‘A sacred relic kept’: Protestant relics and ‘the good death’ experience in nineteenth-century America

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Abstract

By at least the 1830s, evangelical Protestants in the United States considered relic collection and distribution to be an essential part of an individual’s ‘good death’ experience. Protestant relics took form as bodily and contact relics. Bodily relics included locks of hair, pictures of bodies that once lived, post-mortem images, and, in rare cases, blood and bones. Contact relics included Bibles, clothes, burial shrouds, letters, and other objects associated with the dead. Evangelical publishers employed the memoir genre to teach children and adults how to distribute these relics on their deathbeds to family and friends. Some evangelical children even modeled handwritten memoirs of their friends after these published accounts. By the mid-nineteenth century, most Anglo-American Protestants regarded relic collection and distribution around the deathbed as a defining feature of evangelicalism. This held true for evangelical women, children, and men. In fact, evangelical men took these deathbed practices with them to war. Civil War soldiers who died away from home insisted on writing deathbed letters to families as part of their good death experiences. These letters usually carried soldiers’ most treasured possessions back home as Protestant relics, including locks of hair, Bibles, and rings.

keywords: evangelicalism; deathbeds; good death; Protestantism; Protestant relics; material religion; memento mori; hair; Civil War Bibles; religious bodies

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Introduction

In late nineteenth-century America, E. C. Shriner made a name for herself as an accomplished hairwork artist. She entered pieces of her craft in the 1876 Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia. The Centennial Commission recognized her efforts with an award for ‘neat and well-executed designs in hair work’ (Walker 1880:42). According to one advertisement, Shriner practiced hairwork in Philadelphia by creating ‘mementoes of the dead’ (cited in Sheumaker 2007:57). The advertisement explained that she produced mementos as ‘wreaths made from Relics of Deceased Friends’ (Sheumaker 2007:59). These wreaths could be made from an assortment of relics including, ‘pieces of their Clothing, Shrouds, Coffins, Old Shoes, Stockings, or articles found among their effects’ (Sheumaker 2007:59). Locks of hair could be made into flowers for the wreaths for fifty cents. Encouraging readers to employ her services, the advertisement concluded, ‘How pleasant to preserve in so beautiful of form the Relics of our loved ones’ (Sheumaker 2007:59). Shriner worked hair and other ‘relics’ into wreaths for the living to keep as ‘mementoes of the dead.’ While this advertisement did not explain how or why Americans collected relics of the dead, nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants explained the collection process, their reasons for keeping relics, and how these objects worked as religious objects in everyday life.

By at least the 1830s, evangelical Protestants in the United States considered relic collection and distribution to be an essential part of an individual’s ‘good death’ experience.1 Protestant relics took form as bodily and contact relics. Bodily relics included locks of hair, pictures of bodies that once lived, post-mortem images, and, in rare cases, blood and bones. Contact relics included Bibles, clothes, burial shrouds, letters, and other objects associated with the dead. Evangelical publishers employed the memoir genre to teach children and adults how to distribute these relics on their deathbeds to family and friends. Some evangelical children even modeled handwritten memoirs of their friends after these published accounts. By the mid-nineteenth century, most Anglo-American Protestants regarded relic collection and distribution around the deathbed as a defining feature of evangelicalism. This held true for evangelical women, children, and men. In fact, evangelical men took these deathbed practices with them to war. Civil War soldiers who died away from home insisted on writing deathbed letters to families as part of their good death experiences. These letters usually carried soldiers’ most treasured possessions back home as Protestant relics, including locks of hair, Bibles, and rings.
Evangelicals learned how to engage with relics as supernatural memory objects from other Protestants who wrote advice literature about protracted mourning practices. According to Protestants, relics worked through touch after the death of an individual. Evangelicals touched relics to conjure memories of the dead stored in the objects. Touching embodied memories made dead evangelicals’ piety present, so the living could experience it. Touching the material piety of a person helped the living become better Christians and, in some cases, induced conversion experiences. Protestant relics helped evangelicals do the work of mourning in preparation for the next material life in heaven with Jesus. For many Protestants, touching a Protestant relic also generated the material memories and emotions necessary for the living to experience the presence of the absent dead in heaven. Protestant relics did not conjure the spirit of the dead in an immaterial sense. They made the absent dead really present in another material form. Protestant relics functioned as material bridges between this life and the next. They linked living evangelical bodies on earth to dead evangelicals living in new heavenly bodies.

**Protestant relics in historiography and notes on method**

The general consensus among many scholars has been that after the Continental and English Reformations, Protestants eschewed the cult of relics promoted by the Roman Catholic Church. Many historians have assumed that these Reformations initiated a split in western Christianity, such that Protestantism and Roman Catholicism have existed as mutually exclusive branches of Christianity for the past 500 years. The points on which these two branches supposedly differed hinged on the notions that Protestants stopped believing in purgatory and stopped engaging with relics, images, and other objects as powerful sacra. Many historians have accepted it as fact that Protestants stopped employing relics in their religious practices because they assumed that sixteenth-century confessional polemics formed Protestantism into a religion focused on the absence of ‘real presence’ (Orsi 2016:2–10) in devotional objects and worship practices.²

Scholars of religion and material culture, however, have pointed to convincing historical evidence that Protestantism has not been as iconoclastic a tradition as once presumed.³ Protestant Reformation scholar Alexandria Walsham examined transformations and adaptations in Protestant relic practices. The English Reformation, according to Walsham, ‘involved a redefinition of the relic as a symbolic memento rather than a miraculous divine entity’ (2010a:22). Walsham concluded that a reformed relic culture emerged that evidenced ‘the development of a Protestant culture of
memory and identity centered as much on material objects as on distinctive dogmas and rituals’ (Walsham 2010b:143). English Protestants redefined the category of relic, so that it referred to different types of memory objects. This reformed relic culture was a part of ‘the confessionalization of material culture in post-Reformation society,’ whereby relics became embroiled in ‘the politics of religious identity formation’ (2010b:122). English Protestants deployed relics of martyrs as symbolic memory objects to define their religious identity and material culture as separate from that of English Catholics.

Rachel McBride Lindsey’s *A Communion of Shadows* (2017) introduced the notion that many nineteenth-century American Protestants engaged with hair and likenesses of the dead as relics. Like Walsham, Lindsey identified Protestant relics as memory objects. These objects, however, were not the remains of Protestant martyrs. In nineteenth-century America, according to Lindsey, Protestant relics were the bodily remains (corpses, locks of hair) and photographic likenesses (living and post-mortem) of individual dead Protestants preserved by living family and friends. Protestant ministers in the United States ‘may have scoffed at the idea that these likenesses mirrored the devotional habits of Catholic immigrants,’ Lindsey explained, but ‘the category of the photographic relic nevertheless resonated for many of [their] contemporaries as articles that are “kept in memory of another with a kind of religious veneration”’ (Lindsey 2017:101). Nineteenth-century Protestant relics were not symbolic like English Reformation relics. They were not dead matter that only referred to past events and people. According to Lindsey, nineteenth-century Protestant relics signaled ‘the realness of what had passed before the camera’s lens but also the continued presence of the departed as well as promises of glories to come’ (2017:89). They operated as lively memory objects that mediated the presence of individual dead Protestants and their heavenly reunion with loved ones. Lindsey concluded that, ‘if hairwork and photographs were not considered relics in the sacramental sense familiar to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, they were nevertheless highly charged articles that traversed similar theological and social registers’ (2017:101). Following Lindsey, this article foregrounds the ways nineteenth-century American Protestants defined relics as lively memory objects that generated presence.

The notion that memory objects can generate presence may seem strange to some modern readers. We tend to think of memory as something that exists in the past, or as something that exists in an immaterial form about past people, places, events, and ideas. This leads us to think about memory objects as dead matter, signs of the past, objects of absence,
or lifeless mnemonic devices. This thinking can be traced back, in part, to the history of Protestantism itself, and how some Protestant assumptions about matter have been replicated in scholarship. As Robert A. Orsi argued in *History and Presence*:

The internecine debate among Christian theologians in the sixteenth century about the nature of the divine body in the Host hardened over time into the stark dichotomy between presence and absence, which then became the metric for mapping the religious worlds of the planet. The origin of the map’s coordinates, the zero point from which all the other elements are computed or constrained, was Catholics = presence (in the old sense), Protestants = absence ... In time, as modernity evolved, the gods were severed [by scholars of religion] from the media of their representation, which became signs and symbols, not embodied presences (Orsi 2016:249–50).

Orsi invited scholars of religion to reconsider the ways we replicate the Catholicism = presence, Protestantism = absence dichotomy in our scholarship. It has been used as a template for studying history and religion, even when evidence suggests that Protestants do engage with God, Jesus, angels, monsters, and the dead in terms of presence (Orsi 2016:25). Following Orsi, this study considers how Protestants engaged the embodied presences of their dead as lively memory objects. Protestants touched relics to feel God, Jesus, and the dead, in order to make them really present in their heavenly absence. Protestant relics functioned as supernatural memory nodes that embodied dead individuals in other material forms to connect heaven and earth.

Because Protestant relics operated as memory objects, some nineteenth-century Protestants did not always use the term ‘relic’ to describe objects that belonged to this category. While one nineteenth-century Protestant referred to a lock of hair collected from a dead person as a ‘relic,’ another referred to a lock of hair collected from a dead person as a ‘memento.’ Sometimes, Protestants employed these words interchangeably to refer to a plethora of memory objects of the dead (e.g., locks of hair, clothing, shrouds, etc.), as in Shriner’s advertisement. They also referred to Protestant relics as ‘memento mori,’ ‘memorials,’ and ‘tokens of the dead.’ All of these phrases evoked the nature of these objects as religious memory objects of the dead without using the word ‘relic.’ This means language is not always the best indicator for identifying objects that belonged to the category of ‘Protestant relic.’

This article examines Protestant relics by studying religion as ‘the matter of belief.’ Examining ‘the matter of belief’ shifts scholars’ attention away from studying religion only as linguistic events. As David Morgan has
argued, ‘belief is more than the linguistic act of signification’ (2010:5). It is also ‘the embodied, material features of lived religion’ (2010:7). Studying religion as ‘the matter of belief’ recognizes that ‘materiality mediates belief,’ such that ‘material objects and practices both enable [belief] and enact [belief]’ (2010:12). This study does not only identify Protestant relics in terms of linguistic acts of signification. It defines Protestant relics according to the words Protestants used to name objects, as well as how the objects worked for Protestants, and how Protestants engaged the objects in their religious practices. The phrase ‘Protestant relics’ denotes a category of object that includes many different forms of memory objects of the dead employed by Protestants in their deathbed and protracted mourning practices. While these memory objects ranged in form from hair and blood to Bibles and clothes, all of the objects examined in this essay worked as Protestant relics, even though nineteenth-century evangelicals did not always use the term ‘relic’ to describe each object.

Some Protestants probably felt uncomfortable using the term ‘relic,’ because it connected their practices to Catholic relic practices. In many cases, Protestants attempted to differentiate their relic practices by attacking Catholic relic practices. In 1820, for example, the Methodist Episcopal Church issued the twentieth edition of its doctrines and principles. Besides outlining Methodist practices, the book also included refutations of Catholic practices. On purgatory, it noted, ‘the Romanish doctrine concerning purgatory, pardon, worshipping, and adoration, as well of images as of relics, and also invocation of saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but repugnant to the word of God’ (MEC 1820:13). These attacks on Catholic relic practices should not be read as evidence for a complete disavowal of relic practices among American Protestants. There is too much evidence to suggest otherwise. For example, some American Methodists had been touching George Whitefield’s relics since the early 1800s to feel his presence (Brummitt 2018:88–91; Lee 1810:38; 1823:154–6). Rather, these arguments should be read as similar to those made by Protestants during the English Reformation. These arguments were a part of ‘the confessionalization of material culture’ in an increasingly diverse Christian society, whereby relics became embroiled in ‘the politics of religious identity formation’ (Walsham 2010b:122). Like English Protestants, American Protestants defined their relic practices against Catholic relic practices, in order to support their own material culture of the dead and their own understanding of presence. The need to differentiate Protestant and Catholic relic practices increased in the 1820s, as Irish Catholics started immigrating to the United States. 6
In the 1830s, some Protestants tried to more clearly define Protestant relic practices in evangelical memoirs.

‘Wear this in remembrance of me’: relics and the evangelical deathbed in the 1830s

The ‘good death’ in Protestantism has been thoroughly examined by scholars. According to Pat Jalland, ‘the Protestant ideal of the good death was powerfully revitalized by the Evangelical movement’ of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (1996:19). This movement emphasized the piety of individuals through ‘new birth,’ or emotional conversion experiences. The evangelical deathbed functioned as a particularly ripe moment for conversion. The manner and condition in which one died provided evidence, according to evangelicals, as to whether or not a person had been truly saved. For those who had not converted in life, the deathbed provided the final opportunity to experience salvation through an emotional conversion experience. A good death confirmed salvation for witnesses and the dying person. It was a moment when people scrutinized dying bodies for physical, emotional, and supernatural evidence of salvation (Jalland 1996:21).

Evangelicals disseminated notions about the good death in the memoirs of people perceived to be eminently pious. Memoirs took form as published narratives in popular journals, tracts, and magazines, as well as handwritten accounts in letters and diaries. Some of the earliest memoirs appeared in the 1790s in the British Evangelical Magazine, which often included a memoir at the beginning of each new issue. These memoirs recounted the pious life of an evangelical, including a detailed description of the person’s deathbed. This genre was based, sometimes very loosely, on actual deathbed experiences (Jalland 1996:21–3). In the United States, deathbed memoirs took on more supernatural traits. As Diana Walsh Pasulka has shown, ‘depictions of elements such as communication between the living and the dead, visions of heaven, and so forth, which for the British writers were purely fantasy and fiction, or “only a little more than dreams,” are more realistically presented in American versions’ (2007:55). These supernatural memoirs taught American evangelicals how to die the good death.

The good death in nineteenth-century American evangelicalism, ideally, took place at home, where the dying person bid farewell to family and friends. Ministers visited the dying to ensure they converted. From the deathbed, the dying also performed the tasks of a minister and dispensed spiritual advice to all who would listen. They engaged in devotional practices such as reading the Bible, singing, and witnessing to others. Despite
bouts of intense suffering, they prayed for the forgiveness of their sins, resigned themselves to the will of God, and regained lucidity and awareness of their situation before the end. Their final moments were likely filled with intense pain and suffering, but they bore these with fortitude, because these were the moments when they discerned the face of Jesus, heard heavenly songs, and beheld angels descending from heaven to take them home.8 These moments of ecstatic anguish often served as evidence of conversion and salvation in Jesus (Pasulka 2007:55–9). The moment of death marked their faces or bodies as especially pious, sometimes like that of an angel. Witnesses examined the marks on the body for what could be discerned about salvation, as well as heaven and its inhabitants (Lindsey 2017:69; Seeman 2019:202–6). The good death for American evangelicals was a teachable moment and, as such, evangelicals recorded in minute detail the deathbed experiences of their loved ones. They expected that re-examining deathbeds and dying bodies in person as well as through journals, memoirs, publications, images (Figure 1), and letters would teach them how to die the good death.

Figure 1: ‘The death-bed of Wesley,’ engraved by John Sartain and published by William Sartain (Philadelphia, c. 1840s). Image courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
While scholars have examined the significance and manner of the good death in evangelicalism, they have neglected a crucial aspect of it in nineteenth-century America. By at least the 1830s, evangelical Protestants in the United States considered relics to be a category of religious object that should be distributed on the deathbed as part of the good death experience and used later in protracted mourning practices. The clearest examples of these prescriptions appear in literature for children and young adults, who served as primary target audiences for the popular Protestant print culture that emerged in the early 1800s. Parents and grandparents read this literature to children, children read this literature for themselves, and they all learned to model their evangelical practices on the pictures printed in these texts (Morgan 1999:201–34). Non-denominational publishers employed print and images in memoirs to train children, young people, and adults to convert to evangelicalism before death. The memoir genre also instructed readers that the good death included distributing relics on their deathbeds.

In 1833, the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society (MSSS) published the Memoir of Ann Elizabeth Pierce to instruct children how to die as evangelicals distributing their relics. The memoir outlined the life, conversion experience, and good death of Ann, a young girl from Massachusetts. According to the memoir, Ann’s parents provided her with no religious instruction in her short nine years of life. They did not take her to the meeting house, have her baptized, or read the Bible to her. Ann received most of her religious education from her local Sabbath School in the summers of 1830 and 1831. By January 1832, consumption (tuberculosis) seized Ann and she no longer left her house. Four weeks before she died, Ann’s evangelical grandmother visited. The two engaged in Bible reading, sang hymns, and prayed together. Before Ann’s grandmother departed, the child ‘learned the way of salvation, gave her own heart … to the Saviour, and then besought her father and mother to do so also; assuring them that it was “easy”’ (MSSS 1833:12). Near death, Ann assured her weeping parents not to cry for her, because she was ‘going to be happy with God’ (MSSS 1833:19). The memoir taught children how to die like Ann. The book instructed young readers to experience conversion before death, and to minister to family and friends on their deathbeds. Ministering to others included praying for the unconverted, reading the Bible and singing hymns with them, and talking to them about giving their hearts to Jesus.

The Memoir of Ann Elizabeth Pierce also taught children that they should minister to their families and friends by distributing relics on their deathbeds. One of the ‘most striking instances’ of Ann’s death, the book explained, ‘was seen in the manner in which she distributed various little
articles that belonged particularly to her’ (MSSS 1833:20). The distribution of these articles occurred at a particular moment and in a particular place. Although the book did not indicate this explicitly in the text, the frontispiece and caption made it clear. The MSSS placed an engraving of Ann on her deathbed opposite the title page (Figure 2). The engraving visualized Ann’s good death as she lay propped on pillows in bed surrounded by her parents, siblings, and cousins. It showed Ann handing something to her mother. The engraving caption and text explained what happened: ‘Her clothes she gave to her sister, and as she did it, said, “Now, I suppose, mother, you will cry when you see them, but I do not want you should” ’ (MSSS 1833:frontispiece caption, 21). The image depicted Ann gifting pieces of clothes to her mother for her sister to wear after her death.

Ann also dispensed other objects to the rest of her family. To her brothers, she gave her Sabbath School certificates. Ann received the certificates for her ‘diligence and good conduct’ (MSSS 1833:20). She directed her mother to ‘keep them for her brothers, until they were able to read them, and then, said she, “Give them to them, and tell them to keep them to remember me by” ’ (MSSS 1833:21). She gifted her hymnbook to her father and advised, ‘Do read it, father, for I want you should become a good

Figure 2: Frontispiece in Memoir of Ann Elizabeth Pierce (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1833). Image courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
man’ (MSSS 1833:20). Ann also ‘distributed some of her things among her cousins, and among the rest, did not forget a little boy that her mother had formerly taken to nurse’ (MSSS 1833:20). Evangelical children learned from memoirs how to distribute their material possessions on their deathbeds to loved ones who would put them to use later.

The *Memoir of Ann Elizabeth Pierce* described how these material memories worked to cultivate Christian piety and practice in the living. As material memories, relics took on the qualities of the dying person. Ann was a model child who converted before death. Death marked her body and possessions as pious objects that retained her Christian traits. If Ann’s mother saw her sister wearing her clothes, she would cry because they would induce emotional memories of Ann’s life and deathbed. Reading or handling the certificates would provoke memories of Ann, her good conduct at Sabbath School, and her pious death. Reading her hymnbook would lead her father to more easily engage in Protestant reading and singing practices. The clothes, certificates, and hymnbook were intimately connected to Ann’s religious life, pious practices, conversion experience, and her deathbed. She had touched and used these objects in her own Christian practices. She chose these objects to give to specific people on her deathbed. After Ann’s death, these objects became memory objects family members were supposed to use in their protracted mourning practices and devotional life. The objects became more affective as Christian objects, because they were once the possessions of a converted and dying individual. The clothes, certificates, and book embodied Ann’s piety, her Christian conduct, and her reading and singing habits in life and on her deathbed. The memoir taught children that material memories distributed on deathbeds helped families enact remembrance in mourning, in order to imitate the pious life, practices, and death of the converted. Experiencing Ann’s piety through the memory objects, the memoir suggested, would cultivate her family’s Protestant practices and make them better Christians. Protestant relics worked by making the piety of the dead present in other material forms for the living to use to cultivate their own Christian piety and practices.

In case children did not come by these memoirs on their own, non-denominational children’s periodicals urged them to buy and read memoirs. *The Youth’s Companion*, a Boston children’s periodical, featured the *Memoir of Ann Elizabeth Pierce* as an important book for children to read. In October 1833, the newspaper published an extract of Ann’s memoir along with Figure 2 in a section called ‘The Library.’ Editors advertised the memoir as an appropriate book for any Sabbath School library collection. The advertisement also directed children and parents to buy the book for themselves at Depository, No. 24, Cornhill in Boston. The extract
published with the image described all of the articles Ann dispensed to her family on her deathbed (*The Youth’s Companion* 1833a:85). In November 1833, *The Youth’s Companion* advertised a similar memoir titled the *Memoir of Mary West* along with Figure 3 (1833b:97). This wood engraving captured the moment the dying Mary gifted her ring to her mother on her deathbed. The text explained the image: ‘Having called for her ring, on which her name was engraven [sic], she put it upon the hand of her mother, saying: “You must always wear this in remembrance of me.” Then bid her farewell’ (1833b:97). Mary gave the ring engraved with her name to her mother. She expected her mother to wear it as a memory object. These books, newspapers, and images taught children, young people, and adults how to distribute relics as pious memory objects on their deathbeds as part of the good death experience.

Some young evangelicals modeled handwritten memoirs after these published accounts by narrating their friends’ deathbed experiences and relic distribution practices. One of these handwritten memoirs is preserved in the New Hampshire Historical Society. According to the author,
this book was ‘a short but interesting memoir of Harriet N. Cilley who departed this life January 9th 1838 aged 15.’ Harriet was born in October 1822 in Deerfield, New Hampshire to the Honorable Horatio Gates Cilley and Sally Jenness Cilley (Cogswell 1878:354–5). The author, who witnessed the deathbed scene, invited readers to ‘Go with me to her dying bed, see that lovely creature, when everything tended to render life pleasant.’ Just before she died, Harriet called her brothers and sisters to her deathbed. She said to them, ‘We have been a happy family; how pleasant it will be if we can all meet in Heaven! I want you all to forgive me if I have done anything wrong, or have hurt your feelings.’ She then gave each of her brothers and sisters ‘some little token of love and asked them to keep it to remember her by.’ The handwritten memoir did not expand on what types of memory tokens Harriet distributed, or what exactly she intended them to do for the living. What is clear is that Harriet and the memorialist understood relic practices as being central to the evangelical good death. The deathbed was incomplete without the dying distributing her relics as memory objects for the living to use later.

‘Holy in our eyes’: Protestant relics as supernatural memory objects in the 1850s

By the mid-nineteenth century, writers of advice literature recognized the pervasiveness and power of Protestant relics among American evangelicals. In 1851, the editor of the Western Literary Messenger Jesse Clement described how relics were ubiquitous objects. In ‘Memorials of the dead,’ the Baptist Clement (Burrage 1888:380–1) explained how mourners usually kept ‘some little memento’ of each person they saw buried (Clement 1851:269). ‘Few persons,’ according to Clement, ‘need leave their own hearts’ home, to find an illustration of the sacredness and moral power of the memorials of the dead’ (1851:269). Almost everyone, even Clement himself, retained some powerful memento of the dead, because ‘with each visitation of death some object is invested with sacredness’ (1851:269). After the deaths of loved ones, their ordinary objects became memory objects of the dead kept by the living. Transformed by death, these objects ‘become dearer to memory’ and are ‘the most sacred of the [living] heart’s treasures’ (1851:269). No matter ‘how trifling’ the object, Clement explained, ‘things possess-ing [sic] otherwise no value, become, by the touch of death, of inestimable price’ (1851:269). A lock of hair had no monetary value, but ‘if it be all the memorial one has of a dead and dear friend, it is to that person more precious than rubies’ (1851:269). Death endowed individuals’ ordinary objects with extraordinary memory value.
Once ordinary objects, locks of hair and other objects associated with the dead transformed into highly valuable memory objects.

Evangelicals regarded the relics of Christian family and friends as particularly valuable. ‘If the deceased of whom we possess memorals [sic], was of an amiable disposition, of strong social affections, and rich in the Christian graces,’ Clement reasoned, ‘the memorials themselves are more highly prized, and are productive of far more moral good’ (1851:269). The memorials of the Christian dead, specifically the evangelical dead, were highly prized by the living because they embodied the religious and moral affections of that person. The objects collected on a deathbed were not just any objects. They were objects invested with ‘Christian graces,’ because they were the bodily relics and contact relics of people perceived to be pious (1851:269). They were objects of people who converted to evangelicalism before death. Death transformed the corpses and objects of evangelicals into pious memory objects. Preserving the memory of an evangelical meant preserving her corpse (Stabile 2004:179) and objects associated with her corpse. Evangelicals expected relics to work in particular ways for the living to produce moral good.

Other mid-nineteenth-century evangelicals explained in more detail how relics functioned as powerful objects for the living, and how they engaged relics as supernatural memory objects in protracted mourning practices. In 1856, T. S. Arthur published *Words of Cheer for the Tempted, the Toiling, and the Sorrowing*. To comfort Protestant readers who mourned, Arthur included a short selection titled ‘The Dead’ (1856:24–7). It was an excerpt from the longer essay ‘Our Friends in Heaven’ by Harriett Beecher Stowe, the famous evangelical Protestant (1856:96–8). The selection explained how the moment of death transformed the possessions of loved ones such that they became invested with sacredness. ‘All he wore or touched, or looked upon familiarly,’ Stowe wrote, ‘becomes sacred as relics’ (Arthur 1856:24). Yesterday, ‘homely articles’ were ‘to be tossed to and fro, handled lightly, given away thoughtlessly’ (1856:24). Death, however, transformed these objects such that ‘to-day we touch them softly, our tears drop on them … and they have become holy in our eyes’ (1856:24). For Stowe, ‘the familiar household object[s] of to-day may become sacred relics tomorrow’ (1856:26). Death transformed individuals’ ordinary objects into special memory objects that some Protestants called ‘relics.’

Living evangelicals collected relics in mourning rituals. After a loved one’s death, Stowe explained, ‘it is a touching ceremony to divide among a circle of friends the memorials of the lost’ (Arthur 1856:25). The relics divided among friends might include the objects ‘oftenest touched or worn’ by the dead such as their clothes (1856:25). They might include ‘pet articles
of fancy, ‘like pictures or vases, treasured by the dead for ‘some peculiar
taste’ (1856:25). The objects might also include texts the dead once read
with the living, like ‘the old Bible’ or a hymn (1856:25). Living Protestants
did not only value relics for their inherent ‘beauty or worth’ (1856:25).
They valued relics, according to Stowe, for ‘the frequency with which we
have seen them touched or used’ (1856:25). Any object had the potential
to become a Protestant relic around a person’s death, if valued by the living
for its connection to the deceased through memory by touch or use.

Evangelicals also valued relics for the ways they brought the dead nearer
to the living. Each relic, Stowe explained, ‘comes to us with an almost
supernatural power’ (Arthur 1856:25). This power stemmed from relics’
ability to generate the absence and presence of the dead. According to
Stowe, a relic ‘comes inscribed – “no more” ’ (1856:25). A Protestant relic
by its nature recalled material memories of the dead to forefront that per-
son’s absence from earth. While relics revealed the absence of the dead,
Stowe clarified, ‘yet each one, too, is a pledge of reunion’ (1856:25). For
Stowe, reunion was the day when the living would reunite with the dead
in heaven. Like other mid-nineteenth-century Protestants, Stowe under-
stood heaven to be a material place, much like earth, where humans lived
in bodily form after death.12 As a pledge of reunion, a relic served as a mate-
rial assurance that living Protestants would one day meet their dead loved
ones in heaven. It promised they would live together again in reconstituted
bodies and heavenly homes. This material assurance also made the dead
present in another material form until that day of reunion. Protestant relics
mediated absence and presence, space and time, in order to bring the dead
nearer to the living now on earth. By remembering the dead in sorrow and
relics, Stow concluded, ‘may our heavenly friends prove to us ministering
spirits’ (1856:27). As pledges of reunion, Protestant relics made the absent
dead present to guide the living to a material heaven for life after death
with the dead.

‘Thy talismanic touch’: activating the supernatural power of
Protestant relics by touch

Evangelicals understood that touching relics activated their supernatu-
ral power. Locks of hair served as particularly effective Protestant relics,
because they were actual pieces of corpses collected from deathbeds. When
touched, locks of hair conjured a series of embodied memories that made
the dead present. In the poem ‘The Lock of Hair’ Lydia Sigourney explained
this memory process as it related to a lock of hair cut from her dead daugh-
ter’s head. This poem first appeared in the collection Gleanings, published
in 1860. ‘How full thou art of memories,—sever’d tress!’, the poem began (Sigourney 1860a:100). The hair was a lively material memory. According to Sigourney, touching the hair evoked its memories of the deceased. She explained, ‘Back at thy talismanic touch return[s] / A merry face through clustered ringlets peeping’ (1860a:100). The hair was a talisman, or an object with supernatural properties. It helped the possessor perform a particular type of touch. The ‘talismanic touch’ conjured memory-vignettes of the hair in the one who touched it. The toucher recalled memories of the hair that once belonged to a young child with curly ringlets, as a schoolgirl with books, and as a young woman. The hair even conjured the memory of the young woman converting: ‘A sweet disciple at her Saviour’s feet / Choosing the better part’ (1860a:100). The hair also recalled the last time the mother saw her daughter on her deathbed:

The white camelia [sic], and the winter rose,
Lay on her bosom, and the lustrous hair
Was parted o’er her forehead, but the hand
Returned no pressure, and a sad-toned bell
Bade those who loved her, come and look their last
On those calm features (1860a:101).

The hair stored the mother’s melancholy memory of its position on her dead daughter. It literally preserved the absent daughter’s corpse for moments like these when a talismanic touch brought her back to life. Touching a Protestant relic activated its memorial powers to make the absent dead present to the living once again.

This poem was also published in *The Lady’s Almanac for 1860*. The publication illustrated the touch and memory process described in the poem (Sigourney 1860b:84–5). The illustration depicts a severed lock of hair set into a mourning brooch at the bottom center of the image (Figure 4). To touch the lock of hair, in this case, was to wear it on the living body. Many Protestants commissioned jewelry like this filled with plaited hair to wear after the death of a loved one. Women usually pinned mourning brooches over their hearts or at the base of their necks (Figure 5). Men attached lockets on chains filled with hair to their vests or carried them in their pockets. Often, these hair devices included small daguerreotypes of the deceased along with the locks of hair (Lindsey 2017:104). The image and poem published in *The Lady’s Almanac for 1860* explained how these hair devices worked for those in mourning (Sigourney 1860b: 84–5). In Figure 4, memories surround the relic as vignettes that have been conjured by the hair. In the top image, a seated mother and child lovingly embrace and stare into one another’s eyes. The next memory shows the child as a
schoolgirl practicing her piano. A third image captures two young lovers holding hands at their marriage ceremony. The final image, just below the mourning brooch, recalls the young woman as she was laid out on her deathbed. Her eyes are closed and her head rests propped on a pillow. She has been dressed in a white burial shroud, and the lower half of her body is covered with a sheet or blanket. Loose locks of her hair cascade down the pillow. The locks of hair in the jewelry preserved the mother’s most tender memories of her daughter, the last of which was her corpse shrouded in the home on her deathbed.

While Sigourney’s poem argued that touching individual locks of hair activated their memories, the image suggested that touching locks by wearing them as pieces of jewelry would do the same. Wearing a dead loved one’s hair conjured tender memories locked in the tresses to make the dead present. As another poet noted, a lock of hair in a locket was ‘A sacred relic kept... / Of her from earth now gone’ (S. C. R. 1856:76). Hair relics conjured the presence of a person even when the person’s physical body was in the ground and her spiritual body was thought to be in heaven.
Touching Protestant relics activated their supernatural memorial powers, in order to make the absent dead who lived in heaven present on earth in another material form to the living.

‘One of those valued relics’: a soldier’s Bible as a Protestant relic in the Civil War

While evangelicals collected and dispensed Protestant relics first-hand at deathbeds, not everyone had the privilege of being present for a loved one’s final moments. In these cases, families, friends, and strangers narrated the protracted episodes of suffering in deathbed letters and exchanged relics with families in these letters. This was especially true during the Civil War, when thousands of evangelicals died away from home on battlefields. Between 1861 and 1865, close to 620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers
were killed or wounded. Historians estimate that civilian deaths from those caught in the crossfire of battle numbered near 50,000. Uncounted among these deaths were the men, women, and children who fell victim to diseases that spread with troops, guerrilla warfare, riots, and food shortages (Faust 2008:xii–xiii). In the face of death, some evangelical Protestants in war continued doing what their families had been doing for over 30 years (Schantz 2008:1–5, 9). Despite the challenges of doing so, some evangelical soldiers recorded written accounts of their good deaths and sent relics home in deathbed letters.

Pocket Bibles carried by soldiers became the most common type of relic sent home during the war. Given the success of the American Bible Society and the Confederate Bible Society’s distribution efforts, most soldiers carried a small Bible in their breast pockets (Brummitt 2022, forthcoming; Fea 2016:75–83). Soldiers often died with Bibles in their pockets, clutched in their hands, or dropped at their sides. On battlefield and camp deathbeds, soldiers regarded Bibles as books and objects of comfort that promised eternal life after death (Fea 2016:81–3). When possible, Bibles were recovered from soldiers’ corpses and shipped back to families. One Confederate army evangelist recounted that he wrote one last letter for a soldier to his mother and then watched the soldier touch his Bible before death. The evangelist noted, ‘The precious treasure, “The Soldier’s Bible,” [sic] has been returned to the family, and is now one of those valued relics that bind many sad hearts with links of gold to bygone days’ (cited in Jones 1887:417). Families did not only value the Bibles of dead soldiers as objects that identified their corpses (Faust 2008:119) or as religious books filled with God’s words. A Bible transformed into another type of religious object on a soldier’s death: a Protestant relic. It became a highly valued memory object of a dead soldier that helped Protestant families engage in protracted mourning practices. Families considered soldiers’ contact relics to be particularly valuable because, in many cases, they could not access soldiers’ corpses for Protestant deathbed rituals, burials, and mourning practices. As contact relics, Bibles provided physical evidence of soldiers’ conversions to evangelicalism. They were often the last books that soldiers touched and read on their deathbeds. Bibles also carried other contact relics to families, such as letters and rings. Sometimes, these books became bodily relics when they absorbed the blood of dying soldiers or preserved soldiers’ own handwritten accounts of their deathbeds.

The pocket Bible of Thomas Cox exemplifies how a soldier’s Bible worked in these ways as a multifaceted Protestant relic. In June 1861, Thomas Cox enlisted in the Virginia Infantry (Pvt Thomas A. Cox 2000). Some time afterwards, Cox obtained a Bible printed by the Confederate
States Bible Society (Figure 6). A handwritten note on the cover suggests Cox received the Bible from the Morris Church in Carroll County, Virginia. Cox carried the book in one of his breast pockets into the Battle of Monocacy just outside of Frederick, Maryland on July 9, 1864. In the battle, Cox was shot in the chest and severely wounded. The bullet struck the Bible as it entered his body. The Bible carried the physical evidence of the soldier’s wound. A bullet hole is still visible in the middle of the book’s spine, as well as blood that soaked into the spine and cover. After the battle, Union forces captured Cox as a prisoner of war and took him to West Hospital in Baltimore. He carried his Bible with him and kept it close by his side.13

While at West Hospital, Cox befriended another prisoner named H. S. Shepherd, whom he employed to write his deathbed narrative in the Bible (Figure 7). The dying Cox narrated the meaning of the bullet hole in his Bible, and Shepherd wrote the account in the margins of several pages. These pages noted, ‘The ball that struck this ... book entered my left brest [sic] over... & came out of Right – it saved instant death ... & will be the means (over) ... of saving my soul ... Thomas Cox ... Blessed are the dead ... that die in the Lord.’ Cox interpreted the book’s presence in his pocket as divine intervention and the means of salvation for his soul. Cox likely meant that the words of the book provided spiritual nourishment to his soul when he read them on the battlefield and while imprisoned. He also meant that the book as an object saved him from instant death, allowing him time to carry out the deathbed practices associated with the good death.14
The Bible saved Cox from instant death and allowed him to die slowly. This gave him time to experience the good death of an evangelical Protestant who professed his love of Jesus, turned his eye toward heaven, and distributed relics. In the front of the Bible, Shepherd recorded more about the good death of Cox. He scribbled, ‘I was with Thos. Cox when he died – he was willing – & appear[ed] ready to leave this world for a better one to come.’ Shepherd suggested that Cox died willingly as an evangelical who had converted before death and looked forward to living in heaven. Cox died the good death of a Protestant soldier. Shepherd also recorded Cox’s Protestant relic distribution practices on the inside of the back cover (Figure 8). He wrote, ‘Give [name indecipherable] this ring – was taken from his finger – by his request for his wife.’ Cox instructed Shepherd to send the ring in the blood-soaked Bible with the deathbed narrative to his wife after his death. Like other nineteenth-century Protestants, Cox died the good death of an evangelical who distributed his most prized earthly possessions on his deathbed to his family. He just happened to do it far from home as a prisoner of war. The soldier lingered near death for more than a month and finally succumbed to his wound on August 15, 1864.15

Scholars have discovered accounts of these deathbed practices among Civil War soldiers. These practices have been interpreted as idiosyncratic, secular practices that had nothing to do with religion. In This Republic
of Suffering, Drew Gilpin Faust observed, ‘Soldiers’ personal possessions often took on the character of memento mori, relics that retained and represented something of the spirit of the departed’ (Faust 2008:29). For Faust, the personal possessions of dead soldiers functioned like relics or memento mori because they ‘represented’ the spirit of the dead to living families. ‘A Bible, a watch, a diary, a lock of hair, even the bullet with which a son or brother had been killed,’ according to Faust, ‘could help to fill the void left by the loved one’s departure, and could help make tangible a loss known only through the abstractions of language’ (Faust 2008:29). The personal possessions of dead soldiers, according to Faust, operated as tangible metaphors for the reality of a soldier’s death and, perhaps, invoked the soldiers’ spirits. Although the words ‘relics’ and ‘memento mori’ were used

to describe these objects, Faust considered these to be secular objects and practices related to metaphor, not religion.

The categories of objects (i.e., relics, memento mori) Faust employed to analyze Civil War deathbed practices were never rigorously interrogated in the book. Like most other historians at the time, Faust assumed that Protestants did not engage in religious relic practices. After recounting how Henry Bowditch fashioned an ‘amulet’ from a ring and a ‘cavalry button cut from his [son’s] blood-stained vest,’ Faust concluded that this father ‘supplemented the formal rituals of religion with rituals of his own’ (2008:169). Many historians of the United States, not just Faust, have assumed that one of the defining features of Protestantism is that Protestants do not engage with relics. When relic practices are examined, historians usually describe them as secular or metaphorical practices.16 Protestants, they have assumed, never employed relics as religious objects that conveyed presence. Such rituals, however, were not Bowditch’s own. Civil War era Americans did not describe the personal possessions of dead soldiers as metaphors for death that stood in for the reality of abstract language. They did not consider the objects to ‘represent’ the spirit of the departed in an immaterial sense. They did not define these rituals or objects as secular. The relic practices of Civil War soldiers and families were an intimate part of the ways evangelical Protestants practiced ‘lived religion’ (Morgan 2010:6–7) in nineteenth-century America. Evangelicals engaged with Protestant relics as religious objects that generated presence, because they were intimately associated with the good death experience.

Nineteenth-century Protestant pastors never officially authorized Protestant relic practices in churches, official documents, or creeds. Even so, ordinary Protestants, even ministers, participated in these relic practices as part of evangelicals’ lived experiences of religion. As the Union Soldier Robert Allen lay dying in a Kentucky hospital, the Reverend Landis, of the U.S. Christian Commission, spoke with him about giving his heart to Jesus.17 The U.S. Christian Commission was a voluntary war relief agency founded by the Young Men’s Christian Association in 1861. The young men and women who volunteered for this agency were Protestants who provided soldiers with the supplies necessary to win the war, including general supplies, medical supplies, religious literature, and paper to write home to their families. The people who served as chaplains led services in camps, but they also ministered to dying soldiers and helped them write deathbed letters to their families (Cimbala and Miller 2017:74; Faust 2008:107–10). The day after the Reverend Landis spoke to Robert Allen, the soldier died. Landis notified Robert’s family of his death. In a letter, he wrote, ‘Your son died yesterday morning ... I was greatly surprised to find
yesterday morning him gone to his loving home.’ He also explained, ‘I think he was a Christian. He enjoyed our services in his tent very much.’ Not able to provide any last written words or descriptions from Robert’s deathbed, Landis sent in their place ‘a lock of his hair which I knew you would be glad to preserve.’ The Reverend Landis cut a lock of hair from Robert’s corpse and mailed it in the deathbed letter to the family.18

This Protestant minister assumed that locks of hair were important objects for family members who mourned the death of a Protestant soldier. The hair was collected from the deathbed, or the closest scene to a deathbed the pastor witnessed, as evidence of the soldier’s good death. The minister expected the lock of hair would help the family engage in its evangelical mourning practices. The lock of hair was a Protestant relic of the Civil War dead. Like other mid-nineteenth-century Protestants, this minister assumed that collecting relics on a person’s deathbed and distributing them to family members were perfectly acceptable Protestant mourning practices outside of church and church life. Nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants engaged in a lively relic culture focused on preserving the material memories of the dead collected as part of the good death experience. Protestant relic practices were a part of everyday, lived religion, not the formal practices of religion defined in churches, doctrines, or creeds.

The good death, relics, and presence in nineteenth-century American Protestantism

In nineteenth-century America, families and friends treasured Protestant relics as personal, sentimental, religious objects. They displayed the objects in their homes, tucked them into family Bibles, and wore them on their bodies. Unlike Catholic relics, Protestant relics were not authorized in official doctrines through revelation and Church history. They were not attached to indulgences. They did not embody canonized saints, martyrs, or priests. Protestant relics were not usually deposited in official holy spaces, such as churches or shrines. They were not incorruptible. They did not provide miraculous intervention in terms of healing the sick or lessening the number of days the dead spent in purgatory. They did not weep, bleed, or walk. This does not mean, however, that Protestant relics were not powerful in their own way.19

The power of Protestant relics stemmed, in part, from the ways evangelicals centered bodies in their protracted mourning practices. Evangelicals argued that the experience of the good death visibly and indelibly marked individuals’ dying bodies and corpses. They inspected dying bodies on deathbeds and corpses laid out for burial, in the hope of catching some
visible, supernatural sign of the good death that pointed to the person’s salvation and afterlife in heaven. The good death, according to evangelicals, transformed bodies in ways that could be re-experienced by the living through sight before burial. Evangelicals extended this practice of corpse inspection by collecting bodily relics and contact relics. Bodily relics included locks of hair, pictures of bodies that once lived, post-mortem images, and, in rare cases, blood and bones. Contact relics included Bibles, clothes, burial shrouds, letters, and other objects associated with the dead. Family and friends usually received relics at deathbed gatherings from the dying person, who carefully chose which objects to gift. If someone could not be present for a deathbed, family and friends exchanged relics saved for that person at special gatherings after the death or in deathbed letters.

Any object intimately associated with an individual Protestant by tactile forms of memory, such as touch, use, or fancy, transformed into a relic on that person’s deathbed. Evangelicals understood that just as death transformed corpses into supernatural nodes that required inspection, death transformed the objects of the pious dead into supernatural memory objects that required inspection. Given the relationship between these objects, deathbeds, and corpses, Protestants assumed that relics retained the embodied memories of the dead, such as their physical traits, piety, and presence.

Living evangelicals put relics to work in their protracted mourning practices by viewing, touching, or wearing them after a person’s death. Touch activated the power of Protestant relics to work on the living. Touching relics conjured lively memories of the dead embedded in the objects. These material memories embodied the piety of the dead and made it present in the object. Sometimes, touching memories worked to induce conversion experiences in the living. At other times, evangelicals touched the material memories to experience the presence of the absent dead in heaven. Usually, all of this happened upon touching a relic. Protestant relics functioned as material bridges, or supernatural memory nodes, that connected this life and the next, in order to help living Protestants maintain relationships with God, Jesus, and their dead. Evangelicals considered Protestant relics to be ordinary objects transformed by the death of an individual Protestant into powerful, supernatural memory objects that worked on the living through touch to make the absent dead present on earth.

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Notes

1 The exact definition of an evangelical Protestant changed from the late 1700s to 1860s, but I refer to evangelicals as those Protestants who identified as Anglicans, Episcopalians, Unitarians, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Quakers, and the like. These people were connected by their material practices of religion. They worshipped Jesus, engaged the Bible, experienced emotional conversions, felt God in everyday life, and mourned by preserving the relics of their dead as powerful memory objects. My definition of ‘evangelical’ departs from other scholarly definitions, in that it focuses on practices and objects, not beliefs. For other definitions, see Dochuck 2015.

2 For discussions of this, see Orsi 2016:2–5, 8–10, 30–42, 249–52; Wharton 2014:414. For examples of this, see Bruggeman 2011:35–50; Kammen 2010:10, 18; Laderman 1996:7.

3 For studies of Protestant material culture, see Brummitt 2020:13, n. 10; Cray 1990; McDannell 1995; Morgan 1999; Promey 1993, 2005.

4 For examples of Orsi’s discussion of the Catholicism = presence, Protestantism = absence dichotomy in scholarship, and how this has manifested in terms of secularism and metaphor regarding relics used by Protestants, see Barnett 2013:29–37, 49, 51–3; Lutz 2011:128–9; Stabile 2004:222–7.

5 For a discussion of lively memory objects, see Brummitt 2018:22–31.

6 For more on Irish Catholic immigration and American Catholic relic practices, see Pasulka 2014:102–6.


8 For examples of nineteenth-century American deathbeds, see MSSS 1833; Cooley 1833; ‘The Last Hours of Harriet N. Cilley,’ c. 1838, n. p., M 1926-008, New Hampshire Historical Society (NHHS).
9 ‘The Last Hours of Harriet N. Cilley,’ c. 1838, n. p. [1], M 1926-008, NHHS. A handwritten note indicates the memoir was ‘Presented by Miss EA Johnson.’ It is not clear if the book was written by Johnson or presented to the NHHS by Johnson.

10 ‘The Last Hours of Harriet N. Cilley,’ c. 1838, n. p. [2].

11 All quotations are from ‘The Last Hours of Harriet N. Cilley,’ c. 1838, n. p. [29–30], M 1926-008, NHHS.

12 On the material nature of nineteenth-century heaven, see Douglas 1974; McDannel and Lang 2001; Schantz 2008:38–69; Smith 2011:70–86.

13 For the handwritten notes in Thomas Cox’s Bible, see The New Testament (Augusta, Georgia: Confederate States Bible Society / Atlanta, Georgia. Printed by Wood, Hanletter Rice & Co., 1862), cover, inside cover, pp. 158–65, 303; ‘Rare and Important Confederate Imprinted Id’d Bullet Struck Bibles, Perry Adams Antiques’ (blog); retrieved February 6, 2018 from http://perryadamsantiques.com/shop/rare-and-important-confederate-imprinted-idd-bullet-struck-bible

14 See note 13. For more on Shepherd, see Heritage Auction Galleries 2006:64.

15 For the handwritten notes in Cox’s Bible, including death date, see The New Testament (Augusta, Georgia: Confederate States Bible Society / Atlanta, Georgia. Printed by Wood, Hanletter Rice & Co., 1862), inside cover, pp. 158–65, 303, inside back cover; ‘Rare and Important Confederate Imprinted Id’d Bullet Struck Bibles, Perry Adams Antiques’ (blog); retrieved February 6, 2018 from http://perryadamsantiques.com/shop/rare-and-important-confederate-imprinted-idd-bullet-struck-bible

16 For another example of Protestant relics as metaphors, see Sheumaker 2007:57.


18 All quotations: see note 17.

19 For more on medieval Catholic relics, see Bynum 2011:125–216. For more on Protestant relics, see Brummitt 2018, 2020.

References


Brummitt, J. (2022, forthcoming) ‘How dare men mix up the Bible so with their own bad passions’: when the Good Book became the Bad Book in the American Civil War. Material Religion.


*The Youth's Companion* (1833a) The Library: Memoir of Ann Elizabeth Pierce, October 16.

*The Youth's Companion* (1833b) The Library: Memoir of Mary West, November 6.