

Title: Of Worship and Sin – a Brief Discussion of Religion, Sacrilege and Hell

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The aim of this essay is to define and discuss three words, then construct a line of questioning in accordance with the themes explored. In order to provide a firm analysis on these keywords, it is crucial to first understand them by examining works that span the subject matter. As the words to be discussed are 'religion', 'sacrilege' and 'Hell', it is only appropriate to conduct research utilising biblical texts, theorists, critics and (Christian denomination) religious artworks to devise a compelling exposition of the aforementioned topics. As these words not only explicitly align but also connote to each other, one can only find it compelling to delve into their meanings and nuances to truly acknowledge how they intertwine.

Sources of interest to delve into the understanding of religion within art, include High Renaissance works such as *The Creation of Adam* (Michelangelo) and *The Last Supper* (Leonardo da Vinci). To investigate sacrilege, pieces such as *La Civilización Occidental y Cristiana* (León Ferrari) and *Sometimes I Spit with Pleasure on the Portrait of my Mother (The Sacred Heart)* (Salvador Dalí) will be dissected to understand the blasphemous nature of artwork that questions and criticises the Christian culture. Finally, the visual depictions of Hell as both a concept and punishment for sin will be analysed through examples such as Botticelli and Blake's

interpretations of *Inferno* (Divine Comedy - Dante). Alongside this, authors and theorists of interest include Dante Alighieri, Anthony Fisher, Hayden Ramsey and various other writers to explore the themes of religion, sacrilege and hell (and societal response) within this essay.

The topic of religion within art dates back many centuries, with some of the first depictions of Christianity emerging in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2024). Despite their simple nature, the representation of Christ within these images were sufficient enough to display the faith of the authors. These art pieces were particularly common in the early Roman Empire, with many themes of death and resurrection relating to stories in the Old Testament (Farber, 2015).



Fig. 1: Unauthored (3rd century) *The Shepherd of Hermas*

Fig. 1 portrays an unauthored depiction of Christ from the early 3rd Century. Due to the lack of understanding of Jesus's appearance within early religious texts, iconography and symbolism were typically used to represent him (Traverso, 2018). This depiction in particular could be derivative of the following passage:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. (John 10:11-14).

The utilisation of imagery showcasing Jesus as a shepherd puts forth to the viewer his protective nature and care for his followers, providing a sense of welcoming and ease. This is one of many ways in which his role as a leader and prophet is represented, though in future artworks the creativity of the author inspires much more grand concepts.

For example, the High Renaissance period denotes the pinnacle of the Renaissance era. Renowned artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo dominated this period (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2024), intersecting anatomy and religion to create ineffable historical pieces that are still discussed to this day.



Fig.2 : Michelangelo (1536-1541) *The Last Judgement*

The Last Judgement portrays Christ being surrounded by followers alike as the final judgement is bestowed upon mankind, with angels, devils and mortals anxiously waiting for Christ's decision to be made. Within this verdict, many may be damned to Hell while others are able to arise to Heaven. Within the image, classic iconography is also depicted such as the cross and the crown of thorns. The painting is located within the Sistine Chapel (Italian Renaissance Art, n.d.), an important place to explore the worship of Christ.

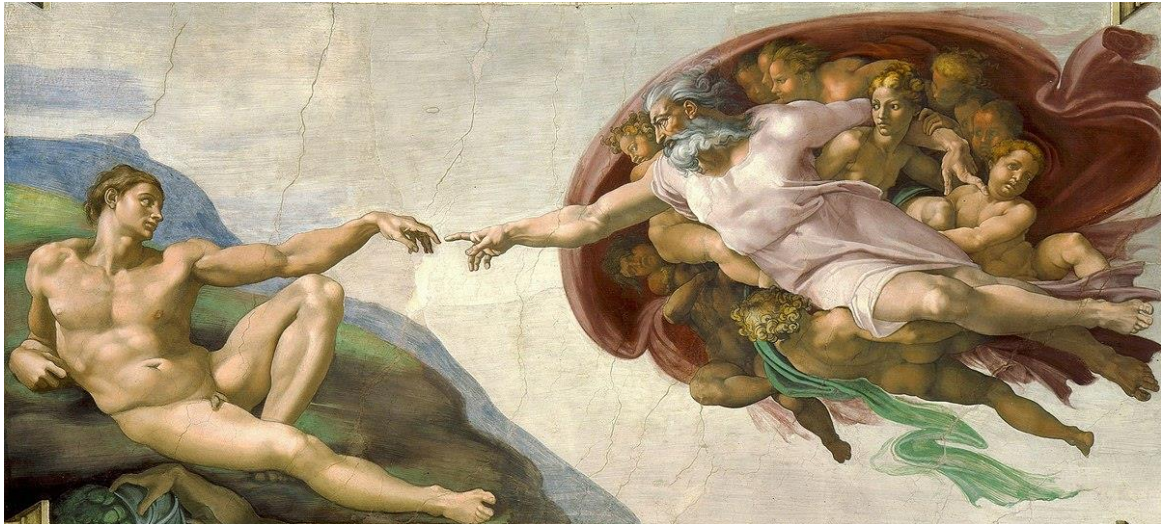


Fig. 3: Michelangelo (1512) *The Creation of Adam*

The Creation of Adam is also housed within the Sistine Chapel (Sistine Chapel, n.d.) and is one of the chapel's most famous works. Due to the painting's location upon the ceiling, the construction of the image took immense dedication by Michelangelo, showing his devotion to both his craft and his faith. This painting represents Michelangelo's belief that God (represented on the right) is responsible for breathing life and virtue into Man (represented by the figure depicting Adam on the right) (), who's relaxed position juxtaposes God's outstretched arm. The concepts Michelangelo dreams up are much grander than that of Fig. 1, though still fit within the interpretation of the Bible.

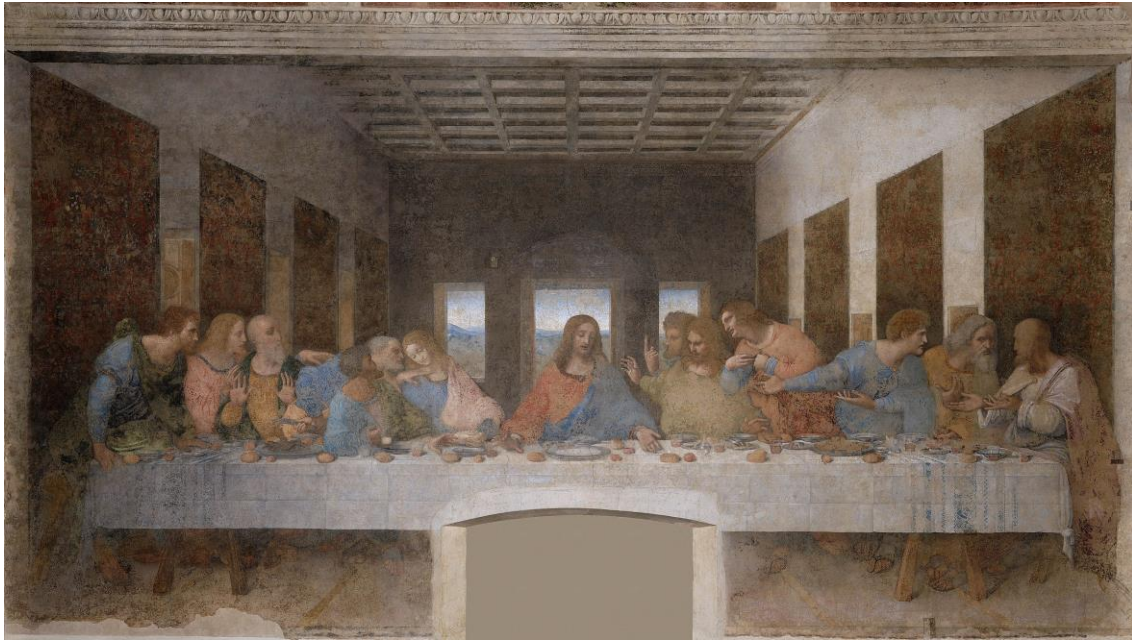


Fig. 4: Leonardo da Vinci (1495-1498) *The Last Supper*

Leonardo da Vinci's depiction of *The Last Supper* depicts the moment in which Jesus declares one of his twelve disciples will betray him (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2024), showing their individual reactions in response to this harrowing revelation. Each action is carefully thought out and posed accordingly, displaying da Vinci's true understanding of human anatomy and emotion. This mural along with Fig. 2 and 3 show the true pinnacle of religion within art, which juxtaposes the true defilement of Christ within the sacrilegious works that follow.

The subject of sacrilege encompasses both blasphemy and heresy – the acts of physically tarnishing the representation of God and poisoning the minds of others to walk the path of sin. Art that is considered sacrilegious tends to directly insult the very idea of Christianity, whether it be defacing holy iconography or leading the viewer to reconsider the strength of their faith. For instance, Argentinian artist León Ferrari wasted no time with indirectness in his artworks, pinning down his specific gripes with the Church with precision and accuracy.

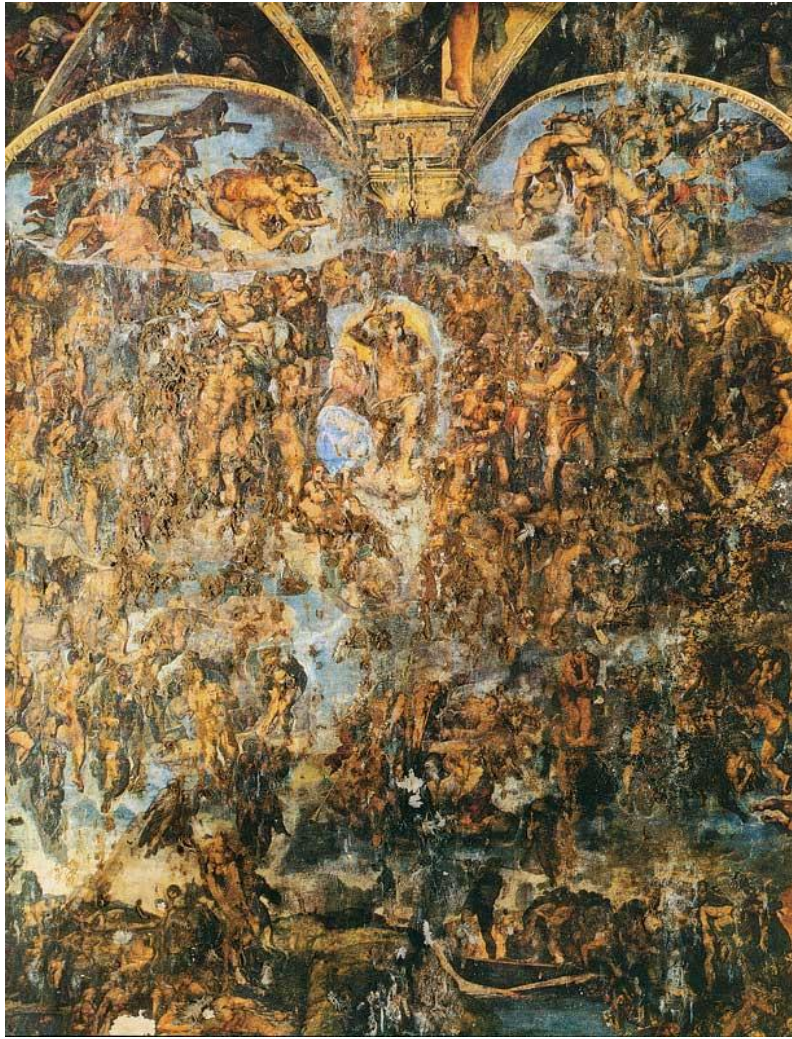


Fig. 6: León Ferrari (1994) *Juicio Final*

Juicio Final (translated to 'Last Judgement' in English) is Ferrari's take on Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* (Fig. 2), building upon the historical piece of work by placing bird cages above the painting and having them defecate on it (Birbragher-Rozencwaig, 2009). This is a clear example of Ferrari's distaste for both Christianity but also the illustration of artist's faith, metaphorically deeming it filthy. One can see the massive difference in the two works, as the image is almost unrecognisable as the previously shown Fig. 2 without close observation; the image's beautiful blue skies and green hills are lost within a disgusting swamp of brown. Naturally, Ferrari's jabs at the Church were not without backlash (Smart,

2013). His provocative pieces sparked outrage within the Christian community and many of his works were destroyed in the name of 'blasphemy'. As Ferrari's intentions for the piece were to cause outrage and fear, his work falls into the realm of sacrilege due to his mockery of Christ. This is also clear with his earlier work. Take into consideration Fig. 7:



Fig. 7: León Ferrari (1965) *La Civilización Occidental y Cristiana*

Fig. 7 is a life-size sculpture depicting the crucifixion of Jesus upon a wooden US warplane instead of a wooden cross. Despite its inflammatory intentions, this piece clearly displays the juxtaposition between Christ's will for love and peace on Earth versus the constant war, pain and violence advocated for in Western

civilisations (Castagnino Macro, 2018). Ferrari poses strong questions about how a blind eye is turned to bloodshed and suffering only for his artworks shedding light on these subjects sparking mass controversy. In this way, he is taking advantage of the hypocrisy of the masses to promote his ideals. However, Ferrari's majorly political and blasphemous career forced him into exile due to bitter indignation from Argentinian dictatorship in the early 1970s (Lempesis, n.d.). Many of his popular works faced major censorship due to their 'offensive' subjects, including Fig. 6.

Another example of an artist causing mass debate with controversial and sacrilegious works is surrealist Salvador Dalí. Disillusioned by the premise of his Catholic faith, Dalí's early work consists of thought-provoking criticisms of the core of Catholicism, still within the realm of his surrealist nature (Fig. 8) (Fig. 9).

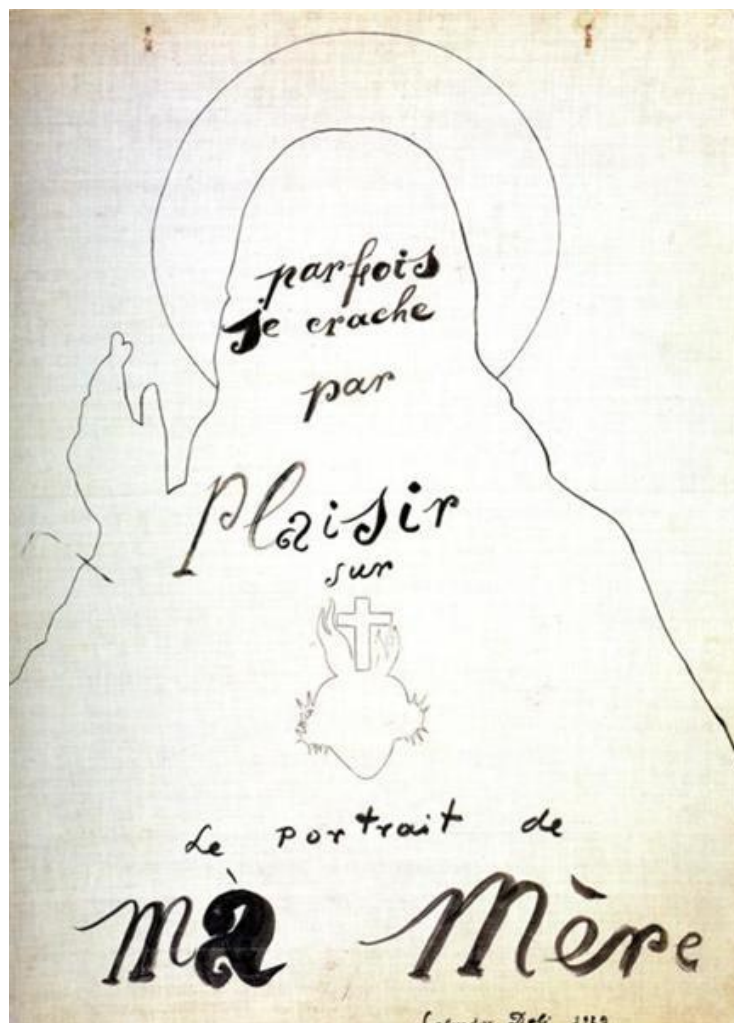


Fig. 8: Salvador Dalí (1929) *Parfois je crache par plaisir sur le portrait de ma mère*

Many of Dalí's works concerning religion in the beginning were considered "corrupt, ignorant and hypocritical" (National Gallery of Victoria, n.d.), including Fig. 8. It crudely represents a silhouette of Christ and the sacred heart, defiled with the phrase "Sometimes I Spit with Pleasure on the Portrait of my Mother". The publication of this image brought about great distress and shame upon his family, but he continued with his smear of Catholicism nonetheless, claiming to be a "Surrealist void of all moral values" (Artlyst, 2020) in 1929.



Fig. 9: Salvador Dalí (1931) *Profanation of the Host*

Dalí's offence evoking paintings continues with Fig. 9, in which he explores the themes of masturbation. Dalí depicts himself as four different heads, taking from a 1929 portrait in which he named *The Great Masturbator* (Fig. 10).

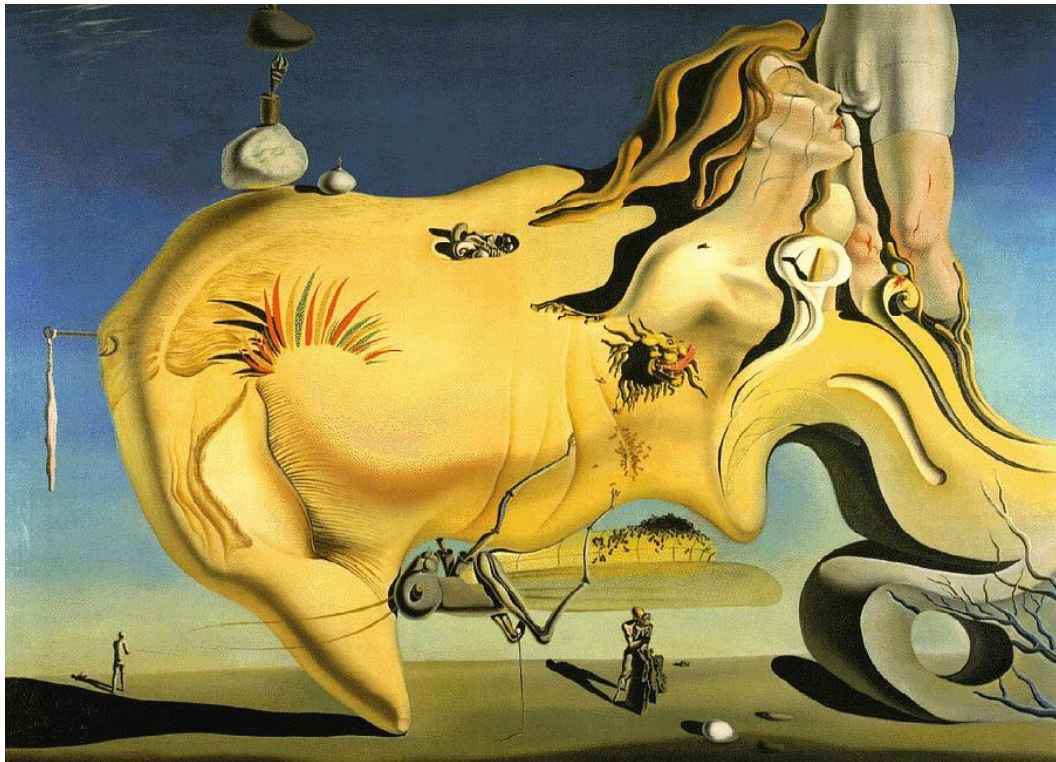


Fig. 10: Salvador Dalí (1929) *The Great Masturbator*

This representation of the self has been used many times in Dalí's career (Dali Paintings, n.d.), and is speculated to be how he truly perceives himself within his work. Within *Profanation of the Host*, the heads appear to droop in a way that could signify the guilt and shame he feels concerning his Catholic background (National Gallery of Victoria, n.d.). This distortion of the self and the humanoid figures in the foreground indicate a sense of remorse for the sinful way he represents himself and his family by extension.

The examples of worship and sin discussed so far are night and day examples of what would get one into Heaven and Hell. According to Dante, those who stumble into the path of sin and do not aim to repent end up in Hell with no chance at escape. They are doomed to torturous conditions for eternity (Alighieri & Ciardi, 1977). Many artists have depicted the scenes of Inferno (Hell), Purgatorio (Purgatory) and Paradiso (Heaven) according to his vision, one of the most popular being Botticelli's rendition.

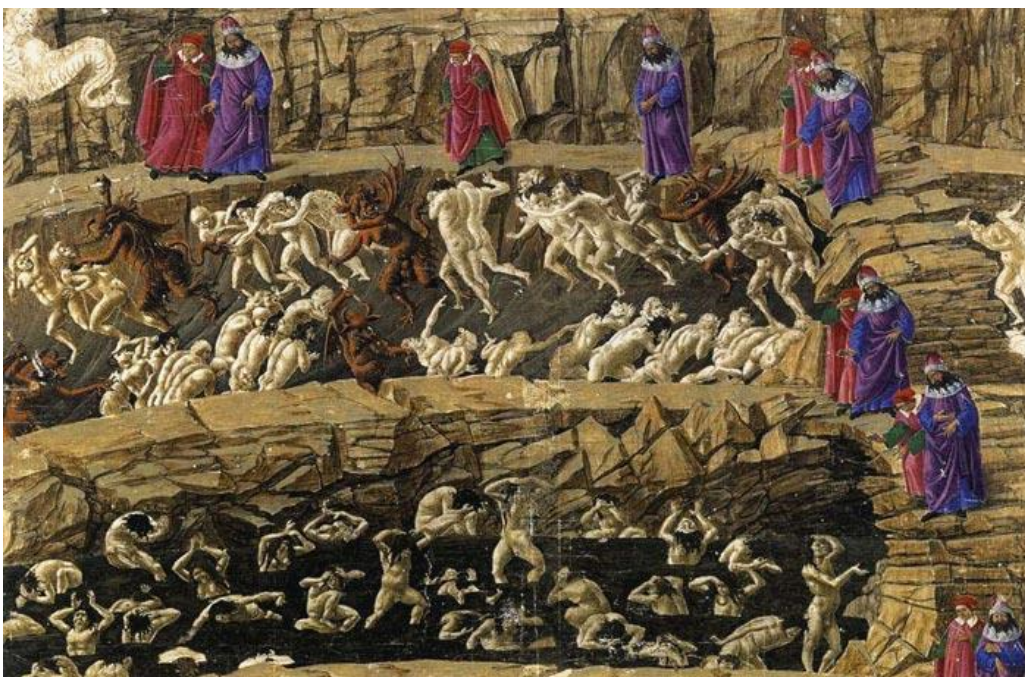


Fig. 11: Sandro Botticelli (1481-1488) *Inferno, Canto XVIII*

In Fig. 11, Dante (in red) is being lead by Virgil (in blue) through the beginning of the 8th circle of Hell. Named 'Maleboge' by Alighieri (Alighieri & Ciardi, 1977, p. 169), this area of Hell is designated to those who would defraud others during their lifetime. This canto describes "seducers" marching in formation with demons that whip them (p. 172) and "felons" drowning in pools of excrement as punishment for their sin (p. 173) in separate pits depending on the severity of the fraud. This canto only describes the first two pits, of which Botticelli has illustrated Dante and Virgil's

movements. Botticelli's depiction is extremely loyal to Dante's original text, putting mass amounts of attention to detail within the work. This piece in particular is one of few fully completed illustrations by Botticelli (Lee, 2021), as many are incomplete. So far, only ninety-two of his works concerning the Divine Comedy have been uncovered and many are simple sketches (Art in Tuscany, n.d.), such as Fig. 11.



Fig. 12: Sandro Botticelli (1480-1495) *Inferno, Canto XIII*

Botticelli is not the only artist to visualise the Divine comedy – Fig. 13 displays William Blake's interpretation of canto XIX, a pit in which Simoniacs (sinners guilty of selling sacred items, blessings and titles) are burned in proportion to their greed (Alighieri & Ciardi, 1977, p. 177).



Fig. 13: William Blake (1824-1827) *The Simoniac Pope*

Blake's composition and limited use of colour in this image allows for the viewer to focus on the sinner's terror and pain within this moment, his feet "jerking madly" as he writhes from the torture (p. 179). This contrasts with Botticelli's interpretation, as his depiction was much more impersonal and focused on the mass suffering of the souls in Hell. However, Blake's shows a much more intimate scene that focuses on the soul that Dante is speaking with. This illustration highlights the discussion between the sinner and Dante as he is shielded by Virgil:

And as I sang him this tune, he began to twitch and kick both feet out wildly,
as if in rage or gnawed by conscience—little matter which. (Alighieri & Ciardi,
1977, p. 181)

While Blake and Botticelli's depictions of *Inferno* differ greatly, they both represent the true horrors of Hell, expressing to the reader the discomfort of the torture these wretched souls endure. They both highlight Dante's travels through the underworld – guided by Virgil – to reach *Paradiso*.

This essay has explored the nuances of religion, sacrilege and hell and the links between these concepts. Through discussing the work of Michelangelo contrasting with Ferrari, it is clear that the way in which an image of Christ can be interpreted as a worship and devotion to faith or a complete mockery of it. Other artists – such as Dalí – have a more personal connection to their works, including their own ideology and aspects of themselves into their work (Fig. 8 & Fig. 9 for example). The concept of Hell as a consequence of sin is a fascinating topic, and it would be interesting to delve into it more.

Lines of questioning that could be explored further from the nature of this essay include “How has the perception and interpretation of Hell changed within media?”, “In what ways is the Devil represented within art?” or “Is art a tangible and accessible form of worship or sin?”. I find the discussion of Hell a compelling basis for my dissertation, so I would be likely to pursue this topic specifically by researching further visual adaptations of the *Divine Comedy*, perhaps even looking at depictions of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* in addition to *Inferno*. As for my practice, I would be interested in illustrating the layers of Hell as according to my own interpretations of Alighieri's writings.

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