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# Media Representations of Jesus Christ: The Dichotomy between the Sacred and the Profane

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**Abstract.** Today, images of Christ are used in visual media to create new meanings. This article aims to determine the relationship between the sacred and the profane as reflected in the images of Jesus on the front covers of popular magazines. In 2023, a study of around 12,000 magazine covers from 2001 to 2023 was conducted, focusing on 80 of the most popular periodical publications globally. Forty-two covers were found to include visual references to Jesus Christ and were examined using the social semiotic approach and rhetorical discourse analysis. The research confirmed that the publishing industry follows a relatively consistent policy of exploiting the image of Jesus. It can be concluded that sacral elements in the studied images tended to dominate over secular aspects. Also, the analysis confirmed that the cover images of Jesus reflect current historical, religious, and cultural contexts and accommodate the diversity of viewpoints.

**Keywords:** sacred / profane, images of Jesus Christ, semiotic approach, magazine covers.

**JEL Code:** G35

## Introduction

The idea that a human being is a combination of divine soul and earthly matter appears in various religious and secular discourses. Jesus Christ is often seen as human nature's most concentrated form of divinity. Symbolically embodying sacredness, this historical, spiritual, and, in some sense, even mythical individual represents the highest possible expression of divinity in Western Culture. Traditionally associated with religion, the figure of Jesus Christ has also become an essential part of popular Western


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Culture. As a result, additional meanings of his image are being created alongside the more conventional associations with the Son of God and spiritual teacher.

Most magazines use specific images on their front covers to attract the audience's attention, which would result in a purchase. Often, the cover image is linked to the central theme of the magazine, which generally reflects current affairs, dominant cultural discourses, perceptions, or beliefs. The front cover is an essential structural element of the magazine directly connected to the publication's commodity status. McCracken (1993) categorizes the cover as an advertising rather than editorial element, arguing that "[l]ike many forms of mass culture, the [women's] magazine is a commodity bought and sold on the market." The front cover "helps to establish the brand identity of the magazine-commodity" and is, therefore, "the most important advertisement in any magazine" (ibid.: 14).

When appearing on magazine front covers, images of Jesus can perform different functions and represent varying degrees of sacredness and profanity. The relationship between the sacred and the profane depictions of Jesus across mass media reflects the dominant values, views, and cultural trends. Thus, contrasting and comparing these two categories invariably creates tension. Such polarization can be represented differently, depending on whether the narrative is traditionally religious or postmodern and ironic, i.e., one that breaks taboos and expresses value pluralism. Thus, this study aims to determine the relationship between the two categories – sacredness and profanity – as represented in media depictions of Jesus on the front covers of popular magazines.

No studies focusing on images of Jesus on magazine covers were found. However, some scholars have previously delved into certain aspects of religious symbols in media, including religious images on magazine covers. Some of these studies touch on the visual expression of sacredness and secularity. For example, Scott and Stout (2006) investigated how religious symbols on *TIME* magazine covers created and sustained religious worldviews.

**1. Christian Symbols in Commercial Media: The Sacred vs the Profane**

The binary sacred-profane opposition plays a significant role in representing the prevailing beliefs and values of certain groups in society, including faith communities. *Sacred* describes something distinguished from the standard or ordinary, in other words, from the secular world; it expresses the total transcendent value and meaning of life. This concept comes from the Old Latin word *saceres* for "hallowed, consecrated, or made holy by association with divinity or divine things or by religious ceremony or sanction" (Online Etymology Dictionary). The category of the *sacred* is, therefore, characterized by the ultimate, eternal, and cosmic force that flows into existence and gives order and stability to life. Sacredness is conveyed through symbols or rituals that create a perception of a different reality, opposite to secular existence. The concept of the *sacred* as something mysterious and irrational was first defined by the German theologian R. Otto and the Romanian religious historian M. Eliade in their texts on the philosophy of religion. According to Muñoz (2014), sacredness has neither philosophical nor anthropological validity as a universal category of human actions or objects. Along with the concept of profaneness, it is a dual semantic category for organizing human experience.

Guthrie (1996: 124) defines sacredness as one of the fundamental concepts of religious studies, which has largely replaced the notion of divinity as a factor determining religion. It covers everything that is ultimate, sacred, or supernatural and has rather vague limits, making it popular. Guthrie states that it has become the dominant criterion for determining what is religious and what is not, with the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane identified as the basis for any religious analysis.

The category of the *profane* is in semantic proximity to the concepts of the earthly, mundane, temporal, nonspiritual, physical, etc. In Latin, *profanus* (in Medieval Latin, often *prophanus*) means "unholy, not sacred, not consecrated"; of persons "not initiated" (Online Etymology Dictionary). Stating that symbols of the profane are powerful cultural elements, Ignatow (2003: 2) points out that its meaning could be further supplemented and clarified by the term *mundane* (routine, ordinary).

Symbols are essential information carriers, so signs related to consumption or everyday reality are often used to express profanity, while religious symbols represent the sacred. These symbols "are not simply

non-natural, they are supernatural. The symbolic efficacy is replaced by the supposed causal interference of (or upon) the supernatural being(s)" (De Dijn 2003: 62). Allegories, personifications, figures, analogies, metaphors, parables, pictorial representations, signs, emblems and other forms of religious symbols represent formal, historical, literary and artificial categories that are common in all cultures (Goldammer 2006).

Religious symbols can also represent the convergence of sacredness and profanity, particularly in art and media. Commercial discourses and media increasingly "portray individualized and privatized religion" (Zitkiene & Kriauciunaite-Lazauskiene 2019: 127). Many researchers see religious images and symbols in advertising as a tool of persuasion, with the complex and multifaceted nature of this issue identified in many studies focusing on the relationship between religion and marketing (Henley et al. 2009). Other researchers examined the impact of this dynamic on consumer behaviors (Essoo & Dibb 2004, Agarwala *et al*. 2019) as well as how religious symbolism can influence the effectiveness of an advert and consumer choices (Henley et al. 2009, Lumpkins 2010, Taylor et al. 2017).

Religious symbolism can "establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations" (Geertz 1993: 94), so "the use of Christian religious symbols in advertising can trigger both positive and negative reactions from the consumer and being aware of the extent and nature of these influences is crucial for marketers" (Taylor et al. 2017: 2). A similar conclusion was reached by Gineikiene et al. (2015) after studying the depictions of Christ as a controversial religious symbol in advertising: "the implementation of controversial religious symbols in advertising should be based on the profiles of the consumers who are the target group of the company and its products. <...> companies should be aware of their customers' religiosity levels" (ibid.: 49).

Christian symbols and the ideas and beliefs they represent are often used to improve brand value. Research shows that images of Jesus have also become a brand with corporate identity and aspirations to "shape certain kinds of behavior and establish a particular worldview" (Zitkiene & Kriauciunaite-Lazauskiene 2019: 132). However, researchers unanimously agree that when used in commercial discourse, religious symbols are part of a provocative strategy that will always grab attention and evoke associations to engage the consumer in the message broadcast (Dahl et al. 2003).

## 2. Method and Data

One of the methods used for studying multimodal texts is social semiotics. According to Hodge and Kress (1988), language is only one part of a much more comprehensive range of cultural, primarily visual, resources. Guided by Halliday's (1978) views that every semiotic mode conveys ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings, Kress and van Leeuwen concluded that all non-verbal discoursal elements can be studied as modes creating meanings based on the perception and portrayal of the world.

Other researchers, such as Kucuk (2015) and Jewitt and Oyama (2004), have also used the visual semiotics method. There has been considerable focus on the interplay between verbal and visual elements on the front covers of magazines and newspapers (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1998, McLoughlin 2000, Bednarek & Caple 2012), the rhetorical expression of magazine covers (Held 2005), and multimodal argumentation (Tseronis 2015). However, despite explaining a wide range of meaning-making tools and helping decipher hidden meanings, more than semiotics is required for extensive analysis. Many semiotic resource studies use social semiotics as just one of the elements within a more comprehensive interdisciplinary approach encompassing different theories and methods (Jewitt & Oyama 2004).

The specifics of the researched subject determined the choice of an additional methodological tool for the present study. From the perspectives of rhetorical theory and its practical implications, a magazine front cover functions as "the show window that attracts the readers' attention and informs them about the stories featured in the inside pages" (Tseronis 2015: 18). In other words, one of the main functions of the front cover is rhetorical persuasion, so this pragmatic discoursal nature allows examining publication covers as an "act of persuasion" (Walton & Godden 2006: 292), identifying (in)direct conclusions or assumptions (Tseronis & Forceville 2017, Tseronis & Pollaroli 2018). Rhetorical discourse analysis can,

therefore, significantly supplement the semiotic study of magazine covers. Combining these approaches can help identify meaning construction's invisible dimension and persuasive potential.

Although the simultaneous use of semiotics and rhetorical analysis is a common approach to discourse research (Moses 2012, Lefsrud et al. 2017, Hanan 2023). Rhetorical discourse analysis deals with macro processes such as "speaker authority, audience response, persuasion and other effects of texts, the rhetor's goals, contextually situated interaction, and the like" (Andrus 2013: 4976). Furthermore, „[r]hetoric and influence go hand in hand. Persuasion encompasses the purpose of the speaker and textual results. The effectiveness of discourse is determined by its aptitude to convince" (Hanan 2023: 278).

The current study was conducted using meaning reconstruction and analysis, combining social semiotics and rhetorical discourse analysis tools. This analytical approach helps identify the hidden dimension of a front cover as promotional discourse – indirect assumptions and conclusions, the positions broadcast by discourse creators, and the relation between discourse and social, philosophical, cultural, and ideological structures (Hoven 2015). The combination and interaction between verbal and visual elements is the main subject of semiotic and rhetorical research (Kress & Leeuwen 2001). The convergence of social semiotics and rhetoric helps to examine how visual and verbal components "combine to create a more persuasive message" (Lefsrud et al. 2017: 136).

The present research on front cover images of Jesus investigates the link between direct symbolical meanings, their cultural references, rhetorical explanations, and the rationale for modification. This analysis helps determine meaning implications on both the semiotic and rhetorical levels. The study was conducted in the following order: 1) collection of research material; 2) identification of visual and verbal semiotic codes, grouping them into categories; 3) deconstruction of code meanings, identification of expression consistency, and rhetorical estimate. The semiotic approach was applied in identifying four types of codes: (1) visual codes as thematic elements, (2) compositional codes, (3) symbolic codes, and (4) textual codes (Kucuk 2015).

To explore the meanings of sacredness and profanity reflected in the images of Jesus Christ in mass media, three lists of the 50 most popular and profitable magazines globally were taken from the worldstopinsider.com, Muck Rask, and Chicago Tribune websites. With some titles overlapping, 80 magazines were selected for the final analysis, all published from 2001 to 2023. The front covers were then located in the archives of the magazine websites and Google Images. The empirical data were collected in November-December 2023. Around 12,000 images were accessed and examined in total, with 42 front covers identified to include visual references to Jesus Christ: *Der Spiegel* (14 issues), *Newsweek* (10 issues), *National Geographic* (9 issues), *Time* (6 issues), *The Economist* (1 issue), *Historia y Vida* (1 issue), and *Bloomberg Businessweek* (1 issue) and 20 of the front covers appeared on the so-called Special Issues or Special Editions. Not surprisingly, depictions of Jesus are mainly used for Christmas or Easter magazine covers.

## 3. Data analysis

### *3.1. Thematic Codes*

To analyze the thematic codes underlying Christ's images and systemize the data, all selected front covers were divided into three groups: 1) portrait images of Jesus (22 covers[i]), 2) Nativity, i.e., the birth of Jesus (8 covers[ii]), and 3) other biblical scenes from Jesus' life, such as his entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the betrayal of Judas, and the crowning with thorns (12 covers[iii]). These thematic categories not only organise the semiotic material but also activate culturally shared rhetorical topoi about Jesus' identity, providing distinct starting points for the persuasive work performed by the covers.

Descriptions of Jesus' physical appearance can be found in the four Gospels of the New Testament. However, even without these references, the image of Jesus Christ is a well-established Western tradition, easily recognizable in cultural narratives, both religious and popular. In Christian visual art, Jesus is usually portrayed as a merciful, tall man with light blond or light brown hair, deep blue eyes, and a peaceful facial expression (Swartwood 2020). These traditional images have long served as powerful symbols in

Protestant and Catholic religious cultures because believers have learned to recognize them from childhood, creating a clear association with the deity (Morgan 1993: 32).

This deep-rooted association is reflected in the work of the American artist W. E. Sallman, whose paintings embody "a long tradition of white Europeans creating and disseminating pictures of Christ made in their own image" (Swartwood 2020). By drawing on such familiar and deeply entrenched visual conventions, the covers rely on the rhetorical power of pre-existing audience recognition, which enables them to guide interpretation with minimal verbal mediation.

Although, over the centuries, local artists tended to transfer some of their features onto the images of Jesus, colonization and global trade helped disseminate the European depiction of Christ to other parts of the world. Later, anti-Semitic forces in Europe, including the Nazis, sought to completely distance Jesus from the visual traditions of Judaism, replacing him with the Aryan stereotype.

Unsurprisingly, this visual tradition of Jesus as a light-skinned European appears in over half of the analyzed magazine covers. Contrary to the data provided by historians, Christ is shown to have light hair and blue or green eyes in ten cover portraits. One such example is the front cover of *Newsweek* (Fig. 1), depicting Jesus in a yellow-purple robe. Although the message broadcast to the reader focuses on modern media, a traditional Western image of Jesus conveys it.

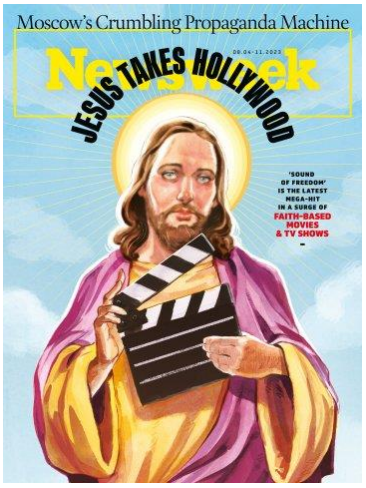


**Figure 1.** Cover of *Newsweek*, 4 August 2023 (Digital Edition)

Ten front cover images of Jesus portray him with an Arabic complexion, while three further depictions do not reveal any physical characteristics. Here, Jesus is shown from the back (*National Geographic*, Dec 2021), in black and red (*Der Spiegel*, 22 Apr 2011, 17) or as imprints of his face on the Shroud of Turin (*Der Spiegel*, 2004, 16).

Another thematically important point is the depiction of Jesus with a crown of thorns on his head, emphasizing his passion, sacrifice, and sacredness. The halo, a traditional symbol of divinity in Christian visual art, can also illustrate this connotation. However, only four front cover images (*Der Spiegel*, 2004, 16; *National Geographic*, Dec 2017; *Newsweek*, Feb 2012; *Der Spiegel*, 28 Nov 2011, 6) do not reference sacredness. Here, Jesus can only be identified through textual codes. Therefore, the images themselves could be described as profane rather than sacred.

Two portraits stand out from the group, as Jesus is depicted in modern settings and contemporary clothes. One of these front covers from *Newsweek* focuses on the central figure of a casually dressed man standing in Times Square and looking up while yellow cabs are whizzing past him (Fig. 2). Several compositional elements suggest that the man is Jesus Christ: the traditional Western depiction (long

blond hair and a beard), a crown of thorns, a faint halo-like light. This contemporary portrayal of Jesus represents the convergence of the past and the present.


**Figure 2.** Cover of *Newsweek*, April 2012 (Special Edition)

Intertextual references used in some cover portrait images also play an essential role. Several of these depictions employ fragments of famous artworks: *Ecce Homo* by J. de Juanes (*Newsweek*, Easter 2014), *Christ Risen* by K. P. Bryullov, and *Christ with Mocking Soldier* by C. Bloch (*Newsweek*, May 2015), *Christ on the Sarcophagus* by P. Perugino (*Newsweek*, 1 Jan 2005), *Head of Christ* by Rembrandt Van Rijn (*National Geographic*, Dec 2017), *Christ and the Virgin* by L. Cranach the Elder (*Der Spiegel*, 28 Nov 2011, 6) and *The Last Days of Jesus of Nazareth* by S. Goetze, a contemporary artist (Fig. 9).

The second group of covers consists of nativity scenes depicting the Holy Family. Out of seven front covers in this category, only one does not include an apparent reference to a famous artwork. Four cover images contain obvious intertextual links to well-known paintings: *The Madonna with the Sleeping Christ Child* by G. B. Salvi (Il Sassoferrato) (*National Geographic*, Mar 2018; Fig. 7), *Adoration of the Shepherds* by C. Procaccini (*Time*, 13 Dec 2004, 164(24)) and *The Adoration of the Magi* by C. van Loo (*National Geographic*, Dec 2019). Two further covers are parodies of famous works: *Adoration of the Magi* by G. da Fabriano (Fig. 3) and *Nativity* by L. Lotto. These paintings are deconstructed, transformed, and supplemented with modern-day references.

The 2014 Christmas cover of the *Economist* (Fig. 3) combines a fragment from da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* with contemporary elements, such as the politician, Statue of Liberty, flowers, logo of the London underground, domestic animals, and other details. The result is a funny collage that dispels the impression of sacredness created by the original painting. The front cover, therefore, represents a comic blend of the past and the present, introducing the profane into the Nativity miracle. In rhetorical terms, such recontextualized collages prompt the viewer to draw an implicit conclusion: when sacred narratives are placed within contemporary consumer-oriented imagery, their meaning and emotional resonance become subject to cultural renegotiation rather than accepted as fixed or immutable.


**Figure 3.** Cover of *The Economist*, 20 December 2014

Similarly, Lotto's *Nativity* is deconstructed and transformed by adding several significant details, such as an Amazon-branded box with Baby Jesus inside it (*Der Spiegel*, 8 Dec 2017, 50). As with the previous example, the past and the present come together in this image, implying that Amazon can deliver everything, even a newborn deity. This idea disrupts the discourse of sacredness and transforms the Nativity scene into a casual, insignificant event.

The third group of covers includes biblical scenes from Jesus' last days. Every image represents a fragment of a famous painting: *Last Supper* by L. da Vinci (*National Geographic*, Mar 2012), *The Betrayal of Christ* by G. C. Procaccini (*Der Spiegel*, 2009, 16), *The Entrance of Christ into Jerusalem* by Ph. de Champaigne (*National Geographic*, 24 Nov 2017), *The Sermon on the Mount* by J.-B. de Champaigne (*Newsweek*, 30 Aug 2004)*, Ecce Homo* by A. Ciseri (*National Geographic*, 25 Nov 2016), *The Entrance of Christ into Jerusalem* by J. H. Flandrin (Fig. 5) and *Christ Carrying the Cross* by A. Solario (Fig. 7).

There are no intertextual variations or parodies here, so all the fragments of famous paintings serve as thematic codes of sacredness and anchor the classical religious narrative in art. This group of covers supports the traditional Christian discourse, presenting Jesus as the Son of God who sacrificed himself to atone for the sins of humanity. For example, Ciseri's *Ecce Homo* depicts the scene of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate giving thorn-crowned Jesus Christ to his accuser and pronouncing the famous phrase *"Behold the man!"* so the connotation of sacredness is preserved in the front cover image (Fig. 4).

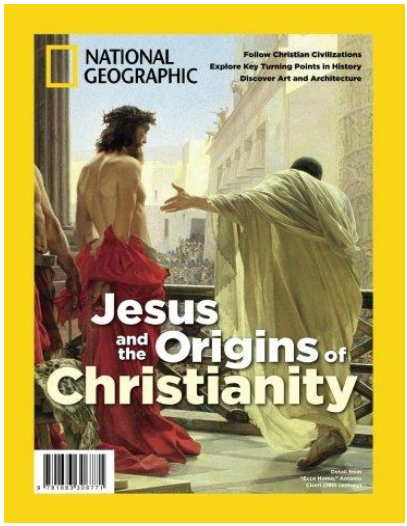


**Figure 4.** Cover of *National Geographic*, 25 November 2016 (Special Issue)

Thus, the thematic codes that dominate the analyzed magazine covers confirm the traditional Christian narrative, giving it value and making it relevant in modern cultural contexts. On the other hand, these thematic codes are also employed to consolidate the scientific discourse by presenting Jesus as a historical personality. The first trend represents the expression of the sacred in the figure of Christ, while the second tendency is linked with profanity.

### *3.2. Compositional codes*

Composition is another essential tool for expressing the sacred-profane opposition in the images of Jesus on magazine covers. Reflecting attitudes, values, and ideas, elements such as the size and position of figures in space, distances between these figures, salience, color contrast, and contact with the viewer are significant (Kucuk 2015, Jewitt & Oyama 2004).

Almost all analyzed covers show Jesus as the central figure and often use portrait orientation. This close-up depiction of him creates a sense of intimacy, the impression that the observer and Jesus are close acquaintances. Facial details and expressions testify to Christ's individuality and emotional state. Such close-up portrayals construct a rhetorical ethos of proximity and credibility — that is, a sense of relational closeness and trust — positioning Jesus as a directly addressing figure rather than a distant doctrinal abstraction. The Nativity-themed front covers show the Holy Family in the middle, and despite being tiny, Baby Jesus is the central figure bringing everything together.

Eye contact is another compositional code used in front cover images. A more intimate connection is established when the gaze is directed at the viewer. This is the case in ten portrait images, each creating the impression of suggestibility. Within a rhetorical framework, the direct gaze functions as a pathos-oriented device — that is, one appealing to the viewer's emotions — inviting a quasi-dialogue and enhancing the persuasive force of the represented scene. In some analyzed covers, Jesus looks up (Fig. 2), visually reinforcing his connection with the heavenly realm and emphasizing the expression of the sacred.

In some images, hand gestures are particularly significant. Often, Jesus is depicted with his hand placed on his chest, implying Christ's sincerity and inviting the observer to listen to their heart, or with his palms and wrists open, demonstrating honesty and vulnerability. Several covers show Jesus with his hands raised or making the victory sign. All these body language codes reflect the sacred dimension.

Salience, another compositional characteristic, highlights certain elements and makes them look more attractive. Color contrast is a dominant feature on Jesus-themed magazine covers. The light vs. dark dichotomy often emphasizes Christ's uniqueness within the general background, reinforcing the meaning of divinity and sacredness.

The visual opposition of light against darkness is also used to express the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. This contrast is particularly noticeable in almost half of the portrait images, four Nativity scenes, and six biblical-themed covers. On nearly all the remaining cover images, light alone is used to highlight Jesus' face or his figure, including images that are not religious but have scientific or other narrative content. Light is an essential symbol of sacredness, so by contrasting it with darkness, which often surrounds the space behind Jesus, emphasis is placed on opposing meanings.

Regarding salience, the top-to-bottom dimension is exceptional in front cover images. As well as being the central figure depicted in close-up, Jesus appears elevated compared to other significant compositional elements. This vertical arrangement operates rhetorically by encoding a hierarchy of authority and moral legitimacy, visually asserting the superiority of Christ's position within the narrative frame. Two of these images are based on fragments of paintings showing Jesus' entry into Jerusalem astride a black donkey or a white horse. These portrayals emphasize Christ's uniqueness and sacredness (Fig. 5).

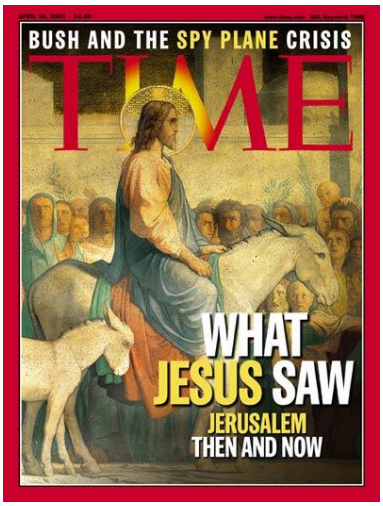


**Figure 5.** Cover of *Time*, 16 April 2001, Issue 157(15)

Another example is Newsweek's August 2004 cover, which uses a fragment of de Champaigne's *The Sermon on the Mount*. The front cover shows Jesus sitting higher than others, indicating his superior position. Similarly, the cover of Bloomberg Businessweek magazine depicts Jesus blessing two kneeling men in black suits, so his pose expresses the position of power. The balcony scene with Jesus and Pontius Pilate, prefect of the Roman province of Judea, places both men well above the implied crowd, emphasizing their power (Fig. 4).

### *3.3. Symbolic Codes*

Christian symbols related to sacredness and divinity are used frequently on magazine front covers. These include images such as the Bible, halos, flowers, and vestments. The Cross of Christ is a significant symbol signifying his "love, suffering and self-giving for humanity" (Eke 2020: 400).

The meaning of the sacred is conveyed using a wide range of Christian symbols: almost half of the analyzed images have a halo and light surrounding Jesus' head, or the crown of thorns, while bread and a cup of wine are attributes of the Last Supper appear on three portrayals. Symbols such as the white shroud, the red cross on a white background, the V sign, or the Grail are less commonly used. From a rhetorical perspective, these specific iconographic symbols function as culturally sedimented topoi: by activating familiar associations, they pre-structure the audience's interpretation and reduce the need for explicit verbal argumentation.

The symbol of the red cross appears on two front covers. The cross frames Jesus' head and merges with his halo in the first one. The second cover shows the cross on a flying white flag (Fig. 6). Known as St. George's Cross or the Knights Templar Cross, this is a common symbol in traditional ecclesiastical visual art. The cross can be interpreted in many ways but is mainly recognized as the symbol of one's connection to the Church, the spiritual path, and martyrdom. In contemporary mass media, the cross is commonly used to emphasize the sacredness of Jesus Christ.


**Figure 6.** Cover of *National Geographic*, March 2021 (Special Issue)

Light is another symbolic expression of the sacred. Already mentioned as one of the compositional codes used for magazine covers, the presence or absence of light sets apart the sacred from the profane. Fundamental to religious experience, light can also reflect purity, sanctity, and supremacy in specific contexts. Images of light are, therefore, symbolic expressions of holiness, illumination, and joy of the soul. It can also be depicted with aureoles, rays of dawn, or beams of spiritual illumination. In contrast, the absence of light, i.e., darkness, represents death, danger, and evil (Weightman 1996). Most examined cover images use light as a powerful positive symbol of sacredness, with Jesus' face or figure highlighted as the embodiment of the divine in a specific context.

Regarding the symbolic meanings of colors, some observations can be made. In the Christian tradition, some of the symbolic meanings of colors come from the Old Testament. For example, red has a linguistic and metaphorical connection to Adam, earth, blood, and ruby. It also represents Christian values: awakening, power, strength, emotion, action, the Holy Spirit, and suffering (Krier 1988, Eke 2020).

April 2004 front cover depicts Jesus carrying a cross that symbolizes his passion and sacrifice (Fig. 7), reinforcing the traditional religious narrative. The use of color symbolism on magazine covers is significant in depicting Jesus, especially dressed in red in the scenes before the crucifixion, emphasizing his sacrifice and suffering:

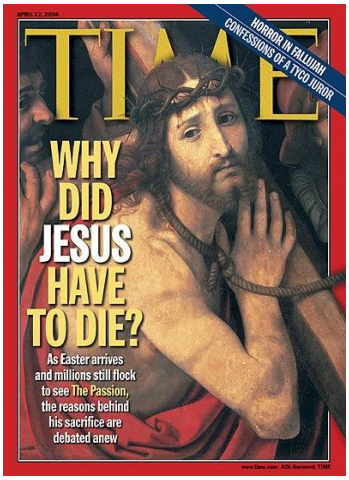


**Figure 7.** Cover of *Time*, 12 April 2004, Issue 163(15)

Blue, purple, scarlet, and white are also considered sacral colors. They are routinely used in King Solomon's chapters of the Old Testament (Almalech 2021). Yellow, purple, silver and white are other colors metaphorically connected to the sacred, while gold has long been associated with the divine sphere. Blue stands for religious feeling, devotion, and innocence (Cirlot 2015) and is related to the Virgin Mari's robe (Fig. 8):

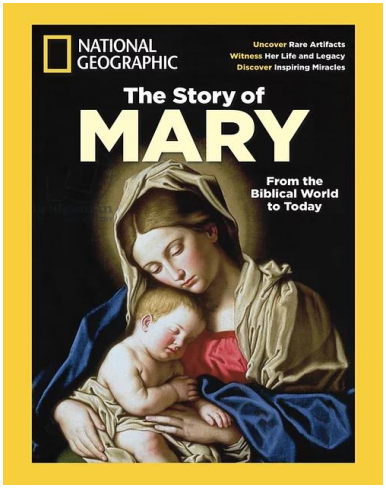


**Figure 8.** Cover of *National Geographic*, March 2018

Only three images of Jesus show him wearing white, 2 of these being fragments of well-known paintings: Bryullov's *Christ Risen* (*Der Spiegel*, 21 Mar 2008, 13) and Goetze's *The Last Days of Jesus of Nazareth* (Fig. 9). According to Olszewska (2017: 150), the category of the sacred is typically expressed through white, with the earthly element represented by grey, creating a contrast between perfection and imperfection:


**Figure 9.** Cover of *Der Spiegel*, 30 March 2018, Issue 14

Most of the symbols mentioned above are closely related to the sacred dimension. However, several elements are used to convey the meaning of the profane, too. For example, a clapper board (Fig. 1), yellow New York taxis in Times Square (Fig. 2), and the Statue of Liberty (Fig. 3) all represent the fast pace of modern life, materialism, and consumerism. The juxtaposition of sacred and profane elements constitutes a rhetorical strategy of recontextualisation, prompting viewers to negotiate competing value systems and to draw their own evaluative conclusions.

### *3.4. Textual Codes*

Supplementing and expanding the meanings visually created by front cover codes are textual messages. Headlines thus operate rhetorically by framing the argumentative stance of the cover—whether devotional, historical, ironic, or investigative—and by guiding readers toward interpretive trajectories. Here, the primary trend is using Jesus' full or partial name alongside his image. Such a setup was identified on half of the magazine covers. The remaining covers are dominated by biblical or Jesus-themed headlines such as *Secrets of the Nativity* (*Time*, 13 Dec 2004, 164(24)), *The War of Christians* (*Newsweek*, Feb 2012), and *The Journey of the Apostles* (*National Geographic,* Mar 2012), thematically creating a religious context.

Analyzing the textual codes, it is noticeable that a large part of the headlines has the structure of a rhetorical question, aiming to motivate readers to find answers in the magazine. The question's phrasing often hides little-known facts or a certain globally relevant problem, for example, *The Real Jesus. What Archeology Reveals About His Life* (*National Geographic*, Dec 2017), *Where Did God Go?* (*Time*, 16 June 2003, 157(15)) or *Who Really Killed Jesus?* (*Newsweek*, Feb 2004, 16). This trend is particularly common on Time magazine covers. It is also notable that, although the grammatical question structure is used, the question mark is often not used.

Another semantically distinct large group of headlines has a provocative character, using various rhetorical figures such as hyperbolic metaphors (*Jesus takes Hollywood. 'Sound of freedom' is the latest mega-hit in a surge of faith-based movies & TV shows* (*Newsweek*, 4 Aug 2023)), idioms (*An eye for an eye. The Biblical War*, *Der Spiegel*, 07 Apr 2002, 15), aposiopesis (*You should not...*, *Der Spiegel*, 14 Apr 2006, 16) and irony (*INSIDE THE MORMON EMPIRE. ...And thou shall build a shopping mall, own stock in Burger King, and open a Polynesian theme park in Hawaii that shall be largely exempt from the frustrations of tax…*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 16 June – 22 July 2012).

The December 2012 issue of *Newsweek* is exceptional as featuring the Holy Family with Infant Jesus in a neutral discourse tradition (Fig. 10). Although not done ironically, the questions asked (*Who Was Jesus? How many Wise Men Were There? Why Bethlehem? Did He Have a Wife? In a Manger or a Cave?)* appeal to scientific evidence and facts, demystifying the life of Jesus. As a result, the impression of sacredness, traditionally associated with the miracle of Christ's birth, is shattered. This question functions as a rhetorical move that invites an implicit conclusion: if Jesus' life can be scrutinized through empirical inquiry, then traditional sacred narratives become subject to critical reinterpretation, encouraging the reader to approach the narrative not simply with reverence, but with a critical perspective.


**Figure 10.** Cover of *Newsweek*, 17 December 2012 (Special Edition)

In some cases, the text on the front cover conveys comic content. One example is the dialogue between Joseph and Mary captured on the cover of *Der Spiegel* (8 Dec 2017, 50). Joseph says: *I didn't order this* (*Das habe ich nicht bestellt*). Mary replies: *Can we change it?* (*Können wir ihn umtauschen?*). *The delivered festival (Das gelieferte Fest*). Below, the text in smaller font reads *How online shopping fundamentally changes our lives* (*Wie der Onlinehandel unser Leben revolutioniert*). The message is presented as a collage, imitating the format of comics or caricatures to attract readers' attention. By translating the Nativity narrative into the idiom of customer service, the cover performs a rhetorical reframing that equates divine incarnation with routine consumer experience, thereby advancing an implicit critique of commodified spirituality.

It can be noted that only one cover has no textual codes directly linked to the depiction of Jesus. This is the December 2014 edition of *The Economist* featuring a playful collage on its front cover (Fig. 3). As the whole issue is dedicated to Christmas, the central Nativity scene is thematically connected to the main headline *Christmas double issue*.

**Conclusions**

The analysis of magazine front covers effectively confirms that the publishing industry considers these recommendations and pursues a relatively consistent policy of exploiting the image of Jesus Christ. The rhetorical analysis of commercial discourses identified recurring themes, motifs, and symbols. At the same time, the semiotic examination confirmed that sacral elements in the studied images tended to dominate over secular aspects. These findings demonstrate that the covers not only reproduce cultural imagery but also deploy it rhetorically to shape readers' evaluative responses and to naturalize particular interpretations of sacred and profane meanings.

Nonetheless, a few front covers dispel the impression of sacredness with explicit references to the profane. This demonstrates efforts to give a new meaning to a modern individual's spirituality or present the myth of Jesus in a scientific, sometimes ironic manner in current cultural contexts. This softens the deformed or transformed images of Jesus, which would otherwise seem too provocative to some addressees. At the same time, cover images reflect the effort to reconcile contemporary sociocultural and religious narratives to explain the balance of power and wisdom without undermining or compromising the sacredness of the primary object.

The magazine front covers featuring various representations of sacredness predominantly convey universally recognizable thematic codes, such as the figure of Jesus and the most significant scenes from his life – his birth, the Last Supper ritual, carrying the cross, and resurrection. Most magazine covers feature a traditional Western image of Jesus Christ, which has little in common with his historical portrayal, although several interpretations were also identified. So, as well as trying to align historical and popular religious images with private religious beliefs formed in the Western Christian culture, these subjects are used as a rhetorical tool in constructing persuasive discourse.

The same function is performed by purposeful and systematic intertextual expression. Using fragments of famous Renaissance or Baroque paintings and contemporary artworks, magazine covers follow the Western tradition of depicting Jesus. The symbolism of sacredness is supported by many elements often associated with Christ, such as the halo, cross, crown of thorns, the Grail, various forms of light, etc. The analyzed cover images are also dominated by specific colors, which evoke connotations of sacredness, an effect further reinforced by using the category "up" instead of "down," the latter conveying the profane. The symbolic juxtaposition of light and darkness is another tool frequently used to express the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane.

Thus, the images of Jesus Christ on popular magazine covers tend to reflect current historical, religious, and cultural contexts. Accommodating the diversity of viewpoints, these contemporary portrayals also indicate that Jesus and related subjects – sacrifice, mercy, suffering, love, and resurrection – remain popular and significant in Western Culture. In an increasingly image-driven world, visual communication represents the values of the dominant ideology and prompts new global views on some of the most important subjects. Conversely, provocative visual information that does not correspond to society's

prevailing values and beliefs can evoke different reactions. These responses, in turn, offer new value models, reflecting shifts in attitudes and broader societal changes.

### Author contributions

**Aistė Vitkūnė-Bajorinienė**: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing - original draft, writing - review & editing, visualization.

**Eglė Gabrėnaitė**: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing - original draft, writing - review & editing.

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