is ironically accentuated by the monument to the “seller” of patent medicines, identified simply as the “millionaire medical fraud.”

Such magazines as Puck, Judge, and other well-known magazines of the period frequently punctuated their critiques of medical humbugs with references to “Liddy Blink ‘em” and “Perusa,” thinly veiled satirical allusions to Lydia Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound for Women and PE-RU-NA, a Catarrh cure [buildup of mucus] — two of the most widely distributed and frequently ingested “cure alls” on the market at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, not surprisingly, with the high

alcohol content.

The muckraking press — led by Samuel Hopkins Adams' exposé of the consequences of the “secret” ingredients promoted in patent medicines — mixing various “creative concoctions” of alcohol, opium, cocaine, morphine, quinine, bromides, herbs, fruits, plants, grains, and swamp roots — helped exert enormous pressure on the federal government to regulate what had long been one of the most profitable and addictive industries in America. Hopkins' eleven part series, "The Great American Fraud" (Collier's, 1905), had a significant impact on public opinion and policy and also contributed to the passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act. Although this statute did not ban the alcohol, narcotics, and stimulants in the products, it did require they be identified as such. It was not until 1936 that the law was revised to prohibit misleading, exaggerated, or fraudulent claims that had been crowded onto labels.

Although federal regulators eventually sought to control the often wild and inflated claims of patent medicines, the widespread promotion of these products had an indelible impact on producing what have become standard features of American advertising: brand names, readily recognizable packaging, as well distinct symbols and trademarks, along with extravagant claims, and hyperbolic prose.

Patent medicines also established the first national brands and introduced many of the persuasive strategies (including, for example, psychological lures, before-and-after illustrations as well as striking graphics and the use of color) that continue to prompt consumers — as Will Rogers wryly observed — “to spend money they don't have, for something they don't need.”

What has received far less attention has been the nature and extent to which the issues, structures, styles, and rhetorical strategies of patent medicine ads are deeply embedded in — and

drew heavily on — the terms and tropes of popular religious discourse and are grounded in the fervor of long-standing expectations about self-help, personal regeneration, and the perfectibility of the body, the mind, the self and the soul. In effect, patent medicine advertising offers provocative testaments to the interrelations of commerce, religion, and culture — and especially of the ways in which issues of faith, persuasion, and belief continue to be commercialized in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century America.

This influence has now reversed direction: patent medicine advertisers drew freely on traditional expressions of religious discourse; now many popular religious figures routinely adapt shop-worn advertising strategies to promote their goods and “services.”

These interconnections have deep linguistic and cultural roots. In *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith* Oxford University Press, 1987, James Kinneavy offers an insightful exegesis of the relationship between the Greek term for “persuasion” and the Christian word for faith (*pistis*). Kinneavy weaves an intricate argument that “a substantial part of the concept of faith found in the New Testament can be found in the rhetorical concept of persuasion, which was a major meaning of the noun *pistis* (faith or persuasion) and the verb *pisteuein* (to believe) in the Greek language during the period when the New Testament was written.”

Kinneavy further identifies a common semantic structure between trust, assent, and knowledge in the Christian model of faith and the ethical, pathetic, and logical elements in the model of persuasion. The basic features of faith, persuasion, and belief mark much of late-nineteenth century American patent medicine advertising.

There are several striking similarities between the processes of persuasion and earning confidence and the methods of evoking faith and belief in religion and advertising. Both benefit, for

example, from the same basic appeal: promoting expectations, if not explicitly offering promises, of immediate, dramatic, and even miraculous intervention into what Americans are often encouraged to perceive as their hum-drum lives.

**MADAME DEAN'S SPINAL SUPPORTING CORSETS.**  
 They support the Spine, relieve the muscles of the back, brace the shoulders in a natural and easy manner, imparting graceful carriage to the wearer without discomfort, expanding the chest, thereby giving full action to the lungs, and health and comfort to the body. Take the place of the ORDINARY CORSET in every respect, and are made of fine Cotton, in the best manner. In various styles and sold by agents everywhere at popular prices. Mrs. Wm. Papes, Keota, Iowa, says:—I have been an invalid for six years, have travelled extensively for health, yet never received as much benefit as I have in a few weeks wear, of your MADAME DEAN'S CORSET. I am gaining strength all the time, and could not do without it. It has proven to me a *godsend*.  
**FREE** Our new book entitled: "Dress Reform for Ladies" with elegant wood engraving and Biography of Worth, the King of Fashion, Paris; also our New Illustrated Catalogue sent free to any address on receipt of two 2-cent stamps to pay postage and packing.  
**AGENTS WANTED** for these celebrated Corsets. No experience required. Four orders per day give the agent \$150 monthly. Our agents report from four to twenty sales daily. \$3.00 Outfit Free. Send for terms and full particulars. SCHIELE & CO., 390 Broadway, New York.

[1885]

*Madame Dean's Spinal Supporting Corsets / (Figure 4)*

As this advertisement for Madame Dean's Spinal Supporting Corsets makes evident, the fundamental forms of popular American religious and commercial discourse encourage artful displays of similarly sacrosanct basic values: devotion to the sacred ideals of individual liberty and

expression, commitment to the drive to succeed (usually expressed as the pursuit of economic opportunity), as well as anticipation of literal or figurative salvation — all told, a world in which persuasion, faith and belief are fixed firmly in a distinctively artful blend of invention, guilt, and optimism.

Advertising — commercial efforts to establish memorable relationships between people and products — has always drawn heavily on the traditional terms and forms of religious discourse. There are, for example, striking thematic, structural, and stylistic parallels between patent medicine advertisements and the rhetoric of American revivalism. These connections can be traced back to the Charles Grandison Finney, and Peter Cartwright — two of the most prominent evangelical ministers in the Second Great Awakening during the first few decades of the 19th century. They are later reconfigured in rousing sermons of such prominent itinerant preachers in the tradition of George Whitefield – and later found other forms in the gospel hymns of Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey.

[For a comprehensive discussion of the presence of the itinerant preacher in American culture, see J. R. Dolan, *The Yankee Peddlers of Early America*. William G. McLoughlin's *Revivals, Awakening and Reforms* examines the relationship between America's five great religious awakenings and influence on the nation's great movements for social reform. Sandra Sizer's *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion* analyzes the rhetoric patterns of the enormously powerful hymns and sermons of Ira D. Sankey and Dwight Moody. See also Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*.]

Consider, for example, the similarities between their uses of colloquial language to reinforce a specific narrative line, their reliance on vivid imagery and profuse detail to illustrate a dramatic

point, as well as their seemingly direct and extemporaneous appeals both to some outside authority and to the individual in some perilously lapsed state.

Many of the most compelling stylistic innovations of revivalist discourse are packed into the sermons of Charles Grandison Finney. Finney abandoned the abstract, metaphysical style of his Calvinist predecessors and spoke directly and formally to his audience: “I talked to them like a lawyer at the bar,” Finney asserted; “I urged the people with such vehemence as if they might not have a moment to live . . . . I said ‘you.’ Instead of preaching [abstractly] about sin and sinners and saying ‘they’ . . . . I said ‘hell’ and with such an emphasis as often to shock the people.”

[As quoted in G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakening and Reforms: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977*, p. 163. See also, Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs*.]

Similar patterns of urgency and intimate address remain the hallmarks of effective advertising. Revivalist sermons and much of late-nineteenth century patent medicine advertising are also grounded in similar assumptions about the imperfect self and are often structured along corresponding lines. They often feature parables and moral lessons as well as create the expectation of immediate, and extraordinary, intervention in the lives of ordinary people.

At the same time, patent medicine advertising often adapts the methods and structures of religious sermons for commercial purposes. Consider, for example, the advertisement for **Scott’s Emulsion** (Figure 5) that appeared in the December, 1892 issue of *The Ladies’ Home Journal*.

# SCOTT'S EMULSION



## A Quick Return to Rosy Health

The Experience, Doings and Sayings of a Bright Little Southern Girl

"Under the Doctor's Care for Three Years"—"A Fearful Cough That Baffled Their Skill"—  
"Became Thin and Weak and Nervous"—"Doctors All Said She Had Consumption"—"Last  
Winter They About Gave Her Up"—"Doctors Agreeing, They Tried Scott's Emulsion—Again  
"Plump and Rosy."

ELIZABETH CITY, N. C., June 28, 1892.

Mrs. Scott & Bowne, New York.

GENTLEMEN—It has been a pleasure to me to advise, in many instances, my friends to use your Emulsion, and thus far to know of their rapid improvement. I cite one case in particular. A dear little girl of nine years, a music pupil of mine, had been under the doctor's care for three years or more before I knew her. Her trouble was a fearful cough which defied their treatment and baffled their skill. The poor child became so thin and weak and nervous that she could do nothing. The doctors all said she had Consumption.

This last winter they about gave her up. I was there one day and her parents were telling me that they had done everything, and I asked whether they had ever given her Scott's Emulsion

of Cod Liver Oil. She shuddered at the name. They said "No," and I asked them to try it faithfully. They did. Within a month, in fact, less than a month, she was out and has not been sick since. She continues taking the Emulsion, and her cough is nearly well, and she begins to look so plump and rosy, so though she had never been ill.

The other day as she was taking her lesson, she looked up at me and said, "I thought it was going to be bad, but I like it now." Not knowing what she had on her mind, and supposing she was speaking of the music, I asked her what she meant, and she greatly amused me by replying, "Why, I meant my C. O. D." She is very bright, and can fully appreciate a joke. Wishing you all manner of success.

Yours very truly,

SCOTT'S EMULSION of Cod Liver Oil with Hypophosphites of Lime and Soda restores healthy flesh, dissipated through ANY cause at ANY period of life. Where it is required and used once in Consumption it does service a score of times in the treatment and prompt cure of Coughs, Colds and Throat Affections, so often sources of Consumption. In this preparation the cod liver oil is freed from its drawbacks of taste and indigestibility, and becomes a practical medicine, a practical food. Partly digested by chemical process, it is easy of assimilation, and available when all other forms of flesh-producing foods fail. It strengthens digestion, and renews failing appetite. It arrests wasting diseases by rapidly and abundantly supplying sound tissue, pure blood and nerve force.

Scott's Emulsion is Sold by Druggists the World Over. THE GENUINE IS ALWAYS ENCLOSED IN A SALMON COLORED WRAPPER, WITH LABEL OF MAN WITH FISH ON BACK.

PREPARED BY SCOTT & BOWNE, CHEMISTS

New York London Paris Barcelona Milan Belleville, Canada

As is often the case with many revivalist sermons, this advertisement cites a precedent for the problem being discussed, which here takes the form of a dramatic narrative featuring "a Bright Little Southern Girl" beset by "A Fearful Cough" that baffled the skill of the doctors who tried to treat her illness. By defining the problem in clear, graphic, and negative terms, the advertisement creates an environment of anxiety, or fear or intimidation.

The solution is quite similar to the prophetic vision in a sermon in which the promises of good things to come will be revealed, but only if the "believer" acts now. In effect, such

advertisements depend for much of their success on creating an authoritative voice, one that invariably encourages confidence and conformity as well as projects a sense of comfort in an audience. Advertising reifies assurance; it creates the impression that security is purchasable.

Charles Grandison Finney professionalized evangelism. In doing so, he also set the stage for gradually blurring the distinctions between its religious and commercial interests and the vocabulary of many less-celebrated itinerant preachers. Their economic survival often depended on peddling door-to-door the goods they carried out into the field with them. These itinerant preachers/peddlers helped spread — and blend — religious discourse and commercial interests.

In the decades following Finney and Cartwright, advertisers continuously promoted and then capitalized on such popular conceptions as bodily impurity and sin as the cause of disease — beliefs that were carried down from the Protestant work ethic and revivalist discourse and were rekindled by the evangelical fervor of the late 1850's, the spectacular ministry of Dwight Moody during the 1870's, and the razzmatazz of Billy Sunday and the flamboyant revivals of the early twentieth century. During the height of patent medicine promotions, advertisers encouraged the general public to pursue what Leo Spitzer called “the craving to be saved from the ills and shortcomings of the flesh.” (Leo Spitzer, “American Advertising Explained as Popular Art.” In *Essays on English and American Literature*. ed. Anna Hatcher. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962, p. 276.)

Advertisers recognized these abundant opportunities early / and frequently rendered the human body as besieged by the evil of infectious diseases. As the following ads for Swaim's Panacea, and Wm. Radam's Microbe Killer illustrate, satanic creatures and demonic mythological figures most often embodied the threat of disease. **(See Images 6-8)**

These advertisements — and countless others similar to them — highlight the widespread practice among nineteenth century advertisers to rely on religious representations of various diseases

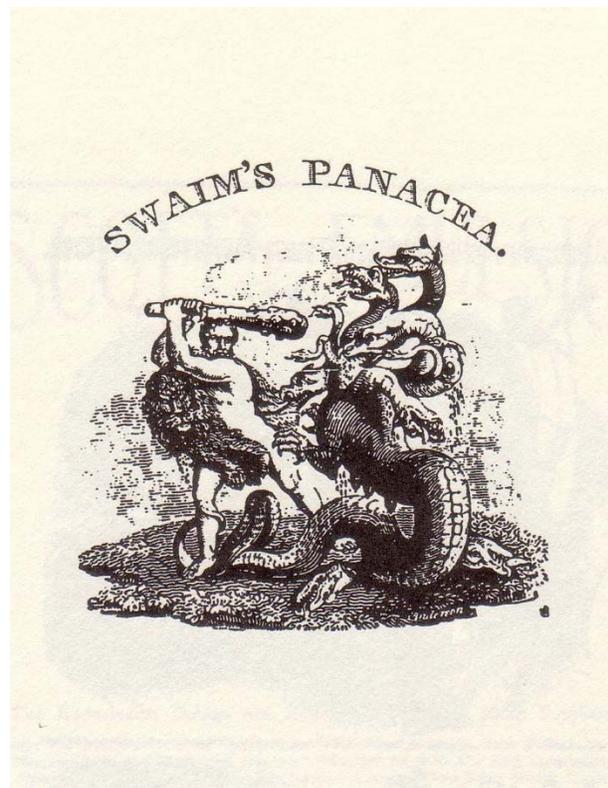


Figure 6

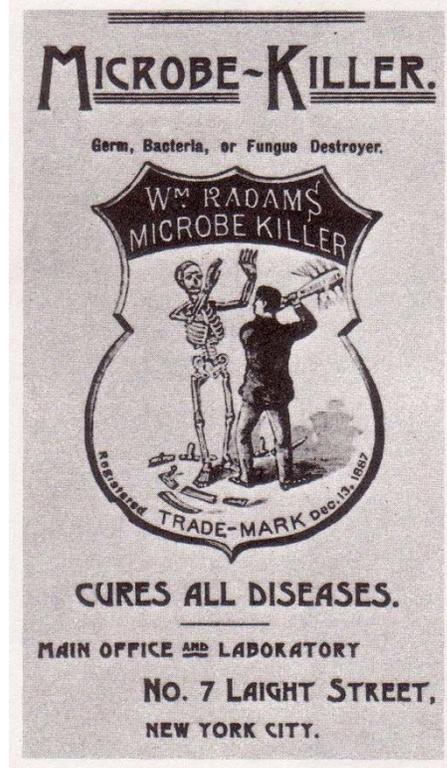


Figure 7

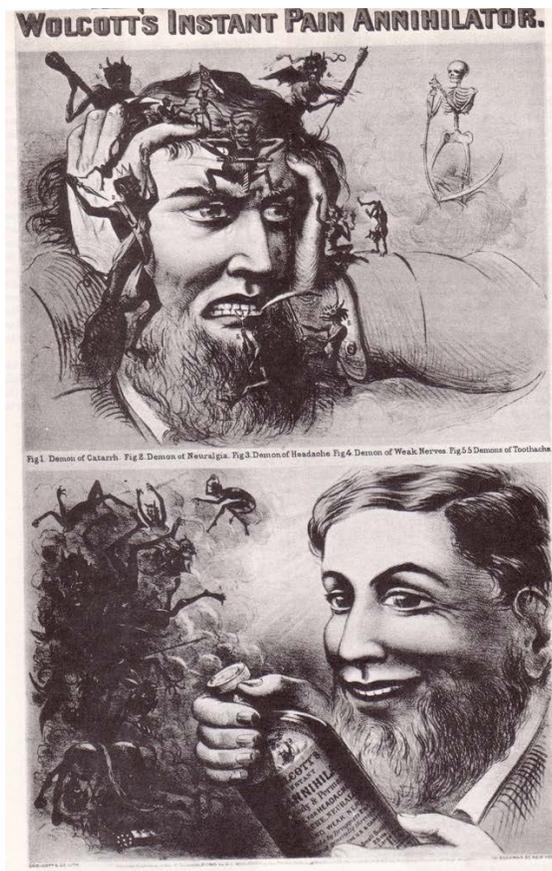


Figure 8

as well as their cures to earn the audience's consent to purchase a particular product.

As these ads illustrate, advertising serves as a graphic reaffirmation of the moral and religious underpinnings of acceptable public behavior and beliefs. Consider, for example, the following advertisement for Tarrant's Seltzer Aperient from an 1877 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*

**PAIN IS A BLESSING**

**It Locates disease. Whenever the bowels become irregular, use Tarrant's Seltzer Aperient, it will save much pain and danger. Nature sometimes is so outraged by the burden she is made to carry, through the heedlessness of her children, that she openly rebels, and punishes fearfully. Don't neglect the proper treatment when the symptoms first appear. Resort to the aperient, and get well speedily. Sold by all Druggists.**

As this ad suggests, a similar moralizing impulse lies at the heart of the religious persuasion and advertising: the conviction that consumers/sinners can be "saved" / "redeemed" if they simply yield to the terms made readily available to them for precisely that purpose.

Alexander Rustow underscores the distinction between the producers and the consumers of such beliefs in appropriately religious terms: "**To produce and to sell** belong to the elect, to buy and to consume belong to the damned." (As cited in Spitzer, p. 276)

The deep structures and purposes of a great deal of American advertising are rooted in such fundamentalist precepts as sin, guilt, shame, public confession, conversion and rebirth, as well as in various forms of millennialism.

Many ads for household product were — and continue to be — structured around the belief

that dirt is the domestic representation of sin and that every household needs to participate regularly in rites of purification and purgation in order to relieve the anxiety and guilt advertisers conventionally associate with dirt and a messy household. There are innumerable ads featuring a female cowering in the presence of a stare from her husband who has returned from his work.

In this respect, advertisers encourage cleansing the world of common failures and the impurity of the commonplace, replacing it with a world of superlatives, a world that Michael Arlen has described as “more real than real.” (Michael Arlen, *Thirty Seconds*, New York: Penguin, 190, p. 110.)

These rituals of purification and purgation can be traced back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and can be illustrated by the remarkable success of **Brandreth’s Pills**, one of the most widely advertised — and distributed — products of the mid-nineteenth century.

Brandreth capitalized on the availability of inexpensive space in the “Penny Press” and flooded American newspapers and magazines with distinctive typographical variations of the following appeal. Such ads served as a graphic expression of the general reformist sentiments prevalent throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, in this instance, of the conflation of remedy and religion and the spreading of dissatisfaction with the still-unscientific state of the medical profession. Yet, the emphasis on the “scientific” production of Brandreth’s Pills (“prepared in my own laboratory, where a steam engine of 140 horse power is employed exclusively for this purpose”) does not eliminate the fundamentally Gnostic elements (esoteric / mystical knowledge) that underpin this ad and many others like it.

Reassurances of miraculous cures became standard fare in patent medicine ads. And, the effectiveness of patent medicines was often illustrated in dramatic depictions of death-bed conversion scenes (being “born again”) and miraculous interventions expressed in countless variations of a

simple formula: "I had given up hope . . . until . . ."

**(PURGATION)**  
WITH  
**BRANDRETH'S PILLS**  
PURGES THE **BLOOD** & CANNOT FAIL  
TO CURE WHEN ENFORCED  
**IN TIME.**  
AND LET ME SAY THAT THIS KNOWLEDGE IS  
SECOND ONLY TO CHRISTIANITY IN THE BENEFITS  
IT IS CAPABLE OF CONFERRING UPON MANKIND.  
LET NOT MEDICAL MEN PERSUADE YOU BRAND-  
RETH'S PILLS ARE A QUACK REMEDY. IT IS NO SUCH  
THING.  
WHAT I SELL TO YOU FOR 2 SHILLINGS  
THESE MEN  
COULD NOT SUPPLY FOR ONE DOLLAR.  
MY HERBS AND EXTRACTS ARE ALL PREPARED  
IN MY OWN LABORATORY, WHERE A STEAM ENGINE  
OF 140 HORSE POWER IS EMPLOYED EXCLUSIVELY  
FOR THIS PURPOSE BESIDES AN EXTENSIVE  
WATER POWER.  
IN USING THESE PILLS YOU RISK NOTHING, FOR  
THEY HAVE BEEN USED BY MILLIONS;  
SO THAT SHOULD YOU FEEL DISPOSED TO TAKE A  
SIX DOSE YOU WILL BE CERTAINLY ABLE TO LIVE  
THROUGH THE OPERATION; AND YOU MAY HAVE  
THE LAUGH ON YOUR SIDE, WHEN THE DOCTOR  
TELLS YOU THAT HE HIT YOUR CASE EXACTLY WITH THAT  
LAST MEDICINE. GO ON IN THE USE OF THE PILLS.  
THEY WILL CURE WITHOUT HURTING YOUR TEETH  
OR GUMS. AND IN EVERY WAY IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH,  
IN FACT GIVE YOU SUCH AS WAS ENJOYED BY THE  
PATRIARCHS OF OLD.  
Sold at  
DR. BRANDRETH'S PRINCIPAL OFFICE  
294 CANAL STREET NEW YORK.  
AND BY ALL DRUGGISTS.

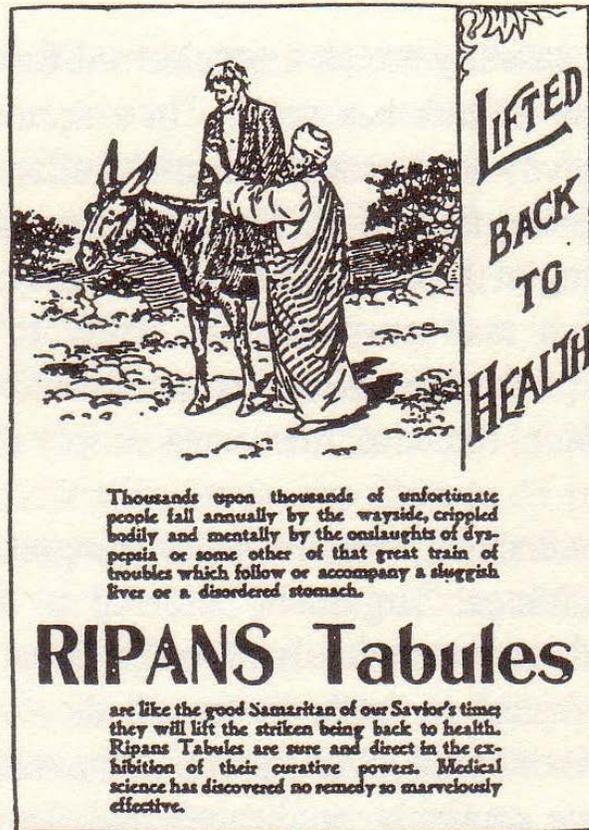
Advertising combines, to adapt a point William McLoughlin makes about revivalism, the

tone of both the funeral service and the christening (p. 21).

Products with mysterious names (e.g. “Dr. Mattison’s Sure Remedies for Special Diseases. Indian Emmenagogue,” [increases menstrual flow] “Hamlin’s Wizard Oil,” “Ayer’s Cherry Pectoral,” and “Dr. Pierce’s Golden Medical Discovery” and the like) and equally mysterious ingredients (often more than 40% alcohol), as well as illnesses and diseases with catch-all causes and cure-all solutions helped turn America into a nation of notions.

When William James deftly observed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that the “more complex ways of experiencing religion are new manners of producing happiness” (76), he not only characterized the substance of many theological disputations but also anticipated much of the artifice of American advertising, and especially its pitches for patent medicines.

A strikingly similar emphasis on sermonizing characterizes many patent medicine ads: urgent and ardent calls to remedy human weakness, to correct errors in judgment, and to change the course of back-sliding behavior. These tropes have long served as rhetorical staples for evangelists. See, for example, the advertisement for **RIPANS Tabules** (Figure 11) in which “Thousands upon thousands of unfortunate people fall annually by the wayside . . .” but [are] lifted back to health by RIPANS Tabules, much in the manner of “the good Samaritan of our Savior’s times.”



Thousands upon thousands of unfortunate people fall annually by the wayside, crippled bodily and mentally by the onslaughts of dyspepsia or some other of that great train of troubles which follow or accompany a sluggish liver or a disordered stomach.

**RIPANS Tabules**

are like the good Samaritan of our Savior's times they will lift the stricken being back to health. Ripans Tabules are sure and direct in the exhibition of their curative powers. Medical science has discovered no remedy so marvelously effective.

Consider the countless advertisements to save some “sick soul.” Advertisers have always known that the promises of such cures are as potent as their ability not only to create a sense of expectation but also to associate their product with the language of revelation. Yet these bewitching linkages (Raymond Williams calls advertising “the magic system”) depend on the individual’s “will to believe.” (Raymond Williams, “Advertising: The Magic System,” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London: Verso, 1980, 170-195.)

The preacher and the advertiser promote “better” behavior, and both depend on the

individual's receptivity to improving — although with clearly different ends in mind. So, too, both trade on some form of an individual's guilt as well as anxiety about the future, and both “minister” to notions of individual vulnerability and self-perfectibility. And, both induce their audiences to believe that they are dedicated to helping those who seek to experience some version of “the promised land.”

Trust and assent are cornerstones of persuasion, belief, and faith. Using an intimate tone and direct address lends an air of credibility to commercial and religious appeals and induces a sense of expectation. Yet, both advertisers and preachers encourage urgency when envisioning the future. Both trade on “promises,” on encouraging people to anticipate signs of revelation or renewal if they act immediately or follow a prescribed course of behavior.

The advertisement for Dr. F. G. Kinsman's cure for heart disease implies, for example, that the reward — in this case a miraculous cure — will be as “sudden” as the onset of the problem. (See figure 12).

The intimate but urgent tone of the opening string of subjunctives at the beginning of this ad is reinforced by the emphatic personal assurances offered at the end. Yet consent isn't enough; assent is required. Assent involves not only acceptance; it implies a change in behavior or belief. Whatever the emotional basis for this change, there is also often a rational dimension to this process of “conversion,” of being “born again.” Acceptance is often presented in some form of justification, normally a two-part public testimonial that is at once an expression of relief (something gone wrong has been rectified) as well as a public avowal of some form (“once I was, now I am. . .”).

Another important aspect of faith, persuasion, and belief is awareness, a new understanding of one's relation to the world or to a specific product, and often accompanied by increased self-

assurance.

*Figure 12*

*Dr. F. G. Kinsman's Cure for Heart Disease*

Consider, for example, the widely known slogan for Ivory Snow — it is “99 and 44/100ths percent pure.” Here, statistics create the illusion of precision. Implicit in the slogan is the projection of confidence, of the manufacturer’s achieving the perfectibility of the product. The tone of assurance in such instances promotes continued use of Ivory Soap to maintain “purity.” Within the context of commodities, such conviction is simply another expression of brand loyalty. Faith — or the product — becomes a metaphoric representation of the individual’s belief as well as reinforces the process of believing.

To appreciate how deeply the issues, structures, styles, and strategies of advertising are embedded in the rhetoric of popular American religion, consider, however briefly, the extent to which advertising and religion remain interrelated throughout the twentieth century — from the convergence of federal restrictions on advertising at the turn into the twentieth century with the first wave of revivalism to the more recent successes of the electronic ministries of such charismatic preachers as, among many others, Oral Roberts, Billy Graham, the now-notorious Jimmy Swaggert, and, until his death in 2007, the ubiquitous Jerry Falwell.

A fascinating reversal marks the relationship between advertising and the rhetoric of popular American religion in more recent social history. Advertising was the borrower; now it is the lender.

By the late 1960's, the leading practitioners of what became known as the charismatic revival of evangelist religion had discarded worn-out crutches and drawn-out sermons and conversions in makeshift, sweat-box rural meeting halls in favor of instantaneous, mass religious regeneration in "living color." By the mid-1970's, television ministries alone paid over \$600 million to carry their services into what advertisers call "the privacy of your own home."

By 1980, there were more than 1000 religious radio stations, 30 religion-dominated television stations, and four cable religious networks. While it is difficult to secure reliable figures for the past few years, it's reasonable to project that these numbers have increased substantially.

Merchandising religion has taken on all of the trappings of major corporate enterprise. Jerry Falwell's ministry offers a convenient example. As is true of the vast majority of the most prosperous and prophetic of the new breed of evangelists, Falwell employed an advertising agency. As he put it, "We try to do everything that General Motors does to sell automobiles. Except that we do it better, maybe." (Frances Fitzgerald, "A Reporter at Large (The Reverend Jerry Falwell)." *The New Yorker*, May 18, 1981, p. 84.)

And, as recent studies have shown, Falwell clearly mastered the art of what is now called “saturation evangelism.” He accounted for much of the success of his ministry by modeling it on the best of box-top offers: “Send in \$9.95 and you will receive, in addition to your own special volume of inspirational literature, a perfectly free gratis ‘Jesus First pin’.” (Fitzgerald, 84)

In effect, Falwell’s efforts, along with those of such celebrity evangelists as Pat Robertson and Robert Schuller, to name but two immensely popular figures, to engender faith and belief demonstrate that advertising’s traditional reliance on religious models of persuasion has been turned upside down.

Advertising and popular American religion constitute important — and still relatively unexplored — resources available for understanding some of the changes and continuities in American culture. Whatever the particular state of the American economy or culture, every indication is that advertising has been — and undoubtedly will continue to be — a conspicuous part of it. American corporations, for example, spent nearly \$143 billion in 2005 to advertise their goods and services. Yet behind this enormous outlay lies one truth on which evangelists, practitioners of advertising, and its critics agree: advertising is an aggressive commercial force that affects nearly every facet of American life. Yet, the American public, fascinated with the business of securing better ways to live, seldom takes the time to reflect on the effects of advertising on its collective and individual consciousness.

In 2021, global digital ad spending surged by 29.1%, and digital ad buyers ended up paying \$491.70 billion in 2021, an increase of 12% from 2020.

[An aside: the only available comprehensive history of American advertising — Frank Presbrey’s *The History and Development of Advertising* — was written in 1929, long before the commercial distribution of television.]

In a similar vein, American popular religion — and especially evangelism — remained until recently a neglected underside of American religious experience. At the same time, however, popular forms of religious experience continue to enthrall millions of receptive Americans with increasingly novel ways to ensure deliverance and salvation. Like advertising, evangelism stretches across the full spectrum of invention and verbal extravagance — from the musical evangelism of the dynamic “prophet of the poor,” A.A. Allen, to the histrionics of religious programs on late-night and Sunday morning television.

In closing, I encourage you to consider for a moment the socio-cultural, linguistic, and metaphoric resonances — as well as the political and religious dimensions — of the “threading” and deepening of evangelical discourse and beliefs in American experience.

I’d like to leave you with this gift:

The Emperor of Ice Cream

Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.  
Let be be finale of seem.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,  
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
On which she embroidered fantails once  
And spread it so as to cover her face.  
If her horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and dumb.  
Let the lamp affix its beam.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Wallace Stevens