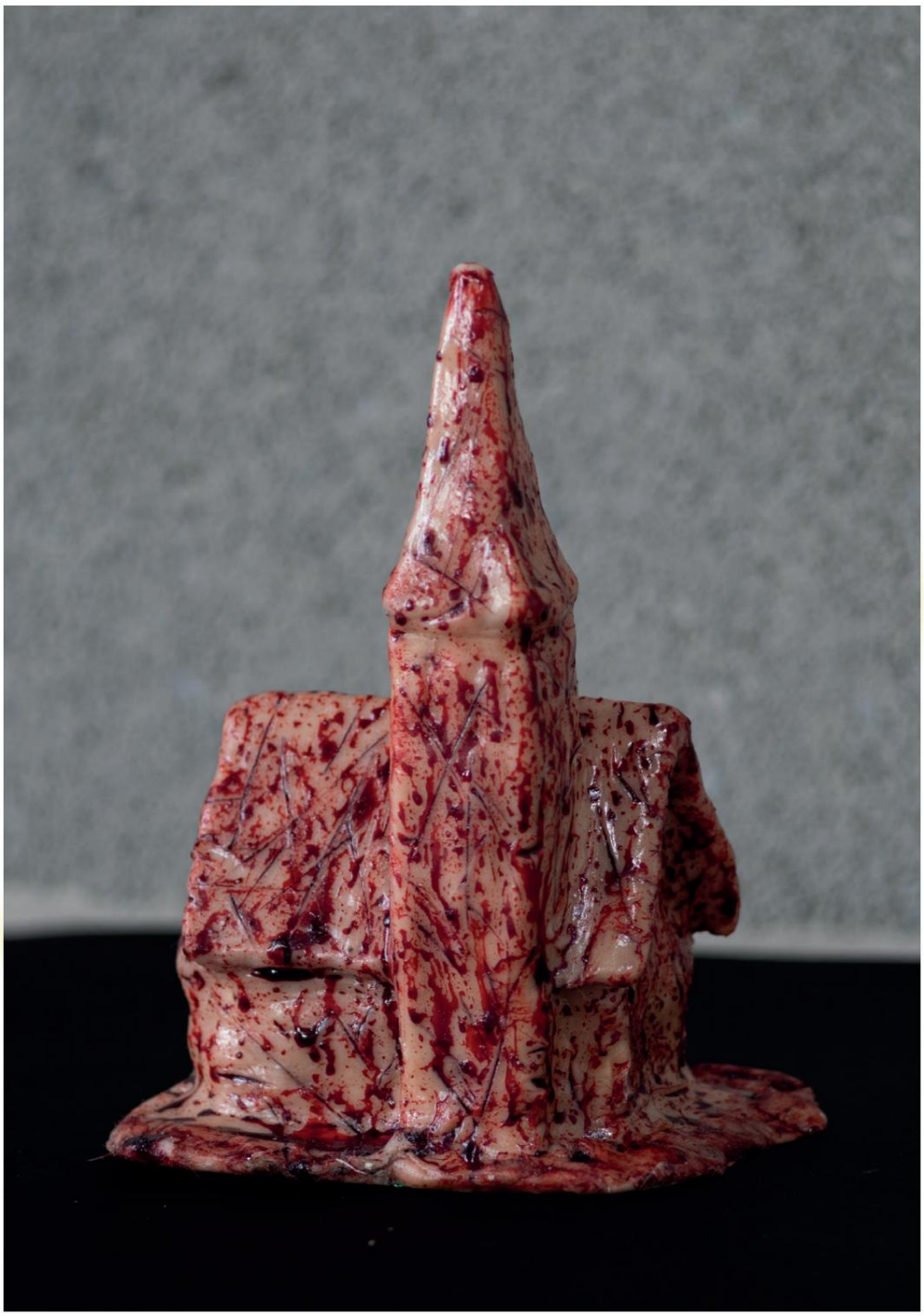
Notes on Catholicism

The Self and the Other

Door Isabella Greenwood

Religion is a recurring theme in the work of writer and curator Isabella Greenwood. In 2024, Greenwood curated two exhibitions on this subject: *Vigil: Death & the Afterlife* at Loods6 in Amsterdam and *God Willing* at Shipton Gallery in London. In this text, she takes us along in her personal and philosophical reflections on Catholicism, and the traces it leaves in the body, memory and in the relationship to the other.



Lily Bloom, *Mud and Mire,* 2023, plastic, wax, blood, 12 x 17 x 8.5 cm, installation view *God Willing,* Shipton, London, 2024

I would like to ask her so many things:
How to rub shame of your best blouse
How to survive a bee storm
How to make God storm
How to survive God

Joy Sullivan, *What Eve Knew,* uit: *Instructions for Traveling West,* 2024

I

My first memory of religion was my younger brother's baptism. They say you never remember your own baptism, perhaps because the ritual assumes that you are not truly born before baptism, at least not in the eyes of God. But if you can't remember, how do you know if the sacrament has taken hold (and, I wonder now, does that make me unholy in some way?). It's as if my first memories of religion are about the nature of memory itself: if we remember that we are good and blessed, we will remain holy. Do we sin by forgetting?

When I was nine years old, a woman in church gave me her rosary. It glowed in the dark, like the Lord's love, she said. It shines even in the darkness. I kept it on my bedside table, next to a luminous image of the Blessed Virgin Mary that my grandmother had given me. Some nights I wanted my room to be completely dark, but with the light of the Lord it would be bright. Yet, despite the woman's generosity, there was a condition to her gesture (pray every night and you can keep it forever, she said). A form of unconditionality that remains subject to a series of conditions, typical of religion. What if I forgot to pray one night? Would my room stop shining?

II

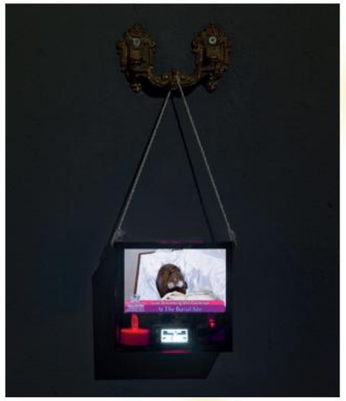
No, said the priest who was in church on Sunday, but you do. My second lesson about religion was that kindness in religion does not come without conditions.

III

The third was about the phenomenology of faith.
Religion carried a distinctly phenomenological weight during my childhood. This anchoring began in the church I attended every Sunday, a place of ritual, repetition, and reverence, but extended further, into the wider parish community. Beyond this social and architectural center, Catholicism seeped into the broader cultural fabric: it was encoded in my Italian heritage, embedded in everyday, domestic gestures. But perhaps the most enduring manifestation of religion was found in the body itself: in the slow-growing sense of guilt and perpetual self-surveillance. As the psalmist writes, "There is no health in my body because of your wrath; there is no peace in my bones because of my sin" (Psalm 38:4).

Although I enjoyed holding my little pink Bible in my hands—its weight felt meaningful—my mind often wandered. I kept glancing at the clock during the service. And I kept asking myself, Is this the true meaning of faith? And by extension, of religion?

Getting tired in silence while waiting for release, yet remaining seated (even when the exit is right nearby).



Max Otis King, *Votive Watching,* 2022, physical video (livestream), installation view *Vigil: Death & the Afterlife,* curated by Isabella Greenwood, in collaboration with Semester.9, Loods6 & Shipton, 2024, photo: Gert-Jan van Rooij

Dyke Viagra, *Archaic 01,* 2024, mild steel, natural leather, tattoo ink, plaster, variable dimensions, installation view *God Willing,* Shipton, London, 2024

IV

The fourth was about the way men view women. As I grew older, I struggled less with boredom and more with frustration with the Catholic concept of womanhood. If God is defined as the source of all life, the one who gives birth to the world, then it follows that God is, by definition, a woman—the one who is capable of creation. Under patriarchal systems, God is reduced to ruler, judge, and man. They recreated God in their own image: detached from the womb, disembodied, and as far removed from the feminine as possible. Thus a new God emerged: disembodied and unmistakably male.

In

The fifth was about the violence of appropriating archives for political gain.
Another important lesson I learned from religion was the distinction between service and community. I learned that Scripture, far from being a neutral vessel of divine truth, could be weaponized—torn from its context and repurposed to legitimize political hierarchy, justify social inequality, and sustain economic systems. Religious archives turned out to be not only testaments to faith but also instruments of power. The same is true of art history. Sacred imagery has been used to naturalize authority for centuries, from haloed monarchs in medieval manuscripts to the theatrical grandeur of Baroque altarpieces, staged to impress and subdue.

Stories of redemption and sacrifice turned into mechanisms of control
once they were viewed through a patriarchal, colonial, or capitalist lens. This was not a lesson in devotion, but in manipulation: how the divine could be put to work in the service of empire, patriarchy, and exclusion. Sacred texts no longer served to liberate, but to control. This led me to ask: can religion exist outside the institutions that shape it? And if so, can we still call it religion, or does it morph into something else entirely? This is where the boundaries between religion, spirituality, and faith begin to blur, and the need for sharper, more critical definitions emerges.

WE

The sixth was about the market value of forgiveness.
The morning I was assigned to write this piece, a woman stopped me at the entrance to the subway station. She was handing out flyers that said *Jesus Saves.* I was reminded of the early 2000s T-shirt with the slogan *Jesus Saves So I Can Spend.* I kept the thought to myself, for fear that she wouldn't see the humor in it, and because, in a way, it also felt like more evidence of how much I might need saving.

She told me I could be forgiven. *Forgiven for what, exactly?* Catholicism, like many other Christian traditions, offers the promise of immediate forgiveness. No interrogation, no moral cross-examination. In theory, all you have to do is confess, and absolution is granted. But if sin can be erased with a single statement, where is the responsibility? She handed me another pamphlet. The front read: *The Book for You,* with a tacky clip-art image of a Bible illuminated by beams of light. I took it home, ironically, perhaps for that very reason.

Is forgiveness something you can package, market, sell?

In religious economies, forgiveness is presented as infinite, but in practice it is often selectively granted, based on systems of merit, repentance, and power. In neoliberal structures, forgiveness is commodified—packaged as self-help, deployed as a therapeutic tool. But within that logic, forgiveness loses its nature as a radical act of grace, it becomes a transaction, claimed in the name of social or spiritual efficacy.

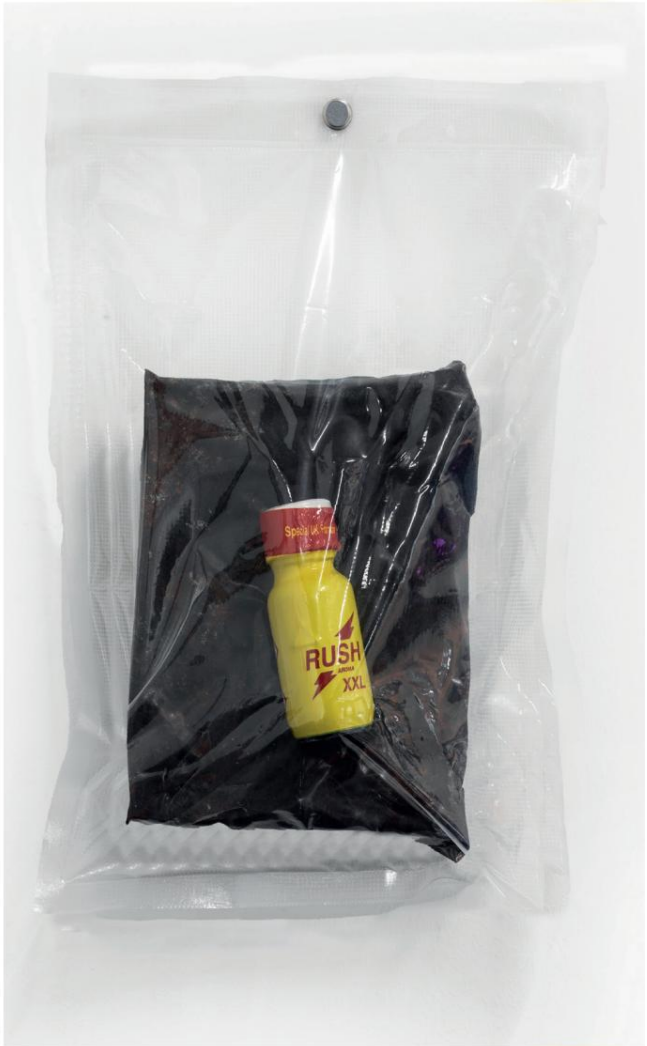
VII

The seventh was not so much about religious doctrine as about a reaction: the appropriation of religion through a Camp lens. Catholic propaganda is best understood through a Camp sensibility. Its excess, its shameless spectacle, lends itself effortlessly to ironic consumption. As Susan Sontag writes in *Notes on "Camp,"* exaggeration becomes a form of survival, here as a way to consume dogma without being subjected to it. To read Jesus pamphlets, for example, ironically is not merely to mock but also to acknowledge the theatricality of faith, and perhaps to disarm its authority.

Still, something of my Catholic upbringing remained with me, something nostalgic: the cool, dim churches, their ceilings and walls covered with hundreds of hand-carved and painted angels; the warmth of a sea of candles beneath a statue of the Virgin Mary; a mother rocking back and forth, her head bowed, in prayer, her screaming child tugging at her sleeve; an elderly woman entering alone, lighting a candle, and raising her gaze to the heavens.

Outside the stone-walled silence, the culture of religion, specifically Catholicism, continued to fascinate me: why do we believe what we believe? How can religion simultaneously create community and divide? How can it create as much doubt as it does trust? It generates conflict and comfort, faith and suspicion.

I explored these questions in my exhibition *God Willing* (London, 2024), in which queer artists reclaim their own experience of religion – whether Greek Orthodox, Irish/Italian Catholic, or Buddhist Catholic. Importantly, this is not a romanticization or aestheticization of religion, but an appropriation of religious symbols through a queer and contemporary lens. For example, M. Lissoni's work, such as *Saint John the Baptist, Patron of Baptism and people dealing with storms* (2020), reimagined the iconography of saints through contemporary relics: poppers, locks of friends' hair. The chrome-plated crucifix of



M. Lissoni, *Saint Sebastian, Patron of Archers and Athletes,* 2020, weathered copper, 'Rush' poppers, hand bound book, vacuum sealed plastic bag, 20 x 30 cm, installation view *God Willing,* Shipton, London, 2024

Dyke Viagra, combined with a leather bead mat covered in tattoos, formed a devotional theater of queer martyrdom, desire, and the eroticized body as sacrifice.

The future of Catholic theory lies in neither the past nor the future, but in the fleshy in-between where both can come together.

VIII

As is well known, religion has no definitive doctrine, and so I return to the beginning: baptism. If religion is a place in which we are born, could it also be a place from which we grow? Can we leave it and take it with us as a critical – and sometimes ironic – reflection?

As Deleuze writes: We are not in the world, we become *with* the world; we become by beholding it.
Religion is not a static legacy but a changing relationship—something you move through, look at from a distance, and perhaps even reshape.

Isabella Greenwood is a curator and writer