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## Desacralization of the iconographic message in religious pictures

### ABSTRACT

The transformations in modern religiousness are behind the phenomenon of prayer card desacralization. The traditional iconographic message is replaced by syncretic content. Artists freely combine Christological, Mariological or hagiographic themes with the world of Islam or Buddhism. The ideological layer is lost: faith is replaced by ideology and its derivatives. Feminist or pacifist inclinations are becoming popular. The axiological slope towards LGBT circles is increasing. Religious materiality loses its sacred dimension in favor of the cultural code, where secular content dominates and faith is completely marginalized.

**KEYWORDS:** Christian iconography, religious image, cultural syncretism, modern religiousness

### STRESZCZENIE

*Przejawy profanizacji przekazu ikonograficznego na obrazku religijnym*

Przeobrażenia w religijności nowoczesnej stoją za zjawiskiem profanizacji obrazka religijnego. Tradycyjny przekaz ikonograficzny jest zastępowany przez synkretyczne treści. Artyści swobodnie łączą ze sobą wątki chrystologiczne, mariologiczne czy hagiologiczne z światem

buddyzmu lub islamu. Zatraceni ulega warstwa ideowa: wiarę zastępuje ideologia i jej pochodne. Modne stają się inklinacje feministyczne czy pacyfistyczne. Wzrasta nachylenie aksjologiczne w stronę środowiska LGBT. Materialności religijne tracą sakralny wymiar na rzecz kulturowego kodu, gdzie treści laickie dominują, a wiara jest zupełnie zmarginalizowana.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** ikonografia chrześcijańska, obrazek religijny, synkretyzm kulturowy, religijność nowoczesna

In the contemporary religious culture, we observe a process of excluding devotional products from the institutional influence of the Church in favor of the influence of more subjective trends.<sup>1</sup> Especially the so called holy cards, which are losing canonical value, are becoming subject to desacralization.<sup>2</sup> In the atmosphere of a “new artistic opening” that prevailed in making devotional items after the Second Vatican Council, these religious artifacts acquire a pop-cultural aspect full of syncretic, often contradictory, content.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, foreign trends are gaining popularity: sacred images with Asian, African, Indian or Papuan features, and on the other hand, the Byzantine icon, prepared in accordance with the centuries-old tradition of Christian Orthodoxy, is in fashion.<sup>4</sup> The “new aesthetics” is seeking a spiritual harbor to be more easily assimilated by societies undergoing profound structural changes.<sup>5</sup> In addition, new qualities are being crystallized in religiousness, especially in the United States. The so-called

1 Cf. D. Morgan, *Thing*, Material Religion. The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief 2011, 1, p. 143. According to David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, popular culture undermines the monopoly of the Church in shaping sacred space and allows other groups of influence to affect it. For this reason, Leonard Primiano believes that religious materiality is not only an object of devotional practice today, but also has other functions, such as identification. Cf. *American Sacred Space*, ed. D. Chidester, E.T. Linenthal, Bloomington 1995, p. 15; L.N. Primiano, *Artifacts of Belief: Holy Cards in Roman Catholic Culture*, in: *Religion: New Approaches to Personal Religiosity (Ethnology of Religion)*, ed. C. Saraiva, P.J. Margry, L. Obadia, K. Povedak, J. Mapril, Münster 2016, p. 137.

2 S.J. Grenz, *Culture and Spirit: the Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection*, “Asbury Theological Journal” 2000, vol. 55, 2, p. 40; M. Jagiello, *Od świętości do codzienności, czyli o profaniczności obrazka dewocyjnego u schyłku epoki audiowizualnej*, “Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa” 2002, 1-2, p. 142.

3 R.C. Wood, *Contending for the Faith: The Church's Engagement with Culture*, Waco 2003, p. 63.

4 *Andachtsbild*, in: *Wörterbuch der deutschen Volkskunde*, Stuttgart 1974, p. 21.

5 Cf. Ch. H. Lippy, *Being Religious. American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States*, Westport 1994, p. 189-207.

marginalized faithful are becoming more numerous: those who do fit into any doctrine and function on the margins of orthodoxy. For them, traditional iconographic canons are difficult to understand or even illegible, because they do not speak to their spiritual experiences and everyday lives.<sup>6</sup> Among such believers, the importance of the context, of what is considered sacred, is growing.<sup>7</sup> Fashionable gadgets are more easily assimilated as carriers of ideas: vinyl plates decorated with religious symbols, key rings with images of spiritual patrons, smartphones and tablets in suggestive cases referring to faith.<sup>8</sup> Camp, a decorative style based on form, not content, is in style. It makes religious references irreligious, and makes them commercially tradable.<sup>9</sup> This kind of sacro-marketing is transferred to new spaces of influence: religious images removed from church vestibules, where devotional cards were displayed for potential buyers, to the Internet, to religious websites and online shops. There, demand determines what will be subjected to worship and how.<sup>10</sup> The subject matter of the message is to be recognizable, therefore the iconographic symbolism is narrowed down to the most popular motifs. Christology and Mariology are replaced by hagiology and angelology, which have been present in the background so far to have become the most important ones recently. Humanization, however, is accompanied by strong syncretisation: angels and saints move freely from the orders of Christian transcendence into the world of Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. They also receive the appearance of pop culture idols.<sup>11</sup>

The desacralization of religious images progresses with increasing migration and is more visible in areas undergoing strong urban and

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6 E.H. Gombrich, *Obraz wizualny*, in: *Symbole i symbolika*, Warszawa 1990, p. 330; M. Jagiełło, *Od świętości do codzienności, czyli o profaniczności obrazka dewocyjnego u schyłku epoki audiowizualnej*, cited in, p. 144-145.

7 D. Morgan, S.M. Promey, *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, Berkeley 2001, p. 38.

8 J. Wasilewska, *Pamiątka – świętość czy talizman? Dlaczego zbieramy obrazki święte?*, "Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne", 91, 2009, pp. 64-65.

9 A. Malinowska, *Camp a sprawa polska, czyli krótka zaduma nad kondycją polskiego kampu*, in: *CAMPania. Zjawisko campu we współczesnej kulturze*, ed. P. Oczko, Warszawa 2008, p. 152.

10 K. Jarkiewicz, *Sakralność i profaniczność obrazka religijnego. Wokół problemów oddziaływania Kościoła na sferę wytwórczości dewocyjnej*, in: *Ponowoczesne przestrzenie oddziaływań wychowawczo-formacyjnych Kościoła i „ziemie niczyje”*, ed. R. Jasnos, E. Miśkowiec, Kraków 2015, pp. 266-267.

11 J.F. Petruzzelli, *Catholic Holy Cards: Visual, Verbal, and Tactile Codes for the (In)visible*, in: *The Other Print Tradition: Essays on Chapbooks, Broadsides, and Related Ephemera*, ed. C.L. Preston and M.J. Preston, New York 1995, pp. 280-282; K. Jarkiewicz, *Ten przesłodki obrazek. Wokół teologii dewocyjnego kiczu*, "Życie Duchowe" 2017, 89, pp. 39, 45-46.

industrial changes.<sup>12</sup> The wave of emancipation of groups marginalized due to skin color, sexual preferences or diseases considered as diseases considered (neurofibromatosis, AIDS) gives rise to a growing demand for artifacts that express previously taboo experiences.<sup>13</sup> The limited possibilities of showing these experiences in a traditional form are conducive to experiments on the verge of orthodoxy.<sup>14</sup> All particularities revealed on the wave of social fluctuations are also weakened: the shrinking ghettos of recipients are not able to support the producers, who are moving out of necessity towards more universal codes. Thus, the ethnic diversity of religious materialities, so characteristic of religious images from the turn of the 20th century, is lost.<sup>15</sup> Laicization is also fostered by new artistic trends which, by contesting traditional values, weaken the message of sacred art. It becomes a domain of spiritual dilettantes, who find it difficult to receive criticism and instruction from ecclesiastical bodies. They produce works with a controversial ideological charge and in an avant-garde form. Copied multiple times, they become a current trend present, e.g., in advertising.<sup>16</sup>

Examples of this type of phenomena multiply at an alarming pace, leading us to believe in their global intensity.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the core of the transformation is characteristic of American culture of the Middle West, where already in the 1970s there was a growth of religious dissent, among other reasons, in connection with the opening of Native American reserves and the influx of people of Mexican origin. The revision of faith was carried out under the influence of itinerant preachers and Protestant missionaries who introduced orthodox content into the spiritual crucible. The neophytes, both of Latin and Eastern rite, were inspired, moreover, by Buddhism and Islam. Multiculturalism blew up the Christian tradition,

12 Cf. R.A. Orsi, *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, Bloomington 1999, p. 281.

13 Traditional iconography presented holiness as perfect beauty and sin as ugliness, which limited the ability of sick and disabled people to identify with these experiences. It was much harder for those suffering from physical disfigurement to pray to perfect saints because they did not reflect their life experiences. Also, the asexuality of religious images significantly limited the possibility of arousing higher feelings in people for whom having a high libido was synonymous with love. Cf. D. Morgan, *Painting as Visual Evidence: Production, Circulation, Reception*, in: *Using Visual Evidence*, ed. R. Howells, R.W. Matson, Maidenhead 2009, pp. 12-18.

14 L.N. Primiano, *Artifacts of Belief: Holy Cards in Roman Catholic Culture*, in: *Religion: New Approaches to Personal Religiosity (Ethnology of Religion)*, ed. C. Saraiva, P.J. Margry, L. Obadia, K. Povedak, J. Mapril, Münster 2016, p. 136.

15 More in: L.N. Primiano, *Post-modern Sites of Catholic Sacred Materiality*, in: *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture*, ed. P.W. Williams, Malden 1999, pp. 187-202.

16 K.L. Mallia, *From the Sacred to the Profane: A Critical Analysis of the Changing Nature of Religious Imagery in Advertising*, "Journal of Media and Religion" 2009, vol. 8, issue. (3), pp. 173-174.

17 A. Rosen, *Art & Religion in the 21st Century*, London 2015, pp. 112-114.

which directed towards syncretism and secularization.<sup>18</sup> Desacralization was deepened by the phenomenon of transferring individual spiritual needs to objects of worship created by self-taught artists and disseminating them through non-church distribution institutions. With time, professional artists began to appear among the enthusiasts of the “new opening”. Some of them were finally grouped around the TrinityStores.com website, where Robert Lentz, a Franciscan, became the undisputed leader. We inspired eight other painters: Bob Gilroy, Louis Glanzman, Julie Lonneman, Mickey McGrath, Perry Milou, Artur Olivias, Dan Paulos and Lewis Williams to start creating expressive and rebellious images. William Hart McNichols, a Jesuit, initially under the influence of Lentz, chose an independent path. With time, his compositions began to be more inspired by current politics than faith. Both Colorado-born painters were attracted by a trend associated with counter-culture, pacifism and homosexuality. What made them different was their social status, political views and artistic way. For Robert Lentz, born in a family of Russian immigrants, the Orthodox icon became a passport to the discovery of spiritual identity. He learnt this art in 1977 during individual studies in Pho-tios Kontoglou, a Greek monastery of the Transfiguration in Brooklyn, Massachusetts. Uncertain about his sexual orientation, lost on the road of religious vocation and balancing between the Eastern rite and Latin culture, he searched a possibility to synchronize his individual needs through this sacred medium.<sup>19</sup> As an introvert, he was the opposite of the expressive Jesuit he met in Albuquerque in New Mexico in 1990, when William Hart McNichols began to study icon-writing under his direction. William Hart McNichols came from a well-established family. His family belonged to influential Denver democrats linked to John Kennedy. McNichols received a comprehensive education and showed an early interest in public affairs. As a Jesuit seminarist, he participated in a protest against the Vietnam War with a group of 27 colleagues in 1971. Later in life, he was directed to the hospice of St. Vincent in Manhattan, New York City, famous for its support to homosexuals suffering from AIDS. In 1990, he published a book describing their life experiences, in which he appealed to Catholics to increase their understanding for the human weaknesses revealed by this pandemic. In 2002, in the wake of the gay scandal in the American Church, when his sexual orientation was revealed, he left the Society of Jesus and began working at the Church of St. Francis in Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico. He continued his artistic activity, which included creating,

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18 Cf. Ch. Park, *Religion and geography*, in: *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. J. Hinnels, London 2004, pp. 442-443.

19 J.D. Chittister, R. Lentz, *A Passion for Life: Fragments of the Face of God*, Maryknoll 1996, p. 8.

among others, the icon of Our Lady of the New Advent for the World Youth Day 1993 with John Paul II in Denver. McNichols is also the author of the biggest icon in the world, *Viriditas: Finding God in All Things*, which has been displayed at the Loyola University Chicago since in 2015.<sup>20</sup>

For both painters, the problem is the extent of Catholic orthodoxy, which significantly prevents, if not excludes, a certain part of the society from benefiting from the faith. Theologians are shocked when artists freely go beyond conventions and give up the canon. In Lentz's opinion, this is justified by his personal experiences. The Franciscan reminds the opponents of this attitude that he lived between cultures since he was a child and he never saw any "neat, black and white worlds". In addition, he worked for some time in an orphanage in Santiago, Chile, and experienced life on the margins of society. He is convinced that it is unfair to tell people to imitate the saints, with whom they have nothing in common. If holiness is to be accessible to all, it must be expressed by human icons, which you can really imitate.<sup>21</sup> The artist's expression of this humanistic attitude was the 2002 icon, *Christ of Maryknoll*, which is his best known and the most frequently cited work in the discussion about the excluded.<sup>22</sup> It was created when Lentz lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico where he would meet immigrants from the south. Based on their stories of crossing the border, he created an image of Christ behind a barbed wire, looking like one of his congregation (Christ wears a T-shirt). Christ is hopeful, but he has tears in his eyes and we do not know whether it is because of the wounds from the barbed wire on his hands, or because of his passion to come to pass. The picture frame can correspond to the arms of the cross as well as a fence. For Lentz, it is just as important what this wire fence means and who is actually excluded: whether it is Christ, who has no access to the world, or the people who put barriers to him in contact with themselves. It is notable that objections expressed in the icon are related to the activity of the American organization – Maryknoll – which brings together both religious and lay missionaries focused on working among the poorest. The association has set up schools, educational and humanitarian centers to integrate Mexican migrants into American society in some southern states. Despite this, it still arouses controversy, because its activity is based on the theology of liberation. Lentz indirectly asks the recipients of his work whether they identify with Maryknoll and its message.

20 D. Berrigan, *The Bride: Images of the Church. Icons by William Hart McNichols*, Maryknoll 2000, pp. 12-19.

21 R. Lentz, E. Gately, *Christ in the Margins*, Maryknoll 2003, pp. 62,69.

22 A comprehensive interpretation of the work is included in a lecture by Robert Lentz published on YouTube.

Rebellion against the canon of representing Christ is also expressed by the work of William Hart McNichols entitled *Jesus Listen and Pray* 251 of 2012 (Fig. 1). The icon was created on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the students' opposition to the Vietnam War and the publication of the Port Huron Statement, which was an expression of the hope for the youth of that time for a fairer world, free from wars and exploitation.<sup>23</sup> The image of Christ listening and praying in the seated lotus position like Indian or Buddhist sages refers to that period of fascination with Eastern religions and the search for spiritual rebirth in them. Jesus, like the Buddha, becomes an idol: he contests reality, at the same time proposing pacifism and love instead of anarchy. The artist is still fascinated by the hippie movement, whose costume he uses to dress theology and rejects the voices of critics who accuse him of playing with convention. McNichols is convinced that canon should not limit the message and presents himself as a proponent of the theory of using means of artistic expression adequate to the situation. He is also opposed to the claims that he is inspired New Age movement. He believes that Christ does not lose his identity, but as God, he extends it to other cultures.<sup>24</sup>

Syncretism is also visible in the Mariological message, which not only takes advantage of the rich tradition of Eastern Christianity, but also includes oriental worship. On the basis of the theological discussions on Marian Coredemption, the matriarchal world order is strongly emphasized, dominated by emotional values rather than utilitarian ones. The new figuration provides the Mother of God feminist attributes, even adding sexuality to her character.<sup>25</sup> The old iconographic motifs, among others, the representations of Mary of Rokitno and the Enthroned Madonna. The best-known example of such practice is the icon by the Franciscan tertian associated with Robert Lentz Lewis Williams' *Our Mother of Sorrows* (2002). It was made for the anniversary celebrations after the tragedy of 9-11 and refers to the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, very popular especially in Spanish-speaking communities.<sup>26</sup> The original painting is found in the Church of the Sacred Heart in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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23 Cf. Ch.F. Howlett, *Antiwar Movement (1960s-1970s)*, in: *Revolts, Protests, Demonstrations, and Rebellions in American History*, ed. S.L. Denver, Santa Barbara 2011, pp. 930-931; Ch.F. Howlett, *Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 943.

24 The artist often enters into polemics with their adversaries using social networks, mainly Facebook. Cf. D. Berrigan, *The Bride: Images of the Church. Icons by William Hart McNichols*, Maryknoll 2000, p. 9.

25 Cf. D. George, M. Salvatori Rizzi, *Holy Cards/Immaginette: The Extraordinary Literacy of Vernacular Religion*, "College Composition and Communication" 2008, Issue 2, pp. 268-269.

26 J. Sprutta, *Ikona Matki Bożej Bolesnej (Nieustającej Pomocy): historia i teologia*, „Salvatori Mater” 2011, 1-2, p. 216.

Small cards with the image were given out to participants of the memorial celebrations. On the reverse side of the distributed pictures, the Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy (Salve Regina) prayer was printed, which is usually sung during funerals, thus adding a special importance to these artifacts. The icon is not a model example of the image of Our Lady of Sorrows. Instead of angels accompanying the Madonna, planes are shown, symbolizing the ones that had struck the World Trade Center, as well as those that targeted the Pentagon and Washington, DC. The airplanes are clearly associated with the evil that threatens the sacred space of mandorla, the untouchable area of transcendence in which the souls of the blessed dwell.<sup>27</sup> In this respect, the composition is identical to the universe of the Hindu cosmogony (mandala), where heavenly and earthly kingdoms intersect. Mary is presented in an Eastern Christian fashion as the Mother of God (Theotokos). However, her heart is pierced by swords but not because of Christ's death.<sup>28</sup> The Madonna suffers because the World Trade Center is burning, and the great egg, symbolizing her womb rather than her heart, accepts life and surrounds it with care. Williams consciously fused many cultural themes in the composition: The Mother of God embraces all those who lost their lives, regardless of religion or nationality and also commiserates with anyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. This is also important integration, since it does not exclude anyone from the mourning. A similarly unifying message accompanies the work by Keith Mallett entitled *The Guardian Angel of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter* of 2000 (Fig. 2). Four tables represent a black guardian angel stylized as the Mother of God, holding an infant, like a little baby Jesus. The women have wings, they are clearly from another world, although their clothes allude to the seasons which they symbolize. Their halos of sanctity, however, are barely sketched, as if human emotions and motherhood took away the attributes of perfection. This uncertainty is dominant in Mallett's works. The artist raised in Pennsylvania lost his father, a veteran of World War II, early, and never come to terms with the situation. He was brought up by his mother, looking for male models, feeling insecure in the world of patriarchy.

Rebellion against the feminisation of life and loss of confidence by men is behind many images of desacralized saints. A frequent motive is often cited by the "new opening" artists: the image of St. Joseph as a shadow of the Father. The best-known composition of this type is the work of William Hart McNichols, *San Jose Sombra del Padre 161* of 2013, combining

27 *Mandorla*, in: Á P. Chenel, A.S. Simarro, *Stownik symboli*, Warszawa 2008, p. 146-147.

28 J. Sprutta, *Ikona Matki Bożej Bolesnej (Nieustającej Pomocy): historia i teologia*, „Salvatori Mater” 2011, 1-2, p. 215.



Trinitarian and hagiological themes. The artist uses the iconographic type of the Throne of Grace characteristic of Western European art and combines it with the image of St. Joseph holding the infant Jesus in his arms.<sup>29</sup> In the scene *Pietas Domini* scene, the Father holds the dead body of Christ or His mantle surrounds the cross with Christ's silhouette. Over the composition usually the Spirit is usually rising as a dove.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, in a McNichols' painting, God the Father's mantle surrounds St. Joseph, who holds the Infant Jesus. We are not able to tell if the baby is asleep or dead. The Holy Spirit (or Mary) watching the scene is shown in a highly lunar way as a woman-mother. The artist consciously crosses the canon of representation to emphasize all contemporary fears of men, both in terms of their identity and their attachment to fatherhood. After all, God is the father to both Joseph and Jesus, therefore the caring carpenter is both the father and brother of Christ. Relations between the two intersect in a web of dependence, where the actor is a woman. The decision of the Holy Spirit or Mary contains the whole tragedy of God the Father, St. Joseph and the baby Jesus, as in people's lives drama of tangled relationships stems from women's maternity plans. The rebellion of the "new opening" artists also involves opposition to the macho culture that strips men of emotionality. For Robert Lentz, it is an important question whether patriarchal patterns served in hagiographies can still be educational, since there is a lack of fathers in families and there is no teaching of love there. Male gestures of sensitivity of old versus the modern homosexual coming out can receive ambiguous reactions and give rise to some doubts about sexual identity. Lentz himself is uncertain whether male love is possible.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the pressure of oriental cultures changes the context of the debate about male sensibility. Interest in the so-called spiritual brotherhood (adelphopoiesis) is revived, which is a kind of relationship between persons of the same sex, which is sanctioned in the Orthodox Church.<sup>32</sup> According to Lentz such a bond could have existed between the 4th century Roman soldiers, Sergius and Bacchus who were beheaded, although there

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29 N. Mojżyn, *Ojcostwo Boga. O niektórych przedstawieniach Boga Ojca w relacji do Syna w chrześcijańskiej sztuce religijnej*, "Fides et Ratio" 2014, 4, p. 140; K. Onasch, A. Schnieper, *Ikony. Fakty i legendy*, transl. by Z. Szanter, Warszawa 2007, pp. 144-145.

30 O. Cyrek, *Nowożytnie ikony bizantyjskie i ruskie z symbolicznymi wizerunkami Jezusa Chrystusa. Kanon ikonograficzny i wyjaśnienie teologiczne*, „Tarnowskie Studia Teologiczne”, vol. 31, 1, p. 36.

31 Cf. J.D. Chittister, R. Lentz, *A Passion for Life: Fragments of the Face of God*, Maryknoll 1996, p. 47.

32 Cf. P. Jestice, *Holy People of the World: A Cross-Cultural Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, Santa Barbara 2004, p. 781; M.D. Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions: The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage*, Chicago 2005, pp. 135-136.

is no convincing evidence for that.<sup>33</sup> However, overcoming a myth of the inability of men to have higher feelings if they do not have lasting relationships with women is important for the artist. In the context of the debate on this issue it is understandable that Lentz supported the presentation of the icon of St. Sergius and Bacchus at the Chicago gay pride parade in 1994.<sup>34</sup> The subject back in light of a publication concerning the events of 1219, when St. Francis accompanied by brother Iluminato met with Sultan Maleki Al-Kamil and his Sufi teacher Fakhr ad-din al-Farisi in Damietta in Egypt. The debate lasted for over twenty days on the mystical life and the importance of prayer. Although no conclusions were reached, they confirmed the belief that people who love God are able to have dialog.<sup>35</sup> The scientists were primarily interested in the possibility of establishing peaceful relations with Muslims, although many of them perceived the cultural contexts: bringing Arab customs closer to radical Orthodox trends.<sup>36</sup> At the time, Robert Lentz entered again the Franciscan Order and in 2008 he was transferred from New Mexico to the East Coast. He taught students at St. Bonaventure University in Allegany, New York, which, as a Franciscan institution was the most actively involved in the discourse of researchers around the Sultan meeting with the Poverello of Assisi. The artist saw many similarities in their relationship to spiritual brotherhood which could have resulted from their personal experiences (both were raised by dominant fathers and did not receive love from their families), but could also be an element of a certain rebellion against the world that repressed male emotionality. His position in this regard is concluded in the work *St. Francis and the Sultan* of 2009, which was made in the convention of Islamic art (Fig. 3). In the foreground, he depicted a warm embrace between Francis and Malek, which can bring to mind the ritual of a kiss of peace, but also a love scene between two men. The ambiguity of interpretation is emphasized by the flames behind their silhouettes. In Islamic art, a holy person shows up with a ball of fire above their head, which is to illustrate the state of their religious fervor.<sup>37</sup> Such an explanation for the flames also has to do with the medieval belief that during the debate, there was a fire test, intended to prove whose faith is true. It ended with kindling

33 Such a conviction was promoted John Boswell. Cf. J. Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, New York 1994, p. 154.

34 D. O'Neill, *Passionate Holiness: Marginalized Christian Devotions for Distinctive Peoples*, Bloomington 2005, p. 82.

35 Cf. J.V. Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter*, Oxford 2009, pp. 3-6.

36 Cf. K. Warren, *Daring to Cross the Threshold: Francis of Assisi Encounters Sultan Malek Al-Kamil*, Eugene 2012, pp. 19-23.

37 J.W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria*, Oxford 2002, p. 98.

of even more heat, so that it is possible for this extraordinary phenomenon to be reflected by a quote from the Koran seen in the image, saying “Praise be to Allah, the Lord of universes”. For Western iconography, the symbolism of fire is evil and punishing. Fire expresses vitality and lust.<sup>38</sup> In this spirit, the relationship between men would be part of sinful passion. Lentz does not determine definitively what was going on, leaving the audience in suspense.

This state of permanent ambiguity characterizes most of the “new opening” art, which, for obvious reasons, makes it impossible to maintain the sacred character of the resulting images. Even those that were prepared especially for religious ceremonies are nowadays characterized by a high degree of secularization. In order to illustrate this, it is worth looking at the pontificate artifacts from recent years. The most characteristic example is the picture from 2013 entitled *Habemus Papam*, painted by an illustrator renowned by the Church, Mickey McGrath, for the purposes of the pilgrimage movement. It presents Pope Francis on the balcony of St. Peter’s in Rome at the moment of the announcement of his choice to the faithful. The head of the Catholic Church is presented in a fun way, as a celebrity who happily greets the crowds by shouting “Hola”. The entertaining character of the ceremony is also to be emphasized by the Holy Spirit represented as a dove newscaster replacing the Cardinal protodeacon in his duties. Pilgrims who came to the inaugural ceremony of the pontificate are not only obliged to pray for the Pope, as was previously customary, but are also asked to share the information about the election with their friends and acquaintances through specially distributed postcards.

Desacralization of the iconographic message is also taking place in the hagiological area and it affects the presentation of women saints the most. They are presented without their sacred attributes, often in sexy poses, which are to replace the existing spiritual models. The worship of everyday life flourishes in a modernized version, regardless of the fact that the former patrons usually performed different activities than are done today. Behind the artistic activities there is of course a noble *idée* of bringing holiness closer, but the way it is presented is more and more secular and to a lesser extent refers to values that are important for religion. It is worth mentioning here the project from 2002 carried out by the leading American illustrator Loius S. Glanzman and portraying 13 women from the New Testament. The *Soul Sisters* series was to be distributed as playing cards in a special case and to inspire spiritual reflection on the religious condition of contemporary women. One of these works is a picture from 2004 entitled *St. Martha* (photo 4). The artist spent a considerable amount

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38 *Ogień*, in: Á.P. Chenel, A.S. Simarro, *Stownik symboli*, Warszawa 2008, p. 167.

of time studying oriental culture, wanting to faithfully reflect the specificity of the clothing worn by the people of Palestine, but he over-modernized his model. The person from Gospel depicted has attractive appearance and a resolute face. She seems to have a predilection for splendor in an Eastern fashion, including love for jewelry. She does not appear like a Christian saint, nor does she have the attributes of a halo or aureole. Her look is as impudent and shameless as of a typical *Vogue* model.

An important feature of contemporary religious iconography of the “new opening” is also the ideologization of the message by replacing the spiritual message with secular content. The prayer text, characteristic of religious cards, is either replaced by political, pacifist or ecological call, or transposed into an ideological area different from the original source, e.g. feminist or LGBT. Especially for the American gays, the world of Christian symbolism it is an interesting inspiration. In the search for identification references, the French national heroine, St. Joan of Arc, became the patron saint of transsexuals, due to the fact that she was known to wear men’s clothes, which in medieval times was considered at least bizarre. LGBT people are not convinced by historians’ theses that her behavior was caused by fear of violence.<sup>39</sup> They believe the words of the saint on the divine inspiration of her actions to be true, which requires opposition to the strict separation of the sexes. In this respect, her image is carried during gay pride parades and distributed in the form of prayer cards by the JesusInLove.org website. The main idea is the same as in the work of Robert Lentz, *St. Joan of Arc* of 1994, that the Church rejected as non-canonical because of the androgynous face of the French heroine. She was presented in a knight’s gear with a cross, which she made in prison. The saint is accompanied by white butterflies as symbols of diversity and the words “I pray to be equally bold in my beliefs as you, St. Joan. I ask you to accompany me in my struggles.” Lentz’s 1983 painting *Oscar Romero of El Salvador* is also considered controversial because it refers to acts of opposition to any oppressive political or religious systems. The Franciscan painted his icon when he left the Order for the first time to devote himself to painting. For him, the figure of Archbishop San Salvador Oscar Romero, who was killed in 1980 and who was beatified in 2015, was inspiring not for religious but for humanistic reasons. The priest opposed the system, like the painter opposed the religious order. The Archbishop was depicted as Our Lady of Perpetual Help is, though instead of the infant Jesus, he holds a poor boy on his arm. He wears a cross around his neck as a sign of identification with faith, because only in it can he hope to save his life from the American planes. The boy’s sandal slipped down, just like Christ’s, but it

39 Cf. D. Fraioli, *Joan of Arc: The Early Debate*, London 2002, p. 29, 131.

is not a symbol of true humanity, but of bombs being dropped on El Salvador.<sup>40</sup> Lentz sacralized and canonized the bishop before, at the same time desacralizing the topic of the identification of Christ with poverty and misery. For the artist the ideological message of the political martyr is in fact more important than the dogmas of the faith. William Hart McNichols made his work *Holy Prophet Daniel Berrigan 291* of 2016 in a similar spirit (photo 5). He dedicated it to the memory of the then deceased Jesuit Daniel Berrigan, since he sympathized with his pacifist views. Daniel was an anarchist who opposed every form of oppression of life. As a young man, like McNichols, he was a poet and spoke out against the Vietnam War and armaments, then organized anti-abortion campaigns, and finally led protests against the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq.<sup>41</sup> In the picture he is shown with the baby Jesus. The artist juxtaposed the quotation from the Gospel “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against” with fragments of Berrigan’s own statement: “We should always proclaim that killing is a disruption of life, gentleness and community, and selflessness is the only order we recognize. How many really must die in order for us to hear the voice of God.” Daniel is styled as a spiritual leader of the first centuries of Christianity. He bears the sign of the fish and the Piscatory Ring. His face is reminiscent of Pope Francis, which indicates the artist’s suggestion that he might be a good person in that office. McNichols consciously manipulates the iconographic message and uses the form reserved for saints to glorify the controversial clergyman and his views.

To sum up, it should be emphasized that the manifestations of desacralization of the religious image have a much wider scope than the above outlined. They progress with the transformations of the area of modern religion, which secularizes and melts in the cultural syncretism. The institutional Church has little responsibility for this process, since the devotional products after the Second Vatican Council emancipated themselves from the influence of church bodies and have functioned in the area of pop culture. According to the researchers (Morgan, Petruzzelli, Primiano), this process will deepen and the religious materialities will eventually lose their sacred dimension giving way to a certain cultural code, of which religion will be only one of the symptoms.

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40 The iconographic motif presentation of Our Lady of Perpetual Help is analyzed by M. Janocha in *Ikony w Polsce. Od średniowiecza do współczesności*, Warszawa 2008, p. 112. Cf. J. Sprutta, *Ikona Matki Bożej Bolesnej (Nieustającej Pomocy): historia i teologia*, „Salvatori Mater” 2011, 1-2, pp. 217-218.

41 Cf. D.L. Anderson, *The Human Tradition in America Since 1945*, Wilmington 2003, pp. 85-89.

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Photo 1 Non-canonical use of a Christological motif



Robert Lentz OFM, *Christ of Maryknoll* (2002)



William Hart McNichols, SJ, *Jesus Listen and Pray 251* (2012)

Photo 2 New convention in the Mariological themes



Lewis Williams, *Our Mother of Sorrows* (2002)



Keith Mallett, *The Guardian Angel of Autumn and Winter* (2000)

Photo 3. Going beyond the scheme in the Trinitarian and hagiographical themes



William Hart McNichols, SJ, *San Jose Sombra del Padre 161* (2013)



Robert Lentz, OFM, *St. Francis and the Sultan* (2009)

Photo 4. Playing with artistic convention within the canon area



Mickey McGrath, OSFS, *Habemus Papam* (2013)



Louis S. Glanzman, *St. Martha* (2004)

Photo 5 Ideologization of iconographic message



Robert Lentz, OFM, *St. Joan of Arc* (1994)

William Hart McNichols, SJ, *Holy Prophet Daniel Berrigan 291* (2016)

