

More than 70 years ago, the American historian David Brion Davis drew attention to what he described as “countersubversive movements” in the nineteenth-century United States. As Davis showed, three such reactionary movements emerged within roughly a generation in the antebellum period, all of which worked on roughly parallel logic in response to what were perceived as three supposedly dangerous “internal threats” to the Republic: Catholicism, Freemasonry, and Mormonism. The actual political danger of each of these threats was, in retrospect, minimal or nonexistent. Yet each stimulated genuine anxiety—anxiety that coalesced in national political movements like the Know Nothings, the Anti-Masonic Party, and agitation around the “Mormon Question.” A sense of secrecy and alien solidarity was, as Davis pointed out, the “distinguishing mark” imputed to the movements that prompted this kind of hostility.

Notably, for each of these movements, secrecy and solidarity coiled around strange practices that most Americans found both arresting and uncomfortable. Indeed, just as the civic rituals of the early Republic helped reify the imagined reality of a new nation, the taboo rites of Catholicism, Masonry, and Mormonism helped stoke a fear of dangerous elements in the body politic. Vividly imagined and luridly described, these unseemly practices provided the ocular proof which helped to fix subversive plots and nefarious plotters in the American public mind. These taboo practices frequently supplied anxious Americans with the mechanics of conspiracy. Rituals—especially ritual oaths—were often the mechanisms by which conspiracies were supposedly created and through which they were thought to operate. Catholic, Masonic, and Mormon rites were thus not just odd or even idolatrous—they were politically dangerous because, as Americans recognized, they had a mysterious power to bind individuals together in a common interest. Applied in the interest of the Republic, ceremonies might serve the common weal. But deployed secretly by would-be theocrats or within shadowy networks of political intrigue, such practices became works of darkness, inimical to both true religion and the republican state.

My research, supported by a fellowship from *Lived Religion in the Digital Age*, has examined a particular set of nineteenth-century visual artifacts that depict Mormon, Catholic, and Freemasonic rituals. These illustrations—woodcuts, engravings, and lithotypes—surged in popularity and use in the early nineteenth-century as media technologies improved, techniques were refined, and production costs diminished. They were increasingly incorporated into books, reproduced in newspapers, and deployed in other forms of print media surging in the new nation. Scholars have referred to these images as “pictorial print,” since they added a visual and pictorial dimension to printed texts. These images have been virtually ignored by scholars of religion, and yet they added a powerful new dimension to religious and social polemics. As the archive of images that I have collected attests, these images very often depicted Mormon, Catholic, and Freemasonic practices in highly stylized and exoticized ways. Far more effectively than the text that surrounded them, these images were able to convey, as their commissioners hoped, the alien qualities of the movements they caricatured.

As with all polemics, the purpose of these productions was to differentiate between legitimate insiders and an undesirable out-group. The images, however, added a potent visual and aesthetic dimension to this process. For a complex variety of reasons that I address in broader research, ritual practices were deeply discomfiting to most Americans during this period. In these printed artifacts, that distrust is clear and can be interpreted as an aesthetic, a gaze, an antipathetic way of looking. This accords with the insights of recent ritual theorists, who note that ritual itself is a fraught and unstable category which often serves to create and construct difference. In other words, what we recognize as ritual today has as much to do with *how we see it* as with what is done. Printed images of 'exotic' religion in the nineteenth-century United States provide illustrate this phenomena very well.