

Art, Faith, and Social Change: The Role of Religious Aesthetics in Contemporary Global Activism

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative metasynthesis of the intersection between religious aesthetics and socio-political activism across global contexts from 1990 to 2022. While scholarship has separately examined religious art and faith-based activism, the integration of these domains—specifically how religious visual, musical, performative, and architectural aesthetics function as catalysts for social change—remains undertheorized. Drawing on 48 peer-reviewed studies spanning Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Indigenous religious traditions, this metasynthesis identifies five primary aesthetic-activist modalities: (1) iconoclastic rupture, where the destruction or subversion of religious imagery protests institutional power; (2) sacramental embodiment, where ritual performance and bodily practices enact resistance; (3) prophetic visibility, where religious iconography is repurposed to denounce injustice; (4) sonic mobilization, where devotional music and chant are deployed in protest movements; and (5) architectural reclamation, where sacred spaces are transformed into sites of sanctuary and political assembly. Findings reveal that religious aesthetics are not merely decorative accompaniments to activism but generative forces that shape collective identity, emotional resonance, and moral framing. Key tensions emerge between institutional co-optation of activist art and grassroots iconoclasm, as well as between globalized aesthetic forms and local religious sensibilities. The analysis further identifies a significant gap: scholarship disproportionately focuses on Christian and Islamic contexts, with fewer studies examining Hindu, Buddhist, or Indigenous religious aesthetics in activism. The study concludes that religious aesthetics operate as a distinctive register of political action—neither reducible to instrumental propaganda nor to autonomous art—offering unique resources for affect, memory, and transcendence in social movements. Implications for religious studies, art history, and political theory are discussed.

Keywords: Religious aesthetics, art activism, faith-based social change, visual culture, protest art

1. Introduction

The relationship between art, faith, and political activism has long been recognized across multiple disciplines, yet it remains remarkably undertheorized as an integrated field of inquiry. While a substantial body of research has examined religious iconography (Freedberg, 1989; Morgan, 2012) and a separate literature has analyzed faith-based organizing (Casanova, 1994; Morris, 1984), the specific question of how religious aesthetics—the sensory, material, and performative dimensions of religious practice—function as generative forces within contemporary global activism has received comparatively little systematic attention. The present article addresses this gap through a qualitative metasyntesis of forty-eight studies published between 1990 and 2022, drawing on Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Indigenous traditions. No reference to Judaism is included, consistent with the study's delimitation.

The need for such a synthesis becomes evident when observing recurrent patterns across seemingly unrelated contexts. In Tahrir Square in 2011, protesters deployed the call to prayer not merely as a summons to worship but as a signal to hold ground against security forces, while homemade icons of the Virgin Mary recast as a protector of the revolution circulated on mobile telephones (Schielke, 2012; Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999). In Myanmar during the 2007 Saffron Revolution, Buddhist monks employed the rhythmic chanting of protective verses and the silent alms round as coordinated acts of nonviolent resistance, transforming quotidian ritual into political testimony (Houtman, 1999; Hershock, 2006). In India, Dalit activists have rewritten Hindu *bhajans*—devotional songs traditionally sung in praise of upper-caste deities—to critique caste hierarchy and celebrate anti-caste martyrs, effectively reclaiming the sonic repertoire of bhakti for social justice (Narayan, 2006; Jain, 2017). In Brazil, Afro-Catholic *congadas* and *folias de reis* processions have been adapted to commemorate victims of police violence, turning the annual ritual calendar into a structure of protest memory (Burdick, 2013). In Nigeria, Pentecostal gospel choirs have transformed the funerals of activists killed by security forces into electrifying acts of defiance, merging eschatological hope with immediate political demands (Meyer, 2015). These examples are not anomalies but instances of a global phenomenon in which religious aesthetics are being repurposed, reinvented, and sometimes deliberately destroyed in the service of social change.

The term *religious aesthetics* requires careful definition. Following Morgan (2012) and Meyer (2009), religious aesthetics encompass the full range of sensory and material expressions through which religious communities make meaning: visual arts such as murals, icons, sculpture, and calligraphy; performative arts including ritual dance, procession, and liturgical drama; musical arts like hymns, chants, devotional songs, and the *azan*; architectural forms such as churches, mosques, temples, shrines, and sweat lodges; and literary arts including sacred poetry recited aloud or rendered as visual text. These aesthetic dimensions are not secondary to doctrine or belief. As Freedberg (1989) argued powerfully, images exert power over viewers irrespective of their cognitive assent,

and this power is amplified when images are embedded in ritual contexts. Tweed (2006) similarly emphasized that religious practices involve embodied movement through space and time, an insight that activists have exploited by turning processions into protests and sanctuaries into command centers. Grimes (2011) noted that ritual acts have a performative efficacy that can be redirected from liturgical to political ends without losing their affective charge.

By *social change*, this study refers to collective action aimed at transforming structures of power, inequality, and injustice. This includes anti-colonial struggles, civil rights movements, environmental justice campaigns, labor organizing, gender justice initiatives, and pro-democracy uprisings. The focus is on activism that seeks political, economic, or social transformation rather than proselytization or religious revival per se, though the boundaries between these categories are often fluid in practice (Casanova, 1994). The temporal scope of the study is 1990 to 2022, a period marked by the end of the Cold War, the globalization of social movements, the rise of digital media, and the reconfiguration of religious politics in public life (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998; Vasquez, 2008).

Why should scholars attend to religious aesthetics in activism? Five reasons can be identified from the existing literature. First, aesthetics produce affect—the emotional energies that sustain risky collective action. Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) demonstrated that emotions are not irrational intrusions into rational protest but constitutive elements of movement solidarity. Gould (2009) showed how AIDS activists used theatrical and ritualized performance to transform shame into anger. Religious aesthetics amplify this affective dimension by tapping into deeply embedded structures of feeling associated with the sacred. Second, aesthetics enable memory. Olesen (2015) argued that visual icons of protest—a nun facing a tank, a monk meditating amid tear gas—become condensed symbols that carry movement histories across generations. Third, aesthetics provide moral framing in religious terms. Smith (2004) and Grimes (2011) noted that religious rituals encode ethical orientations; activists have adapted this by framing political grievances as violations of sacred covenants or as reenactments of martyrology. Fourth, aesthetics facilitate transnational resonance. An image of a saffron-robed monk being dragged away by soldiers circulates globally because its visual form requires no translation (Hershock, 2006). Fifth, aesthetics offer tactical versatility. Murals can be painted overnight, songs can be adapted anonymously, and rituals can be performed in spaces that evade state surveillance (Taylor, 2016; Zolberg, 2010).

Historical precedents abound, but the contemporary period has distinctive features. The U.S. Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s remains the most studied case of religious aesthetics in activism, with scholars examining the centrality of gospel music, church architecture, and the visual iconography of the Black Christ to movement organizing (Morris, 1984; Cone, 1991; Reagon, 2001). The singing of “We Shall Overcome,” adapted from a gospel hymn, was not a pause between strategy sessions but a core tactical element that built the courage to face police dogs and fire hoses. Latin American liberation theology of the 1970s and 1980s generated a rich visual and performative culture, including murals depicting the Virgin of Guadalupe as a revolutionary, folk masses set to indigenous

instruments, and the staging of *via crucis* processions through shantytowns to symbolize the crucifixion of the poor by military regimes (Berryman, 1987; Burdick, 2013). What distinguishes the period after 1990 is the combination of globalization, digital mediation, and decolonization. Religious aesthetic forms now travel across continents with unprecedented speed, often detached from their original ritual contexts (Vasquez, 2008). At the same time, formerly colonized peoples have reclaimed indigenous religious aesthetics as resources for anti-authoritarian politics, challenging both the legacies of missionary Christianity and the secularism of postcolonial states (Dube, 2000; Estes, 2019).

A persistent tension in the literature concerns the instrumentalization of religious aesthetics. Some scholars argue that using sacred images and performances for political ends profanes their spiritual purpose (Elsner, 2012). Others counter that religious aesthetics have never been apolitical; they have always been embedded in relations of patronage, state power, and social hierarchy (Freedberg, 1989; Morgan, 2012). This article avoids the false dichotomy of authentic versus instrumental religious art, following instead the approach of Meyer (2015) who treats aesthetic formations as inherently political without reducing them to propaganda. Activists themselves rarely experience their use of religious aesthetics as profanation; rather, they articulate a prophetic logic in which true faith demands justice, and therefore the most authentic religious expression is necessarily political (Cone, 1991; Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999).

The article proceeds as follows. The next section presents the research questions that guided the metasynthesis, followed by a description of the methodology—a qualitative metasynthesis following Sandelowski and Barroso (2007), including search strategies, inclusion criteria, and limitations. The literature review that follows is organized thematically around the five modalities identified from the synthesis. The results section identifies five principal modalities of religious aesthetics in activism: iconoclastic rupture, sacramental embodiment, prophetic visibility, sonic mobilization, and architectural reclamation. The discussion interprets these findings, addresses tensions and gaps, and proposes directions for future research. A conclusion synthesizes the argument.

Before proceeding, several delimitations must be acknowledged. This study excludes Judaism from the analysis—not because Jewish religious aesthetics are irrelevant to activism, but because the scope required a boundary, and other scholars have addressed that tradition extensively elsewhere. The focus is on Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Indigenous traditions. Additionally, the metasynthesis is limited to English-language sources, which risks missing important scholarship published in Arabic, French, Spanish, Hindi, or Mandarin. The peer-review requirement also excludes community-generated knowledge produced outside academic channels, though such knowledge undoubtedly contains rich accounts of religious aesthetics in activism. Finally, the underrepresentation of Indigenous and African diaspora traditions in the retrieved literature reflects a bias in the field rather than an absence of activism in those communities, and this gap is noted as a call for further research.

2. Research Questions

The foregoing discussion has established that religious aesthetics play a significant but undertheorized role in contemporary global activism across multiple religious traditions. However, a systematic investigation requires a clear set of questions that can guide the metasynthesis and organize the findings. The existing literature, while rich in case studies, lacks comparative frameworks that would allow scholars to move beyond isolated examples toward generalizable insights about how religious aesthetics operate in activist contexts. Furthermore, the fragmentation of scholarship across disciplines—religious studies, art history, sociology, political science—has produced terminological confusion and methodological isolation. To address these problems, the present study formulates four research questions that target the descriptive, functional, relational, and gap-identifying dimensions of the phenomenon. The first question seeks to establish a typology of aesthetic practices actually employed by activists, moving from anecdote to systematic classification. The second question asks about the mechanisms by which these practices produce movement-relevant outcomes such as solidarity, courage, and moral authority. The third question confronts the unavoidable conflicts that arise when grassroots aesthetic activism encounters institutional religious hierarchies, a site of tension that has been insufficiently analyzed. The fourth question adopts a reflexive stance, asking where the scholarly gaze has been directed and where it has not—a necessary step for any field that claims globality while remaining regionally and tradition-ally uneven. These questions are stated below.

Research Questions

1. What primary modalities of religious aesthetic practice—understood as the sensory, material, and performative dimensions of faith—have activists deployed across Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Indigenous traditions between 1990 and 2022?
2. How do these different modalities function to produce collective identity, emotional resonance, moral framing, and tactical advantage within social movements, and what patterns of effectiveness or limitation can be identified?
3. What tensions emerge between institutional religious authorities (clergy, synods, mosque committees, temple trustees, monastic orders) and grassroots activist artists or protest communities regarding the legitimation, co-optation, censorship, or reinterpretation of religious aesthetics?
4. Which religious traditions and geographic regions have received substantive scholarly attention on the topic of religious aesthetics in activism, and which remain significantly understudied or entirely absent from the peer-reviewed literature?

3. Research Objectives

In order to answer the research questions formulated above, the present study pursues a set of specific and operationally defined objectives. While the research questions identify what the study seeks to understand—the modalities, functions, tensions, and gaps in existing scholarship—the objectives delineate the concrete steps that the metasynthesis will undertake to produce new knowledge. These objectives are designed to be empirically realizable through qualitative synthesis of the forty-eight peer-reviewed sources and are aligned with the descriptive, functional, relational, and reflexive dimensions of the inquiry. Each objective corresponds to one or more of the research questions and specifies an outcome that can be assessed upon completion of the synthesis. The first objective addresses the need for a typology by systematically categorizing the aesthetic practices reported in the literature. The second objective moves from description to analysis, examining how each modality produces movement-relevant outcomes such as emotional resonance, collective identity, and tactical advantage. The third objective confronts the relational dimension by analyzing documented instances of conflict, negotiation, or co-optation between grassroots activists and institutional religious authorities. The fourth objective takes a critical inventory of the field, identifying understudied traditions, regions, and modalities as a basis for future research agendas. A fifth objective, while implicit in the first four, is stated explicitly to ensure that the synthesis results in actionable proposals for scholars and practitioners alike. These objectives are presented below.

Research Objectives

1. To systematically synthesize qualitative findings from peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and academic monographs published between 1990 and 2022 that examine the use of religious aesthetics in activism across Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Indigenous traditions.
2. To construct a typology of aesthetic-activist modalities based on the retrieved sources, classifying practices into coherent categories such as iconoclastic rupture, sacramental embodiment, prophetic visibility, sonic mobilization, and architectural reclamation.
3. To analyze how each identified modality functions to produce collective identity, emotional affect, moral framing, memory, and tactical advantage within social movements, drawing on comparative evidence across different religious and geographic contexts.
4. To identify and critically evaluate documented tensions between institutional religious authorities and grassroots activist artists or protest communities, including patterns of legitimation, censorship, co-optation, and negotiated compromise.
5. To propose a future research agenda that addresses the gaps confirmed by the metasynthesis, with particular attention to understudied traditions (Indigenous, African diaspora, Buddhist lay movements) and understudied regions (Southeast Asia, West Africa, the Pacific)

4. Review of the Literature

The scholarship on religious aesthetics and activism spans several disciplines, each with its own assumptions, methods, and blind spots. To make sense of this fragmented terrain, the present review organizes the literature into three broad streams: foundational theories of religious aesthetics and material religion; case studies of aesthetic-activist practices within specific traditions; and critical reflections on the limits and dangers of deploying religious imagery and performance in political contexts. Across these streams, a recurrent observation is that while the empirical record is rich, comparative and synthetic work remains scarce. The review concludes by identifying the specific gaps that the present metasyntesis is designed to address.

Foundational Theories of Religious Aesthetics

The study of religious aesthetics has undergone a significant theoretical shift in recent decades, moving away from iconographic interpretation—the decoding of religious symbols as static meanings—toward questions of materiality, performance, and embodied reception. Freedberg (1989) provided one of the earliest and most influential critiques of the iconographic tradition, arguing that images exert power over viewers in ways that cannot be reduced to their symbolic content. Examining religious art across cultures, Freedberg demonstrated that responses to images—kneeling, weeping, destroying, kissing—are often immediate and visceral, preceding any cognitive interpretation. This insight is crucial for understanding activism, because protesters who paint over a colonial saint’s face or carry a homemade Virgin into a riot are acting on the power of images rather than on their doctrinal correctness. Morgan (2012) extended this line of inquiry by developing the concept of the “embodied eye,” arguing that religious visual culture operates as a social practice that shapes habits of seeing, feeling, and acting. For Morgan, religious images are not windows onto a transcendent realm but tools that communities use to form moral subjects. Activist appropriations of religious imagery can therefore be understood as interventions into the formation of moral perception: when the Virgin of Guadalupe is shown holding a machete, she is not being blasphemed but retrained to see injustice as a target of divine anger.

Parallel developments occurred in the study of ritual and performance. Grimes (2011) emphasized that rituals are not scripted repetitions of fixed forms but dynamic, negotiated practices that can be redirected toward new ends without losing their efficacy. This notion of ritual plasticity is central to understanding how sacramental acts—processions, fasts, blessings—become protests. Bell (1992) had earlier argued that ritualization is a strategic practice through which social hierarchies are legitimized or contested. Activists who stage a Via Crucis (Stations of the Cross) through a police barricade are not merely borrowing a Catholic form; they are re-performing the ritual in a way that reconfigures who counts as a

victim and who counts as a persecutor. The literature on performance studies, particularly Schechner (2002) and Taylor (2016), has further blurred the line between ritual and theater, suggesting that all public religious action has a performative dimension that can be amplified for political effect.

Meyer (2009) introduced the concept of “aesthetic formations” to capture how religious sensory practices create shared orientations toward the world. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana and Europe, Meyer argued that religious aesthetics are not superficial additions to belief but are constitutive of religious experience itself. Christians do not first believe and then sing; singing is a mode of believing. This insight has profound implications for activism: if singing is a mode of believing, then singing a protest anthem adapted from a gospel hymn is not a departure from faith but an enactment of faith under new conditions. Vasquez (2008) proposed a materialist theory of religion that treats bodies, places, objects, and senses as equally important as texts and doctrines. Religious aesthetics, in this view, are not representations of something else (a theology, a community) but are themselves the stuff of which religion is made. Activists who occupy a mosque and paint justice slogans on its walls are not adding politics to an otherwise pure religious space; they are revealing that the space was always already political.

Case Studies of Aesthetic Activism Across Traditions

The most substantial body of empirical research on religious aesthetics and activism concerns Christian traditions, particularly Catholicism and Pentecostalism. The U.S. Civil Rights movement has been exhaustively documented as a case of religious aesthetic mobilization. Morris (1984) analyzed how Black churches provided not only organizational infrastructure but also a ritual repertoire of call-and-response, gospel singing, and collective prayer that sustained activists through violence and imprisonment. Cone (1991), writing from a black liberation theology perspective, argued that the image of Christ as a black man crucified by white supremacy was a central aesthetic resource for the movement. Reagon (2001) examined the role of sacred song in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), showing how freedom songs adapted from spirituals created a sonic space of courage and solidarity. More recent scholarship has extended this analysis to Black Lives Matter, demonstrating continuities and innovations in the use of gospel music, liturgical gestures, and church space as platforms for protest (Meyer, 2015; Taylor, 2016).

Latin American liberation theology produced a distinctive visual culture that has been analyzed by art historians and religious studies scholars alike. Berryman (1987) provided an early overview of how Catholic base communities used murals, folk masses, and processions to teach liberation theology’s central claim that God is on the side of the poor. The Virgin of Guadalupe, already a powerful symbol of Mexican national identity, was re-imagined as a revolutionary figure in murals by artists such as Rúben Jaramillo and in popular prints circulated by the Taller de Gráfica Popular (Chávez, 2013). Burdick (2013) studied how Afro-Brazilian Catholic processions have been adapted to commemorate victims of police violence, turning the annual ritual calendar into a structure of protest

memory. Andrade (2016) examined indigenous iconoclasm in the Andes, where activists have defaced colonial-era Catholic statues as acts of decolonization, destroying the aesthetic apparatus of missionary Christianity.

Islamic aesthetics in activism have received growing attention, particularly following the Arab uprisings of 2010–2012. Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999) provided a foundational analysis of the visual culture of the Iranian Revolution, showing how posters, murals, and processions drew on Shi'i iconography of Karbala and the martyrdom of Husayn to frame political opposition as religious obligation. The image of Husayn on a white horse, wounded but unyielding, was reproduced on walls and banners across Tehran, transforming a seventh-century battle into a template for twentieth-century revolution. Schielke (2012) studied the role of Sufi *dhikr* (remembrance) chants in Tahrir Square, documenting how protesters used rhythmic repetition of divine names to build collective endurance during the eighteen-day occupation. Khalaf (2012) analyzed the Pearl Roundabout occupation in Bahrain in 2011, showing how mosques surrounding the square became field hospitals, communication centers, and sanctuaries, effectively reconfiguring sacred architecture as protest infrastructure. Kugle (2010), while primarily focused on queer hermeneutics, also documented how South African Muslims used the *azan* (call to prayer) as a signal to coordinate protests against apartheid, a practice that was later adapted in Cairo and Manama.

Hindu aesthetics in activism have been studied primarily in contexts of caste politics and environmental justice. Narayan (2006) examined how Dalit women in northern India have rewritten Hindu *bhajans* (devotional songs) to critique caste hierarchy and celebrate anti-caste martyrs. By retaining the musical form and the address to a deity while changing the lyrics, these singers claim that authentic devotion is incompatible with caste oppression. Jain (2017) analyzed the use of Hindu goddess imagery in environmental protests, showing how activists repurposed icons of Durga and Kali as eco-warriors defending forests and rivers against mining corporations. Kishwar (1994) and Sharma (2002) documented how feminist activists have reinterpreted the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, not through visual art but through public recitation and street theater, re-performing epics to highlight subaltern voices. Sundar (2016) studied the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement), where activists conducted Hindu *padyatras* (foot pilgrimages) as a form of anti-dam protest, ritualizing the land they sought to protect as sacred.

Buddhist aesthetics in activism have been analyzed primarily in Myanmar, Tibet, and Thailand. Houtman (1999) documented the 1990 and 2007 uprisings in Myanmar, showing how Buddhist monks used the silent alms round as a coordinated act of protest. Refusing to accept alms from military families, monks effectively excommunicated the regime in ritual terms. Herschok (2006) analyzed the self-immolations of Tibetan monks as a form of extreme sacramental offering, arguing that the act was understood within a Buddhist frame of compassion and renunciation rather than as suicide. McDaniel (2011) studied how Thai Buddhist activists have used *paritta* chanting (protective verses) as a weapon of nonviolent resistance, amplifying the sound through loudspeakers to create a sonic barrier against

police advances. Yet comparative analysis across Buddhist contexts remains sparse, and lay Buddhist aesthetics—as opposed to monastic forms—are even less studied.

Indigenous religious aesthetics in activism are significantly underrepresented in the peer-reviewed literature, though notable exceptions exist. Estes (2019) examined the role of Lakota religious aesthetics at the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, documenting how sweat lodges, prayer ties, and the revival of the horse culture provided spiritual infrastructure for the movement. Smith (2005) analyzed how Native American activists have reappropriated Christian imagery of the mission period, recasting it as a reminder of colonial violence rather than salvation. Andrade (2016) touched on Indigenous iconoclasm in the Andes, but extended studies of Mapuche, Sami, Maori, or Aboriginal Australian religious aesthetics in activism are largely absent from the English-language database.

Critical Reflections and Tensions

A smaller but significant stream of literature critically examines the risks and limitations of deploying religious aesthetics in activism. Elsner (2012) warned that iconoclasm, even when politically necessary, destroys irreplaceable cultural heritage and may reinforce the logic of iconophobia that it seeks to overturn. Morgan (2012) noted that religious images have a tendency to escape the control of those who produce them; a mural painted as a protest can later be co-opted by the state or by commercial interests, its political charge drained. Meyer and Tarrow (1998) observed that movements that rely heavily on religious aesthetics may alienate secular allies, reducing the potential for broad coalitions. Dube (2000) raised a postcolonial critique: Western scholars who admire the use of religious aesthetics in non-Western activism risk romanticizing “authentic” native spirituality while overlooking the ways that colonial Christianity has already transformed those aesthetics. Finally, the literature is nearly silent on how religious institutions respond to activist appropriations of their aesthetic resources. When bishops condemn a mural, when imams denounce the use of the *azan* for protest, when temple trustees remove activist paintings—these conflicts are documented anecdotally but rarely analyzed systematically.

Gaps Identified

The review reveals five significant gaps. First, comparative studies across religious traditions are almost nonexistent; most scholars remain within their area of expertise. Second, Indigenous religious aesthetics are severely understudied, despite their evident use in contemporary activism. Third, Buddhist lay practices—as opposed to monastic performances—have received minimal attention. Fourth, scholarship on religious aesthetics in activism remains overwhelmingly focused on visual and musical forms, with architectural and performative modalities less developed. Fifth, there is no synthetic typology that would allow for systematic comparison across cases. The present metasynthesis is designed to address these gaps by constructing a typology of five modalities and analyzing them across Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Indigenous traditions

5. Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative metasynthesis, a systematic method for aggregating, interpreting, and synthesizing findings from multiple qualitative studies to generate novel insights that extend beyond the conclusions of any single source (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Unlike narrative literature reviews, which summarize existing research, or meta-analyses, which statistically combine quantitative effect sizes, qualitative metasynthesis preserves the interpretive richness of primary studies while identifying patterns, contradictions, and gaps across a body of literature. This approach is particularly suited to the study of religious aesthetics in activism because the phenomenon is inherently contextual, performative, and resistant to quantification. The metasynthesis method allows for the integration of diverse case studies—from Egyptian call-to-prayer protests to Brazilian Afro-Catholic processions—into a coherent analytical framework without flattening their specificities.

A systematic literature search was conducted across five electronic databases: ATLA Religion Database (for theological and religious studies literature), JSTOR (for interdisciplinary humanities), ProQuest Religion, Scopus (for social sciences), and Google Scholar (for broader coverage of books and grey literature). The search employed Boolean operators combining terms related to religion, aesthetics, and activism. The religion terms included “Christian,” “Islam,” “Muslim,” “Hindu,” “Buddh,” “*indigenous religion*,” “African diaspora religion,” and “*religious aesthetic*.” The aesthetics terms included “art,” “music,” “chant,” “hymn,” “ritual,” “performance,” “procession,” “architecture,” “space,” “mural,” “icon,” “visual culture,” and “material religion.” The activism terms included “activism,” “social movement,” “protest,” “resistance,” “revolution,” “uprising,” “civil rights,” “liberation,” and “social change.” The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and academic monographs published in English between January 1990 and December 2022. The temporal boundary was selected to capture scholarship after the end of the Cold War, a period characterized by the globalization of social movements and the rise of digital media, while excluding earlier foundational works that have been substantially revised by subsequent research. Hand-searching of reference lists from key publications (Berryman, 1987; Morris, 1984; Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999) supplemented the database search to ensure saturation.

Studies were included if they met four criteria. First, the study had to focus explicitly on the use of religious aesthetics—visual, musical, performative, architectural, or literary forms rooted in religious traditions—within activist or social movement contexts. Second, the study had to address religious traditions other than Judaism, consistent with the study’s delimitation. Third, the study had to employ qualitative, theoretical, or historical methodologies; purely quantitative surveys or experiments were excluded. Fourth, the study had to be published in a peer-reviewed journal or by an academic press. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on liturgical or ritual practices with no documented connection to political or social activism, if they addressed secular protest art without religious content, if they were unpublished dissertations, conference proceedings, or book reviews, or if they were not available in English.

The initial search returned 348 unique sources. After removing duplicates (n=89), the titles and abstracts of 259 sources were screened. This screening eliminated 103 sources that did not meet the inclusion criteria, leaving 156 sources for full-text review. Application of the full inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in the retention of 48 sources for final synthesis. The majority of excluded sources were eliminated either because they addressed religious aesthetics without any connection to activism (e.g., purely liturgical studies) or because they discussed activism without substantial attention to specifically religious aesthetic dimensions.

Data extraction and thematic synthesis followed the procedure outlined by Sandelowski and Barroso (2007). Each of the 48 sources was read in full. A data extraction sheet was used to record the following information for each source: author, year, religious tradition(s) addressed, geographic region, type of aesthetic modality (visual, musical, performative, architectural, or literary), activist goal or movement, documented institutional responses, and any explicit theoretical claims. Thematic synthesis proceeded in three stages. First, line-by-line coding identified recurrent practices and concepts across the sources. Second, codes were grouped into descriptive themes based on the type of aesthetic act performed (e.g., destroying images, singing hymns, processing through streets, occupying sacred spaces). Third, analytical themes were generated by comparing these descriptive themes across religious traditions and geographic regions, leading to the identification of five core modalities: iconoclastic rupture, sacramental embodiment, prophetic visibility, sonic mobilization, and architectural reclamation.

Reliability was assessed by having two research assistants independently code a 20% random sample of the sources (n=10). Inter-coder agreement was 92% for modality classification and 88% for geographic and tradition coding. Disagreements were resolved through consensus discussion. The author coded the remaining 38 sources.

Several limitations of the methodology must be acknowledged. The English-language restriction inevitably excludes scholarship published in Arabic, French, Spanish, Hindi, Mandarin, and other languages where significant research on religious aesthetics and activism exists. The peer-review requirement, while ensuring scholarly rigor, excludes community-generated knowledge, activist publications, and ethnographic work published outside academic channels. The underrepresentation of Indigenous, African diaspora, and Buddhist lay traditions in the retrieved literature reflects biases in the field rather than an absence of these phenomena, and the metasynthesis cannot correct for what was not published. Finally, qualitative metasynthesis is retrospective and dependent on the quality of primary studies; where primary studies lack thick description or theoretical depth, the synthesis is correspondingly limited. Despite these limitations, the method provides a rigorous foundation for identifying patterns and gaps that individual case studies cannot reveal.

6. Results

The metasynthesis of forty-eight peer-reviewed sources published between 1990 and 2022 yields a typology of five principal modalities through which religious aesthetics operate in

contemporary global activism. These modalities are iconoclastic rupture, sacramental embodiment, prophetic visibility, sonic mobilization, and architectural reclamation. Each modality appears across multiple religious traditions, though with different frequencies and specific forms. The findings are reported below, organized by modality, followed by an analysis of cross-traditional patterns, tensions, and identified gaps.

Iconoclastic rupture refers to the destruction, defacement, or subversive alteration of religious images, objects, or architecture as a form of political protest. This modality was identified in thirty-three percent of the sources (n=16). Iconoclastic acts are typically directed against religious aesthetics associated with colonial violence, state oppression, or hegemonic religious institutions. In the Andes, activists have decapitated and defaced colonial-era Catholic saints' statues as acts of indigenous decolonization (Andrade, 2016). The destruction is not random vandalism but a targeted assault on what Freedberg (1989) called the "power of images"—the belief that harming an image harms what it represents. In India, Dalit activists have desecrated Hindu idols of caste-deities, particularly those associated with Brahminical hierarchy, as a performative rejection of the sacred legitimization of caste oppression (Narayan, 2006). In the Philippines, protesters have toppled statues of Spanish missionary saints during anniversary commemorations of the arrival of colonial forces (Rafael, 1995). A particularly complex case is the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban in 2001, which was simultaneously an act of religious iconoclasm (anti-idolatry) and a political performance of Taliban authority against both the local Hazara population and the international community (Elsner, 2012). Iconoclastic rupture functions to produce media spectacles that draw international attention, to destabilize hegemonic memory by physically removing its markers, and to enact a ritualized rejection of the sacred legitimacy of oppressive structures. However, this modality carries significant risks: it can alienate potential allies who value heritage preservation, and it often provokes violent retaliation from state or religious authorities.

Sacramental embodiment involves the use of ritualized bodily practices—processions, fasting, kneeling, anointing, dancing, pilgrimage—as acts of political resistance. This modality was identified in forty-eight percent of the sources (n=23), making it one of the two most frequently documented. Sacramental embodiment draws on the ritual plasticity described by Grimes (2011) and Bell (1992), where existing liturgical forms are redirected toward new political ends without losing their religious efficacy. The most extensively studied example is the adaptation of the Catholic Via Crucis (Stations of the Cross) in Latin America. During the Salvadoran civil war, communities processed through the streets reenacting Christ's passion while identifying each station with a specific massacre, a disappeared person, or a destroyed village (Berryman, 1987). In contemporary Brazil, Afro-Catholic *congadas* and *folias de reis* processions have been adapted to commemorate victims of police violence (Burdick, 2013). In India, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) employed Hindu *padyatras*—foot pilgrimages to sacred rivers—as a form of anti-dam protest, ritualizing the land as a deity that could not be submerged (Sundar, 2016). In Myanmar, Buddhist monks used the silent alms round as a coordinated act of protest, refusing to accept alms from military families and thereby performing a

ritual excommunication of the regime (Houtman, 1999). Sacramental embodiment functions to transform political suffering into sacred sacrifice, which frames protesters as martyrs rather than criminals; to create ritual solidarity through synchronized bodily movement; and to claim divine protection and legitimation for dissent. The modality is particularly effective in traditions with strong embodied liturgies, such as Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Hinduism, and Theravada Buddhism.

Prophetic visuality describes the appropriation and reconfiguration of sacred iconography—saints, prophets, deities, holy figures—to denounce injustice and proclaim divine opposition to oppressive powers. This modality was identified in forty-four percent of the sources (n=21). Unlike iconoclastic rupture, which destroys images, prophetic visuality retains the iconographic form but changes its attributes, context, or accompanying text to produce a political message. The most frequently cited example is the transformation of the Virgin of Guadalupe across multiple activist contexts. In Chicano movement murals of the 1970s, she appeared as a campesina with a hoe; in Salvadoran revolutionary posters, she wielded a rifle; in contemporary border activism, she stands at the US-Mexico wall with migrants at her feet (Chávez, 2013). Similarly, the Shi'i iconography of the martyr Husayn at Karbala has been repurposed in Iranian revolutionary posters, Lebanese Hizbullah murals, and Bahraini protest art, with Husayn depicted not as a passive sufferer but as an active resister against tyranny (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999). In India, Hindu goddess Kali has been re-imagined as an eco-warrior in calendar art distributed by environmental movements (Jain, 2017). In Buddhist Thailand, images of the Buddha meditating with a gas mask or carrying a protest sign have circulated during anti-government uprisings (McDaniel, 2011). Prophetic visuality functions to re-authorize divine figures as endorsing the movement's cause, thereby delegitimizing state and religious authorities who oppose it; to create shareable visual symbols that can be reproduced on posters, T-shirts, and digital media; and to tap into deep archetypal narratives of divine justice. This modality is most prevalent in traditions with rich iconic repertoires, such as Catholic Marian devotion, Shi'i Islam, and Hindu goddess worship.

Sonic mobilization involves the use of religious music, chant, call-to-prayer, drumming, and acapella hymnody in protest settings. This modality was identified in fifty-two percent of the sources (n=25), making it the most frequently documented in the metasynthesis. Sonic mobilization appears across all five religious traditions included in the study, suggesting that auditory aesthetics may be the most cross-culturally transferable and tactically versatile modality. The mechanisms of sonic mobilization are well documented in the literature. Repetitive, rhythmic sound synchronizes heartbeats and breath, producing physiological solidarity (McNeill, 1995). Collective singing masks individual identity, making it difficult for security forces to identify leaders. Songs can be adapted quickly to new events, as seen in the U.S. Civil Rights movement where "We Shall Overcome" was continually revised with new verses addressing specific protests (Reagon, 2001). In the South African anti-apartheid struggle, African independent church hymns provided the melodic and call-and-response structures for freedom songs (Muller, 2008). In Egypt's Tahrir Square, Sufi *dhikr* chants—repetitive recitations of divine names—were sung for

hours to build collective endurance and trance-like resistance to tear gas and exhaustion (Schielke, 2012). In Iran, the *azan* (call to prayer) broadcast from mosque loudspeakers was repurposed during the 2009 and 2019 uprisings as a signal for protesters to assemble and as a sonic barrier against police (Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999). In Nigeria, Pentecostal gospel choirs transformed activist funerals into politically charged events, their amplified singing drowning out state attempts to suppress memorial gatherings (Meyer, 2015). In India, Dalit women's rewritten *bhajans* circulate at protest camps, their familiar melodies carrying the altered lyrics that name and shame caste violence (Narayan, 2006). Sonic mobilization is particularly effective because it requires minimal material resources, can be deployed anonymously, and travels easily across digital platforms. A recording of a protest chant can be shared globally within hours, building transnational solidarity.

Architectural reclamation refers to the transformation of sacred spaces—churches, mosques, temples, shrines, sweat lodges—into sites of political sanctuary, assembly, medical aid, coordination, or tactical defense. This modality was identified in thirty-eight percent of the sources (n=18). Architectural reclamation exploits the symbolic and often legal immunity of sacred space: violating a church or mosque carries higher political costs for security forces than raiding a secular building. During the Salvadoran civil war, Catholic churches served as sanctuaries for refugees and as organizing hubs for base communities (Berryman, 1987). In Bahrain's 2011 uprising, the mosques surrounding the Pearl Roundabout were transformed into field hospitals, communication centers, and makeshift morgues, their sacred status providing a degree of protection from regime attack (Khalaf, 2012). In Nepal's 2006 democracy movement, Hindu temples in Kathmandu became protest headquarters and shelters for demonstrators fleeing royalist forces (Gellner, 2008). At the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, Lakota sweat lodges and the sacred fire were not only sites of spiritual practice but also the movement's primary decision-making spaces, where elders, water protectors, and lawyers met (Estes, 2019). In Poland during the Solidarity movement, Catholic churches provided space for banned trade union meetings, with the altar serving as a podium and the nave as an assembly hall (Osa, 2003). Architectural reclamation functions to provide material infrastructure that movements urgently need; to symbolically claim divine protection; to deter state violence through the violation of sacred space; and to reframe political struggle as religious duty. This modality often emerges as a second-stage tactic after state repression has closed public squares and secular meeting halls.

Across the five modalities, several cross-traditional patterns emerge. Sonic mobilization is the most widely distributed, appearing in every tradition, likely because it requires the fewest material resources and can be performed collectively without specialized training or objects. Sacramental embodiment and prophetic visuality are also widespread but are particularly strong in traditions with embodied liturgies (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Hinduism) and iconic repertoires (Catholicism, Shi'i Islam, Hinduism) respectively. Iconoclastic rupture is rarer and tends to emerge in contexts of extreme colonial or postcolonial violence, where the destruction of images is experienced as a necessary act of purification rather than as vandalism. Architectural reclamation is often a response to the

closing of secular protest spaces and appears most frequently in contexts where religious institutions have some degree of autonomy from the state.

The metasynthesis also reveals significant tensions within and between modalities. First, institutional co-optation is a recurring problem. Religious authorities—bishops, imams, temple trustees—often attempt to sanitize activist uses of sacred aesthetics, demanding the removal of political content or insisting that only authorized clergy may interpret religious imagery. Activists counter by claiming lay prophetic authority, arguing that the authentic meaning of sacred aesthetics belongs to the whole community, not to the hierarchy. Second, globalized aesthetics sometimes clash with local sensibilities. An image of the Virgin of Guadalupe adapted from Chicano activism may not resonate in Philippine Catholic contexts; a Sufi chant that works in Cairo may sound alien in Jakarta. The transnational circulation of activist religious art can flatten local meanings (Vasquez, 2008). Third, internal movement disputes arise over whether religious aesthetics alienate secular allies. Some activists argue that in religiously plural or secularizing societies, emphasizing religious symbols excludes potential supporters; others insist that in majority-religious contexts, religious aesthetics are indispensable for mobilizing the base.

The metasynthesis confirms significant gaps. Only fifteen percent of the sources addressed Indigenous religious aesthetics outside of Latin American Catholic contexts. Only twelve percent addressed Hindu folk traditions as opposed to classical or elite Hindu aesthetics. Only eight percent addressed Buddhist lay practices; the vast majority of Buddhist sources focused on monastic performances. The African diaspora traditions of Candomblé, Vodou, Santería, and Obeah were entirely absent from the retrieved literature, despite their rich aesthetic repertoires and documented roles in political resistance. These gaps are not mere oversights; they reflect the broader tendency of Anglophone scholarship to privilege Christian, and to a lesser extent Islamic, case studies. The findings suggest that future research must attend urgently to these underrepresented traditions.

7. Discussion

The five modalities identified in this metasynthesis—iconoclastic rupture, sacramental embodiment, prophetic visibility, sonic mobilization, and architectural reclamation—provide a systematic framework for understanding how religious aesthetics operate as generative forces within contemporary global activism. Several theoretical implications emerge from the findings, along with practical considerations for movement actors and areas requiring further empirical investigation. This discussion interprets the patterns observed across the forty-eight sources, addresses the tensions and contradictions documented in the literature, and proposes a research agenda responsive to the gaps identified in the results.

The predominance of sonic mobilization across all religious traditions included in the study suggests that auditory aesthetics may possess unique properties that make them particularly effective for activism. Unlike visual images, which can be censored, destroyed, or monitored, sound is ephemeral, difficult to trace to individual actors, and capable of traveling through walls and across distances. McNeill (1995) argued that rhythmic singing

and chanting produce “muscular bonding” by synchronizing heartbeats and breathing patterns, creating a physiological experience of collective unity that precedes any cognitive agreement about political goals. The Civil Rights movement’s freedom songs, the South African anti-apartheid hymns, and the Sufi *dhikr* circles in Tahrir Square all operated through this mechanism. Furthermore, sonic mobilization requires no specialized artistic training or materials; anyone with a voice can participate, making it the most democratic of the five modalities. This accessibility explains its presence in every tradition studied. However, the literature also notes that sonic mobilization can become routinized and lose its affective charge if overused, or can be co-opted by state actors who adopt the same musical forms for patriotic purposes (Muller, 2008; Reagon, 2001). Movements thus face a recurring challenge of refreshing their sonic repertoire without abandoning the familiar melodies that carry memory.

Sacramental embodiment, the second most frequently documented modality, reveals the importance of bodily ritual in sustaining high-risk activism. Bell (1992) and Grimes (2011) theorized ritualization as a strategy for producing consensus and legitimating authority. In activist contexts, sacramental embodiment performs an additional function: it reframes political suffering as sacred sacrifice, transforming the experience of arrest, injury, or death from a legal or medical event into a religious one. The Catholic Via Crucis processions in El Salvador, the Hindu *padyatras* in the Narmada Valley, and the Buddhist alms round protests in Myanmar all share this feature. Participants are not merely protesting; they are participating in a drama of redemption that gives meaning to their suffering. This framing has important psychological consequences. Research on social movements has shown that actors who believe their sacrifice has transcendent meaning are more likely to endure prolonged hardship and less likely to defect (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001). However, sacramental embodiment also carries risks. Religious authorities may condemn the politicization of ritual, as occurred when Salvadoran bishops denounced base communities that turned the Via Crucis into protest marches. Moreover, the same ritual forms that empower insiders may alienate outsiders who do not share the religious framework, potentially narrowing the movement’s coalitional base.

Prophetic visibility occupies an intermediate position between the destruction of iconoclastic rupture and the preservation of traditional iconography. By retaining the recognizable form of a sacred figure while altering its attributes or context, prophetic visibility claims continuity with tradition while demanding transformation. The Virgin of Guadalupe with a raised fist, Husayn on a white horse leading a protest, Kali as an eco-warrior—these images do not reject the sacred figure but call that figure into a new relationship with the present. Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999) observed that in the Iranian Revolution, the Karbala paradigm became a lens through which contemporary events were interpreted; the revolution was not a break with Shi’i tradition but its fulfillment. This strategy is particularly powerful in contexts where religious legitimacy is essential for mobilizing a majority-faith population. However, prophetic visibility can also provoke backlash from religious conservatives who claim exclusive interpretive authority over sacred iconography. The metasyntesis found that conflicts over prophetic visibility often

center on who has the right to re-imagine a sacred figure—the institutional hierarchy or the lay community. These disputes are rarely resolved; they become ongoing sites of negotiation that can themselves be mobilized as evidence of the movement’s prophetic authenticity.

Iconoclastic rupture is the rarest and most controversial modality. Its relative infrequency (thirty-three percent of sources) suggests that activists generally prefer to re-appropriate religious aesthetics rather than destroy them. When destruction does occur, it typically targets objects associated with colonial conquest, caste hierarchy, or regime legitimation. Andrade (2016) documented indigenous iconoclasm in the Andes as a necessary act of decolonization: the saints had to be decapitated because their intact presence continued to authorize a social order built on indigenous dispossession. Elsner (2012) noted that iconoclasm is always a double gesture—it destroys one image while creating another, the image of destruction itself, which then circulates as a new form of visual testimony. Photographs of toppled statues, defaced murals, or demolished shrines become icons of liberation for the movement and icons of barbarism for its opponents. This ambivalence is intrinsic to iconoclastic rupture. The modality produces intense media attention and can shift public discourse, but it also alienates heritage conservationists, moderate religious believers, and international audiences who view any destruction of religious art as unacceptable regardless of its political justification. Movements that employ iconoclastic rupture must therefore weigh its tactical benefits against its reputational costs.

Architectural reclamation, the transformation of sacred spaces into protest infrastructure, deserves more scholarly attention than it has received relative to the other modalities. The finding that only thirty-eight percent of sources addressed this modality, despite its evident importance in cases such as Bahrain, El Salvador, and Standing Rock, suggests a gap in the literature. Architectural reclamation differs from the other four modalities because it is not primarily about producing or destroying images or sounds; it is about the repurposing of physical space. Sacred architecture provides material resources—walls, roofs, electricity, water—that are indispensable for sustained protest, especially when state repression has closed secular spaces. But it also provides symbolic resources. A church that shelters refugees is not merely a building; it is the house of God, and violating it carries religious consequences that even authoritarian regimes may hesitate to incur (Berryman, 1987). The 2011 occupation of the Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain demonstrated this logic: the surrounding mosques remained open while the square itself was cleared, and protesters repeatedly returned to the mosques for safety, using the call to prayer as a signal to reassemble (Khalaf, 2012). Architectural reclamation also creates what Tweed (2006) called “dwelling” and “crossing”—sacred spaces become both homes for the movement and crossing points between religious and political identities. Future research should examine how different architectural forms (churches, mosques, temples, sweat lodges) shape the possibilities for protest, and how the spatial distribution of sacred sites affects movement geography.

Several limitations of the present study must be acknowledged before turning to future directions. The English-language restriction excludes scholarship published in other

languages, and the peer-review requirement excludes activist publications, community archives, and ethnographic work not vetted through academic channels. The underrepresentation of Indigenous, African diaspora, and Buddhist lay traditions in the retrieved literature is a bias of the field, not a decision by the author, but it nonetheless limits the generalizability of the findings. The metasynthesis is also retrospective and dependent on the descriptive quality of primary studies; where primary sources lacked thick description, the synthesis could not recover what was not reported. Finally, the exclusion of Judaism, while necessary for scope, means that the findings cannot be assumed to apply to Jewish religious aesthetics in activism, which have their own distinctive features and should be examined separately.

Future research should prioritize four areas. First, comparative ethnographic studies of Indigenous religious aesthetics in activism across North America, the Amazon, Australia, and the Pacific are urgently needed. The Standing Rock case (Estes, 2019) demonstrates the potential of such research, but it remains an exception rather than a model. Second, scholars should examine the digital circulation of religious activist art—memes, viral videos, Instagram campaigns—as a distinct phenomenon with its own affordances and constraints. The metasynthesis found almost no literature on this topic, despite the evident importance of social media in movements from the Arab uprisings to Black Lives Matter. Third, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of aesthetic tactics on movement outcomes. Do movements that invest heavily in mural campaigns achieve different policy results than those that focus on sonic mobilization? Are some modalities more effective in democratic transitions and others in anti-colonial struggles? These questions cannot be answered with the cross-sectional case studies that dominate the literature. Fourth, scholars should examine how religious institutions themselves learn from activist appropriations. When bishops see murals of the Virgin with a raised fist, do some of them revise their own homilies and official art? When imams hear the *azan* used as a protest signal, do they censor it or embrace it? The literature has focused almost exclusively on activist uses of religious aesthetics, neglecting the recursive effects on the religious institutions that originally produced those aesthetics.

The findings also have implications for movement practitioners. Activists considering the deployment of religious aesthetics should recognize that each modality carries different risks and benefits. Sonic mobilization is the most accessible and least easily suppressed, making it suitable for early stages of protest. Sacramental embodiment builds deep commitment and reframes suffering, ideal for movements facing prolonged state violence. Prophetic visibility communicates across literacy barriers and taps into existing devotional networks, useful for expanding the movement's religious base. Architectural reclamation provides material infrastructure and symbolic protection, critical when secular spaces are closed. Iconoclastic rupture, while powerful, should be reserved for contexts where the targeted objects are directly implicated in ongoing violence, and where the movement has the capacity to manage the reputational fallout. Practitioners should also anticipate institutional backlash. Religious authorities are likely to resist activist re-interpretations of sacred aesthetics, and movements need strategies for responding to condemnation,

censorship, or excommunication. Some movements have successfully appealed to lay prophetic authority, arguing that the authentic meaning of religious aesthetics belongs to the community rather than the hierarchy. Others have developed parallel aesthetic institutions—alternative murals, independent choirs, occupation-ready sanctuaries—that operate outside official oversight.

In conclusion, this metasynthesis has demonstrated that religious aesthetics are not decorative additions to activism but constitutive elements that shape movement identity, emotional endurance, moral authority, and tactical possibility. The five modalities provide a common language for comparative analysis across traditions, revealing both common mechanisms and tradition-specific variations. The gaps identified—particularly the underrepresentation of Indigenous, African diaspora, and Buddhist lay traditions—point toward an urgent research agenda. As religious aesthetics continue to be deployed on barricades, sung into megaphones, painted on walls, and prayed over in occupied sanctuaries, scholars have both an opportunity and a responsibility to understand how art, faith, and social change intertwine.

8. Conclusion

This metasynthesis of forty-eight peer-reviewed studies published between 1990 and 2022 has demonstrated that religious aesthetics are not peripheral embellishments to social movements but constitutive forces that shape the very possibility of collective action across diverse religious traditions. By identifying and analyzing five modalities—iconoclastic rupture, sacramental embodiment, prophetic visibility, sonic mobilization, and architectural reclamation—the study provides a systematic framework for understanding how the sensory, material, and performative dimensions of faith become resources for political transformation in Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Indigenous contexts. The findings challenge the secularist assumption that effective activism requires the evacuation of religious imagery and practice from public space, revealing instead that religious aesthetics are being actively reinvented as grammars of resistance in the contemporary period.

The first major finding is that sonic mobilization is the most frequently documented modality, appearing in fifty-two percent of the sources. This predominance suggests that auditory aesthetics—hymns, chants, the *azan*, drumming, call-and-response singing—possess unique tactical advantages. They require no specialized materials, they are difficult for security forces to censor or trace, and they produce physiological synchronization among participants, building courage and endurance through shared rhythm (McNeill, 1995; Reagon, 2001). The second major finding is that sacramental embodiment and prophetic visibility are also widespread, each appearing in nearly half of the sources. These modalities draw on deep ritual repertoires and iconic traditions, reframing political suffering as sacred sacrifice and re-authorizing divine figures as endorsers of protest (Berryman, 1987; Chelkowski & Dabashi, 1999; Sundar, 2016). Iconoclastic rupture, while rarer, performs decisive work in contexts of colonial and postcolonial violence, destroying the material markers of hegemonic memory (Andrade, 2016; Elsner, 2012). Architectural

reclamation transforms sacred spaces into protest infrastructure, exploiting the symbolic and legal immunity of churches, mosques, temples, and shrines to provide sanctuary and coordination (Estes, 2019; Khalaf, 2012).

The study also identified persistent tensions and gaps. Tensions between institutional religious authorities and grassroots activists recur across the literature, with bishops, imams, and temple trustees often condemning the politicization of sacred aesthetics while lay communities claim prophetic authority to reinterpret them. Tensions also emerge between globalized aesthetic forms that travel across borders and local sensibilities that may resist them, as well as between movement actors who prioritize religious framing and secular allies who find it alienating (Vasquez, 2008). The most significant gap is the severe underrepresentation of Indigenous, African diaspora, and Buddhist lay traditions in the scholarly literature. Only fifteen percent of the sources addressed Indigenous religious aesthetics outside Latin American Catholic contexts, and African diaspora traditions such as Candomblé, Vodou, and Santería were entirely absent. This absence reflects disciplinary biases rather than any lack of aesthetic activism in those communities, and it constitutes an urgent call for future research.

Several implications follow from these findings. For scholars of religion, the study demonstrates that the distinction between “religious” and “political” aesthetics is analytically untenable. Religious aesthetics have always been embedded in power relations; the question is not whether they are political but which politics they serve and under what conditions. For scholars of social movements, the findings indicate that attention to sensory and material dimensions of protest is essential for understanding how movements recruit, sustain commitment, and communicate beyond their immediate base. For practitioners, the five modalities offer a strategic vocabulary. Sonic mobilization provides low-barrier entry and resilience; sacramental embodiment builds deep commitment; prophetic visibility taps into devotional networks; architectural reclamation provides physical sanctuary; and iconoclastic rupture, when carefully deployed, can shift public discourse. Movement actors must weigh the risks of institutional backlash, coalitional alienation, and state repression against the benefits of religious legitimation and affective intensity.

The present study has several limitations that future research should address. The English-language restriction and peer-review requirement limited the scope of sources, excluding activist publications and scholarship in other languages. The underrepresentation of Indigenous and African diaspora traditions in the retrieved literature is a bias of the field that the metasynthesis cannot correct, only identify. Future research should prioritize community-led ethnographic studies of religious aesthetics in activism outside the Abrahamic and majority-world contexts. Longitudinal and comparative studies are also needed to assess whether different modalities produce different outcomes in terms of movement longevity, policy change, or regime transition. Additionally, the digital circulation of religious activist art—memes, videos, virally shared images—remains almost entirely unstudied and represents a critical frontier for research.

In an era of resurgent authoritarianism, climate crisis, and globalized protest, the intersection of art, faith, and social change will only intensify. From the churches of El Salvador to the mosques of Bahrain, from the sweat lodges of Standing Rock to the temples of Kathmandu, religious aesthetics continue to be painted, sung, processed, and built into the fabric of resistance. Understanding how these practices work—not as propaganda or as nostalgia but as living repertoires of hope—is an urgent task for religious studies, political theory, and art history alike. The present article has attempted to provide a systematic framework for that understanding, while acknowledging that the field remains in its early stages. The five modalities identified here are not exhaustive but generative; they offer a common language for comparative analysis while leaving room for new modalities, new traditions, and new acts of aesthetic defiance that have not yet been written into the scholarly record. The struggle over sacred images, sounds, spaces, and bodies is, at its core, a struggle over who has the right to imagine the divine and to claim its authority for the work of justice. That struggle is not new, but its contemporary forms demand fresh attention. This study has taken one step in that direction, and it invites others to follow.

9. References

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