

## Preparing for A105: dismantling of religious objects

From Book 2, *Tradition and Dissent*, Chapter 4 Pugin and the Revival of the Gothic Tradition, p. 138

The dismantling of religious images in the Protestant church arose out of a fundamental disagreement about the purposes they served. Centuries earlier, Pope Gregory the Great (590–604 CE) first attempted to define and justify the function of religious art to Serenus, the bishop of Marseille. Bishop Serenus believed that such art might tempt Christians to worship images (i.e. indulge in idolatry) rather than God himself, and that this justified their destruction. We have already seen that the plea for prayer left by Notke and his assistants inside the statue of John the Evangelist at Lübeck's cathedral appears to blur the distinction between statue and saint. According to Pope Gregory, however, religious art had a value as a visual substitute for those who could not read: just as the literate minority learned through studying religious texts, so the illiterate majority learned through studying works of art.

For most of the period between 1559 and Pugin's own day, the Protestant church took the same line as Serenus in regarding religious images as potential idols that were best destroyed. Pugin was able to break with the English Protestant tradition of empty, imageless churches because Pope Gregory's justification of religious art retained its validity in the Roman Catholic church. He even acquired original Gothic images from Belgium, France and Germany, in order to re-create church interiors furnished in pre-Reformation style: many of the sculptures that formerly decorated the St Chad's rood screen are authentic Gothic works.