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**METAPHYSICAL, RELIGIOUS AND
SACRED ART IN POLAND: SKETCH
FOR A PANORAMA**

Art inspired by beliefs, art stemming from opinions that elude empirical competencies, art associated with metaphysical intuitions and general religiosity has always been a component of art history. In the culture of the West, since the era of Renaissance humanism and the Reformation, there has occurred a slow loosening of ties between art and religion. The process accelerated rapidly during the Enlightenment and was sealed by the social revolution of the early 20th century, the counter culture of the 1960s and the 1970s, and postmodernity bent on deconstructing historical structures of meaning. Art of this kind appears to be in constant decline, drifting ever further from the so-called mainstream of artistic events. The rate and the nature of the processes of art secularisation depend on the context of local cultures and the specificity of the transformations in the respective societies. A special place on this map is due to the Polish art system, as it coexists with a still relatively common Christian – and in particular Catholic – religiosity. A significant share in our collective imaginary dedicated to the religious component translates into the phenomenon of Polish metaphysical, religious, and sacred art.

One may regard as a phenomenon on a global scale the independent culture of the 1980s, it being the reaction of the local artistic milieu to the totalitarian control imposed by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) during the period of martial law. The boycott of the official state-run art distribution system was accompanied by the artists of various media turning towards sacred spaces, which took on the function of alternative exhibition venues.¹ In correlation with the willingly assumed view of the social and political reality through the lens of Christian sensitivity and iconography, it gave rise to a distinct artistic movement which was no less incisive than the Polish critical art movement was to be a decade later. The period of gradual removal of the oppressive measures during the twilight of the communist dictatorship and the subsequent tumultuous and chaotic process of systemic transformation brought with it the disintegration of the independent culture, briefly replaced by a pluralist artistic polyphony, which subsequently, after 1993, ever more markedly gave way to the increasing dominance of art in the vein of leftist social change. During the time of the institutional hegemony of this paradigm, art inspired by Christianity was almost entirely ousted from official circulation. However, neither this 'descent into the catacombs' meant its demise, nor the 'conservative turn' of sorts undertaken by a part of cultural institutions after 2015 has been tantamount to creating artistic phenomena *ex nihilo*.

The Polish world of contemporary art is to a degree composed of a rather numerous group of artists who in their own different ways and from

1 R. Rogozińska, *W stronę Golgoty. Inspiracje pasyjne w sztuce polskiej w latach 1970–1999*, Poznań, 2002.

their own different perspectives relate to metaphysical and religious inspirations.

On the one hand, we are dealing with art that is more or less critical of religiosity embedded within the framework of confessional conventions; on the other, the map of Polish art features a series of phenomena that are rooted in primordially understood and variously actualised Christianity. These are created by people for whom, regardless of current political climates and dominating discourses, art related to religiosity – far from lying at the margin of the artworld – is situated at the very centre thereof and appears to be the creative endeavour of the greatest profundity and value.

Artists closer to the critical attitude explore universal motifs of fascination and horror evoked by the borderline states of human existence. The art created within this circle, though it does not identify with the Christian *imaginarium*, refers to it unwittingly, transforming and transposing it in a way that can only be fully understood in its context. Works of this kind appear to constitute a part of the wider phenomenon known as post-Christianity. It deconstructs the sacred, as it is traditionally understood, and rediscovers it, albeit in dimensions that are seemingly far from obvious. A survey of artistic output produced in this vein had already been provided during exhibitions held at the outset of the 21st century. These were: *Irreligia* (2001) – curated by Kazimierz Piotrowski – which brought together artists such as, among others, Marta Deskur, Katarzyna Górna, Grzegorz Klaman, Zbigniew Libera, Dorota Nieznalska, Joanna Rajkowska, and Robert Rumas, as well as the 2002 group presentation compiled by Grzegorz Kowalski, held in the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw, which was titled *Co widzi trupa wyszklona źrenica* (*What does the corpse's glazed pupil see*), with many others following afterwards. Among significant developments, one should include selected works by Artur Żmijewski, Katarzyna Kozyra, recently also the queer and religious works by Daniel Rycharski, as well as Bolesław Chromy's exhibition highlighting the problem of paedophilia, titled *Katechizm dla wszystkich klas* (*A Catechism for All Grades*), held in Gdansk City Gallery in February 2022.²

A convincing typology of this field of art has been put forth by Paweł Moźdzynski,³ who distinguished between the several movements in various ways relating to the notion of the sacred. Although benefiting from his proposal, I will nevertheless take the liberty to provide a slightly

2 <https://magazynsum.pl/katechizm-dla-wszystkich-klas-boleslawa-chromrego-w-ggm/>, [retrieved on: 6.07.2023].

3 P. Moźdzynski, "Transgresyjne sacrum we współczesnych sztukach wizualnych. Próba typologii", [in:] *Sztuka wobec metafizyki. Postawy i strategie lat 2000–2020*, ed. by R. Solewski, B. Stano, Ł. Murzyn, Kraków, 2023.

altered classification of these, together with a commentary. The sacred of the body is, according to the author, predominantly the domain of performance art. What becomes the medium here is the whole psychophysical and spiritual condition of the artist. The intimate, at times extreme experience of the functions and limitations of corporeality allows artists to come into contact with what in the religious experience is related to the mystery of incarnation, suffering, and ecstasy. In this context, Możdżyński points to the works of Alicja Żebrowska, but also to the already mentioned installation and object art by Grzegorz Klaman. The sacred in nature, in turn, is explored by artists who endeavour to restore the ability to truly see natural phenomena in contemporary audiences, by encouraging them to reach beyond the perspective of humans as a species. This is where the land art and the activity of Jarek Lustych comes in, strongly rooted, as it is, in ecology and post-humanism, focused on the soundscape of water; alongside it the art of Agnieszka Brzeżańska, and projects by Tatiana Czekalska and Leszek Golec, exploring 'the sacred in animals'. The female sacred, related to the figure of the Mother Goddess, is evoked in the works by Izabela Gustowska, and Iwona Demko, whose omission in the cited study seems rather unjustified. One should also note the large number of female artists exploring esotericism and magic, reaching for the motifs of witches and *szeptunki* (spirit talkers) as figures of specifically feminine power and special metaphysical competence, inaccessible to men. The sacredness of death is in a way touched upon in such works as Katarzyna Kozyra's *Pyramid of Animals*. The artist leads the spectator through the liminal experience of inflicting death on animals within the industrial protein and so-called 'animal products' trade, a process suppressed in the collective consciousness. Another approach to evoking a sense of transgression was adopted by Artur Żmijewski, who chose as the venue for his video *Berek (The Game of Tag)* a gas chamber in a death camp. We are certainly dealing with a transgression of an established dimension of reality; however, what may be alarming is the direction this transgression takes. The work appears to be breaking the convention of revering the victims, while the artist confronts the – impossible to be verbalised – horror, grief, and reverence with an energetic play.

Artists whose art grows out of the post-structuralist suspicion of the traditional catalogue of universal values focus on the heretic sacred, which is syncretic and conceived of in an extremely individualistic manner. Contemporary art, however, also features the sacred of the void, which can be described as an artistically stimulated experience of nothingness. It can be accessed through abstract and minimalist art, taking the form of both paintings and – not infrequently – installations. Following in the footsteps of Malevich, such actions, using the reduction of the visual, lead to numinotic non-object sensations which reveal at once the

attractive and terrifying power of the absolute. Within this perspective, the sacred is recognised as radically 'other' and inconceivable, beyond any everyday visual experience; in a sense, it is felt because of the aesthetic rejection of visibility. It seems that, depending on the artist's intention and individual disposition of the spectator, art centred on the sacred of the void can open itself to both a positive experience of transcendence, even allowing the existence of the personal absolute, and to infernal experiences, devoid of the hope offered within the theist framework by the assumption of the divine presence and agency.

However, Mozdzyński further describes the mystical sacred, hinting at the theosophical explorations of Hilma af Klint, Wassily Kandinsky, and the neoplasticism of Mondrian, whose interpretation of geometry was symbolic. Among the Polish artists, the figure of Jerzy Nowosielski is brought up in this context with his concept of abstraction as a record of the communication with beings that belong to the heavenly realm. In this perspective, the artist sees himself as a medium in actual contact with the supernatural. We are no longer dealing here merely with a vague intuition or an intellectual play on notions derived from metaphysics but with a clearly declared belief in the dual nature of reality and the possibility of establishing communication between both of its dimensions through art.

The mystical sacred appears, therefore, to be typical of the understanding of art embraced by religious artists. Within such a conception of creative process, Christian motifs emerge as positive points of reference in the works by artists faithful to the traditional media of painting, sculpture, and graphic art as well as in realisations within the newer media, in concept art, installations, video and video installations, performance art, works created with the use of virtual and augmented reality techniques, all the way to the realm of gaming and web apps for meditative and prayer practices. These feature both the traditional themes proper to religious art, centred on depicting the figures of Christ and the saints in various conventions, and symbolic representations that actualise the crucial issues of theology and Christian morality within contemporary circumstances and in relation to the civilisational and cultural challenges of today. There are also works that, using the idiom of critical and post-critical art, in various ways approach the problems that the Church struggles with nowadays. Religious artists share the conviction of the importance and great social value of art created in relation to God – who is associated with the notion of transcendental love, the genuine source of the truth, goodness, and beauty – inspired by the Gospel and moral norms stemming from it. This milieu, however, is far from being philosophically homogenous. There are tensions within it between the various sensitivities that make artists emphasise different elements of the philosophy of art they profess. There are clear-cut differences between those who perceive the truths of faith the Eastern way, mainly in

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light of illumination entrusted to one by the absolute, who are closer to thinking in terms of perfect models ‘descending’ from above, available to artists through grace, and those who in a manner typical of the Western sensitivity break through towards the religious experience, as though ‘ascending’ towards it from the – depicted in their art – depths of struggles with the daunting condition and challenging existential experiences of contemporary man. A less obvious at first glance tension exists also on another level. It runs between the group of believers who favour traditional skills and techniques and those who prefer the new media, and rests on their divergent concepts and interpretations of the origin of the forms of contemporary art and the different methods they choose for maintaining and continuing the Christian cultural heritage.

Some of the more conservative artists tend to treat specific physical qualities of an artwork along with the aurative and aesthetic creative strategy as conditions *sine qua non* of any artistic manifestation of the sacred. This is true not only of those fascinated by the canon of the Orthodox icon, but also of the artists hailing from the artistic tradition of the West. They look with a somewhat distrustful eye at artistic languages whose origin is associated with the ideas of the historical avant-garde insofar as that avant-garde paradigm is associated with the social and cultural revolution of the early 20th century. They manifest an even greater reserve towards the media that were defined within the counter culture, as well as the most contemporary phenomena that emerged in the postmodern era. Traditionalists seem to be seeking, as it were, an escapist return to the art forms created during the periods when the Christian culture flourished, in times free from iconoclastic transgressions and artistic violations of established social norms and religious symbols. At times, they go as far as to postulate ‘emulation’⁴ – the practice of faithfully imitating the old masters. Among the heralds of such an attitude we can rank, for instance, Janusz Janowski, who has since 2022 been the Director of the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art. Focusing solely on the single media of painting was also the approach adopted in the recent project titled *Namalować katolicyzm od nowa (Paint Catholicism Anew)* curated by Dariusz Karłowicz from *Teologia Polityczna*; on this occasion, however, some emphasis in the process of painting new images of Christ the Merciful was also placed on seeking a form adequate for the contemporary world. The Fraternity of St Francis is a community that brings together artists working in that spirit, the most prominent among them being Marcin Kędzierski, Krzysztof Karoń, and the representatives of the milieu of the Kraków-based Open Studio: Ignacy Czwartos, Jacek Dłużewski, and Krzysztof Klimek. The discussed type of sensitivity appears to be a local instantia-

4 J. Janowski, ‘Emulacja, układ ikonograficzny i konfesja’, *ArsForum*, 2018, no. 3.

tion of Foster's reactive postmodernism,⁵ related to the neoconservative social outlook. Members of this cohort, as part of a peculiarly understood sense of social mission, willingly enter into alliances with political factions who also subscribe to the neoconservative worldview.

Opposed to such beliefs is another group of artists, those more open to new artistic languages, through the use of which they seek to renew the transmission of the evangelical message. Even though they tend to use the already proven technical solutions and endeavour to express well-known universal truths, they operate in an experimental space because the combination of such forms with the above content opens new and thus far poorly explored venues of expression. At this juncture, a reference to the notion of avant-garde conservatism deftly coined by Zbigniew Warpechowski seems suitable.⁶ It posits an optimistic attitude towards new forms of art as adequate instruments for communicating in the conditions of the rapidly transforming visual sensitivity of culture participants. Artists embracing the concept of avant-garde conservatism seem to understand the responsibility for the Christian heritage rather in terms of maintaining the balance between the unchangeable, though constantly deepened, spiritual message and the incessant enterprise of actualising the forms to communicate it. We can hardly classify them, by way of a simple opposition, in the category of postmodernism of resistance, as described by Foster.⁷ The important thing for them is artistic experimentation and a certain dose of novelty, conceived of as an adjustment of the art form to the sensitivity of contemporary audiences. However, they also share commitment to the so-called universal values, alien to the idea of deconstruction and counter cultural resistance. A more appropriate reference in this case would be the concept developed by Nicholas Zurbrugg, who sees postmodernity as a reservoir of new opportunities for creation, based on advancements of modern civilisation and new ways of defining art.⁸ Particular attention in this context is due to the video works by Lech Majewski; the video installations by Dominik Lejman, discreetly highlighting the key values; performance art by Zbigniew Warpechowski; sculptures by Józef Murzyn, and Paweł Jach; the videoclips by Ada Karczmarczyk (adu) benefitting from the pop aesthetic; the luminous installations by Karolina Hałatek; the graphical and floral objects by Aleksandra Pulińska; the oneiric and poetic photography of Kamila Kansy; the abstract reliefs by Krzysztof Sokolowski, marking a radical transformation

5 *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by H. Foster, London, 1985.

6 P. Rojek, *Awangardowy konserwatyzm. Idea polska w późnej nowoczesności*, Kraków, 2016.

7 *Postmodern Culture*, op. cit.

8 N. Zurbrugg, *The Parameters of Postmodernism*, Carbondale, 1993.

of the icon canon; and much other output produced with the use of various media and techniques. The Vera Icon Community of Christian Artists has proven important for the younger generation of artists, a community of prayer and art, which consistently develops its local structures in academic centres throughout Poland.

The tripartite division of artistic attitudes in terms of the representation of Christian motifs which I have proposed here constitutes – much like all categorisations of the sort, obviously – a major oversimplification. Indeed, there are many phenomena and artists that elude simple categorisation. A good example here may be, say, the oeuvre by Aleksandra Tubielewicz, the curator of the 2021 project *Niereligia w Jezusie (Non-Religion in Jesus)*, which stemmed from a specifically understood and – one could say – ‘privatised’ Protestantism. Depending on the applied criteria, her activity as an artist and curator may be classified both as post-Christian practices and as the strategy of avant-garde conservatism. Similar is the case of the symbolic installations and graphic art by Jakub Woynarowski, which constitute philosophical interpretations of motifs akin to Christian gnosticism.

Another version of the typology of that section of the Polish art scene served as an integral part of the exhibition I co-organised in early 2022 in Kraków, titled *Sztuka i metafizyka. Postawy i strategie lat 2000–2020 (Art and Metaphysics. Attitudes and Strategies 2000–2020)*. The display was organised according to an arbitrary division into three spheres: attitudes critical of metaphysics and religion; neutral attitudes that record the complexity of the nature of reality and the metaphysical needs of man; and attitudes clearly positive towards philosophically understood metaphysics as well as religion itself. The exhibition featured the following artists: Tomasz Biłka, Agnieszka Daca, Łukasz Huculak, Paweł Jach, Ada Karczmarczyk, Andrzej Kapusta, Marcin Kędzierski, Grzegorz Kłaman, Kle Mens, the Nihilist Church, Katarzyna Kozyra, Dominik Lejman, Lech Majewski, Łukasz Murzyn, Tomasz Opania, Romuald Oramus, Jan Pamuła, Daniel Rycharski, Krzysztof Sokolowski, Beata Stankiewicz, Małgorzata Wielek, Tadeusz Gustaw Wiktor, Jakub Woynarowski, and Artur Żmijewski. That exhibition, much like the presentations and publications that followed, as well as the Internet site which features a constantly updated base of artists and texts, are the result of the operation of the Art and Metaphysics research team, established at the Faculty of Art of the Pedagogical University of Kraków.⁹

The team I am delighted to be in charge of contributes to the broader intellectual background of the discussed field of art. The work of our team is bolstered by art historians and theorists: Rafał Solewski,

⁹ <https://sztukaimetafizyka.up.krakow.pl/> [retrieved on: 20.01.2023].

Sebastian Stankiewicz, and Bernadeta Stano, as well as artists: Romuald Oramus, Agnieszka Daca, and Stanisław Wójcicki. Among the group of scholars who have made a lasting impact on the reflection regarding the matters at hand, one should mention: Władysław Stróżewski, Renata Rogozińska, and Krystyna Czerni. Worth noting are also the numerous texts presented in the journal *Sacrum et Decorum*, edited by Grażyna Ryba at the University of Rzeszów, as well as the reflections of Małgorzata Wrześniak of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (uksw) in Warsaw, Reverend Professors Tadeusz Dzidek and Janusz Królikowski of the Pontifical University of John Paul II (upjpii), and many other theorists hailing from various academic centres.

Indeed, this branch of art receives support not only from scholars. Besides media dedicated to general art issues, the promotion and criticism of the oeuvre by artists dealing with religious and metaphysical themes is provided with varying intensity by the editors of *Znak*, *Więź*, *Pressje*, *Teologia Polityczna*, *Fronda Lux*, and *Kontakt*. The list of institutions of culture welcoming religious themes opens with the Piarist Crypt Gallery in Kraków, and the Dom Praczek Gallery of Contemporary Sacred Art in Kielce. Temporary exhibitions of art to some extent related to Christian sensitivity are held, among others in: the Znaki Czasu Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, the EL Gallery in Elbląg, and the Municipal Art Gallery in Częstochowa, which has rendered particular service to the community by holding the Sacrum Art Triennial. Another strong point on the map is the Zielona 13 Gallery in Łódź – young, but already with several dozen presentations under its belt – run by Fr. Tomasz Biłka OP, an artist and theologian, and the spiritual guide of the Vera Icon Community. Another institutional resource, albeit not fully utilised yet, is the network of diocesan museums, of which the most active appear to be the branches in Warsaw, Poznań, Katowice, and Kraków. Exhibitions related to the discussed issues are occasionally held in many different galleries and museums throughout the country. Particular commitment to the cause has also been declared by the new Management Board of the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw. One should also mention the Slot Art Festival held in the Lower Silesian town of Lubiąż, along with ArtKatedra – the section thereof devoted to visual arts.

Communities of people fascinated with Orthodox icons and artists specialising in the art related to church architecture mark distinct enclaves within the system of Christian art distribution. Education on icons, supported by the appropriate spiritual formation, is provided, among others, by the Warsaw-based Study of the Christian East, which benefits from the involvement of one of the professors of the University of Warsaw, Bishop Michał Janocha. A similar function is served by the International Iconographic Workshops organised in Nowica by Mateusz

Sora, the Silesian School of Iconography run by Rev. Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki, and the Pojednanie Fraternity of Brother Marcin Świąder OFM-cap. A major role within this field of artistic activity is played by the Icon Museum in Supraśl, as well as the collaboration established between Polish iconographers and the Chair of Sacral Art of Lviv National Academy of Arts. Meanwhile, artists specialising in realisations of church interiors and monument sculpture, as well as church art restorers, on the one hand, compete among themselves within the market – strongly regulated, as it is, by church commissions – while on the other, cooperate closely with the decision-makers in the diocesan curiae and parishes. The venue of their annual gatherings, which providing this group of artists an opportunity to present their offer and realisations, is the Sacro Expo trade fair held in Kielce.

Thus, besides a large group of active artists, the discussed branch of the art system also benefits from an intellectual, media and institutional background, which enabled the artists to endure the period of exclusion from the institutional mainstream and which may provide a basis for a robust community in the future. The necessary condition for its growth, however, is a certain level of consolidation and the cultivation of collaboration between the respective persons and institutions. The recent Synod of Artists,¹⁰ held in Łódź in connection to the Synod on Synodality, initiated by Pope Francis, was precisely such an undertaking aimed at stirring dialogue and collaboration between artistic communities and the Church. Thus, artists were able to voice their opinions on improving the communication within the Church and seeking synergies between pastoral duties and contemporary art, the potential of which was highlighted in the public statements by both St John Paul II,¹¹ and Pope Benedict XVI.¹² During the workshops and discussions, combined with a concurrently expanding exhibition, it was emphasised that, besides aesthetic categories, the creative, critical and inclusive competencies of contemporary art may also have a major and beneficial social influence, congruent with the message of the Gospel. Specific issues were also raised, for instance, a proposal to invite professional artists to serve in Parish Councils and take active part in creating churches decorations, extending everyday care over the visual aspect of the worship performed, controlling the quality of designed visual communication, publications, and seasonal decorations, as well as animating Christian cultural activity. Participants pointed out

10 <https://www.ekai.pl/lodz-polscy-artysci-wlaczyli-sie-w-proces-synodalny/> [retrieved on: 20.01.2023].

11 Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, transl. by J. Saward, San Francisco, 2000.

12 John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 4 April 1999.

the need to reform and redefine the competencies of diocesan building committees and establish a permanent Visual Culture Council at the Polish Episcopal Conference (kep). There were calls to change the *modus operandi* of the network of archdiocesan and diocesan museums, which should be expected to be more proactive in the field of contemporary art and to collaborate with lay institutions of culture. It was postulated that an academic, philosophical and theological account of the phenomena of the most recent art be developed and the media involvement of Christian art criticism be increased. An artistic scholarship of the President of kep, connected with a periodic art competition under the auspices of the Primate of Poland, was seen as worth establishing, there were even voices that a Christian artistic academy be formed.

To sum up: regardless of any attempts to classify the contemporary art associated with Christianity, what appears to be most interesting is the discovery of affiliations, connections and mutual relations between the discussed attitudes, art forms, and stories they carry. One can certainly claim that the creative tensions and differences within the said field of the art system determine its cultural value, attractiveness and vitality, ensuring it has the perspective of *long durée* and a permanent place in the Polish artworld. The advantage of this art subsystem lies in its grassroots nature, stemming from the beliefs of artists and the needs of spectators, its unequivocally Polish originality, the resultant of our social and cultural background, a great number of engaged artists and the support of theoreticians, administrators of cultural institutions, and media professionals. Meanwhile, what continues to be the challenge is its internal integration and the ability to act jointly and fostering synergies with the aim of acquiring greater visibility and a more distinct influence on the entirety of the Polish artistic discourse. Ultimately, of great value would be an attempt to reinforce the tendency to present and analyse together – above any societal political and worldview divisions – artistic phenomena which use different perspectives to explore the issues related to metaphysics and religiosity.

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Abstract:

On the face of it, art inspired by beliefs is in constant decline. Curiously, however, metaphysical motifs continue to emerge in many contemporary artistic movements. In the Polish circumstances, we are able to recognise artists who, having adopted attitudes critical of tradition, go on to define the sphere of the sacred in their own post-Christian way. There is also a significant milieu of artists positively disposed towards Christianity, who either accept the dual nature of reality or, recognising the existence of metaphysical longings in man, explore the various ways of satisfying them. Artists who declare their commitment to Christian values are supported by a number of institutions of culture, a group of art critics, and some editorial boards of sector media. Initiatives are undertaken aimed at consolidating this community and taking advantage of the potential represented by the institutions of culture and associations linked to religious institutions.

Keywords:

contemporary art, painting, new media, metaphysics, religion, Christianity, post-Christianity, institutions of culture

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