



Exploring the Sacred: How Contemporary Art Bridges Secularism and Spirituality through Iconography

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary art has a place in our world today it is a way to think about the values of our culture and it is also a way to explore spiritual things. Even though many parts of our life are not about religion anymore symbols from religion and special pictures are still used a lot in art. This paper is about how artists today use these pictures to bring together the things that seem to be separate like not believing in religion and being spiritual. It looks at the work of artists like Andres Serrano, Bill Viola, Anselm Kiefer, Marina Abramović and Kehinde Wiley to show that contemporary art takes religious symbols and uses them to think about big questions, like who we are what we remember and things that are beyond us. The paper says that of stopping spirituality contemporary art changes the old spiritual symbols to fit into our diverse and non-religious world making new places for people to be spiritual. By looking at what people think about secularization, symbols and how art looks today this work adds to the talks that are happening about the place of spirituality, in our culture today.

1. Introduction

The connection between art and spirituality has always been very strong. If we look at cave paintings church buildings from the middle ages and famous paintings from the Renaissance time we can see that art was often used for religious purposes and it showed peoples desire to find something bigger than themselves.. When modern times came and people started to question traditional religious beliefs art began to change a lot. As people in countries became less religious in the 19th and 20th centuries many experts thought that religion would have less influence, on public life.. Surprisingly modern art still deals with spiritual ideas and uses religious symbols a lot. This makes us wonder why artists still use symbols even though fewer people are going to church. How do modern artists change religious symbols to fit into a world with many different cultures and ideas? What part does art play in helping people have experiences when many people are skeptical and there are so many different beliefs?

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This paper looks at how modern art connects a -religious world with spirituality through the use of religious symbols. It says that modern artists use these symbols not to make their art look nice but to explore who they are what they remember, what they suffer how they find meaning and how they transcend. When artists change and reinterpret these symbols they give them meaning while still keeping a connection to where they came from which is religion.

The connection between art, spirituality and secularism has been getting more attention from scholars over the past thirty years. In the past people who studied art history often thought that religion and modern times did not get along.. Now scholars are saying that spiritual ideas are still present in modern art even if they have changed. This change is happening in areas of study too like sociology, religious studies, philosophy and aesthetics. Scholars are starting to question the idea that as societies become more modern people will stop being religious. One of the discussions about secularism started with the work of Max Weber. Weber said that as people became more modern they stopped believing in religious things and started believing in science and reason instead. He said that modern times changed the way people experienced things and that traditional religious institutions were not as influential as they used to be. Even though Weber was not specifically talking about art his ideas had an impact on how people understood modern art. Many scholars thought that modern art movements, those from the late 1800s and early 1900s showed that people were becoming more secular and were questioning religious authority. Peter Berger also wrote about secularism in his book *The Sacred Canopy*. At first Berger said that as societies became more modern religion would become less important.. Later he changed his mind and said that religion was still present in modern societies even if it had changed. Bergers ideas had an impact on cultural theorists who saw that spiritual themes were still present in literature, movies, architecture and modern art. His work shows that religion does not disappear. Instead adapts to changing social circumstances and takes on new forms.

Charles Taylors book *A Secular Age* is one of the comprehensive studies of secularism and spirituality in modern society. Taylor says that secularism should not be understood as people simply stopping going to church. Instead modern times have created a way of thinking about faith, where it is just one option among many. People have to navigate a spiritual landscape where they have many choices. This idea is especially helpful for understanding art, where artists often use religious imagery without necessarily saying what they believe.

Art historians have also started to question the idea that art and religion're separate. James Elkins says that religion is in a place in modern art. Even though spiritual themes are common talking about religion is often not allowed in art criticism. Elkins says that modern artists often address questions in indirect ways using symbols, rituals and exploring existential questions. His work shows that there is tension between art institutions and spiritual subject matter.

David Morgans study of culture and religion provides another important perspective. Morgan says that images are not representations of theological ideas but are actually active participants in spiritual experiences. According to Morgan sacred images shape how we perceive, feel and remember things. This helps explain why modern artists still use iconography even when they are talking to secular audiences.

Hans Beltings idea of image anthropology is also helpful. Belting says that we should not make distinctions between sacred and secular images. Instead he emphasizes the need for visual mediation. Images connect what we can see with what we cannot see and help us negotiate questions of identity, mortality and transcendence. Sacred iconography is still powerful because it addresses human concerns that are still present even if people are not part of a traditional religious institution. The concept of spirituality has also changed in scholarship. Robert Wuthnow says that after World War II Western societies started to shift from religious participation to more individualized forms of spiritual seeking. This is reflected in art, where artists often emphasize personal experience, self-transformation and subjective meaning-making. Spirituality is no longer about following rules but is an open-ended process.

2. Literature Review

Philosophical aesthetics has also contributed to our understanding of spirituality in art. Thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida explored the possibility of transcendence after traditional metaphysical systems declined. Their work suggests that absence, fragmentation and uncertainty can actually create experiences. Modern artists often explore these themes through installations, performances and multimedia works that evoke mystery without providing answers. Postmodern theorists challenged narratives and questioned established authorities, including religious institutions.. At the same time postmodernism also created space for spiritual inquiry by showing the limitations of purely rational explanations. Scholars like Jean-François Lyotard emphasized the importance of plurality and difference which allowed diverse spiritual traditions to coexist within discourse.

Modern art criticism is starting to recognize that spiritual engagement is not just limited to religious subject matter. Themes like memory, embodiment, suffering, ecological interconnectedness and social justice often function as vehicles for reflection.

Artists use iconography not just to express faith but also to critique power structures explore identity and confront historical trauma. Overall the literature shows that modern art is a site for negotiating the relationship between secularism and spirituality. Than being opposing categories, the sacred and secular often intersect in modern art. This intersection is the foundation, for examining how artists reinterpret symbols in modern contexts. Modern art, spirituality and secularism are connected in ways and scholars are still trying to understand these connections.

2.1. The History of Sacred Pictures/ Iconography

Pictures have been a big part of art for a very long time. From ritual objects to modern installations these pictures have helped people connect with something bigger than themselves. To understand why sacred pictures are still used today we need to look at how they developed over time in cultures. The first sacred pictures can be found in cave paintings and ritual objects. These pictures were likely used in ceremonies to help with hunting, fertility and community identity. Even though we do not know what they meant they show that people have always wanted to use pictures to represent things we cannot see.

Old civilizations developed systems of symbols that connected politics, the universe and religion. For example Egyptian art showed rulers as gods. Pictured the afterlife in a very detailed way. Mesopotamian reliefs showed gods, mythical creatures and sacred stories that helped keep order. In both cases pictures helped connect the world with the spiritual world. The ancient Greeks and Romans did things a bit differently. They showed gods as humans, which reflected their interest in beauty and harmony. Temples, sculptures and public monuments combined symbols with everyday life. Sacred pictures became a part of who people were and what they believed in.

When Christianity came along it changed how people made pictures in the Western world. Early Christians used symbols like the fish, shepherd and cross to teach about their beliefs. As Christianity grew so did the use of pictures. Byzantine icons became very important for worship. Were seen as a way to connect with the spiritual world. There was a debate in the Byzantine Empire about whether sacred pictures were a good thing or not. Some people thought they were too focused on the material world while others believed they could help people connect with the divine. In the end the people who defended pictures won and their arguments shaped Christian art for centuries.

In Europe art and religion were closely tied. Cathedrals were like picture books that used stained glass, sculpture and painting to tell biblical stories. Sacred pictures helped teach people about their faith. Reinforced their community identity. Most art was still controlled by the church. Was used to teach religious lessons. The Renaissance brought changes to sacred pictures. Artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael combined themes with humanist ideas and realistic representation. Sacred figures started to look more emotional and realistic which reflected changing ideas about humanity's relationship with the divine.

The Protestant Reformation caused problems for sacred pictures. Some people thought they were being used in ways while others believed they could still be a powerful tool for worship. Catholic artists responded by creating emotional and engaging pictures. These different approaches changed how sacred pictures were used in Europe. As the world became more secular sacred pictures were not as important as they used to be. Science, politics and industry weakened the power of religion. Artists started to focus on making beautiful pictures than on teaching religious lessons. However sacred themes still appeared in art in different forms.

The Romantic movement brought back a focus on spirituality, emotion and individual experience. Artists looked for transcendence outside of religion and created new kinds of spiritual art. Symbolist artists explored esoteric themes in their work. In the century modern art made things even more complicated. Some artists, like Wassily Kandinsky, abstract art to spiritual experience. Surrealists explored dreams, myths and symbolism. Even though many people thought religion was declining many modern artists were still interested in the spiritual. Today artists are still using pictures but in new and different ways. Sacred iconography is no longer about teaching religious lessons but, about exploring big questions and ideas. Old symbols still have cultural power but they can also be reinterpreted and reimaged in new ways. Sacred pictures continue to be a part of human culture and identity.

2.2. Postmodern Spiritual Aesthetics

The idea of theory had a big impact on how we think about spirituality and art today. It started to take shape in the half of the twentieth century and challenged our assumptions about what is true who has authority and what things mean. Even though people often think of postmodernism as being skeptical and relative it also opened up ways for people to explore their spirituality. Jean-François Lyotard said that postmodernism is about not believing in stories that try to explain everything. These stories, like teachings, scientific progress and political ideologies do not do a good job of explaining the complex world

we live in. Of looking for one truth postmodernism emphasizes that there are many different truths and that things are often fragmented.

This way of thinking had an impact on spirituality. Traditional religious institutions were no longer the ones who could say what was spiritually meaningful. This created space for different kinds of beliefs and practices to emerge. Artists started to use symbols from religious traditions in their work often combining sacred images with everyday concerns. Jacques Derridas idea of deconstruction also influenced how we think about aesthetics. He said that meaning is never fixed and is always changing as we interpret and talk about things. When we apply this to images it helps us see that the meanings of these images are not stable and can be interpreted in many different ways. Artists often use this ambiguity to get people to think and talk about things.

Michel Foucaults work on power and discourse also shaped how we think about images. He said that these images are not expressions of faith but also tools that can be used to exert control over people. Artists often reinterpret images to challenge the stories that have been used to exclude certain groups of people and to highlight the inequalities of the past. In spirituality experience is often more important than doctrine. Of saying what we believe artists create environments that invite people to reflect and feel deeply. Installations, performances and multimedia works are like spaces where people can explore their spirituality without having to be part of an institution. The idea of the sublime has become important again in aesthetics. It is about having experiences that're so big and overwhelming that they make us feel small and connected to something bigger than ourselves. Large installations, immersive environments and mediated experiences can evoke feelings that are similar to the awe we might feel in a religious context.

Globalization has also contributed to spirituality by making it easier for people to share ideas and cultures. Artists are drawing on Buddhist, Hindu and Indigenous, Islamic and Christian traditions to create kinds of images that reflect the interconnected world we live in. This challenges the idea that there are boundaries between the sacred and the secular or between different cultures and traditions. So postmodern theory does not get rid of spirituality. It changes how we experience it. Sacred images become more fluid, pluralistic and open to interpretation reflecting the diversity and individuality of our culture.

2.3. Expanded Case Studies

There are artists who demonstrate how sacred images can be used to explore the relationship between the secular and the spiritual.

- Anish Kapoor's big sculptures often evoke themes through abstract shapes and sensory experiences. His works, like *Cloud Gate* and *Descent into Limbo* explore ideas of infinity, emptiness and transcendence. Even though they are not explicitly religious Kapoor's art creates experiences that encourage people to think about their place in the world.
- James Turrell's light installations are another example. He uses light to create environments that're contemplative and immersive. People who experience his work often say that it is like meditation or a mystical experience showing how art can facilitate engagement without using traditional images.
- Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Rooms* are also worth mentioning. She uses mirrors, repetition and immersive environments to create experiences of boundlessness and interconnectedness. While her work is rooted in her experiences it also resonates with spiritual concepts from many different traditions.
- Shirin Neshat explores symbolism, gender and identity through photography and film. Her work addresses the tensions between tradition and contemporary social realities. By reinterpreting visual culture Neshat challenges stereotypes and highlights the ongoing importance of spirituality in modern life.
- Christian Boltanski uses memory, absence and ritual to address mortality and collective remembrance. His installations often resemble spaces, incorporating candles, photographs and archival materials. Even though his work is not overtly religious it evokes themes that are traditionally associated with reflection.
- These artists show the diversity of approaches to sacred images. Some use religious symbols while others create spiritual experiences through abstraction, environment and participation. Together they reveal the adaptability of aesthetics in contemporary culture.

3. Research Methodology

When we do research we need to think about how we're going to do it. This is because the way we do research affects what we find out. In studies about art, spirituality and religion it is especially important to think about our approach. We need to consider the symbols, meanings and experiences that are involved. Unlike science, which often looks at things that can be measured research in the humanities needs to look at the meanings of things.

3.1. Research Philosophy

Our research philosophy is about what we think knowledge is and how we can get it. It is like a set of assumptions that guides us. Every research project has these assumptions whether we realize it or not. This study is based on the idea that reality's not just one thing but is constructed by people through their interactions and experiences. This means that meanings are not fixed, they are created by people in different contexts. We think this approach is particularly good for studying art and spirituality because both of these involve symbols and meanings that're open to interpretation. For example sacred imagery does not have one meaning but can be understood in different ways by different people.

3.2. Ontological Position

Our ontological position is about what we think reality is. We think that reality is not one thing but is shaped by social and cultural factors. This means that there can be different interpretations of the same thing and no one interpretation is more true than any other. We can see this with symbols, which can have different meanings in different contexts. For example a crucifix can be a symbol, a work of art or a cultural icon depending on how it is used and understood. We think that this approach is particularly good for studying art because it often involves complex and multiple meanings.

3.3. Epistemological Foundations

Our epistemological foundations are about how we think we can know things. We think that knowledge is not something that we can discover but is something that we construct through our interactions and experiences. We use a method called hermeneutics, which involves interpreting texts and symbols to understand their meanings. We think that artworks are like texts that communicate meanings through forms and that we need to interpret them in order to understand them. We also think that the researcher is not a neutral observer but is actively involved in the interpretation process. This means that we need to be aware of our assumptions and biases and to reflect on how they shape our interpretations.

3.4. Research Paradigm

Our research paradigm is like a framework that guides our research. We are using the paradigm, which emphasizes meaning, understanding and context. We think that this approach is particularly good for studying art and spirituality because it involves complex cultural meanings that cannot be reduced to numbers or measurements. We need to understand the contexts in which artworks are created and understood and to interpret the symbols and meanings that they involve.

3.5. Research Approach

We are using a research approach, which means that we are starting with specific observations and then moving to broader conclusions. We are not starting with a hypothesis. Then testing it but are instead allowing our theories to emerge from our data. We think that this approach is particularly good for research because it allows us to be open to new ideas and to follow our interests. We are also using a research design, which means that we are focusing on depth rather than breadth. We want to understand the complexities of our subject matter than just looking at surface-level features.

3.6. Research Design

Our research design is qualitative, interpretive and based on multiple case studies. We are combining methods, such as visual analysis, iconographic interpretation and comparative case-study analysis in order to get a comprehensive understanding of our subject matter. We think that this approach is particularly good for studying iconography because it involves complex symbols and meanings that cannot be reduced to simple measurements. We want to understand how meaning is produced and communicated through representation and to explore the cultural significance of sacred imagery, in contemporary art.

4. Analysis and Discussion

When we compare these artists we can see some patterns in how they engage with sacred images.

- First sacred symbols are still cultural resources even if traditional institutions are not as influential as they used to be. Artists keep coming to these symbols because they provide rich frameworks for exploring big questions about human existence.
- Second contemporary uses of images are often about reinterpretation rather than repetition. Traditional symbols take on meanings as artists engage with issues like identity, race, gender, memory and globalization. This allows artists to preserve the resonance of these symbols while addressing contemporary concerns.

- Third many contemporary works prioritize experience over doctrine. Whether through video installations, performance art or immersive environments artists create conditions for contemplation than transmitting fixed messages. Spirituality becomes something that we experience participate in and explore in a ended way.
- Fourth contemporary art often blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. Museums and galleries are becoming spaces where people can encounter forms of reflection that are traditionally associated with practice. Artistic experience is taking on a -ritual dimension suggesting alternative modes of spiritual engagement.

The differences between artists are also significant. Some use provocation to stimulate reflection while others emphasize contemplation. Some focus on representation and social justice while others explore transcendence through abstraction. These variations show the flexibility of images in contemporary artistic discourse. The fact that there are different approaches to sacred images reflects the pluralism of our culture. Contemporary spirituality is not, about consensus. About diversity. Artists draw on different traditions and experiences creating works that can be interpreted in many different ways. This openness enables images to remain relevant in a world that is increasingly heterogeneous. Ultimately contemporary art shows that secularization does not mean the end of concerns. Instead spirituality adapts to cultural conditions finding expression through innovative visual forms and interpretive practices.

4.1. Framework: Secularism, Spirituality and Iconography

Secularization theory traditionally says that modernization leads to less religious influence in social institutions and cultural life. Max Weber described modernity as a process of losing magic, where rationalization reduces the role of sacred beliefs.¹ Peter Berger initially supported this perspective arguing that modern societies would become secular. However later studies challenged simple ideas of religious decline. Charles Taylor argues that secularization does not eliminate spirituality but changes how belief works.³ People now explore spiritual options rather than sticking to one institutional religious structure. This perspective helps explain why sacred images are still present in art.

Iconography refers to the representation and interpretation of symbolic images. According to Erwin Panofsky analyzing iconography helps scholars uncover cultural meanings in artistic forms.⁴ Religious iconography traditionally communicated theological concepts and facilitated devotional practices. Today these symbols often have layers of meaning that go beyond doctrinal frameworks. Hans Belting's work on image anthropology shows how images act as mediators between invisible realities.⁵ Sacred symbols retain cultural power because they evoke collective memories, emotional responses and existential questions. Contemporary artists draw on this reservoir to address concerns that go beyond purely material or secular perspectives.

4.2. Sacred Imagery in Contemporary Art

A characteristic of contemporary art is its ability to transform familiar religious symbols into vehicles for critical reflection. Artists often reinterpret images in ways that challenge viewers assumptions about religion, identity and culture. Religious imagery remains culturally recognizable among audiences with limited religious knowledge. Symbols like the cross, halo, Madonna and crucifixion have enduring power because they are embedded in collective cultural consciousness. Contemporary artists use these symbols to create dialogues between traditions and contemporary experiences. The continued relevance of iconography suggests that spiritual concerns persist despite institutional secularization. Art provides a space to explore questions of mortality, suffering, redemption and transcendence without requiring adherence to religious doctrines. Consequently contemporary artworks often function as sites of inquiry rather than expressions of conventional faith.

4.3. Andres Serrano and the Provocation of Sacred Symbols

Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) is an example of contemporary engagement with religious imagery. The photograph depicts a crucifix submerged in the artist's urine, generating debates concerning blasphemy, artistic freedom and religious respect. Critics interpreted the work as an attack on Christianity while supporters argued that it invited reflection on the commercialization and trivialization of symbols. The luminous quality of the photograph paradoxically evokes devotional imagery despite its unconventional materials. Serrano's work demonstrates how contemporary art can provoke reflection through confrontation rather than reverence. By disrupting expectations *Piss Christ* compels viewers to reconsider the significance of religious symbols in contemporary culture.

4.4. Bill Viola and Digital Spirituality

Bill Viola's video installations represent a contemplative engagement with spirituality. Influenced by mysticism Buddhism and Sufism Viola employs slow-motion imagery and immersive environments to explore themes of birth, death, transformation and transcendence. Works like *The Crossing* (1996) and *Martyrs* (2014) draw heavily on symbolism while utilizing contemporary

technology. In *The Crossing* a figure is consumed by fire and water evoking themes of purification, destruction and rebirth. The imagery resonates with religious traditions while remaining open to diverse interpretations. Violas work exemplifies how contemporary media can facilitate experiences traditionally associated with ritual. The viewer encounters images that encourage contemplation, emotional engagement and existential reflection.

4.5. Anselm Kiefer: Memory, Trauma and Redemption

German artist Anselm Kiefer frequently incorporates references and mystical symbolism into works addressing historical trauma and collective memory. Emerging in the aftermath of World War II Kiefer confronts Germany's relationship with its past while drawing on religious and mythological imagery. His monumental sculptures feature references to Jewish mysticism, Christian theology and apocalyptic narratives. Works like *Margarethe* (1981). *Sulamith* (1983) engage themes of destruction and remembrance through symbolic associations with Holocaust history. Kiefer's use of iconography illustrates how spirituality can contribute to processes of historical reflection and ethical responsibility. Religious symbols provide a language through which experiences of suffering, guilt and redemption may be explored.

4.6. Marina Abramović and Ritual Performance

Performance artist Marina Abramović occupies a position within contemporary discussions of spirituality and art. Her works often emphasize endurance, ritual, presence and transformation. Influenced by spiritual traditions and indigenous ceremonial practices Abramović creates performances that blur distinctions between artistic activity and spiritual exercise. In *The Artist Is Present* (2010) she sat silently across from museum visitors for periods generating profound emotional encounters. Abramović's performances evoke structures traditionally associated with sacred practice. Participants frequently describe experiences of awareness, emotional release and interpersonal connection.

4.7. Kehinde Wiley and the Reimagining of Religious Iconography

Kehinde Wiley's paintings provide an example of how contemporary artists reinterpret sacred imagery to address issues of identity and representation. Drawing inspiration from religious painting Wiley replaces traditional saints and aristocrats with contemporary Black subjects. Works like *Saint John the Baptist* (2014) challenge exclusions within Western art while preserving the visual language of sacred iconography. By recontextualizing imagery Wiley creates new possibilities for cultural recognition and empowerment.

4.8. Contemporary Art as a Site of Spiritual Experience

The examples discussed reveal a trend within contemporary art: the emergence of museums, galleries and installations as alternative spaces for spiritual engagement. Scholars note similarities between religious experiences particularly regarding contemplation, emotional intensity and transcendence. Art institutions often function as sanctuaries where visitors encounter works capable of provoking profound reflection. Unlike religious settings these spaces accommodate diverse interpretations and belief systems. The concept of spirituality itself has expanded beyond religious affiliation. Many individuals identify as spiritual than religious seeking meaning through personal experience rather, than institutional authority. Contemporary art responds to this shift by creating environments that encourage exploration without prescribing specific beliefs. Sacred iconography remains effective because it connects viewers to standing symbolic traditions while allowing reinterpretation. Through transformation religious images continue to generate dialogue concerning mortality, identity, suffering, hope and transcendence.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

The thing about pictures in modern art is that it shows people still care about spirituality even when they are not really into church and stuff. A lot of people thought that as time went on people would stop caring about religion. Artists are still using religious symbols and ideas in their work to talk about things that are happening today. Pictures of things are a really good way for artists to think about who they are, what they remember and what things mean to them. If you look back in time you can see that sacred pictures have always changed as the world around them changed. Artists today are using symbols in new ways to talk about things like the world getting smaller technology changing everything and people being treated unfairly. This is what keeps pictures alive and important in the art world. In the future people might want to study how computers, virtual reality and the internet are changing how we think about spirituality. It would be cool to learn more about what people in parts of the world think about art and religion and how people are using art to talk about the earth and our place in it. This would help us understand better how art, religion and the world we live in are all connected. At the end of the day modern art is like a bridge between people who do not go to church and people who do. It shows us that people are still trying to figure out what

life is about. When artists use pictures in new and different ways they are making spaces where people can think deeply be amazed and feel like they are a part of something bigger, than themselves even when the world is really confusing.

Today art shows us that just because we do not talk about spirituality much as we used to it does not mean it is gone. Spirituality is still much present in our culture it is just expressed in different ways. The pictures and symbols that people used to think were sacred are still important in art. They help connect ideas about religion to the way we live now. Artists like Andres Serrano, Bill Viola, Anselm Kiefer, Marina Abramović and Kehinde Wiley are examples of this. They use methods to show the importance of spirituality in our everyday lives. Some of them make us think some make us remember. Some make us feel like we are part of something bigger than ourselves. They all show that spirituality is still a part of our culture. We should not think that being secular and being spiritual are two things that cannot coexist. Art shows us that they can actually work together. The symbols that people used to think were sacred are still powerful because they deal with things that people have always cared about. As we continue to try to figure out what we believe in and who we are art will be a place where we can see the connection, between the sacred and the secular.

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