The potential of personality culture in religious art

Nataly Zatsepina | Yaroslava Bondarchuk | Mariana Studnytska | Ivan Tsykhuliak | Stepan Pisyo

Abstract Religious art, a profound expression of human spirituality and ideals, shapes distinctive aesthetic dimensions through the historical interplay between religion and artists. As one of humanity’s oldest and most pervasive forms of spiritual consciousness and world understanding, religion plays a pivotal role in shaping the spiritual realm of individuals. This article delves into the dual function of religious art: it serves religious worship while preserving aesthetic value. The significance of this issue is underscored by the attention it has garnered from contemporary national and international researchers. Their interest stems from the realization that the formation of worldviews and cultural paradigms, which will guide humanity’s future humanitarian progress, hinges on the interaction between humans and culture. This interaction leads to the emergence of a new concept of humans as the anthropological ideal of the 21st century. The article substantiates this model interpretation of personality in religious art. The potential of personal culture in sacred art is assessed using research findings from philosophy, aesthetics, cultural studies, psychology, and art history. The article highlights the artistic and stylistic features of icons depicting holy warriors from the late 14th and early 15th centuries, noting their psycho-emotional impact on individuals. The study seeks to trace spiritual development across history and culture, underscoring the central role of religious art in molding individuals’ moral values over time. The author demonstrates that the role of religious art in the modern era is on the rise.

Keywords: icon painting, morality, religious values, christian axiology, religious ethics, secularization processes

1. Introduction

Religion and art are spiritual phenomena in which the emotional perception of objects plays a crucial role. In recent years, there has been a noticeable trend toward the desacralization of everyday life and the separation of religious and state life. On the other hand, the importance of religious self-identification and the cultural factors of religion have become significant, especially in the modification of Europe’s ideological paradigms. Since religion reflects societal consciousness and worldview, it is one of the oldest and most widespread domains of human spiritual life and activity. Religious culture within the system of spiritual culture is the most influential and meaningful sphere, encompassing virtually all aspects of human life. Each religious depiction has unique content. Within a person’s consciousness, religious awareness is solidified through emotions. The interpretation of the concept of personality is fundamental in religious art and, at the same time, in all fields of anthropology. However, these interpretations vary greatly and constantly contradict each other. With the development of contemporary Ukrainian culture, there has been a noticeable return to its traditional foundations, including religious and spiritual aspects. Today, questions about the content and function of religious art, as well as the issue of the spiritual influence of personality, are gaining new relevance.

This study aims to reveal and analyze the vital role of personality culture potential in religious art. This study seeks to show that the interaction between people and culture determines the formation of worldviews and cultural paradigms.

The potential of personal culture in religious art is the subject of scientific research by both Ukrainian and foreign scholars. Aspects of the spiritual and cultural significance of creativity and the aesthetic and moral foundations of humanity were revealed by Ball (2011), Bekh (2012), Bodak (2004), Kireeva and Kireeva (2014), Medintsev (2011), Ovcharuk (2015; 2019), and Yakunina (2021).

Thus, this study aims to reveal and analyze the vital role of the cultural potential of individuals in religious art. This study seeks to show that the interaction of man and culture determines the formation of worldviews and cultural paradigms.

In their work, Ball and Medintsev (2011) examine the notion of personality as an individual mode of operation of culture and as an integrative quality of an individual. Their work delves into how personality interacts with cultural factors. Bodak (2004), in turn, discusses the role of religion in shaping an individual’s cultural identity. This article is likely to consider how
religious beliefs influence various aspects of personality and behavior. The work of Yakunina (2021), which focuses on the meaning and purpose of religious art, is also notable. This source is likely to provide insight into the significance of religious art in cultural and spiritual contexts. Together, these sources offer perspectives on the interplay between the individual, culture, and religion, shedding light on how individuals are shaped by and contribute to their cultural and spiritual environments.

2. Methods

The author employed generally accepted methods of cognition—general scientific and special scientific methods. The general philosophical method of cognition was used at all stages of the cognitive process. The general scientific dialectical method has allowed a comprehensive study of the essence of personality potential at different stages of societal development and an analysis of the main issues that have arisen at present. The analysis method was used to reveal the typical features and to study some peculiarities of the holy warrior image in Ukrainian icons with life scenes. At present, an essential component of the art historical analysis of the iconography of St. George in Ukrainian art is the study of the influence of the St. George cult on the formation of different variants of the saint's images since its inception. This philosophical and logical method allows us to consider religious art as an object of philosophical knowledge and a sociospiritual phenomenon of society that reveals spiritual values, religious symbols, and ideas.

3. Results and discussion

Religion comprehensively and thoroughly reveals reality, unlike more specific forms of societal consciousness such as morality, politics, and law. It functions as a worldview, namely, as a system for understanding the world and human interactions within it, as well as the norms of their everyday behavior. Religion has always found and continues to find answers to eternal problems of the human inner state and to hidden and personal aspects of people’s lives. When studying the significance of a personality’s spiritual culture, it is necessary to highlight its potential concerning societal development. In this context, a high level of spiritual elevation is always accompanied by personal growth and refinement.

Let us explore the concept of religious culture. Religious culture is a distinct part of human culture that explains a person and elucidates relationships and activities based on the religious principles of Christian doctrine. Essentially, religious culture is based on the ability to perceive the world as a unity through faith, without rational proof or validation through personal experience. At the same time, it is important to remember that religious culture, like any other, is divided into spiritual (prayers, rituals, systems of values, customs, etc.) and material elements (art, institutions, literature, etc.), yet it is practically impossible to entirely separate (Kryshmarel, 2017). Furthermore, religious art is so contentious that its investigation remains a subject of scholarly inquiry for domestic and international researchers. Moreover, to this day, more questions than answers have been raised.

The priority of research on human spiritual culture is its consideration at the personal level. The spiritual world of an individual intertwines with the manifestation of human creative nature and is simultaneously directed toward unlimited and eternal values. The uniqueness of religion lies in the fact that it is a fantastic form of reality reflection. However, this phenomenon also exists in science and art. Throughout historical development, religion and art interacted interwovenly and merged, giving rise to unique phenomena in cultural history.

Over the centuries, analyzing historiography, there have been enough cases of miraculous power imbued with religious art. The artistic warehouse of the Christian religious cult as a carrier of sacred meanings in the process of temple activities transforms the static format of divine services into a figurative and dynamic process. The suggestive influence of religious art is based not only on the system of dogmas of faith but also on the inner-person experiences of a person and his or her emotions in the process of aesthetically mastering the world.

In cultural studies, a human is presented as a subject, creator, and product of culture, considering theoretical and practical results from various fields of scientific inquiry, namely:

- philosophy and philosophical anthropology;
- aesthetics;
- ethnology;
- cultural anthropology;
- ethno-psychology;
- art history.

Religious artworks, which have artistic and aesthetic value, allow for the revelation and demonstration of significant achievements of humanity. As a result, “A person as a subject of sociohistorical activity, a creator and simultaneously a product of culture, emerges as the object of cultural research” (Ovcharuk, 2015).

Art can replicate various cultural situations and convey different nuances of people’s emotional states. It can depict both "feelings of dependence and subordination" born from religious experience and the feeling of triumph arising from the sensation of dominance over the world. Pointing out a range of existing approaches to the study of personality in modern
science, G. O. Ball asserts: "Just as the human body not only functions in the natural environment but is also a part of nature. Similarly, a person as a carrier of personality not only exists in a cultural environment but can also be regarded as a component of culture" (Ball & Medintsev, 2011).

Spiritual culture, in its essence, demonstrates the motivation and defining results of activity, as well as a significant impact on personality development. All components of culture—art, law, morality, customs, and traditions—originate from religion. Art undergoes various stages of its formation, considering historical conditions, and is a substantial form of reality reflection. According to its content, religious representation often holds a unique and exceptional character. The field of icons or frescoes is often perceived as subtext or teaching.

The Church, as the custodian of religious art, the custodian of ethical strength, spiritual substance and unity of the people, has been the vanguard of the practical implementation of significant artistic currents and stylistic influences throughout the centuries. At the same time, the interaction of the Church and the world of culture was not always simple cooperation and mutual enrichment. Preaching the eternal truth of Christ to people living in changing historical circumstances, the Church realizes this through the mediation of actual cultural forms that are characteristic of the time, nation and various social groups. The verbal and figurative language of the gospel and its methods and means naturally change with the progress of history. At the same time, the changing moods of the world are not a reason to level the heritage of past centuries worthy of imitation and to forget the Church Tradition.

As an element of the religious sphere, culture shapes and reinforces the social component of the individual, acting as an intermediary and guide for achieving complete self-awareness and embarking on transformation and transition to a higher level. At the same time, the motivational and persuasive foundations of activities aimed at the spiritual development of people and society reveal the significance and role of spiritual culture. Religious creativity reflects creative products such as information captured in poetry and music, architecture, painting, and calls for dialog (Byrkovych et al., 2023). The artist's imagination is the main feature of human creative thinking, enabling the transformation of the world of objects and human attitudes through figurative representation. The potential of personality in religious art lies in the fact that a person, as a cultural subject, creates and illustrates their research emerging within their cultural space and is also an active participant in the creation of multiple cultures.

Spiritual culture exhibits the following aspects:

- Historical conditioning;
- Maximum freedom of creativity for people;
- Common human values;
- National characteristics.

These properties are inherent to all phenomena of spiritual culture and, of course, to religion, which is also created by human society and serves people.

The potential of human culture in religious art reveals the integrity of individuals' existence, spirituality, and intellectual development under the influence of life in society. It serves as the basis for the unity of humanity and simultaneously serves as a source of its diversity. Presenting the phenomenon of religious creativity using conventional concepts and categories is impossible because it is impossible to trace and describe the process of perceiving a product and the result of an individual's religious creativity in a unified manner. Religious consciousness, along with creative activity, unlike a person's everyday life, normalizes their spiritual state. In contrast to Byzantine iconography, the peculiarity of the Ancient Rus icon is that the images—symbols—draw more emotional and joyful perceptions of the universe.

As noted by Ovcharuk, "Thus, a person as a subject of culture, a social subject, an individual, a personality, an individuality, whose context of realization is sociocultural activity, emerges as an object of culturological cognition in its classical and postmodern approaches based on the integration of achievements from various fields of sociohumanitarian knowledge, namely:

- philosophy and philosophical anthropology;
- history;
- sociology;
- cultural and social anthropology;
- ethnology;
- psychology;
- art studies, etc." (Ovcharuk, 2019).

Art can model various cultural situations and convey different nuances of emotional states. It operates through the method of figurative mastery of reality, revealing individuals' inner states and relationships with the environment, which is a result of the emergence of new forms.
One of the main expressions of material religious culture is art objects. An example of this is icon painting, where the icon serves as an object of worship and devotion in the Christian religion. Icon painters note that the language of icons is highly complex. As a result, people have long perceived the Christian faith through signs and artistic symbols.

A significant event and catalyst for the development of personal culture in religious art was the establishment of Christianity in the Kyivan Rus by Prince Volodymyr in 988. Christianization strengthened the state’s influence on the international stage and positively changed people’s worldviews. This influenced the development of domestic culture for subsequent generations.

Fine Orthodox art recognizes the Sophianic destiny of personality and calls upon it to realize the world’s wisdom and transform a person’s inner world. The acquired wisdom acquires a reflective character. It not only addresses the external world but also, through it, reaches the internal world, aiming at understanding the meaning of life. In Orthodoxy, there are artistic means to embody spiritual experience in perfect examples of fine art.

The main feature of a Ukrainian icon is its expressiveness and vibrancy. Due to historical events, a cult of holy warriors was established. The most honored were St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki, St. George, St. Theodore Stratilates, Eustathius Placidas, and Archangel Michael. They protected the Christian faith and became a national ideal of courage and readiness for defense, always striving for the triumph of good over evil.

As an example of personality in religious art, let us consider the images embodied in Ukrainian icons, depicting holy warriors with scenes from their lives and actions from the second half of the XIV to the beginning of the XVI century. Due to the prevailing historical conditions in Ukrainian territories during that period, the idea of defense and protection of the native land and state was significantly emphasized. It was also reflected in the works of artists. The study of such icons indicates the existence of various methods and principles for forming cycles of life. Moskal notes that “The images of Demetrius of Thessaloniki, Boris and Gleb, Archangel Michael, and St. George with scenes from their lives constitute the most numerous groups of monuments in Ukrainian icon painting of the late Middle Ages depicting holy warriors” (Moskal, 2019).

The history of life of Ukrainian icons is an artistic phenomenon that is part of the creative heritage of people. They influenced the formation of moral principles and the way of life for many people, most of whom were believers. N. Kolpakova identifies the typical features of the monuments of the late XIV-mid-XV centuries: “However, new forms of stylistic changes appear, manifested in the significance of lines, drawings, and thoughtful compositional solutions. The dynamism inherent in this style introduces movement into the composition, replacing the static and symmetry. In icons of this time, we observe the influence of the Paleologan revival” (Kolpakova, 2015).

The axiology of spiritual art is nurtured by the spiritual heritage of Eastern Christianity. It is enough to pay attention to the iconographic palette of church property. Due to the impeccable drawing, the perfect compositional system, and the originality of the idea, the iconographic palette is positioned as the embodiment of the expressive purity of the artistic style. In religious images, the ratio of chiaroscuro play, shape, size, color, play of lines and spots, texture and flatness synnergize. The paintings are distinguished by a special conventionality, enhanced volume, expressive silhouettes and exquisite color relations, which are characteristic of the spiritual heritage of Eastern Christianity.

The study of icons depicting the life of holy warriors from the late XIV century to the beginning of the XVI century confirms the existence of various methods and principles for forming life cycles. Through icons portraying saints, a believing person attains enlightenment and peace. Ukrainian icon painters were acquainted with and utilized all the ancient models of arranging life cycles characteristic of the Byzantine, Italian, and Romanesque icons.

Among the most famous monuments of late medieval iconography depicting holy warriors are stories from the life of St. Archangel Michael. In the Bible, Archangel Michael is portrayed as the supreme commander of God’s army. He is an Archistrategos who opposes the forces of evil and protects the Christian faith from all that is malevolent. The image of Archangel Michael is mentioned in the text of the New Testament. In the Book of Revelation, he emerges as the commander-in-chief in the war against the devil and the rebellious angels (Steyn, 2008). Archangel Michael is considered the guardian of the gates of Heaven. The image of Archangel Michael revealed broad representation in the visual arts, particularly in iconography. The main values embodied in the person of Archangel Michael are piety, devotion, loyalty to God, and the ability to sacrifice.

In Ukrainian iconography, the image of Michael is most commonly encountered in the form of Prayer, on the Deacon’s Doors of the iconostasis, as a separate temple image, and in scenes of the Last Judgment. In the XVI century, the iconography of Michael as a warrior replaced the portrayal of imperial robes. Currently, we have several icons from the late Middle Ages that vividly embody the image of the Archistrategos – a mighty warrior and defender against evil forces – detailing his actions. In this period, the Archistrategos was often depicted by the artist as a contemporary knight in armor with a red cloak. He holds a sword on one hand and a case for his sword on the other.

Archangel Michael fulfills the role of a hero who mediates between God and Christians, guiding them on the true path that saints and martyrs follow for the Christian faith. In honor of Archangel Michael, many churches were named all over Ukraine, among which the main one is St. Michael’s Golden-Domed Cathedral. The image of Archangel Michael revealed broad reflection in the visual arts, particularly in iconography. M. Moskal notes, “As we can see, in the depictions of Archangel
Michael, folkloric elements border on high-professional art. For the figure of this Archangel depicted in the monument, a distinct silhouette, rhythm, the integrity of form, and balanced color spots are characteristic (Moskal, 2019).

Thus, in folk traditions and Ukrainian culture, Saint Michael is recognized as the patron of warriors defending truth, as well as the defender of Christians against enemies and the highest of archangels. The Cossacks most of all respected and glorified St. Nicholas and the Archangel Michael as heavenly patrons of the army. According to their legends and traditions, these two people invisibly watched over and helped the Cossacks in battles. At the same time, in the image of St. George—a Christian saint who, like St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki, died a martyr’s death for the sake of the Christian faith—the motif of a warrior is also depicted. Kievan Rus adopted the cult of St. George as the patron of the ruling power, and his veneration was carried out at the state level. He became an idealized image of eternal Orthodox warriorhood during the reign of Vladimir the Great and his son Yaroslav the Wise. St. George the Warrior became a beloved character in folk creativity.

The iconographic types of St. George are most commonly studied in the context of three main images of the saint: the martyr, the patron, and the rescuer ("Miracle of the Rescue of the Youth from Captivity.", "Miracle of the Dragon"). Icons depicting scenes from the life of St. George as an infantry warrior from the late Middle Ages have not survived to our time. However, from the XIV to the early XVI centuries, a separate narrative of the saint’s deeds gained the most recognition.

In iconography, Saint George is often portrayed riding a white horse and striking the dragon with a lance. This image is associated with the posthumous miracles of the great martyr. The transformation of the Christian martyr-warrior into a dragon slayer reveals the change in Christian attitudes toward military themes. The image of George (Yuri the Victorious) has solidified in popular consciousness as a defender of justice and goodness, and people turned to him as a protector.

The practice of worshiping the warrior and great martyr George became widespread in Kyivan Rus since the cult of St. George had an Eastern Christian origin. This image of the warrior-dragon slayer has remained significant for the Ukrainian people.

For a believer, a sacred work's religious content always precedes its artistry. When evaluating works of religious art, it is important to note that they "carry the concept of higher truth, goodness, justice, which is absent from human life. Embodied in work and filled with feeling, these ideas come to life not only in the artist's soul but also in those who perceive them. Thus, life imitates art to no lesser extent than art imitates life. In this sense, religious art leads a person out of an anthropological crisis, providing them with vital energy if, of course, a person is familiar with this realm of spiritual culture" (Bodak, 2004).

Religious culture significantly influences overall human spiritual culture, and its role continues to grow. Religious art embodies the idea of the highest truth, righteousness, and goodness, which are not always encountered in human life.

The potential of personal culture in religious art in the context of secularization processes is important for understanding the current state of Western culture. The historical condition that defines our time as secular possesses fundamental characteristics such as spiritual, social, philosophical, worldview, and ideological. The process of secularization is characterized by a reduction in the influence of religion on both public and private life, thereby fostering the growth of secular concepts and values. In this context, the culture of the individual in religious art plays a role that helps preserve spiritual and moral values, even in a society where secular trends dominate. One of the revolutionary ideas of our time is the realization that religious and secular worldviews are necessary for each other. They are not hostile or oppositional, but rather complementary. Religious art, emphasizing the culture of the individual, can add depth and meaning to the secular context, providing a spiritual foundation for moral and ethical development. At the same time, the secular approach promotes critical thinking and individual freedom, which can enrich religious traditions and make them more adapted to modern realities. Thus, the two worldview systems interact, maintaining a balance between the spiritual and the secular and ensuring the harmonious development of society (Fylypovich, 2019).

Personality culture in contemporary cultural practices has a significant impact on society, especially in the context of spiritual decline and the destruction of morality. Religious art plays a significant role in restoring moral and religious values that hold significance in contemporary society. It emphasizes virtues such as compassion, honesty, and mercy and calls for their realization in life. It contributes to preserving national identity and pride in cultural heritage, promotes the spiritual development of the individual, and fosters the formation of ethical education based on religious ethics (Baklanova, 2019). In Christian axiology, for example, the generations’ experience and heritage are objectively reflected through the prism of biblical values, helping young people understand morality and family values. This contributes to self-awareness as representatives of a particular denomination and exerts an impact on spiritual culture and religious knowledge (Havelia, 2019). The integration of religious art into education and cultural practices increases young people's interest in cultural values, helping to overcome the spiritual crisis and create the conditions for the growth of spiritual potential (Baklanova, 2019).

The analysis makes it possible to realize that, today, it is essential to reevaluate the potential for personal development within society and the role of religion in culture, taking into account historical facts of the existence of a specific culture and the subjective (internal psychological and external) conditions of a person’s life. Religious consciousness permeates an individual’s mind through feelings and emotions. Research into the external and internal factors influencing the creative process has provided the opportunity to reveal the significance of image, symbol, and sign in various genres of sacred art. Each historical period has its own peculiarities and holds great importance in the study of religious culture. The strength and recognition of these icons among the Ukrainian people lie in their enhanced faith in God and encouraged prayer.
4. Conclusions

Within the framework of spiritual culture, religious culture is the most influential and significant sphere encompassing virtually all aspects of human life. The essence of religious art lies in its considerable impact on a person’s emotions, feelings, and consciousness. The potential of personal culture in religious art reveals the following:

- the integrity of human existence, spirituality, and intellectual development under the influence of life in society;
- It is the basis of humanity’s unity and, at the same time, the center of its diversity.

The iconography of holy warriors was constructed directly based on the peculiarities and uniqueness of their lives. Each religious depiction is unique in terms of its content. At the same time, there is a tendency to revive Ukrainian iconography in the religious artistic dimension at the present stage.

The modern view of the world, which is based on traditional beliefs and values, has given way to a scientific worldview. Secularization and devaluation of values also affect the relationship to the values of spiritual heritage. Society has changed the motivation for spiritual salvation to economic achievements, which determine people’s main goals. Despite the tendency to lose the influence of traditional values in a number of spheres of social life, some of them still synergize with social expectations, remaining relevant to modern development trends.

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