

**The Intersection of Christian Apologetics and the Arts:  
The Power of the Arts to Convey Truth and Change Lives**

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Intersection of Apologetics & the Arts Thesis

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## Thesis Statement

The topic of this research paper is conversions to Christianity in the United Kingdom between 350 AD-1999 AD to find out what part the arts played in both mass conversions and individual conversions, and to discover what Christian truths and apologetic philosophies conveyed through the arts may have contributed to these conversions. This information may encourage Christian artists to better understand their faith and to study apologetics, so Christian philosophies may show up in their work and inform it. Similarly, this information may encourage Christians, and professional apologists and evangelists, to incorporate the arts to a greater extent into their evangelistic endeavors and teaching.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, Christian apologetics has been understood, especially in Western culture, to mean a logical defense of Christianity in the form of debates, speeches, writing, and verbal evangelism, to name a few common methods. Philosophy professor and apologist, Douglas Groothuis, describes Christian apologetics as that which “defends the defining Christian truth claims against various challenges from unbelievers...This definition of apologetics invokes both rational legitimacy (objective truth) and emotional appeal (subjective attractiveness).”<sup>1</sup> The most famous use of the term apologetics from a Christian perspective comes from 1 Peter 3:15 when the Apostle Peter appeals to Christians to revere Christ as Lord in their hearts and to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”<sup>2</sup> In our modernity, this has come to be “linked” to

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1. Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 168-69, Kindle.

2. 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV).

additional fields of study including “theology, philosophy and evangelism,” although according to Groothuis, “it is not reducible to any one of these disciplines.”<sup>3</sup> Rather, the study of apologetics “depends on theology”<sup>4</sup> for the articulation of Biblical truth claims, leans on an understanding of philosophy to address the deep questions of the skeptic, and is incorporated into evangelism as a means to remove barriers to belief such that one may be willing to consider the claims of Christianity.

However, one of the questions that will be explored in this thesis is whether the general definition and understanding of Christian apologetics should be expanded to include and account for the place the arts may hold in effectively conveying Christian truth and giving reasons for belief. Although there has already been some modern shift toward acceptance of such an expanded definition of Christian apologetics and evangelism, the history of art within the church has included attitudes ranging from encouraging to hostile. However, since the influence of Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century many within the Christian community have been unsure of what role the arts should play, resulting in narrow uses within the fields of apologetics and evangelism.<sup>5</sup>

Author and Reverend, Dr David Millikan, provides a concise and detailed background on general attitudes toward the arts and their involvement in the Church in his article, *The Christian and the Concept of Beauty*. The cultural background into which Christianity began was initially

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3. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 189.

4. *Ibid.*

5. David Millikan, “The Christian and the Concept of Beauty,” *Theology News & Notes* Vol. 20, No. 03 (October 1974): 3-5, accessed July 11, 2019, <http://digitalcommons.fuller.edu/tnn/48>.

and primarily influenced by the Jewish culture. This Jewish culture “did little to encourage the cause of the arts in the early Church” as “Jews had interpreted the second command as a prohibition against all images made to be objects of religious worship.”<sup>6</sup> However, as chronicled in the letters and books of the New Testament, the culture of the Greeks and Romans quickly began to assimilate into the Christian culture as it spread out across the “gentile” world in the first century.<sup>7</sup> With this influx of Greek and Roman culture, this “shyness in representing things which they considered to be holy....diminished.”<sup>8</sup> As is apparent in the historical record of Greek and Roman culture, the arts enjoyed tremendous popularity. However, an additional “philosophical tradition” handed down through Platonism relegated the role of art and the artist, in particular, to a secondary stature.<sup>9</sup> Plato “believed art to be subsequent to nature” and “dependent on the natural world for its material,” resulting in a general attitude that art is “unreal or false insofar as it deviates from nature.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, these two influences on the early Christian Fathers resulted in a “low view of the arts,” from Origen, to Clement, and Tertullian.<sup>11</sup> However, as we will see in subsequent sections, the manner in which the Church viewed art transitioned in the following centuries as the need arose for visual representations of Christianity for the illiterate. Importantly, it was recognized that the arts provided a way to engage the minds and

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6. Millikan, “The Christian and the Concept of Beauty,” 3.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

hearts of non-Christians who were suspicious or hostile to Christianity. Although not the particular topic of this research, it should be noted that through the time period studied in this thesis, the Church's view of art would undergo an entire revolution in thought at the time of the Reformation, as images and art had often become objects of worship. As a strong reaction, many artistic expressions were removed or defaced, and the perception of art within the Church was set back for a time. Over time art within the Church regained a renewed level of acceptance before the next major influence arrived with Kant's *Critique of Judgment* which resulted in aesthetic beauty being "decisively removed from the person of God and brought down to earth" with the philosophies of subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> Much of Kant's influence has remained with modern culture and impacted the Church, contributing to the tentative and narrow uses of art within some Christian traditions. Numerous responses have been given over the last two centuries to address the influence of subjectivity on the Church's view of art, including philosophers like Karl Barth, Francis Schaeffer, and even Pope Paul VI, and offer support for the conclusion of this thesis.

As I will demonstrate in this thesis, the arts are still needed to reach the hearts and minds of non-Christians in our current, twenty-first century culture. For, as apologist Abdu Murray explains, our culture has lost a sense of reality and truth, preferring to subjugate the truth to "preferences."<sup>13</sup> This can pose a difficulty when trying to help skeptics see the truth of Christianity. While an intellectually developed apologetic for Christ will certainly help the faith of the individual Christian and the Church, it may fall on the unreceptive ears of the skeptic. However, when a skeptic experiences the ultimate love, truth, beauty, holiness, and miraculous

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12. Millikan, "The Christian and the Concept of Beauty," 4.

13. Abdu Murray, *Saving Truth: Finding Meaning and Clarity in a Post-Truth World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 11-14, Kindle.

power of God, many are convinced of the truth of Christianity. The arts can create opportunities and environments wherein people can have meaningful faith conversations, experience God, and come face-to-face with reality. These artistic environments can also help foster relationships that enable the apologist or evangelist to gain a more receptive ear from a skeptic. To press this point further, let us briefly review the Apostle Paul's conversion experience.

The Apostle Paul, formerly Saul, was present at the trial and stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. At Stephen's trial he gave his apologetic for belief in Christ, which included his defense of how Jesus was the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Paul was not convinced of Christ's Messiahship until he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. It was only after this that Paul began to learn what it was that Jesus taught and how Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew scriptures. Paul *experienced* Christ first and *then* he developed his intellectual and theological reason for belief. Our experiences of God, while subjective, are an important part of our testimony and in our apologetic for Christ.

I argue that the defense of Christianity and of God can take place not just in logical arguments given by Christians but through the arts. In our individual pursuit of truth, if we are honestly seeking answers to life's major questions, we are more likely to be ready to think deeply and thoughtfully about reality and how our worldview compares. We receive knowledge about reality not just by listening to debates and speeches, or by reading a book or article on philosophy, theology, or apologetics, but also through the conceptual and propositional experiences that can be gained through the arts. The act of contemplating visual arts, experiencing performance arts, or listening to music, can help lead us to God or open our hearts

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14. See Acts 7.



and minds to the truth.

An individual's discovery of God's truth can happen at any time and in any place and through whatever means God's Holy Spirit chooses. Just as the death of a loved one can compel us to think of our own mortality, the meaning of life, our origin, etc.—in the same way the arts can help us to think deeply about reality. The arts can touch our beliefs, thoughts, and emotions in powerful ways because they compel us to enter into a narrative where we may discover things about ourselves, about others, about reality, and about truth. Jesus knew that and the Old Testament prophet Nathan knew that, because the former often used parables to teach God's truth and the latter used a parable to reveal the evil in the heart of King David. As the famed author, professor, and philologist J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote, the writer of the story:

...makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside.<sup>15</sup>

This can be said of other art forms too, not just literature. Professor and philosopher, John W. Bender agrees with Tolkien when he writes that "The power of fiction lies in its ability to create 'worlds' or situations and give us a sense of what it is like to inhabit them."<sup>16</sup> The arts can help to break down our philosophical barriers to truth and present us with the whole of the human experience, both good and evil. As C.S. Lewis once said, when speaking about fairy tales and

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15. J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories" in *Tolkien On Fairy-stories: Expanded edition, with commentary and notes*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 52.

16. John Bender, "Art, Science, and Knowledge: Knowing the World Through Art" in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. John Bender and Gene Blocker (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 562.

their ability to go under our philosophical radar:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.<sup>17</sup>

As we will later discover, C.S. Lewis' receptivity to God began when he read a fairy story and encountered joy and holiness, which stole past his watchful dragons. Therefore, the arts may not provide a superior "road to faith, but it is, in fact, a road, and there is a population of people for whom the best approach" to faith in Christ may be "along that route,"<sup>18</sup> which is the topic of this thesis.

## I. METHODS AND MATERIALS

At this point I should define my research parameters. First, I was interested to research the role of the arts in Christian conversions in the United Kingdom from the first signs of Christianity, in the middle of the fourth century, and through to the twentieth century. Due to the extensive scope of this proposal, it was necessary that I limit the geographical region and timeline for my research. Second, the arts included in my research are those within the following three categories: the visual arts (architecture, drawing, printmaking, painting, ceramics, crafts, carpentry, video, filmmaking, design, photography, and sculpture), the literary arts (drama,

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17. C.S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 70-71, Kindle.

18. Rebecca Hans, "That Hideous Strength and Till We Have Faces: C.S. Lewis, Evangelism, and the Role of Story," *The Journal of Inklings Studies* Vol 7, Issue 2 (October 2017): 8, accessed July 23, 2019. Italics in original.

poetry and prose), and the performing arts (theatre, dance, and music). While all of these art forms were included in my research, not all of them presented information useful to this thesis.

Third, within the conversion case studies, I attempted to identify what specific Christian apologetic(s) might be present in the art form that made an impact on the converted or what apologetic was drawn by the convert. Of course, this third research focus is highly dependent on the existence of a detailed record of the conversion event(s), which limited this portion of my research to more recent history. Also, because every worldview attempts to address questions surrounding the origin and purpose of life, how we should morally live, and what happens to us after we die, this research focused on how the arts may give an apologetic under one or more of these four main categories.

The body of this thesis is broken down into four sections, starting with (1) three considerations for the reader: regarding the nature of conversions, a word on autobiographies and first-hand conversion accounts, and the Imago Dei and God's use of the arts; (2) the art forms and conversion experiences within five time periods in the United Kingdom; (3) a discussion on the arts' ability to convey knowledge, and (4) the conclusion.

## **II. CONSIDERATIONS**

### **The Nature of Conversion**

It is important to discuss the nature by which people convert to Christianity and how something can be reasonably deemed a conversion. First, the Apostle Paul reminds us that in our evangelistic efforts we may help to plant seeds and water them but “no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup> God is the one who “makes

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19. 1 Corinthians 3:5-11 (NIV).

things grow.”<sup>20</sup> Second, conversions can be immediate, as was the case with the Apostle Paul, but we generally don’t see dramatic conversions. Instead, conversions generally appear to take a long time. Professor Molly Murray explains conversion this way:

Conversion can be a deliberate, voluntary action, and the passive receipt of the grace of God. It can be incremental and painfully protracted, and it can be instantaneous and cataclysmic. It can be a matter of refusal and rejection, and a matter of intensifying commitments that already exist. It can bolster individual and communal identities, and it can destroy and refashion them.<sup>21</sup>

As Murray points out, conversions can be a switch from one Christian theological and societal identity to another. However, for the purposes of this thesis I was not interested in conversions from one form of Christian doctrine to another, as was witnessed during the Protestant Reformation and beyond, but in the individual’s acceptance of Christ as their Savior. Third, as we will explore in the following sections, before the fifteenth century first-hand and eyewitness accounts are scant, leaving us with the inability to verify the occurrence of specific and authentic conversions. However, history has provided us with evidences demonstrating the spread of Christianity, as well as the intentional efforts of some to further spread its messages, resulting in the reasonable conclusion that many authentic conversions to Christianity were taking place.

### **Autobiographies and First-Hand Conversion Accounts**

As previously stated, one of the goals of my research was to find autobiographies and first-person accounts written by Christians, to determine if the arts assisted in any way in their conversions. Typically, when we think of an autobiography, we think of a book written by a celebrity about their life—which are aplenty in our modernity. Autobiographies, as we know

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20. Ibid.

21. Molly Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to Dryden* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.

them in the twenty-first century, are prose accounts written by an individual about their life, and usually in book form. However, this form of writing was rare in the United Kingdom until they began to appear in the last two hundred years. Prior to the nineteenth century, most “early life-writings” consisted of “diaries, spiritual testimonies, [and] financial accounts”<sup>22</sup> which are often kept in private collections. While “writers in England between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries made vibrant records of their lives, in letters and visions like Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations*, or, spectacularly, in the *Book of Margery Kempe*...” these were unhelpful to my thesis. Further, the spiritual autobiographies produced by Puritans in the “late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” generally followed a formula or “matrix” of writing because the “political context for conversion shifted” during that time. “The Puritans fostered spiritual autobiography in part by their stress upon religious experience” and “the Elizabethan Puritans built upon the doctrinal insights of the magisterial Reformers to develop a more applied theology of conversion.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the spiritual autobiographies produced often followed a structure set in place by leaders in the Protestant church. Thus, most of the first-hand accounts and autobiographies which are present in my thesis begin in the eighteenth century. Therefore, before we arrive at the eighteenth century, this thesis will attempt to draw connections between the arts created in a given time period, the spread of Christianity, how these art forms may have played a part in conversions, and how they may have given an apologetic for belief in Christ.

### **The Imago Dei and God’s Use of the Arts**

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22. Adam Smyth, ed., *A History of English Autobiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2.

23. D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 35.

Before we delve into the various art forms and conversion stories of the United Kingdom, it is worth exploring what the Bible says about the arts. First, God was and is the first and best artist. In the first chapter of Genesis we read about all that God created. Part of His creation was mankind, which He made in His image. When God created humankind in His image, He gave us some of his attributes like imagination, creativity, an appreciation for aesthetics, and the ability to create. However, we do not possess the ability to create something out of nothing, as God can, but we can “create by making something new out of something already created.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, at the root of all humankind, even for those who do not yet know God, is God’s image and therefore we all have the capacity to create and imagine.

Second, the veneration of Christian icons and martyrs has been rightly criticized by the Protestant church. The book of Leviticus clearly states that we are not to make any idols or images to worship, for only God is to be worshipped.<sup>25</sup> However, as theologian and philosopher, Francis Schaeffer argues “the commandment is not against art but against worshipping anything other than God and specifically against worshipping art. To worship art is wrong, but to make art is not.”<sup>26</sup> While we can appreciate the arts, the artists, and the messages within, we are not to worship them.

Third, in the Old Testament, God gave the command for art to be created. Schaeffer states that “on Mount Sinai God *simultaneously* gave the Ten Commandments and commanded

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24. James W. Sire, *Apologetics Beyond Reason: Why Seeing Really is Believing* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 67, Kindle.

25. Leviticus 26:1 (NIV).

26. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible: Two Essays* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 19, Kindle.

Moses to fashion a tabernacle in a way that would involve almost every form of representational art that men have ever known.”<sup>27</sup> Further, as Schaeffer points out, God gave the command to create art that was not just representational of religious subjects but also of “nature, flowers, blossoms” and “things of natural beauty.”<sup>28</sup> In Exodus, God also gives directions to sew “pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet” on the priests’ robes. Schaeffer astutely notices that:

In nature, pomegranates are red, but these pomegranates were to be blue, purple and scarlet. Purple and scarlet could be natural changes in the growth of a pomegranate. But blue isn’t. The implication is that there is freedom to make something which gets its impetus from nature but can be different from it and it too can be brought into the presence of God. In other words, art does not need to be “photographic” in the poor sense of photographic!<sup>29</sup>

Further, as was previously stated, Jesus used parables—a form of narrative—to teach people something about God’s nature and our own. Jesus used stories to captivate the minds and hearts of the listeners and to expose them to God’s truth. Groothuis argues that God designed us with the ability to imagine because it is an important way for us to receive truth:

[Jesus] believed that objective truth is knowable (realism), that factual evidence is crucial in supporting truth claims, that noncontradiction is a necessary test for truth, that the truth Jesus reveals has experiential effects, that the imagination is a key organ for receiving truth (his use of parables and figures of speech) and that one’s ability to know truth is closely tied to one’s moral rectitude.<sup>30</sup>

The Apostle Paul demonstrated that he understood this when he gave his famous sermon on Mars Hill and used a pagan altar (art) “to an unknown God” to argue for the truth of

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27. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 20. Italics in original.

28. *Ibid.*, 23.

29. *Ibid.*, 23-24.

30. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 793.

Christianity.<sup>31</sup> Also, a large portion of the Bible falls under the genre of poetry, which is an art form.

Fourth, it is important to remember that “Christianity is not just involved with ‘salvation’ but with the total man in the total world.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the arts should reflect this and not just things that we would deem as ‘religious.’ As Schaeffer explains, “God’s creation—the mountains, the trees, the birds and the birds’ songs” are not religious and that the “Christian message begins with the existence of God forever and then with creation. It does not begin with salvation.”<sup>33</sup> The implication here is that artists should portray the whole of the human experience and should not be concerned that their work is solely “a vehicle for some sort of self-conscious evangelism,”<sup>34</sup> because these non-religious things can draw us to truth and ultimately, to God. Likewise, even works of art which are created by non-Christians and reflect the artist’s worldview may reveal that their view contradicts reality. Thus, this kind of art can still be used by God to reveal truth. Christians should be cautious when trying to determine what art is considered secular or sacred, for God is not bound by these distinctions. Having established these considerations, I will now turn to the results of my research.

### **III. RESULTS**

#### **350 AD through 1066 AD**

Due to a lack of surviving written record, not much is known about the first Christian

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31. See Acts 17:22-31.

32. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 86.

33. *Ibid.*, 87-89.

34. *Ibid.*, 89-94.



converts in the United Kingdom from the fourth through the sixth centuries, nor what specific apologetics for Christ *individually* drew them to convert. Fewer than two thousand Anglo-Saxon charters dating prior to 1066 are still in existence, more than half of which are grants by kings.<sup>35</sup>

One of the only historical texts which survives from this period, which gives us a glimpse into the culture and the spread of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England, is that written by the Venerable Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in 731 AD. From this, it is strongly implied that there were “some Christians in Britain by the second century” because:

By 314 there were bishops in Britain, for three of them attended a council at Arles that year. It is clear that some of the owners of great fourth-century villas were Christian. This is most strikingly demonstrated by the mosaic with the head of Christ and the Chi-Rho monogram found in an important villa at Hinton St Mary in Dorset. Although paganism was not dead in the late fourth-century Britain, there is reason to suppose that among the many great changes then taking place not the least was the widespread adoption of Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

Further, according to Bede, King Aethelbert in 597 AD was uncertain of the gospel that was preached to him and although he thought it “fair indeed”, was hesitant to “abandon the age-old beliefs” that he “held together with the whole English nation.”<sup>37</sup> This gives us a clue that even in the mid-sixth century, the dominant religious beliefs of the English people were still pagan and not Christian. They were also a superstitious people and predominantly illiterate. Therefore, for those preaching the gospel to the English in this time period, it was necessary to deploy methods

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35. M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 3rd Ed. (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 31.

36. James Campbell eds, *The Anglo-Saxons* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982), 12-13.

37. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. D.H. Farmer (UK: Penguin Books, 1990), 75, Kindle.

of communication that crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries, as Biblical texts would have only been available in Latin, and few could have read such texts even if they were written in their native tongue. This concept was certainly understood by Pope St Gregory I, also known as Gregory the Great, “who defended the importance of images as Christian pedagogy,” and famously sent Augustine of Canterbury forth in *Letter of Bishop Serenus* “with an icon of Christ, a processional cross, and a Bible to convert the Anglo-Saxons.”<sup>38</sup> What Pope St Gregory I recognized was that even “those who were not textually literate would be visually literate.”<sup>39</sup> Bede relays that Augustine of Canterbury and the monks who were with him were “endowed with power from God” and approached King Aethelbert while “carrying a silver cross as their standard and the likeness of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board.”<sup>40</sup>

From the beginning vital Christian themes were presented in visual images to an unlettered culture. This combination of visual art with spoken word is another aspect of preaching by word and example; it is there in the great Anglo-Irish books such as Kells and Lindisfarne, and also in the presence of some more painted panels which were later brought from Rome and Gaul to England, confirming this way of conveying truth...Such paintings were not there for artistic effect; they were indeed examples of beauty but also an external replica of the truths being taught by words.<sup>41</sup>

Bede describes that these painted panels of important Christian messages, stories, and people were brought by Benedict Bishop to “adorn the church of St Peter” so that it could be seen “whichever way they looked” and by everyone who entered, even the illiterate, so they could

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38. Diane, Apostolos-Cappadona, “Seeing Religious Conversion through the Arts” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, edited by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 334.

39. Ibid.

40. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 74.

41. Benedicta Ward SLG, *High King of Heaven: Aspects of Early English Spirituality* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1999), 7-8.

“put themselves more firmly in mind of the Lord’s Incarnation and, as they saw the decisive moment of the Last Judgement before their very eyes be brought to examine their conscience with all due severity.”<sup>42</sup> From these examples we can see that the arts were consistently and intentionally being employed to make an impression upon unbelievers and to teach them the truth of Christianity.

Thus the decision to use figural images in the decoration of the carved stone sculptures of the early Christian Church in Anglo-Saxon England seems to have been a relatively rare, and quite deliberate phenomenon. More specifically, the images selected to illustrate the Ministry of Christ on these monuments were, in all likelihood, chosen because of their iconographic potential to illustrate the two rituals of initiation and participation in the mystery of Christ as mediated by his Church.<sup>43</sup>

Understanding that Jesus is incarnate God and was born of a virgin; that we are sinners who have disobeyed God; and that God will come to judge us for our sins—are essential doctrines within Christianity. The images deployed for Christian conversion during this time period would help make these truths evident despite cultural and linguistic barriers, and would have been especially poignant for an already artistic culture that both understood and utilized symbolism.

While it is notable that Christian symbols are sometimes found to be amongst pagan symbols, it cannot be denied that Christianity was on the rise during the fourth century in England. Symbols were important to a predominately oral culture and thus Christian art and symbols may have created opportunities to discuss the meaning behind the images and their significance to the owner. Because symbols were used as a way to declare what was important to

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42. Bede, *Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, trans. D.H. Farmer, in *The Age of Bede* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2004), 192, Kindle.

43. M.O.H. Carver, *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: York Medieval Press, 2003), 365.

the wearer or owner, the rise of art with Christian symbols would have meant that conversions to Christianity were taking place. One of the earliest examples of this is the fourth-century mosaic from a villa at Hinton St Mary in Dorset. Malcolm Lambert explains:

Some fourth-century villa owners...demonstrated their Christian sympathies in the choice of themes for their mosaic pavements and, in the case of one house-church, murals. A pavement on the site of a villa at Hinton St Mary in Dorset is the most remarkable of all. Short cross-walls divide a square, the largest of the sub-rooms, from a rectangle, with an area of mosaic between. The rectangle is dominated by a representation of Bellerophon on this horse slaying the Chimera, the square by a roundel with a beardless man in tunica and pallium, flanked by pomegranates, with a chi-rho behind his head and a hair style reminiscent of that on the coinage of the emperor Constans (337-50). For some Christian authorities, the Decalogue was still held to be a prohibition of human representation, yet, by general agreement, here we have a representation of Christ and, moreover, Christ in a unique position, on a floor. It is one of the earliest such representations with no hint of allegory, the key figure in the largest of the mosaics: there are no imperial insignia, which makes identification with Constantine unlikely. Pomegranates were symbols of immortality, the chi-rho a major Christian symbol. It may be Christ as Pantocrator, with chi-rhos and pomegranates together radiating out from his head like rays of the sun, recalling the cult of Sol Invictus.<sup>44</sup>

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44. Malcolm Lambert, *Christians and Pagans: The Conversion of Britain from Alban to Bede* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 15-16.

On the walls surrounding this floor are more mosaic scenes which depict pagan symbols and mythical figures. There is scholarly debate as to why the mosaic of Christ is on the floor and why there are pagan images in the same room, but the consensus among scholars remains that it is the head of Christ in the center of the floor mosaic and there is little doubt of the “Christian affiliation” of the owner.<sup>45</sup> We can only speculate how this mosaic would have impacted those who saw it, but it can provide us with a reasonably strong implication that the owner intended to convey some meaning through this symbol. The craftsmanship is exquisite and it would have been expensive in its day, thus the subject matter was important enough to the owner to have installed.



Figure 1. A portion of the fourth century mosaic from a villa at Hinton St Mary, Dorset. The mosaic is believed to be the head of Christ with the Chi-Rho symbol behind his head. Courtesy of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). Accessed on May 16, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/timelines/zxjwmb>

Poetry and songs during this time period were art forms that held great influence.

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45. Ibid, 17-19.

Because the rhyme and meter of poetry and in songs assists the presenter and the listener in memorization, it was an important form of storytelling and transmitting Christian messages and apologetics to oral cultures. One of the earliest poems that exists from the seventh century is that composed by the illiterate shepherd turned monk, Caedmon. Bede tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History* that Caedmon “had followed a secular occupation until well advanced in years without ever learning anything about poetry.”<sup>46</sup> According to Bede, Caedmon was so unskilled with poetry that he would “get up from the table and go home” when those at feasts would begin to “sing and entertain the company” and send the “harp” his way.<sup>47</sup> This happened again one evening and Caedmon laid down to sleep in a stable when the following event took place:

Suddenly in a dream he saw a man standing beside him who called him by name. ‘Caedmon,’ he said, ‘sing me a song.’ ‘I don’t know how to sing,’ he replied. ‘It is because I cannot sing that I left the feast and came here.’ The man who addressed him then said: ‘But you shall sing to me.’ ‘What should I sing about?’ he replied. ‘Sing about the Creation of all things,’ the other answered. And Caedmon immediately began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator that he had never heard before... When Caedmon awoke, he remembered everything that he had sung in his dream, and soon added more verses in the same style to a song truly worthy of God. Early in the morning he went to his superior the reeve, and told him about this gift that he had received. The reeve took him before the abbess, who ordered him to give an account of his dream and repeat the verses in the presence of many learned men, so that a decision might be reached by common consent as to their quality and origin. All of them agreed that Caedmon’s gift had been given him by our Lord.<sup>48</sup>

Bede states that Caedmon was so skillful in “composing religious and devotional songs that, when any passage of Scripture was explained to him by interpreters, he could quickly turn it into

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46. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 248.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, 248-49.

delightful and moving poetry in his own English tongue.”<sup>49</sup> Most importantly, those who heard Caedmon’s poems were “stirred” in their “hearts” to “despise the world and aspire to heavenly things.”<sup>50</sup> From this, we can draw a clear conclusion that God was using artists to create art which drew people to Christ and gave them an apologetic for belief.



Figure 2I. Eighth century Ruthwell Cross depicting the Dream of the Rood poem. Courtesy of the British Library, accessed on August 17, 2019. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/ruthwell-cross>

Two other pieces of art that contained Christian messages and would have been heard and

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49. Ibid., 248.

50. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 248.

seen by non-Christians are the seventh century *Dream of the Rood* poem and the eighteen-foot stone cross which depicts part of this poem, known as the Ruthwell Cross. The poem is considered to be the “finest, most imaginatively conceived and most original of the Old English religious poems”<sup>51</sup> and depicts the beauty of the crucifixion and sacrifice of Christ. This may have served as a powerful apologetic to those who heard the poem or saw it depicted on the Ruthwell Cross as proof of God’s love for us.

While this was a period of time which saw an explosion of beautiful art forms that held deep Christian truths, not all would have been available to those outside the doors of the church or monastery to be used in evangelizing including illuminated manuscripts and embroidered tapestries, to name a few. We now reach another historical demarcation with the Norman Conquest which brought changes in language and culture and therefore infused additional art forms as a means of evangelism.

### **1067 through 1699 AD**

And God said “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.<sup>52</sup> In no other period of time in the history of Christianity in the United Kingdom were these words of God taken more seriously and literally than at the height of Gothic architecture of churches and cathedrals. As architectural technology improved, so did the architect’s ability to incorporate larger windows and natural light in the construction of these churches and cathedrals. As is stunningly evident throughout the Christian world in this time period, the result of these changes was the incorporation of majestic and

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51. Richard Hamer, ed, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2016), 163, Kindle.

52. Genesis 1 (NIV).



intricate windows of stained and painted glass. While this art form reached its height from the twelfth century to the latter half of the fifteenth century, the history of stained and painted glass prior to this time is no less significant and impressive. Archeological evidence indicates that decorative glass windows were in use in and manufactured in Sussex and Wales prior to the fall of the Roman Empire.<sup>53</sup> This production appears to have been interrupted with the fall of the empire but was likely “reintroduced through contact with the churches of Gaul” in the seventh century.<sup>54</sup> Descriptions of seventh century stained and painted glass at the church in Monkwearmouth show up in Bede’s *History of the Abbots of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow* and in Eddius Stephanus’ *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid* he describes the church at York as being “glazed against wind, rain, and the passage of bird, but allowing light to shine within.”<sup>55</sup> The impact of the beauty in this medium of art and its clear aesthetic and theological intent “as a reflection of the medieval concept of the role of light in the ecclesiastical interior” cannot be overstated.<sup>56</sup> Stained and painted glass windows not only allowed the previously (and architecturally necessary) dark interiors of churches to be flooded with light and color, but “were carriers of signs and images, capable of proclaiming the central truths of the Christian faith in a very direct and public way.”<sup>57</sup> The remainder of this thesis could easily be taken up with descriptions of the majesty and meaning of these architectural marvels (both generally and in very specific

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53. Sarah Brown and David O’Connor, *Medieval Craftsmen: Glass-Painters* (London: British Museum Press, 1991), 7.

54. *Ibid.*, 8.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, 9-10.

57. Brown and O’Connor, *Medieval Craftsmen*, 11.

instances), but the following description of the introduction of stained and painted glass to Churches during the Anglo-Saxon period captures its meaning well:

The churches were themselves images of the glory of the kingdom of heaven and the barbaric love of gold, of light and colour, was reflected in the new stone buildings which arose at Canterbury, York, Ripon, Hexham, Wearmouth and Jarrow and, eventually Lindisfarne. The wonder of the fact of God in Christ redeeming the world to himself was conveyed in words by preaching but even more in the beauty of holiness in the ceremonies and in the form and decoration of the churches themselves.<sup>58</sup>

This is a magnificent description of the beauty of churches in the Anglo-Saxon period, which were overshadowed many times over in the following centuries of the Gothic period. Most importantly, however, stained and painted glass represents another significant vehicle of communicating Christian messages to a culture that was well-accustomed to “seeking meaning in shadows, signs, and symbols.”<sup>59</sup> One such example is the elaborate and exquisite east window found in York Minster<sup>60</sup> which depicts figures from both the Old Testament and Revelation. The artists who created the window “exploited symbolism in a number of ways, most obviously in the typological linking of Old and New Testament themes.”<sup>61</sup> The window depicts themes such as “good and evil” thus stained glass was an ideal art form to visually stress this message with the contrast of “light and darkness.”<sup>62</sup> Further, the arrangement of the panels was deliberate so that “certain key scenes containing God were placed centrally in the window” and because it is

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58. Benedicta Ward SLG, *High King of Heaven: Aspects of Early English Spirituality* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1999), 30-31.

59. Brown and O’Connor, *Medieval Craftsmen*, 13.

60. The cathedral took around four hundred years to complete and construction started sometime around the year 1080.

61. Brown and O’Connor, *Medieval Craftsmen*, 13.

62. Brown and O’Connor, *Medieval Craftsmen*, 13.

so large, care was given that the panels closest to the floor were “modified” so that they would be “more legible.”<sup>63</sup> Much thought was given to “psychology and drama”<sup>64</sup> in its design in order to draw viewers to it and to effectively convey meaning. Further, although the art form of stained glass does not receive as much appreciation today as it once did, it should be stressed that it played a “major role” in the eleventh through fifteenth centuries. Thus, the east window of York Minster (which is a Biblical representation of Creation, the Last Judgment, and of Heaven) and the incredible cathedral in which it is housed, would have created an environment for introspection, questions, and opportunities to explain the Christian worldview.

The apologetic and evangelical intent within stained glass windows was clear, and the impact has not lessened to this day in conveying a sense of awe and majesty, eliciting transcendent thoughts in the viewer and as a reminder of God’s presence on Earth. For both the passerby and the church-goer, the aspect of light and beauty in stained glass windows contrasted sharply with the evil and darkness in the world and would have served as a strong apologetic for belief in God and Christ because of its effect of holiness, light, joy, and beauty upon a culture that needed it. And I would emphasize that, for those willing to take the time to appreciate it, this is still true today.

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63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

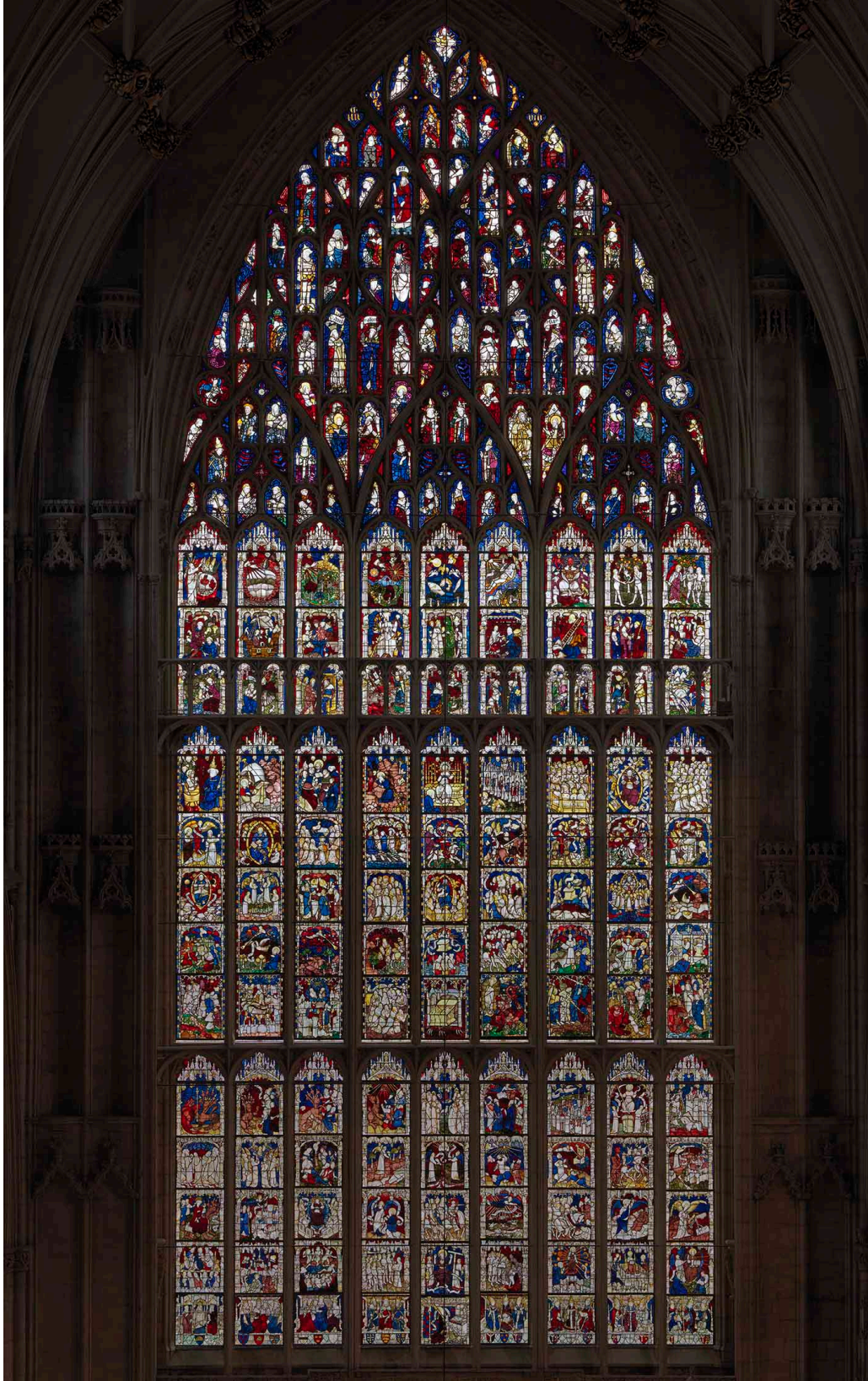


Figure 3. The east window of York Minster which depicts subjects from the Old Testament and Revelation.

Another art form that must be mentioned in this time period is that of medieval theater, which could rightly be considered the predominant art whose purpose was deliberately instructive for the spreading of the Christian worldview. What originally began as “liturgical drama,” carried out in “closed communities” by orders of nuns and monks for aid in their own worship, blossomed into full-fledged plays and dramas, even deploying music, dance, and iconography for the enjoyment and instruction of entire towns, before quickly dissipating under the social and theological revolution of the Reformation.<sup>65</sup> However, the historical evidence of medieval theater is relatively small given what historians know about the breadth, scope, and popularity of these events. This is primarily attributed to the fact that the idea of preserving theatrical manuscripts was not commonplace, with the “earliest surviving text of the complete Chester cycle...in antiquarian spirit” being dated to approximately “twenty years after the last date on which it is known to have been performed.”<sup>66</sup> Additionally, any surviving texts are believed to have become “liable to destruction on doctrinal grounds at the Reformation.”<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, history has left us with sufficient evidence of the popularity of this art form in the form of both scripts and textual fragments, but also “references to dramatic activity in external sources, such as civil and ecclesiastical prohibitions, civic ordinances, and most frequently, financial accounts.”<sup>68</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, medieval theater provides an excellent representation of the historical use of the arts to express apologetic or evangelical messages. As

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65. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3 and 21.

66. *Ibid.*, 8.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*, 7.

noted, this art form itself incorporated a number of other art forms that would have been used to provide context, meaning, and set the feeling or mood of the scene in order to strengthen the impact of the message being given. As an example, and as is common practice today, musical cues would have been provided to the audience in the form of beautiful or harmonious lines for good characters and moments, and cacophonous tones for evil characters and moments.<sup>69</sup>

Alongside dramatic iconography, music, and dance, the impact of these plays would have engaged their emotions as they witnessed the “humanity and suffering of Christ as a means to stimulate their devotion and penance” and they would have engaged with the apologetic messages themselves.<sup>70</sup>

As previously indicated, medieval theater began on a modest scale in the tenth century with the earliest known example of “liturgical drama” being *Quem quareritis* (Whom do you seek?), which was written in Latin, and would have been performed by monks and nuns within the confines of their own orders.<sup>71</sup> According to modern scholarship, “liturgical drama was not originally conceived as a presentation for a passive audience of spectators.”<sup>72</sup> Further, it is believed that the scope of this art form remained this way into the thirteenth century, as “most twelfth-century evidence...concerns plays written and performed entirely in Latin,”<sup>73</sup> rather than the vernacular tongue. Thus, such dramas would not have been well-understood by the broader

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69. Beadle and Fletcher, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 346.

70. *Ibid.*, 6.

71. *Ibid.*, 3.

72. *Ibid.*, 4.

73. *Ibid.*

culture. However, beginning in the thirteenth century and certainly by the fourteenth, “efforts were made to ensure that the laity knew the Lord’s Prayer (Pater Noster) and the Creed,”<sup>74</sup> and drama was becoming a leading vehicle for teaching biblical stories, truth, and morals. This is famously declared by Lady Katherine of Sutton, abbess of the nunnery in Barking, Essex in the mid-fourteenth century in the preface to a liturgical ceremony, when she “emphasized that her aim was ‘to strengthen and stimulate faith among those already initiated into the mysteries, to eradicate spiritual torpor and to excite the ardour of the faithful more intensely.’”<sup>75</sup> With this shift of purpose in the medieval theater, the language used changed from Latin to the vernacular “Middle English,” and provides a clear catalyst to the sizeable town-wide productions produced through the middle of the sixteenth century.<sup>76</sup>

With the broader culture now being engaged by this performance art, “the Church joined forces with an educated and devout section of the laity” to “mediate religious culture to socially diverse audiences” of the day.<sup>77</sup> Plays became “living books” for a culture “more accustomed to hearing their literature read aloud,”<sup>78</sup> providing “explications” of doctrine and “embodied sermons...for the moral betterment of their audiences.”<sup>79</sup> By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, at least two, and as many as four towns maintained year-round “cycles” of plays

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74. Beadle and Fletcher, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 6.

75. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

76. *Ibid.*, 5.

77. *Ibid.*, 7 and 76.

78. *Ibid.*, xi.

79. *Ibid.*, 79.

“cumulatively [telling] the story of salvation history from Creation to Doomsday.”<sup>80</sup> An even greater number of cities and towns held regular dramatic events on smaller scales:

In one sense the idea that all the world is a stage would have made perfect sense to a resident of fifteenth-century England. In a society without purpose-built playhouses, drama could, and often did, happen almost anywhere, turning city streets, inn-yards, churches or open fields into temporary stages for the purposes of a performance.<sup>81</sup>

While the modern historian remains limited in their ability to tie these plays to specific conversion experiences, given the limited use of biography, it is well-established that such plays were popular and impactful to both viewers and performers.

### **1700 through 1999 AD**

This section of the thesis breaks away in form from the previous sections because autobiography and first-hand accounts are now more available. Thus, this section will look at the testimonies of four persons and how different art forms played a part in their conversions.

#### **Case Study I: John Newton**

Former slave ship captain turned Anglican clergyman, John Newton was born in 1725 and is most famously known for writing the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. In his autobiography, *Out of the Depths*, Newton writes about his mother’s lasting influence and how her reading of Scripture, poems, and the singing of hymns would later play a part in his conversion to Christianity. Newton writes that when he was “four years old” he could “read any common book with understanding” and that his mother helped him memorize “many valuable verses, portions, and

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80. Beadle and Fletcher, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, 8.

81. *Ibid.*, 75.



chapters of scripture as well as catechisms, hymns, and poems.”<sup>82</sup> He describes his time with his mother as “happy” and that he “was always willing to learn as she was to teach.”<sup>83</sup> However, Newton says that years after his mother’s death, when he was the young age of six, that he “sinned away all the advantages” of his “early learning” but that “they did restrain my behavior for some time.”<sup>84</sup> Newton acknowledges that although the “best education may fall short of affecting the heart” this should not discourage “godly parents to continue doing their part faithfully.”<sup>85</sup> He said this because the poems, hymns, catechisms, and scripture his mother taught him “returned to my mind again and again, and it was a very long time before I could wholly shake them off. When the Lord finally opened my eyes, I found that my recollection of them was a great benefit.”<sup>86</sup> While Newton went through a period time when he was living for the world’s pleasures, the things his mother taught him as a little boy had a lasting effect on him. Most likely, because Newton’s mother was a “dissenter,” he would have been exposed to hymns written by the Isaac Watts. Professor and author, John Richard Watson, describes Watts’s hymns and the effect they had on those who learned them:

To read or sing Watts's hymns is to be exposed to a particular art, in which the passion of the inspired poet smoulders with a fiery heat and energy within the controlled lines. The enthusiasm is in stark contrast to the worship material that was available to him as a

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82. John Newton, *Out of the Depths: The Autobiography of John Newton*, ed. Dennis R. Hillman (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), Kindle Locations 19-20. Kindle Edition.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid.

young man.<sup>87</sup>

As is demonstrated in the life of John Newton, the impact of poetry and the musical arts inspired another, whose own poetry and hymn-writing has now comforted, inspired, and spoken to hearts of many more for more than two centuries. Perhaps as much as any other form of art, it is easiest to provide clear evidence of the apologetic value of the musical arts, with its ability to both move the heart and soul, and directly infuse apologetic content with words. John Newton's biography is just one of many such potential examples of persons who were impacted by the apologetic in music.

### **Case Study II: Clive Staples Lewis**

Clive Staples Lewis, better known as C.S. Lewis, was a prolific writer of fiction and theology and was the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College at the University of Cambridge. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis describes one of his first encounters with joy and holiness when, at the age of eighteen, he read the fairy tale *Phantastes*, written by the author and Christian, George MacDonald. Lewis describes his experience with these elements in the book by saying that he had come "alive" in the world created in the story.<sup>88</sup> He says that writers like "Malory, Spencer, Morris, and Yeats" all possessed similar charms but that this book was different<sup>89</sup>:

I did not yet know (and I was long in learning) the name of the new quality, the bright shadow, that rested on the travels of Anodos. I do now. It was Holiness....Now for the first time I felt that it was out of reach not because of something I could not do but

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87. J.R. Watson, "The Hymns of Isaac Watts and the Tradition of Dissent," in *Dissenting Praise: Religious Dissent and the Hymn in England and Wales*, ed. Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 34.

88. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd, 1955), 169-171.

89. *Ibid.*

because of something I could not stop doing. If I could only leave off, let go, unmake myself, it would be there. Meanwhile, in this new region all the confusion that had hitherto perplexed my search for Joy were disarmed....But now I saw the bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged. Or, more accurately, I saw the common things drawn into the bright shadow....In the depth of my disgraces, in the then invincible ignorance of my intellect, all this was given me without asking, even without consent. That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptised; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer.<sup>90</sup>

Lewis had experienced the light, and the ultimate beauty and joy that can only be found in God—what he experienced was holiness. Years later in 1931, while he was walking one evening through the deer park at Magdalen College, Oxford, his friends and fellow academics, J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson walked with him and they talked to him about the truth of Christianity. A few years prior, Lewis had become a theist, having come to the conclusion that God had to exist for objective truth to exist, but he had not yet determined if Christianity was true. What Dyson and Tolkien challenged Lewis to consider was that he liked the “idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story” and that if he “met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself” that he “liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it” if he met it “anywhere *except* the Gospels.”<sup>91</sup> Tolkien and Dyson reasoned with Lewis that he was “prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings” in “Pagan stories” but that the “story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*” and that Pagan stories are but glimpses of the real story of Christ.<sup>92</sup> Further,

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90. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 169-171.

91. C. S. Lewis, “To Arthur Greeves: from The Kilns (on his conversion to Christianity), 18 October 1931” in *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, edited by W.H. Lewis and Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 368-69. Kindle. Italics in original.

92. Lewis, “To Arthur Greeves,” 368-69. Italics in original.

Tolkien and Dyson pressed Lewis that he “must be content” to “accept [Christianity] in the same way, remembering that it is God’s myth where the others are men’s myths.”<sup>93</sup> Lewis concludes:

Therefore it is *true*, not in the sense of being a ‘description’ of God (that no finite mind could take in) but in the sense of being the way in which God chooses to (or can) appear to our faculties. The ‘doctrines’ we get *out of* the true myth are of course *less* true: they are translations into our *concepts* and *ideas* of that wh. God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Does this amount to a belief in Christianity? At any rate I am now certain (a) That this Christian story is to be approached, in a sense, as I approach the other myths. (b) That it is the most important and full of meaning. I am also *nearly* certain that it really happened...<sup>94</sup>

Through their conversation, Lewis realized that Christianity had within it all the things that we love in great stories but it was really true: the perfect hero who laid down his life to save us. The next day, on his way to the zoo with his brother, Lewis accepted Christ as his savior.

We can clearly see how imagination and fiction literature gave Tolkien and Dyson a way to talk to Lewis about the truth of Christianity. God used the arts to reveal himself to Lewis, to reveal His holiness, absolute beauty, and joy. While there were certainly other factors throughout Lewis’ life that played a part in his conversion, the arts played a major role and helped his mind and heart to accept the truth. Further, like Newton with his music, Lewis’ own stories have continued to influence others with the same Christian qualities and themes which impacted him in his conversion.

### **Case Study III: Peter Hitchens**

While the following event did not occur in the United Kingdom, it involves a man from England while he was abroad in Beaune, France in 1981. That man is Peter Hitchens, probably

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93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

best known for being the brother of the now-deceased and famous atheist journalist and author, Christopher Hitchens. Peter Hitchens is an English conservative journalist and author and before the following event took place, he was a committed atheist, like his brother. In his book, *Rage Against God*, Hitchens reveals that he had been wrestling with issues of morality and values and was more “curious than ever about their origins...in the mind of man and in the better angels of his nature” because in his travels as a journalist he had witnessed depravity in other countries and felt a need to protect his “own civilization” from being stripped of things like “trust, civility, and peace.”<sup>95</sup> Hitchens was still “noisily, arrogantly atheist” when he visited the “Hotel-Dieu in Beaune” where he encountered Rogier van der Weyden’s “fifteenth-century polyptych *The Last Judgment*.”<sup>96</sup> He says that when he saw it listed in the guidebook he “scoffed” at the prospect of “another religious painting” but when he finally stood in front of this eighteen-foot masterpiece, he immediately saw “the naked figures fleeing toward the pit of hell” and was mesmerized.<sup>97</sup>

Hitchens writes of how this affected him:

I gaped, my mouth actually hanging open. These people did not appear remote or from the ancient past; they were my own generation. Because they were naked, they were not imprisoned in their own age by time-bound fashions. On the contrary, their hair and, in an odd way, the set of their faces were entirely in the style of my own time. They were me and the people I knew. One of them—and I have always wondered how the painter thought of it—is actually vomiting with shock and fear at the sound of the Last Trump. I did not have a “religious experience.” Nothing mystical or inexplicable took place—no trance, no swoon, no vision, no voices, no blaze of light. But I had a sudden, strong sense of religion being a thing of the present day, not imprisoned under thick layers of time. A large catalogue of misdeeds, ranging from the embarrassing to the appalling, replayed themselves rapidly in my head. I had absolutely no doubt that I was among the damned, if there were any damned. And what if there were? How did I know there were not? I did not know. I could not know....I

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95. Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), Kindle Locations 96. Kindle Edition.

96. *Ibid.*, 101.

97. *Ibid.*

had simply no idea that an adult could be frightened, in broad daylight and after a good lunch, by such things...No doubt I should be ashamed to confess that fear played a part in my return to religion. I could easily make up some other, more creditable story. But I should be even more ashamed to pretend that fear did not.<sup>98</sup>

Standing in front of a painting with the temperament of doubt, Hitchens came face-to-face with the truth of his own mortality and the evil in his own heart. This experience with art acted as a doorway for Hitchens to discover the beauty of Christ and his great need to be redeemed.

#### **Case Study IV: Charlie Mackesy**

English visual artist, Charlie Mackesy, was an atheist who had grown up with “religious things at school” and hated them. They had sung about God but he “didn’t like God. I didn’t think he existed, but if he did, I didn’t like him.”<sup>99</sup> In an interview with Christian Bible Network he states that you need a reason to draw and he found it one day when he was in a London park. Even as an atheist, he had the thought that there had to be more to life than what he could see, and says that the Holy Spirit quietly introduced him to seeing people as really beautiful. This is when he describes his art as really beginning. Even though he did not yet know God, the Holy Spirit had begun to point people out to him—people Mackesy would not have normally noticed—and showing him how beautiful they were.

Then one day, while attending a music festival in Glastonbury, England in 1986, he had stepped inside a filthy portable toilet. It was “so filthy that he stood on the seat to avoid the

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98. Hitchens, *The Rage Against God*, 101-05.

99. Dawn Goeb, “Former Atheist Artist Becomes Unlikely Evangelist” (*CBN News*, written on July 3, 2017), accessed on June 24, 2019, <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/entertainment/2016/april/unorthodox-evangelist-artist-reaches-unlikely-audience>.

overflow.”<sup>100</sup> In the midst of this putrid environment, Mackesy heard the gospel song, “Oh, Happy Day” being sung by the Edwin Hawkins Singers. He says that while standing on the portable toilet the song “pierced through his atheism, moving him to tears.”<sup>101</sup> He was so moved by the song that his foot slipped and he fell in, waist deep into the filth. In the most unlikely of places where one does not expect to find beauty, Mackesy is moved by the joyful words and melody of the song that he experiences the holiness of God and it prompts him to accept Christ as his savior. The lyrics and music of ‘Oh, Happy Day’ is a proclamation of the complete joy that ensues when Jesus washes our sins away. As it was with C.S. Lewis, the experience of joy can act as a powerful apologetic for belief in God. This story is further proof that God can reach us *wherever* we are with His overpowering love.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Having assessed the apologetic value of the arts, implied or demonstrated through the history of Christianity in the United Kingdom from the mid-fourth through twentieth centuries, a discussion on *how* the arts can provide the knowledge necessary to gain apologetic value is warranted. The reason being, it could be argued that if the arts cannot provide knowledge, then they would be of limited apologetic value. However, as discussed by multiple authors in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art*, it can be reasonably argued that the arts can be a source of propositional and conceptual knowledge. Philosophers have often said that the arts only deal

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100. Goeb, “Former Atheist Artist Becomes Unlikely Evangelist,” <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/entertainment/2016/april/unorthodox-evangelist-artist-reaches-unlikely-audience>.

101. Ibid.

with emotions, concern values, and suggest perspectives but are not a source of knowledge.<sup>102</sup> Unfortunately, this is one of the “[legacies] of the Enlightenment” in which it is believed that “empirical science alone can furnish us with useful knowledge about the world.”<sup>103</sup> For the purpose of this section I will use the following definition of knowledge: “If one believes a proposition and the proposition is true, and one is justified in believing it true, then one has knowledge.”<sup>104</sup> Working from this definition, one may come to test propositions through the worlds and situations created by the arts. Within these worlds or situations, we may “acquire a hypothesis” and be “presented with a certain possibility” about which we may come to know “how things would be” if the hypothesis were true.<sup>105</sup> This would be considered “conceptual knowledge.”<sup>106</sup> Further, what we learn from these fictional worlds have real world implications. Some examples of skills we can learn, from novels for instance, could be strategy, perception of environments, and empathy. A reader of a novel may acquire a hypothesis and test it in this fictional world to determine if that hypothesis is true. Thus, “it would seem...that readers acquire factual beliefs and propositional knowledge from fiction in the way that scientists gather

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102. Bender, “Art, Science, and Knowledge,” 557.

103. David Novitz, “Fiction and the Growth of Knowledge” in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. John Bender and Gene Blocker (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 585.

104. Louis Arnaud Reid, “Art and Knowledge” in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. John Bender and Gene Blocker (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 563.

105. Bender, “Art, Science, and Knowledge,” 561.

106. Ibid.



knowledge about the fabric of the universe.”<sup>107</sup> Further, those who dismiss “art as an epistemic vehicle” do so because their belief “arises from two common philosophical dispositions: our ability to say (and penchant for saying) what art is *not*, and a persistent essentialist hope that whatever it *is*, its nature is singular and definable.”<sup>108</sup> Clearly, any attempt to narrowly define art or obtain knowledge from every piece of art would be fruitless. In fact, Bender provides a vivid illustration of art as an “epistemic vehicle” when he describes it as “a complex intentional object suspended in an even more complex inferential web, some strands of which lead to knowledge.”<sup>109</sup> So, how is one to approach art and what knowledge is to be gained when so many messages within the various art forms contradict and some pieces may present conflicting messages within themselves? Bender argues that we evaluate the truth claims of art as we would with any other philosophical truth claim. We should “critically examine the ground on which they are held, and more broadly estimate their likelihood of truth, by calling on our own relevant knowledge and experience and checking for coherence and other epistemic virtues.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, we seek to identify those strands that lead to truth.

This ties nicely into apologetics because one of the particular strengths of the arts are their ability to present moral knowledge. I am therefore offering a challenge to both the Christian artist and the audience, which is part of the complexity of the arts in general: 1) while the artist

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107. Novitz, “Fiction and the Growth of Knowledge,” 587.

108. John Bender, “Art as a Source of Knowledge: Linking Analytic Aesthetics and Epistemology” in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. John Bender and Gene Blocker (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 594.

109. Ibid.

110. Ibid., 603.

should be concerned with the excellence of their art form, they need to realize that their creations can provide knowledge which can assist those who are searching for truth and 2) the audience should thoughtfully approach the arts in search of the strands of truth that lead to knowledge of origin, meaning, morality, and destiny.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to discover if the arts have played a part in Christian conversions and if any apologetic message could be drawn from them. While my research has by no means been exhaustive, by analyzing the arts, history, and Christian conversion narratives from the United Kingdom between the fourth and twentieth centuries, this thesis has effectively shown how the arts *can* and *have* assisted persons in their conversions to Christ and contain apologetic value.

Further, this research clearly illustrates that the arts can provide some forms of knowledge and assist in our pursuit of truth. While there were only four case studies included in my research, it is reasonable to expect that many more testimonies may be added to this research in the future. However, with the exception of prominent figures in the culture, it was challenging to find academic-quality cataloging of conversion testimonies. This lack of information should encourage Christians to share their conversion testimonies and convey what things helped lead them to Christ. Having this information may provide better insight to Christian leaders on how they might effectively evangelize and instruct their followers, especially when trying to reach our current post-truth culture. Also, future studies could be done on the extensive history of each art form and how they have affected conversions, to build upon and enrich my research.

In conclusion, with our current, twenty-first century culture being significantly motivated by and concerned with entertainment—whether in the visual, performance, or literary arts—this

research should aid Christian apologists, the Church, and artists to understand the power the arts have in being able to convey truth and transform lives. Further, this research should motivate Christians to consider encouraging the artists in their lives to create artistic experiences in our churches, universities, galleries, and other venues whereby they can engage minds and hearts for Christ and foster opportunities for introspection, questions, and apologetic conversations.

Finally, the arts may prove to be a powerful vehicle for reaching hearts and transmitting truth to our current culture, which in many instances is hostile to Christianity and has abandoned logic for emotions.

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