Loyola University Chicago

From the SelectedWorks of Pamela K. Morris

Summer 2012

Branding the Devine: Albrech Dürer's Praying Hands and the Branding of Iconography

Pamela K. Morris, Loyola University Chicago
Katya Maslakowski

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/pamela_morris/6/
Branding the Divine: Albrech Dürer’s Praying Hands and the Branding of Iconography

Pamela K. Morris
Loyola University Chicago

Katya Maslakowski
University of Chicago

Abstract: In 1508, artist Albrech Dürer sketched a life-study of a pair of hands clasped in prayer. Over 500 years later, the Betende Hände can be found all over the United States in the form of knickknacks in private homes and civic statues, and online. The phenomenon is an interesting case study of popular religion, consumer culture, and the intersections of public and private worship. Using a blend of advertising and branding theory and iconographic theory, this paper proposes to illuminate the ways that the Praying Hands of Dürer became a lasting symbol of popular devotion across a wide range of media.

Keywords: Praying Hands, Metaphors, Advertising, Branding, Iconography, popular religion, United States

On the eve of the Reformation, in 1508, Albrech Dürer, a painter from Nürnberg, Germany, was commissioned by Jakob Heller to design the Altar of St. Thomas. On the right of the finished altar, Dürer painted an apostle with hands clasped in prayer. In order to execute this pose, he sketched a small figure study of his own hands in silver paint on blue paper (Wimmer 1999) (see Figure 1). This sketch, which was never intended to be publicly viewed, was first shown in Vienna in 1871 and achieved dramatic popular appeal. Thanks to new techniques in art reproduction, in 1896 the Dürers Betende Hände, as they were known, began their long life as public and private symbols of faith. In other words, this sketch became an icon (Bauer 1972, 48).

The Betende Hände, or Praying Hands, can now be found on candles, plates, guitar picks, funeral cards, lockets, flower planters, basins, place mats, automobile license plates, and water towers (see Figures 2–4). Why? What is it that makes this study by an artist that was never meant to be seen so popular even in the twenty-first century? More importantly, why does the proliferation of this image deserve comment?

The Betende Hände is an interesting case study of popular religion, consumer culture, and the intersections of public and private worship. Unlike iconography of saints, the Hände is not condemned by iconoclastic Protestant sensibilities. In fact, much of its proliferation has occurred in the heavily Protestant United States. It is this creation of an icon in American popular religion that this paper intends to explore.
Methodology

Popular culture and religion have never been discrete cultural phenomena. Despite the tendency of the academy at large to encourage distinct specializations, one can only really begin to understand the religious in everyday life if one takes a cross-discipline approach. This discursive approach to the study of religion certainly owes a great deal to Foucault’s concepts of discourse and power. Richard King provides a succinct summation of why one cannot view the religious as an isolated aspect of culture:

I wish to argue for an awareness of the mutual imbrication of religion, culture and power as categories. This is not to say that religion and culture can be reduced to a set of power relations but rather that religion and culture are the field in which power relations operate. Materialist and cultural analyses are not mutually exclusive, “either/or” explanations. Power is not mere material conditions without cultural trace since there is no power in the abstract—power, indeed, is constituted in particular cultural forms. Equally, cultural forms are embedded in a field of power relations. What is required, therefore, is an approach that avoids materialist reductionism (which denies culture) or culturalist reductionism (which denies power) with a renewed emphasis upon the mutual imbrication of the two. (King 1999, 12)

It is from this model of interdisciplinary technique that the project of this paper is derived. One of the most startling changes at the end of the nineteenth century was the formation of a distinct consumer culture. The factors that contributed to this new consumption-driven society, the technological advancements that revolutionized manufacturing, transportation, and communication have long been noted by historians of popular culture, but the influence on
the religious aspect of communal and individual lives and the intersection between religion and consumer culture is only just starting to be explored. As Jeffrey Mahan writes in his critical essay “Reflections on the Past and Future of the Study of Religion and Popular Culture,”

Though earlier religious communities were also formed by the culture of their day, the rapid acceleration of ways in which religion and popular culture interact in late modern and postmodern society demands particular attention. (2007, 50)

This attention has been given by a number of skilled theologians who have worked toward the definition of “popular religion,” which exists at this intersection of the modern and the theological. In God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture, editors Eric Mazur and Kate McCarthy draw distinct boundaries between the popular religious—“defined by its extraconstitutional status, its nonelite practitioners, its immediacy and informality, or the sheer numbers of people it draws, [which] still refers to behavior and ideas recognized by both participant and observer as religious, even if the practices are not condoned by the religious elites” (Mazur and McCarthy 2000, 2–3)—and popular culture, defined as the products and rituals that strike the actor and observer as secular though they may have religious undertones or allusions. This difference is seen as particularly poignant in a country like the United States because of the privileged nature of the religious in the public square.

This dichotomy between the profane and sacred is always imprecise even at its best, and the intersections between these categories are frequent and messy. In his theological analysis of the rituals of capitalism and their effect on modern Christian belief and practice, Vincent Miller draws attention to the interesting interaction not just between the religious and the secular but also between Christianity and consumer culture. Although his argument maintains a clear bias against the commodification of culture, which he considers as undermining modern religion, his understanding of the way that religion is actually changed by the growth of consumption will be helpful here:

As people were being trained to find fulfillment in consumption, they were also, in effect, being trained to bring habits and dispositions of the realm of consumption to more traditional sources of meaning, including religion. (Miller 2005, 88)
By viewing the practices of popular religion as an extension of the attitudes and behaviours of consumerism, avenues of inquiry open. If practitioners can be seen to consume products of religion such as the iconographic Betende Hände, could this icon then be viewed as acting psychologically similar to branding? This is the project of this paper, to use current branding theory and consumer response studies to help illuminate the work done by this popular Christian image in three specifically modern sectors: the public, the private, and the virtual.

Iconography
As art historian Roelof van Straten points out, “Iconography is derived from the Greek words, ikon and graphein, that is ‘image’ and ‘writing.’ Therefore, translated literally, iconography means ‘imagewriting’ or ‘image describing’” (van Straten 2004, 3). Thus, icons act as visual metaphors that stimulate the imagination and emotive responses in the religious practitioner. Theologically, iconography acts as an intercessory device between the penitent and the divine. In this way, icons are not quite ordinary objects but instead enjoy a privileged position without actually being considered holy in and of themselves (Howes 2006, 18–19). Even iconoclastic traditions, like mainstream American Protestant denominations, use religious imagery such as the Praying Hands as a way of connecting with faith. David Morgan in his work with Protestant iconography defines the use of icons thus:

Memory functions in 3 discrete ways in conservative Protestant uses of imagery. The first as we have seen, is to articulate the sacred in temporal rather than spatial terms. A second role of images is to help store information in the memory and apply that information to its interpretations of the bible. Finally images have helped many Christians assemble from memory their sense of who they are and to tell this story to others. (D. Morgan 1998, 183)

In other words, American Protestants use icons as text, and specifically as metaphorical ways to tell themselves and others about the things that define them.

As metaphors for the divine, icons join their linguistic cousins in their function as a “master trope” of human cognitive expression that create emotive and complex image connections between terms (Nelson and Hitchon 1999, 356), along with metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Metaphors are ubiquitous in language and it is through them that we are able to understand our world and express ourselves. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) in their seminal book, Metaphors We Live By, describe metaphors as giving a constellation of meaning to abstract concepts.

Communication requires that we constantly assemble comparisons and similarities or, in a word, use metaphors. Metaphors are so pervasive that they are the foundation of language—we can not think, say, or do anything without them (Leary 1995, 267–98). Metaphors provide a framework for organizing information about the world and allow us to make sense of our experiences. This categorization and schema development become part of our conceptual system. It is from this perspective that American philosopher Stephen Pepper (1942) proposed the idea of root metaphor (Siltanen 1981, 68). By creating relevant categories for people to use to organize their beliefs and encounters, root metaphors determine our worldview (Siltanen 1981, 68). Metaphors, and iconography as a specific application of this principle, help us understand the world by making sense of our experiences and feelings, enabling us to make decisions, act appropriately, and function in life.

By their very nature, metaphors require imagination (Nelson and Hitchon 1999). Connecting two seemingly dissimilar things produces new knowledge as well as creates emotions (Sopory and Dillard 2002, 382). Metaphors may also appeal to our senses, which can evoke
dialogue (Siltanen 1981, 69). Sopory and Dillard reasoned that the dramatic effect of metaphorical language leads to greater attention to the message, increases comprehension, and enhances the ability to change opinions or win over arguments (2002, 414). Due to their convincing powers, metaphors are key in communication, especially when addressing audiences outside of our content framework. In this manner, metaphors are particularly effective tools to be employed in speeches (Bowers and Osborn 1966, 147–55) and advertising.²

Branding

The concept of iconography functioning in a similar way as branding is not a new one, having been highlighted both in studies of visual culture and in studies of theology a number of times (Finkelstein 2007, 152). By viewing branding techniques as attempting to do for consumer products what iconography does for the religious, we are able to look to studies that address consumer response to brand images to better understand how popular religious iconography is used.

Despite the ubiquitous presence of branding in the everyday life of a modern individual, there is no clear consensus on the definition of the concept. An early use of branding in marketing comes from a 1957 Harvard Business Review article by Joseph Newman entitled “New Insight, New Progress, for Marketing.” He defined a brand “as a composite image of everything people associate with it” (101). In his view, impressions for how a prospective buyer feels about a brand came from several dimensions, including functional, economic, social, and psychological. A few years later, Herta Herzog, a pioneer in media research, specifically radio, also used the term. She described branding as the “sum total of impressions the consumer receives from many sources” (1963, 82). She defined branding as the combined effect of actual experience, hearsay, packaging, name, company, people seen using the brand, and advertising, including its specific characteristics of tone, format, and vehicle. She was one of the first to give credit to media’s influence on the perceptions people hold of brands. David Aaker, as an author of many texts on the subject, is a current leading expert on branding.³ Aaker defined a brand as having a distinguishing name and/or symbol, such as a logo, trademark, and/or package design, intended to identify and differentiate the product or service from the competitors (1991, 7).

While these descriptions of branding are very general, others have emphasized the human qualities associated with products and brands through such terms as *brand personality* (Aaker 1997, 347–56), *personality image* (Sirgy 1985, 195–206), and *brand character* (Hendon and Williams 1985, 65–75). Practitioners use these concepts to distinguish their brand from others in the same product category. It is also how people have learned to satisfy human needs, create identity, and conceptualize a sense of self through purchases, brands, and commercialization. Today’s brands have been shown to be so interrelated to how people define their world that Marc Gobé (2001) champions the concept of emotional branding. He argues that a product or service kindles an emotional dialogue with the consumer. For Gobé, branding is about bonding with people (2001, 17). Ultimately, brands are so integrated into our everyday lives and we hold them so dear that they “provide humanity with the endowments it needs to survive,” according to Danesi (2006, 35).

Branding Images and Iconography

One of the most important images in branding is, of course, the ubiquitous logo. From the logo, the consumer is expected to call forth an entire narrative of data, personal, social, and cultural, that help define his or her perception of a brand. Logo, or logogram, comes from the
Greek logos, which has an entire host of meanings including word, language, statement, story, saying, narrative, history, and even expectation (Liddell and Scott 1889). By looking at logos, and the brands they recall, as this complicated and entirely mental process of association, we can see the direct connection with the concept of iconography.

In their 2007 study on consumer response to advertising images, researchers Linda Scott and Patrick Vargas postulate that, unlike many previous studies that assumed that branding images provided viewers with only sensory data, consumers were actually “reading” the pictures as though they were textual data:

Once we think of logos as familiar components in a stream of complex communication, we can explain other research findings. Nordhielm, for instance, set out to study repetition effects (2002). . . . Nordhielm’s findings supported the wisdom of common practice: ads are varied, sometimes frequently, but slogans and logos tend to remain the same, year after year. The combination of new and familiar coordinates mitigates the effects of repetition. Thus, logos and slogans can become heavy with the meaning that years of advertising adds to them, while not becoming boring themselves. Each appearance “free plays” against all previous significations on behalf of the brand (Scott 1992). As symbols standing for complex ideas, familiar logos are not comparable to raw sensory experience. We offer that Pimentel and Heckler (2002; also Janiszewski and Meyvis 2001) were actually studying a specific form often contained by written language: the ideograph, a conventional mark that, through layered association in use, is able to signify a complex constellation of meaning. (Scott and Vargas 2007, 341–56)

It is not difficult to see the use of this kind of data in the study of iconography. The “weight of meaning” provided by repeat usage of similar imagery in different contexts is strikingly similar to the constellation of myth, ritual, and context with which icons are imbued.

The Proliferation of Hands
In 2008, the city of Nürnberg, Germany, hosted a 500-year celebration of Dürers Betende Hände. Presented at the exhibit were thousands of reproductions of the original print, ceramic wall art, tasteful funeral urns, books covers, samplers, and candles (see Figure 5). Also present were less expected versions of the famous icon: a pewter toilet roll dispenser, a slightly sinister bright red gnome with hands clasped, and a Mickey Mouse T-shirt featuring the famous cartoon hands in a moment of prayer (see Figures 6–8). The tag line used to advertise this eclectic collection was, in essence, the question of consumerism or religious icon: “Kitsch oder Kunst?” (Bilder-Downloads 2008). Instead of asking if this icon falls into the false dichotomy of religion or pop culture, this paper asks what the Betende Hände is doing as both an icon of faith and as an image bought and sold in a consumer market.

Theological Function
The popularity of icons such as the Hände has roots in the Protestant Reformation. Theologians such as Jeffery Mahan have come to view the Reformation as inherently the struggle of a faith community faced with new communication technology:

Cheap printing created widespread literacy, which in turn heightened the authority of the individual reader, and a new religious movement responded to those changes. Similarly, the success of the Weseyan movement in America, and of the Great Awakening, can be understood in part as the emergence of forms of religion shaped by the situation and sensibilities of frontier working people. (Mahan 2007, 48)
In the process of privileging text, iconography became suspected of inciting the common practitioner to not prokynesis veneration but latreia adoration (Howes 2006, 18–19). The classical intercessory functions of the saints, and their icons, became mere idolatry. The Word, as embodied in the Bible, was to function as the ultimate channel of God’s grace.

What was lacking in this formation was the emotive quality inherent in the metaphorical icon. As repository of theological memory, the Bible operates on a higher intellectual plane. It
has discrete meaning. Instead, the sacred visual becomes imbued with textual meaning far afield from the original intent of the artist. Just as a brand represents far more than the sensory data of colour and shape, an icon is more than just a representation of a religious figure or in this case, gesture. Pieces of social memory, personal reflection, and institutional history create the complicated language of an image (D. Morgan 2005, 55).

Visual practice refers to the ways individuals interact with this religious imagery. It is these visual practices that provide much of the meaning of icons. David Morgan’s seminal work on visual piety defines the symbolic aims of this interaction:

What do religious images and visual practice do? They accomplish any of the following aims for those who cherish and use them:

- order space and time
- imagine community
- communicate with the divine or transcendent
- embody forms of communion with the divine
- collaborate with other forms of representation
- influence thought and behavior by persuasion or magic
- displace rival images and ideologies (D. Morgan 2005, 55)

In this context, the Betende Hände engages the viewer in several ways, and in several different contexts. The proliferation of these reproductions of the Hände allows us to analyze these images as they act in three distinct spheres—private space, public or civic space, and virtual space.

Economic Function
In addition the more obvious theological implications of this phenomena, there is a purely economic consideration. What happens to the icon when one sells it? What happens when it is sold en masse? Does it obey market rules or is there a discrete behaviour pattern that guides purchases of faith?

Advertising, branding, and marketing have become so embedded in the visual space of modernity that their impact on how we think and what we think is far greater than we realize when negotiating our world. Joanna Finkelstein, in her work on visual culture and the formation of identity has posited, “The easily recognized logo or soup can function in much the same way as, say, the religious icon. Representational and figurative art do not capture reality but replace it” (2007, 152).

This fetishization of secular logos and products that occurs in our everyday interaction with the world suggests that the religious commodity not only functions as an icon but also becomes nearly subliminal in its ubiquity. This, then, influences consumers to create their worldview with the embedded textual messages of these icons functioning as an automatic backdrop (D. Morgan 1998, 207).

The icons themselves also undergo market-influenced transformations (D. Morgan 1998, 207). Much like the brands analyzed by the Nordhielm repetition-effects study (Scott and Vargas 2007, 343), the commodified religious icon undergoes stylistic transformations that revitalize the “product” while keeping the traditional forms of the brand. The effect of the “new and familiar coordinates” allows the icon to become imbued with cultural meaning, while still resonating with the fast pace of modernity.
Betende Hände become Praying Hands

When, in 1896, the first reproduction of Dürers Betende Hände was manufactured, the timing was hardly arbitrary. The late Victorian period saw the development of an increasingly secular Europe, yet the fact remains that it was during this time that there was a significant increase in the reproduction and purchase of religious art. While this might be explained by the advances in design techniques and other revolutionary manufacturing processes during this half-century, what is interesting for our study is that “the overwhelming proportion of those who purchased religious art for themselves at this time, thereby contributing to the sales boom... were religious Nonconformists of one hue or another” (Howes 2006, 47).

What functions could this art serve Protestant dissenters? The answer to that is complex and multidimensional, engaging the political identity of the nation states where this art was purchased. For the United States, the practice of faith and its interaction with the public-national narrative gives us a partial suggestion of why reproductions of Christian art suddenly flooded the primarily iconoclastic culture.

When the British first colonized the “New World,” faith leader Reverend John Winthrop envisioned it as a New Israel, the new territory of the faithful. In his famous speech, given on the ship as it departed the old world that the Puritans knew, Winthrop spoke of making the colonies a “city on the hill,” to shine as an example to fallen Christendom (E. Morgan 2003). Even when the colony became the new country of the United States, the community continued to be overwhelmingly Protestant.

In 1845, the Great Famine of Ireland created an influx of primarily Catholic immigrants to the United States, altering the religious landscape of the young country. Suddenly the separation of church and state was a contested issue. At the same time, education reformers such as Horace Mann in Massachusetts and Henry Barnes in Connecticut were striving to create statewide school systems (Church and Sedlak 1976). The result was that the Bible, which had been a primary part of the educational system across the country, was removed from the classroom. Similar restrictions on biblical presence occurred in civic spheres. Protestant communities began to express concern that the sacred was slipping out of the national mythology with this disestablishment of religion. According to David Morgan’s look at religious visual culture in the United States, many Protestants began to turn to “mass-produced images to compensate... either by enhancing voluntary campaigns to disseminate Protestant influence, or by appealing to a unifying symbol to gather Christians” (2005, 226). Dürer’s Praying Hands, now in its American context as Dürrer’s Praying Hands, was perfectly suited to this role. The emergence and dominance of Praying Hands in private, public, and, lately, virtual space provides a unique look at how branded iconography operates across these different spheres of influence.

Private Hands

Although Protestant churches in the United States reveal some concession to visual piety, the most common location for iconography for Protestants is the home (D. Morgan 1998, 153). The functions of private devotional artefacts can be outlined using Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s articulation of how objects can help create identity, as used by David Morgan in his study of popular religious images. These images accomplish three primary tasks for consumers: self-selected identity marking, memory/world view shaping and creation, and the rituals of relationships (D. Morgan 1998, 18).

The first, and likely the most overtly acknowledged, task of a private religious icon is to announce a self-reflective choice of identity, usually communal as well as personal. In this case, the Praying Hands tends to be used as a profession of a Christian faith, although the
image can be non-denominational, or even non-Christian as in the case of certain individuals who profess a general spirituality but no defined religious tradition.

Dürer’s Praying Hands was remarkably suited to this task. Not only does it avoid the specific prohibition against iconography, but it also connects with an individual on a personal level. By invoking the private practice of prayer, one that is both personal in action but communally universal, the Hands become a symbol of humility at the same time expressing the identity of the owner (see Figure 9).

This is similar to the way that branded secular consumer goods can be displayed to create an identity associated with the cultural patterns of the products defined by the brand. One can display a Harley-Davidson branded knickknack, which does as much toward the creation of identity as the more interactive religious icon. The icon says more than “Christian” just as the Harley-Davidson logo says more than “motorcycle” (see Figure 10). The textual depth of the brand is in constant play, and each observer brings his or her own personal associations, as well as those held by different communities, to the reading. This becomes tricky when you have possible “mis-readings” of these artefacts. For instance, to keep to the Harley Davidson comparison, some individuals may associate this logo with expensive and well-made touring motorcycles, others may think of the Hell’s Angels, and even more may think of the safety issues associated with motorcycle riding. All of these elements are latent in the brand, making it read much like a text.

In this way, icons in the home signal a number of interrelated associations to viewers. In his investigation of the uses of icons in the typical New York home, David Morgan found that some Catholics were drawn to more secularized or Protestant-friendly imagery, such as Sallman’s Head of Christ (see Figure 11). This is of interest here, because it suggests that although the choice to display icons in the home is one of personal identity construction, there is another layer involved. The actual choice of what religious imagery to display is a complex, interrelated process of defining oneself in relation to one’s own faith community as well as to the broader community of neighbours. Further complicating the situation, Morgan found that some Protestants actually purposely used their home iconography to advertise their faith to non-Christian visitors, in a passive act of evangelism (D. Morgan 1998, 153).

In addition to building the blocks of identity, iconography can help shape the daily practice of faith through the centring of the religious narrative. Iconography, as the visual embodiment
of mythology, becomes the apex of ritualized remembering. The iconographic ritual practices suggested by the Praying Hands artefacts are specific to the medium of reproduction. The most natural is, of course, a print of the original, or a modern revisioning of this image. These hang on walls, according to Morgan often in the “family room,” where the household gathers to spend communal time together, and where guests are entertained (D. Morgan 1998, 153). This is a location similar to where one would expect to find some of the larger statuary versions. The smaller knickknacks are harder to situate in the home without field work, but we can surmise that these items could be placed on nightstands, desks, or bureaus as personal reminders of devotion, and a less public statement of faith.

The Praying Hands can also be found as functional art, as salt shakers, nightlights (see Figures 12 and 13), or the previously mentioned toilet roll dispensers (see Figure 6). Here,
although we can imagine the ritual purpose of these items, further study would be required to analyze their theological implications. Finally, the images, which are often given as gifts ritually marking important life events such as graduations or faith community milestones, can reflect a person’s connection with others of his or her community, and define these connections in relation to the world at large through social ritual.

Civic Hands
Private uses of the Praying Hands make sense under the premise of religious freedom in the United States, but in an ostensibly secular society, the existence of public versions of Dürer’s Praying Hands may seem more difficult to explain. However, the rise of secularism in the nineteenth century, as well as the increase in a nationalism tied directly to mythology and land in the West, provides a way of considering how this Christian image became a civic icon.

One of the most startlingly large versions of civic Hands can be found in King Jack Park in Webb City, Missouri. The thirty-two-foot-tall 100-ton Praying Hands has become a powerful city symbol and is even displayed at top centre on the city’s official Web site (Webb City n.d.) (See Figure 14 and Figure 15). The artist of this concrete and steel monument, Jack Dawson, began the project in 1972, when he was only twenty.

Dawson’s primary artistic goal “has been to spread the message of Jesus Christ through his work” (Dawson n.d.), which from a quick survey of his gallery, is accomplished through the threading together of the Christian and American patriotism (see Figure 16 and Figure 17). The Webb City Hands is clearly part of this greater project, and is also directly tied to civic religion through the interwoven mythology of Christianity and nationalism. The statue is found surrounded by American flags and is the site of city- and nation-wide rituals including the National Day of Prayer (Webb City n.d.).

The Web site for the monument contextualizes the imagery of Praying Hands flanked by flags with three specifically chosen quotes. The first is a verse from Jeremiah 33:3: “Call unto me and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things which thou knowest not” (Webb City n.d.). This is both a direct appeal to viewers of this icon, inciting them to pray, as well as an allusion to the privileged position of Christianity in the American context. The way for man to speak to God is through prayer, and the act of prayer is made visible by the Praying Hands monument. In this context, the image of Praying Hands has dived deep into fundamentalist American culture. The image fills a visual need for a religious landscape that is
saturated with Word, but is almost barren of figurative imagery. Yet it is the figurative image that carries the most “direct answer.” And to paraphrase Trevor Pateman, it is the image that gives rise to “implications” as visual facts, and it does so because the viewer seeks to account for them (this may or may not be consciously done by the viewer) in a way consistent with the assumption that the visual’s ideal is being fulfilled (Pateman 1980, 615).

The other quotes are attributed to two major national demigods, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln: “And where as it is the duty of all nations, as well of men, to owe their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sin and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon” (Webb City, n.d.), from Lincoln, and from Washington, “It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible” (Webb City, n.d.). Each of these quotes ties the American civic project with supplication or subordination to the divine.

**Virtual Hands**

One of the most ubiquitous spaces in our modern lives is not actually a space in the traditional sense. The Internet is more a part of our culture now than it was even five to ten years ago (Morales n.d.) and, as such, has changed how people view the world, and religion, in drastic ways. In this virtual world, you can give confession via instant messaging, you can download guided bible study videos, or you can attend church group meetings well outside of your physical proximity. The Internet has altered our sense of community, and our sense of what it means to connect with one another.

Given that the results of this increased use of the Internet for social interaction are still in the process of being fully understood, we must be careful not to assume that the social impulses and reactions to this iconographic stimuli are necessarily the same as in the physical world. However, as branding and thus iconography is primarily a mental process, we can start to surmise some of the role played by religious images in this context.
As religious images in the home, or even in the civic space, work to create symbolic boundaries between the sacred and the profane, one would expect that this process would continue within the virtual world. Yet boundaries in an infinite and indefinable space are hard to establish. Mythology, which has long been articulated by scholars as a means of creating metaphysical boundaries (Eliade 1957), serves to create these markers of social space within virtual space. This tendency to use myth has continued with the use of the Praying Hands on numerous Web sites.

One of the stories with which the Hands of Dürer have been associated can be found on many Web sites, including that of Phylameana lila Desy, a clairvoyant, intuitive counsellor and holistic healer living in Burlington, Iowa, who is unreliably credited as the author. The story, in abridged format is as follows:

Back in the fifteenth century, in a tiny village near Nuremberg, lived a family with eighteen children . . . Two of Albrecht Dürer the Elder’s children had a dream. They both wanted to pursue their talent for art, but they knew full well that their father would never be financially able to send either of them to Nuremberg to study at the Academy . . .

The two boys finally worked out a pact. They would toss a coin. The loser would go down into the nearby mines and, with his earnings, support his brother while he attended the academy. Then, when that brother who won the toss completed his studies, in four years, he would support the other brother at the academy, either with sales of his artwork or, if necessary, also by laboring in the mines.

Albrecht Dürer won the toss and went off to Nuremberg. Albert went down into the dangerous mines and, for the next four years, financed his brother, whose work at the academy was almost an immediate sensation. . . . By the time he graduated, he was beginning to earn considerable fees for his commissioned works.

When the young artist returned to his village, the Dürer family held a festive dinner on their lawn to celebrate Albrecht's triumphant homecoming. After a long and memorable meal, punctuated with music and laughter, Albrecht rose from his honored position at the head of the table to drink a toast to his beloved brother for the years of sacrifice that had enabled Albrecht to fulfill his ambition. His closing words were, “And now, Albert, blessed brother of mine, now it is your turn. Now you can go to Nuremberg to pursue your dream, and I will take care of you.”

All heads turned in eager expectation to the far end of the table where Albert sat, tears streaming down his pale face, shaking his lowered head from side to side while he sobbed and repeated, over and over, “No . . . no . . . no . . . no.” . . . “No, brother. I cannot go to Nuremberg. It is too late for me. Look . . . look what four years in the mines have done to my hands! The bones in every finger have been smashed at least once, and lately I have been suffering from arthritis so badly in my right hand that I cannot even hold a glass to return your toast . . . No, brother . . . for me it is too late.” (Desy n.d.)

Although this sad, over-romantic tale has been repeated many times on the Internet and before that in numerous publications since at least the 1950s, there is no truth to it. The hands are not those of a miner; they do not reflect the abuse that would be present in a miner’s hands. In fact, they are likely to be Dürer’s own hands (Bauer 1972, 48).

The frequency of this tale on the Internet illuminates and underpins the enormous popularity this mythos holds. The Hands, once released of its historic context and function, became strictly visual in a way, unreal—that is, it could take on other meanings. And so the Hands
became the visual carriers of emotions, a visual gesture of piety, an iconic symbol of devotion and belief. In a phrase, a brand image that fits most any context calling for prayer.

**Conclusion**

Just like a successful brand or metaphor, the Praying Hands fuelled and served a multitude of functions. Dürer’s Praying Hands morphed from a study for a painting to one of the most popular sentimental images in American popular culture—a metaphor for spirituality, prayer, and salvation in the same way brands have enhanced, consciously or unconsciously, the desire for products and services.

Brands help us understand the world, from which jeans to wear, what laundry detergent to use, and which chips to eat, to how we understand love, anger, fear, beauty, and all of our emotions, feelings, and everyday encounters. Metaphors become part of our conceptual system to provide a framework to fashion an identity, make decisions, and function in life.

As an emotional and imaginative symbol, Praying Hands is a powerful idea. Praying Hands, made in different materials, colours, and sizes, and found in private homes, civic spaces, and on Web pages, reinforces the same spiritual story. Similarly, branding creates abstract concepts through integrated marketing communication efforts. That is, advertising is placed in numerous media vehicles and promotions are directed in assorted marketing channels, such as special events, product placement, and social media. Together, the images, colours, narratives, music, jingles, contexts, and personalities lead to a gestalt of commercial spirituality.

We are inundated with images, symbols, and representations—all aggressively offering more information. At the same time, these images confuse and clarify the truth as we struggle to find meaning. Praying Hands, liked brands, are there to provide us an individual experience and give us a framework for understanding the world we live in.

**Acknowledgement**

The authors gratefully thank Rolf Achilles for making the first draft of this paper possible.

**Notes**


References


