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What Makes Saint Martin Come Marching In? On Facilitating Holy Play

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In the study of urban events on the boundaries between the religious and the secular, an underdeveloped theme is the facilitation and performance of sacrality. Two questions should be asked: to what extent is an event ritualized and sacralized and how is religion involved? A further question is how these events succeed in performing the sacred. This article uses ethnographic research into the Saint Martin's Day Parade in the Dutch city of Utrecht, a festive procession of children and parents, to clarify how the interplaying fields of religion, art, and, urban governance facilitate an event that may acquire the qualities of a "holy play," depending on the fulfillment of performative requirements on one hand and the balance between sacralizing movements and particular strategies on the other.

Key words: heritagization; community art; play; religious diversity; ritualization; urban politics.

A festive light procession of children and adults has been held in the Dutch city of Utrecht every year since 2011 on a Saturday close to November 11. They carry self-made but similar-looking white lanterns and are accompanied by musicians, choirs, and performers. It is called Saint Martin's Day Parade and references both a custom in the Netherlands, Belgium, and the German Rhineland of children begging playfully for sweets on November 11 while carrying lanterns and singing songs, and the patron saint of the city, portrayed in a central light sculpture as a man on horseback, whose feast day is on this date.

The parade starts on the square outside the historic Saint Martin's Cathedral (*Domkerk*), not in the building itself. Although a page on the organizing committee's website mentions Martin of Tours († 397) as a Christian bishop and saint, the man on horseback is more often referred to as "a Roman soldier" who gave his cloak to a beggar ([Sharing Arts Society 2022](#)). Historically, Martin, born in what is now Hungary, was a driving force behind the Christianization of

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Europe as a symbol of “sharing and caring” (Holland 2019:127–41). He became a patron saint of France and of several European cities, and an important saint on the calendar of the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike in regular processions, however, religious actors seem to be absent in the Utrecht parade; the organizing committee is a society dedicated to participatory art, supported by urban and national funding agencies.

The object of the research project presented in this contribution can be regarded as an art performance in a public space with a high level of audience participation. The role of the holy man, however, is intriguing. In Dutch society, Christianity has lost its dominant position, and the presence of other religions, such as Islam, is slightly increasing against the background of a religiously indifferent majority (Kregting et al. 2023). In 2022, less than half (45.3%) of the inhabitants of the Utrecht region indicate they belong to a religion or worldview (19.2% Protestant; 15.0% Catholic; and 5.5% Islam) (Schmeets and Houben 2023). One-third of the inhabitants (2022: 360,000) have parents or grandparents who migrated to the Netherlands or are immigrants themselves. The mayors of the city either have had a (conservative) liberal or social democratic background; Christian-democratic parties never had a prominent position. It is remarkable that this recently created urban event looks like a procession and uses a saint from the Christian tradition. This raises questions such as: to what extent is this event ritualized and how does it refer to religion? Research into these kinds of urban religious events is burgeoning (Bramadat et al. 2021). Following convincing critique on the category of the postsecular (Beckford 2012; Spickard 2023:374), I neither take the perspective of broad long-term trends such as secularization nor of its antiprograms (Beaumont 2019; Wijnia 2019). The ambivalent role of religious symbols in the Dutch lantern procession is striking, but not the focus of my interest. We need to go beyond merely signaling the presence of religion in a secular urban setting (e.g., Weir 2023) and seek to find out how this kind of event works.

Therefore, my key question is, using a concept developed earlier (De Groot 2017): how is “holy play” possible in complex secular societies? The Dutch Saint Martin’s Day Parade serves as a case study to investigate this. I discern three sub-questions. The first sub-question is how traditions and actors considered as religious are actively or passively involved in these events. The second sub-question is how and to what extent these events are ritualized and sacralized. It is important to discern these two questions: the ritual and sacred character of the performance as such should not be considered as indicating the involvement of institutional religion. Even a study that strongly informed the analysis that is presented here tends to link “the sacred” exclusively with religious, or “confessional” symbols (Astor 2023). Sacralization, however, the process of acquiring an extraordinary status, is not restricted to the realm of religions—a distinction I elaborate below. The third and final sub-question is: how is this event, in particular its use of religious symbols and its ritualized character, facilitated, and restricted?

THEORY

The Involvement of Religion

The first issue points to developments in the way various actors deal with the persistent involvement of religion in the public urban domain. Several sociologists have drawn attention to the use of religious symbols in reworking social identities. [Geneviève Zubrzycki \(2013\)](#) analyzed this in detail for the Parade of Saint John the Baptist in Quebec, distinguishing iconic-making, iconoclastic unmaking and iconographic remaking. [Beaman \(2021\)](#) discussed the articulation of heritage in exclusive narratives about a Christian nation. [Griera et al. \(2024\)](#) studied the politics of heritage in strategies that emphasize the Christian identity of Cordoba's Mosque-Cathedral. In these studies, there is a major role for religious actors.

[Avi Astor and Damon Mayrl \(2020\)](#) developed the concept of “culturalized religion,” “forms of religious identification, discourse, and expression that are primarily cultural in character, insofar as they are divorced from belief in religious dogma or participation in religious ritual.” In a context of religious diversity on one hand and secular governance on the other, this culturalized religion on the boundary of the secular and religious may appear as the expression of a certain communal identity, a relic from the past that is now celebrated as heritage, or as a continuation of a way of doing no longer recognized as religious ([Astor, and Damon 2020](#)). In the latter case, an apparently “neutral” approach may conceal the ongoing dominance of a particular religion, if only because the “usual” format for an activity, an organization, or an authority is derived from a particular religious template ([Oosterbaan 2014](#)). Urban governance is not just a matter of explicit regulations but also of implicit power that is reflected in the way urban space is organized ([Burchardt 2020:94](#)).

This concept proved useful for the present study, be it that this case showed a more ambivalent picture (cf. [Isnart 2021](#)), as strategies of continuing and discontinuing religion are intertwined. The Saint Martin's Day Parade, as an ambivalent case of secular procession, seems to combine two strategies of dealing with religion in the public space: playing *with* religion and playing *down* religion. The former refers to making heritage using elements from the Christian tradition to promote and sacralize a collective—here: urban—identity. The latter to the exclusion of religious elements from the public sphere in order to include people of all religions and none.

The strategy of exclusion departs from the notion that a diversity in worldviews—both religious and secular—requires the abstinence of manifest specific religious symbols in the public sphere ([Martínez-Ariño 2021](#)). I add “specific,” as identity markers of a religious minority, for example the veil, are more often regarded as offensive than identity markers of a religious majority, such as the Christian cross ([Berger 2019](#)). This strategy is contested as it favors a non-religious worldview over a religious worldview. Moreover, this “neutral” discourse may in fact reflect the dominant discourse, e.g., a secularized version of the Christian tradition.

Against this background, the approach advocated here attempts to understand the simultaneous re-introduction of religion in the public sphere and the stripping of specific religious references. Using the Christian tradition as a cultural resource in this way has been described as “liquidizing,” referring to the condition of the diminishing power of religious authorities that enables the use of religion in other institutional spheres (de Groot 2018:129–77). This implies two movements. Firstly, religion is redefined as culture (cf. Astor, and Damon 2020). Secondly, the locus of authority shifts from, e.g., churches to event organizers and city marketeers. As to the performative aspects of the event itself, and this is an important link with the second sub-question, the in some ways instrumental use of religion may at the same time invite to participate playfully, as the event neither requires nor expresses a religious faith but is open to everyone who wants to take part in something that is both serious and joyful. The ludic mode can then evoke experiences of reverence and awe precisely because “it is not real” (Grainger 2014). Practical theologian Mirella Klomp (2020) uses the term “ludification” to describe what happens to religion in this process.

The Sacrality of the Event

References to the Christian tradition aside, there is a second sub-question: what kind of artwork is this and to what extent is sacrality at play? In this respect, the study of community art, ritual, and performance has been informative, to which I add a means to discuss the degree of sacralization. This issue relates to what Alexander, Bartmanski, and Giessen (2012:102) have called “the iconic depth” of a ritual, which requires a detailed investigation into what it looks like, how it works, and how it is presented. An ethnographic method is needed that is attentive to symbols and scripts, actors and audience, the means of symbolic production (time, space, and objects), a *mise-en-scène* and the social powers that establish the boundaries for—but, as I argue below, also facilitate—the performance (Alexander 2004). This approach also enables evaluations of success and failure. If the script of the performance matches with the symbolic representations that are already there in the background, such as the figure of Saint Martin, an evaluation as “truthful” is likely and if the audience perceives the performance as “real,” it is successful. If this link is seen as “fake” and the performance as “artificial” it fails (Alexander 2004:551). The study of cultural pragmatics helps to understand how actors in complex societies succeed in creating social performances that do not seem inauthentic and artificial.

The Saint Martin’s Day Parade has choreographic, musical, and theatrical elements, recitations, and, above all, artfully crafted lanterns of all sizes. Characteristically, it is held in the public space of the city and it has a high degree of audience participation. This brings us more specifically into the realm of community art (Crehan 2020), where the question is to what extent audience participation and the formation of community play a role.

The community dimension is one of two dimensions De Groot (2017, 2012) has identified in ethnographic research on theatrical productions, festivals, and

events such as bingo evenings and touristic pilgrimage. The central concept in this approach is play, classically articulated by [Johan Huizinga \(1955\)](#) as a voluntary act performed within certain limits of time and space according to prevailing rules. Its purpose lies primarily in itself, it is accompanied by feelings of excitement and joy, and the participants are well aware that what they are doing differs from ordinary life. This applies well to the Saint Martin's Day Parade.

Play carries with it the potentiality of a sacred dimension, which is the second dimension that De Groot distinguishes. [Alexander \(2004:533–34\)](#) avoids exploring this “romantic” notion, but it can, and should, be studied in a sociologically sound way. Rudolf Otto's notion of “reverence and awe” has become the classic circumscription of the holy (discussed thoroughly by [ter Borg 1991:251](#)), but De Groot takes a constructive approach suggested by [Gordon Lynch \(2011:15\)](#). Adapting Émile Durkheim's notion of the sacred, he operationalized sacrality as “a particular type of signification in which symbols, objects, sentiments, and practices are experienced as expressions of a normative, absolute reality.” This is already going on when you live in a region where St. Martin's Day is celebrated in the traditional way, and the eve of November 11 has arrived. It is getting dark, and the doorbell is rung by children with lanterns singing a song about either Saint Martin or, more likely, St. Martin's Day, and, afterward, expectantly holding up their hands for some candy or fruit. There is no escaping the moral obligation to open the door, listen benevolently, admire the lanterns, and above all: to give. A sacred duty. That is, if the call takes place in the late afternoon or evening of November 11 and the children fulfill their ritual obligations at least minimally. In this sense, walking with lanterns is like a *holy play* in which a light, temporary form of community between the participants is created in an atmosphere that is cherished as special.

When Durkheim does not follow in his equation of the sacred with the social ([Rosati 2009](#)), the communal and the sacred dimensions can be seen as independent categories. Analytically, the concept of holy play therefore has two dimensions: the enhancement of a sense of community (C+, C–), and the enhancement of a sense of the sacred (S+, S–). Crossing these two dimensions creates four categories that De Groot labels as: *show* (low on sacralization, low on communality), *ceremony* (high on sacralization, but low on communality), *holy play* (high on sacralization and on communality), and *gathering* (low on sacralization, but high on communality). This instrument ([Table 1](#)) will be used to analyze the ritual and sacred character of the Saint Martin's Day Parade, both in a comparison between three editions and in retrospective.

Facilitating Holy Play

When it comes to studying the context of events, studies on community art ([Gielen 2015](#)) focus on the restricting role of social powers such as urban governance. The communal experience of being engaged in the creation of something special is often contrasted with strategies that seek to instrumentalize and limit it. Moreover, there is much reservation in paying analytical attention to any sacred

TABLE 1 Typology of Events

	Community (-)	Community (+)
Sacred sphere (+)	Ceremony	Holy play
Sacred sphere (-)	Show	Gathering

Source: Based on [de Groot \(2017\)](#).

qualities. This is even the case for an earlier study on the Saint Martin's Day Parade in the context of managing sacrality ([Wagenaar 2022](#)).

A picture of the parade in Utrecht is on the cover of a collection of essays “that analyze the divergent interests, attachments, and emotions of the people involved and the ways these are managed at various, intersecting levels and scales when religious sites, objects, or practices are transformed into cultural heritage” ([van den Hemel, Salemink, and Stengs 2022:5](#)). Thus, the editors promote research on “managing sacralities,” both in the religious and in the secular sphere, such as in politics and culture. Yet, the case study of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations provides detailed insights into the secular framing of religious heritage, but only scarce evidence for the sacred dimension of the resulting celebration ([Wagenaar 2022](#)). The notion of sacralization is only backed by the observation that the moral dimension comes to the fore in framing the Parade as a “Feast of Sharing.” In the study of religious heritage, a more stringent notion of sacralization is needed. “Sacred” is not another word for religion migrated to the secular sphere (cf. [Joas 2021](#)). Not only in the case of the Utrecht Saint Martin's Day Parade, the challenge to explore the connections between sacrality and management still stands.

In the following, I will not only look at urban governance but focus on the three most important fields that exercise power over the production of the event. The first is the religious field with its priests, traditions, symbols, and church buildings. The second is the field of art with its societies of performers, artistic directors, dramaturgical codes, and props. The third is the field of urban governance with funding agencies, bureaucracies, urban polity, and ideas on citizenship. In particular, by paying attention to the genealogy of the event, I intend to clarify further how the fields of religion, art, and urban governance interact and contribute to the event as a form of holy play. This issue relates to studies on the governance of religion in the urban space, especially in relation to festivals ([Becci, Burchardt, and Casanova 2013](#); [Bramadat et al. 2021](#); [Knott, Volkhard, and Birgit 2016](#)). How can the social dynamics be described that facilitate and restrict holy play?

METHOD

With the approach used in the present study, we come closer to explaining the emergence of secular sacred events in the public domain without reducing the sacred dimension to something else. The three sub-questions work together.

I examined how and to what extent religion is referenced and involved in the Saint Martin's Day Parade, to what extent the event itself has a ritual and sacred character, and the social dynamics that facilitate and restrict the emergence of holy play.

At the heart of the project is a participant observation of three editions of the Parade. Following the ethnographic tradition (Grimes 2013:44–46), this includes taking the researcher's experiences into account: including these in fieldnotes and reflecting on them. Informal conversations with participants were also part of the observations, which were guided by observational guidelines, derived from ritual studies (cf. de Groot 2017). Two editions of the Parade were affected by the corona-virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (2020–2021). I participated in and observed the 2018 edition, analyzed the content of the 2020 online edition, and attended, experienced, and observed one of the rounds in the adapted 2021 edition. Four anthropology students visited other rounds; their fieldnotes are referred to separately. The differences between the yearly editions made it possible to compare.

With medievalist Els Rose (2022a), I also interviewed three experts: Eugène van Erven and Rien Sprenger, who initiated the Parade and Paul Feld, who took over as an artistic director in 2014. In addition, I corresponded with them through e-mail, studied documents, reports, videoclips, news items, and historic and ethnographic literature on Saint Martin's Day rituals, particularly in Utrecht. These data enabled an additional historical approach.

On this basis, the fourth section reconstructs how the Parade came into being and how it evolved into the large-scale urban event it is now. In the fifth section, I first describe my observations of and experiences with the three editions (cf. de Groot 2022) and, secondly, interpret these as more or less successful attempts at performing a holy play around Saint Martin. The sixth section gathers the conclusions and presents a template that serves to analyze similar events. In the seventh section, I discuss the merits and limitations of this approach.

GENEALOGY: HOW COMMUNITY ART BROUGHT BACK A SAINT TO THE CITY OF UTRECHT

Folklorization

The grassroots tradition of walking with lanterns in honor of Saint Martin on November 11 has old roots and extends to several countries in Europe (Helsloot 2001). It had subversive aspects; sometimes the behavior of participating young people got out of hand. Since the 1930s, the custom has increasingly been regarded as folklore. Its roots in Roman festivities dedicated to the godhead Mars and in Germanic festivities connected with the harvest were stressed. Attempts to revitalize its Christian roots failed in the Netherlands, unlike in areas such as the Rhineland. Churches did not become involved in the public rituals. Only in anthroposophical milieus did the person of Saint Martin receive ample attention,

e.g., through the practice of impersonating him in live action by a child on a horse. Its framing as folklore promoted regulation of the tradition by schools and parents in their battle against rioting, while at the same time ridding it of the association with begging.

Yet, the Christian roots of the practice can hardly be denied and are well documented, especially for the city of Utrecht. Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, a procession to the Dom Church was held in Utrecht on Saint Martin's Day in honor of the saint, who was "represented"—or, should we say, played—by the bishop. And at least in the sixteenth century, a torchlight procession was held in the city on Saint Martin's Eve by everyone employed by the city, accompanied by the city musicians and singing schoolchildren (Bogaers 2008:299). There were also children who, with soot-blackened faces and torches in hand, went past the houses to collect chestnuts, almonds, apples, and medlars (Stevens 2017). The Reformation, which turned the Dom into a Protestant church, did not result in the removal of Catholic symbols and rituals from the public space, as is often assumed (Yasuhira 2021). The parade with torches was prohibited, but unsuccessfully so. In various regions throughout the country, the festival was transformed into something belonging to popular culture, probably facilitated by the absence of support from the church.

In the modern era, internal migration brought this popular cultural tradition to regions where it had not been practiced before, and in other regions, it vanished for a while or longer. To this day, Saint Martin's Day is celebrated in much the same way in various places in the Netherlands: children going around the neighborhood singing—and their songs containing a reference to the saint or the date—and receiving treats. Since the 1980s, daycare centers and schools have tried to revitalize this custom (Meertens Instituut 2018). (More recently, they started to promote the celebration of Halloween.) The organizers of the Parade tapped into an existing practice that had itself become folklore and used this to create a new tradition, thus re-enchanting the regular Saint Martin's Day celebration (cf. Stengs 2020).

Community Art

The revitalization of Saint Martin was the unforeseen outcome of a neighborhood event that just happened to take place on November 11. In 2006, the folk practice of children walking with lanterns was included in the opening of a cultural center in a former church building (Saint Stephen's church) in Overvecht, a multicultural neighborhood in Utrecht dominated by low-income apartment buildings. As the opening had coincidentally been planned for November 11, a link was made with the local tradition of the light procession, in the form of an artistic version, organized by Community Arts Lab, a collective of lecturers from the Utrecht School of the Arts (Rien Sprenger) and Utrecht University (Eugène van Erven) and performers. They cooperated with a local community music organization that drew its inspiration from the prominent British performance company provocatively called *Welfare State International*. This company had organized

light processions in marginalized towns and neighborhoods as a way to empower people overlooked by the rulers of the country. These parades became part of spectacular site-specific theatrical events they created all over the world ([Welfare State International 2006](#)).

Together they invited children from two primary schools for a children's parade with lanterns and joined by music groups. In terms of community art, this was a successful short-term initiative in the space of the neighborhood, connecting the public space of the streets with a redefined heterotopic building. A small-scale event, partly bottom-up, although with a considerable role for scholars and artists was "performing the common city" [Gielen \(2015\)](#).

As pictures in the local media showed participating children and mothers with headscarves ([Schouten 2006](#)), the event was regarded as promoting the message that (Muslim) migrants were embracing this "Dutch" tradition. This inspired city-wide initiatives aimed at these multicultural neighborhoods, as well as the use of Saint Martin as a symbol of sharing ([Rose 2022b:189](#)).

Saint Martin Comes In

The neighborhood initiative went urban. Community Arts Lab and its partners joined the recently formed Treaty of Utrecht organization. This organization had been founded with support from the city and the province to create culture and art for and with the local population in the lead-up to the official commemoration (2013) of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), which helped to end the European War of the Spanish Succession. Rather than looking back at this historic event, the organizers decided to celebrate "the art of making peace" (Renger de Bruin quoted in [Rose 2022a:188](#)). Participatory art was discovered as a means to promote peace, globally, but also on an urban scale, focusing on the neighborhoods. The Saint Martin Committee, an originally church-based committee devoted to the continuation of the traditions and values associated with Saint Martin of Tours, participated as well ([Sint Maarten Utrecht 2024](#)). Its policy was to promote Saint Martin while toning down aspects considered as religious ([Wagenaar 2023](#)): references to Christ, Church, and Christianity. Thus, in the background, not secular agencies but culturalized religious actors themselves became involved in a process of heritagizing Saint Martin. This active contribution to the process of heritagization from the part of the religious field itself (cf. [Kock 2022](#); [Vogel et al. 2023](#)) corrects a one-sided view that regards heritage formation from the perspective of secularization.

Established organizations and artistic performers met. For what in hindsight is regarded as the first edition of the Saint Martin's Day Parade explicit references to Saint Martin were introduced. Dan Fox from Welfare State International introduced the technique of designing and making light sculptures using willow twigs and tissue paper, lighted by electric bulbs and carried on bamboo frames ([van Erven 2013](#)). With others, he created the central image of Saint Martin on his horse.

Interestingly, the organizers did not use the iconic image of Saint Martin sharing his cloak with a beggar as a model for the light sculpture. Instead, inspiration was derived from a modern statue standing in front of the Roman Catholic parish of Saint Martin in Utrecht. This Saint Martin is a Christian soldier, recognizable by a cross on his helmet, who tramples a dragon symbolizing the Nazism of the German occupation in 1940–1945. The anachronistic image is in line with the local urban history of the saint. As the city was lucky to possess a reliquary, the tenth century Bishop Radboud had called to Saint Martin in his attempt to gather the citizens in the battle against the Vikings. For this act, he could refer to the reports that Saint Martin had also helped the city of Tours to survive the Vikings' attacks (Rose 2022b). The Catholic statue takes up this tradition of Saint Martin as a protector of urban peace. However, the artistic remake of this statue omitted the cross on the helmet, the soldier's sword, and the dragon. Thus, the meaning of the image became ambivalent, combining subtle references to two "avatars" of Saint Martin: the protector of the city and the symbol of sharing.

This first edition, the Saint Martin's Parade started in Ondiep, a working-class district identified by the government as one of the 40 problematic neighborhoods in the Netherlands (Lörzing, Harbers, and Schluchter 2008). Looking back at the preparation of the event in 2011, Eugène van Erven, Professor of Performance, Media and the City at Utrecht University, connected artfulness and sacrality:

The first time, we carried the large light sculpture from the Van Gendt & Loos warehouse to the Music House near the Rode Brug in the old city district of Ondiep. The wind took the sculpture under its wings and people immediately reacted to this first, as yet embryonic version of the parade as if it was something magical. Neighborhood residents were hanging out of their windows to see this, people burst into laughter, became emotional at the beauty of something so unexpected in the public space. This was a Eureka moment for us as organizers: wow, this is really something powerful and beautiful. We are offering the city something very special with this. This "wow factor" still marks the Parade today (van Erven in: (Rose 2022b:190)

The event had the characteristics of a holy play as all ingredients worked together organically. Children carried self-made lanterns on their way from the neighborhood to the Dom Square, sang songs and rapped about Saint Martin, danced, and made noise by banging on scaffold tubes. A carriage with real horses was involved. It was "exciting" and "fun," according to the young participants interviewed for the regional television (U in de Wijk Zuilen 2011). In a turbulent world, Saint Martin, as the central figure in a multicultural urban event, personified the importance of sharing and caring.

From this first edition onwards, Saint Martin "himself," the holy man, also played an important role. Firstly, there is the importance of the date of November 11, connected to the folk tradition of walking with lanterns, which goes back to the day Martin's body was buried. Secondly, the mention of his name should not be underestimated, even when his story is not shared in detail. Thirdly, all editions would either start or/and finish at the Dom Square. These elements link the event with a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000). A tradition of remembrance is carried on even if no one consciously dwells on it. It is an institution.

Participatory Art

In his book *Community Art Dialogues*, Van Erven quotes Dan Fox: “The best thing would be if in four or five years it were run entirely by people from Utrecht itself.” (van Erven 2013:35). Clearly, the intention of the founding artists was to engage the inhabitants of the neighborhood in making something beautiful, empowering them to take control over their own everyday environment: the common city (Gielen 2015). But the development of the Parade took another route. The city decided to invest in the promotion of popular culture and the Dutch Ministry of Culture had recently founded a national foundation for participatory art and cultural education. The organizers seized the opportunity and continued the Parade yearly as a city-wide project and moved the performance from the outskirts of town to the center, though the preparing workshops were still held in the neighborhoods.

At the same time, the Saint Martin Committee sought to consolidate this ludic revitalization of the saint’s veneration. As recently as in 1990, a picture of the saint had been removed from the city flag: a square, diagonally divided in red and white, referring to the sharing of the cloak. Now, he was carried through the streets, even wearing one half of a red cloak, draped over his shoulder, contrasting with the white light of the sculpture. Utrecht re-appropriated and canonized the saint: in 2012, the Saint Martin’s celebration in Utrecht was recognized as “intangible heritage” (Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland 2012).

In 2014, *Sharing Arts Society* (with Paul Feld as the artistic director) took over the organization of the parade. The shift in terminology from “community art” to “sharing” and “participatory art” aptly reflects a subtle move: urban citizens would *participate* in a large-scale artistic event (*Sharing Arts Society* 2022). Theatrical elements were introduced, such as the participation of silent clowns carrying signs marked “thirst,” “hunger,” “homelessness,” and other issues relating to poverty. Their performance is supposed to refer to the anonymous beggar who once received half of Martin’s cloak at the gates of Amiens. According to the legend, Christ himself appeared to Martin, dressed in this piece of cloth, expressing to the angels surrounding him his thankfulness toward Martin. This religious layer in the tradition of Saint Martin has intentionally been left aside (Wagenaar 2023). Instead, a moral dimension has been strengthened as, since 2015, the Parade started to take one of the United Nations’ Global Goals as a yearly theme.

In this way, an artistic initiative oriented toward the grass-root level became part of top-down strategies. As in other cities, authorities embraced the concept of participatory art, a form of art that directly engages audience members in the creative process so that they become participants in the event. Indeed, the current project leader of the Saint Martin’s Day Parade, considers it a form of participatory art, not only because it is performed by a collective of city residents, but also because the music, lanterns, and performances are prepared in community centers, schools, nursing homes and shelters for asylum seekers. This preparatory process, the marketing, and the execution are themselves woven into a

widely spun social web. The scale of the project is considerable and the number of partner organizations exceeds one hundred.

The Patron Saint Rediscovered

This strategic environment signifies a shift from the “common city” to the “creative city,” characterized by long-term, top-down initiatives. In this ideal-typical context, creative artists are incorporated and “may now try to repair the holes in the social fabric” and “cheer up the neighborhood” through “megalomaniac light festivals and spectacular circus acts” that replace the function the cathedral had in the “monumental city” (Gielen 2015:287). In Utrecht, political strategies indeed play a role as a connection is sought between city residents of different cultural backgrounds, and so do economic strategies, as the city of Utrecht is promoted, and cultural strategies, as the patron saint of the city is rediscovered. A local, artistic initiative aimed at the neighborhood has been transformed into an urban heritage event.

As the city’s polity is to promote inclusion and connection between citizens, there is no radical departure from the original initiative. The event is still embedded in civil society and has not become a spectacle performed by professionals. People share pictures of the Parade on social media, and increasingly so, which could be seen as adopting a spectator perspective, but it is also a way of widening the event to a virtual environment (Rose 2022a). With respect to religious references, it is remarkable that Saint Martin acts as a connecting figure. In 2019, the Religious Heritage Museum Catharijneconvent even displayed a reliquary from their collection (a piece of his skull) outside their building alongside the route of the parade. Yet, Martin is primarily not presented here in his rendition as a Christian saint, but as a familiar, local, legendary personification of sharing. This phenomenon might be comparable with local saint veneration in religiously diverse regions (Ponniah 2021). Saint Martin seems to function well as a background symbol in a holy play that more or less transcends the borders between various believers and unbelievers.

OBSERVATIONS AND INTERPRETATION: FROM HOLY PLAY TO CEREMONY TO SHOW

A Secular Procession

November 10, 2018, 5:30 p.m. A large group of children, parents, and volunteers gathers on the Dom Square in Utrecht. Many of the children are carrying lanterns, a group of adults are carrying a sign that says: “Peace in Bosnia.” We are welcomed by the organizing committee. “Is everyone in their box?” Names of participating schools, asylum seekers’ centers, and senior citizens’ associations are read out. I do not know about any boxes, so I just stand where I am. From the stage, the current Minister of Education, Culture, and Science, associated with

the progressive liberals, then gives a speech about heritage, peace, and charity. It is difficult to pay attention to it. There is too much to see: small and large white, illuminated willow lanterns and, above all, many people, adults and children, who are eager to start walking. Two musicians from the international music festival *Le Guess Who?*, which is taking place in Utrecht at the same time, come on stage. Then we start the countdown. The church bells ring. We are about to begin.

Walking is not the only way of participating. There are many parents with children standing along the route who are watching and also have lanterns in their hands. “This way you see a lot more,” one father says. “And walking the whole Parade is too much for the little girl,” says another father.

Clowns are walking around with signs around their necks that read “cold,” “homeless,” “thirsty,” “lost”. They try to make contact by pretending to warm themselves on lanterns, eliciting an embrace, and one even walks into a house that has its door open. I find it hard to respond to them. There is also a horse-drawn carriage with a choir on it singing St. Martin’s Day songs. But most of all we hear the wind ensemble playing familiar tunes such as “Copacabana” and various other South American rhythms. It occurs to me that this St. Martin’s Parade is somewhat similar to other outdoor events, such as carnival parades, where some of the participants walk a route with musical and visual entertainment along the way, while others watch. Theatrical elements are increasingly being incorporated into these events.

The Saint Martin Parade is different, however. The artistic part is not inserted into a larger event that is brought to the consuming audience; instead, the event is to a considerable extent made by the community itself. What are lacking here are, firstly, beer and, secondly, amplified music—this is precisely why the convivial character is preserved. The food truck and entertainment industries are conspicuously absent. There is plenty of music, but this too is participatory, both in the parade and along the side of the road. For example, at a home for the elderly, a senior choir sings as the director of the facility plays the accordion. When we return to the starting point, the Dom Square, we are treated to a performance by a musical ensemble of asylum seekers, as the Salvation Army is serving tomato soup. The presence of Saint Martin was not very obvious, however, partly because he was no longer wearing his red cloak.

The theme of the route was also unobtrusive, but I did get a sense of the importance of peace and of the attention given to people who have fled war and are seeking safety in Utrecht. Afterward, I read that Global Goal number 16, “Peace and security for all,” had been chosen as the central focus and that this year’s theme was therefore “building bridges” ([Sharing Arts Society 2018](#)). I was particularly struck by the fact that we performed a ritual in the open space together: a functionally useless walk around the church by all sorts of people, watched by all sorts of people. I learned afterward that 10,000 people participated. Church-based religion and party politics were both notably absent. This was not a demonstration against anything, not a spectacular event with headliners; the script served

the celebration of civic values in an urban context. The message seemed to be that everyone belongs, whether they were born here or moved here, and we have each other's best interests at heart in this city.

This is a low-threshold, noncontroversial event in which the crowd willingly cooperates with the agenda of the organization, while at the same time everyone can cherish their own enjoyment, admiration, personal expression, and sense of belonging. Something special happens here, like in a procession under the auspices of the church, but at the same time it is connected to everyday life. In the sense described above, this could count as a holy play, an interpretation that is confirmed by several eyewitnesses, such as in the report of a spectator of the 2019 edition who “found himself fully surrounded by a miraculous world” (Hijne 2019). A journalist concluded: “Saint Martin’s Day Parade is the only event I can think of that is not about money, where words such as tolerance are everything but hollow, and where, most of all, everyone shares one blissful moment of togetherness” (Dubbelman 2019).

This was a sacralized trip from A to A as an expression of community, perhaps a common identity, but in that case a multi-interpretable and undefined identity. The sponsors and partners are largely secular. Saint Martin here figures prominently only in the peripheral program: the presentation of an award for a diaconal project called “The Mantle of Saint Martin” and celebrations in several churches in Utrecht.

Commemorating the Absence of Community

November 11, 2020. “We never give up. We stand together for Utrecht. Please sit down. Light a candle.” (Sharing Arts Society 2020a) These words were the welcoming address for the Tour of St. Martin @Home 2020, spoken from Dom Square, but heard by participants only through the media, not outside, not together. Everything that is now absent due to the COVID-19 ban on gatherings is emphasized in the video film that RTV Utrecht broadcast as an alternative to the Saint Martin’s Day Parade. Sheltering in our homes, as has been customary for centuries during epidemics, we are able to watch a virtual alternative.

The smoothly edited collage of earlier and recent footage—some 50 scenes in 50 minutes—gives a more spectacular impression than a parade in which you yourself participate does. It is a lot, and it is impressive: images of white lanterns, musicians, and singers of all ages from all over the world, the clowns with their signs. The music and the outfits sometimes give a carnivalesque impression.

At the same time, the figure of Saint Martin is clearly present. Both the presenter and the deputy mayor (Green Left) call him “our patron saint,” and an alderwoman (Green Left) argues that it is “in the DNA of our city” to dedicate ourselves to sharing with each other. We have “inherited this from Saint Martin.” The Sustainable Development Goal chosen for this year—end poverty—corresponds organically with the memory of Saint Martin. Ten percent of the population of Utrecht, 36,000 people, live in poverty. One of them speaks in an interview, fragments of which are woven throughout the film: a quiet and

personal contribution about the experience of exclusion, giving up, and finding the way back to being connected again with other people.

The video concludes with a call to participation—“Share your story”—to include viewers in the “we” that has been presented. This is an attempt to compensate for the forced lack of actual participation, although kits to make your own Saint Martin @Home 2020 lanterns were distributed in advance (Vönhögen 2020).

In 2020, there are hardly any participants in any on-site event, but most people are spectators of something that exists only on film. However, by putting all the music, performances, speeches, reports, and interviews together, a composite “we” is created that has never existed in physical form. In this sense, this virtual Tour of St. Martin has an added value compared to the live Parade. The various “worlds”—of schools, asylum seekers’ centers, and residential areas, of individual people and of collectives such as the local professional soccer club FC Utrecht (with torches on the soccer pitch that formed the words “Together we are Utrecht”)—are brought together in the editing of this video film.

The educational dimension is to the fore in this virtual edition, but at the same time the special sphere of the parade is retained and reinforced in a time of empty streets and the absence of public events. Forced by the conditions of a lockdown, the Parade takes on the character of a ceremony, with the optional experience of a virtual community. Comments received by the organizers through email and at meetings suggest that this actually happened: “I sat on the couch with enduring tears of emotion, comfort, and togetherness. What an unimaginably special tradition this is. I am really proud to live in this city.” (Sharing Arts Society 2020b:18) As inhabitants of Utrecht gather around Saint Martin in the privacy of their homes, the making of heritage takes place at a new level.

A Theatrical Exhibition

November 7, 2021, 8:30 p.m.. For the second evening this week, people who have registered in advance can go to Berlin Square in an urban development west of downtown Utrecht, where they can do a tour that takes them along lanterns, dance, music, and other performances and ends with a Syrian buffet or Dutch mini pancakes. Again, a massive event like the Parade is not possible this year due to renewed COVID-19 restrictions. This year, a formula was chosen whereby 250 people are admitted every 15 minutes to a spacious square that is still under construction. This system would allow a total of 7,500 people to come and take a look (RTV Utrecht 2021).

Spectating is the main mode of participation this time. There is no parade with a common start and a common end. You are not part of a larger whole and there is no audience to watch. A few children do the tour carrying a lantern, but they are an exception. The visitors stroll around, watch, listen, and take pictures as this open-air exhibition invites them to do. But no matter how artfully the white paper boats, churches, houses, animals, and vegetables—and halfway through a rider on horseback—are displayed, they look less charming standing there exposed to the weather than carried around in a parade.

A light sculpture of Saint Martin is also present, but easy to overlook. I see and hear a lot—street organ music, flamenco dancing with an Italian song (“Volare”), Dutch rap, and jazz-pop (“All of me”)—but there is no discernible connection with the occasion. I do see a painting, provided by the Catharijneconvent Museum, depicting scenes from the saint’s life, but I do not get the impression that this is what it is all about right now.

The clowns are back. I decided to give my coat to one of them but get it back soon. I still do not know how I am supposed to react to them. Part of the route is emphatically devoted to a specific theme: opportunities to learn for everyone. Signs carry quotations from the Pakistani child rights activist Malala Yousafzai about the importance of education for girls. Apparently, Sustainable Development Goal 4 was chosen this year, but unlike last year, the connection with a St. Martin’s Day event feels contrived. We are invited by the university and teaching hospital to “ask science a question’. The exhortation adds to the experience of a museum visit. The good intentions are clear and so is the distinction between suppliers and consumers. We are the consumers, and visitors to an open-air exhibition.

The ritual character of the 2021 St. Martin’s Day Tour is limited. There is a community dimension but, this is probably limited to the preparatory phase of making the lanterns and now mainly connected with the families who come to see the work of their young children, and to other individual networks of makers and viewers. The setting does not strongly invite mutual contact that transcends these circles. Nor does the experience of sacredness, which participants and audiences previously referred to using words such as “magic,” “wonder,” and “wow,” seem common. One journalist put it more bluntly: “This is how you kill a tradition” (Goossens 2021).

However, the students’ eyewitness accounts and conversations show that individual visitors and volunteers did enjoy the lanterns and the togetherness (Kuijl 2022; Loo 2022; Machiela 2022; van der Veer 2022). The memory of walking with lanterns, and even the figure of Saint Martin appeared to have a place in the experience of this event, although it is necessary to ask participants specifically about this before it becomes evident. It was not November 11, we did not march past the houses but across a square, along red-white police tape that marked the route, and children with lanterns were only sporadically present. This exhibition is not a full-fledged celebration of the feast of St. Martin, but the memory of this feast is cherished albeit within the limits of what is permitted. What is left is a theatrical exhibition, a show.

DISCUSSION: THE INTERPLAY OF RELIGION, ART, AND GOVERNANCE IN FACILITATING HOLY PLAY

How is “holy play” possible in complex secular societies? This section answers the three sub-questions distinguished at the outset and relates them to each other: the involvement of religion, the sacrality of the event, and the

facilitation of holy play. Studying the Saint Martin Day's Parade as community art in the urban space clarifies how sacred events work. The reference to a holy man is not the same thing as "playing with the holy." The former is about potential references to religion, and the latter is a sign of sacralization and play. Religious references play a subordinate role in making performances work, namely as a background symbol.

Saint Martin as a Background Symbol

Although what initially struck the eye was the fact that a Christian saint had been made part of this event, it subsequently became apparent that the generous man on horseback and the devotion to him only played a modest role, and that his religious inspiration and career were largely ignored. Must we conclude that this parade is more about a connection with the playful practice of walking with lanterns than with Saint Martin?

The moral dimension of the "Feast of Sharing" suggests that this is not the whole story. While the religious, or more specifically Christian, side of Saint Martin's Day is kept in the background, a political–educational notion is brought to the fore: no matter how diverse our backgrounds, we are all citizens of Utrecht, and we should care for each other. The festival celebrates an inclusive kind of citizenship. Strikingly enough, politicians have recourse to the city's patron saint in this context. He has become an "Utrecht saint", rather than a Christian saint. Saint Martin has become the object of urban heritage politics.

This study suggests that the ludic mode of participatory art enables diverse actors to deal with the tension between playing *with* religion and playing *down* religion. References are made that are both playful and serious, such as to the images of Saint Martin, the music dedicated to him, the stories, and the cloak: the whole collection of material and immaterial culture that is connected to him, and all of this without touching on what is considered as exclusive ecclesiastical territory. However, other, more secular, themes also appear. In the 2022 edition, the 900th anniversary of the city's existence was celebrated under the inclusive and more general headings of "City without Walls" and "Give Light" ([Sharing Arts Society 2022](#)). Sometimes Saint Martin stands in the shadow of the Parade that carries his name. The process of liquidizing allows for various degrees of the persistence of religion.

Performing Holy Play

Begun as a local artistic community initiative, the Parade now has the character of a large-scale event. As participatory art, it still has the potential to facilitate holy play but succeeds in doing so to varied degrees. It is an essential feature that people do something special together: participation and sacralization. The pre- COVID-19 editions, and even the filmed version certainly contained a high degree of "holy play," a unifying celebration that radiated glimpses of hope and evoked the experience of a normative absolute reality. The later adapted version lacked important elements of this carefully constructed piece of participatory art.

In the standard edition (2011–2019), walking in a procession or watching others walk is key. The script is a musical light procession. Through the lanterns, the participating children and adults distinguish themselves from their ordinary way of doing. The cityscape, the date, and the dark are actively involved too, as means of production. The figure of Saint Martin and the folkloric tradition of walking with lanterns are organically connected in a multi-interpretable celebration of citizenship. As anthropologists have observed, these ritualized festivals often turn into performances for tourists (Cerchiaro and Houtman 2021). I have not observed this trend here.

The virtual edition (2020) is self-referential and has the characteristics of a memorial: this is how we celebrate and hope to celebrate again. In this case, there are three layers of reality involved: the event that has been recorded, the video film, and the viewing situation. The discussion of the film shows that the format allows both for showing the spectacular and the informative. Ritualization of the viewing situation was enhanced by providing do-it-yourself-kits and inviting to light a candle. Thus, the viewers were able to create their own *mise-en-scène*. A sphere of sacrality was clearly present, helped by the extraordinary context of the pandemic. The community dimension was not entirely clear: a perception of the virtual community may well have been provoked. The attempt to continue the Parade as a holy play can be regarded as largely successful, although with a move towards the ceremony.

The exhibition edition (2021) failed as a holy play. Walking with lanterns turned into walking past lanterns, which radically changed the script. Only the volunteers were actors now, all others were made into visitors. The new script was derived from visiting a museum or a street fair. The *mise-en-scène* on the confined space of a square outside the city center promoted the experience of a visit instead of participation in a public event. The social powers were emphatically present with their well-intended messages; the spirit of Saint Martin was hard to find.

Community art is a craft. People make the art but whether it is experienced as art depends on the successful interplay of the essential ingredients, such as the background symbol. When Saint Martin is given space in a “truthful” manner, he radiates power which contributes to a scent of holiness. Yet, playing the card of a Saint Martin “in person” is not necessary for a successful event, as the precursor to the official Parade displayed. Neither is his presence a sufficient condition, as the exhibition edition showed. Sacrality lies within the glare of a successful event. It can only happen when the background representations, script, and audience match.

The Facilitating and Limiting Role of Fields

The event, however, is not construed in the vacuum of a laboratory, but in the context of interplaying fields each trying to manage its sacrality. Three played a major role: religion, art, and governance. The religious field demonstrated an openness toward culturalization. The field of arts has an interest in audience participation, and the field of governance has a tendency toward a secular approach

to including diversity. These three all interact. In the interaction between art and governance, the city administration and subsidizing funds support and incorporate community art in a politics of inclusion, while the field of art contributes to an eventization of citizenship. In the interaction between religion and governance, political actors use religious heritage as a cultural resource to strengthen the urban identity, while religious actors seek to continue the attention to the saint of caring and sharing in the urban space. In the interaction between art and religion, artists rediscover religious symbols and artifacts as means of production, while religious representatives cooperate with “ludified” versions of saint veneration. Together, these interactions create a dynamic environment for the creation of holy play.

The creation of the Saint Martin’s Day Parade as a successful performance depends on the combination of three sacralizing movements originating in the artistic ambition to create a moment of “wow,” the political goal to celebrate the city, and the religious zeal to revitalize the veneration of Saint Martin. When a holy play is the result, the performance can be considered as successful. The performance fails when particular strategies dominate. This happened when Saint Martin did not fit “authentically” into the script and theatrical elements such as the clowns and other performing artists moved the event into the direction of a spectacle. Here, artistic overtones limited the performance. It also happened when political strategies dominated the scene, introducing campaigns unrelated to Saint Martin. I did not find examples of religious actors pushing their agenda. As argued above, they were careful not to overestimate their sphere of influence while disclosing a part of the hegemonic Christian tradition that would speak to believers and unbelievers of all sorts.

These findings in the secular and religiously diverse context of Utrecht nuance the way the revitalization of rituals linked to religious traditions in secular societies are often pictured. Our understanding should not be guided by either a presumed predominance of confessional identity politics or an attack on this, although this is a pattern more common in other contexts. Apparently, both religious and secular actors can have other agendas that work with a noncompetitive conception of the religious and the secular (Spalová et al. 2024). This case study shows that it is important to make distinctions between the strategies of the various parties involved that can either promote or inhibit the successful performance of the holy play.

CONCLUSION

This approach to events on the boundaries of the religious and the secular integrates insights from performance studies, urban studies, and heritage studies through a practice-oriented sociology of religion. It moves beyond the concept of the postsecular as a concept that merely alerts to the sacred in the secular and distinguishes the role of religion within practices of sacralization. Though already rich in detail, the empirical material the present study is based on could be expanded with more

extensive research into the production, performance, and reception of the event. The ambition, however, has not been to report comprehensively on a particular event, but to provide a helpful template for further studies in this area.

This template departs from a view of religion as liquidizing, uses holy play as an analytical category, and locates the performance in the interaction between fields. It allows for the distinction between successful and unsuccessful events in practice and thereby escapes the mere reproduction of actors' intentions. This evaluation is not objective but rather intersubjective: it rests on several subjective interpretations, both of the researchers and of other observers. By closely presenting both observations and experiences I have strived for a maximum of transparency. My interpretation of performative success in the "standard" editions similar to the one of 2018 was confirmed both by the generally intense mode of participation and the written reports found in the media. Interpretations pointing in the direction of performative failure were absent. Viewers' responses to the virtual edition (2020) also confirmed the researcher's interpretation. The assessment of the exhibition edition (2021) as a performative failure was sustained by the observations and short interviews made by four students and a media report. Yet, refined ways of audience research, such as interviewing, video-recording, and content analysis of comments on social media, could enhance the objectivity of the findings.

In conclusion, a reflexive note on the role of science is in order. The genealogy of the Parade indicates an active role of scholars in the explicit attempt to create a performance with sacral qualities. Both earlier studies on this event and the present one contribute to the status of the Parade, its recognition as contemporary saint veneration, and perhaps even to the sacralization of the event.

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