

Dear Sam,

Thank you for writing us at Christian Questions Radio. You asked about the significance of the halo.

We researched the halo's significance on the Internet and have summarized our findings below.

Though the halo, also called nimbus, is traditionally associated with Christianity, its beginning can be found long before Christ was born. Use of halos goes back to the ancient Egyptians' worship of the sun and animals. Drawings of bulls with halos have been traced as far back as 3000 BC. The Egyptian god Ra, associated with the sun and believed to be self-created and the father of all gods, is depicted with a halo-like symbol.

In Hellenistic and Roman art the sun-god Helios and Roman emperors often appear with a crown of rays. Because of its pagan origin, the halo was avoided in Early Christian art, but a simple circular nimbus, was adopted by Christian emperors for their official portraits.

However, by the middle of the 4th century, Christ was also shown with this imperial attribute, as was his symbol, the Lamb of God. In the 5th century the halo was sometimes given to angels, but it was not until the 6th century that it became customary for the Virgin Mary and other saints. For a period during the 5th century, living persons of eminence were depicted with a square nimbus.

In Flemish painting of the 15th century, the halo began to be represented as rays of light. Under the influence of the Counter-Reformation, which sought to restore a glorious conception to religious art, this form was adopted by Italian artists of the late 16th century, notably Tintoretto, as a realistically rendered light emanating from the holy person's head. This new interpretation was the standard one in the Baroque period and in most subsequent religious works.

The halo is also found in Buddhist art of India, appearing from the late 3rd century AD. It is believed that the motif was brought to the East by Greek invaders.

In conclusion, the origin of the halo is entirely pagan, not Christian. Therefore, we recognize it as such. We hope we have answered your question. Please write us again.

Sincerely,
Christian Questions Radio