

# Cross Iconography in Religious and Fashion Cultures

Sophia Garcia

## Introduction

The iconography of a cross in religion and fashion is a multifaceted symbol that captures spirituality and contemporary style across a vast network of people. The first introduction of the use of crosses dates back to the first century CE, the Common Era, in Jerusalem, when the Romans performed Roman crucifixion practices as a form of execution. In the present day, crosses are seen throughout the fashion industry, from jewelry to clothing, and used in religious contexts, from ritual practices to a symbol of faith. The cross symbol in these two cultures has spread globally as the fashion industry impacts cultures across nations, and religion has had a historical impact since the first century CE. In cultures such as fashion and religion, it is generated by the group's collective patterns, beliefs, ethics, and customs. Fashion culture ties into religion as religious individuals wear crosses to represent their faith. Gothic and Christianity use cross iconography in different ways but do have a slight overlap of similarities.

## Christianity Culture

In Christianity, the cross symbol can first be identified in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ by the Romans. The word crucifixion comes from the Latin root 'crux,' which translates to cross, and *figere*, which translates to 'fasten' (Vocabulary.com). It is a directed means of fastening one to a cross. Roman Crucifixion in the first century was a form of execution used where the charged individual was nailed to a wooden cross with horizontally stretched arms and feet nailed vertically to the beam (Shisley, 2024). The wooden beams of torture were initially used as

execution, which is how it led to how crosses are viewed in Christianity. In the Bible, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ became a beacon of Jesus Christ's love for his followers and humankind. In Galatians of the Bible, it is translated that Christ redeemed humans from evil as "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (English Standard Version Bible, 2016, Galatians 3:13). The Church Institute retells this story and uses crosses and crucifixes to be a reminder of Christ's sacrifices. The culture within Christianity is structured by the institute of the church and those who are followers of Christianity. Christianity's culture believes that the cross used in the Crucifixion of Christ keeps their faith that his resurrection three days signified eternal life in heaven, and when he returns to earth, it will be the end of time. In John 17:3 of the Bible, the apostles state, "this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." this is where it is inferred that believers obtain eternal life because of Christ's sacrifice (English Standard Version Bible, 2016, John 17:3). In religion, crosses were also seen within the ordinary people's fashion world. Around the second century AD, philosopher Tertullian considered Christians as "devotees of the cross," prompting this group to wear the cross visibly around their necks, which were wooden crosses strung on narrow leather bands (Fangonilo, 2021). This norm is continued even in the present day. Popes, cardinals, bishops, and the Christian community wear cross pendants and crucifixes as devotees of Christianity.

## Goth Culture

Goth emerged in the late 1970s with dark aesthetics that influenced music, fashion, and the overall lifestyle inspired by other subcultures such as punk (Nally, 2020). Crosses in fashion began with religious individuals wearing jewelry with crosses to represent their beliefs. Goth's use of Christian iconography in challenging ways defines the culture's dedication to individualism, acceptance, and shared interests in themes of pain and suffering (Latham, 2014,

p.280). In Gothic fashion, crosses are typically used in an opposing way, either to defy religion or to provide aesthetic pleasure. They were perceived to be used in a more evil use of the symbol. The culture within Gothic fashion is structured by the community, music, films, and literature that influenced the years of the goth scene. Goth emerged around the same time as the literary Romanticism period, and the two seemed to connect as Romanticism also centers on the ideas of individualism, themes of death, and other dark topics (Marshall, 2015). It seems that Goth cultures use cross iconography to combat the use of crosses in Christianity. Gothic and Romanticism were rooted in their curiosity about religion as the Age of Enlightenment, which emphasized intellectual and philosophical thinking, influenced or provoked a response from these genres (Bathaliya, 2024, p. 4-5). There is a common misconception that gothic fashion uses crosses only in an anti-Christ or rebellious way. Many goths also wear crosses to honor their religion. An individual can be both goth and religious; goth culture is not bounded by religion. In this culture, cross iconography is used both with honor and defiance.

## Reflection

In Catholicism, popes, priests, nuns, and many others use Latin crosses. I am more knowledgeable about Catholicism as I grew up in the Catholic church, but I am no longer religious. As a child, I would wear a cross ring to represent my faith, but once I became agnostic, I stopped wearing the ring. It felt wrong to wear a symbol of faith without being religious. My younger brother, who is also not religious, was gifted a cross necklace by our Catholic grandparents to wear. To this day, he wears the necklace because of its aesthetic pleasure rather than the religious connotation. Growing up Catholic gave me background knowledge on the religious use of crosses. I also attend CCD, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, every Sunday, an organization that offers religious education to Catholic children. Being immersed in

Christianity, I saw crosses everywhere, from inside the church to the twenty-five crosses nailed into the wall of my grandparents' house.

Due to my understanding of the symbol, I correlated the crucifix and a cross interchangeably. Even though I now identify as Agnostic, which is a person who is not committed to the belief or nonbelief of God, I still believe that crosses are reserved for religion, not fashion. Goth subculture has always appeared to be demonic, which I am sure ties into my bias towards religion. To me, goth, punk, and emo were grouped into one community even though goth and emo were subcultures of punk, and punk's precursor was rock. While they keep a few characteristics of the other, they have created an entirely new lifestyle genre. The cross symbol is reserved for religion in the minds of many. In the art world, artists use religious iconography as a form of expression, whether that is goth fashion or Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*. The line between expression and offense is often blurred in art. Cultures connect, mix, and sometimes offend one another while staying true to themselves.

## Conclusion

Gothic fashion and Christianity are assumed to be opposites on the similarity spectrum. However, their cultures both use crosses in religion and fashion, whether crucifixes and crosses hang around their necks or are printed on their jeans. Their use of the iconography of crosses represents the history of their culture. It has transformed over the years but keeps its core values through the strong sense of community they both have. There has been an argument against the use of crosses in the fashion world, which appears face-on in the discussion of goth and Christianity. There has even been criticism for using crosses in the high fashion industry, proving that it isn't a target against the gothic community in general but rather the art world.

## References

- Bagthaliya, R. B. (2024, January 10). *A Study of "The Gothic Elements in Romantic Literature" With A Focus on Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe's Works*. VidhyayanaeJournal. <https://j.vidhyayanaejournal.org/index.php/journal/article/download/1011/1112/4103>
- English Standard Version Bible. (2016). ESV Online. <https://www.bible.com/>
- Fangonilo, L. (2021, October 5). *The history of the Crucifix Necklace*. Oliver Cabell. <https://olivercabell.com/blogs/helpful-hints/the-history-of-the-crucifix-necklace?srsId=AfmBOoq-Lr-aUGsRbU2ec0MB3fSYGTIMp3caCtTcob7mLvTW7YjvOu8>
- Latham, R. (2014). Goths and God: Theological Reflections on a Subculture. *Practical Theology*, 7(4), 280–292. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1756073X14Z.000000000047>
- Marshall, B. M. (2015, January 22). *Romanticism and/or/vesus the Gothic*. Gothic v. Romanticism. <https://faculty.uml.edu/bmarshall/romanticismandgothicartlit.html#:~:text=I%20think%20it%20continues%20well,Individuality>
- Nally, C. (2020, April 27). *Goth*. Museum of Youth Culture. <https://www.museumofyouthculture.com/goth/#:~:text=Goth%20is%20a%20music%20category,commercial%20visibility%20in%20the%201990s>.
- Shisley, S. (2024, January 25). *Jesus and the Cross*. Biblical Archaeology Society. <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/crucifixion/jesus-and-the-cross/>
- Vocabulary.com. (n.d.). Crucifixion. In *Vocabulary.com Dictionary*. Retrieved October 28, 2024, from <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/crucifixion>