

Art & Belief

Forgive us our Trespassing

For 30 years, Banksy's graffiti art has focused on injustice, corruption, and oppression of the poor while also revealing a shift from faith to secularity. One stencil depicts a crucifixion with Christ holding shopping bags tied with red ribbons questioning how consumerism overshadows Christ's sacrifice, especially at Christmas. Banksy also critiques idolatry in a crucifixion where Christ wears a Bristol City football jersey beside the word "religion." Another stencil shows a haloed Darth Vader cradling Jesus like Mary with the Christ child referencing *Star Wars*, itself a Christian allegory. Though Jediism began as a joke in 2001, by 2015 it had morphed into a religion/philosophy granted IRS tax exemption in the United States. Another stencil shows Christ with the phrase, "I don't have all the answers, try Google" critiquing society's expectation of immediate answers and pointing to misplaced faith in technology.

Graffiti versions of Banksy's *Forgive us our Trespassing* began to appear as early as 2010. Accompanying these words borrowed from the Lord's prayer, he portrays a boy kneeling in prayer next to a paint can and brush. The image suggests three meanings of "trespass": moral sin, crossing physical boundaries without authorization, and challenging social norms by exposing hypocrisy of revered institutions. The cheeky image evokes both rebelliousness and contrition—an ask-for-forgiveness-not-permission attitude. Banksy later adapted this motif for a museum piece (above)- with the same name. Banksy provided wooden panels and invited 6th to 9th graders at City of



Banksy, Forgive Us Our Trespassing, 2011. Acrylic, spray-paint, marker pens, wood panels (7 m tall). MOCA, Los Angeles.

Angels School in Los Angeles to leave their tag—a unique signature or symbol. Banksy then stenciled over the panels, adding Gothic window tracery and the praying boy. The result suggests a vandalized church and challenges assumptions about what is considered art. Does spray paint belong on a church window?

In confession, we ask forgiveness "for what we've done and what we've left undone." If we see tags as individuals, are some people left out because they don't fit our idea of who belongs? In this way, *Forgive us our Trespassing* reminds us of the church's outreach mission to all our neighbors—like Jesus loved people who were easy to dismiss and disrespect.

Another interpretation sees a merger of traditional art with contemporary art that unites the individual with communal. In

today's culture, graffiti tags celebrate individual identity, while artists in the Gothic era remained anonymous because a sense of communal pride outweighed their need for individual recognition. The Gothic window thus becomes a framework that holds individuals in community, much like a church where the study of scripture and tradition form a framework to understand a kaleidoscope of views and experiences.

-- Gayle L. Goudy, PhD

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