
THE CULTURAL PHENOMENON OF HAGIOGRAPHIC MYTHOLOGY IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

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Abstract

The concept of ‘holiness’ is one of the oldest components of Christianity and implies a complete change in a person with the participation of God. It is closely related to hagiographic literature dedicated to the life of devotees to religious pietism. The secular humanities refer to this literature as hagiographic mythology. The study presents a religious and philosophical understanding of the ‘holiness’ category. The authors of the article analyse the cultural phenomenon of hagiographic mythology and determined its main features.

Keywords: holiness, saint, Christianity, cult, ascesis

1. Introduction

In the Christian culture, reference values or value-based goals demonstrate the highest degree of necessity, self-sufficiency and constant significance of their infinite semantic content. The acknowledgment of these ideals and the need for them can take on various historical forms due to specific ideas about the sacred, truth, good, etc. However, their realization as meta-values has not been changed throughout the cultural and historical life of humankind [1]. Within the framework of Christianity, the priority values expressed in a certain life-meaning strategy are concentrated in the cult of saints. The latter can be defined as a socio-cultural standard of absolute perfection (and ideas common to the Christian worldview) which elevates the carriers and creators of this culture above the ordinary (profane) reality and canonizes them [2].

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It is worth mentioning that the Christian cult of saints formed in the corresponding cultural and historical context of the Greco-Roman world, in particular, is the cult of mythologized heroes and city-state patron gods. They had their own holidays, rituals and ceremonies in these areas, which either acquired a religious character or turned into pure folklore. In Athens, the feast of Oschophoria was dedicated to Theseus' return from Crete. In honour of Hercules, some rituals were held at special altars with the depiction of a club that represented a favourite attribute of the Greek hero, etc. The traditions that survived in the sphere of oral folk art since pagan times were partially adopted by Christianity in the form of cults [3, 4].

In general, the Christian cult of saints is a complex phenomenon that formed in the course of long cultural-religious and philosophical-theological evolution. It still plays a crucial role in the common religious worldview [5]. Saints are an object of interest not only in Theology and Philosophy but also in Medicine, Psychology, History, iconography, art history, literary criticism and even graphology.

Among various cultural modifications, hagiographic literature dedicated to the life of devotees to religious pietism is of great importance. The secular humanities refer to this literature as hagiographic mythology [6]. The interest of cultural studies in the hagiography of saints reveals a set of issues that relate to the content, form and mechanism of such myths in their correlation with culture. Cultural studies are a reconstruction of humanitarian knowledge in the context of paradigms.

The article aims at studying the specifics of hagiographic mythology as a cultural phenomenon. Such research contributes to the study of hagiographic culture and clarifies the methodological capabilities of cultural studies in the interpretation of hagiographic texts.

2. Methods

The main research source is specific examples from the Christian hagiography, as well as the relevant literary texts of the Orthodox culture. While working on this article, we used the historical, phenomenological and linguo-cultural methods, as well as the method of structural analysis for a holistic and comprehensive analysis of the holiness category and the cultural phenomenon of hagiographic mythology in the Christian tradition.

Using the historical method, we analysed hagiographic literature to determine typical features of the Christian cult of saints. The phenomenological method allowed to clarify the phenomenon of hagiographic mythology in the Christian tradition. The linguo-cultural method was used to study the cultural content and theological religious determinism of the holiness category. When formulating the main arguments, the method of structural analysis was also used to determine in the analysed narratives, those patterns and models that are used to legitimize 'holiness', saints and holy life.

3. Religious and philosophical understanding of the ‘holiness’ category

Table 1. Typical features of the holiness category.

No.	Author, source	Typical features of the holiness category
1	V.N. Toporov [7]	The ancient consciousness developed in Kievan Rus between the 1040s and the 1120s comprised three closely related ideas of holiness: 1) unity in space and the sphere of power; 2) unity in time and spirit, i.e. the idea of spiritual heritage; 3) holiness as the highest moral ideal of behaviour and one’s life position.
2	N. Ormerod [8]	Holy is something ‘totally different’ that causes both awe and fear (the numinous).
3	L. Warner [9]	Holiness is the ability of a person to a reasonably volitional way of life that evokes a sacred and reverent attitude towards such a person in other people. It gives rise to a blessed feeling of one's equality combined with dependence, which does not humiliate but rather rises to the heights of the world soul. Saints seem to be ‘out of this world’.
4	O.M. Kudina [10]	Being a spiritual phenomenon, holiness expressed through saints acts as grace-filled growth and prosperity of the life-giving spiritual substance, is a breakthrough to a new spiritual state (the eternal) and the basis of spiritual birth.
5	V.S. Harrison [11]	The Christian understanding of a holy person means the highest measure of moral character traits and the realization of values. Holiness is confirmed by the church authority and actively encouraged as an example to follow, according to the biblical-theological concept of imitatio.
6	A.P. Zabayako [12]	“In the hierarchy of categories constituting religious consciousness, the category of holiness together with God and faith is among paramount values.”
7	M.Y. Paramonova [13]	“A saint embodied the ideal of Christian asceticism and exemplary religiosity. At the same time, saints were typical figures modelling religiously justified social behaviour [...]. On the one hand, the cults of saints were a special type of social and religious practices of the Middle Ages playing a key role in everyday life and specific church activities. On the other hand, they turned out to be a significant and sometimes even the leading factor in the organization of various interactions, including the implementation of the functions of political power and social integration.”
8	J. Webster [14]	A saint is the name of a person capable of realizing the highest values, marked by an ideal measurement of moral perfection, endowed with the functions of a personal example, and surrounded by the corresponding religious cult.

The category of holiness, its semantic cultural content, and theological religious determinism have been the research object of many philosophers and religious scholars (Table 1).

The considered category of 'holiness' is reflected in the hagiographic literature dedicated to the life of saints. It is sometimes called the hagiographic myth and is a certain cultural phenomenon characteristic not only of Christianity, but also of other Abrahamic religions (the cult of the righteous (tzaddiks) in Judaism, the cult of saints in Islam).

4. The cultural phenomenon of hagiographic mythology

The interest of cultural studies in the hagiography of saints reveals a set of issues that relate to the content, form and mechanism of such myths in their correlation with culture.

According to A.M. Prilutskii, the phenomenon of hagiographic mythology has not been studied yet. One of its interpretations states that a myth is understood as fiction taken for the truth, which testifies to its incompatibility with scientific data [15].

The comprehension of this issue is based on the definition of a myth as a narrative that focuses on sacred meanings. The phenomenon of the sacred as a mythical universal was considered by M. Eliade [16]. Having worked through myths from around the world, the scholar was convinced that the sacred and the profane were two fundamental meanings of a person's existence and universal constants of mythology [16].

E. Cassirer, a philosopher of the Neo-Kantian school, drew attention to spatial, temporal and numerical hierophanies. He noted, "Thus, the opposition between the sacred and the profane is for the first time understood not as a particular but as a truly universal opposition <...>. It enables the special morphology of myths complementing reasonings about the general form of an opinion, which is their basis and fills them with real and concrete content." [17] Thus, the mythical worldview is based on the differentiation of the sacred and the profane [8]. Cassirer emphasized these components as the essential semantic fields that myths integrate into indifferent being. "The projection of any being and everything that happens on one sacred-profane opposition allows to find new content in this very projection, i.e. the content that they not just 'have' from the very beginning but form in this mythological context." [17, p. 134]

The task of myths is not limited to explaining the existing worldview. All cultures aim at establishing and maintaining a certain social order with the help of numerous cultural channels, including mythology. Therefore, the mythical explanation of the world dwells on the order presented in the corresponding sociocultural tradition. According to the famous researcher of mythology E.M. Meletinskii, this explanation is closely related to authorization [18]. Considering the central significance of the sacred in relation to the profane, we can speak of the sacred as a semantic mythical nucleus around which the order is concentrated and which determines its content. The relationship between the

sacred and the profane in myths reflects the hierarchy of power of the former over the latter. At the same time, the sacred is seen as a force that controls the consciousness of people and directs them in that axiological direction that predetermines this or that tradition. The sacred is the determining factor in behavioural patterns [11]. M. Eliade defined the main function of myths to create exemplary models of all rituals and all significant human actions performed in life and this function was put into the context of the sacred and the profane [16].

The intersection between the sacred and the profane is the human community to which myths are addressed. In the above-mentioned cultural topos (the meaningful image of a myth), the sacred creates a certain order and determines the will to follow this order (the striving for the sacred) within a particular community [13]. Thus, a myth directs people to traditions that have their own will elevated to the sacred meaning.

The general characterization of mythology should be regarded as metacontext for comprehending hagiographic literature which is a special modification of myths.

The central figure of hagiographic mythology is a righteous saint who strives for holiness, i.e. a certain ideal that determines the strategy and tactics of one's life [14]. This circumstance indicates two essential aspects of a myth: existential and axiological. The former serves as an answer to the question about the meaning of life and the fate of a person. The latter assesses the value of cultural traditions. In this regard, an ascetic realizes the ideal of a myth, i.e. an anthropological ideal created by the spiritual creativity of authors. The tools of such an ideal myth are signs that form separate mythical configurations: mythical space, time and different images (saints, people, demons and events). In hagiographic mythology, all individual meanings and configurations are concentrated around saints and reveal their ascent to the ideal of holiness.

The ascetic's ascent to holiness characterizes saints as dynamic figures [9, 10]. The dynamics of their life is presented not through a smooth evolutionary process but rather through situations of colossal life tension, which demonstrates their tireless spiritual work and spiritual struggle. Some myths show the formation of holiness with acute mental traumas and temporary spiritual falls that are overcome by huge expenditures of ascetic energy. Thus, a saint is endowed with certain traits of a cultural hero. However, hagiographic mythology needs to direct heroic deeds to the spiritual feat of holiness. This act is called ascetic and the devotee's life is called ascetic as a specific modification of the individual's culture.

Asceticism contains two main intentions: 'the refusal of the ascetic' and 'the striving of the ascetic' to the transcendental principle. The 'refusal of the ascetic' belongs to the world and one's self sacrificed for the service of God. The departure from the world is closely associated with the liberation from its values. Therefore, resistance to the onslaught of worldly temptations should be regarded as the individual's struggle for gaining personal freedom. Moreover, this struggle takes place in the soul of the ascetic, which gives rise to various

worldly desires that distract the consciousness from serving God. Hagiographic mythology demonstrates the intense resistance of the ascetic to the outside world, human nature, and devilish temptations. The ascetic's ascent to holiness is characterized as a 'spiritual struggle'. This 'spiritual struggle' with one's own nature is closely connected with the opposition to the world. This refers to the fight against the innate defects of a person typical of their nature. An ascetic feat is accompanied by a radical reorientation of consciousness towards the divine, from the position of which the repression of worldly thoughts is carried out [19].

Hagiographic literature often describes the temptation of righteous people by demonic forces. This plot takes on different meanings: firstly, it testifies to a danger that awaits ascetics on their life path; secondly, it emphasizes the hard ascent of a righteous person to the peak of holiness. The opposition of a righteous person to infernal forces testifies to one's heroism, according to which the righteous path becomes heroic. The victory over the devil's temptations proves the glory and righteousness of an ascetic, as well as celebrates certain sacred forces with the help of which this victory is achieved.

The most important way of forming the axiological scale in hagiographic myths is ethics. It aims at ascetic discourse and takes the form of ascetic ethics asserting the cult of saints in conformity with the moral norms of religious traditions. The prerequisites for an ascetic lifestyle are deep faith in God, prayer and fasting. One of the essential manifestations of one's spiritual achievements is humility as protection from pride and arrogance. The value of humility means not only refusing to inflict any physical or mental harm on other people but also voluntarily accepting grievances from them. Abstaining from worldly desires is a tactical means in the strategy of ascetic abstinence from the world temptations and service to God. The value of humility takes on a radical form, i.e. the renunciation of one's own self and the recognition of the unconditional significance of God. Such renunciation is viewed as a voluntary sacrifice of one's life to God which is spiritually purified and developed.

Hagiography pays much attention to the demonstration of an ascetic life, which emphasizes the extreme severity of a monastic lifestyle in the context of the natural and social needs of people. In the first case, it refers to the ultimate limitation of physiological norms of nutrition, clothing and sleep. In the second case, this lifestyle limits communication with the outside world. At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize the idea that the authors of such a myth strive not only to represent the harsh lifestyle of a monk but also to convey the hard work of arranging an ascetic dwelling. It organically forms the general process of spiritual struggling for the realization of ascetic ideals.

Miracles play a special role in hagiographic literature, including supernatural visions, omens, reviews and worships. They are designed to increase the importance of God not only in the life of people but also saints, devotees of pietism, and asceticism. In religious culture, a miracle is crucial for encouraging an individual to observe the established order that forms the values and rules of a particular culture. The mechanism of this striving is mythopoetic speech, and a miracle is regarded as a specific form of such a language. In this

context, a miracle performs the function of a sacred sanction, i.e. an essential mechanism of socio-cultural regulation that blesses the approved cultural order in religious traditions.

The necessary feature of hagiographic mythology is the glorification of a righteous person. This approach should be regarded as the sacred legitimation of their way of life. The main forms of such legitimation are as follows:

- 1) God's election of a righteous person;
- 2) the help of sacred forces (God, angels or saints) to a righteous person in their ascent to holiness, which improves their spiritual and physical strength, as well as protects them from any obstacles encountered on the path of life;
- 3) the miracles performed by God through his chosen righteous people during their earthly life (healing and prophecy) or after their death;
- 4) the demonstration of the spiritual peak in the life of righteous ascetics;
- 5) the glorification of victory in the confrontation with infernal forces (demons);
- 6) a picture of the blessed death of a righteous person, whose soul is accepted into the heavenly host.

At the same time, the glorification of a saint means the glorification of ascetic ideals and cultural traditions that affirm the ideal of holiness together with its human carriers.

5. Conclusions

The generalization of studies on hagiographic mythology allows highlighting the following main features. The first feature is that an ascetic of religious pietism becomes the central figure in a narrative as a specific anthropological type. Therefore, a hagiographic myth should be recognized as a kind of an anthropological myth in its religious modification. The second feature is that holiness is the main ideal of a narrative, towards which a devotee is directed. Holiness should be regarded as the systematizing core and modifier of the axiological scale of the myth under consideration. Finally, any narrative represents ascetics in two main aspects: the denial of profane values and the striving for God. The ascetic ascent is a struggle against the obstacles that arise in the path. This myth demonstrates the ultimatum obsession of the ascetic's consciousness with numinous aspects, which is accompanied by the rejection of the profane as unworthy in relation to spiritual aspirations. The spiritual struggle of a devotee is linked with persistent spiritual work to acquire and strengthen the virtues necessary for holiness. Mythical images as ideal examples of an ascetic life play the role of cultural standards important for the preservation, reproduction, and transmission of confessional values.

We propose to consider hagiographic texts as mythopoetic narratives that perform apologetic tasks in the interests of a certain confession. It is advisable to call such apologetics hagiographic, whose originality is a poetic language with a

variety of artistic images (holy and demonic), metaphors, rhetoric, and dialogues.

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