

STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY WATERMARKS
AS THE PRESENCE OF GOD



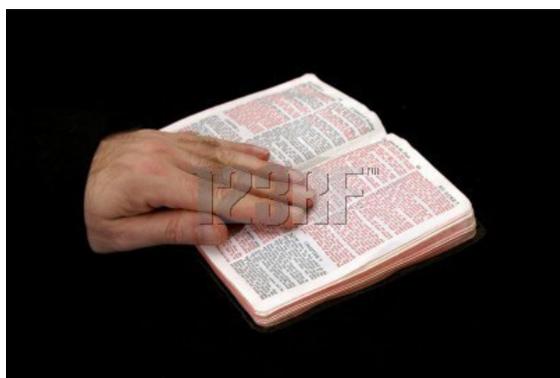
Disagreements on the ownership of intellectual property are issues of personal belief, and are therefore spiritual issues. Stock photography corporations have their own rigid dogma on the ownership of information, and they hold their beliefs to be truth. Like shepherds guarding a flock, these corporations brand their property in order to protect themselves and their patrons (the photographers) from unlicensed misuse or “evil” on the lawless web. In this collection of photos I have limited myself to an investigation of the protective watermarks of one such stock photography website, 123RF.com, and the search term “prayer.”



None of these subjects present a convincing depiction of religious devotion. Instead, they seem aware of the artificiality of their prayer, of the photographer and the impending image. As hired models they were undoubtedly aware of their own status as a potential advertisement. But whereas most photos end with the relationships of subject to photographer and viewer to subject, these subjects have been stamped with an additional voice. The translucent logo 123RF, unwaveringly placed in the exact center of every composition, becomes so tangible after its repetition that the subjects seem almost aware of its presence. The logo's placement activates an inexplicable sense of One-ness in the otherwise disconnected and insincere subjects. Their prayers suddenly become convincing as communication with the deity 123RF, the almighty regulator of information.

To believe that information can be regulated is to bow down to a higher power and become submissive to the regulator. 123RF promises to protect and deliver prosperity to the faithful through its far reaching arms of commerce. In this instance, the photographer could have thought, "Alone I am helpless. I need a higher power with mighty marketing skills. If I align myself with an infrastructure like 123RF, I will become empowered and my photos will thrive in all eternity and sell like hotcakes."

Accordingly the loyal photographer would travel to a computer and uploaded the photo as an offering. And there, after the final click of the upload form, at the moment of its dissemination into the infinite web, a logo miraculously appears on the photo — the name of God! Thanks to a few simple lines of code, the very presence that had gone unseen in the photo studio is made visible on every image, each photo an equal lamb of 123RF. This baptism-by-code is a ritual that marks the photo's spiritual progression from to worthless single to infinite multiple. The photo no longer belongs to the photographer alone; it is now a commodity and child of God. And so the mark floats there forever, between the photographer and the subject and between the subject and the viewer, standing in for the presence of the Almighty.



“Look at my power as a barrier” says the watermark, “I am fused with this image. I own this image. If you want this to change, you must prove you believe in the ownership of information by paying a small offering to my church of commerce.” 123RF exists because the users do; their collective photo offerings give 123RF shape, viability, power, and income. A small percentage of this income is returned to the photographers for their faith. By contrast, your typical torrent hungry web sinner, an unbeliever, sees the watermark a stern warning. “Repent!” says the watermark, “embrace our corporation and you will be rewarded.” The unbeliever calls in to question the infallibility of the corporation, photoshopping out the watermark, parodying it, turning it into sassy net art, or perhaps even deliberately misusing the images for an essay on an art criticism website.

The below image is an example of a watermark parody found on a popular message board. It was not generated by believers, but made by unbelievers as a joke (note that the watermark is off center).



After viewing all 6,639 search results for the word “prayer,” the 123RF watermark began to feel oppressive to me. It seemed to be preventing the subjects from praying to any other deity, hopelessly branding them with this mark. Maybe they should have been worshipping the Moon or Jehovah or Getty Images instead, pleading that 123RF will stay in business long enough to deliver the next royalty check. The watermark began to feel like a dangerous tactic, so easily laying claim to everything it touches, imprinting its name over the Bible, over the setting sun, over the earth itself. Its transforms the image, but its propagation also negates its power; the 123RF logo seen so many times it becomes meaningless. This mutability suggests a contradictory position of representation; the logo selling the idea of God, the logo representing God, the logo ultimately attempting to name that which can not be named.

Kevin Bewersdorf, 2008

