

Introduction

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Dalí studied
 Spanish
 mystics for
 whom art,
 science and
 religion were
 one.

I believe in God but I have no faith. Mathematics and Science tell me that God must exist but I don't believe it.

The Dalí Dimension (DVD), directed by Susi Marquès, Media 3.14, Barcelona, 2004

Salvador Dalí's experience of religion was divided from early on. His mother's family were devout Catholics, but his father was a staunch atheist who sent him initially to the local state school to spare his son a Catholic education. The young Dalí shared his father's aversion. In 1929–30 his films *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or*, made with Luis Bunuel, included scandalous portrayals of the priesthood as corrupt, ignorant and hypocritical. In 1929 Dalí also drew a blasphemous image of Christ and the sacred heart, which he entitled *Sometimes I spit with pleasure on the portrait of my mother* (The Sacred Heart) to the anger and distress of his family.

Although he once blamed Catholicism for his profound sense of guilt about sex, Dalí began drifting back to the church from the 1940s onwards exploring his religious roots and studying medieval, particularly Spanish mystics for whom art, science and religion were one.

During a private audience with Pope Pius X11 in 1949, Dalí showed him his latest painting *The Madonna of Port Lligat* – the serene canvas depicting his wife Gala as the Virgin Mary floating dreamily above the bay of Port Lligat was blessed by the pontiff.

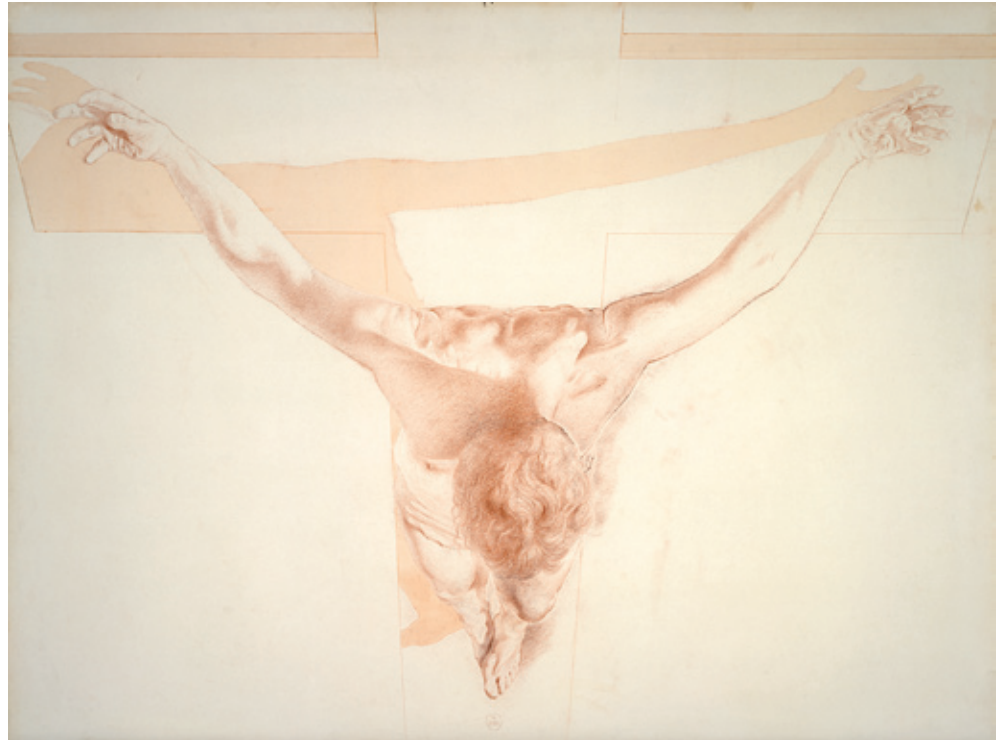
On 19 October 1950, he gave a lecture at the Ateneu in Barcelona, titled '*Why I was Sacrilegious. Why I am a Mystic*' which sought to explain his transformation from a zealous anti-cleric to a devout Catholic albeit one who lacked complete 'faith'. Reincarnating himself, he attempted to persuade his audience that he was himself a true religious mystic who reinterpreted and rationalised the Christian religion through the lens of contemporary scientific discoveries.

The paintings from this period that Dalí called Nuclear mysticism are characterised by a painterly style characteristic of traditions of classicism particularly those of the great Italian masters of ten Renaissance period such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.

During a television interview with American Mike Wallace in 1958 Dalí explained that everything in life was erotic and therefore ugly, whilst death in comparison was free of eroticism and a sublime, beautiful experience. Nevertheless he feared his own death and hoped to avoid it altogether. Failing this he died with last rites in 1989.

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This exquisitely delicate monochromatic drawing is related to the very popular *The Christ of St. John of the Cross*, 1951, a painting which ever since its acquisition by Glasgow Corporation for Kelvingrove Art, Museum in 1952 has aroused admiration, criticism and controversy. The work, like the drawing, features the dramatic composition of a crucified, male figure who appears to float above the rocky harbour of Dalí's home village, Port Lligat apparently defying gravity upon a cross viewed from an aerial perspective. The hyper-realistic figure painted in luminous yellow tones overlaid with dark, eerie shadows creates an otherworldly image that makes an unforgettable impression on the viewer leading Jonathan Jones, the esteemed art critic for British newspaper, *The Guardian* (29 January 2009), to suggest that 'It is, for better or worse, probably the most enduring vision of the crucifixion painted in the 20th century'.

The painting caused controversy initially because modern art critics felt it was a backward step, as it was painted in such a traditional style, and art students from Glasgow School of Art protested that the money spent on purchasing the work, (£8,200 pounds), could have been better spent encouraging local artists by providing them with exhibition space.

However it has now become a corner stone of Glasgow's cultural life and in 2005 was voted Scotland's favourite painting in a poll conducted by *The Herald* newspaper.

The masterful drawing, reminiscent in its grandeur of the artist Francesco de Zurbarán, was inspired by the poetry of the Spanish religious mystic St John of the Cross and his dramatic drawing of the crucified Christ. It is noticeable that Dalí focuses on the serene beauty of Christ rather than the agony normally depicted, accompanied by blood, nails and a crown of thorns. As the work was executed during a period in which the artist was seeking a religious faith that made sense to him in the light of contemporary science, it may indicate his desire to focus on a metaphorical reading of the crucifixion which transcends the purely physical, a theory compounded by Dalí's own comments that the drawing represented the nucleus of an atom which became for him a symbol of the unity of the universe.

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Dalí was influenced by the writings of St John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic.

Dalí and Religion

Dalí under the microscope



Looking and discussing

Scholars of both scripture and art indicate that greater understanding of them can be gained by appreciating and researching three areas – the historical background to a work of art or scripture, the information contained within it and what people bring to their appreciation of it.

Referring to one or more of Dalí's works, research, think about and note something of the following areas:

- The world behind the artwork. **Describe the artist's background.**
- The world of the artwork. **Name what the work is about.**
- The world in front of the artwork. **What do we bring to its interpretation?**

- **Research** crucifixion. **Report your findings** to the class or a small group.
- **Compare and contrast** three depictions of crucifixion across three different times and artists.
- **Find** a traditional song/hymn about Good Friday, the day Jesus was crucified. **Read** it and indicate several **key points** it makes.
- **Imagine** you are Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene or St John standing at the foot of the cross. **Describe what you see.**
- As a group or individually, **compare and contrast** the crucifixion of Jesus in the four Gospel accounts of Mark, Luke, Matthew and John. Then look at Dalí's *Christ in perspective*. **How does it compare with these accounts?**
- Dalí was influenced by the writings of St John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic. **Research** this person and his writings. Research the mystic tradition in Catholicism and other religious traditions.

Dalí under the microscope



The word
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Bread and fish are significant features in the stories about Jesus. Breaking bread and eating with others is a symbol and was a reality of hospitality in ancient Mediterranean society. In one story Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. The word for fish in Ancient Greek is used as an anagram in early Christian art and teaching. The fish is still used as a Christian symbol today. Another early Christian symbol is the anchor. Today there is a plethora of Christian symbols.

- **Research** and present Christian symbols over time.
- **Read** one or more of the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper of Jesus from which the Christian ritual of Eucharist is derived.
- Jesus' Last Supper was a celebration of another religious tradition's festival, namely the Jewish Feast of Passover. **Research and present information** about this.
- The word 'Eucharist' comes from a Greek word meaning 'thanksgiving'. In the early days of the Christian tradition the disciples would gather in a spirit of gratitude for the life and resurrection of Jesus. **Read how** they celebrated Eucharist by reading about it in Acts of the Apostles.
- At the Last Supper Christ used the elements of bread and wine. Dalí's painting was titled *Eucharistic still life* some time after it was purchased by the collector A. Reynolds Morse. Prior to this it was called *Nature Morte Evangelique* (Evangelical still life). **Define** what is meant by the word evangelical. Which title is more appropriate and why? Why are the titles of artworks sometimes changed?
- Sit with the image for one minute picking out as much of its detail as you can. (Use the zoom tool if you need to.) **Comment** on the painting's meaning.
- Form groups with each person looking at one of several versions of the Last Supper by the following artists:
 - Leonardo da Vinci
 - Salvador Dalí's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*
 - James J. Tissot
 - William Blake
 - Herman Nitsch
 - Marisol Escobar
 - Mary Beth Edelson's feminist interpretation
 - Francine LeClercq (installation)

Without showing your image to the other groups, or knowing which images they have, describe your picture to the other groups using as many descriptive words as possible. Then return the picture to the teacher. The teacher shuffles the images at the end and displays them. Students try to guess each group's artwork. Discuss why the one event might have elicited such a variety of interpretations.

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in

United States 1940–48

Eucharistic still life 1952

oil on canvas

54.6 x 87.0 cm

The Salvador Dalí Museum,

St Petersburg, Florida

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Dalí and Religion

Dalí under the microscope



Before attempting these questions please visit the zoom tour available on the Dalí and religion webpage

- **Print out** the image and divide it up into sections. **Examine it closely** and list what you see in each section.
- **When** did Dalí complete this painting? **What** was happening in the world of Christianity, namely Roman Catholicism, at this time?
- Pope John XXIII was elected in 1958 as pope. **Research** and present information about this decisive twentieth-century man.
- Pope John XXIII was responsible for calling the Second Vatican Council in 1962. **Find pictures** of this on the internet. What changes did this gathering of the church bring about?
- Dalí references several painters of historical note in this work. **Note two of them and discover** five points about each through simple research.
- In the painting, Dalí's wife Gala is depicted as St Helena, Emperor Constantine's mother. St Helena is said to have found the true cross on which Jesus was crucified. **Find** another picture in which Dalí uses Gala as a religious reference. **Describe** that image.
- Christians have the belief that God is made up of three parts – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Collectively they are known as the Holy Trinity. Research how painters have depicted the Holy Trinity throughout time. **Present your findings.** **Describe** how Dalí has painted the Holy Trinity in this work.
- During this period of history Dalí was profoundly affected by nuclear physics. We see some of the representations of photographed patterns of atomic particles in the zigzag lines on Jesus. He stated that 'for the first time in the history of science, physics was providing proof of the existence of God'. **How** could physics, particularly nuclear physics, elicit such a response? Imagine you are Salvador Dalí and you are asked to further **explain** what you mean. What would you say?

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Dalí and Religion

Dalí under the microscope



For Dalí, Werner Heisenberg, one of the greatest physicists of the twentieth century, replaced Freud as his 'father figure'.

Dalí gave a lecture in Barcelona, titled 'Why I was Sacrilegious. Why I am a Mystic'. The main point was to explain his spiritual transformation from a fervent anti-cleric into a devout Catholic. He attempted to persuade his audience not only that his Catholic imagery was the work of a sincere believer, but also that he was, in fact, a true religious mystic, informed by the latest scientific advancements. He dubbed his new position 'nuclear mysticism' – a fascinating, albeit sometimes awkward, union of science and Catholicism that would inform his work for the remainder of the 1950s.

- **Find out the meanings** of nuclear physics, sacrilegious, anti-cleric, devout, mystic.
- **View** *Galatea of the spheres*. **Describe** what you see.
- **How** does this work relate to nuclear physics and to religion?
- Mysticism can be defined as 'an immediate consciousness of the transcendent or ultimate reality or God'. **Discuss** how nuclear physics could give Dalí this consciousness (or understanding). **What other experiences** do you think could provide an immediate awareness of the transcendent?

Throughout history people have undergone significant changes because of personal experiences. Dalí was profoundly affected by the nuclear bomb and nuclear physics. He had previously tried to understand his world through psychologist, Sigmund Freud. For Dalí, Werner Heisenberg, one of the greatest physicists of the twentieth century, replaced Freud as his 'father figure'. He commented that 'the exterior world – that of physics – has transcended the one of psychology'.

Research other people who have gone through significant change because of personal experiences. VCE Religion and Society, Unit 3, Area of Study 3, Life experience and religious beliefs, focuses on the interplay between religious beliefs and significant life experiences. Refer to the Study Design – <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vce/studies/religion/religionsocietysd.pdf> for more learning activities.

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Dalí under the microscope

The bigger picture – thinking beyond

Christianity grew out of Judaism. Jesus of Nazareth, born between 6–4 BC, is the key figure in Christianity's history. Mary, Jesus' mother was called upon by God through the angel Gabriel to bear God's son (Luke: 1). This is called the Annunciation. Jesus was born in very poor conditions in a stable in Bethlehem. He was raised in a religiously observant family in Nazareth. At about thirty years of age he became an itinerant preacher and healer and collected a group of followers, called disciples. His teachings and growing popularity brought him into conflict with religious and political leaders in Jerusalem. This eventually precipitated his death by crucifixion, a form of execution reserved for political adversaries of the Roman Empire. Three days afterwards he was reported to have been raised from the dead. His disciples began to take this experience and Jesus' teaching to different parts of the world. In 1904 Salvador Dalí was born into a very Catholic country, Spain.

- **Map out in point form** some of the major historical events that give understanding to Dalí's historical and religious context. Mention one or more of the following:
 - St Paul, Emperor Constantine, St Jerome, the Council of Nicaea, monasteries and convents, the great Schism, the Crusades, the Renaissance, the Reformation, Ecumenism.
- Choosing one, **explain** briefly the beginnings of another great religious tradition such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or Judaism.

Dalí lived in a turbulent century marked by huge challenges and changes: World Wars, the Great Depression, the nuclear bomb, the discovery of DNA, the invention of television and jet aircraft, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, changes in religions and national boundaries, and great movements in the world of the arts. Salvador Dalí's experience of religion was divided from early on. His mother's family were devout Roman Catholics, but his father was a staunch atheist and sent him to a local state school.

- On a page **draw a horizontal timeline** starting from 1900 and finishing at the present year. Above it create three rows labelled World history, Religious history and Dalí's history. Note several significant events along the length of the timeline in each row.
- **Define** atheism, agnosticism and theism.
- **Research** the populations of the world's five great religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) in 1904 and again in 1989. How would you describe the changes?
- **Research** the Catholic tradition.
 - What are its key beliefs? Name some of its rules. **Draw several of its important symbols.** Name the important people, key festivals and special places. **Describe** one or several of its rituals. What is the tradition's sacred text? List the different Catholic denominations in this tradition.

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Dalí and Religion

Dalí under the microscope

Dalí once blamed Catholicism for his profound sense of guilt about sex.

- **What** are some of Catholicism's teachings about sex?
- **Compare and contrast** this to the teachings about sex in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism.

Dalí's attitude to religion began shifting when he lived in the United States during the 1940s. His experience of modern science, particularly the discoveries made in nuclear physics, and his understanding of religious mystics, took him down a particular artistic and religious path which combines the two.

In 1950 Dalí declared himself to be Catholic, but a Catholic without faith.

- **Discuss** how this might or might not be possible.

Religion comes from a Latin word meaning 'to bind'. Throughout history people have expressed their communal beliefs and way of life through their belonging to a religious tradition that unifies and strengthens them and their communities. They have used art to celebrate and indicate important aspects of their religion. Art is used in ceremonies, buildings and in teaching.

- **Research** the use of art in religious traditions in one or several stages of history. You may wish to focus on a form of art such as architecture, illumination, poetry, painting, sculpture or music.