

<b>Institution:</b> King's College London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 31 Theology and Religious Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Christianity and the Arts		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2013–2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Professor Ben Quash	Professor of Christianity & the Arts, Director of the Centre for Arts & the Sacred, KCL	From 2007
Dr Michelle Fletcher	Research Fellow	From 2017
Dr Chloë Reddaway	Research Fellow	From 2012
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014–2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		

### 1. Summary of the impact

Adapting ancient precedents, King's has pioneered a new model of 'conversational' scriptural interpretation in which visual art is used as a dialogue partner with the Bible. The contemporary conversational engagement of art with Scripture builds mutual understanding and creative perspectives on present issues for non-religious as well as religious audiences. The approach has crucial importance for our increasingly polarised and conflictual times.

This research has had a direct and wide-reaching impact on (i) the funding priorities of a major philanthropic foundation in the USA (Fieldstead & Co.); (ii) two major galleries (the National Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A)) which have developed curatorial and public education initiatives based on the conversational paradigm developed at King's; (iii) a growing ecumenical network of churches worldwide, which have used it to deepen community while fostering greater understanding of other traditions; and (iv) the resourcing of both Christian ministerial training (in the UK and the US) and RE teaching (in the UK), and in particular the successful piloting of online formational study at a London school.

### 2. Underpinning research

Theology and the Arts is a leading research area at King's: the UoA has concentrated expertise in theological hermeneutics [1,4], visual exegesis [1,3,5], the devotional uses of art [1], and art's capacity to act as a theological medium [2,5]. King's research has shown how a 'conversational' approach to the interaction of the Bible and visual art has direct continuities with the symposia of ancient Greece and Rome, and with ancient dialogical forms of Jewish and Christian commentary – especially the Talmud and Christian *catenae* [4,5]. We diagnosed the need for an accessible, contemporary equivalent of such ancient scriptural commentary forms, and sought to create a comprehensive online analogue to traditional illuminated Scriptures like the *biblia pauperum* and *Bible Moralisée*.

We developed a theoretical framework for this ambitious project that combines the 'reception aesthetics' (*Rezeptionsästhetik*) of the Konstanz School of literary studies with Christian theological accounts of the Holy Spirit ('pneumatology') to analyse how visual art and biblical texts can interact in the present [1]. Works of art – like the texts of Scripture with which they are frequently in dialogue – can have valuable new meanings unfolded from them in new historical contexts. Quash has shown that, viewed in this framework, neither the biblical text nor any individual artwork need be regarded as just an historical artefact, speaking only of the circumstances of its original production. His research explores how encounters with text and artworks can be envisioned as an enriching and transformative process which leads communities of interpreters beyond the specific meanings that have previously been read out of the Bible [1,5].

This research produced the hermeneutical principles that now undergird *The Visual Commentary on Scripture* (VCS; thevcs.org) [4]. Its innovation is to focus on how biblical texts are capable of productive 'speech' in the present (i.e. generative of new transformative meanings for

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contemporary audiences), and how this can be catalysed through the curated deployment of visual art to provide fresh contexts for reading and discussing Scripture in conversational mode.

A supple awareness of how different perspectives can interact productively in the interpretation of the Bible is essential in offsetting narrowly doctrinaire and potentially violent readings of biblical texts. Visual art is typically a hospitable space for multiple viewpoints to be explored [3,5], and the ‘conversational’ mode of interaction fostered by groups of three artworks (as is standard at thevcs.org) promotes peaceable rather than conflictual interpretative practices.

As the VCS demonstrates, new juxtapositions of text and artwork disclose a shared context: the ‘one world’ we share, despite the many perspectives on it that necessarily coexist in human history and in the present [1].

The VCS has attracted international media coverage, and KCL’s pioneering approach to engagement with art as a catalyst for the interpretation of the Bible has informed several recent BBC broadcasts, including BBC1’s *Songs of Praise* and Radio 4’s *Sunday Worship* [J].

### 3. References to the research

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1. Quash, B. (2013). *Found Theology: History, Imagination, and the Holy Spirit*. London: T&T Clark. T&T Clark is a highly distinguished international publishers of academic theology.
2. Reddaway, C.R. (2015). *Transformations in Persons and Paint: Visual Theology, Historical Images, and the Modern Viewer*. Turnhout: Brepols. This book launched the new academic series Arts and the Sacred (ASAC) from Brepols, which now runs to several volumes.
3. Fletcher, M. (2017) *Reading Revelation as Pastiche: Imitating the Past*. Series: The Library of New Testament Studies (LNTS). London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark). The LNTS is one of the most highly respected book series in its field.
4. Quash, B. (2018). ‘The Theological and Hermeneutical Principles of The Visual Commentary on Scripture’, The VCS website, [www.thevcs.org/about](http://www.thevcs.org/about). This article was peer-reviewed by an advisory group of 20 theologians, art historians and biblical scholars.
5. Quash, B. (2021). *The Visual Commentary on Scripture: Principles and Platforms*. In S. Beaumont & M. E. Thiele, *Transforming Christian Thought in the Visual Arts: Theology, Aesthetics and Practice* (delayed output). Abingdon & New York: Routledge. A peer-reviewed book of scholarly essays arising from a conference held with the University of Chichester in 2018.

### 4. Details of the impact

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#### Impact 1: Fieldstead & Co.

King’s underpinning research produced theological and hermeneutical principles [4] that convinced a philanthropic organisation in the USA to explore the potential of art in online spaces to create dialogue for the public good, and to fund the VCS website. The organisation is now committed to supporting this innovative approach more extensively.

In 2016, we shared ‘The Theological and Hermeneutical Principles of the VCS’ and supporting materials (including draft examples of online exhibitions) with Fieldstead & Co., an organisation in the USA that supports causes it perceives to be of major public and international benefit (including affordable housing; community-centred town planning; and Christian–Muslim dialogue in Indonesia). This resulted in a GBP6 million investment to extend the scope and reach of The Visual Commentary on Scripture. The website was launched at Tate Modern in 2018 and is now in the process of creating 1,300 online exhibitions, featuring 3,900 high-resolution artworks, covering the entire canon of Christian Scripture. To date 225 exhibitions have been produced and displayed online. VCS exhibitions have created new dialogues in which historical works of art become a catalyst for present-day reflection, and established new audiences for such artworks. This, in turn, reveals new potential for meaning in the artworks themselves.

Fieldstead’s Senior Vice President confirmed that its major investment in the VCS “*represents a significant recalibration of our funding priorities*” [A]. Fieldstead has been influenced by Quash’s research to support further projects that use visual art to explore religious ideas for the public benefit, and in October 2019 opened a contemporary art gallery based in Los Angeles (Bridge Projects [J]) to foster “*more advanced and more open interdisciplinary explorations of the relations between contemporary art, spirituality, and religious traditions*”.

#### Impact 2: The National Gallery and the V&A

King’s research has directly influenced curatorial practice at these two major art institutions. Both the National Gallery and the V&A have drawn upon the VCS methodology to generate dialogue

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about and between religious traditions, and to engage a wider public in conversation with religious ideas and biblical stories.

The National Gallery's Director of Collections and Research, Dr Caroline Campbell, confirmed the longstanding impact of the UoA's research, writing that *"The original research being undertaken by scholars of theology and biblical studies at King's College London has continued to play a fundamental role in informing new initiatives at the National Gallery, as it comes into dialogue with the art-historical expertise of our curators and researchers"* [B]. Dr Campbell testifies that *"Professor Ben Quash's theological research in combination with [then National Gallery Curator] Dr Jennifer Sliwka's art-historical research enabled us to produce a series of 10 films on John the Baptist in art (presented by Quash and Sliwka) in 2014 [J], now hosted permanently on the NG's website. These have had over 82,000 viewers (and over 1,500 likes) as of December 2020"* [B].

The National Gallery has programmed several recent exhibitions that examine explicitly religious themes, such as Visions of Paradise (2015) and Sin (2020). Dr Sliwka, Curator of Visions of Paradise, confirmed that *"much of the material explored in this exhibition developed out of the collaborative work I did alongside KCL scholars (Professor Ben Quash, Dr Robin Griffith-Jones and others) ... [T]his research enabled me to re-situate [Botticini's Palmieri Altarpiece] into its original context, and better understand the wishes of its commissioner"* [B]. Sliwka, who joined King's in 2017 to become Deputy Director of the VCS, affirmed that during her curatorial work for the National Gallery her collaborations with Quash and his colleagues *"led me to think more deeply about the original intended functions of devotional works of art in the NG collection"* [B].

Similarly, the National Gallery's Curator in Art and Religion, Dr Joost Joustra, testified that *"my ideas, methods, and approaches have drawn deeply on the research culture and outputs of King's Department of Theology and Religious Studies"* [B]. Dr Joustra, who led the curation of Sin, states that *"An active partnership and ongoing conversations with Professor Ben Quash and his colleagues [...] was fundamental to the conception of Sin, and explicitly informed the choice of works, the exhibition interpretation (wall text and labels) and the accompanying publication, Sin: The Art of Transgression."* He specifically implemented Quash's conversational methodology in this exhibition, resulting in *"a different sort of curation"* [B]: *"using often surprising, diachronic juxtapositions of works to encourage a 'conversation' – both between the works, and between the works and the diverse audiences of the exhibition, who were encouraged to find and share their own pathways through the exhibition and think about a central religious (and inter religious) question"* [B]. Dr Campbell confirmed the significant impact of the conversational model pioneered by Quash and his team: *"These novel, religiously informed approaches to art developed in our partnership with King's, and the conversational approach to art which brings historic and contemporary works of art together to ask ethical and spiritual questions, has fed into our planning of various new exhibitions on religious themes [...] The curators worked very closely with King's theologians in designing these ground-breaking exhibitions, opening up fresh perspectives on the sacred art at the National Gallery for contemporary audiences"* [B]. A TLS review of Sin further indicates the success of Quash's conversational approach, affirming this exhibition's *"undogmatic ... transgression of fixed meaning": "suggestive juxtaposition takes the place of hard exegesis"* [B].

The National Gallery was inspired by the success of Dr Reddaway's research [2] to commission her to write and present a series of seven films for its website entitled The Audacity of Christian Art in 2017 [J]. More recently, it has prepared to launch a new strand of its public engagement activity in Art and Religion. As a direct consequence of King's research, the Gallery has invited a wider public into conversations about the Bible and its role in art. A new National Gallery inter-faith forum has been developed on the basis of the conversational approach to art and religion modelled in the King's–National Gallery partnership, to allow predominantly Christian bodies of art to function as a starting point for conversation between people with diverse religious and philosophical interests. Dr Campbell emphasises the distinctiveness of this initiative: *"This cutting-edge 'triangulated' relationship between a university department (King's), a national art collection (the National Gallery) and faith leaders across the board (from the contacts of both institutions) is unique in the UK as a way of opening up dialogue and using art as a way of bringing people together in a cohesive and congenial spirit, and in a less contentious way than direct discussions of disputed texts and doctrines might do"* (E2). These developments have been intensified by National Gallery curators' close involvement in the VCS, which has shaped their curatorial

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practice. The VCS model moves beyond the consideration of how to tell ‘the story of art’, to ask questions *with the help of art* about what sort of a world we think we inhabit, and how to live in it well.

In 2020, the V&A completed a major refurbishment of its Raphael Court, on the 500th anniversary of Raphael’s death. The V&A invited Quash to collaborate on a half-hour film to celebrate the occasion, which will be hosted on both the V&A and VCS websites. The production of this film was inspired by the VCS’s conversational approach, and by previous films produced in a conversational mode (cf. *John the Baptist*, referred to above [J]). The V&A film stages a dialogue between an art historian, an historian and a theologian on how the biblical themes of Raphael’s famous Cartoons might speak to diverse audiences. This marks a new approach to presenting the Cartoons to a wider public, not just as historical artefacts but as works with the capacity to inform present perspectives and shared societal reflection. Dr Ana Debenedetti, Curator of Paintings at the V&A, explains that the Cartoons project *“included a new interpretive approach to provide the public with a deeper level of access to the Raphael Cartoons ... I discerned a way in which the underpinning research done at King’s in order to establish the principles and methods of the Visual Commentary on Scripture could be of great value to the project in opening up the Raphael Cartoons to new interpretations”* [C].

### Impact 3: Churches

Religious leaders and congregations have successfully used the VCS to foster a conversational mode of scriptural interpretation; to build ecumenical understanding between Christian traditions; and to sustain community during the Covid-19 pandemic. This proved especially beneficial (emotionally, spiritually and intellectually) during Holy Week 2020 and in Advent 2020.

The VCS facilitated the global reach of King’s research. Hundreds of churches worldwide have benefited from the distinctive textual and visual resources provided in VCS exhibitions. These beneficiaries range across most Christian denominations, whose members are introduced through the VCS to the art and interpretative perspectives of diverse Christian cultures (Coptic Ethiopian, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Pentecostal), as well as Jewish perspectives. Churches have used the VCS to teach how the Bible and visual art are historically intertwined, and to enact an ongoing dialogue between the Bible and visual art that has cultural and personal significance, and provides an aid to devotion. In 2019, *The Tablet* reported that the VCS *“offers a new way to pray”* [J].

In Holy Week 2020, we launched a daily VCS exhibition which ran from Palm Sunday until Easter Monday. This caused VCS subscription numbers to treble, and increased regular church use, which has remained at the higher level (35,000 page views per month) ever since, with the help of daily tweets on social media, as well as wide-reaching press coverage (e.g. *The Christian Post*, *The Spectator* [J]).

The VCS is being used as a focus of study groups and a resource for preachers. The church resourcing movement HeartEdge [J], initiated by the congregation of St Martin-in-the-Fields in 2017, promotes the VCS as a tool for growing and enriching the lives of parish communities. The Revd Jonathan Evens confirmed that the UoA’s research on the relationship between Christianity and the Arts has been *“a key resource and inspiration for HeartEdge’s ‘Culture’ strand”* and has *“played a vital part in how we conceive of, as well as how we implement, our vision”* [D]. Dr Reddaway was instrumental in devising a HeartEdge course, *Inspired to Follow: Art and the Biblical Story*, which draws on the National Gallery’s collections, and users’ engagement with this course *“indicates use of the materials by 800+ churches, including as far afield as Kathmandu”* [D].

Further far-reaching impact for the VCS has been achieved through a partnership with Advent Online [J]. The VCS Online Advent Calendar 2020 was used by 3,000 church congregations through the Advent Online website. Revd Arwen Folkes, Curator of Advent Online, testified that the VCS provides *“shareable, high quality, traditional, and original content ... To have the VCS as part of our collaborative project has been a real asset [...] Churches have been directly sharing these resources with their communities, and dioceses and bishops throughout the Church of England, the Anglican Churches in Australia and Northern America and churches of other denominations ... [The website] has been a timely and valuable source of encouragement and enrichment to many hundreds of people trying to sustain church fellowship and worship under lockdown conditions”* [E].

#### Impact 4: Schools and centres of ministerial formation

Several educational institutions including Highgate School in London (at secondary level) Sarum College, Salisbury (which trains Christian ministers for ordination) and the Center for Transformational Churches at Trinity International University, USA (which provides ongoing Christian ministerial formation) piloted the use of the VCS to guide students to curate their own dialogues with visual arts and Scripture. They testified that the VCS website has generated a hospitable space for creative reflection and conversations at a time when many are studying at a distance, which has had intellectual and emotional benefits for students and teachers.

Clement Boden, a Religion and Philosophy teacher at Highgate School, used the VCS to teach four GCSE groups during 2019/20. Pupils were guided to replicate the VCS format of one biblical text, three artworks and a set of short commentaries that explore the present-day implications of both artworks and texts. Boden reported that the VCS *“encouraged reflection, discussion, thought and debate”* [F 0.55], and noted its inclusivity: *“Jewish pupils within the group were particularly pleased by [the resources] being more inclusive than they expected”* [F 3:10]. He reflected that pupils chose *“a large number of images of hope and renewal”* [F, 3:30]; *“that this group of 16-year-olds had been looking for strength and hope during the depths of mid-May 2020 is encouraging; I remember feeling that I had greater hope in this generation for their and our futures than before the activity”* [F 3:58]. Boden concluded that *“the VCS resources are about making great art accessible, as much as about making scripture inviting and fathomable, and I can’t wait to use them again”* [F 4:35].

In 2020, the VCS was presented to a UK-wide network of teachers from the Research Schools Network at a conference at St Matthew’s School, Birmingham on ‘RE within the curriculum’. Educational consultant Mary Myatt, a guest speaker at the conference, advised teachers to use the VCS website *“as a first port of call”* when introducing Christianity to pupils [G]. Ben Wood, Chair of the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE), has endorsed the VCS, saying *“if, like you me, you use artworks in lessons”*, the website is *“just brilliant”* [G]. Sarum College in Salisbury has used the VCS at all levels of its educational activity, from its *“short course programme [...] geared toward informal theological education for the general public”* to its *“Ministerial Formation programme”*. Its Director of Academic Development, Dr Jayme Reaves, confirms *“[t]he VCS has been an invaluable resource for us in helping students of all types make connections between the biblical text and art, creativity, and imagination and students have found it to be refreshing, illuminating, and engaging as it opens up new avenues for reflection for them they did not have previously”* [H].

The educational impact of the VCS clearly has potential for a global reach, and this is already demonstrable in the USA. Professor Taylor B. Worley, Managing Director for the Center for Transformational Churches at Trinity International University, used the VCS for ministerial training in 2020. He wrote, *“I was so encouraged by how generative these devotions became for our seminar overall. The students [...] all remarked on how helpful it was to engage Scripture with the curated works of art ... It was a great way to start each day by warming up the visual and theological imagination. The students really benefited from that exercise and it propelled our discussions forward by leaps and bounds. They also expressed confidence to use the VCS with their [...] churches”* [I].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

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- A. Testimonial from: Senior Vice President, Fieldstead & Co., 15 December 2020.
  - B. Testimonials from: (i) Director of Collections and Research and (ii and iii) curatorial staff, The National Gallery, 10 January 2021; 14 December 2020; 15 December 2020.
  - C. Testimonial from: Curator of Paintings, The Victoria & Albert Museum, 12 January 2021.
  - D. Testimonial from: Director of HeartEdge, St Martin in the Fields, 4 January, 2021.
  - E. Testimonial from: Founder and Curator, Advent Online, 6 January 2021.
  - F. Transcript of video testimonial from: RE Teacher at Highgate School, London, 26 July 2020.
  - G. Testimonials from: (i) Co-founder of the RE Quality Mark, and (ii) Chair of the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE), 29 January 2021.
  - H. Testimonial from: Director of Academic Development, Sarum College, 29 January 2021.
  - I. Testimonial from: Managing Director, Center for Transformational Churches, 15 December 2020.
  - J. Full list of weblinks referred to, with screenshots.