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## **Symbol of the Cross in Popular Culture: an Analysis of the Use and Transformation of the Symbol in *Machina* Magazine**

*Abstract:* The article focuses on the use and transformation of religious symbols in popular culture. The Polish pop culture magazine, *Machina*, was chosen as a case study. Popular culture, based strongly on visual communication, has fluid canons and is of an (auto)ironic nature. Symbols from different domains are transformed within this culture so that they fit its rules of communication. Religious symbols have been used extensively in *Machina* in a conventional, humorous and deriding manner. According to the results of the analysis, the use of religious symbols in popular culture is inevitably connected to the overlapping of religious communication and pop cultural communication, which creates a particular ambivalence of the meaning of the symbol. One should ask if resulting adaptations of religious symbols by popular culture might be considered to be a process of desacralisation. On the basis of the above-mentioned case study, one cannot give an unequivocal answer. Although pop cultural communication may lead to simplification and the deconstruction of symbols, one cannot claim it is de-symbolised as such. Desymbolisation and desacralisation are ongoing processes, but they are parallel to the process of creation and transformation of symbols as well. The research may be an inspiration for further analysis of the way religious symbols function within the realm of popular culture.

*Keywords:* desacralisation; desymbolisation; popular culture; religion; symbols

In February 2006, the *Machina* magazine in Poland started its re-launch campaign after four years of suspension. The return of the magazine, which used to be one of the best and most popular in its category, was accompanied by considerable media publicity. The “0 Issue,” marking the re-launch, was available only through limited distribution—one could register via the *Machina* website and acquire the re-launch issue. In order to raise interest in the project, the magazine was advertised on posters in most big cities around the country. The cover depicted the faces of artist Madonna with her daughter Lourdes pasted into the cutout figures of Madonna and Jesus from the famous Black Madonna Icon in Jasna Góra. Immediately after the first billboards and adverts were shown to the public, the Pauline Fathers from the Jasna Góra Convent, followed by groups of Catholics from all over Poland, protested against the use of this religious symbol on the magazine cover. The artistic collage was called “blasphemous,” “offensive” and “disrespectful” by some religious leaders, priests, as well as by politicians and several public figures.<sup>1</sup> The editors reacted to the protest

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.jasnagora.com/wydarzenieDuze.php?ID=1490>; (Wiśniewska, Makarenko, Kowalski 2006), (Tomczak 2006).

in a public exchange of statements, which eventually lead to charges being pressed against the editors and publishers for the alleged affront to religious sentiments. Both sides of the conflict interpreted the use of the religious symbol differently: the editors regarded it as a form of artistic expression, while their opponents saw it as sacrilegious abuse.

Inspired by the conflict about the meaning of the religious symbol in a pop cultural setting, this text focuses on various uses of religious symbols in the magazine. Due to practical limitations, the symbolic conflict itself will not be analysed, however, it must be seen as an important part of the negotiation of the symbol's meaning. Firstly, the term "popular culture" (or "pop culture"), will be analysed with regards to its relation to mass culture. Then, the various uses of religious symbols in "Machina" magazine will be depicted and scrutinised: from the neutral use, whose aim is illustrational, to that of a deriding and mocking one. On the basis of this analysis, it will be discussed if the desacralisation of religious symbols is inherent in popular culture.

### Popular Culture and Its Contexts

The term "popular culture" is often regarded as a synonym for "mass culture," although there have been numerous studies pointing out the erroneous assumption behind it. Mass culture, a term popularised especially by the Frankfurt School, denotes a type of culture for the lower classes, which is produced by the *culture industry* (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 96). As such, it is simplified and standardised so that it fits the common taste and is comprehensible for even the least educated; it is "infecting everything with sameness" (ibid: 94). Since its recipients are not capable of creating culture themselves, being deprived of both the cultural and economical capital, this type of culture is created elsewhere and then imposed on the masses. In their sceptical view of the mass culture, as part and parcel of the capitalist system, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their famous "Dialectic of Enlightenment" wrote that mass production and standardisation turn culture into products and its recipients into consumers, who are inactive (as in deprived of cultural initiative and creativity) and easily manipulated. There is also a clear distinction between "high" and "mass culture," the first representing artistic values and stemming from authentic expression, as opposed to acquired (or rather imposed) taste, which is part of the mass culture.

The abovementioned division between high and mass culture entails a normative standpoint. It also ascribes initiative or lack thereof to certain groups or societal classes. The post-war transformations of culture in the western world did however trigger important changes in the academic world. The emergence of *cultural studies* in the mid-sixties was a hallmark of the coming shifts in theoretical perspectives. Although cultural studies as a discipline has influences in the Frankfurt School it offers a different perspective on culture itself, as well as its producers and recipients. Criticism towards the division between passive consumers and imposing producers of culture led to a different understanding of what popular culture actually is. As

John Fiske wrote, “Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant. Popular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without and above as mass cultural theorists would have it” (Fiske 2011: 2). Fiske adds that popular culture is always to some extent rebellious, as in opposing hegemonic forces. Furthermore, it is always a culture of conflict, where cultural meanings and their dominance are at stake and where the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic are constantly interacting. It is important to emphasise this last notion—the shift from *mass culture* to *popular culture*—is not simply a rhetorical move, nor is it a complete negation of the former concept. The presence of both the dominant and dominated groups is strongly emphasised, but the power relation is seen as a dynamic process, not a set agenda. The recipients are to some extent consumers, but they make conscious choices about what they consume, how they consume it, as well as what it means to them. Instead of replicating the hegemonic structures (as mass culture would), popular culture is, using Wallerstein’s term, an ideological battlefield, an arena of consent or resistance in the fight for cultural meanings (Hall 1981: 128–129).

The notion of creative recipients was developed into the concept of active audiences who not only receive cultural content, but also produce it (*ibid.*: 128). It is observable especially in the new media, such as the Internet, which blur the distinction between producers and recipients, enabling almost anybody to participate in the creative culture process. What follows from it is the so-called culture of convergence (Jenkins 2006), which is a process through which content flows across “multiple media platforms” (*ibid.*: 2), and through which different media industries cooperate. Convergence also assumes the constant movement of audiences, who switch between various media channels in search for information and entertainment. Since this media convergence is dependent on participatory audiences, the notion of active audiences plays a crucial role. Henry Jenkins argued against seeing the convergence only through technological lenses: for him it is first and foremost a cultural shift (*ibid.*: 3).

Should one accept this stance, the next question requiring analysis is that of the meaning of the content that is being circulated. The mass culture concepts entailed that since the spectator is passive and lacks creativity, it is the producers who not only create content, but also create meanings. Through that, manipulation of the masses is easily achieved. The concept of popular culture undermines the imposed nature of meaning: instead, researchers claim that meaning is created during interaction. Interpretation requires understanding; therefore knowledge is a prerequisite for a successful interaction to take place. This knowledge can be understood in very basic terms: when coming from a similar cultural background, society or class, people share some notions about what things are, how they are used, etc. Nevertheless, this knowledge does not determine what particular individuals or groups *mean* when they refer to objects, symbols and notions (Barthes gives the example of “love” which, although it has many common associations, can mean different things for different people). Taking the active part in cultural production is a continuous confrontation with and negotiation of meanings. Popular culture, due to its globalised and convergent nature, widens the arena of negotiation to an unprecedented extent: we are confronted with

people whose basic knowledge is only partially—or is not at all—overlapping with what we make of the world. However, as this article aims to show, the confrontations are present even in the most local contexts.

Having said *what* popular culture *is*, we must not neglect the description of *what* popular culture *is like*. Media convergence facilitates the circulation and modification of content, which may result in some form of pastiche or parody. Canons and rules are fragile; they change fairly easily. What was considered kitschy and worthless yesterday may earn a cult status tomorrow—and vice versa. It seems that certain cultural fashions dictate the rhythm of those flows and shifts, just as they determine the circulation of cultural motifs. Pastiche, parody and auto-irony are crucial elements of that process, as will also be shown in this essay.

### The Magazine and Method of Analysis

Before its suspension in 2002, *Machina* had been a fairly influential pop cultural magazine. Established in 1995, it was one of the first ones in post-1989 Poland to introduce the newest pop cultural trends and developments to Polish youth. In a media landscape of limited cable television availability, and a slow and hardly accessible internet, *Machina* was a monthly magazine rife with interviews, articles and reviews, all presenting the newest trends in music, film, art and fashion from home and abroad. With a circulation of about 100,000 copies, the magazine was targeted at young people from big cities, but later on also the emerging middle class, i.e. people in their early thirties, wealthy enough to travel and more open to cultural diversity than previous generations. During its eight years of presence in the Polish press market, *Machina* had an established reputation. However, with the increasing popularity of new media, the magazine's position as a "pop cultural pioneer" began to decline. In 2002 the magazine was officially suspended and it disappeared from the market for four years. The re-launch cover scandal raised interest in the magazine due to the controversial use of a religious symbol. However, it was neither the first nor the last use of religious symbols in the magazine.

For this research, all issues of *Machina* magazine, from 1996 to 2002 and from 2004 to 2009, were analysed, with 51 issues collected for the final analysis. The items comprised both texts (articles, reviews, summaries, etc.) and visual material (pictures, illustrations, drawings), which contained or represented Christian religious symbols. The method used for analysis was semiology<sup>2</sup> (Rose 2007: 31, 74–106). One of the

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<sup>2</sup> Here one should be cognizant of the difference between the terms "semiotics" and "semiology." The former, popularized by Locke, is widely used especially within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, while *semiology*, a term made well-known by de Saussure, is prominent within the French one. In this essay, I am referring to the latter tradition. Although both terms refer to scientific analysis of signs and language, *semiotics* is associated with the essence and functioning of the signs of language, which is connected with logic and linguistics (Pelc 1982: 16). *Semiology*, on the other hand, is a science "which studies the role of signs as part of social life" (de Saussure 1983: 15–16) and is devoted to the social construction of signs, their meanings, and laws which govern the usage of signs. This theory does not refer to social processes as such (Halas 2001: 27). Rose, using the term "semiology," refers to the French tradition (incl. the works of R. Barthes)

principles of this approach is based on the notion that culture, in its broadest sense, is based on signs, whose meanings are socially constructed and negotiated, and which can also be objects of conflicts. Rose points out that semiology is a manifold method—it does not rely solely on the compositional analysis of visual materials or content analysis, but instead focuses on all aspects of the researched material. Therefore, all signs, slogans, titles, subtitles are also analysed, along with composition, content and placement of visual materials. What is vital here is the focus on various types of symbols, their meaning and social construction, as well as socially determined meaning attribution. Rose emphasizes that semiology can shed light on the mechanisms of constructing meanings, including vital ideas and notions which are behind this process. A painting or an iconical image is not only a visual depiction of something—it should be analysed within the social context in which it was created and in which it functions. One must answer the questions of the nature of values that the image carries, how and why those values are presented, and what the function of the image is. Furthermore, it should not be seen as a single exemplification of some kind, but instead as an element of a web of other images, all interconnected on various levels. The issue of authorship, the usage or display of the image (Where? Why? By whom was it displayed?), should also be taken into account. Considering the above-mentioned factors, semiology offers broad tools which can help discover the less apparent mechanisms of constructing meaning.

The aim of the analysis, aided with semiology, was to see how religious symbols are used and transformed in a pop cultural setting. On the basis of this research, three main uses of religious symbols have been selected.

### **Conventional Use of Religious Symbols**

Although *Machina* is a magazine mostly devoted to all things related to pop culture, it also featured numerous articles and commentaries on religious or religion-related issues. Among the topics were: the transformations of religious institutions as a result to secularisation and globalisation, Pope John Paul II and his work, and portrayals of people whose work and life were greatly influenced by religion. In most of those articles, the use of religious symbols was of illustrative and conventional character. Nevertheless, religious symbols were used conventionally also in those articles which were not devoted to religion. A description of the life of St. Isidore of Seville (“Święty Izidor od Internetu,” *Machina*, 07/2001) included a reproduction of a mediaeval icon presenting the Saint meticulously calligraphing pages of a book. Since St. Isidore was pronounced patron saint of the Internet, the text focuses on his life, as well as his contribution to European culture and engagement in the development of educational institutions as possible explanations of the patronage. The illustration does not, in any way, counteract or oppose the content and context of the article. In another case, in an interview with Robert Tekieli, from issue 11/1999, the interviewee emphasises

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and focuses on the meanings that people attribute to symbols rather than linguistic or logical methods of constructing signs. Such an approach is suitable for the demands of this essay.

the importance of his conversion to Catholicism, also emphasising the meaning that religion has had to him since he became a believer. Among several illustrations and pictures accompanying the interview, the most prominent one is a light-blue symbol of the cross, used as a background to the text. Despite its faint colouring, the presence of the symbol is overwhelming and it fortifies the religious purport of the interviewee's statements.

In both cases the use of religious symbols was not aimed at changing the readers' reception of the text, as it did not in any way interfere with the original context.

### **Humorous Use of Religious Symbols**

The second use of religious symbols in *Machina* was that of humorous nature. In many cases, the line between humour and mockery was very thin and dependent on the reader's perception. For the purpose of analysis, "humorous" use was defined as that whose aim was not to create a contrast or opposition to the text (as was the case of mocking and deriding use), but rather change the perception of the text to a less serious one. One of the best examples of humorous use was in the special series of articles depicting the transformations of and within the Catholic Church throughout the centuries. The article "The Catholic Church anno domini 2006, or what has changed" (transl. MK) (Soszyński 2006) is written in a serious manner, presenting the readers with some essential facts from the history of the institution, the papal office, clergy, etc. Although it is not meant as a historical analysis, the text is rife with dates and names from the history of the Church and is highly informative. The first page of the article however, sets the scene in a rather unconventional way. The full-page photo depicts a church with a little yard where diligent monks work in the garden. Next to the yard, there is a small graveyard with a couple of tombstones. What makes this picture humorous is the computer-game style, with prominent pixels and word balloons containing paraphrased lyrics from popular Polish songs. The topic of the article—transformations of the Catholic church—is therefore given a humorous visual commentary that does not oppose or counter the text, but takes off some of its seriousness.

### **Mocking/Deriding Use of Religious Symbols**

The third most common use of religious symbols in *Machina* was a deriding or mocking one. As mentioned above, this type of use was differentiated from the humorous approach through the existence of a contrast or opposition between the text and the picture, strictly connected with the sacred/profane dichotomy. Three examples will be analysed to further elaborate on this opposition.

The first case is a series of articles called "The cult object" ["Rzecz kultowa"], whose aim is to present certain gadgets or items that have, or should have, cult status. The symbol of the cross appears in two articles from the series: in November 1996

and 2001. The former, entitled “Wola Twoja Panie” is a photographic representation of a cemetery—it contains pictures of graves, crosses, lights and flowers. The date of both publications is by no means accidental: the 1<sup>st</sup> of November is All Saints Day, followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November celebrations of *Zaduszki*. Both holidays are dedicated to remembering the dead and reflecting on the meaning of life and death, with millions of Poles visiting cemeteries and places of commemoration, such as war memorials and statues. The 1996 article mocks the reflexive nature of the celebration by depicting the cemetery as a special type of market where every item, including tombstones, crosses and candles, is a commodity. As such, those items are deprived of their religious associations and become nothing more than secular objects whose value is almost exclusively commercial. Supplemented with ironic remarks, the article plays with the sacred/profane contrast, adding dubious meaning to the phrase “cult object.” In a similar fashion, the 2001 article introduces the readers to popular kitschy gadgets such as key-chains, toys, and plastic figurines. Among them, we find a couple of crosses that are presented and described in the exact same way as other items in the collection. Here, again, the religious symbol is deprived of its religious context and instead presented like a secular object with a certain market value. This juxtaposition of sacred/profane, made in an ironic and mocking manner, directs the readers toward certain interpretations of the content.

Another example of the deriding use of religious symbols is the illustration to the article entitled “The Holy Cross and Other Edens” [“Święty krzyż i inne raję”] (*Machina* 07/2006). This text is a loose narrative about female martyrs and stigmatics in the Catholic Church; it deals with their life and circumstances of their death. The text itself is written in a humorous manner, focusing for the most part on the shocking and violent episodes from the stigmatics’ lives. Nevertheless, the article itself does not mock religious symbols in any way. What changes the direction of possible interpretation is the series of photographs accompanying the text. Some of them are black and white reproductions of mediaeval icons and paintings of saint martyrs. Some, however, present “drag queens” and “cross-dressers” in religious poses: including a photo of Sugar, a popular “drag queen” performing in Poland. Sugar’s performances involve the use of religious symbols, such as stick-on stigmata, which also appear in the photograph. The artist is portrayed kneeling on the floor, wearing a white dress symbolising innocence and purity, with his arms wide open and palms of his hands exposing the rubber stigmata.

By the same token, the sacred/profane contrast is present in numerous articles about Marilyn Manson, a controversial American rock musician known for performances often incorporating the abuse of religious symbols, such as ripping up the Bible on stage. In an article from the 10/2000 issue, Manson is shown as Jesus on the cross—at his feet are his devoted fans and other musicians, paying homage to their idol. In the next issue, from November 2011, another article about Manson is published: the title page includes a short introduction arranged in the shape of the cross. The text emphasizes the hostile attitude of Manson towards the Church, which, juxtaposed with the shape of the text, can be seen as another exemplification of the sacred/profane contrast.

### The Idol of Pop Culture

Another common theme found during the analysis was the figure of an idol. From singers to performance artists, from writers to filmmakers, those who made it to the top were celebrated in *Machina* with reverence, but also with a dose of irony and distance. The word “idol,” whose etymological roots are found in the Greek phrase “eidolon” (meaning “reflection” or “apparition”), has religious connotations, as one of its meanings is related to cult objects or images that are representations of a god and, as such, are being worshipped. A more modern understanding of the term is a person loved or admired by others. In the pop cultural domain, fame seems to be a prerequisite for acquiring the idol or anti-idol status. Idols are portrayed in numerous ways, but in *Machina* one of the most common depictions was a religion-inspired one. This was true not only for such stars like Madonna or Manson, who use religious symbolism in their performances, lyrics and music videos, but also many others, who the public would not necessarily associate with religion and religiosity.

In the June 2006 issue, there is a review of an upcoming album of a well-known American rock band called The Red Hot Chilli Peppers. The article entitled “Red Hot Finger of God” [“Red Hot Palec Boży”] is accompanied with a photograph of the band’s guitarist. He is posing in a manner that evokes associations with Christ on the cross: the musician is wearing a white loincloth and has the crown of thorns on his head. In place of timber, however, we see an electric guitar. Although never in the review does one see any mention of religion, this depiction of the artist gives the word “idol” a deeper meaning. The resemblance to Jesus emphasises how special the musician is. This stylistics, being a form of travesty of Christian symbols such as sacrifice, grace and redemption, suggests that the fate of an artist is a sacrifice, since subjecting one’s life to music and art, despite numerous advantages, is rife with difficulties and loneliness.

The motif of sacrifice is a recurrent theme: the October 1998 issue contains an article about Prince—a celebrated American musician. The article tells a story about the artist’s difficult road to fame, his achievements and the idol status he earned due to his outstanding work. There is an illustration adjoining the text: it shows Prince during a concert, directly under a purple spotlight, with his arms wide open. It could be just another picture of a musician in the moment of triumph and glory, but one immediately notices that the picture has been cut into the shape of the cross. This transforms the meaning of the whole article into a proverb about art as a vocation, which may lead to great achievements, but is also a hard and difficult mission.

The cover of the 01/2006 issue features Maciej Maleńczuk, a Polish singer and songwriter, kneeling on the floor and praying. Maleńczuk, like Manson, can hardly be called an enthusiast of religion and is known for his extravagant rock musician lifestyle. The contrast of sacred and profane though, does not seem to belittle or undermine the religious connotations that a life of an idol evokes. In this example, it strengthens the notion of “music as a vocation” yet again.

One observation needs to be made here: all three examples, despite numerous differences in composition, context and setting, have one thing in common. The



religious symbols are used as a background, removed from their original context and used in a different setting. They do not “stand” independently, but instead are used to emphasise, strengthen or ennoble a person or an event that is of purely secular nature. What can be made of this manipulation and transformation of symbols, and if that affects the nature of symbols in any way, will be examined in the following sections.

### **The Ambivalence of the Meaning of Symbols**

Although all the above mentioned cases differ with regards to the context in which the symbol was used and the function that this use has, in all of them one can observe the process of transformation of the meaning of religious symbols according to the rules imposed by popular culture, or, to be more precise, its communication rules.

One of the reasons why religious symbols (especially iconical) appear so often in pop cultural communication is their universality: most audiences, even those without Christian backgrounds, know the symbolism behind the cross or the crown of thorns. Naturally, as was said before, in order to read the symbols present in the visual sphere, a specific kind of knowledge is needed: namely that of conventions, which are the guidelines of how certain content is represented within a particular culture. Those conventions are keys to interpretation. Due to their pervasiveness and universality, one may assume that in the Eurocentric culture, Christian symbols are widely known and recognized. However, this recognition does not entail a single interpretation of the symbol, since interpreting encompasses individual dispositions of the reader, as well as the social and historical context. Take the example of Hail Mary as a symbol especially significant in Roman Catholicism: several versions of Mary, among them The Virgin Mary of Guadalupe or The Lady of Lourdes, combine theology with local traditions, history and folklore. In their classical work on pilgrimage, Victor and Edith Turner claim that:

The more particular the form of the symbol-vehicle (and the more attention is paid to its form), the likelier the signifier is to take on a life in its own, apart from its intended or original meaning, or ‘signified’. New significance may then be generated as devotees associate the particularized, personalized image with their own hopes and sorrows as members of a particular community with a specific history (Turner, Turner 2011: 143).

The original meaning is partly replaced in the course of significant historical events, creating a new semantic scene (*ibid.*: 144), on which numerous meanings and values coexist, be it in peace or in conflict.

Victor and Edith Turner distinguish three levels of the meaning of symbol: the exegetic level (the interpretation of the meaning is based on the characteristics of the symbol), the operational level (related to ways of using the symbol and actions undertaken with reference to the symbol) and the positional level (the meaning is connected to the interrelations between various symbols) (*ibid.*: 145, 146). The operational meaning includes the social history of the symbol, i.e. the connection of the symbol with important historical events. In the structure of religious symbols one thing

may be “included or merged with the transcendent reality” (Rusecki 2002: 1157). Religious symbols may therefore comprise both references to transcendence—common to all Christians—and references to national, regional or even individual history.

Gilbert Durand emphasizes the fact that religious symbols create “numerous redundancies” (Durand 1986: 27–28). This repetitiveness, the excess of certain content, allows for a widening and deepening of the symbol’s meaning and facilitates explaining one through the other. According to Durand, all images, especially religious ones, refer to a certain reality even despite being copied and duplicated: regardless of the number of images of the Holy Mother, they will always refer to the Immaculate Conception, the Mother of Jesus, etc. In that sense, copying a symbol will not result in the “blurring” of its meaning or the symbol becoming less respectable (*ibid.*: 28). However, what may distort its original meaning is the transformation of the symbol. Whether this will happen depends primarily on the context in which the symbol is used, as well as the function which such use will have. Let us analyse this problem using the image of Marilyn Manson on the cross mentioned earlier in this essay. This image consists of two overlapping types of communication: the pop cultural (to which Manson himself “belongs”) and religious one (with which the symbolism of the cross can be associated). The combination of those types in one image, in a specific context created by the *Machina* magazine, enables the religious symbol to be transformed and adapted by pop cultural communication. The adaptation facilitates the adjustment of the symbol and directs the readers towards a different interpretation—namely, a non-religious one. The religious symbols and all the interpretations and associations carried with them must be present in order to remain legible to the viewers: had the cross from the Manson’s photograph been removed, the religious connotations would not have been so distinct. On the other hand, the symbol *must* be transformed in such a way that its reception changes as well. Pop cultural communication, to recall the beginning of this essay, is characterized by irony, mockery, lack of settled canons and continuous travesty of cultural symbols. Religious symbols are adapted by this communication so that they serve different, non-religious purposes.

It is worthwhile to point out that the process of assimilation and transformation is not a one-sided one. Pop cultural communication also can be, and often is, used for religious purposes. Among many examples in Poland, some are especially worth mentioning. One of them is the “Zrób się na Post” campaign organised by the members of the Dominican Order in Cracow. The campaign, whose name can be translated as “Get yourself up for Lent,” was advertised on posters and via a website.<sup>3</sup> The posters show energetic, happy young people dressed up nicely, walking around town. The website, except for the posters, also has a professional layout that is no different to the standard well designed website. At first glance, this campaign seems to be some kind of advertisement for a service targeted at young people. Maybe an insurance company? A bank account for students? When we read the text accompanying the posters, everything becomes clear: the texts include Bible extracts related to Lent. The aim of this campaign is to show that Lent should be celebrated joyously and with

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<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.beczka.krakow.dominikanie.pl/post/>

hope—and so it becomes part of the Catholic Church’s evangelic mission. Elements of pop cultural communication are adapted and transformed by a Dominican ministry in order to convey the values related to religion and piety.

### **The Desacralisation of Religious Symbols**

In the final chapter of this essay, one should ask the question whether the transformation and assimilation of religious symbols through pop cultural communication has a desacralising function. Desacralisation will be understood both as a process of depriving symbols (as well as festivities, rituals, etc.) of their sacral elements and religious functions, and a perspective that helps explain certain phenomena by referring to concepts outside of the religious field (Furseth and Repstad 2007: 83).

Remembering the main features of popular culture and its assimilation and transformation of other cultural elements for certain purposes, one may conclude that the process of desacralisation is one of the aspects of the coexistence of religious and pop cultural communication. We can talk of desacralisation in the case of some religious holidays (such as Christmas) or religious celebrations (like baptism), whose religious side becomes less significant—instead, those events are more often seen as occasions for family reunions, social events and off-work relaxation. The commercial and secular aspects of religious holidays and celebrations have become increasingly prominent in Poland over the last decade (Baniak 2007: 152, 511).

In this analysis, the magazine’s profile and function as a vehicle of pop cultural communication is crucial as it places the transformed images in a specific context, suggesting their reading from a pop cultural perspective. This does not mean that “Machina’s” profile itself deprives all religious symbols of their original sacral associations. Therefore, there is no confirmation of the thesis that popular culture is desymbolised (by desymbolisation I understand the reduction of the meaning of the symbol to a mere carrier of content, see Bronk 1979: 1202), reducing all religious symbols to images without references to a different reality and different logic. Pop cultural communication may lead to some simplifications, generalizations or “blurring” of meanings, for example by connecting them with commercialization or commodification. Due to certain features and qualities of popular culture, symbols existing within its realm may be deconstructed. Nevertheless, thanks to the very same qualities, new symbols are being created and the meaning of the existing ones is changing. In the magazine, as was shown above, religious symbols appeared in different contexts: both those that did not modify their original meaning and those that did so by juxtaposing the symbol with elements of popular culture in a sacred/profane contrast.

### **Conclusion**

Versatility, malleability and fluency characterising popular culture create a perfect environment for transforming various cultural elements, such as symbols, and adapt-

ing them to pop cultural communication. Many of those adaptations go unnoticed, dressed in the common form of pastiche or irony. Some, however, attract attention and may cause conflicts, as in the case of numerous scandals involving the use of religious symbols in advertising, films or video clips,<sup>4</sup> to name a few examples. Those conflicts seem unavoidable, due to the nature of symbols themselves: their interpretation depends on historical and social contexts, as well as individual dispositions and perceptions. Therefore, transformed religious symbols, used within the realm of pop cultural communication, may be interpreted by some recipients as acts of artistic expression, while others will find them offensive to their beliefs and values.

The aim of the article was to show that despite what we can call de-contextualisation (i.e. the extraction of symbols from their original context and implementing them in a different setting), one cannot claim that any presence of religious symbols in popular culture is an instance of desacralisation. As was shown above in the case of the “Machina” magazine, religious symbols can be used in various ways and for multiple purposes, such as illustrative, humorous and mocking ones, and while one use may be more common than others, there is not one pattern of transforming religious symbols by popular culture. The mocking or deriding use raises attention due to its controversiality, but it would be an overstatement to perceive it as representative to popular culture as such.

The analysis presented in this paper may inspire a more systematic research on the functioning of religious symbols within pop cultural communication in Poland. Popular culture and religion influence each other constantly, oftentimes leading to conflicts of interpretation and controversies. It is worth asking the question of how this mutual influence progresses in other spheres of culture, and what its consequences and effects on both popular culture and religion are.

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<sup>4</sup> Among those examples, there are some especially worth mentioning: Marithé and François Gribaud’s “Last Supper” advertisement (a photographic paraphrase of Da Vinci’s renowned “Last Supper”) which raised concerns among the Milan city council members. The city authorities described the photo as a parody of “theological symbols for commercial ends” (Clarke 2005) and brought the case to court, which resulted in the advertisement being banned in the city of Milan. As a reaction, the Catholic church officials in France—on the basis of similar charges—won a court injunction to ban the ad in the whole country. Marin Scorsese’s 1988 film “The Last Temptation of Christ,” an adaptation of N. Kazantzakis’s novel under the same title, was considered highly controversial by several religious groups. Since it depicts Jesus struggling with earthly desires and considering giving in to some of them, the film was met with protests around the world, and a series of incidents in Paris in 1988, when a Christian fundamentalist group attacked the audience of a cinema in Paris with Molotov cocktails. Thirteen people were injured as a result. Madonna’s 1989 “Like a Prayer” music video featuring stigmata, burning crosses, and the singer seducing a saint, was deemed controversial by MTV (where the clip premiered) and numerous critics alike. Several religious groups, especially in the USA, protested against showing the music video. Both the artist and her works were banned from Italy after the Pope had issued a statement criticising the video clip (more on this case can be found at: <http://eightiesclub.tripod.com/id135.htm>).

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