

From Icons to AI: Evolution of Imagery in Religious Communication

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ABSTRACT

Using icons in religious communication is a widespread practice that dates back many centuries. In various religions, icons have been instrumental in conveying religious messages, themes, and beliefs as religious leaders, artists, and craftsmen utilized icons to represent religious stories, rituals, and events visually. One of the main reasons images are used in religious communication is that they can effectively convey complex ideas and emotions that may be difficult to express through words alone. Thus, icons help not only to beautify sacred spaces but to make abstract concepts more tangible and accessible, making it easier for people to engage and understand otherwise lofty and abstract religious teachings. They also serve as powerful and evocative tools for inspiring devotion and promoting practices that can lead to increased participation in religious rituals and a more profound sense of connection to one's faith. This paper aims to present the evolution of icons and understand whether AI-generated icons made possible today by generative AI tools can be employed in religious communication. In presenting the said theme, the following topics are unfolded: first, the use of symbols and icons across religions; second, the evolution of using images in various faiths; and third, the advent of AI-generated icons and the possibility of employing them as mediums of religious communication and education.

Keywords: *AI, icons, images, sacred images, religious communication*

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1. Introduction

The meaning of the word “icon” has largely evolved in today’s digital age, where our first association with it might be with the small images or symbols displayed on our electronic devices. These icons on our smartphones, tablets, and computers, which have become almost universally recognizable to digital natives, represent various applications, functions or actions that allow users to navigate and interact with technology seamlessly and effortlessly. In this context, icons are essential for efficient communication and user-friendly design as they make use of visual language in place of long verbal labels, descriptions, or instructions. However, the concept and use of icons actually goes back long before its digital equivalent.

The word “icon” originates from the Greek term “*eikon*,” which refers to images, pictures, portraits, or representations.⁴ Throughout history, icons have been widely used, especially in conveying religious messages, themes, and beliefs. Religious leaders, artists, and craftsmen have utilized icons to represent religious stories, rituals, and events visually. These icons include paintings, sculptures, stained glass windows, and many other mediums. One of the main reasons images are used in religious communication is that they can effectively convey complex ideas and emotions that may be difficult to express through words alone. Icons can also help to make abstract concepts more tangible and accessible, making it easier for people to engage and understand religious teachings that can otherwise be rather lofty or too abstract. With their highly evocative effect on people, icons likewise serve as powerful tools for inspiring devotion and promoting religious practices that can lead to increased participation in religious rituals and a more profound sense of connection to one’s faith.

This paper aims to present the evolution of icons and understand whether AI-generated icons can be employed in religious communication. In developing the said theme, the following parts are unfolded: first, the use of symbols and icons across religions; second, the evolution of using images in various faiths; and third, the advent of

⁴ Fed Margaret E. Kenna, “Icons in Theory and Practice: An Orthodox Christian Example,” *History of Religions Online* 24, no. 4 (2023): 347.

AI-generated icons and the possibility of employing them as mediums of religious communication and education.

2. Symbols and Icons Across Different Religions

Religion is the archetypal realm of symbolism. Its symbols are imbued with tremendous emotion because they represent answers to the most fundamental questions such as the meaning of life and the purpose of our existence: Where did I come from? Why am I here? Will I cease to exist when I die? All religions try to provide their believers with answers to these and other existential questions. The solutions take the form not only of explicit doctrinal discourse but also of literary narrative and visual symbols. Symbols mediate reality or meaning in a powerful way; they serve as “the path to truth . . . the making present of something absent – something that would remain absent and inaccessible without the symbols.”⁵

Religious symbols have often been used to bridge the gap between humans and the divine. For instance, icons represent deities who are invisible but become visible through representation. In many spiritual traditions, the sacred is often perceived as transcendent, existing beyond the physical realm and human comprehension. This transcendence makes it challenging for humans to establish a direct connection with the divine on an immediate sensory level and also on the emotional level. Religious symbols, including icons, bridge this gap by providing a tangible form or representation by which believers can engage with their faith. As such, pieces of information about faith are transmitted from “masters to initiates over generations, using artistic ways of expression: drawing, music, sculpture, architecture or literature (myths).”⁶ It was from here that these symbols became part and parcel of religion. In primal religions, the traditions of tribal people, usually organized in small villages, allow the faith community itself to become the icon, as their “living bodies transform into apparitions through dance and voice.”⁷

⁵ Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol, and Myth in Religion and Theology* (New York: Routledge Press, 1999), 110.

⁶ Florentina Neamtu, “Religious Symbols and Communication in Public Administration,” *Economy Transdisciplinary Cognition* 24, no. 1 (2023): 57.

⁷ Hans Belting, “Iconic Presence: Images in Religious Traditions,” *Material Religion* 12, no. 2 (2016): 235.

Symbols have a threefold function: “to store information, transmit information and to serve as a means of recognition for the member of the group.”⁸ Thus, icons allow important information to be preserved and passed down through generations without the need for lengthy or complex discursive explanations, enabling communication across language barriers or cultural differences and creating a sense of belongingness and unity by providing a recognizable marker for the members of a faith community. For the example, the image of the Madonna, or a mother and child, taps into the common human experience of motherhood and childhood that are easily recognizable and relatable across boundaries of time and space.

Nevertheless, the attitude of religions towards icons and their use has not always been receptive or welcoming. In the Catholic Church, for instance, using images is considered not only theologically permissible but acceptable and desirable “since God himself has become a kind of image in Christ.”⁹ The same, however, is not true of all Christian denominations since some adhere to the prohibition in the Old Testament of the use of graven images. Thus, we find that there are religions that do not only disdain but explicitly ban the use of images. Another example is Islam where God who is “the Greatest and only Creator of all things, is beyond human imagination, and Muslims deem that they are not allowed to represent him.”¹⁰ This forbiddance of images is called ‘aniconism’ and usually reflects a negative experience with pictures,¹¹ while ‘iconoclasm’ refers to the campaign to destroy and eliminate icons as contrary to faith. Nevertheless, this ban and the corresponding aversion to icons has not been total or absolute in many cases. Islamic popular piety, for instance, remains replete with objects and images that

⁸ Belting, “Iconic Presence,” 235.

⁹ “Why Does the Church Allow Images When the Ten Commandments Forbids Them?,” *Catholic Answers*, July 9, 2023, <https://www.catholic.com/qa/why-does-the-church-allow-images-when-the-ten-commandments-forbids-them>.

¹⁰ Astaneh Zahra, “The Representation of God in Islam and Its Prohibition: Strategies Used by Iranian Children When Asked to Draw God: New Approaches to Scientific Religion,” in *When Children Draw Gods: A Multicultural and Interdisciplinary Approach to Children’s Representations of Supernatural Agents*, eds. Pierre-Yves Brandt et al. (Cham: Springer, 2023), 398.

¹¹ Zahra, “The Representation of God in Islam,” 398.

represent or commemorate a person or an event.¹² Moreover, even in periods and places where the possession and veneration of icons was proscribed and punished, believers persisted in their use of icons and even gave up their lives in the process, as we see for example in the anti-iconoclastic movement.

History demonstrates that in many cultures, art and religion have been closely intertwined. This deep intimacy between art and religion has prevailed beyond historical convolutions, transformations, and permutations in global, cultural, and religious values.¹³ As a stimulus for creativity and culture, religion is the spiritual impulse that conjoins humanity with divinity through spiritual experience, ceremony, and mythology.¹⁴ The religious practice of veneration of images can be related to the natural inclination of humans to express their thoughts and feelings in various forms of art. Thus, it can be argued that the creation and utilizations of images is natural to human beings.

In the same way, since humans have always been inclined to express their most profound thoughts, needs, and desires in art forms, it is not surprising that they channel their religious beliefs and sentiments through every form of artistic expression. In other words, throughout human history and across human cultures, we find a tendency to revere, venerate or even worship various forms of visual representations, whether they be artistic depictions, idols, religious icons, or other symbolic imagery. Humans are apparent beings and have physical bodies. They frequently rely on visual cues to understand and interpret the world. Images can serve as a way for them to remember individuals, events, and ideas that hold significance. Also, humans are emotional, and images can evoke strong emotional responses.

Art is rooted in human nature, and sacred art expresses religious belief.¹⁵ Art in general reflects inherent human creativity and desire for

¹² Oleg Grabar, "From the Icon to Aniconism: Islam and the Image," *Museum International* 55, no. 2 (2003): 46.

¹³ Cf. Jennifer Ocampo, "Ancient Deities," *Ancient Art*, April 24, 2015, <https://ancientart.as.ua.edu/ancient-deities/>.

¹⁴ Cf. Ocampo, "Ancient Deities."

¹⁵ Adrian Fortescue, "Veneration of Sacred Images," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, July 10, 2023, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07664a.htm>.

communication, while the particular use of art for religious purposes enables people to convey complex spiritual ideas and doctrinal concepts in ways that words alone might struggle to capture. Art also employs visual archetypes and idealizations on the journey to truth and beauty, proffering visions of the sacred and models to follow on the path to salvation.

The foundational principle for the interconnections between art and religion is the reciprocity between image-making and meaning-making as the creative correspondence of humanity with divinity.¹⁶ In other words, the essence of the relationship between art and religion lies in the reciprocal connection between creating visual representations (images) and imbuing them with profound significance (meaning). This dynamic process reflects humanity's endeavor to communicate with and understand the divine through creative expression. This means the intertwining of art and religion highlights how human creativity, combined with spiritual yearning, results in sacred art that speaks to the ineffable and encourages individuals to seek higher truths and virtues on their journey toward salvation.

3. The History of the Use of Images in Religions

Tracing the history of using images in various religions is a fascinating journey through time and culture. From the intricate frescoes of ancient temples to the exquisite icons of Christianity and the intricate mandalas of Buddhism, the visual representation of religious beliefs has played a pivotal role in shaping the faith, identity, and culture of diverse religious traditions. This part delves into the evolution of religious imagery, its significance, and the profound impact it has had on religious practices and human experience.

Ancient Near Eastern cultures have left the modern world a rich legacy: not only are there well-preserved monuments, artifacts, and human remains, but extensive religious and secular literature has also survived.¹⁷ Beginning in the 19th century CE, with the discovery

¹⁶ Fortescue, "Veneration of Sacred Images."

¹⁷ Rosalie David, "Ancient Egypt," in *A Handbook of Ancient Religions*, ed.

and excavation of ancient Mesopotamian sites and deciphering Mesopotamian languages such as Sumerian and Akkadian, scholars have identified texts, objects, and architecture as religious. They used these to reconstruct ancient Mesopotamian religious beliefs and practices without any continuous or living tradition from ancient times to the present.¹⁸

Ancient India's first civilization arose on the plains of the Greater Indus Valley of Pakistan and north-western India during the second half of the third millennium BCE (c. 2500–1900 BCE). This has come to be called the Indus Civilization and was the first period of urbanization in the Indian subcontinent. The great cities of the Indus Civilization were Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, both in Pakistan. The ancient Indus peoples lived in a society with marked social classes and craft and career specialists, some of whom knew the art of writing.¹⁹ In further elucidation of the religious significance of India in the world's history, it may be pointed out that there are on earth only two major birthplaces or creative centers of the world's great religions, namely, Palestine-Arabia and India-Persia. Similarly, two races have been religiously creative in a prolific manner, namely, the Semitic race, producing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and the Aryan race, making Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism.²⁰

Hinduism has always had a general animistic or pantheistic tendency to deify whatever is. This tendency may be observed in almost every period of its history. In the Rig-Veda, the earliest literary monument of Hinduism, divine honor is paid to heaven and earth, sun, wind, fire, dawn, rivers, mountains, trees, sacrificial implements, the cow, dead ancestors, etc.: “gods many and lords many,” any one of them being worshiped singly or all of them combined. The test for the selection of objects for worship was a pragmatic one. Whatever force

John R. Hinnells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57.

¹⁸ Benjamin R. Foster, “Mesopotamia,” in *A Handbook of Ancient Religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 162.

¹⁹ Gregory L. Possehl, “The Indus Civilization,” in *A Handbook of Ancient Religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 423.

²⁰ Hervey D. Griswold, “Some Characteristics of Hinduism as a Religion,” *The Biblical World* 40, no. 3 (1912): 168.

or things of nature were helpful to human or striking in appearance or effects was a candidate for apotheosis.²¹

Hindu images, such as sculptures and paintings, vary widely regarding the deities depicted, their poses, the objects they hold, and the overall artistic style. Hinduism is diverse and complex, with many gods, beliefs, practices, and cultural variations. Differences in appearance occur according to where a piece of artwork was made, and since changes occur with time, the build will be affected by when it was made. As a system, Hinduism is as vast and amorphous as the sea. It is based upon a radical theory of the immanence of God in all things. Its method of growth and development is through syncretism. Its whole tendency has been to touch with religious sanction, whatever is, consecrating some of the worst and the best things. Simultaneously, Hinduism's vast and chaotic fabric is shot through with profound ideas and illumined here and there with lofty aspirations and splendid gleams of insight.²²

Buddhism in India developed slowly in the first several centuries after the Buddha's death but achieved great prominence during the reign of the Maurya king, Ashoka (304–232 BCE), who propagated the new faith throughout his vast kingdom in northern and central India. Among the symbols appropriated by Ashoka²³ is the lion representing the Shakya clan, often visible at the top of several of the commemorative stone columns that he erected throughout his realm and the *dharma chakra* or wheel of the dharma.²⁴ In the succeeding Shunga Dynasty (185–75 BCE),

²¹ Possehl, "The Indus Civilization," 426.

²² Cf. Griswold, "Some Characteristics of Hinduism as a Religion," 163–72.

²³ Ashoka, also spelled Asoka (died 238 BCE, India), was the last central emperor of India's Mauryan dynasty. His vigorous patronage of Buddhism during his reign (c. 265–238 BCE; also given as c. 273–232 BCE) furthered the expansion of that religion throughout India. Following his successful but bloody conquest of the Kalinga country on the east coast, Ashoka renounced armed conquest and adopted a policy called "conquest by dharma" (i.e., by principles of proper life). To gain wide publicity for his teachings and work, Ashoka made them known using oral announcements and engravings on rocks and pillars at suitable sites. These inscriptions—the rock and pillar edicts mostly dated in various years of his reign—contain statements regarding his thoughts and actions and provide information on his life and acts. His utterances rang of frankness and sincerity.

²⁴ Stephen H. Little and T. Lawrence Larkin, "Buddhism." *Northeastern Asia and the Northern Rockies*. (2022), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53288/0383.1.00>.

Buddhism spread and gained adherents, especially in northern India. This period witnessed the creation of a number of enormous stupas, or reliquary mounds, housing relics of the Buddha's physical body.²⁵ The Shunga Dynasty also saw the widespread carving of *chaitya* (prominent temples) directly out of rock cliffs, dating from the first century BCE to the second century CE.²⁶ The Kushan Dynasty (1 BCE to 4 CE) was a period of widespread practice of Buddhism in both north central and northwest India. The Gupta Dynasty (320 CE to 550 CE) and its immediate successors, the branch of Buddhism known as *Vajrayana*, *Tantric* (also known as Esoteric) Buddhism came to fruition. *Vajrayana* Buddhist practice brought with it the use of several tools. These include the *mantra* (a sacred syllable or sound embodying the spiritual energy of a Buddha or other deity), the *mudra* (a sacred gesture indicating a particular state of being or symbolizing a specific Buddha or God), and the *mandala* (a sacred diagram and, at the same time, a map of cosmic space and a diagram of human consciousness).²⁷ *Vajrayana* Buddhism proliferated during this period, leaving a substantial artistic legacy of painting and sculpture.

In China, Buddhism encountered the indigenous Chinese belief in Daoism. By the fourth and fifth centuries, this philosophy had transformed into a full-fledged religion with an astonishing pantheon of gods and goddesses but, paradoxically, no supreme being.²⁸ In China and elsewhere in East Asia, the Buddhist stupa was transformed into the multistoried tower known as a pagoda. Pagodas can take many different shapes, but they all function as reliquaries, with the sacred relics buried within the pagoda's foundation.

The Wheel of Dharma is closely associated with the Buddha's first sermon, known as the "Turning of the Wheel of Dharma" or "*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*." The wheel's spokes symbolize the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha's prescription for leading a balanced and enlightened life. The Eightfold Path consists of principles like Right Understanding, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration

²⁵ Little and Larkin, "Buddhism," 125.

²⁶ Little and Larkin, "Buddhism," 125.

²⁷ Little and Larkin, "Buddhism," 125.

²⁸ Cf. Stephen Little and Shawn Eichman, *Taoism, and the Arts of China* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), 56.

For Judaism, the logic of the commandment is clear: “It is not the image itself that is forbidden, but its use.”²⁹ According to the rules of *Halakha* (generally known as the Jewish Law), it is possible to represent celestial creatures, heavenly bodies, and human figures, as long as they are imperfect because perfection belongs only to God. Therefore, the images alone are allowed, but there are some limitations in their representations, and their use, in particular, determines whether an image is permitted. If used correctly, images can also have positive influences.³⁰

Judaism, the first of the Abrahamic religions, influenced Islam and Christianity. In Islam, there are two approaches to figurative art: the first approach states that in the Quran, there is no explicit reference to figurative prohibition, while the second approach argues that there are in fact indirect references when considering Hadiths, Sunnah, and Tafsirs.³¹ In brief, there is always the prohibition to portray God and Mohammed, but the possibility of making figurative art sometimes depends on religious currents and the socio-cultural context of reference.³²

On the other hand, in Muslim art, it is explicitly forbidden to portray human figures in religious buildings. Consequently, calligraphy, which took the place of human portraits, achieved a very high level in Islamic devotional art. The focus of Islam lies in the divine message written in the book of the Quran.³³ Some of the beautiful patterns that have been created are geometric and straight-edged, while others are richly curving. A word used for intricately curving designs is “arabesque.”³⁴ These intricate designs found in mosques and manuscripts were intended to reflect the perfection and order of the divine.

²⁹ Hubbard, *Images of Devotion*, 119.

³⁰ Hubbard, *Images of Devotion*, 119.

³¹ Cf. Hubbard, *Images of Devotion*, 119. These are the precepts of Mohammed, the oral tradition of Mohammed’s teaching, and the Koranic exegeses.

³² Hubbard, *Images of Devotion*, 119.

³³ Hubbard, *Images of Devotion*, 119.

³⁴ Cf. Hubbard, *Images of Devotion*, 119. A mihrab is a niche cut into a mosque wall as the focus for prayer in the Islamic religion. The priest, or imam, stands before the mihrab to lead prayers. As a result of their importance, mihrabs have become the most artistic, decorated parts of mosques.

4. Icons and Images in Christianity

In more detail, we shall now take a closer look at the use of icons and images in Christianity to trace its evolution. Most scholars admit that the icon concept pre-dates Christianity and probably originated with an ancient Egyptian funeral portrait.³⁵ This is an example of the relatively common occurrence of the Christianity borrowing from a pre-existing culture. “To develop its language, the Church used form, symbols, and even myths of antiquity, like pagan forms of expression; but it did not use these forms without purifying them and adapting them to its own goals.”³⁶ As many sources show, the early Christian Church did not have sacred art depicting the deity yet. Even the idea of trying to utter the name of the invisible and almighty God was strange to early Christians. This attitude to cultic images was inherited from Judaism and was rooted in biblical tradition.

The first evidence of Christian art is found in the Roman Catacombs (underground burial places in and around Rome). During times of persecution, symbols such as fish and loaves were painted on the walls of these secret places³⁷ where early Christians gathered and Church leaders were buried.³⁸ The primary purpose of these pictures was to convey the gospel stories and to portray their inner meaning.³⁹ While the origins of Christian art may be traced, in a general way, to the pictures of the Catacombs, principles of icon painting are not yet seen here.

The first instance of a Christian icon is traced to the story of the image said to have been created by Christ Himself. The story is about an ancient King, Abgar of Osroene, who was dying of leprosy and sent a message begging Jesus to visit him. According to the story, Christ created an image of himself by pressing his face on a cloth. This image remained in Edessa until the tenth century when it was taken to Constantinople. After the destruction of the city in 1204 CE, the said image disappeared.⁴⁰ This

³⁵ Mahmoud Zibawi, *The Icon: Its Meaning and History* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 79.

³⁶ Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Volumes 1 & 2 (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), 86.

³⁷ Zibawi, *The Icon: Its Meaning and History*, 79.

³⁸ Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 38.

³⁹ Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 38.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Begbey, *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts*

image of the holy face is called as the one “made without human hands” or *Acheiropoietos* in Greek.⁴¹ While there is virtually no physical evidence to support this event, many continue to believe in it as the origin of the icon of Christ.

Another example of early Christian art can be traced back to 200 CE. They were pictures on the walls of the catacombs in Rome, in burial places. Andre Grabar shows that all Christian art of that epoch was mainly funeral in intent. It can easily be explained by the fact that the first Christian communities had only one way for legal gathering in the Roman Empire: by disguising themselves as funeral societies. Symbolic scenes from the Old and New Testament on walls and sarcophagi depicted by them did not, however, express mourning over dead brothers and sisters but declared faith in the victory over death (i.e., Abraham offers his son, Daniel sits in the lion’s den, and the resurrection of Lazarus and Christ). These pictures illustrated different aspects of God’s work of salvation, often accompanied by prayerful inscriptions such as “Save me as you saved that biblical hero.”⁴²

Early Christians also often used simple symbols; each could be interpreted as a hint on a particular point of doctrine – a sermon in visual form. Images of such type were necessary to express the main accents of Christian hope within the Church. The developed system of metaphors was evident only for initiates. Fish, Lamb, Dove, Anchor, and Ship were the most widespread images.⁴³ Surprisingly, the cross image was seldom used up to the 4th century because crucifixion remained a well-recognized sign of shame in society. Also, here, intentionally borrowed symbols from pagan Greek cultures, such as the peacock (symbol of immortality) or the phoenix (symbol of the resurrection) were used. Andre Grabar declares, “Christian imagery, at its birth, borrowed and kept the Greco-Latin iconographic language as commonly practiced at the beginning of our era everywhere around the Mediterranean.”⁴⁴

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 84.

⁴¹ Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 51.

⁴² André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origin in Bollingen* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 6-14.

⁴³ Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, xlv.

44 Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, xlv.

Thus, it can be concluded that in the age before the fourth century, the Christian attitude toward cultic images was sharply negative – due to the tendency to keep a distance from paganism. The art of this epoch is symbolic, depicting certain beliefs rather than utter heavenly realities. The situation began to change with the acknowledgment of Christianity as *religio licita* by Constantine the Great.

For Christians, the Incarnation makes possible the conditions in which humans are not ultimately destroyed by the consuming fire of God's presence, as opposed to the Old Testament predicate that no man can see the face of God and live (cf. Ex 33: 20). The Orthodox party at the Second Council of Nicaea claimed that refusing to allow the image of Christ to be depicted and venerated is tantamount to denying the Incarnation itself – that in the Incarnation, matter admits of divine penetration. Indeed, icons in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy admit of every human sense: they are gazed upon and thus seen; they are kissed and therefore tasted; they are censed and thus smelled; they are even heard on the Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, the priest holds the image in front of his face and the icon itself “proclaims” the *Synodikon* of Orthodoxy. These are ritual acts performed with care and reverence. The iconic portrayal of Christ and the saints in these sacred images, along with the veneration shown to them, are tightly governed by Orthodox tradition because the Orthodox – like Calvinists and the Israelites of old – understand the difficulty of looking upon the holy.⁴⁵

In the East, controversies arose between *iconoclasts* or those who opposed the use of icons and *iconodules* or those who insisted on their veneration. Notwithstanding these debates, however, the use of images in the Orthodox Church has remained vital to their spiritual practice and tradition. By the ninth century, the West and the East had drifted apart and the iconoclastic controversy remained an Eastern phenomenon. Thus, neither the sacramental theology of icons that provided the basis for their veneration nor the prohibitions against depicting the Father that sought to uphold the Mosaic commandment ever took root in the Latin-speaking world. In the West, images were mainly teaching devices; in

⁴⁵ Jeff Reimer, “Images of the Invisible God,” *Commonweal Magazine*, February, 2022. https://commonwealmagazine.org/sites/default/files/imce/31076/Commonweal_2.2022_Discussion%20%281%29.pdf.

the East, they were incorporated into worship. In the West, they reflected tradition; in the East, they were tradition – a mode of revelation.⁴⁶

From the twelfth century, the Gothic style began to spread and became the first Christian style with no ties to the art of the Eastern Church. In this period, the most representative element of Christian art was the introduction of the early stained-glass windows, which were created to lead the light into the church building, symbolic of God who illuminates the soul of believers.⁴⁷ The Middle Ages saw the continued rise of Christian art, with magnificent cathedrals adorned with stained glass windows, ornate sculptures, and intricate paintings. These artworks were meant to inspire awe and reverence and convey biblical narratives to an often illiterate congregation.

During the Renaissance, artists like Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael created masterpieces that merged religious themes with humanism and naturalism. Their works celebrated the divine while exploring human emotion and anatomy, resulting in some of the most iconic artworks in history. In more recent period, artists have continued to explore religious themes, but with greater freedom and diversity.

5. Using AI Icons in Religious Communication and Educational Instruction

Art has played a significant role in the practice and preservation of religious traditions throughout history. Religious icons have been powerful tools for communication, worship, and education, from sacred paintings to sculptures and symbols.⁴⁸ Over the years, as technologies emerged and proliferated, numerous individuals endeavored to establish a connection between the realms of arts, religion, technologies, and science. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, many

⁴⁶ Reimer, “Images of the Invisible God.”

⁴⁷ Sara Valentina Schieppati, Cinzia Di Dio, and Gabriella Gilli, “Religious and Sacred Art: Recent Psychological Perspectives,” *Ricerche Di Psicologia* 45 no.1, (January 1, 2000): 3.

⁴⁸ Cf. Cyril Mango, *The Art of Byzantine Empire*, 175, cited by C.A. Tsakiridou, in his book *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image* (England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 1.

influential roboticists and AI pioneers revealed the close connection between religion and science in contemporary life. These include roboticist Hans Moravec, AI inventor Ray Kurzweil, neural net builder Hugo de Garis, and UK roboticist Kevin Warwick. The two most important figures in “Apocalyptic AI” are Hans Moravec and Ray Kurzweil.⁴⁹ In doing so, these AI advocates led a scientific movement that did not stray far from the traditions of Western culture. With the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), a new era of iconography is dawning in our time. One is in the form of AI-generated icons. This refers to religious symbols, figures, or representations created using artificial intelligence techniques, such as generative adversarial networks (GANs) or deep learning algorithms.⁵⁰

In the contemporary world, “where most publics’ level of religious literacy has declined through secularization, the public’s ability to understand the message of such art has reduced.”⁵¹ One significant example of this situation is the artwork of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel about the Creation of Adam and the Last Judgement. In a 2018 survey of 218 visitors in the chapel, Emanuela Edwards claims that the artworks appeal to believers and non-believers because of the extraordinary artistic images that strike at the heart of human experience, regardless of religion.⁵² While the Sistine Chapel offers reading materials and guides, the public still sees it differently and approaches it with different levels of prior knowledge.⁵³

In the same article where the artworks in the Sistine Chapel were discussed, there was a resolution of making an AI creation meme about biblical events and religious information, reworking the cultural images

⁴⁹ Robert M. Geraci, “Apocalyptic AI: Religion and the Promise of Artificial Intelligence,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 1 (2008): 139.

⁵⁰ Cf. Seung Heon Sheen, “Can AI Paint an Icon?” *Transpositions*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.transpositions.co.uk/can-an-ai-paint-an-icon/?fbclid=IwAR3FNM7OuVZ05FvW4DN91-HMMgIxcY-Wvqy8zC8o8QmNNS57YxbXRg5c8Qg>

⁵¹ Emanuela Edwards, “Survey of Audience Reception in the Sistine Chapel: Decoding the Message of Sacred Art,” *Church, Communication, and Culture* 3, no. 3 (2018): 261.

⁵² Edwards, “Survey of Audience Reception in the Sistine Chapel,” 261.

⁵³ Beth Singler, *The AI Creation Meme: A Case Study of the New Visibility of Religion in Artificial Intelligence Discourse* (MDPI Religions, 2020), 17.

of the Creation of Adam, and posting it in the ‘secular spaces or social media. This leads to the arguments and ideas of the New Visibility of Religion and the relationship between religion and the media inasmuch as though they are now AI memes, they are still inspired by symbolism, themes, and aesthetics from a much older artwork.⁵⁴

Another significant role of AI is the work of the Apocalyptic AI group, where they used AI to interpret biblical events, especially depicting future events mentioned in the bible. An example of this is the text in Isaiah: “See, I will create a new heaven and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17). The Apocalyptic AI group came up with a resolution of having a virtual kingdom where people can see and experience what it’s like to be in the ‘New Jerusalem’ virtually.⁵⁵ Through the endeavors of the Apocalyptic AI pioneers, AI might have the potential to revolutionize the way major religions engage with their faithful, offering AI as an innovative medium of religious communication and educational instruction.

Recently, however, there has been controversy about ‘AI-generated Art’ where it is asked whether these generated icons are proper.⁵⁶ With all the AI applications that are emerging in this cyber age, which could turn an image into icons, likewise applications that could turn an ordinary photo into an AI-enhanced graphic image, the religious community could no longer get rid of these emerging technologies but instead accept them and integrate them as part of their lives.

Some examples of AI-generated religious icons are the image of Yama, the God of death in Buddhism; Vishnu, the preserver; Brahma, the creator; Hanuman, the God of wisdom, strength, and courage; and Ganesha, the God of wisdom in Hinduism; as well as the Ecce Homo and Madonna of Christianity. These digital representations created through the use of AI are regarded as significant symbols as they depict the holy images they represent. When people look upon these images, they are often filled with reverence and admiration.

⁵⁴ Singler, *The AI Creation Meme*, 16.

⁵⁵ Geraci, “Apocalyptic AI,” 144.

⁵⁶ Sheen, “Can AI Paint an Icon?”

On the other hand, the process of making AI-generated icons can be significantly different from that of traditional icons. First, their production only involves a minimal amount of time and effort, sometimes involving only a few minutes, as opposed to the lengthy and laborious process of producing a traditional icon. This concerns not only the amount of time or talent poured into the manufacture of the religious image but also the sense of devotion and dedication on the part of the producer of religious art who sometimes consider the process as a sacred and spiritual experience. Second, the medium for digital art, especially if they are reproduced or printed, is frequently cheaper and more common like tarpaulins or Sintra boards, as compared to traditional art which involves more precious and special materials like wood, marble or ivory. Third, digital icons tend to be produced independently with little guidance or regulation from religious authorities, as opposed to icons which are carefully supervised, especially when they are destined for use in sacred spaces and rituals. For instance, in the Catholic Church, the following guidelines are given:

The matter should relate to the truths of the faith and their hierarchy, beauty, and quality must also be applied to images and objects destined for private and personal devotion. To ensure that the iconography used in sacred places is not left to private initiatives, those responsible for churches and oratories should safeguard the dignity, beauty, and quality of those religious images exposed for public veneration. Likewise, they should avoid the de facto imposition on the community of pictures or statues inspired by the private devotion of individuals. The bishops, therefore, and the rectors of sanctuaries are to ensure that the sacred images produced for the use of the faithful, either in their homes or on their persons, or those borne aloft on their shoulders, are not reduced to banalities or risk giving rise to error.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, there are also important similarities between the way people experience and use traditional icons and AI-generated religious images. These digital pictures are in effect elevated by

⁵⁷ Vatican, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021), Nos. 18-22.

eneration to the status of icons. While traditional icons are commonly found in altars at homes, offices or in churches, digital icons for instance are sometimes utilized by religious people as smartphone screens or desktop wallpapers, evoking memories, emotions, and a sense of continued connection to the saints and gods they depict. Creating and keeping digital pictures of saints and gods is a heartfelt expression of devotion and a desire to preserve precious memories. Also, as traditional icons have been used to share and spread faith, digital icons are posted and shared on social media as a way of promoting religious beliefs and expressing religious affinity. They are sometimes even sent to family members and friends through digital messaging as a form of prayer or blessing.

As AI becomes an increasingly integral part of people's lives, it is crucial to harness its potential to educate and engage individuals in religious discourse. 'AI-generated icons' is likewise a significant movement to make it easier for people and religions to embrace the inseparable bond between humanity, technology, and religion. As Marius Dorobantu said, "AI could help us widen our understanding of divine revelation by providing a fresh perspective on some of the core tenets of religious faith. If robots reach human-level intelligence, they may also become interested in religion."⁵⁸

How could AI-generated icons be used to educate people about religions? Leonid Ouspensky said, "To understand the meaning of the veneration of icons in our time is to understand the icon itself, not merely as a church ornament or as a help in prayer. It is also to understand its message, its significance for modern man, to be aware of its spiritual witness transmitted from the depths of Orthodoxy, the meaning of the Christian revelation."⁵⁹

In the present times characterized by advancements in both people and technologies, capturing individuals' attention, particularly

⁵⁸ Marius Dorobantu, "Artificial Intelligence as a Testing Ground for Key Theological Questions," *Zygon Journal of Religion & Science* 57, no. 4 (2022): 835-1155.

⁵⁹ Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, Volume Two, translated by Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), 3.

on matters of religion, can be challenging. Therefore, it is good for various religions to try to utilize the language and learning platforms that resonate most effectively with their faithful, including AI-generated icons.

First, AI-generated icons can enhance visual representation. AI technology has advanced to a stage where it can generate highly realistic and visually appealing images. This capability can be harnessed to create icons that accurately represent religious figures, symbols, and scenes. By utilizing AI algorithms, religious institutions can generate iconographic depictions that adhere to the principles of their respective traditions. AI-generated icons have the advantage of consistency and standardization, ensuring the representations are faithful to religious teachings. This is similar to the AI Creation Meme, which also highlights the literal visibility of religion in an age increasingly proven to be less secular than has been claimed.⁶⁰

Second, AI-generated icons can promote accessibility and inclusivity. One of the challenges that religious institutions face is reaching out to diverse audiences and adapting to the needs of different communities. AI-generated icons can help overcome language and cultural barriers by providing a universal visual language. These icons can be adapted to other contexts, languages, and artistic sensibilities, making religious teachings more accessible and inclusive. With the ability to generate icons representing various ethnicities, genders, and age groups, AI can help create a sense of belonging and representation for all religious community members.

Third, AI-generated icons can help personalize spiritual experiences. With the assistance of AI algorithms, users can be empowered to create unique iconographic representations that resonate with their personal spiritual experiences. This customization can foster a deeper connection between individuals and their religious practices, allowing them to express their faith in a way that aligns with their identity. AI can also facilitate interactive experiences, allowing users to engage with icons through virtual or augmented reality technologies. However, it is essential to consider that before doing this, the production

⁶⁰ Singler, *The AI Creation Meme*, 17.

as well the use of AI-generated icons is properly guided and regulated by religious authorities so that distorted depictions which can later lead to distortion of beliefs can be avoided.

The fourth is for religious education. AI-generated icons hold immense potential as educational tools for religious instruction. With the accompaniment of experts, theologians, and religious authorities from the respective religions, these digital images can enhance the learning experience for children and adults in analyzing sacred texts, traditions, and commentaries and provide in-depth explanations and interpretations of sacred teachings. As in previous applications of art and imagery to teaching and preaching, this involves presenting exemplary events from sacred texts as interpretive models which are then translated into visual art which are not only didactic to the intellect but evocative to the affect.

The use of AI today is auspicious and could be understood by present generations and secular individuals since they have grown up in a digital era. They are accustomed to using various digital platforms and interfaces that heavily rely on icons. The continuous improvement through machine learning contributes to the effectiveness and relevance of digital icons in modern society. While the potential of AI-generated icons is promising, one should also consider the authority and authenticity of religious icons. One must give respect to religious leaders and scholars to navigate the fine line between embracing current technological advancements and preserving the integrity of religious traditions. Thus, it is essential to ensure that AI-generated icons are used responsibly and in alignment with the teachings and beliefs of each religious tradition.

On May 27, 2023, an AI-generated image series depicting Pope Francis in a white puffer jacket went viral on social media and tagged as “Dope Francis,” “Pope Smoke,” and “Pontiflex.” Several people used this image to sell posters, and a famous luxury fashion brand even fakely claimed the design of the Pope’s clothing.⁶¹ Nevertheless, while

⁶¹ Jacqueline Burkepile, “No, The Vatican DID NOT Make a Deal with Balenciaga for a ‘Spiritual’ Clothing Line,” ChurchPOP, July 10, 2023, <https://www.churchpop.com/no-the-vatican-did-not-make-a-deal-with-balenciaga-for-a-spiritual-clothing-line/>.

the humor in the pictures may be clear to its creator/s and to some of its audiences, there is always the possibility of people being led to think mistakenly and unfairly that the pictures are real, and that the Pope is vain and materialistic. As such, the improper or even dishonest use of generative AI to produce images like this, especially in depicting religious figures, can confuse viewers instead of enlightening them. As the same Pope said in a recent address on March 27, 2023, about the responsible use of AI, the development of AI can contribute positively to the future of humanity and “we cannot dismiss it.” At the same time, he said that this potential will be realized only if there is constant and consistent commitment on the part of developers to act ethically and responsibly.⁶²

6. Conclusion

Art and religion have influenced and enriched each other in countless ways. Art has provided a visual language for religious beliefs, rituals, and stories. At the same time, religion has served as a wellspring of inspiration for artists seeking to connect with the sacred and explore profound existential questions. In addition, images can also serve as powerful tools for inspiring devotion and promoting religious practices. Seeing pictures of revered religious figures, such as Jesus Christ or the Buddha, can evoke strong emotions and feelings of reverence in believers. This can lead to increased participation in religious practices and a deeper connection to one’s faith.

Studying symbols and icons across different religions reveals their profound significance and versatility. They serve as powerful tools for religious communication, fostering a connection between believers and their faith. Through a historical survey, we have traced the origins of these icons, witnessing their evolution and diverse applications. The advent of AI-generated icons opens up new possibilities for religious communication and education, with their creation and dissemination in

⁶² Pope Francis, Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the “Minerva Dialogues,” Vatican Website, March 27, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/march/documents/20230327-minerva-dialogues.html#:~:text=I%20encourage%20you%2C%20in%20your,every%20level%20of%20human%20life.>

various mediums. As we continue to explore the rich tapestry of religious symbols and icons, we embrace the potential for deeper interfaith understanding and innovative approaches to spiritual expression in our ever-evolving world.

The intricate relationship between art and religion has endured throughout human history, intertwining in profound and diverse ways. From the earliest cave paintings and sacred sculptures to the magnificent cathedrals and intricate religious rituals, art has been a powerful vehicle for expressing and exploring religious beliefs and spirituality. Ultimately, the interplay between art and religion is a testament to the deep human yearning for meaning, transcendence, and connection with the divine. It is a reminder of the power of human creative expression to convey the ineffable and the sacred while simultaneously inviting individuals and communities to engage in a deeper exploration of their faith and spirituality.

Like traditional religious icons, AI-generated icons can be used to educate people in truth, assist in their endeavor for spiritual growth and lead them to meaningful experiences of the divine. As such, the advent of AI-generated icons opens exciting possibilities for all religions. However, all faith communities must approach this technology carefully, ensuring that it aligns with their core tenets and values. As AI-generated icons continue to evolve, it is essential to see to it that they do not totally replace traditional icons and images, which are part of living tradition, but complement them. Thus, AI-generated icons can be harnessed and developed as powerful tools and emerging avenues for religious communication and education.

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