

The Second Commandment: Media and Representation

Welcome to the lecture “The Second Commandment: Media and Representation.” What did the New England Puritans think about pictures and artwork? One view might be that they thought that any kind of pictures were ungodly. We might not think of the Puritans as having detailed stained glass windows or paintings depicting Jesus in their churches, for example. In this lecture, we’ll explore Puritan views on using visuals in detail. Ultimately I’ll suggest that the New England Puritans weren’t actually averse to images, but rather to changes in the media environment generally. The learning goals are for you to be able to discuss Reformation-era views on images in worship as well as identify some of Samuel Mather’s reasons for banning visuals in churches.

Let’s start with a paradigm we have about Puritan approaches to images. Then we will investigate how accurate it is. One common impression is that the Puritans, as Calvinists, were entirely opposed to the creation of images. This impression comes from the fact that we think of iconoclasm when we think of the Calvinists. Iconoclasm is the idea that images depicting religious scenes were heretical and should be destroyed. And iconoclasts were people who destroyed religious images. Indeed, at times fine and beautiful art from medieval churches was destroyed in the Reformation period. There were mobs who destroyed stained glass and paintings in churches violently, in places including Germany, Switzerland, and Latvia (MacCulloch 558). However, this kind of thorough destruction was not the case everywhere. In some places images were simply covered up with cloths. Sometimes Lutherans even added Christ-centered art to churches (MacCulloch 558). These instances show that reformed Christians of different sects might have slightly different perspectives on religious art. Let’s explore the roots of iconoclasm more deeply.

Several Protestant Reformers, including John Calvin, thought of images depicting God as idolatrous. This idea applied most directly to images of Jesus, but it also could apply to images depicting other scenes in the Bible. Calvin’s rationale for the concern about religious images was the second commandment. The 10 commandments were given to the Israelites after they were led out of slavery in Egypt. The second commandment is “You shall not make for yourself **an image** in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.” In some translations the word “idol” is used instead of images: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below...” Calvin interpreted this commandment as outlawing religious images. The images or what they depicted could become idols that people worshipped instead of God. People could start to become more obsessed and entranced with them than with God. Even if they thought of the image as representing or pointing to God, people could start to rely on them and consider them as an equivalent of God (Steinmetz 60). Neither were images crucial for the purposes of teaching. Teaching, rather, should be conveyed primarily through clearly worded instruction and not images, according to Calvin (Steinmetz 60).

The Puritans generally followed Calvin and other Reformers’ teachings about religious images. There are very little religious images in early New England. Puritan visual art generally did not consist of paintings depicting Jesus’ crucifixion, his birth, Mary and Joseph, King David fighting Goliath, or other scenes from the Bible. Puritans in New England might have experienced themselves or had relatives who witnessed English iconoclastic campaigns in the mid 1500s in which various images in English churches were removed (Miller).

A sermon series by Samuel Mather, a Puritan born in New England but who moved to Ireland, reveals more details about Puritan views towards images. His sermon can also help give us a more nuanced view on Puritans' attitudes towards religious images. Samuel Mather was the older brother of Increase Mather, who was one of the most prominent ministers in New England. He preached two sermons discussing idolatry, using a passage from 2 Kings as his source text. These sermons also implicitly condemn certain kinds of religious imagery. These sermons are called "A Testimony from the Scripture against Idolatry and Superstition." In the Bible passage he focuses on, 2 Kings 18:4-7, one of the kings of Israel, Hezekiah, removed idols from the land and trusted in God. The passage is brief so I'll read it out loud: "He [Hezekiah] removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan)." The high places, sacred stones, and Asherah poles are idols or places of idol worship. Mather describes how getting rid of idols is something good; then discusses how the 2 Kings passage portrays "idolatry" and how to define what an "idol" is. In his second sermon Mather explains how ceremonies in the church of England could be considered idols. He describes in detail why exactly the ceremonies are not pleasing to God and examines specific ceremonial practices.

In the first sermon Mather distinguishes between two kinds of idols, which he says correspond with the first two commandments: in the first kind, you worship something besides God. This corresponds with the commandment "You shall have no other gods before me." That seems pretty straightforward. In the second kind, you still worship God but in ungodly ways, or ways that are not given by God directly. This corresponds with the second commandment "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above..." Mather says the Bible also describes this second kind of idolatry as "superstition."

So you might note that this second kind of idolatry seems particularly interesting. Mather states that even worshipping God could be considered idolatry, if it is not done with the right means. In fact, he says that this kind of idolatry often happens in the Bible. People will make idols and believe that they are worshipping God through it. He gives the example of the golden calf in Exodus; it was a statue that the Israelites were worshipping, seemingly as if it were a pagan god, but they also directed some of their ceremonies around it towards God Himself. For example, in the course of sacrificing to the calf the Israelites were participating in a festival that was meant for God (Exodus 32:5).

Mather makes some distinctions about what would be considered an idol and what would not be. He does not consider every image to be an idol. He says that he does not consider images for governmental and nonreligious purposes to be idols: "For the civil use of images is lawful for the representation and remembrance of a person absent...but the scope of the command is against images in state and use religious" (Mather). Governmental images, perhaps a portrait or something similar, are not a part of worshipping in church, so the second commandment does not apply.

Mather also acknowledges that the Bible itself prescribes a few kinds of practices, similar to images, that are part of worship already. But these are not considered idols; for example, baptism is not considered an idol, even though it is an action that symbolizes and represents something, much the way that visual art does. Mather also describes the second commandment as drawing upon the literary devices of both synecdoche and metonymy. Mather says: "synecdoche to comprehend all sins of the like kinde, and all the degrees thereof; and metonymies to comprehend all the causes and means, and occasions thereof" (Mather). If you

need a reminder, synecdoche is making a part represents a whole, for example “I need all hands available for the shift.” Metonymy is when something associated with something else is used as a stand-in, for example, “the white house remains silent about this.”¹ The second commandment, for Mather, is a synecdoche and metonymy because the idol is a stand-in for any kind of human invention. It’s not just a prohibition against carved image, but anything that humans have made: “...under this instance is comprehended all other sins of the same kinde, all other inventions of men are included and comprehended under this” (Mather). Mather’s focus seems to be not on visual art, as much as on any kind of new form and practice in worship.

Mather acknowledges the presence of art in the Bible: he cites how God gave some of the Israelites aesthetic and design details for the Ark of the Covenant, which held the 10 commandments. So, he clarifies that it is not visuals or aesthetics in themselves that are idolatrous. Rather, it is those that are made by man and that are added to worship that are idolatrous. Whether something qualifies as an “addition” to worship doesn’t seem to revolve around whether it is specifically an “image,” something aesthetic or representational. For example, he talks about other “additions” to worship like wearing a surplice, bowing at the name of Jesus, and the book of Common Prayer. He focuses on some of these practices in the second sermon. The surplice is a kind of gown that ministers wear. He says that it is not prescribed in the Bible. He also discusses the book of common prayer as an idol because it is something that some churches had required for worshipping God, but God never commanded it. His focus is not so much on mistrusting images as it is a mistrust of additions to the practice of worship. He assumes that worship can get contaminated easily, not just by visual media like paintings, but even by print media like the book of Common Prayer, or by gestures like bowing at the name of Jesus. His views contrast a little with Calvin. Calvin seems critical specifically of the medium of visuals: to think that something created by human eyes and gazed upon by human eyes could come close to capturing the glory of God would be sinful (Michalski 63).

Let’s analyze Samuel Mather’s sermon some more. Ironically, Samuel Mather seems more interested in questions of aesthetics and representation than seem permitted. He describes the second commandment itself as a kind of aesthetic device: a synecdoche and a metonymy. For him, the second commandment uses “graven image” to stand in for all manmade elements in worship. While he is critical of manmade devices, the second commandment seems eerily like a kind of device that he criticizes; it is scripture and so God’s word, but he seems to analyze it by imposing his own aesthetic views on it. Furthermore, Samuel Mather’s sermon helps us to see that Puritans were not as uniformly opposed to visuals as we might think. While we have discussed how they had very little religious art in their churches, on the other hand, Mather’s sermon indicates that they do not seem extremely suspicious of the medium, or mode, of images in and of themselves. Mather clearly indicates that not all images break the second commandment; those for governmental or “civic” purposes are completely permitted. Mather also points out times in the Bible when God specifically asks for artistic creation: he gives the example in the book of Exodus of Bezalel and Oholiab, who had all kinds of art and design skills, and were used by God to execute the plan for the ark of the covenant and the tent of meeting. Scholar of the Puritans have referred to their portrait paintings (see my lecture

¹ ¹ Synecdoche and metonymy are similar literary devices. If someone were to say “I need all hands available for the shift” the person really means people, but hands are a part of people. If someone were to say “the white house remains silent on the issue” they really mean “the president and his officials remain silent,” since the white house is associated with the president and his officials.

“Portraits, People, and Perspective: The Function of the Puritan Portrait”) or their gravestone carvings as additional evidence of visuals in Puritan society (Haims).

Samuel Mather is specifically critical of manmade additions to worship, not just visuals but also gestures and printed books. I don't think he's critical of the medium of visuals at all, but rather is concerned about the media ecology of a place of worship. If too many different media were introduced, they might upset the current balance of media. Worship already involved specific kinds of media, including singing, preaching of God's word, and writing notes. To add in pictures, set forms of movements, and additional books would be to disrupt a delicate balance, and Mather would have wanted to think carefully about the introduction of different media before these were introduced. In other segments of society, introducing new media was fine, but in worship, it needed to be considered more carefully. Marshall McLuhan says that a medium is “any extension of ourselves” (7). It is a way we can amplify part of our body, such as our sense of hearing. For example, the radio is an extension of our ear since we can hear from people miles away from us. To introduce new kinds of media into worship might significantly affect how humans were using their senses, and so lead to some disarray. Perhaps Mather and the Puritans would have wanted to first investigate and weigh any kinds of additional or “extra” media before introducing them or assuming they were a part of, a media environment they highly prioritized.

In conclusion, I've explored this paradigm that the Puritans seemed to avoid images altogether. We've looked at the roots of that belief through a brief discussion of iconoclasm in Europe and John Calvin's views on religious imagery. We've also analyzed Samuel Mather's sermon to get a deeper perspective on the Puritan attitude. In his sermon he seems rather interested in the possibilities of representation, even framing the second commandment itself as a representative device. Mather's criticism is not so much of the medium of images, however, as much as it is a criticism of introducing new media into the media environment of the sermon. McLuhan's definition of media adds a new dimension to our discussion and helps us to see why newer media might cause some disorientation for people. I'll hope to see your thoughts in the discussion forum! For your discussion questions, you can analyze the second commandment yourself or discuss the medium of music.

Discussion question 1: How did Calvin interpret the second commandment, and what is a way to interpret the second commandment in a way different from Calvin? Why do you think some Reformed Christians did not completely destroy all images in churches?

Discussion question 2: Samuel Mather states that “organs and cathedral musick” constitute idols in his sermon. He indicates that the particular forms and contexts of organ music in his time did not correspond with the music that God had commanded the Israelites to play. Mather writes, “And he doth also well observe, that musical instruments do more stir up the minde to delight, then frame it to a right disposition, they raise natural, rather than true spiritual joy: which they that commend them as an help partly natural and partly artificial, to the exhilarating of the spirits for the praise of God, may do well to consider.” Does Mather's reasoning for banning religious visuals hold for banning aural productions? Why or why not? How would the music in a worship service affect congregants differently from something like statues of religious figures?

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