

What is the role of art within Christianity and what power does religious art and iconography have?

Student name: Aimee Brown

Student number: 2300741

Program of study: Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context (BA)

Module: Independent Project (ADAA6000/C)

Tutors: Alex Duncan / Paul Duerinckx / Estéfani Bouza

Word Count: 6400 (excluding title page, abstract, table of contents, figure list,
bibliography)

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work

AI Acknowledgement declaration:

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.

I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Abstract:

This thesis discusses the role of religious art within Christianity, the Notre Dame as an example of the church being instillation art, Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle and Michael Craig-Martin's exploration of faith with his conceptual work titled *An Oak Tree*.

It will discuss Iconoclasms and disrespectful depictions of religious icons which show that any art made not in accordance with the Bible and tradition is not accepted.

Salvador Dalí's sculpture *Christ of the Rubbish*, Titian's *Assumptions of the Virgin* and Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* demonstrate the fact that religious art has the ability to provoke extreme emotion which shows that it has power.

The use of symbolism within the Bible and religious art provide easily recognisable and reproducible imagery. Joseph Beuys and Andres Serrano both created art works intended to show the reality of the crucifixion however they generated completely opposite responses and reactions. The extreme emotional reactions to these artworks show the power of religious art. The simple fact that people care shows that religious art has power.

Table of contents:

Abstract	2
List of Illustrations.....	4
Introduction	6
Chapter 1: The role of art within Christianity	7
Chapter 2: What is the power of religious art?	14
Chapter 3: What is the power of Iconography?	23
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	35

List of Illustrations:

Figure 1: Brown, A. (2025) *The Notre Dame Cathedral*. [Photograph]. Private Collection.

Figure 2: Craig-Martin, M. (1973) *An Oak Tree* [Sculpture]. Available at:

<https://www.michaelcraigmartin.co.uk/artworks/11-an-oak-tree/> (Accessed: 13 November 2025).

Figure 3: Dalí, S. (1960s) *Christ of the Rubbish* [Photograph]. Private Collection.

Figure 4: Titan (1915-1918) *Assumptions of the Virgin* [Oil on panel]. Available at:

<https://smarthistory.org/titian-assumption-of-the-virgin/> (Accessed: 20 November 2025)

Figure 5: Ofili, C. (1996) *The Holy Virgin Mary* [Mixed Media on canvas]. Available at:

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/283373> (Accessed: 18 November 2025)

Figure 6: Beuys, J. (1847-1948) *Sonnenkreuz* [Patinated bronze sculpture]. Available at:

<https://www.artway.eu/posts/joseph-beuys-a-spiritual-german-artist> (Accessed: 22 November 2025).

Figure 7: Serrano, A. (1987) *Piss Christ* [Photograph]. Available at:

<https://andresserrano.org/series/immersions> (Accessed: 17 November 2025).

Figure 8: Christies (2022) *Piss Christ* [Photograph]. Available at:

<https://www.christies.com/en/stories/andres-serrano-transfigures-piss-christ-into-nft-206ace81c7284ec58cb7b8978f2ec53c> (Accessed: 18 November 2025).

Figure 9: Christies (2022) *Piss Christ* [Photograph]. Available at:

<https://www.christies.com/en/stories/andres-serrano-transfigures-piss-christ-into-nft-206ace81c7284ec58cb7b8978f2ec53c> (Accessed: 18 November 2025)

Figure 10: Christies (2022) *Piss Christ* [Photograph]. Available at:

<https://www.christies.com/en/stories/andres-serrano-transfigures-piss-christ-into-nft-206ace81c7284ec58cb7b8978f2ec53c> (Accessed: 18 November 2025)

Introduction

This thesis will discuss the power of religious art and iconography within Christianity. It will aim to argue the importance and power religious art holds to both believers and non-believers; even to non-believers religious art still holds reverence.

Chapter 1 will examine the role of art within Christianity, what the purpose of it is, why it is used so much and what impact it has on the viewer. This will be supported by Guy Debord's *Theory of the Spectacle* and through examining the religious artwork displayed within the Notre Dame, the artwork of Michael Craig-Martin and his exploration of faith with the work *An Oak Tree*.

Chapter 2 will consider the power of religious art; why it is so powerful, where its power comes from and why it is important. It will examine iconoclasm, its effect and through this the power that religious art has. This will be supported by looking at Salvador Dalí's use of found and discarded objects to create a depiction of Christ in his work *Christ of the Rubbish*, Titan's painting *Assumptions of the Virgin* and Chris Ofili's mixed media painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*.

Chapter 3 will investigate the power of religious iconography, why icons and symbols are used within Christianity and the effect and importance of them. Semiotics will be used to question the importance behind symbols and will be supported by examining Joseph Beuys' use of crosses, specifically in his sculpture *Sonnenkreuz* in addition to Andres Serrano's photographic piece, *Piss Christ*.

The aim of this dissertation will be to determine the importance that is placed on religious art and icons and the role they play within the Christian faith.

Chapter 1: The role of art within Christianity.

Religious art is understood most commonly as art that “depicts biblical themes” (Trotter, n.d.). The majority of art created from the Middle Ages through to the 17th century depicted religious imagery relating to Christianity, although the Renaissance is widely acclaimed as the period of time whereby religious art saw its “greatest expression” (Trotter, n.d.) with most created during this period. Its purpose primarily was to create a visual understanding of biblical stories especially during a period when most people could not read, providing information about scriptures, figures and symbols, the life of Jesus or the work of the saints. Religious art provided an opportunity to share religion both visually and aesthetically, designed to inspire and create a “deeper communion with the divine” (Webster, 2023). Whilst its position has long been as a “beacon of devotion, a visual testament to the profound mysteries of faith” (Webster, 2023) religious art has been used as a tool of influence becoming idealised and linked closely to rituals of devotion. Primarily found in churches and religious spaces, religious art is often found to be looking down upon the viewer reinforcing the power imbalance.

Historically the only art that people would ever see would be that which is in a church; the painting, the sculpture, the stained glass and the architecture. The lay person would not have been able to experience art due to low income and class, making their only experience of art situated within religious settings; their understanding of art would therefore be biased. The difficulties with this, is it provides a polarising viewpoint and this arguably can be seen as propaganda. If a person is only presented with one

viewpoint then they can only understand and believe in that one viewpoint without ever being aware that their opinions are being manipulated and controlled; “when only one perspective is shared [...] it can present a skewed version of reality” (CSFA - California State Firefighters’ Association, 2025). Church formed one of the few social gatherings that would have taken place during this period making religious art the only art available. In many ways churches were the first installation art because they provided a full sensorial experience; its cold, all the surfaces are smooth, the smell, silence, echoing, the singing, and everywhere you look there’s art from the paintings to the sculptures to the stained-glass windows and even the architecture of the church itself.



Figure 1: *The Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris* (Brown, 2025).

The Notre Dame is a perfect and infamous example of the church being installation art. Located in Paris it is one of the most famous Catholic cathedrals and largest religious

buildings in the world and was “immediately considered a masterpiece” (Foundation Notre-Dame, 2024). It started being built in 1163 and was finished in 1345 and contains one of the greatest collections of art displaying paintings, stained glass windows, statues and sculptures; people visiting would not have seen so much art in their lives, especially not in the same place at the same time. It was a full sensorial experience and therefore is one of the first examples of installation art. The Notre Dame has stood as a testament of time and been a constant source of comfort and pride ever since it was constructed. “The cathedral has stood as a beacon of architectural achievement, spiritual significance, and, most importantly, a monument at the center of a nation’s cultural identity” (ROST ARCHITECTS, 2024) providing hope and consistency to people of faith. In April 2019 a fire broke out and due to a delayed response to the alarms, by the time fire fighters started working to contain the flames the fire had already spread rapidly “fueled by the cathedral’s wooden framework” (ROST ARCHITECTS, 2024), which resulted in extensive damage including destroying the roof and the spire. “The fall of the spire was a particularly heartbreaking moment, symbolizing the magnitude of the damage inflicted on the cherished monument” (ROST ARCHITECTS, 2024). “The disaster left the world in shock and mourning” (Friends of Notre-Dame de Paris, 2022) showing just how much the iconic cathedral means to people. As soon as the fire was extinguished experts assessed the extent of the damage and immediately started planning the restorations. aiming to completely rebuild the cathedral in just five years, “so that it would be ready before the Paris Olympic Games in 2024” (Maté-González et al., 2025). The intention was to make the restorations as similar to the original as possible by using the same methods, techniques and materials the original builders used. “This meticulous approach ensured that the rebuilt roof was both structurally

faithful and symbolically representative of the original” (Maté-González et al., 2025).

This resulted in the Notre Dame now containing a fascinating mix of ancient and contemporary art. “despite the adversities it has faced, Notre-Dame continues to symbolize the spirit of Paris. The cathedral’s magnificence and enduring presence inspire reverence and awe in all those who behold it” (Friends of Notre-Dame de Paris, 2022). I had the opportunity to visit in October 2025 and it was incredibly awe-inspiring and a bit overwhelming so I can only imagine how it would feel to people visiting in the Middle Ages who would not have seen much art.

Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle states that the media dictates how a person views, interprets and feels about everything making it impossible to form true opinions on anything (Debord, 2012). Applying Debord’s theory to religious art and imagery, its all-consuming unavoidable nature meant that a person knew nothing else with regards to art and this formed a controlling relationship whereby a person’s life could be dictated by it. The purpose of religious art was to teach the correct way to live according to the principles of Christ and his teachings and this was so deeply ingrained into society and personal lives that individual mindsets were non-existent. “Alienates individuals by mediating their social reality through images rather than direct experience” (Singh, 2023). The church controlling all the art that people saw meant they controlled what people thought and made it impossible for them to form their own true opinions, in the same way that contemporary media dictates how a person views and understands things (Debord, 2012). This resulted in religion and the church having

complete control over how people lived their lives, their thoughts, feelings and the relationship that people had with the world and even other people.

Individuals are suspended into the totalizing orb of the spectacle, a sphere that mediates human relations through the image and produces a round of submission, contemplation, and inaction (Singh, 2023).

The overwhelming nature of the spectacle therefore can result in action and submission in the same way that the overpowering nature of religious art in a church setting can be controlling and arguably manipulative. The site specific nature of the religious pieces situated in a church arguably affects the way a person interacts with them and how they are understood. Churches are cold and built from stone mainly grey inside so a person's viewpoint is drawn to the religious imagery which makes it overpowering encouraging belief in what is depicted. The power of belief in the unseen is further examined by Michael Craig-Martin.



Q: To begin with, could you describe this work?
A: Yes, of course. What I've done is change a glass of water into a full-grown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water.
Q: The accidents?
A: Yes. The colour, feel, weight, size ...
Q: Do you mean that the glass of water is a symbol of an oak tree?
A: No. It's not a symbol. I've changed the physical substance of the glass of water into that of an oak tree.
Q: It looks like a glass of water ...
A: Of course it does. I didn't change its appearance. But it's not a glass of water. It's an oak tree.
Q: Can you prove what you claim to have done?
A: Well, yes and no. I claim to have maintained the physical form of the glass of water and, as you can see, I have. However, as one normally looks for evidence of physical change in terms of altered form, no such proof exists.
Q: Haven't you simply called this glass of water an oak tree?
A: Absolutely not. It is not a glass of water any more. I have changed its actual substance. It would no longer be accurate to call it a glass of water. One could call it anything one wished but that would not alter the fact that it is an oak tree.
Q: Isn't this just a case of the emperor's new clothes?
A: No. With the emperor's new clothes people claimed to see something which wasn't there because they felt they should. I would be very surprised if anyone told me they saw an oak tree.
Q: Was it difficult to effect the change?
A: No effort at all. But it took me years of work before I realized I could do it.
Q: When precisely did the glass of water become an oak tree?
A: When I put water in the glass.
Q: Does this happen every time you fill a glass with water?
A: No, of course not. Only when I intend to change it into an oak tree.
Q: Then intention causes the change?
A: I would say it precipitates the change.
Q: You don't know how you do it?
A: It contradicts what I feel I know about cause and effect.
Q: It seems to me you're claiming to have worked a miracle. Isn't that the case?
A: I'm flattered that you think so.
Q: But aren't you the only person who can do something like this?
A: How could I know?
Q: Could you teach others to do it?
A: No. It's not something one can teach.
Q: Do you consider that changing the glass of water into an oak tree constitutes an artwork?
A: Yes.
Q: What precisely is the artwork? The glass of water?
A: There is no glass of water any more.
Q: The process of change?
A: There is no process involved in the change.
Q: The oak tree?
A: Yes, the oak tree.
Q: But the oak tree only exists in the mind.
A: No. The actual oak tree is physically present but in the form of the glass of water. As the glass of water was a particular glass of water, the oak tree is also particular. To conceive the category 'oak tree' or to picture a particular oak tree is not to understand and experience what appears to be a glass of water as an oak tree. Just as it is imperceivable, it is also inconceivable.
Q: Did the particular oak tree exist somewhere else before it took the form of the glass of water?
A: No. This particular oak tree did not exist previously. I should also point out that it does not and will not ever have any other form but that of a glass of water.
Q: How long will it continue to be an oak tree?
A: Until I change it.

Figure 2: *An Oak Tree* (Michael Craig-Martin, 1973).

Michael Craig-Martin is a painter, printmaker, drawer and digital artist who also makes site specific installations. One of his most known works is a conceptual piece made in 1973 called *An Oak Tree* which was first exhibited in the Rowan Gallery in London. The installation consists of a glass of water on a glass shelf 2.5 metres off the ground as well as a piece of text that was first handed out to everyone on arrival however was later mounted to the wall next to the piece. The text explains that the glass of water is an oak tree that just looks like a glass of water.

I realised that if I simply called the glass of water an oak tree everyone would assume I had simply renamed the object rather than totally changed it. I hoped that the interview would allow me to make clear what I was claiming - and not claiming - in a seemingly casual humorous and non-didactic way (Craig-Martin, 2015).

With the text he not only explains the artwork but also involves the viewer in the piece.

An Oak Tree is a metaphor for faith, and a comment on how a person should blindly believe in something that can't be seen or proven and sometimes goes against logic.

People however still believe and have faith despite not being able to see the oak tree or prove it's there. "Belief - that is, the confident faith of the artist in his capacity to speak, and the willing faith of the viewer in accepting what he has to say" (Craig-Martin, 2015). A person often believes what they have been told to believe and this, whilst encouraging faith also can manipulate a person's viewpoint. "Belief may have as much power as real fact, especially if this belief has strong traditional roots" (Biger, 2022). Belief can therefore replace fact; whilst it may physically be a glass of water the viewer is told it is an oak tree and thereby believes what they are told just as Christians believe in an unseen, unknown deity.

Chapter 2: What is the power of religious art?

Iconoclasm literally translates to ‘image breaking’ from the Greek words *eikón* (image) and *kláō* (to break) (Biblehub.com, 2025). It is the destruction of religious or political art or icons. It is “the breaking or destruction of icons for religious or political reasons” (Biger, 2022). The Bible references the time when before entering the Promised Land Moses commanded the Israelis to “Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire.” (Deuteronomy 7:5). This demonstrates that iconoclasm has been prevalent for many years within religious history.

There are two types of iconoclasms, ‘inside aspect’ which takes place within a religion and ‘outside aspect’ which is when one religion destroys the art and icons of another (Biger, 2022). Outside is normally more extreme because they are destroying something that doesn’t belong to them and in the past this has resulted in the complete destruction of religious buildings, sites and even deaths. An example of iconoclasm is when Henry VIII set up the Church of England and destroyed and ordered the destruction of many pieces of religious art which was continued by Edward VI and Elizabeth I.

the gouges, slashes and blows on the faces of Mary or the beheaded statues throughout East Anglia vividly convey the Reformer’ zeal and yet at the same time, their very ardour concedes that there is more to the images than inert matter: why otherwise cut off their heads and scratch out their eyes? (Warner, 2015).

When the Church of England was established they wanted nothing to remain of the Catholic church; the destruction of art was therefore absolute and arguably personal to

a degree, indicated by the ‘scratching’ out of their eyes so they could no longer see (Warner, 2015). This same degree of passion in destruction was evidenced during the French revolution whereby the statues depicting the Kings of Judah situated on the Notre Dame were beheaded and then buried out of site. No-one knew where they were buried and they remained undiscovered until 1977 when they were uncovered during construction nearby; “twenty-one heads – chipped, noseless and bearing the marks of the hammer and the saw” (Warner, 2015). The statues and their detached heads were excavated and then put on display at the Musée de Cluny where they still are today. Religious art during this period was not simply destroyed but decimated so no value arguably remained. When rediscovered however they held more power as a result of the history they held within them.

Iconoclasm is not just the complete destruction of religious art but can also apply to what people consider disrespectful depictions of religious figures. “There is a strong contrast between iconoclasm as wholesale destruction (sacrifice), however, and iconoclasm as the accrual of meaning through interventions such as graffiti, appropriation and reframing” (Warner, 2015). Value behind art is often formed by the viewer but within religious art this arguably originates from the religious source it is depicting. When religious images are thereby re-appropriated this can be perceived as destroying the very sentiment and belief system they represent. Exploration of religious sentiment remains subjective to the artist however can be interpreted negatively by the viewer due to misinterpretation. Salvador Dalí and Andres Serrano (see chapter 3) both

created homages to the figure of Christ however these were interpreted as disrespectful by the viewer due to deviating from traditional depictions.



Figure 3: *Christ of the Rubbish* (Salvador Dalí, late 1960s)

Salvador Dalí was a Spanish surrealist artist known for his strikingly bizarre imagery in his paintings, sculptures and films. He lived in a house in Portlligat-Cadaques with his wife Gala from 1930 to 1982. The house has been turned into a museum since his and his wife's death and opened in 1997. Upon visiting in August, I discovered a piece of his work laying in his garden called *Christ of the Rubbish* (see figure 3) which was made in the late 1960s after a particularly bad storm that resulted in flooding in the area. Dalí used materials and rubbish he found around his house and on the beach nearby "such as the framework of a boat, tyres, pieces of iron, etc." (Fundació Gala - Salvador Dalí,

2025) to construct the huge 12 meter long “ephemeral sculpture” (Pitxot and Aguer, 2008). Each bone in the arms and legs is represented by tree branches, his abdomen a part of a wooden rowboat and the frames of the boat otherwise known as the ‘ribs’ perfectly represented Christ’s ribs making the sculpture feel more human. Its head was represented by an exploded magnetic floating mine left over from World War II; “that’s the perfect head of Christ. It is like a sea urchin with detonators that naturally represent the crown of thorns” (Qrco.de, 2025). The sculpture demonstrates Dalí’s incredible use of found objects as well as his ability to make the most out of accidents and disasters. “Dalí said that you always had to make the most of an accident” (Pitxot and Aguer, 2008). However, some people may interpret Dalí’s use of rubbish to represent Christ as disrespectful and potentially sacrilegious because materials hold power and rubbish is considered to be disposable and worthless and making a representation of Christ out of something worthless can be seen as disrespectful. After Dalí had finished making the huge sculpture he decided to leave it completely untouched. “I’ll leave that Christ here and I’ll never touch it again. One day it will go back to the earth like all of us will very slowly. Dust you are and dust you shall return” (Qrco.de, 2025). Whilst *Christ of the Rubbish* may be considered a sacrilegious depiction of Christ, arguably Dalí’s sentiment of returning Christ to the earth may be interpreted as in tune with religious belief and doctrine; “‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ as nothing can be completed without God’s will and a person will always return to the earth from which they came” (Bolinger, 2025).



Figure 4: *Assumptions of the Virgin* (Titan, 1515-1518)

Assumptions of the Virgin is a 690cm by 360cm oil painting by Titan, an Italian Renaissance artist. He painted it from 1515 – 1518 as the main centrepiece in the largest church in Venice called the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari more commonly known as the Frari. The painting depicts the Virgin Mary ascending up to heaven after her death. She is carried on a cloud by cherubs and angels towards an

older male figure who is the “personification of God” (Titian.org, 2009), surrounded by a golden glowing light. There is a group of people looking up to Mary from below, some are reaching out to her. He has depicted Mary as “youthful, her body uncorrupted by age” (Gallerie dell’Accademia di Venezia, 2024). Titan paints the Virgin Mary as a religious icon, a symbol of innocence and goodness to be admired and emulated. The painting has had a controversial history because Mary’s death is not actually mentioned in the Bible, in fact she is last mentioned in Acts 1:14 in the New Testament when she is praying after Jesus’ ascension back to heaven and she is never mentioned again. Her death is written about in other apocryphal texts many of which talk about her physical ascension to heaven after her death. “Her body was ‘assumed’ into heaven to be reunited with her soul, instead of going through the natural process of physical decay upon death” (Barouxis, 2019). At the end of the fifth century Pope Gelasius, Bishop of Rome at the time, “declared the Assumption of Mary to be heresy” (Staples, 2019) however many people still believed it to be true. In 1950 Pope Pius XII declared that the story was “dogmas of the Catholic church” (Ch’ien, 2015), declaring it to be fact and officially put an end to the debate of what happened to Mary’s body as well as the debate and controversy around Titan’s painting within Catholicism, as it now depicted something they believed to be true. However, “it remains controversial to Protestants” (BBC, 2011) as the Pope is the Head of the Catholic Church not the Protestant church, therefore he does not dictate what is true within Protestantism which means that to them the *Assumptions of the Virgin* is still a controversial painting. Religious art is considered in terms of the truth behind the image it depicts, with pieces reflecting ‘real’ Bible stories holding immense power but when the image does not hold any ‘truth’ the art is considered disrespectful and a

denouncement of Christ and Christianity. Belief thereby underlies the power of religious art and whether it is accepted, creating a strong emotional reaction to the piece and it is this reaction that gives religious art its power. Artists that do not accurately follow the religious depictions in the Bible are thereby open to criticism due to the power that lies behind belief. Chris Ofili is one such artist.



Figure 5: *The Holy Virgin Mary* (Chris Ofili, 1996).

Chris Ofili is British painter who uses many different materials within his work. He was the first ever black artist to win the Turner prize in 1998. *The Holy Virgin Mary* is a painting which depicts the Virgin Mary as black. He used oil paint, glitter layers of resin in addition to map pins in order to make the piece reflect light and sparkle. “It’s visually striking. A black Virgin Mary stands in the centre against a shimmering gold

background” (Norton, n.d.) He cut up women’s bottoms from porn magazines and placed them around Mary as flying cherubs. He also positioned the painting on top of two balls of elephant dung with the top lent against the wall and he used a third ball of elephant dung to represent her exposed breast, “alluding to an absent baby” (MoMa, 2019). He was inspired to use elephant dung in his work after a trip to Zimbabwe because it is a substance that is “believed to have medicinal properties” (MoMa, 2019). He intentionally positioned it close to the floor casually lent against the wall in order to put it at the viewer’s level “rather than the suspended space of art dictated by tradition” (MoMa, 2019). In doing so Ofili arguably removed the power imbalance often created by religious imagery which can be seen as looking down on the viewer from its higher position on the wall. Ofili intended the image to be understood and relatable to the viewer hence positioning it at eye level to encourage connection.

Ofili is challenging the viewer’s preconceptions of what something means to be ‘sacred’, as well as reclaiming Mary’s ethnicity as Middle Eastern - which it is said to have been in the Bible, despite the common depictions of her as Caucasian (Norton, n.d.).

However, many people considered it to be a disrespectful depiction due to the use of elephant dung and nudity. American journalist Bernard Goldberg ranked Ofili number 86 on his ‘100 people who are screwing up America’ list and the former Mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani called the work sick and disgusting. Two months later a retired teacher vandalised the painting by squirting a bottle of white paint onto the piece because “it’s blasphemous” (Norton, n.d.) but luckily the painting was able to be cleaned and there was no lasting damage. However, Ofili did not intend for his work to be disrespectful or offensive. “When I go to the National Gallery and see paintings of the

Virgin Mary, I see how sexually charged they are. Mine is simply a hip-hop version,”
(MoMa, 2019). The strength and passion behind people’s response to the image demonstrates the power behind religious imagery and the reaction it inspires. Whilst religious imagery generates feelings of love and devotion it also creates feelings of anger and hatred when not created according to the Bible.

Chapter 3: What is the power of Iconography?

Religious art contains a wide range of symbolism, both metaphorical and physical. The Bible contains many parables which are “a tale about a simple, common subject to illustrate a more profound, valuable moral lesson” (Bible Study Tools, 2019). Jesus used these in order to teach people important lessons, many of which were about morality. He used these parables to teach people right from wrong, and how to live their lives in accordance to God. For example, in the parable of *The Good Samaritan* (Luke 10:29-37) Jesus told the story of a Jewish man who was robbed and seriously injured by the side of a road. Two people walked past, a priest and a Levite both ignoring his plight followed by a Samaritan who stopped and helped despite Jews hating Samaritans. “He bandaged him and cleaned his wounds. He then put him on the back of his donkey and took him to an innkeeper, whom he paid to look after him” (BBC, 2024). Jesus then told his followers to be like the Samaritan and always offer help no matter who it is to. This parable teaches the importance of having empathy and love for everyone. Jesus used simple concepts that could easily be understood by anyone to teach people more complicated lessons. “Jesus had the wisdom to simplify the profound spiritual truths he needed to share with humanity in the form of relatable stories that are easy to understand” (Bible Study Tools, 2019). Jesus’ use of metaphorical symbolism was vital in communicating his teachings and getting people to understand them.

Christian art utilises physical symbolism as a method to illustrate what a story is about; original religious teachings were illustrative as few people could read. “Originally the intention of signs and symbols was to provide an instantly, visually recognizable representation, or mental picture of a concept” (Smith, 2021). The use of a golden halo

around a figure's head is indicative of divinity and is regularly used in pictures of Jesus, Mary, angels and saints. "This aura around a holy figure's head expresses their glory or divinity and can be seen in art across the world" (Wilson, 2021). Within Semiotics "different elements represent concepts and ideas" (Ungvarsky, 2024) and this dictates how meaning is created. The halo can be understood therefore as a sign signifying power and importance but within a divine realm and connotes that this person must be looked up to and respected (Chandler, 2022). This provides the creator of the image and the viewer with a system of interpretation; specific meanings attributed to symbols underlies much religious teaching and imagery. Many of the symbols used are designed to be easily recognisable and reproducible so that they can be displayed everywhere within a church so that wherever you look you are reminded of something. The repeated use of the same symbols within religious art and spaces provided a way for the viewer to connect to the art as well as the story, message or concept that it represents. It also provides a way of connecting different pieces and concepts together.



Figure 6: *Sonnenkreuz* (Joseph Beuys, 1947-48).

Joseph Beuys is a German performance artist, sculptor and activist who had an “ambitious goal for his work: the transformation of Western culture into a more peaceful, democratic, and creative milieu” (Walker Art Center, n.d.). He wanted to encourage society to be more understanding. He used a lot of crosses throughout his career especially in his early work, and these are often referred to as Beuys crosses, as his work and use of the symbol is distinctly unique and recognisable. From 1947-1948 he made a sculpture out of bronze titled *Sonnenkreuz* which is a 36.5 cm x 20 cm x 5 cm bronze sculpture depicting Jesus hanging on a cross with the sun above his head and behind him. His arms “stretch upwards in the shape of a V with a radiant sun that seems to turn between his arms above his head” (Stoker, 2022). The position and posture of Christ’s body in sculpture shows the suffering Christ endured writhing in pain; “his body

is forced into a lineal zigzag form, the body bent several times, and the overly long arms are reminiscent of the intense illustration of Christ's suffering in Gothic crucifixes" (Lempertz.com, 2019). Through creating a physical replica with Christ's body contorted, Beuys is providing a visual reminder of the suffering of Christ. "The sun and the hanging corpse" (Stoker, 2022) is a comment on the relationship between life and death and a visual representation of how Jesus gave up his life for ours and in turn he got his life back. "Death and resurrection are pictured here in one" (Stoker, 2022). Beuys used the sun to show Jesus' importance as the sun is the centre of the universe and is essential for all life similar to how Jesus' sacrifice was essential for the continuation of life as we know it. In a way Beuys has used the sun as a halo symbolising Jesus' importance and divinity. Beuys replica of the crucifix has gained worldwide respect as a religious symbol however this is subjective dependent upon the viewer's interpretation. Further replicas of the crucifix have received worldwide criticism for their depiction of Christ as they have been interpreted negatively such as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*. This demonstrates the power of religious symbolism to divide and to create such strong emotions.

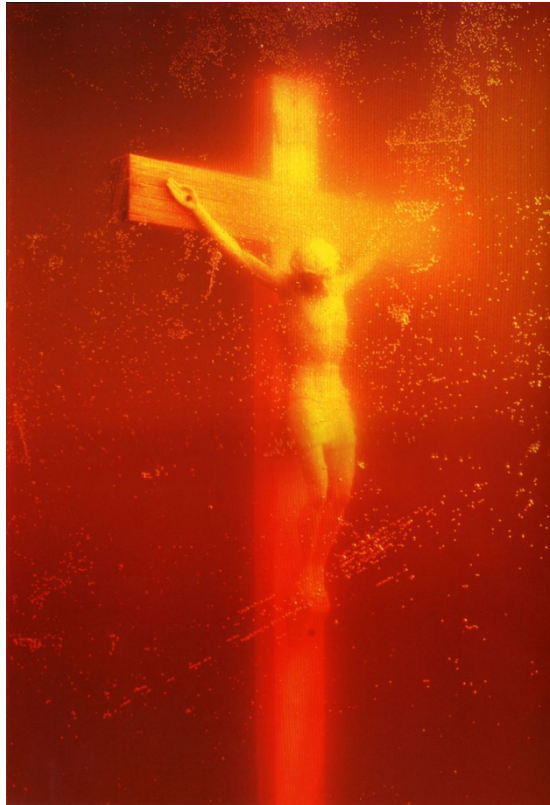


Figure 7: *Piss Christ* (Andres Serrano, 1987)

Andres Serrano is an American photographer best known for his controversial photography. From 1987 to 1990 he created a series of photographs called the *Immersion Series* where he took photos of religious objects and figures submerged in different bodily fluids. One of these photographs is entitled *Piss Christ* created in 1987, which is a 100cm by 150cm photograph of a crucifix submerged in his urine. He printed it on glossy paper making the image shiny and the colours vibrant. “The saturated amber hues along with the texture given from the bubbles make it seem as if there is a light glow coming from the figure of Christ” (Terziyska, 2023). Had the title of the work not been so straight forward and explicit the viewer would have no idea what the image depicted just from looking at it. Serrano said that the photograph “symbolises the way Christ died: blood came out of him but so did the piss and the

shit” (Terziyska, 2023). He also said that “Maybe if *Piss Christ* upsets you it's because it gives some sense of what the crucifixion was actually like” (Terziyska, 2023). Whilst depictions of Christ are accepted they must be in keeping with tradition and the reality of what happened at the crucifixion was not written therefore didn’t happen; people do not want to hear about things that are not respectful and stated clearly in the Bible.



Figure 8: *Piss Christ*- ripped
(Andres Serrano, 1987)

Figure 9: *Piss Christ*- kicked
(Andres Serrano, 1987)

Figure 10: *Piss Christ*-
smashed (Andres Serrano,
1987)

The work was first exhibited in the Stux Gallery in New York City in 1987 but did not generate controversy until it was displayed at the Virginia Museum of Art as critiques called the work “atrocious, blasphemous, and inherently offensive to Christians” (Terziyska, 2023). Serrano received hate mail and death threats and was even criticised by multiple US senators, many of whom called for the immediate removal of the piece from the exhibition. One named Alfonse D’Amato even tore a

reproduction of the photograph in half (Figure 8) on the senate floor during his speech expressing the outrage and indignation he had for the piece. During this discussion of the matter in the US Senate Building they decided to cut the National Endowment for the Arts future funding for all other artists and galleries, as they had given grants both directly to Serrano himself as well as the gallery that displayed the work. *Piss Christ* was not only widely criticised it also faced three major instances of vandalism. In 1997 the work was displayed in the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia which caused much upset. The Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne asked the Australian Supreme Court to remove the work from the exhibition but they refused so he and his followers held a candlelight vigil outside the gallery. On 11th of October 1997 someone removed the work from the wall where it was hanging and kicked it; despite this being an obvious and violent display of disapproval, it caused no major damage however the very next day two teenagers smashed it with a hammer causing irreparable damage to the photograph (Figure 9). In 2011 *Piss Christ* was in the Collection Lambert in Avignon in France and around 1000 Christian protesters gathered outside the gallery again seeking the works removal from the exhibition. The very next day four of the protestors used a hammer and an unidentified sharp object to smash and slash the work again causing everlasting unfixable damage (Figure 10). In 2022 however Serrano collaborated with the London based non-profit organisation, *A/POLITICAL*, to turn *Piss Christ* into a Non Fungible Token (NFT) in order to provide “a new perspective for understanding the artwork’s history” (Terziyska, 2023). The NFT is a 19 second video that runs on a yearly cycle and on the anniversary of each instance of vandalism, the image changes to show what happened to it at that point in its history. By turning *Piss*

Christ into an NFT that shows the original image and then the instances of vandalism, Serrano has immortalised the work, its controversial history and the effect it has had on people, the Christian community and the art world. “Turning *Piss Christ* into an NFT makes it not only eternal but more importantly the works digitalization commemorates the precise moments the photograph has incited attacks and suffered damage” (Terziyska, 2023). Through immortalising *Piss Christ* as an NFT Serrano successfully reclaimed the artwork from the protestors and critics securing its position in the history of religious art.

Serrano did not intend for his work to be controversial or disrespectful in fact he wanted to “highlight a lack of understanding of Christ’s sacrifice revealed by people’s thoughtless consumption of his image” (Terziyska, 2023) He wanted to “point to the commercialization of Christian icons in contemporary consumer culture and to suggest their cultures separation from Christian values” (Terziyska, 2023). Serrano’s intention therefore was not to disrespect any religious icon but instead to draw attention to how commercialised religion has become in contemporary culture and that religious icons to a degree have lost their significance. His critics did not care what the intentions behind his work were or that he is Christian himself and “an artist using the symbols of my faith: the body and blood of Christ” (Terziyska, 2023). The critics could not see beyond the surface level fact that he had used urine and a crucifix in the same work. He “faced scandal from vocal audiences that found little interest in understanding the image beyond the superficial sum of its parts” (Terziyska, 2023). Serrano’s piece is arguably considered on a one dimensional level

by critics who focus purely on his use of liquids rather than the effect they provided, a glow that surrounded Jesus on the crucifix which provided an ethereal halo. The piece was thereby considered by Serrano, a Christian himself, to be paying respect to his belief in Christ and the Christian faith rather than how it was interpreted.

Conclusion

Historically religious imagery has been used to visually depict the stories and teachings of the Bible to those who couldn't read, illustrating the Bible's guide of how to live a good life in accordance to God. Churches were one of the few places for social gatherings so they cultivated a community of people that all believed in the same thing, and art was used as a method to encourage this faith and reinforce devotion. The lay person's only experience of art would be when they saw it in a church meaning that the church had full control over the art and iconography that people saw, presenting them with a biased view. Guy Debord's spectacle theory argues this further, indicating that the church's dominion over artwork meant they were able to dictate how people viewed, interpreted and felt about everything therefore having full control over them and their lives. The church furthermore provided a full sensorial experience making them the first installation art as can be seen within the Notre Dame cathedral. Considered a masterpiece, this cathedral holds one of the greatest collections of artwork and the impact of the fire in 2019 demonstrates the power this building holds; restored as closely as possible to its original features this building now holds a large collection of ancient and contemporary artwork.

Religious art has the ability to provoke many extreme emotions both good and bad and can rely heavily on the use of religious symbols and icons. The religious icon or symbol provides a visual reference point that is understood by everyone and is instantly recognisable reminding a person of a bigger concept or idea. This shows the power of religious iconography as a simple cross has the ability to remind a person of Jesus's

sacrifice for our sins, as can be seen in Joseph Beuys' work. Michael Craig-Martin examined the power of belief in the unseen with his conceptual piece *An Oak Tree*; a metaphor for faith and a comment on how a person is supposed to blindly believe in something that cannot be seen or proven and sometimes goes against logic. However, when an artist creates a piece of art that does not align with religious art as depicted in churches this is seen as sacrilegious and causes massive upset and offence often resulting in the destruction of the artwork itself. Andres Serrano's piece *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a crucifix in urine designed to show the reality of the crucifixion, had multiple acts of violence against it including being ripped up publicly in the Senate. Salvador Dalí's piece *Christ of the Rubbish*, created from rubbish washed up after a storm, also caused upset as he recreated the image of Christ from discarded objects considered to be low value and therefore disrespectful. Additionally, when art is not made completely in line with what is stated in the Bible people react very negatively as can be seen in Chris Ofili's mixed media painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, whereby Mary was depicted as a black woman. Within the Bible and religious art Mary is traditionally seen as a white woman which thereby caused massive offense. These pieces were created with a subjective interpretation of religious iconography but also with respectful intentions. Andres Serrano was a Christian himself and the additional element of urine was used to create a halo effect: Salvador Dalí was reclaiming items and making the best from a disaster: Chris Ofili was creating a depiction of Mary that he could recognise himself in, as a black artist. All pieces demonstrate thereby how Christ can be seen and experienced everywhere, an underlying teaching of the church. There is no adaptivity or interpretation tolerated, only art that is made exactly in line with tradition and what is stated in the Bible is accepted. The extreme reactions that people have when

something outside of this rigid structure is made displays the power of religious art and iconography as it shows how much people care whether the person is a believer or non-believer.

Bibliography:

Barouxis, R. (2019). *Origins and Practices of the Assumption of Mary*. [online] www.bpl.org. Available at: <https://www.bpl.org/blogs/post/origins-and-practices-of-the-assumption-of-mary/> [Accessed 24 Nov. 2025].

BBC (2024). *The Parable of the Good Samaritan - Morality - GCSE Religious Studies Revision - WJEC*. [online] BBC Bitesize. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zwxm97h/revision/6> [Accessed 7 Dec. 2025].

BBC. (2011). *BBC - Religions - Christianity: The Assumption of Mary*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/assumption.shtml> [Accessed 25 Nov. 2025].

Bible Study Tools (2019). *Parables of Jesus*. [online] Bible Study Tools. Available at: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/parables-of-jesus/> [Accessed 29 Nov. 2025].

Bible.com (n.d.). *Deuteronomy 7 | NIV Bible | YouVersion*. [online] www.bible.com. Available at: <https://www.bible.com/bible/111/DEU.7.NIV> [Accessed 24 Nov. 2025].

Bible.com (n.d.). *Luke 10 | NIV Bible | YouVersion*. [online] www.bible.com. Available at: <https://www.bible.com/bible/111/LUK.10.NIV> [Accessed 20 Nov. 2025].

Biblehub.com. (2025). *What defines iconoclasm?* [online] Available at: https://biblehub.com/q/what_defines_iconoclasm.htm [Accessed 13 Nov. 2025].

Biger, G. (2022) *Iconoclasm – A Geographical Viewpoint* [online] European Review, 30(S1). Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-review/article/iconoclasm-a-geographical-viewpoint/EA94D2AF18765352FAAE3453F897790E> [Accessed 21 Nov. 2025]

Bolinger, H. (2025). *Meaning of ‘Ashes to Ashes Dust to Dust’ - Biblical Origin and Why We Say It*. [online] biblestudytools.com. Available at: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-does-ashes-to-ashes-dust-to-dust-mean-and-is-it-in-the-bible.html> [Accessed 20 Nov. 2025].

Ch'ien, L. (2015). *Titian, Assumption of the Virgin – Smarthistory*. [online] Smarthistory.org. Available at: <https://smarthistory.org/titian-assumption-of-the-virgin/> [Accessed 24 Nov. 2025].

Chandler, D. (2022). *Semiotics : The basics*. 4th ed. New York, Ny: Routledge.

Craig-Martin, M. (2015). *On Being an Artist*. London: Art Books.

CSFA - California State Firefighters' Association. (2025). *The Danger of the One-Sided Story - CSFA - California State Firefighters' Association*. [online] Available at: https://www.csfa.net/the-danger-of-the-one-sided-story/?__cf_chl_tk=T5hNG_064VA8qkVnasKXQOltP8ZeMmHqdRzNimyVil8-

1765888167-1.0.1.1-Dd9myVFPdorO3s7j0KsFdlxuMmD9MsK_73UN2si5BEk [Accessed 16 Dec. 2025].

Debord, G. (2012). *The Society of the Spectacle*. Bread and Circuses Publishing.

Foundation Notre-Dame (2024). *The Builders - Notre-Dame de Paris*. [online] Notre-Dame de Paris. Available at: <https://www.notredamedeparis.fr/en/understand/history/the-builders/> [Accessed 1 Nov. 2025].

Friends of Notre-Dame de Paris (2022). *Notre Dame Cathedral (Paris) | History, Facts, Style*. [online] Friends of Notre-Dame De Paris. Available at: <https://www.friendsofnotredamedeparis.org/notre-dame-cathedral/> [Accessed 1 Nov. 2025].

Fundació Gala - Salvador Dalí. (2025). *Extension of the visit to the house-museum - Fundació Gala - Salvador Dalí*. [online] Available at: <https://www.salvador-dali.org/en/dali-foundation/news/extension-of-the-visit-to-the-house-museum/> [Accessed 19 Nov. 2025].

Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia. (2024). *The Assumption of the Virgin*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gallerieaccademia.it/en/assumption-virgin-2> [Accessed 25 Nov. 2025].

Lempertz.com. (2019). *Joseph Beuys - Sonnenkreuz*. [online] Available at: <https://www.lempertz.com/en/catalogues/lot/1144-1/611-joseph-beuys.html> [Accessed 23 Nov. 2025].

Maté-González, M.Á., Blázquez, C.S., Gutiérrez-Martín, N. and Canales, M.L. (2025). Evaluation of the Emotional Impacts of the Notre Dame Cathedral Fire and Restoration on a Population Sample. *Heritage*, [online] 8(6). doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage8060226>.

MoMa (2019). *The Holy Virgin Mary*. [online] The Museum of Modern Art. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/283373> [Accessed 18 Nov. 2025].

Norton, S. (n.d.). *Black Art with a Bang: Chris Ofili's Controversy*. [online] Norman Rea Gallery. Available at: <https://www.normanrea.com/blog/7gvb30da95rajyjavfxacklf0hx3y5> [Accessed 19 Nov. 2025].

Pitxot, A. and Aguer, M. (2008). *Salvador Dalí House-Museum*. Triangle Books.

Qrco.de. (2025). *25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE OPENING TO THE PUBLIC*. [online] Available at: <https://qrco.de/bdgoYg> [Accessed 2 Dec. 2025].

ROST ARCHITECTS. (2024). *The Story of Notre Dame Cathedral: A Chronicle of Construction and Restoration*. [online] Available at:

<https://www.rostarchitects.com/articles/2024/5/14/notre-dame-cathedral> [Accessed 2 Nov. 2025].

Singh, S. (2023) *Invention of the Visual Form: Reciprocal Alienation in Debord's Society of the Spectacle*, [online] Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy / Revue Canadienne de Philosophie Continentale, 27(2), pp. 173–193. Available at: <https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/c/onvpsy/viewer/pdf/b6srqhu2cb> [Accessed 16 Nov. 2025].

Smith, D. (2021). *CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM - The Forgotten Language of the Christian Faith*. [online] bishopspalace.org.uk. Available at: <https://bishopspalace.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Christian-Symbolism-Presentation-Handout.pdf> [Accessed 7 Dec. 2025].

Staples, T. (2019). *The Assumption of Mary in History*. [online] Catholic Answers. Available at: <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/the-assumption-of-mary-in-history> [Accessed 24 Nov. 2025].

Stoker, W. (2022). *Joseph Beuys: A spiritual German artist* | Wessel Stoker. [online] Artway.eu. Available at: <https://www.artway.eu/posts/joseph-beuys-a-spiritual-german-artist> [Accessed 19 Nov. 2025].

Terziyska, Y. (2023). Andres Serrano's Piss Christ NFT. *Art and Christianity*, 114, pp.16–17.

Titian.org. (2009). *The Assumption of the Virgin, 1516-18 by Titian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.titian.org/the-assumption-of-the-virgin.jsp> [Accessed 25 Nov. 2025].

Trotter, F.T. (n.d.). *What is Religious Art?* [online] Religion Online. Available at: <https://www.religion-online.org/article/what-is-religious-art/> [Accessed 20 Nov. 2025].

Ungvarsky, J. (2024). *Semiotics Research Starters*. [online] EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | www.ebsco.com. Available at: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/semiotics> [Accessed 9 Dec. 2025].

Walker Art Center (n.d.). *Joseph Beuys*. [online] walkerart.org. Available at: <https://walkerart.org/collections/artists/joseph-beuys> [Accessed 22 Nov. 2025].

Warner, M. (2015). *Falling Idols*. [online] Frieze.com. Available at: <https://www.frieze.com/article/falling-idols> [Accessed 9 Dec. 2024].

Webster, J. (2023). *The Power of Art in Strengthening Faith: How Religious Art Inspires*. [online] Altus Fine Art. Available at: https://altusfineart.com/blogs/news/the-power-of-art-in-strengthening-faith-how-religious-art-inspires?srsId=AfmBOorEHvZofaLOFYLY-dHNlOf4VIVwr1too2gg_1tf_lz3eMANqlB [Accessed 21 Nov. 2025].

Wilson, M. (2021). *The halo: A symbol that spread around the world*. [online] Bbc.co.uk. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/culture/article/20210623-the-halo-a-symbol-that-spread-around-the-world> [Accessed 7 Dec. 2025].