

## COLOR SYMBOLISM AND RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY IN INFORMATION AGE

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on shifting attitudes of symbolism and iconography experienced in religious expressions through its adaptations to ICT influences on contemporary societies. Some important issues concerning; Color, Mediatization, Religion, Symbolism and Iconography is explored as a way to gain insight into these recent changing paradigms of religion into admitting elements of pop-culture in its bid for relevance. Emphasis on color symbolism and emerging iconography was laid as a way to show how created images and its interpretations inform human expression of the dynamics of its societies. It is within the awareness of the conflictual positions of religion and technology as major causal factor of human existence that this paper engages the dynamic elements of signs, symbols, iconography, colors and their meaning within contemporary religious interpretation. The reason adduced in this paper points to proliferation of images, designs, and infiltration of other cultural items within the internet platforms. This study is important as it interrogates the apparent overthrow of religious structure by internet through the created images and interpretation of colors.

**Keywords:** ICT, Mediatization, Religion, Symbolism, Iconography, Color

### **INTRODUCTION.**

Religion and faith spirituality offers two different realities. Religion refers to organized forms of belief that stems from thoughts and inspiration of a transcendental order. On the other hand, spirituality is an individual encounter or thoughts on a transcendental order. In spite of their existing distinctiveness, the two concepts are mutually agreeing and can be explicitly or implicitly expressed. From Abrahamic faiths to Asian, African Traditional or Native American religious beliefs and the native people of Oceania, religious experiences in contemporary times just as any other aspects of life have been in constant flux. This is accountable to the effects of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on contemporary societies.

A major difference between religion in its traditional sense and religion in ICT mediated, contemporary popular culture is that traditional religions are conservative where contemporary pop-culture religion is constantly in a flux. This distinctive difference presents a different kind of logic for processing their products as cultural materials which is located within space and time. However,

mediating this and other differences is the human who needs both aspects as a veritable handle for accomplishing their spiritual needs.

Issues on religion in recent time often call to question the role of ICT media in contemporary societies. This is evident across almost all existing religious institutions. Consequently, Stig Hjarvard notes that, “[C]ontemporary society is permeated by the media, to an extent that the media may no longer be conceived of as being separate from cultural and other social institutions” (2008, p. 105). While the above situation subsists, in the case of religion and pop-culture, what is apparent is the blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the profane, between religion and technology.

This situation presents a mutually agreeing relationship between erstwhile conflicting systems manifesting as fragmented cultural expressions and give rise to shifting paradigms of institutionalized religious structures to informal or personalized processing of faith through the media of ICT. Internet valorizes syncretism and expanded opportunity for multiple sources of religious communication to its targeted audience. This presents a barrage of new iconographies and symbolisms aimed at reaching the ever growing demands for relevance among individuals, institutions and the different orientations that will aptly locate our global cultural stage.

The consequence of mixing of religion with secular facilities of ICT results in syncretization of religion with the trappings of popular culture. This brings about emergence of new symbolisms and iconography within the context of openness and visibility brought about by ICT and postmodernism. It is this mediating factor of colors, signs and symbols as image writing of human spiritual and physical experience interpreted through iconography as image writing of religious experience.

ICT is a major driver of almost every facets of human cultural life. This accommodates new and fluid cultural items as a mediatized *zeitgeist* of the time. Religion just like any other human expression has come under the influence of technology. The focus of this paper is on how religion had adapted new symbolisms and iconographies through recent exposures of its elements to mediatization processes of the information age. Some important issues concerning; Color, Mediatization, Religion, Symbolism and Iconography will be explored for an in-depth grounding of this engagement.

### **Elements of Symbolism.**

Humans think through symbols a means or medium of reaching the truth behind felt reality, thought, fear, desire, or feelings. Symbolic expression is necessary for humans in order to communicate both inner and outer realities through allegories, myths, metaphors and symbols. Alfred Whitehead had once described

symbolic thought as “the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” The use of symbolism began at the early stage with humans attempting to objectify their internal and external religious feelings within societies by metaphorical codification of words, actions and art.

When it comes to the issue of religion, one can say that symbolism and iconography are related. While symbolism finds meaning of signs through association with other things, iconography is the aggregate of the many symbols that are apparent in an image, sign or artwork and therefore can be said to be shorthand of what symbols transmit. A typical example is the architectural structures of worship centers which are shaped to influence and be influenced by our belief and trust of the central deity being represented.

Humans have used symbols to re-present things and ideas. When the early Chinese raised their vexiloids, or flags, they raise them to symbolize their group as a nation, kindred, association or an order. Symbolism is a reference to things, thoughts and phenomena around human environment. They are not limited to tangible or corporeal things, ideas, thoughts and other forms of signs can serve as symbols. The national anthem presents a typical example of a symbol that represents a country in the same manner the University of Port-Harcourt’s anthem commands the attention of all that is gathered within an occasion as a symbol of respect to the institution. People’s identity, can be decoded from their speech attitudes, dress sense, table manners and even their choice of colors. All these serve as symbolisms for deeper interpretations of other dimensions of reality.

In the field of Fine Art, symbolism became an art movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Odilon Redon and Paul Gauguin took to symbolism as a visual art movement through the radical literal works of Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarme, Paul Verlaine and others in the wake of modernism in Europe.

### Icons and Iconography.



Fig. 1. An example of an early Christian icon.

Source: <https://ccas.creighton.edu>

A mere mention of icon evokes thoughts of images from early Byzantine, Russian, Greek, Ukrainian and Coptic, orthodox catholic churches which can be traced to the 3rd century. These churches made profuse use of icons as a physical entry point into spiritual realms. This role shifted with the advent of modernism when human knowledge was placed at the scrutiny of empiricism. In like manner, digitization of ways of life is challenging the way religion is consumed by contemporary humans.

Icons which in most cases assume anthropomorphic forms to invest divine attributes to heroic humans or give human forms to celestial beings are changing to forms and ideas generated through the ICT dissemination system. Different religions, cultures and societies develop the use of icons from important images that symbolizes object of reverence, admiration or awe. Early Christians created images to represent the iconic essence of dead saints, angels, the Virgin Mary and Jesus. Icons in its basic meaning relate to image making of someone or idea based on noble historic background. The several images of Christ in orthodox and contemporary Christian art express the different spiritual ideals that Jesus Christ had been associated with.

To determine what informs the choice of a particular icon may be conjectural; however, a proper choice of some elements of art along traditional conventions of meanings and historical account can generate certain iconography. This informs interpretation of an idea which is intended or unintended by the maker of a sign. Lines, textures, colors, forms are all embodiments of emotion. These emotions have been adopted as standards by leaders of thought to organize people along a line of reasoning through images of art and this play in concert with other cultural standards over time. The Egyptians believed their Pharaohs to be earthly representative of the gods and created a convention of images of Pharaoh in their god-like majesty.

Icons and the study of iconography as symbols or signs of religion no longer subsist as concrete images or paintings of saints and deities. The use of icon in the past had borrowed from form and color symbolism across religious and cultural lines. In the situation that statues are no longer popular, it subsist that color and shape are the major source of symbols. Therefore the shift in cultural experiences thus favors color due to its emotive strength to come in-between the gaps of traditional images and the religiosity they were purported to symbolize.

### **Iconography.**

Iconography within the academic discipline of art history was championed by Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), promoted by the Warburg Scholars, but its use as a tool of art interpretation that locates experiences and histories of people, individuals and culture predates the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is as old as human use of image to represent their thoughts. It exposes conventional system of codes, themes, and motifs produced in an artwork as a semiotic basis of understanding other extraneous information about an image. The foundation of iconography

likewise influenced Roland Barthes semiotic system of decoding artworks through the 'sign,' 'signifier', and signified approach.

The context whereby an object exists can enhance its awe and affect its iconographical interpretation. Using image to write the history of a people, era, cultural movement or individual is not exclusive to orthodox Christian art of medieval Byzantine. Hindu, Buddha, the Aztecs, African traditional religious beliefs had icons in their religious places, royal courts and communal centers. In Benin royal courts for example, arts representing the status of the Oba or other High Chiefs evoke the status of the King or his ministers as well as narrate stories of epic dimension to the people on past kings, deified warriors, animals and plants that have contributed major landmarks in their history.

## Color

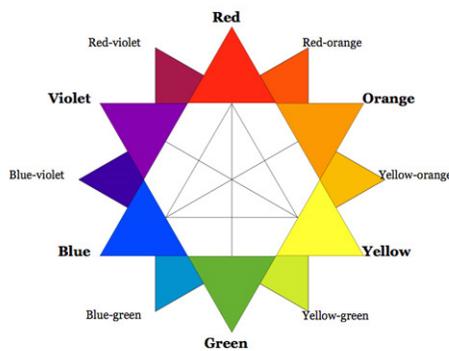


Fig. 2. Color Chart with warm colors on the right and cool colors on the left side.

Color is perceived because there is light; the perception of color will also depend on the intensity of light or its ambience. In an environment of blue light, a yellow object will appear green but in reality where there is white light the object will be seen as blue. Color as a foundational basis for symbolism is a major building block from which studies of iconography can be constructed. Hui-Chih Yu traces its importance to ancient civilizations where color forms the "integral part of the substance and being of everything in life" (Yu, 2014. P.50), this according to Yu, affects both mental and emotional states of humans. Color is a vector of emotion, though it may lack corporeal state as form or concrete image but it is a vehicle for imagistic thought which gives form to intangible and abstract ideas.

Symbolism of icons and color change over time due to media privileging, Green which used to be the color of Father Christmas was changed in the twentieth century to reflect the Coca Cola color (Dilloway 2006, p. 19). This change is

adopted worldwide as the color of Father Christmas which also has its origin from Santa Claus.

Psychologists and Psychotherapists had used color for its symbolic property as a healing element, for Carl Jung, "man's language is full of symbol, he also employs signs or images that are not strictly descriptive" (1978), Jung proposes art therapy for certain psychiatrist patients. In an art class, a teacher teaches the students about the color wheel and their emotional implications, he or she simply divides the color into cool and warm colors, meaning that colors have certain tempo which they operate. Just as cultural interpretation of phenomena differs from space and time, so also are attachment of symbolism on certain colors among people, culture, place and time.

Humans respond to colors both from its association to; pre-existing natural phenomena, psychological reaction to color through historical experiences to dreams or physical encounters and through literary connections to its cultural (which includes religion), technology and any other societal consideration. Attachment of meaning to color may arise from nature but its symbolism extends beyond its natural sources of for example; green vegetation, white or blue sky, red blood, and yellow sun, yellow with age or Jaundiced and the brown earth. However, color symbolisms are not a fixed system of codes that are universally interpretable by all groups, individuals, cultures within different time or space.

Color is a dominant element for the transmutation of feelings to plastic form due to its intrinsic qualities in creating mood, eliciting emotional reaction and symbolizing ideas (Okoronkwo 2001, p.57) However in our contemporary society, some colors have been axiomatically to symbolize certain notions of meaning. For instance in traffic related matters red suggests stop, yellow tells the driver to get ready to move while green signs the driver to move. Before a moving vehicle, a red light in the front suggest caution that notify the car behind of another one in front while a white light notifies the driver of an oncoming vehicle. While in the same vein a red cross against a white background symbolizes medical aid giving or critical medical situation.

In ancient Egypt, yellow had been seen in the realm of the sun and as such suggests happiness which "commands respect as a source of light" (Okoronkwo 2001, p. 59). The Chinese and most other Asian religions adopt yellow as a color of worship.

In some Asian religions, the color blue and black are seen as one color while the Tibetan Buddhists ascribe primacy to five colors of white, yellow, red, blue and green known as *Pancha Varna* which according to them symbolizes a celestial Buddha, a spiritual state of mind, part of the body or the mantra word 'Hum' and a natural element (Kumar 2000). Sukanthy Visagaperumel told this writer that in Sri-Lankan color symbolism, red does not agree to its popular meaning of danger, however it connotes good luck. Most often because red is the color of blood, many cultures had used it for its implication to danger, martyrdom in religious parlances, sexuality and violence. In Christianity, red suggests blood and fire, or

passion. Furthermore, many countries had used red in the national flag as a memorial to bloodshed before its independence or revolution within its national history. In the game of football a red card suggests a final sanction of an errant player.

Red is a color of mourning among South African natives (Dilloway 2006, p. 19) while among the Chinese, red was perceived to have the power to wade off evil spirit. This is based on a lore shared in China of how a brave man stopped a menace of an evil monster called Nian through wearing red and which the community all took over to stop the destructive marauding of the monster (Dilloway 2006, p. 19).

The word for deity in Igbo land is *Alusi*, it is represented by the color red while his symbol is a white ram, this may account to why white and red holds an important place in Igbo traditional worship. Among the traditional water spirit worshippers of Ogbuide in Oguta, white symbolizes sacredness and is used to venerate the chief water spirit on *Orie* days “as a sign of purity and respect” (Okoronkwo. 2001, p.59). Similarly, most Northern European cultures believes that white symbolizes purity, while the Sioux Indians of America adduce wisdom and health as symbolic properties of white however, this sentiment appears different among the Japanese who sees the same white as a symbol of death (Okoronkwo 2001, p.59)

In modern day English usage some colors have been accepted to connote ideas, emotions and physical things, for instance someone can say “the way she reacted, it was obvious that she was green with envy”, “I can’t purchase anything now because I am in the red”, or that “I saw him at a ‘red light’ district”, “the Governor of Sokoto State of Nigeria is a blue blood”, “unfortunately, he is the black sheep of the family” this writer used the expression, “Black in mood and Lonely I stood” to convey an extreme state of desolation and despondency in the poetry collection ‘Petals and Thorns’ (Okoronkwo 2016 p.52).

Among certain group of friends, the freshness of a green leaf is used connotatively to refer to youthfulness, virginity, fertility, sign of hope and unfading beauty as in, “an evergreen construction of beauty”, while blue can connote eroticism such as ‘blue film’ for pornography, or feeling blue for depression. Yellow is another color which when associated to the color of the sun is said to symbolize energy, warmth, summer, sunlight with its implication of agility, blossom or extroversion. In contemporary game of football, a yellow card is given to a player to warn him or her of an impending dismissal from the field of play if the player does not refrain from further foul play.

### **Engaging Religious Iconography within the ICT Environment.**

The printing press technology during modernity transformed religion and knowledge however; this did not translate to “a mediatization of either religion or knowledge” (Hjarvard 2008, p.110). A historical insight of how the printing press aided Protestantism at its early stage will suffice to extrapolate on place of technology on religion. By the end of modernism, pop-culture represented in pop-

art redefined the way icons were made and how iconography extended beyond the walls of sacred institutions to belong to the everyday experience of the people. It will be within the awareness of the conflictual positions of religion and technology as major causal factor of human existence that this paper will engage the dynamic elements of signs, symbols, iconography, colors and their meaning within contemporary religious interpretation. It will also make sense to understand contemporary religious practices as what has passed through the crucibles of ICT and mediatization and hence have shifted as its base of conservatism.

In an interview Alexander Gorlach had with Bandura, the later asserts that religion in its traditional sense “has become replaced by inter-religiosity because of the internet”, this statement is premised on the traditional sense of religion as an organized system of human belief on the existence of a transcendental being. This belief had been organized by institutions as structures through which humans asserts their internal or spiritual longing towards a higher order. According to Bandura, until recently, religion as a cultural structure had constituted the driving force behind the rise of human communities which he laments have been taken over by social and networking media such as Facebook. Bandura describes, Facebook and its likes as that which “de-personalizes the monotheistic of God” to the extent of presenting a new technologically determined logic of ‘network’ as the new energy “that brings people together and fuels their interaction” (cited in Gorlach 2012). This also means that social media platforms such as Facebook bring people from different religious backgrounds with new sets of rules and exposure. It therefore, enhances participation within the new syncretized religion where people understand and misunderstand other people’s use of icons and symbols.

An iconography wrongly expressed or interpreted can cause unfathomable harm to people within and outside a cultural influence. The Danish cartoon of 30 September or Charlie Hebdo in Paris on the 7<sup>th</sup> February 2015 incidents demonstrates how powerful the use of icons and aniconism is perceived within the information age. In both cases an interpretation of cartoon inspired a global agitation by adherents of Islam to the extent that many innocent people were killed in the process.

Bandura is not alone in this fear of veneration of the internet media, thus, Jacob Sloan had expressed similar sentiment when he notes that, “belief in Web divinity appears more subtly, slipping into everyday language in enthusiastic, worshipful comments like ‘this is why I love the Internet” (Sloan 2012). The clamor towards the internet reality had even made many to assert that the concept of God like any other postmodern feature is plural. Neven (2005, p.32) holds that within our digital dispensation, the God of *realitas fidei* who had and cherished relationship with man and God had paled in the minds of individuals who find it difficult to give names to God within the plurality of religious experiences.

Today, internet and digitization of analogue processes inspire the same devotion that was the exclusive domain of religious organizations. Considering the almost six billion people using one form or the other social media platform whose lives depend on the functions they provide. This population use or visit the internet facility on daily basis without any specially designated day for worship such as Sabbath, Sunday or Friday for Judaism, Christianity and Islam respectively, we can rightly say that such devotion has greatly surpassed what subsists in religion. Engaging the Discourse.

At the heart of recent shift is the pervasiveness of the ICT media in the life of individual persons who are exposed to re-interrogation of existing religious dogmas and the secularization precipitated by new systems of governance. Contemporary iconography is an affirmation of what constitutes spiritual experiences of this period by influencing its narratives in every aspect of human physical and spiritual expressions. If technology is at the core of contemporary human experience, and the main aim of technology is to bring people and cultures together through its gadgetries and platforms, it will now follow that the use and reading of iconography will surely accommodate what makes it possible-technology.



Fig. 3. Sunflower design for a website.

Pop culture of the 1960s reflected in art as pop art relied and reified concepts into icon used on computer monitors and mobile devices. As globalization of economics and culture tends to the market place, Hoover notes that traditional religion must adapt to this changes which are no longer manifested in traditional understanding of forms, doctrines, traditions and history (2008, p.33). A new system of icons and iconography is set in place where “the media and its celebrity culture can now define meanings of religious signs, symbols, and language” (Hoover 2008, p.32). In this sense, popular culture appropriates religious symbols which are re-appropriated by religion. This creates blurring of boundaries.

This in effect developed a semiotic system that provides understanding of emerging issues of consumerism, identity, deviance and urbanization. These were

major anchors for the period's cultural expressions and imply extension of iconic symbolism beyond the confines of religion. Flags, colors, national anthems, mode of speech delivery, dressing, public figures, excellent professionals, musical stars, artists, landmarks, currency symbol and a host of things and ideas currently provide reason for adequate iconographic analysis of things and ideas within given spatial and temporal frames.

The multiplicities of cultural influences that have become relevant in the internet platforms now precipitate new logic of symbolism. The ICT gadgets such as computers and other miniaturized, portable mobile devices provide newer approach to symbolism through user friendly and participatory features of the ICT devices. Icon presently, has meaning which though, derived from its original sources had been perverted by proliferation of everyday popular experiences. This takes the pop-culture of the internet into account.

The mediatization of images of fear, poverty, lust, prosperity, financial wealth, the devil, anxiety, social positions, political success, easy visa facilitation, winning without sweating, reaping without planting, miraculous cures from terminal diseases, and other instant miracles among religious leaders have assumed color and image to become a more portent iconography of the information age. The conditions mentioned above have come to typify the symbols and reasons for religious yearning in our time which compete with its spiritual foundation.

While secularization holds sway, religious institutions adopt new strategies to re-invent their relevance within the prevalent cultural logic of postmodern's mediatization and marketization. This according to Mara Einstein will transform religion or the domain of faith to simplification, syncretism and therefore diminished in its own characteristics. Religion is therefore trapped in the web of the struggle for relevance by "taking on the trappings of secular institutions out of fear of becoming marginalized for not having done so." (Einstein 2008 p.17). Religion in this case, becomes a consumable commodity within the postmodern mantra of 'I consume therefore I am'. When religion and pop-culture would have seemed to be engaged at culture war of prominence in the lives of their target audience, it rather appears that either religion subsumes itself within the behemoth structure of ICT or that it sees itself within the competitive race with other marketing forces of postmodernism.

The internet media had succeeded in bringing people under the auspices of its own religion where the hard and high walls of the past is breaking down and facilitating new forms of religious identities. Images and texts are sent and shared among millions of people who accept them without any knowledge of their original symbolisms. These images and texts shared through the internet form new basis of reading and understanding our contemporary society. Johan Fornas captures this situation succinctly by stating that:

In all fields of culture, the presence of the media changes the rules of aesthetic creation, dissemination and the use of sound, images and texts.

To a high degree, mediatization affect reading, the book industry and the school, listening and the music industry, the theater, film and visual culture in both fine-arts and popular culture (Fornas 2011 p.5).

Shapes, colors and forms from ancient civilizations have formed the basis of some contemporary symbols. These sources were either from the mystic basis of religion, appropriated by astrology in understanding cosmological movements of the world, later researched and adopted by other fields of sciences. These associations had remained influential within contemporary thoughts.

Adam McDade in a blog post explains his studio process of updating iconographical reference to the contemporary through adoption of popular cultural materials to be accepted and used within the digital platform. He notes that, “the exploration into visualizing semiotic references to consciousness, psychedelia, and cultural iconography had led me to develop a few new techniques, that until recently had only been appropriated digitally” (McDade, 2014). McDade, appropriates iconography from the Sadatha Gautama’s cool sitting position to create a feeling of nirvana or enlightenment to the users of the product and not necessarily those who have attained the state of *satori*. By evoking the state of *satori* as standard of enlightenment, Mcdade seems to be approving this historical state of being as worthy of attainment in popular culture of Western Capitalism.

### **Conclusion**

Videos and images of Nick Vujicic recently went viral with fans all over the world commenting on his motivational teaching made more lucid by his limbless condition. Being born without legs and arms became a challenge and also a motivation to live and preach the word of God. Though a Christian, Vujicic an Australian tele-evangelist had become an icon of will-power, unstoppable drives and faith. In figure 4, the image of Vujicic against the blue blue sky and the vast blue ocean is symbolic of limitless, infinite power of the mind.

The use of the iconography of color, form or other symbols to frame a religious experience can be easily felt when we look at web designs and pages of most religious organizations. What appears in their website betrays a combination of earthly or worldly, mundane and a little bit of design that symbolizes spiritual consciousness. The reason adduced in this paper points to proliferation of images, designs, and infiltration of other cultural items within the internet platforms. The effect is that unlike medieval and early modern societies when majority of the people are exposed to icons, stories and experiences to their immediate cultural influences, the expansive media of ICT has made it possible for people to exist simultaneously on the local and trans-local platforms where cultural items from far and near is becoming part and parcel of our contemporary life.

There had never and will never be a time when concise and agreeable notion of the symbolism of color will be held by all groups and people of the earth. For this

reason, this study had only interrogated symbolic attachment to some colors, forms and thought that aptly define our current encounter with the ICT. Whether the style of iconography influenced by ICT is assisting converts towards their spiritual journey or towards enthronement of new god in ICT media is an issue of debate, what is important to this paper is that religious and secular forms are fusing to produce new sets of symbolism for new semiotic studies of our time.

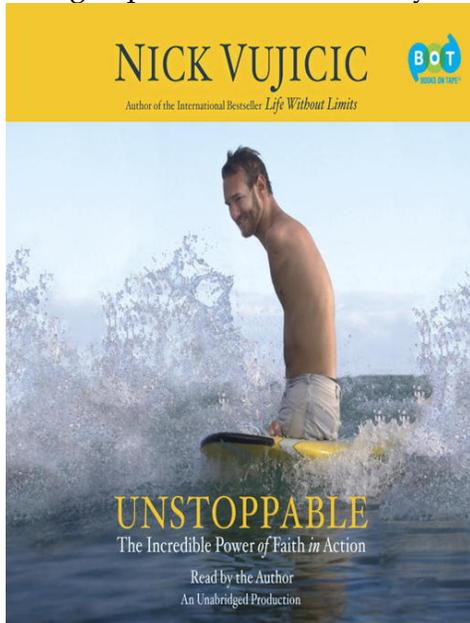


Fig 4. Photo of Nick Vujicic. Source: <https://oakland.overdrive.com/media>

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