

## Article

# Iconic Reconciliations in a Secular Setting: Recent Bohemian Examples

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**Abstract:** In recent years, new exciting, publicly debated, and further thought-provoking events have appeared in the Czech Republic including, the restoration and benediction of the Marian Column on the Old Town Square in Prague, Darina Alster's art performance, the *Non-binary Madonna*, the opening of the new Jan Palach Memorial in Všetaty and the temporary memorial to the victims of COVID-19. All these events, taking place in public, manifested qualities associated with religious practices and the concept of the sacred. Pointing selectively to trends in religious geography (Kong) and utilising the concepts of liquid religion (de Groot) and iconic religion (Tweed, Knott), this case study describes and analyses those events and shortly discusses their public reconciliatory character. It claims that the religious or sacral character of public objects or acts in a secular setting is permanently subject to questioning, contesting and opposition. Ritually enacted boundaries between non-negotiable values (the sacred) and values permanently negotiated (the profane) are always temporary and elusive in the public domain, as so it is with public acts of reconciliation.

**Keywords:** religious geography; liquid religion; iconic religion; memorial; Czech Republic; reconciliation; performances



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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, new exciting, publicly debated, and further thought-provoking events have appeared in the Czech Republic. The National Museum in Prague has opened a new memorial site with a church-like building in Všetaty, designed by the architects M. Cikán and P. Melková, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Jan Palach's self-immolation in 1969. After a protracted struggle of a small group of Roman-Catholic Christians with the Prague municipality, the representatives of the Roman-Catholic Church performed a benediction of the restored Marian Column on the Old Town Square in Prague. In reaction to this event, the performer Darina Alster staged with a small LGBT group a new performance, the *Non-binary Madona—Mater Misericordias*, next to the newly raised Marian Column in Prague. The last event emerged first as a political protest against the government's health policy during the COVID-19 pandemic, which then people spontaneously turned into an act of commemoration of the departed.

In all these public events, reconciliation as a method of coping with what is conceived as the adverse in the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social spheres of human life represented an important aspect, with symbols and acts of religious origins playing a significant role. The religious actors involved in the restoration and benediction of the Marian Column presented the act as a symbolic opportunity to overcome the long-lasting contention about the effects of the process of recatholisation after The Thirty Years' War and the political role that the Roman-Catholic Church had played in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. In contrast, Alster's performance commemorated environmentalists and members of the worldwide LGBTQ+ community, whom she honoured as victims of conservative and authoritarian politics, and who were also represented by many contemporary church leaders.<sup>1</sup> The actors in the performance, thus, publicly questioned the candour of the reconciliatory act organised by people representing the conservative and authoritarian

tendencies in contemporary Czech politics. Meanwhile, the Jan Palach Memorial in Všetaty invites visitors to reflect in the light of Jan Palach's self-immolation on their attitudes to civic engagement; for Palach's contemporaries, walking in the memorial site may become a personal (religious or secular) act of repentance and reconciliation (Hejdánek 2009; Melková and Blažek 2020). In the last case, people turned the protest crosses painted on the surface of the Old Town Square into a personal memorial site where they were expressing their grief and were longing for reconciliation amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Arguably, all these events represent borderline religious phenomena in a secular public setting associated with particular public places and objects. Their organisers and actors aspired "to set things with non-negotiable value apart from things whose value is based on continuous transactions" (Anttonen in Knott 2010b, p. 306), so as to establish the sacred within a public secularising setting. How and to what extent do the spatial and material characteristics of these events affect the events' intended (reconciliatory) function? How do religiously marked spatial objects, particularly permanent ones, such as the column or the house-like sculpture, support a particular public narrative about events and, simultaneously, provoke or attract different, often opposing views and evaluations?

First, we will describe in detail the mentioned religious phenomena that have appeared in a secular setting in the Czech Republic in recent years. Then, we briefly introduce a reception of the spatial turn in religious studies and utilise the concepts of liquid religion (de Groot) and iconic material religion (Tweed, Knott) in analysing the discussed religious phenomena, with the spatial analysis being appreciated as a tool which brings light on significant aspects of those events. We will particularly focus on the role that the religiously marked objects played in the described events. In the final discussion, using the analysed events as examples, we will introduce the notion of "iconic reconciliation" as an application of the general concept of iconic religion in the context of public acts of reconciliation performed in a secular setting. We will present the discussed events as a particular effort "to set things (values) apart" that is nevertheless permanently exposed to questioning or completely different perceptions in a secular setting. We will emphasise the significant role the religiously marked public objects played in the discussed events and point to the ways they affected the events' reception, making a case for careful consideration of the spatial context in planning religious acts and handling religiously marked objects in a secular setting, namely, bohemian examples of religious phenomena in a public setting.

### *1.1. Jan Palach's Memorial*

In 2015, the National Museum in Prague launched a public architectural competition for the design of a new monument to Jan Palach in Všetaty, Palach's hometown. Entrants were required to design the artistic transformation of Palach's original family house into "a specific and symbolic place where the power of experience can launch internal transformation and create a special relationship of the individual to the history of the 20th century". The artistic redesign of the original house had to take into account three aspects: the symbolic, contemplative and educative. All three indicated levels of the monument's function served the intended purpose of the memorial: to commemorate Jan Palach as a victim and to reflect on his symbolic place in Czech history.

Jan Palach was a young student of history and philosophy at Charles University when the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact crossed the border of Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968, who gradually occupied the country's cities and halted the process of democratisation known as the Prague Spring (Navrátil and Benčík 2006).

The majority of the political representatives of the Czech Communist regime succumbed to Moscow's political pressure, with some of them openly collaborating with the Soviet government. The occupation and subsequent political negotiations led to significant restrictions on public life. Citizens lost their freedom of speech, assembly and association, while the Czechoslovak government also limited freedom of the press by introducing political censorship and supporting the dissemination of Soviet propaganda. In addition, the Communist Party insisted on removing influential proponents of the Prague Spring

movement from their positions in the army and political institutions. The introduced political, civic and public restrictions undermined the recently renewed democratic values and the hope associated with them to such an extent that most of the society in Czechoslovakia experienced increasing resentment, frustration, disappointment and resignation (Kolář 2021).

In contrast, students organised in the Union of University Students actively opposed the invasion. In November 1968, the Union declared and later carried out a strike in protest of the occupation. The students demanded respect for human rights and the freedom of speech, assembly, association, scientific research and artistic expression. Jan Palach participated in the strike and was deeply disappointed with its failure. Consequently, he began to consider more radical forms of protest. One of his proposals envisaged an occupation of the Czechoslovak Radio building in order to broadcast a call for a general strike and the abolition of censorship. He later decided to follow the most radical form of public protest that Buddhist monks in South Vietnam practised in the 1960s. Jan Palach set himself on fire on 16 January 1969 and died of his burns three days later. He intended to shock people with this act of self-immolation and move them to protest for freedom of speech and the right to truthful and accurate information. Using symbolic language, he called himself "Torch No. 1" in the letter that he wrote to illuminate his act of protest. Jindřich Chalupecký, an art and literary theorist and critic, did not later hesitate to use religious language to interpret Palach's act and death, or the silent funeral procession held on 25 January 1969 (Chalupecký 2009).

Given such an openly yet hesitantly outlined religious context, one should not be surprised to detect religiously inspired designs of the new Jan Palach memorial. Thirty-one architects and studios took part in the international architectural competition for the memorial. The design developed by the MCA studio of Miroslav Cikán and Pavla Melková received the most votes. Cikán and Melková designed the monument as three distinct yet interrelated objects serving for the three areas of functionality required by the awarding institution. In the studio's proposal, a garden with an apple tree at its centre represents a place for meditation, and a pavilion built next to the tree serves educational purposes. Finally, the architects' core idea was to transform an ordinary house into an abstract and symbolic artistic object interpreting Palach's self-immolation.

A dominant architectural element of this winning house-like sculpture is the tension between its exterior and interior. While the historical events and political circumstances of Palach's life constitute the monument's exterior, the interior represents the intimate sphere of his family and spirituality. A hollow steel pyramid connects both dimensions of Jan's life. Covered by fiery rust and conceived as the edge of evil, it penetrates the house like a wedge, disrupting the home, family and inner world of a human being. Surprisingly, the pyramidal tunnel functions simultaneously as the entrance to the internal space of the memorial house. In contrast, the original entrance door serves only as an exit, reminding visitors that Jan Palach never returned.

Arguably, the memorial's interior is the most artistically impressive and moving part of the monument. It consists of three interrelated spaces, which Pavla Melková likened to the traditional parts of a church building. Leaving the edge, visitors enter the "narthex", a small room with Palach's death mask and a sculpture of his body, both of which were created by artist Olbram Zoubek. The original living room was transformed into the "nave", conceived as an abstract spatial metaphor for Pieta. The "mensa", made of concrete, is the memorial's symbolic centre. It speaks both for the family bonds and self-immolation that stopped the power of the edge. Despite this intimate solidarity and resistance, the invading evil deprived the house of its family life and converted the home into a form of confinement, artistically represented by windows covered with steel plates. The peepholes in the plates point to various surveillance devices that the new Communist regime used to keep Palach's mother under constant control. Light comes to the "nave" only through the upper windows of Jan's room, which no longer exists. The stairs leading to this non-existent room resemble steps ascending to a "pulpit", a place for proclaiming the meaning of Jan's death. Finally,

those leaving the central space pass under the Czech national flag that covered Palach's body like a sudarium after his death.

### 1.2. Benedictions of the Marian Column

In 1650, two years after signing the Peace of Westphalia, Emperor Ferdinand III erected the Marian Column on Old Town Square in Prague to thank the Virgin Mary for the victory given to defenders over the Swedish army, which had besieged Prague and who had attempted to penetrate the city in 1648. A baroque sculptor, Jan Jiří Bendl, placed a sculpture of Immaculata, the Virgin Mary with an aureole of twelve stars and standing on a defeated dragon, on top of the column.

Four struggling angels situated at the corners of the column's plinth represented the cardinal virtues accompanying Mary's victorious fight with the devil. In addition to this explicit religious meaning, the sculpture celebrated the victory of the House of Habsburg over protestant enemies.

This political context strengthened the symbolic role of the column, gradually perceived by religious and political opponents as a symbol of the recatholisation of the Bohemian lands and the power of the Habsburg dynasty.

Consequently, after the abolition of the monarchy and declaration of the independent Czechoslovak state on 28 October 1918, one of the first symbolic acts was the pulling down of the Marian Column by a group of firemen on 3 November 1918 (Šorm and Krajča 1939). Though it was a spontaneous act initiated by an anarchist named Franta Sauer, who had misled the fire brigade, any attempt at restoring the column was unsuccessful until 4 June 2020. On this day, a partly restored sandstone copy of the original column was erected on Old Town Square and the sculpture of the Immaculata was placed on its top. The process leading to the rebuilding of the column has caused, perhaps understandably, many political and ecumenical controversies. Both supporters and opponents of the restoration have gathered arguments covering different perspectives: architectural (the column as a missing vertical element of the square), artistic (the original column was a baroque masterpiece by Jan Jiří Bendl) and historical (the column as a memorial of the Thirty Years' War); however, religious reasons were scarcely mentioned publicly and played a seemingly marginal role in the discussion.

In contrast, the public benediction of the newly raised Marian Column, which took place on 15 August 2020, was announced in the media as the primary official act of the column's inauguration. Prague's archbishop presided at the public rite, in which invited political representatives participated. Nearby, assembled at the place where 27 noblemen were publicly executed on 21 June 1621, a group of evangelicals tried to disrupt the ceremony, repeatedly vociferating toward the archbishop.

The rite of benediction that followed the Marian Column's restoration provoked critical reactions even among politically engaged artists. Artist Darina Alster, a performer, together with the poet and theologian Magdalena Šipka, prepared a concept of a performance that would address Mary as the archetype of a compassionate mother (*Mater Misericordiae*) who cares for marginalised and oppressed human beings as well as for all other living creatures (Alster 2020; Moyzes 2020a). Darina Alster also created a flag with a figure of Mary for the performance, in which she conceives of Mary as a posthuman non-binary being with mythical features. Mary's body consists of a collage of portraits representing members of the LGBTQ+ community who had been murdered, as well as persecuted environmental activists, feminist activists and human rights activists. Darina Alster sees this body as a medium that interrelates the bodies of human and non-human nature.

In Alster's performance art, the cosmic context plays a constitutive role. Thinking about the cosmological aspect of the new performance, she considered one of the original functions of the Marian Column on Old Town Square was, namely, to serve as a gnomon, the shadow of which points to the Prague meridian at midday. Consequently, Darina Alster chose for the time of the performance, 2:00 p.m. on 2 September 2020, on which the last full moon of our Northern Hemisphere fell that summer.

On the set date, a group of post-denominational Christians, as they later would describe themselves, gathered in front of the column to participate in the performance, the shape of which Darina Alster intentionally placed in contrast to the official church ceremony of blessing conducted on 15 August. Whereas the archbishop, accompanied by church ministers and politicians, led the official act, the performance's presiding persons were women in flowing blue garments. While the archbishop's benediction of the column, including a prayer of blessing, did not follow the proper form included in the *De benedictionibus*, the shape of the performance deliberately resembled the structure of the rite of benediction: invitation, reading, speech, intercessions, a prayer of blessing and the sprinkling of water. As an alternative to a short sermon, the performers read the published press release written by Darina Alster.

In her text, Darina Alster controversially highlighted the conservative, xenophobic and homophobic attitudes of the ecclesiastical and political leaders who had supported the restoration of the Marian Column and, in contrast, presented the concept of the non-binary Madonna. Finally, the performance was crowned with the raising of the Marian flag, accompanied by a sprinkling of rose petals on the column balustrade.

Interestingly, both acts attracted the attention of police officers, who notified the performers that the municipality had approved neither the assembly nor the raising of the flag (Moyzes 2020b; McEnchroe 2020). In addition, they said the sprinkled petals might be considered pollution of a public object. The performing group responded that the performance was a religious act that did not need to be announced in advance. Moreover, the performers insisted that raising the flag and sprinkling the petals were integral elements to their religious performance.

### 1.3. Memorial to the Victims of COVID-19

Six months later, on 22 March 2021, the part of Old Town Square surrounding the Marian Column was turned into a memorial to the victims of COVID-19, the first of whom had succumbed to the disease one year prior (Plíhal 2021). Overnight, activists of the political association, Million Moments for Democracy, spray-painted more than 25,000 white crosses on the Square's cobblestones in commemoration of the more than 25,000 victims of the pandemic who had died due to the irresponsible health policy of the Czech government (Topič 2021a). The activists used a washable material for painting and expected they would clean the square later in the evening. Though the happening was undoubtedly a misdemeanour, the Prague City Council decided to keep the painted crosses on the square for a few days as a memorial. If the rain had not washed them away in the meantime, the association should have removed the crosses after those few days.

Over the following days, people spontaneously came to convert the political happening into individual personal memorials of their departed friends, relatives and loved ones. Bereaving people brought flowers, personal photographs, toys, and candles, placing them at the individual crosses or the Marian Column. Some of those attending added names of the departed to the crosses, and some wrote in chalk their dates of birth and death (Danelová 2021). Some people cautiously walked between the memorial crosses, while others kept a distance, observing the memorial scenery quietly. Some passers-by stopped for a few moments, taking pictures or making short videos. It seems that only isolated cases of violating the memorial character of the site by an inappropriate speech or act in public were reported (Topič 2021b; Neff 2021). After fourteen days, a municipality service assisted by volunteer scouts came to remove wilted flowers and burnt-out candles as well as to gather the remaining mourning items scattered around the square into one place—the Marian Column—that should have continued to serve as a memorial (Kalousek 2021; Šafhauser 2021).

Later, on the evening of 10 May 2021, the Office of the President of the Republic organised an official memorial event in the courtyards of Prague Castle, the official residence of the President of the Czech Republic. Almost thirty-thousand candles in plastic (bier) cups covered the main Castle's courtyards and marked roads leading to them. After a presiden-

tial speech commemorating the victims of the COVID-19 pandemic and appreciating the work of medical professionals, president Miloš Zeman with his family lit the first candles, accompanied by the Prague Castle Guard Band. The Castle's employees were instructed to light the rest of the candles. Though the Castle's memorial site was open to the public, the area was bounded by barriers (Volfik 2021) and the event provoked various reactions on social media. Some of them were very critical, for example, Greenpeace's tweet commented on the single-use plastic cups used for the event; others pointed to the inappropriate cups' deformations caused by heat.

## 2. Fluid Forms of Religious Expression in Public

The four cases we have just described represent distinct current examples of the presence of liquid religion in public. Discussing Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, Kees de Groot (2008) delineated three types of liquid religion in a secularising society. The first type consists of various phenomena within a religious sphere, such as open-air liturgies, religious events, small religious gatherings and religious (virtual) networks. de Groot connects this type with fluid forms of contemporary Christian culture. Although this culture is no longer tied to a particular (historical) religious institution, its various expressions "still refer to the (Christian) religious field" (de Groot 2008, p. 281). Ecclesiastical initiatives in a secular milieu constitute the second type of liquid religion. Its phenomena appear on boundaries between a religious and a secular realm. de Groot (2008, pp. 285–87) subsumes special chaplaincies (in a hospital, an army or a prison), religious broadcasting, and diverse public religious events under the umbrella of this type (Klomp and Barnard 2017). Events and meetings in a secular setting that are not organised by any religious institution but that resemble religious ones belong to the third type of fluid religious expressions in the societies of late modernity. While these collective activities are usually uttered in diverse public (political and cultural) spheres, they manifest important religious qualities. As an example of this type, de Groot presents a mosaic of (ritual) reactions to the assassination of the Dutch politician, Pim Fortuyn, and a multi-cultural project, which included an exhibition of religious and non-religious practices of the Dutch residents (de Groot 2008, pp. 288–89).

De Groot's typology provides a valuable tool for characterising the cases we discuss. Arguably, we can include the ecclesiastical blessing of the restored Marian column on the Old Town Square into de Groot's second type of liquid religion in a secular setting. The event was initiated by church representatives and lay members. Believers and non-believers alike gathered on a public site and participated in the event both communally and individually. The event generated a particular experience of temporary community marked with mixed intentions and aims (religious, political, esthetical) that could not be controlled by any traditional institutional tools (de Groot 2008). Consequently, the official gathering was constantly disrupted by opponents of the restoration of the Marian Column, who gathered in the symbolic place (of the execution of 27 noblemen in 1621) near the column at the same time and openly questioned the declared function of the official act as a sign of religious and political reconciliation.

In contrast, Darina Alster's performance, the *Non-binary Madonna*, which reacted to the previously mentioned ecclesiastical blessing, represents the third type of liquid religion, a secular-religious phenomenon. A non-formal group of post-confessional Christians realised the performance, inviting bystanders (*circumstantes*) to react spontaneously to performers who intentionally resembled a religious practice of blessing and created a loose temporary community with religious attributes. In open polemics with the official act of the columns' benediction, the performers offered an alternative interpretation of Mary as Mater Misericordiae and challenged the previous official act's patriarchal, conservative, and hierarchical character.

Similarly, the third type of liquid religion characteristics is the most appropriate for interpreting the Jan Palach Memorial in Všetaty. Not an ecclesiastical body but a public institution (the National Museum) launched a public competition won by a private architecture studio. The winning architects deliberately used an idea of a Christian temple

to create a memorial building as an artistic metaphor to serve as a reflection on Palach's self-immolation in a secular context. The Memorial generates a particular community of visitors with various religious or non-religious backgrounds and different competencies in interpreting religious ideas embodied in the building. Understandably, the guided tour is the most powerful and direct tool to influence a visitor's process of interpretation and appreciation of all layers of the Memorial's meaning.

The turning of the protest crosses into personal memorial sites during the COVID-19 pandemic also represents a religious-secular phenomenon. It started as a spontaneous activity of mourning people who shared the meaning of a cross as a traditional funeral sign with political activists organising a protest against the government. While the activists used painted crosses only as impersonal marks for every person who allegedly died due to COVID-19, the bereaved transformed them into personal memorial sites with flowers, candles, names of the deceased, and their pictures. Personal acts of commemoration transformed the Old Town Square into a particular funeral site resembling a cemetery but without anybody appointed to guarantee the rules of piety and protect them against violation. As a result, the media documented a few cases of people crossing this temporary memorial site without respect for its particular character.

### 3. Religious Geography: Poetics and Politics of Space

The spatial turn in humanities has significantly impacted religious and theological studies (Knott 2010a; Bergmann 2007). Referring to Kong's (2001, 2010) studies in human geography, Knott (2010a) overviewed recent trends in religious geography in which she identified two distinct methodological traditions (cf. Gill 1998). The poetics of space is committed to the primacy of place and the sui generis nature of the sacred. It attracts scholars interested in religious experience, aesthetics, sensual perception, and sacrality, which they are likely to view as an object's inherent quality (Knott 2010a, pp. 31–33). In contrast, the politics of space focuses on the production, practice, and representation of space, paying attention to the relations between place, knowledge and power. Political interests and economic forces involved in producing a particular space are the preferred research topics in this methodological approach to the religious place. It considers the sacred, "a transitive category arising from people's ritual practice and attribution of meaning and value" (Knott 2010a, p. 34). Scholars rooted in the politics of space are attentive to tensions in approaching public space (especially in an urban context) among the different groups of religious actors, between the secular state, municipalities and religious representatives, and finally between religious groups and their public opponents (Knott 2010a, p. 34). They are sensitive to the contested character of public religious space-making, the entanglement of the sacred with the secular, as well as the risk of deconsecration.

Reflecting on the significant role that artificial and natural objects play in religious practice, Knott et al. (2016, p. 132) introduced the heuristic and analytical concept of iconic religion that helps "grasp the emergence of a sense of a sacred surplus". In this concept, various objects (e.g., buildings, pictures, places, statues, clothes, texts, gestures, and bodily behaviour) are endowed with an iconic quality which "refers to a particular human-object relation in which a building, site or other item has the capacity to enshrine and convey a sense of a special, sacrosanct presence to beholders whose acts and attitudes resonate with and reproduce this presence" (Knott et al. 2016, p. 129). An iconic object prompts religious communication, channelling thoughts, behaviour, and perception toward a religious surplus (Knott et al. 2016, p. 133).

The benediction of the restored Marian column on the Old Town Square in Prague, Alster's performance of the *Non-binary Madonna* and the COVID-19 memorial site at the same place, and finally, the Jan Palach Memorial in Všetaty are contemporary Bohemian examples of religious place-making in a public secular setting. In all four instances, a distinctive object plays an important role, having an iconic quality: the column with the statue of Mary on its top in the first case, the same column with the flag of the non-binary Madonna in the following case, the house-sculpture of the Jan Palach Memorial site in

Všetaty in the third case, and the protest crosses arranged as the memorial site on the square in the last case. These objects certainly have a unique iconic quality that may elicit and trigger genuine religious feelings and actions, such as reconciliation, in our cases. Nevertheless, their iconic character is polysemic and multivalent. In consequence, they do not “essentially and at all times bear a resemblance to a religious concept or image . . . and a religiously addressed experience or action, but may also be treated as inadequate and even false” (Knott et al. 2016, p. 133).

#### 4. Spatial Religious Specialness in Public

Iconic religious objects usually constitute the most visible aspects of religious place making in public. Referring to the Our Lady of Guadalupe Chapel in Washington, Tweed (2011) suggested the following characteristics of religious practice’s space: differentiated, kinetic, interrelated, generated, and generative. The word “differentiated” points to “imaginatively figured and/or sensually encountered locales that are deemed more or less, special, ‘singular’, or set apart” (Tweed 2011, p. 119; cf. Knott 2010b).

The differentiated locales are marked by multisensorial encounters and coloured by affective attachments (Tweed 2006; Tweed 2011; Holloway 2003; Holloway 2006). The religious locale represents one kind of special space, a particular (but not the only) way things are set apart (Knott 2010b; Taves 2009). The differentiated space is also kinetic, changing over time and having a history. From this point of view, many special objects, such as churches or temples, can be seen as spatial memories contributing to the construction of identity (Vasquez and Knott 2014, p. 338). To be set apart does not mean isolation but creating a web of unique relations that may connect the locale with, for example, childhood memories and domestic spaces, national narratives and continental history, ideal realms and natural places, as well as utopian spaces and dystopias.

Moreover, the space’s web of relations includes various social relations, political powers, and economic forces; thus, religious spaces are sites “where power is negotiated as meaning is made” (Tweed 2011, p. 121). The specialness of religious spaces is not a quality inherent to these spaces but is generated through embodied perceptions, figurative imaginations, and spatial practices (Tweed 2011, p. 121; Knott 2005, p. 163). The generated space extends from the human body through various intermediate locales (e.g., the home, the street, the city, the homeland, and the political bodies) to the cosmos (Tweed 2011, pp. 121–22). Religious practices are the primary ontogenic sources of generating religious spaces, as they performatively enact boundaries between the sacred and the profane and sacralise space temporarily (Vasquez and Knott 2014). The special spaces are not only generated but also generative, affecting the people inhabiting them in various ways. These sites engender varied emotions, promote particular values, inspire thoughts and lead to actions (Tweed 2011, pp. 122–23).

Knott (2005, 2008, 2010a; 2014, pp. 35–58) has offered a more methodological approach to analysing and interpreting the process of religious place making. Referring mainly to Lefebvre, she identified five analytical steps to localise religion in a secular setting. They include the body as the primary source of space; the physical, social and mental dimensions of space; the configuration, extension, simultaneity, and power as other properties of space; the spatial practices (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and spaces of representation (lived space) as space’s dialectical aspects; finally, the dynamics of space (Knott 2010a, pp. 36–37). Let us report on Knott’s analytical steps in detail.

The body has the primary role in the human experience and representation of space. It is a source of spatial metaphors that are the key figures of speech people use to think and communicate about the environment, social relations, experiences, expectations and memories, and religious phenomena. The body is also a medium of spatial movement and various spatial practices, from daily routines associated with practical issues to religious bodily acts, such as processions or prayer postures. Moreover, it mediates an experience with a place’s dimensions and arrangement as well (Knott 2008, pp. 1108–9).



The physical, social, and mental dimensions of space direct scholarly attention to various materials, objects, social groups, social practices, and mental representations that participate in the human construction of a particular place, site or landscape. Streets, corners, squares, shops, churches, cinemas, theatres, statues, galleries, stadiums, public transportation, offices, factories and other buildings and objects represent the space's physical aspect. Groups of visitors, school children on a field trip, business people, a family having lunch together, lovers sitting on a bench, churchgoers attending a midday prayer, and other types of social groups or individuals constitute the social dimension of space, for example, a square. Whereas fairytales, historical books, songs, city guides, expositions of old photographs, and daily conversations related to and associated with a particular place (e.g., building, street, or urban district) reflect the mental dimension of space (Knott 2008, p. 1109).

Space also has diachronic and synchronic aspects that contribute to the place's extension. Autobiographies often report and comment on many changes that authors' cities, streets, or family houses have undergone during their life and historians trace detailed histories of particular places and place them into broader historical contexts. The recent celebration of the foundation of the National Museum in Prague or the commemorations of the decisive events having taken place in Wenceslas Square in 1969 and 1989 are good examples of a ritual expression of the extensive, diachronic character of space. Not only diachronic trajectories but also synchronic interconnections are an essential site element and these interconnections situate a site in a worldwide network of locations that are similar in kind as well as in a mental community of people sharing their memories on that site. They relate a place in a city to visitors' or migrants' homelands, connect it with the global flows of money and goods, or with other parts of the town from which people regularly come to celebrate a liturgy in a cathedral.

The final property of space that Knott identifies is power, specifically knowledge power and social power (Knott 2008, p. 1110). It focuses scholarly attention on a site as an arena of struggle and the tensions between various individuals and groups that promote and advocate their respective interests, ideas, principles, values, and narratives. These are manifested in shops, places of worship, political gatherings, cultural events, processions, protests, police interventions, LGBTQ+ festivals, tourist tours, residential housing, and other actors. Many of these power manifestations have a character of symbolic acts that express domination and subordination, solidarity and cooperation, inclusion and exclusion, restriction and freedom, and other power-related social phenomena.

The last but not minor step in analysing the location of religion in the secular and public context consists of reflecting on the dialectical aspects of space (Knott 2008, pp. 1110–11). The first of them is spatial practice. It points to the daily routines that people realise in connection to a site: getting to work, shopping, working, having lunch or dinner, attending a daily prayer in church, and similar practical or regular activities. An urban setting of a place represents the second aspect, a place as a conceived space. The city council's political representatives and institutions responsible for urban planning discuss and negotiate the development of a city as a complex place materialising particular political, cultural, social, environmental, and economic ideas (ideologies) and interests. Occasional, often annual events that interrupt routine spatial practices and temporarily overturn the dominant order of the urban setting constitute a place as a lived space. Street festivals, commemorative events, carnivals, and religious processions are fitting examples of this dialectical aspect of space.

Tweed's and Knott's theoretical contributions are an attempt to turn "spatial theory into workable methodology for contextualising religion and analysing its relationship to other social, cultural, economic and political factors" (Knott 2008, p. 1111). In the following section, some of their theoretical insights are used to explain and interpret the previously described religious phenomena in the public space.

#### 4.1. Jan Palach Memorial

Although the religious aspects of the artistic concept of the Jan Palach Memorial have become a subject of occasional expert and media critique, the religiously inspired interpretation of Jan Palach's death has already become a well-established interpretative tradition in the Czech humanities. Jan Palach himself was inclined to think of his reaction to the social consequences of the Soviet occupation in a religious context. The newspaper clippings discovered in Jan Palach's estate witness his interest in the Buddhist monks' self-immolations in protest of the religious persecution and warfare in South Vietnam (Blažek 2009, p. 55; King 2000; Jan 1965). Known also are his admiring comments on Jan Hus (Blažek 2009, pp. 41, 60), and in the farewell letters, Palach signed himself as "a torch", resembling a poem addressed to U. S. Government in 1967 by Nhat Chi Mai before her self-immolation in fire (King 2000, p. 127). Immediately after his death, Palach was included among eminent religious personalities (Jan Hus, Jeroným Pražský, Jan Amos Komenský, Albert Schweitzer, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King) in the emotional funeral sermon delivered by J. S. Trojan (Trojan 2009, p. 142). In an essay, an evangelical philosopher, Ladislav Hejdánek, offered an interpretation in which he, in an original way, discussed a "once for all" character of Palach's death (Hejdánek 2009, pp. 155–56).

Furthermore, Martin C. Putna pointed to a literary tradition of the young martyr's archetype that has shaped a narrative of Jan's life and death (Putna 2009). With respect to the objectives of this study, the comments of geologist Václav Cílek are of particular interest (Cílek 2009). He emphasised the specialness of Palach's self-immolation in a fire, as has been sensed by his contemporaries. In his opinion, most of them have set apart Palach's death as a spiritual *privatissimum* from ordinary public discussions and the media, as well as official memorial celebrations, keeping at the same time a delicate balance between sharing their thoughts on Palach and maintaining a quiet, almost sacral memento.

In their design of the memorial, the architects continued this tradition of a religiously inspired interpretation of Palach's act (Melková and Blažek 2020; Havlová 2020). Moreover, a contemplative aspect of the memorial was already accented in the announcement of the public architectural competition launched by the National Museum. The winning design expresses the conceptualisation of space that has changed the original urban setting, a representation of space, into the space of representation (Knott 2014, pp. 36–37). The transformation of the original ordinary house into the memorial sculpture, as described earlier in this paper, has intensified the fundamental spatial binaries: outside/inside, horizontal/vertical, left/right, front/back; entrance/exit, inclusion/exclusion, movement/station, dwelling/crossing, and ascending/descending. The concrete artistic expression of these binaries amplifies the memorial's spatial attributes and contributes to setting the memorial apart from ordinary buildings or traditional museum spaces. The memorial's singularity is supported by the contrast between an ordinary external house-like appearance of the memorial, as seen by approaching visitors, and its interior radically transformed by the architects from an ordinary museum interior, which many accidental visitors are expecting to enter, into the artistic metaphor for Palach's self-immolation.

The memorial house-like sculpture's primary purpose is to generate a unique bodily experience for visitors, which would manifest the special character of Palach's historical act, articulated in the memorial primarily through the symbols of Christian origins. As the space is perceived mainly individually, the religiously grounded specialness of the memorial space is permanently at risk of its desacralisation by those visitors who consider it to be an inappropriate interpretive context for the evaluation of Palach's protest death, which some of them see as an abnormal, exceptional, regrettable, or even deplorable, and psychopathological act. Interestingly, some scholars may claim that these opposing appreciations of Palach's act are genuine acts of "setting apart", i.e., sacralisation (cf. Knott 2010b).

An educative exposition in the pavilion next to the memorial explicitly displays the interrelated nature of the memorial's space, connecting it with the Prague Spring, Palach's biography, similar protest acts of self-immolation, and literary and artistic reactions to Palach's act. The memorial object reminds visitors of other places commemorating Palach's

self-immolation, such as the cross embedded in the pavement in front of the National Museum (Portel 2008), where Palach set himself on fire, or Palach's pylon raised next to the New Building of the National Museum (Národní Muzeum 2020). In this respect, the memorial is potentially open to creating still new relations, also given the fact that part of the memorial functions as a gallery of modern art, inviting artists to exhibit their artwork inspired by Jan Palach's personality.

#### 4.2. Old Town Square and the Marian Column

The different groups of actors who organised the events consecutively at the Old Town Square in Prague conflated religious, national, and political interests to promote their respective ideas, producing the specific spaces of representation. By realising the restoration and the following benediction of the copy of the originally baroque Marian Column, the Roman Catholic Church representatives and some conservative politicians intended to propagate conservative religious values and the restorative narrative of some key periods in the Bohemian history, namely, the recatholisation promoted by the Habsburg dynasty and the declaration of the independent Czechoslovak state leading to the abolition of the monarchy. A symbolic insertion of the memorial letter for the next generations into the Column manifested the organisers' attempts to transcend temporal limitations of the performance and associate the Column persistently with their (re)foundational act. The event interrupted the spatial practices of international visitors to Prague as well as people who daily cross the square on their way to work, shops, theatres, schools, or homes. Some of them were attracted to the public event and stopped walking to participate in it. Others were fervent in proposing an alternative space of representation as they gathered at the 1621's public execution site, trying to interrupt the running act of the Column's benediction and question its alleged reconciliatory aspiration.

Darina Alster also challenged the narrative behind the ecclesiastical benediction of the Column. Organising an alternative benediction, the performing group, identifying itself as post-confessional Christians, generated a new space of representation to promote values and narratives manifestly opposing those associated with the ecclesiastical benediction. Similarly, the performers interrupted the ordinary spatial routines of Prague's visitors and inhabitants by directing their attention to the statue of Mary on the top of the Column and altering her image of the victorious celestial queen with the artistic depiction of her as a compassionate mother. The presence of the police at both meetings and the role played by the municipality in the restoration of the Column point to the fact that the square was and still is primarily a representation of space.

The protest crosses spray-painted on the Square's cobblestones are examples of a place's representation with a strong emphasis on the political agenda. The activists stressed the non-negotiable value of human life in opposition to the Czech government's health policy. Spontaneously reacting to this protest, people turned the anonymous crosses into personalised memorials commemorating their beloveds who had died of COVID-19. These memorials resembled traditional roadside memorials set up for the victims of car accidents. The bereaved both reinforced and challenged the original political appeal that had made only the number of dead visible. People were coming to pray, kneel, light candles, stay silent, and to cry or hold each other. Nonetheless, others kept their daily spatial practices without respecting the new space of representation. The Marian Column became a centre of the memorial site gradually. Initially, people placed their memorial items (flowers, toys, candles) at the crosses or the Column. Later, the city council decided to reorganise the memorial site and asked Prague Scouts to centre the expressions of piety around the Column by regularly gathering items scattered around the square. To a certain degree, this re-actualised the original purpose of building the Marian columns in Italy and Central Europe, i.e., to commemorate significant historical events, especially the plague epidemics, to give God thanks for delivering humanity from these pandemics, and to be a visible public sign of intercessory prayers for protection (Šorm and Krajča 1939). Though some religious and informed people likely actualised these meaning-making relations in their minds,

no institution expressed or promoted this extensive connection publicly. Conceivably, this might have been due to the strong emphasis on the relation between the Marian Column and the events connected with the Thirty Years' War that the organisers of its new benediction had created.

## 5. Discussion

The concept of iconic religion has proven to be a valuable tool for the analysis of the spatial religious phenomena in the public setting we have described. It enabled us to pay adequate attention to the dialectical spatial aspects of the studied events and see how the inclusion of these aspects enriches the understanding of the discussed religious phenomena in the secularising public settings. Moreover, it helped us to identify the ambivalent role religiously marked public objects may play in secularising public settings. The Palach Memorial, the Marian Column and the COVID-19 memorial site exemplify such religiously marked public "objects". Their inclusion in symbolic actions and interpretation are not entirely controlled by any religious, political or public institution. These free-standing and freely accessible material objects attract diverse groups and institutions, which produce new and sometimes opposing meanings for such objects and the mental universe associated with them. Some groups and institutions cooperate in constructing particular significations, as in the case of the church and the conservative political representatives blessing the Marian Column. Others propose an alternative to previously promoted meanings, as Darina Alster did in her performance. Yet others accept the original intention first, reinterpret it and eventually transform it; recall the people who came to turn the protest crosses into the sites of memorials.

Religious groups mainly generate and preserve the sacrality of churches and other traditional religious places and objects by regularly performing religious rites and communal or individual forms of prayer and enforcing the rules of proper behaviour in such places and the respectful handling of such things. In public spaces, as the discussed events suggest, any attempt "to set things with non-negotiable value apart from things whose value is based on continuous transactions" (Anttonen in Knott 2010b, p. 306; Anttonen 2005) appears to be a temporary act enacting an elusive boundary between the sacred and the profane.

This liquid nature of such attempts may significantly affect symbolic reconciliatory acts performed in public spaces, especially those associated with temporary or permanent objects set in a public space, such as a column, a cross, a memorial, or an installation. We call these acts "iconic reconciliation". The Marian Column, for example, became the centre of at least three different symbolic actions in the meantime: its benediction, the counter-benediction, and the commemoration of the victims of COVID-19. Alster's counter-benediction publicly opposed the reconciliatory intentions of the ecclesiastical and political organisers of the benediction of the restored and newly raised Marian Column. Even the initial act of an official blessing was interrupted by its opponents from various evangelical groups gathered at another symbolic place, the memorial to the execution of 27 noblemen in 1621. When the city council decided to continue the spontaneous COVID-19 memorial site at the Old Town Square, it naturally concentrated continuing expressions of piety to the Column. Interestingly, it seems that the values Darina Alster associated with her performance, *Non-binary Madonna*, i.e., compassion, grief for victims, inclusion, or respect, resembled this new meaning of the Column as the centre of the COVID-19 memorial more than the symbolic representations promoted by the ecclesiastical and political proponents of the Column's restoration. It might be that the final decision to restore the previously demolished historic Marian Column, instead of creating a new and modern Marian column as an ecumenical and broadly shared symbol of reconciliation and a sign of motherly compassionate love, has restricted the symbolic potential of the Column and prevented it from becoming a broadly shared permanent sign of coping with a common adversary—the COVID-19 pandemic and the pain of for its victims—so actualising one of the original meanings of the Marian columns, i.e., being a permanent sign of victory over the plague pandemic and thanksgiving for the deliverance. In this case, the approach accenting the

historical and cultural dimensions of the Column (the Column as a cultural heritage and a redressing of grievance) has limited the genuine religious and humanist meanings of the ecumenical Marian tradition, alluded in Darina Alster's performance.

The tension between the just mentioned role of the Marian columns and the transitory character of the COVID-19 memorial at Prague Old Town Square (and its "twin", the memorial event at the Prague Castle) is intriguing. It reveals a significant feature of the ritual events related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic, namely, their transitory character. The candles at Prague Castle's courtyards burnt out one evening. At midnight, the Castle's gates were closed. Although being initiated by the President, the most prominent political representative of the state, this memorial event was not notably announced. It seems that the organisers conceived it as an institutional event of the President and the Castle's employees rather than an act of the state. Moreover, it became immediately subject to very prosaic critiques.

In contrast, the COVID-19 public memorial site at Prague Old Town Square was warmly accepted by the general public. Nevertheless, originating as a protest event, the site was officially left just as a temporary memorial space, gradually washed away by the rain and the cleaning crews from the square. The concentration of piety to the Marian Column only slowed this process. As far as we know, it has not been terminated by any concluding public ritual that would make this disappearance of the public sacred place visible or transform the slowly evading memorial site into something more permanent. Arguably, Czech society has not yet found a way to close the critical and unprecedented period in its modern history by some symbolic act, resembling the public raising of the Marian columns at the closing of the plague pandemics. Maybe a time for this kind of symbolic act has not yet come. The example of the original Marian columns suggests that without such a public closing symbolic act, the pandemic might be approached as a merely political, technical, and medical issue, with people being left with various transitional means to cope individually with its painful consequences.

The Palach Memorial in Všetaty represents a religiously marked secular object that offers its visitors the opportunity to cope individually with the ambivalent act of Palach's self-immolation and reflect on a debatable period of modern Czech history (1968–1989) or their personal and civic attitudes during that time. While the religious symbolism used in the winning design seemed to the competition committee to be very illuminating, some knowledgeable journalists have called the concept of the Palach Memorial into question, pointing to an arguable tendency to sacralise a commemoration of significant personalities of the national history.

Continuous refining of the concept of iconic religion might be of great value for analysing and interpreting religious phenomena similar to the iconic reconciliations we have dealt with. We hope we have modestly contributed to this endeavour.

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