Questions about Milton’s portraits of God the Father and the Son have usually been addressed as questions about theology: what did Milton believe and how are various Christian doctrines reflected in his poems? With rare exceptions, scholars have not investigated the influence of the Christian visual tradition on Milton’s representations of the divine. This omission stems from the widely shared belief that no such influence would have been likely in Milton’s England. The caricature of Puritanism—that it was iconophobic, aesthetically plain, and rigidly inflexible—depends on a caricature of medieval Catholicism as graphic, extravagant, luxurious and obsessed with death, including the death of Christ. In fact, the visual tradition of the crucifixion associated with the late Middle Ages was not a long-standing, fixed mode of Christian thought and art, but a departure from many earlier styles of representing the passion. The Reformation’s revision of Christian art returns to many of these earlier traditions. Milton and his contemporaries were artists working at a time of theological crisis, during which representational as well as doctrinal questions were at stake, including how to work around the culture of the Catholic church without divesting Christian art of its subjects, styles and forms. The history of Christian imagery and more specifically the range of possibilities for representing Jesus are rarely acknowledged in studies of Milton and his contemporaries, whose antipathy to images of all kinds is assumed tacitly. My aim is to demonstrate that the visual arts made a set of practices for approaching the ineffable available, and that this material had a strong influence on Milton’s reformation of English poetry.

The imagery of the crucifixion that we associate with traditional Christianity is really a brief aberration from a long and varied tradition. As historians of Christian art have shown, the image of a dead and tortured Christ is scarcely known outside of the fourteenth century:

Christians in the west have become so accustomed to assigning a central place to the death of Christ in their theology, liturgy and art that it is natural for them to assume that their tradition must always have
contained this emphasis...All the more surprising, then, is it to discover that as far as Christian art is concerned the crucifixion of Christ did not mean an indubitably dead corpse on the cross until about the beginning of the tenth century, and that this realism was only reached after a long theological struggle.¹

The dominance of the passion in Christian iconography between the twelfth century and the Reformation needs to be understood within a broader context of Christian representational traditions, theories and controversies. The art of earlier centuries of the church bears a much closer resemblance to the work of Protestant artists, including poets.

The earliest surviving examples of Christian art, which date from the third century, concentrate on the human rather than the divine aspect of Christ. They tend to be symbolic—depicting a lamb, fish, or anchor to refer to Jesus—or narrative, drawing on stories from the Hebrew Bible to refer to episodes from his life. According to Robin Jensen,

The art of the early fourth century did not try overtly to display Jesus’ divine nature, or to suggest that he showed forth the visible face of God, but rather it concentrated on narrating the actions or the stories that were told about him. For instance, the earliest representations of Jesus display no haloes or even other signs of divinity that were already in use for images of the gods or of the deified emperor, or even the golden or purple robes associated with royalty or the supreme deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon. The earliest images of Jesus showed him dressed much like the other figures in a composition, in simple tunic and pallium and sandaled feet. He is not shown ‘larger than life’ but rather as of the same stature as his disciples and followers. The only props he holds or attributes associated with him usually are related to the narrative itself...His posture is far from imposing.²

In addition to these visual cues, events from Jesus’ human life which were associated with his divinity, such as the transfiguration, resurrection and ascension do not appear until the fifth century.³ Gertrud Schiller’s survey of early Christian images records only rare representations of his birth and childhood from the fifth century up to the late