"Cameras 'never lie': The Role of Photography in Telling the Story of American Evangelical Missions"¹

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In her controversial novel, *No Graven Image* (1966), former missionary and best-selling evangelical author Elisabeth Elliot described the visit of a zealous missions executive, Mr. Harvey, to observe her main character, missionary Margaret Sparhawk, working among the mountain Quichua Indians in Ecuador. Harvey, a pompous sort, arrived with two cameras slung around his neck and spent most of his visit snapping photographs. When Margaret suggested it was time to leave the home of Pedro, her Quichua language informant, Harvey demurred, not yet finished with his picture taking.

"'I want to get all this stuff. I really want to be able to challenge the folks when I get back.' [Harvey] knelt on one knee to get a backlit photo of Pedro against the sky, and the shoulder of the hill. [Margaret] thought of possible captions Mr. Harvey might give it: 'A typical Indian of the High Andes, one of millions still without Christ,' or, if he chanced to catch Pedro smiling, 'The light of the Gospel shines in the face of one of the descendants of the Inca sun worshipers.' Challenge the folks back home. What did he mean?"²

Margaret questioned whether Harvey on his whirlwind visit, or even she herself after two years on the mission field, could adequately capture either the needs of the Quichua or the truth of what God was doing among them. "He would appear before his audiences as an authority.... And he could, in all honesty, present what seemed to him facts. Had he

1. I wish to thank my student research assistant, Peter Swarr, for his help in preparing this essay.

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not incontestable evidence, there in his pictures, of the need of the Indian, and of the work of the missionary? Who could gainsay him?

"The cameras bobbed and swung at his side—packed with the evidence, [Margaret] thought, for cameras 'never lie'—material for a thousand illustrated 'messages,' thrill-packed missionary 'challenges.'"3

In this scene, Elliot raised questions not only about perceptions of the mission field and methods of missionary recruitment, but also about a seldom examined facet of modern evangelical missions: the role of photographs in conveying images of missionaries and the people among whom they worked to audiences in the homeland. Elliot's characters conveyed contrasting attitudes toward the use of photographs. Mr. Harvey was a booster, confident in the camera's ability to support his preconceived notions about missionary work. Margaret's questions represented a skeptical awareness of its limits.4

It was fitting, though perhaps ironic, that Elisabeth Elliot would raise these issues since she had been a central figure in one of the most photographed evangelical missionary projects of all time—the efforts to reach the Waodani ("Auca") Indians of the Ecuadorian jungles with the Christian message.5 In 1956 those efforts had led to the widely publicized deaths of five missionaries, including Elliot's husband, Jim. Nate Saint, another of the five men who first made contact with the Waodani in January, 1956, was also the first person to capture this isolated and hostile Amazonian tribe on film. Among the few items recovered from the Curaray River in eastern Ecuador the days after

4. Vast numbers of mission photographs exist in archives around the world, and research using them is in its infancy. For example, the collections of the Baptist Missionary Society, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, contain more than twenty-five thousand images from the 1880s on. Robert Schuster, archivist of the Billy Graham Center Archives, estimates that the BGC collection may hold as many as thirty to forty thousand images (photographs, glass lantern slides, negatives, and so on) from independent missions agencies. Thousands of other mission photographs will be available soon through a proposed Internet Mission Photography Archive. Scheduled to be launched in December 2004, and funded by the Getty Grant Program, the site will be hosted by the University of Southern California's Archive Research Center. It will contain digitized images from the mission holdings of Yale University, the Maryknoll orders, and several European collections. See also the theme issue, "Rediscovering Missionary Photography," International Bulletin of Missionary Research 26, no. 4 (October 2002).
5. There are variant spellings for the name of this group. I follow the English form suggested by anthropologist James A. Yost, a leading specialist on Wao language and culture. Other common spellings are "Waorani" and the Spanish "Huaorani." "Auca" is a pejorative term used here only in historical context.
Saint and his friends were speared to death was his camera with a partially used role of film still inside.\(^6\)

Only three days after the missionaries were killed, photojournalist Cornell Capa, on assignment for *Life* magazine, arrived in Ecuador to cover the story. Capa’s presence and subsequent relationship with the missionary community marked the coming together of improbable kindred spirits—a man with a cause meeting believers of another sort. The encounter would have a far-reaching impact on Capa himself, changing the course of his career, and on American evangelicalism, in which Capa’s photography played a critical role in telling the story of Operation Auca and contributed to the iconic power of the “Ecuador martyrs” and their roles as “shapers of modern evangelicalism.”\(^7\)

The photographer, a self-described “nonobservant Hungarian Jew” and humanitarian, believed passionately in the power of photography to help illuminate the human condition.\(^8\) Born Kornel Friedmann on April 10, 1918, in Budapest, Capa had followed the footsteps of the older brother he idolized, war photographer Robert Capa (“Endre Friedmann,” 1913–54), in leaving Hungary and becoming a photojournalist. That path led the younger Capa to the U.S. in 1937 and to a position as a photographer with *Life* in 1946. Robert Capa was killed by a land mine in Indochina in 1954, a loss with profound impact on his brother. Out of loyalty, Cornell resigned from *Life* and joined Magnum, a cooperative photo agency founded in 1947 by Robert and four friends. However, he still did freelance work for *Life*, and one of those assignments took him to Ecuador in 1956.\(^9\)

Capa’s photographs depicted the search for the slain missionaries, their burial on the beach where they died, and the faith and fortitude of the men’s widows. His pictures, combined with Saint’s and others, created a powerful visual impact as a ten-page photo essay in *Life* magazine and later as illustrations for *Through Gates of Splendor* (1957), Elisabeth Elliot’s best-selling account of “Operation Auca.” Capa went on to photograph and produce two more magazine articles, one of

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6. In 1949 Swedish adventurer Rolf Blomberg and his Colombian photographer Horacio Lopez photographed four Waodani women who had left the tribe and appeared dressed as westernized Quichua peons. Others had taken a few poor quality aerial shots of Wao clearings. Saint was the first to take close-up photographs of the Waodani in their own territory. See Rolf Blomberg, *The Naked Auca: An Account of the Indians of Ecuador*, trans. F. H. Lyon (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956).


9. *Cornell Capa Photographs*, 19, 152. Robert Capa changed his name in 1936; Cornell took the same last name when he joined the U.S. Air Force in 1941.
them a collaboration with Elliot, chronicling the ongoing story of the missionaries and the Waodani. The experience sparked an interest in the indigenous peoples of South America and missionary work among them that became a theme in Capa’s photography during the next decade. On a follow-up visit to Ecuador, Capa had taught Elliot to use a camera and convinced her of its value.\(^\text{10}\) The result was *The Savage My Kinsman* (1961), Elliot’s pictorial reflection on the Waodani, their lives, and the role of a missionary among them. Capa and Elisabeth Elliot herself—not to mention later missionaries and a multitude of camera-toting visitors—took hundreds, probably thousands, of photographs of evangelicals and the Waodani.

Cornell Capa, both through his own work and his influence on Elisabeth Elliot, was the first to introduce documentary photography, in the form of photo essays that included pictures of both missionaries and indigenous peoples, to tell the story of evangelical missions. By the mid twentieth century, missionaries had been using photographs for years to fulfill a range of promotional, informational, and devotional purposes. But prior to Capa’s work in Ecuador, most such photographs represented what has been described as “photography for the record,” images that simply recorded the presence of their subjects, whether missionaries or native peoples.\(^\text{11}\) While they often were placed in the context of a narrative, such as in books, magic lantern presentations, or later slide shows, the pictures themselves primarily served as evidence of the missionary presence and the success of Christian work in foreign lands. Capa’s pictures, however, did more than record. They told a story that reflected the empathy and involvement of the photographer with his subjects.

Capa cared about human connections. His approach introduced a way of seeing missionaries and tribal peoples as flesh and blood human beings. In doing so, he stood in a tradition of documentary photography in America that had been anticipated in the social reform photography of Jacob Riis and Lewis W. Hine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and had become identified with the Depression-era photographs taken for the Farm Security Admin-

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istration (FSA) by Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, and others. Combined with photojournalism, documentary photography became a key element of American visual culture during the decade following World War II at the hands of photographers who had gained experience during the war. Whether in the U.S. or as the globetrotting “photographer-tourist,” these photographers created the images that helped to define postwar America through photo essays in mass-circulation magazines such as Life and Look.

Photographs played a key role in communicating the story of Operation Auca to American audiences, both evangelicals and the broader public. In 1956, the year the five missionaries died, Life had 5.8 million subscribers. Although it later would be eclipsed by television news, the magazine still maintained the distinction of a being a “primary vehicle for conveying the news visually to a mass audience.” The twin emphases in Capa’s photography—visual narrative and humanistic concern—enhanced the impact and even the myth surrounding the missionaries and the Waohani for North American evangelicals. The story that appeared in Life and in Through Gates of Splendor became an ongoing saga, an archetypal narrative of missionary sacrifice and heroism for evangelicals during the second half of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, however, when Elisabeth Elliot later employed the same visual approach to the Waohani themselves, the response among evangelical audiences was much less enthusiastic. Apparently readers wanted to see missionaries portrayed in an empathetic light; they seemed less certain about an empathetic portrayal of non-Christian tribal people and their culture.

This ambivalent response points to the potential and limits of documentary photography in telling the story of twentieth-century evangelical missions. It hints at the complexity of evangelical interaction with “the other,” specifically native peoples in South America and elsewhere. It also represents an underexamined aspect of evangelical fascination with technology and interaction with American culture, and the tensions that resulted when that fascination combined

12. James Curtis, Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered (Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 1989). The FSA photographers were the first whose work actually was described as “documentary photography,” images that made a comment about “the world as it was.” Karin Becker Ohrn, Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 37.
13. Eric J. Sandeen, Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 18, 38. I am grateful to Colleen McDannell for her encouragement to put Capa’s work in the context of documentary photography in America, also for her insights into the importance of Capa’s biography, particularly his Jewish heritage, for his work.
with the thoroughgoing and often acultural pietism that characterized much conservative Protestantism in the mid twentieth century.\textsuperscript{15}

The significance and impact of photography in telling the story of the “Ecuador martyrs” and the Waodani to American evangelicals can best be understood against the broader framework of the history of missionary photography in North America. The rise of photography, dating from about 1851 to 1870, occurred in tandem with the rise of the modern American missionary movement, and both photography and Protestant missions came of age at about the same time, roughly from 1870 to the eve of the First World War. By the early decades of the twentieth century, cameras were almost as ubiquitous on the mission field as Bibles. As a corollary, churches and supporters in the U. S. were inundated with photographs of missions.

A fascination with photography has characterized the broad spectrum of North American missionaries and their sending agencies—denominational mission boards, the Protestant woman’s missionary movement, independent evangelical missions, and various Catholic missions. For middle-class Protestants, images of missions appeared in the context of a common visual culture that had developed during the nineteenth century through tract societies, the Sunday School movement, and missions boards and agencies. The historical background in this essay sketches that common visual culture. The focus then narrows to emphasize the evangelical “faith missions” that were in the vanguard of conservative Protestant missionary expansion during the first half of the twentieth century and their use of photography in missionary biographies. Three such groups—Gospel Missionary Union, Mission Aviation Fellowship, and Christian Missions in Many Lands—were sending agencies for the five missionaries killed in Ecuador. A fourth, Wycliffe Bible Translators and its field organization, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, later became the primary mission working with the Waodani. These groups were and are conservative in their theology and conversionist in their focus, although the conversionist concern has been subordinated to an emphasis on Bible translation in the case of Wycliffe.

I. The History of Missionary Photography

Despite a fear of idolatry and a legacy of iconoclasm dating back to the Reformation, nineteenth-century American Protestants did not reject all use of pictures. To the contrary, art historian David Morgan has suggested that during the decades prior to the Civil War, northern Protestants were instrumental in creating the first phase of mass visual culture in the United States. Most Protestants avoided freestanding images, with the exception of portraits, emblems, and allegorical pictures. However, images combined with texts “rarely presented a problem.” From the late 1820s on, Protestants inserted wood engravings and later metal engravings to illustrate a vast number of tracts, almanacs, books, Bibles, charts, and other printed materials.

Images of missions were a part of this Protestant visual culture from the start. In 1821, the first volume of the Christian Almanac, produced by the American Tract Society, featured a wood engraving of a missionary. Framing the illustration was the biblical command to go into all the world and preach the gospel, as well as the promise of Christ’s presence, “Lo, I am with you always.” The image called attention to the tract society’s commitment to “preach” through the dissemination of printed materials, as well as to the larger Anglo-American millennial dream of Christianizing first North America and then the world.

Tract society publications also included a few illustrated books about America’s fledgling foreign missionary effort. One such volume, a book entitled The Morning Star: History of the Children’s Missionary Vessel, and of the Marquesan and Micronesian Missions (1860), contained twenty-three metal plate engravings, as well as engraved embellishments at the beginning of each chapter. Illustrations depicted the Morning Star, a sailing ship commissioned in 1856 for work in the islands of the South Pacific by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and paid for by the contributions of Sunday School children from throughout New England. The engravings highlighted themes that would become staple images of foreign missions to Americans back home well into the next century.

There were representations of the “exotic other”: sketches of non-Western, non-Christian peoples whose ways seemed strange and

17. Ibid., 44, 51.
18. Ibid., 55.
mysterious, in this case, islanders whose bodies were covered with tattoos (Figure 1). Other engravings illustrated missionaries in action, preaching to indigenous people. Often with the preaching came visual symbols of Christianizing influences. One engraving in the Morning Star portrayed Pacific islanders wearing shirts, since the missionary, Mr. Snow, had “taught the natives the impropriety of their attending public worship without clothing.”20 Some plates featured maps or arresting topographical features that enhanced the broader didactic value of missionary books. The illustrations in the Morning Star reinforced the author’s story of the missionary ship, emphasized the need of the South Pacific islanders for the gospel message, and threw in a hefty dose of geography for good measure. American children (and adults) learned about the missionary cause from such books. At the

20. Ibid., 225.
same time, the books introduced them to visual images of the world and its peoples. 21

The decades of the 1840s and 1850s were also the era when the first widely available method of early photography, the daguerreotype, took North America and Europe by storm. The daguerreotype, an exposure made on a metal plate, captured only a single image that could not be reproduced. It was of no use in mass print—the image on the plate was quite thin and easily damaged. Despite these limitations, daguerreotypes enjoyed great popularity, especially in the United States, for the clarity and exactness of the photographic image. One of the earliest known photographs of missions in the United States is an 1854 daguerreotype of missionaries in northern Michigan and the native Americans among whom they worked. 22 As with later photographs, part of the importance of the daguerreotype lay with the idea that the image “appeared continuous with what the human eye sees.” 23 Like no other medium, photography held out the hope of an exact likeness of a person and an accurate record of events.

The popularity of the daguerreotype in the 1840s and 1850s was followed by even more widespread enthusiasm during the 1860s and 1870s for cartes-de-visite, small paper prints, made from glass negatives and pasted on cardboard. The compact size and easier production methods lowered costs and meant that nearly any middle-class person could afford to have a set of the small portraits made. These ubiquitous little cards also helped to popularize the idea of photography as a form of mass communication. Missionaries were not immune to this American—and even international—craze for photographic portraiture. In the 1860s and 1870s, nearly all the missionaries with the Woman’s Union Missionary Society had cartes-de-visite made,

21. The Morning Star was a lavishly illustrated book for its time. A number of other Sunday School books used illustrations more sparingly to communicate information about missionaries and the exotic locales to which they traveled. For example, see images 001/14 and 001/16 of author unknown, Traveller’s Wonders (New York: American Tract Society, 1830), and images 001/16 and 002/16 of Charles Gutzlaff, Visit to the Chinese Coast (New York: American Tract Society, 18—), both available on line as part of “Sunday School Books: Shaping the Values of Youth in Nineteenth-Century America” (American Memory, Library of Congress), http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award99/miemhtml/svyhome.html.

22. Figures in the daguerreotype are identified as the Rev. Able Bingham and Indian converts, Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, circa 1854, Billy Graham Center Museum, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. Two unidentified white women are also in the daguerreotype. Paul Jenkins, mission archivist and lecturer in African history, University of Basel, points to William Ellis, a representative of the Lutheran Missionary Society in Madagascar in 1852 as the first European missionary he has found “who took photographs in a mission context.” Paul Jenkins, “On using historical missionary photographs in modern discussion,” Le Fait Missionnaire 10 (January 2001): 71.

23. Morgan, Protestants and Pictures, 8.
Fig. 2a. Miss Crosby
Fig. 2b.

cartes-de-visite became the first widely circulated photographic images of missionaries. Julia N. Crosby (left) went to Japan in 1871 under the sponsorship of the Woman's Union Missionary Society. The little girl was one of the children she worked with at the American Mission Home in Yokohama. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

which were collected in a cardboard album at the society’s headquarters in New York City. In addition, those missionaries who served in the major cities of Asia sent home cartes-de-visite portraits of the people with whom they worked. Julia N. Crosby, for example, went to Japan in 1871 as one of the first WUMS missionaries to that country. She and her colleagues at the American Mission Home in Yokohama, lined up their young kimono-clad charges for cartes to be sent back to New York (Figure 2).24 Within a few years, woman’s missionary societies were selling photographs of missionaries alongside poems,

sheet music, and books, to encourage missions interest among their auxiliary groups.  

Photography became a dominant part of a new era in mass visual culture during the 1880s and 1890s owing to several significant technological advances. Perhaps most important was the development of halftone printing, a process that made it possible to integrate text and photographic image together in mass print. For the first time, "anything that could be photographed could be reproduced cheaply and immediately in any publication."

The tiny dots that made up halftone printing were not visible to the naked eye, so the halftones seemed to reproduce what one saw. In contrast to the earlier engravings, which were clearly artistic renderings, halftones—like daguerreotypes—seemed to serve as a "transparent window" to the subject of the photograph, giving the reproduced picture a sense of immediacy and accuracy. The halftone process was refined by 1888; that same year George Eastman introduced the first Kodak. With his ever-improving Kodak cameras, Eastman opened photography to amateurs.

It also happened that these were years when North American Protestants were becoming foreign missionaries in ever increasing numbers, from 934 in 1890 to nearly 5,000 by 1900 to more than 9,000 by 1915. The use of missionary photographs on the home front indicated that of them, at least, were eager amateur photographers. Pictures sent home from the mission field found their place in churches that themselves were busily embracing the new medium of photography. The Moody Church in Chicago, an independent congregation that traced its roots to the evangelistic work of D. L. Moody, provides one example. As early as 1903, an eager photographer recorded scenes from the "Fresh Air Work," a church camp sponsored by the Moody Sunday school in Ravinia and Glencoe, Illinois. Photos of hay rides, dining halls, picnics, swimming in Lake Michigan, and even two shots of sunsets were collected in an album "to be kept where the officers and the teachers of the Sunday School have access." By the 1920s and 1930s, photographs became even more prominent, used to document evangelistic work, various groups...

26. Morgan, Protestants and Pictures, 301.
27. Ibid., 8.
30. Collection 330, Moody Memorial Church, Photo Album File, Moody Church—VI. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.
within the church, construction of a new sanctuary, and other significant events.

While images of missions were only one aspect of this more inclusive Protestant visual culture during the first half of the twentieth century, they did play a prominent role. A missions display located in one corner of the Moody Church building ca. 1930 contained about a hundred portrait photos of home and foreign missionaries sponsored by the church, along with a world map indicating where each served. The congregation also distributed illustrated posters promoting the work of specific missionaries and missions agencies. “Hang This Up in Your Home as a Reminder,” read the admonition on one poster containing sixteen photographs of Moody Church members serving with the Africa Inland Mission (Figure 3). Elsewhere, pictures of missions began to appear in growing numbers on postcards, in photo albums for missions conferences, in books, on posters, and in glass lantern or stereo slide formats for early missionary slide shows. Among the most popular early mass-produced images of missions were those found on picture postcards.

II. PICTURE POSTCARDS WITH MISSIONARY SCENES

Picture postcards with missionary scenes were first produced in the 1890s. They proliferated during the first decade of the twentieth century and throughout the heyday of the “penny” postcard, from about 1907 to 1915, and represented one of many efforts to appropriate the postcard craze for religious purposes. A sampling of these cards offers examples of the way missions were depicted before and after World War I and provides insights into what Protestants were trying to accomplish through the mass production of photographic images.

For example, a postcard featuring a portrait photograph of Mr. and Mrs. F. H. Gray (Figure 4), missionaries to Spain who sailed for that country in 1898, illustrated the ongoing Protestant commitment to photographs and text, as well as the continuities in visual culture since the early nineteenth century. In many ways the image on the


32. See, for example, “Images of Colonial Africa,” http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/exhibits/collins, Billy Graham Center Archives.

Pray For These Members of The MOODY CHURCH Laboring in Africa Under the Auspices of
THE AFRICA INLAND MISSION

Rev. Charles E. Hurlburt, General Director, Aha, via Khartoum and Rejaf, Sudan.
HOME COUNCIL—Rev. R. A. Torrey, D.D., President; Rev. O. R. Palmer, Director; John L. Steele, Treas.;
Rev. O. M. Fletcher, General Secretary, 333 Henry Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Fig. 3. Photographs of missionaries played a prominent role in the visual culture of evangelical churches. The Moody Church in Chicago distributed this poster, ca. 1922, of church members serving in Africa. Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.
postcard was a technologically improved version of the engraving of a missionary that appeared on the cover of the *Christian Almanac* some eighty years earlier. The card featured a picture of the Grays, surrounded by the text of the Great Commission, with the exhortation “Brethren Pray for us” in the eye-catching upper left position. A pillar on the right hand side with text explained that “These cards are intended to remind us of the servants of Christ whose faces we have
seen, and whose fellowship we have enjoyed but who are now absent, 
serving the Lord." Finally, a note at the bottom noted that "the 
proceeds from the sale of these cards, above the cost of production, 
will be entirely devoted to the Lord's work in foreign lands."  

The American Baptist Missionary Union in Boston produced a 
series of tinted postcards, probably during the first decade of the 
twentieth century, depicting missionary scenes. Number 48 in the 
series featured Africa and was titled, "A Christian Home and a 
Heathen Hut, Ikoko, Africa." The postcard emphasized the benefits 
of Christianity and the missionary effort through the technique of 
juxtaposition or contrast. In the photograph, a "Christian home" 
appeared in contrast to a non-Christian or "Heathen hut," also 
pictured. The Christian home was neat, whitewashed—so the impression 
was one of light—and the family in front was fully clothed. Non- 
Christians, in contrast, were half naked and living in a dark, ram-
shackle hut. The postcard demonstrated in a visual, tangible way the 
earthly benefits of Christian missions. Christianity brought light, 
civilization, and prosperity to darkest Africa. Other tinted postcards 
depicted a different benefit of Christian missions—medical care, es-
pecially for children. On one of these, produced by the Young Peo-
ple's Missionary Movement in New York, the caption read, "A Chi-
nese Leper Boy. This leper boy has stopped the missionary doctor at 
the door of the hospital to ask if he can be cured." The card pictured 
a doctor, in western clothing and hat, looking at the boy's hands. 
Missionaries brought medical attention, even to poor lepers, and, at 
least as depicted in this postcard, that concern gathered a crowd. 

While some postcards portrayed the benevolent sides of missionary 
activity—improved living conditions or medical care for children— 
others portrayed the more direct conversionist concern. One such card 
featured the photograph of a houseboat, decked out with two ban-
ners, reading "Nile Valley Evangelistic Campaign" and "Christ Died 
for the Ungodly." Dated October 15, 1927, the card included extensive 
text seeking prayer for a group of missionaries who would conduct 
the boat campaign, beginning November 1. The photograph on the 
postcard served as a window through which supporters could view 
the object of prayer a half a world away. The card combined devotion

34. "Mr. and Mrs. F.H. Gray," Postcard 1985.0869, Billy Graham Center Museum, Wheaton 
College, Wheaton, Illinois. 
Graham Center Museum. Although the card was produced for the Boston-based Amer-
ican Baptist Missionary Union, it was printed in Japan. 
and promotion, since the text promised that “further information will be sent to any who desire to co-operate with us.”

During the early decades of the twentieth century, picture postcards provided American Protestants with glimpses of missionary work abroad. The photographs on these cards offered visual evidence of the success of the missionary endeavor—the changes Christianity brought to villages in Africa, the advance of the gospel down the Nile, and the faces of missionaries themselves, faithfully serving in the field. Images provided a way for Americans at home literally to see the missionary effort as they never had before. They helped to provide a sense of personal connection. Historian Colleen McDannell has pointed out that in the Catholic tradition, the use of images helped to “maintain and create relationships with Christ and the saints.” For Protestants, picture postcards or other photographs sustained a sense of relationship with missionaries, the closest Protestants came to having saints of their own. The cards also encouraged such devotional acts as prayer for missionary work and financial giving.

In short, picture postcards carried on the range of tasks that missionaries traditionally had engaged in while home on furlough. Just as missionaries visited churches to tell about missions, to recruit others to join the missionary cause, and to elicit prayer and funds, so, too, picture postcards were to accomplish the same things when they arrived in the mailbox of a church or a Christian home. Protestants historically had seen the printed word—tracts, books, and Scripture portions—as extending the work of preachers and evangelists. In much the same way, the combination of text and image on postcards could extend the work of the missionary on the home front.

Postcards, of course, did have limits as a means of mass communication. Only a small space was available for image and text. Photographs on postcards, due to the nature of the medium, were occasional and episodic, usually offering only a single glimpse of the mission field. Also, for the most part, the images of indigenous people included on the cards tended to be small and nondescript. The cards themselves were ephemeral. Postcards were the visual equivalent of the infamous “sound bite” on television in more recent years. They offered fascinating bits of information but were unable to communicate any true narrative. As with most early photography, the cards offered evidence rather than telling a story.

37. “Ye also helping together by prayer.” Postcard 1999.0041, Billy Graham Center Museum.
III. PHOTOGRAPHY IN BOOKS ON MISSIONS

Books were the place where photographs were employed to draw attention to a detailed and inspirational story of missions. Photographs first began appearing in missionary books in the mid 1890s. Most of the time they provided visual evidence that supported the narrative, picturing scenes already familiar to readers from earlier engraved illustrations. With the increasing popularity of cameras, photo illustrations became common by the 1920s.

The first American evangelical missionary hero whose life story was lavishly illustrated by photographs was William Whiting Borden (1887–1913), the young Yale graduate from a prominent Chicago family who gave up a fortune to be a missionary among Muslims in northwest China. The twenty-five-year-old never reached his chosen field; he died en route of meningitis in Cairo, Egypt. Borden’s sacrifice for the missionary cause, not only of his fortune but also of his life, electrified the student missionary movement in the United States. He was memorialized in a widely popular book, Borden of Yale ’09: “The Life that Counts,” written by Mrs. Howard [Geraldine Guinness] Taylor and published in 1926. Borden had planned to serve as a member of the China Inland Mission (CIM), one of the earliest independent faith missions. By the 1920s, CIM also was one of the most adept at using print and photographs to publicize its work, aided in no small measure by Taylor’s prolific output as a writer.39

The most lavishly illustrated edition of Borden of Yale contained twenty-four photographs, five of them portraits of William at various points in his life, emphasizing and idealizing young Borden’s stellar Christian character.40 Eleven photos depicted significant places. In effect they took the reader on a visual pilgrimage to Borden’s birthplace, his ancestral home in England, Yale College, Princeton Seminary, Moody Church in Chicago, and finally his gravesite near Cairo, Egypt. Seven of the remaining photographs in the book might be considered informal—snapshots of Borden picnicking or climbing in the Alps, though all but two were posed.


40. For an earlier example of halftone portraits used to illustrate missionary biography, see C. C. Creegan, Pioneer Missionaries of the Church (New York: American Tract Society, 1903).
The book closed with one photograph of three men (Figure 5), identified as Tibetan Muslims of Kansu province in northwest China, where Borden had intended to serve. The three Tibetans, dark skinned and in native cloaks and hats, stare, smiling, at the camera. This kind of native-in-exotic-dress photo had become popular in the National Geographic, and it, too, as we have seen, had antecedents in nineteenth-century engravings. Photos like this were often used in both missionary and secular books and in magazines like the Geographic during the first half of the twentieth century to represent a whole range of complex cultural differences. They "came to stand for an entire alien life-style, locale, or mind-set." The exact characteristics or particularities of these cultures were rarely specified. In Borden of Yale, the photograph represented the mission field awaiting those who would pick up the torch from the fallen William Borden. Although by the 1920s some American Protestants were grappling with the issue of religious pluralism, conservative missions like CIM held the line on the uniqueness of Christianity and the imperative of personal conversions. Most of the other photographs in Borden of Yale were taken in the United States or in Europe. While they helped to make Borden an icon of student missionary zeal and reflected evangelical concern for the use of visual imagery, they would not qualify as missionary photos per se.

Pictures more typical of missionary field photography and forerunners of the photographs surrounding Operation Auca appeared in a small book, The Challenge of Amazon’s Indians, by Mrs. Arthur F. [Ethel] Tylee, published in 1931 by Moody Press. The book documented efforts that began shortly after World War I to contact tribal peoples in the Brazilian Amazon, efforts that eventually would cost the lives of a total of six missionaries including Ethel Tylee’s husband, Arthur; her infant daughter, Marian; and Mildred Kratz, a missionary nurse. The ninety-two-page book contained fifteen photographs.

During the early twentieth century, a theme promoted far more in books than on postcards was that of pioneer missionary work. The bulk of the black and white pictures in The Challenge of Amazon’s

41. For example, see Alice Ballantine Kirjassoff, "Formosa the Beautiful," National Geographic 37, no. 3 (March 1920): 280–91, and Thomas F. Lee, "Guatemala: Land of Volcanoes and Progress," National Geographic 50, no. 5 (November 1926): 600, 609, and plates 1–16, pp. 611–26. By the 1920s, the Geographic was using some color photography.
42. Lutz and Collins, Reading National Geographic, 92. Although Lutz and Collins discuss photographic conventions in the Geographic 1950–1986, their analysis often holds true for earlier photographs as well.
TIBETANS WELCOMED AT "THE GOSPEL INN".

This inn has been opened for them at Sining, Kansu. Pray that the Light of Life may also indeed enter many such hearts.

Fig. 5. A photograph of three smiling Tibetans, included in the closing pages of Borden of Yale ’09 (1926), represented what conservative missions viewed as the “unfinished task” awaiting those who would take the place of the fallen William Borden. The photograph also portrayed a range of complex cultural differences.
**ROLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY**

Fig. 6: Early photographs in missionary books often provided visual evidence of pioneering efforts such as this 1924 exploratory trip into the Amazon basin. The amateur, rustic quality of the photographs served to reinforce the frontier nature of the missionary work. *The Challenge of Amazon’s Indians* (1931).

*Indians* show missionaries on the field, engaged in initial, pioneering efforts—journeying on foot and by boat into the vast wilderness of the Amazon basin (Figure 6). The actual photographs were small and their technical quality poor. They look very much like what they probably were: pictures taken with an inexpensive camera by an inexperienced amateur. Still, their rough, almost rustic quality served to illustrate the frontier character of western Brazil and the pioneer nature of the Tylee’s efforts. The small size and poor exposure of many of the shots made the Brazilian Indians seem far away indeed. The obvious difficulty the photographer had in taking his shots paralleled the difficult challenges of the mission itself. Once again, these photographs served primarily as evidence. The Nhambiquara Indians existed; they lived in isolation in a distant land; missionaries had contacted them. Photographs of a Nhambiquara home and of the missionary station continued to employ the common technique of contrast. The Nhambiquara home, as portrayed in the photograph, was only a lean-to; the mission station house, while rustic, had walls and windows. A picture of missionary William Hasker and two Nhambiquaras produced a similar effect (Figure 7). The missionary,
representing Christianity and civilization, posed next to naked Nhambiquaras, grasping their spears. 45

The photographs included in The Challenge of Amazon’s Indians did provide visual evidence of the people featured in the book: the Tylees, Kratz, William Hasker, and the Nhambiquaras. They did little else. Someone leafing through the volume and looking at photographs alone would have no sense of the actual world the Nhambiquara Indians inhabited, their culture or their character. In many ways the Nhambiquaras captured on film were timeless and placeless. They could have been any tribal people, in any place, in contact with intrepid American explorers, who, except for the presence of women and a child, had little that even visually identified them as missionaries. Nor would someone viewing the photographs really know what the challenge of the Amazon Indians was—except for the pioneer

45. Ibid. See photographs opposite pages 31 and 51.
challenge of traveling to this remote location. The photos gave no indication of the Nhambiquara attack in 1930, which resulted in the deaths of Arthur Tylee, Marian, and Mildred Kratz. Photographs had not yet become a dominant feature of evangelical missionary narratives.

IV. Through Gates of Splendor and the Savage My Kinsman

The photo essay in the January 30, 1956 issue of *Life* magazine covering the deaths of the "Ecuador martyrs" dramatically demonstrated a new relationship between photographs and text in telling the story of evangelical missions, in this case a relationship shaped by the conventions of *Life* and by the concerns of Cornell Capa. The essay occupied a prominent place as the lead news picture story of the week. This spot, usually five to seven pages, was reserved for an event that had compelling news value and powerful images. The missionary story met the criteria perfectly. Americans had been alerted to the drama surrounding the men's deaths through front-page newspaper coverage earlier in the month, but *Life* had exclusive photographs. Along with captions and the title, "'Go Ye and Preach the Gospel': Five Do and Die," photographs told the story.

Familiar visual themes were present, but used in a much more evocative and compelling fashion than in traditional missionary books or on postcards. Two large images dominated the opening, double-page spread of the essay: a Cornell Capa photograph of the five widows at the Shell Mera, Ecuador, mission station juxtaposed against a full body shot of Naenkiwi, described as "a savage Auca, his ear lobes distended by wooden plugs," taken by Nate Saint before his death (Figure 8). Everything necessary to communicate faith, grief, idealism, and treachery—American goodness against savage ignorance—was present or absent. Women sat around a kitchen table, some holding babies, surrounded by a clutter of plates and half-eaten sandwiches. Next to them visually stood the Waodani warrior: naked, powerful, serious, and enigmatic. Present by their absence were the five men—husbands to the women, missionaries to the Waodani—now gone. The remaining eight pages of the *Life* article contained twenty-five additional photographs. Although some pictures, contributed by the missionaries in Ecuador, were less technically accom-

46. Apparently they were killed in retaliation for an Indian who had died at the mission station from a virus probably carried by Brazilian telegraph workers. The missionaries had provided medical treatment and so were implicated in the tragedy.
Fig. 8. This photo essay by Cornell Capa, documenting the deaths of five missionaries as they attempted to contact the Waodani in eastern Ecuador, demonstrated a new relationship between photography and text in telling the story of evangelical missions. © 1956 TIME Inc., reprinted by permission. Photo (right) by Nate Saint, © Marcore F. Van Der Puy, used with permission.
plished than Capa's work, the *Life* story bore the marks of a great photo essay: "intimate involvement" with the subject, "strong emotion, a powerful story line that cuts close to the experience of the reader, and unforgettable photographs."49

Capa's pictures of Operation Auca were multidimensional photographs.50 Part of their power came from the way the images worked at many different levels. At one level, they seemed tailor-made for the idealization of American culture promoted and affirmed in the pages of *Life* magazine. *Life* pictured America as readers imagined it: a homogeneous nation of suburbs, prosperity, intact nuclear families, and traditional domesticity.51 While the jungles of Ecuador were a far cry from suburbia, the families featured in Capa's essay fit the wholesome, middle-America image. More than an account of traditional missionary work or church expansion, "'Go Ye Into All the World'" emphasized the ingenuity, courage, and idealism of five young American families in a distant land.

Yet the power of the essay went well beyond its conformity to the editorial conventions of *Life*. Capa's images communicated complex emotions about both the heroism and the humanity of the five families and other evangelical missionaries in Ecuador. The people in his photographs were not the repressed, two-dimensional figures of the fundamentalist missionary stereotype.52 They were idealistic young men and women facing tragedy with dignity, deep feeling, and faith. Pictures of the search party showed missionaries willing to risk their lives to help—and as it turned out, to bury—their friends. The caption beneath the photo of widow Olive Fleming told of Fleming's selfless hope before the bodies were found that if any of the men had survived it would have been those who had children. She and her husband, Pete, did not. Yet the young woman's face in the photograph above the caption was overwhelmed with grief, almost caved in by loss.

Reflecting on the essay more than four decades later, Capa downplayed his own role, except for acknowledging the sensibility required of any good photographer. He was simply "a Hungarian Jewish boy going to the Ecuadorian jungle because something hap-

51. Ibid.
pened." The actual circumstances, of course, were more complex. In 1954, shortly after his brother Robert's death, Capa had worked with photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt to photograph a story on Judaism that became a part of Life's series on "The World's Great Religions." The timing of that assignment, Capa later wrote, "put me in touch with my religious roots at a time when I needed them." An awareness of the realities of religion and of personal loss were still fresh when the photographer arrived in Ecuador and may have contributed to the sensitivity of his photographs.

Life regularly ran stories about religion and missionaries. The Salvation Army in Paris, seafaring ministers in Canada, Protestants and Catholics alike being expelled from China all formed a regular part of the magazine's mix. But the story of Operation Auca was among the most dramatic, and certainly the most visually compelling. Readers responded. More than a year later, Andrew Heiskell, the magazine's publisher wrote that readers had described the piece as "the most inspiring article ever in Life" and "Life's greatest reporting feat."

After the Life story was published, Capa assumed his involvement with missionaries in Ecuador had ended. But the images he had captured on film had linked his life with theirs. Before the Ecuador assignment, Capa had never encountered evangelical missionaries or tribal peoples. It was, he admitted, a "totally unfamiliar world." His photographs combined powerful images with a certain idealistic naiveté toward indigenous cultures and missionaries alike. Evangelicals, both on the mission field and at home, embraced his work. For his part, as an outsider to evangelicalism and the missionary enterprise, the photographer continued to be fascinated by the courage of the five widows. In late 1956, he worked with Elisabeth Elliot and Harpers book publishers as picture editor of Through Gates of Splendor, the "multi-biography" account of the five slain missionaries.

The same philosophy and the same photos from Life, as well as many others, became part of the four picture sections, containing a total of more than sixty photographs that illustrated Through Gates of Splendor, a best seller from its publication in May, 1957. The photos in the book were grouped together chronologically, separate from the text, and had extensive captions similar in style to those in Life or the National Geographic. In effect, Through Gates of Splendor was two books,

56. Capa and Whelan, Cornell Capa, 152.
one text and one photos. Although the two complemented each other and described the same events and people, they did so in different ways. Elisabeth Elliot’s ultimate concerns were spiritual, and within the framework of the lives and deaths of the five men, she emphasized themes familiar to readers of inspirational biography. The young missionaries were models of true Christianity, their lives characterized by dedication, joy, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Like William Borden, each was an example of the missionary-as-successful-youngman, turning aside from the American Dream to pursue the higher good of God’s will. God himself played a significant role in the story, invoked throughout as the principal agent of human action.⁵⁸ Although the events Elisabeth Elliot narrated took place in Ecuador, the setting for the book was as much one of faith as of place.

If Elliot stressed the spirituality behind Operation Auca, Capa emphasized the humanity of all participants in the drama—both through his own photographs and the way he cropped and arranged those of others. Gone were the formal missionary portraits; the five men appeared as they had in the jungles—in tee shirts or work shirts, Nate Saint in his billed pilot’s cap (Figure 9). Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, and Jim Elliot, often called the “Brethren boys” by other missionaries because they came from Plymouth Brethren assemblies, appeared together, emphasizing the friendships that had brought them to Ecuador. Even the Waodani, only pictured briefly in the book, were undeniably human. Evangelicals stressed the triumphal side of the men’s deaths for the cause of the gospel. Capa captured death’s gritty, physical reality: a body floating in the Curaray River, the haunted face of a missionary who had found and buried what was left of his close friends.⁵⁹ Capa’s humanistic photography and Elliot’s inspirational text made a powerful combination. Their collaboration also marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

During subsequent visits to Ecuador, Cornell Capa was intrigued by Elisabeth Elliot’s decision to continue living with her daughter, Valerie, among the Quichua Indians at the Shandia, Ecuador, mission station.⁶⁰ When he realized that, even after her husband’s death, Elliot was hoping and praying for an opportunity to contact the Waodani, Capa-the-humanitarian and Capa-the-photojournalist recognized another dramatic story. Because the Waodani particularly feared foreign

⁵⁹. Ibid., 115–20, 202–3, 216.
men, Capa gave Elliot instructions on how to use a camera. She proved an apt pupil, taking photographs that documented each step of the way as she, Valerie, and Rachel Saint, led by Saint’s language informant, Dayuma, made peaceful contact with the Waodani in October, 1958.

The result was *The Savage My Kinsman*, a book-length photo essay different in image and tone from anything representatives of evangelical faith missions had published up to that time. Photographs and text emphasized the humanity of the Indians, as indicated by the book’s title, and in the book Elliot raised disquieting issues about missions and culture. The Waodani, she wrote, knew nothing of Americans, the superiority of the West, or the temporal benefits often promised with Christianity. “We had come to offer something which, apparently, the Auca was not even looking for,” she wrote, “a Hope [sic], an anchor for the soul, the person of Jesus Christ.” She stressed the integrity of the Wao way of life and asked, “What do we mean when we speak of one people as being more ‘needy’ than another?
What do we mean by ‘savage’?" What, she also wondered, did it mean to be a missionary? The book represented Elliot's personal effort to examine anew "the need of the Indian and ... the work of the missionary." Her photographs reflected an awareness of the common humanity of missionary and Waodani, of white and brown—a point strongly made by the presence in text and photo of the innocent blonde child Valerie, equally at home in both cultures. Less than a year old when the Waodani killed her father, Valerie had been told he was dead, but Elisabeth Elliot had not explained to the three-year-old how her father had died. Still, somehow Valerie had made a connection between the Waodani and her father. When she first met a Waodani man, Kimu [Kemo], her reaction was confusion rather than fear. "He looks like a daddy," she said to her mother. "Is that my daddy?" To Valerie the Waodani were not "savages"; they were mommies and daddies and other children. The majority of Elliot's photographs portrayed smiling people, living in community and content with their way of life (Figure 10). Their small clearing could look bleak when captured in black and white, and the Waodani clearly inhabited an exotic jungle location, a place where hammocks and thatched roofs were common and wearing clothes was not. Yet, in contrast to what Americans, particularly American evangelicals, had come to believe, these were not people who were exceptionally depraved, living in darkness. Instead, some of Elliot's photographs evoked Edenic themes, showing both Waodani and Westerner as created in God's image. In the book's final photo, a picture from the back of Valerie holding the hand of a Waodani man as they walk naked down a creek to go fishing, the Waodani is clearly the more god-like figure (Figure 11). The photography in both The Savage My Kinsman and in Through Gates of Splendor broke new ground in the way evangelical missionaries and tribal peoples were portrayed to American audiences, particularly to American evangelicals. In part the photographs were designed to shock people out of their complacency. Instead of stock images of missionaries preaching, teaching, or posed for a portrait, the pictures in Through Gates of Splendor challenged Americans to accept missionaries as human beings—heroic but human. Those in The Savage My Kinsman sought something similar for the Waodani, to portray

63. Elliot, The Savage My Kinsman, 83; also see photograph, 92, 93.
64. Ibid., 160.
65. Lutz and Collins, Reading National Geographic, 271.
Fig. 10. Elisabeth Elliot’s photographs in *The Savage My Kinsman* portrayed smiling people, content with their way of life. Through text and image Elliot raised disquieting questions about the missionary task and, implicitly, about the use of photography. *The Savage My Kinsman* © 1961 by Elisabeth Elliot. Used with permission.
Fig. 11. In contrast to outsiders’ views of the Waodani as exceptionally depraved, this photograph of Valerie Elliot and a Waodani man evoked an Edenic theme, with the Waodani the more god-like figure. *The Savage My Kinsman* © 1961 by Elisabeth Elliot. Used with permission.
them as people rather than as a subhuman species or as stone-age savages. In both cases photographs told the stories alongside the text. The photographs in each book were idealized and empathetic, but they nonetheless challenged evangelicals to see in new ways.

Audiences eagerly embraced *Through Gates of Splendor*. The book has remained in print for more than forty years and has sold hundreds of thousands of copies. *The Savage My Kinsman* was not nearly so popular among evangelicals, though a 1961 *Library Journal* review suggested the book be required reading for Peace Corps candidates. The book generally received positive notice in the conservative Christian press, although reviewers noted that both Elliot's opinions on missions and her photographs might be problematic. "Some of my very good friends were shocked by the photographs of unclothed Indians," noted Russell Hitt in *Eternity* magazine, although Hitt himself defended the pictures. More shocking, he suggested, were Elliot's conclusions about missions and culture.

It is difficult to assess whether photographs, text, or more probably a combination of the two, dampened the popularity of *The Savage My Kinsman*. Evangelicals were not accustomed to Elliot's focus on the particularity and integrity of an indigenous culture, or to the visual power of her photographs in affirming the Wao way of life. In addition, Elliot refused to make optimistic predictions about the spread of Christianity among the Waodani, something American evangelicals had been anticipating and praying for since the five men had been killed. During the twentieth century, faith missions were at the forefront of Protestant efforts to take the Christian message to indigenous or aboriginal groups, often under difficult circumstances and at great personal sacrifice. They and their financial supporters were motivated by pietistic goals. Everyone, even so-called "primitive peoples," needed to experience personal conversion. At the same time, conservative missions frequently were less than successful in acknowledging the cultures of native peoples or in recognizing the influences of

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68. This was particularly true in Latin America with the rapid growth of the Wycliffe Bible Translators/Summer Institute of Linguistics from Wycliffe's incorporation in 1942, and with the work of the Pioneer Mission Agency, founded 1921, which preceded it. By 1950, at least nine different faith missions were working with indigenous people in Latin America. *Missions Annual—1958* (New York: Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association, 1958), 27 and 28–40 throughout.
their own. Despite the excellence of the photography, it is possible that American Christians did not want to see images of Waodani as happy and human, in need of Christ but no more so than the reader’s non-Christian next door neighbor. Anything that even tacitly questioned the absolute imperative of American missionary outreach was suspect."Somehow in this book Betty Elliot lets us see how all of us are naked before God," wrote Hitt in his review. "The filthy rags of our own culture aren’t sufficient."

Five years after publishing *The Savage My Kinsman*, Elliot would describe her fictional missions executive, Mr. Harvey, in *No Graven Image*. Cameras "bobbed and swung at his side—packed with evidence... for cameras ‘never lie.’" Since the nineteenth century, evangelicals had taken for granted that photographic images provided incontrovertible proof of the subjects recorded on film—American missionary activities and the needs of the non-Christian world. The introduction of documentary photography brought a new level of complexity to the relationship between evangelicals and images. In the hands of Cornell Capa, photographs idealized the courageous dedication of young evangelical missionaries and helped to dispel fundamentalist stereotypes. As Capa’s protégé, Elisabeth Elliot used the camera’s lens to emphasize the humanity of the Waodani and the integrity of their culture. However, evangelicals at home were not yet ready to encounter images that introduced ambiguity and challenged familiar assumptions.


70. For an example of such sentiments expressed toward Elliot a few years later, see William Cameron Townsend to Rachel Saint, 15 April 1966. Letter #23694, William Cameron Townsend Archives, JAARS, Waxhaw, North Carolina.

71. Hitt, "Photojournalism," 44.
