

The Image of the Church and the Priest in the Novel *Confession* by Valeriy Shevchuk. Sacrum or Anti-sacrum?

The topic of this article is the analysis of the image of the priest and the church in the novel *Confession* by Valeriy Shevchuk. The question for which I am trying to find the solution is – if we can include the priest and the space of the church, portrayed by Shevchuk, into the sphere of *sacrum*, as they belong to the universum of symbols and figures of religious faith, or they can also be related to the sphere of *anty-sacrum*, since they are represented in the definite negative context.

Valeriy Shevchuk never concealed his negative attitude to the institutionalized faith, which has its reflection in the number of novels where the author desacralized a lot of religious symbols.

Desacralization in Shevchuk's works involved such symbols and characters: priest, monk, hermit, church, monastery and hermitage. They become the opposite of those things which are considered to be sacred, in other words they can be outlined as some kind of *anty-sacrum*.

In our article we use the definition of *sacrum* which was coined by Rudolf Otto and developed by other phenomenologists of the religion. The definition *sacrum*, as an ambiguous category, combines elements of sanctity and contamination.

In my opinion, the categorical and definite antithesis (full opposition) of the sacral is *anty-sacrum*. As it is, it should be created in accordance with the symbolism of negation or sense substitution. In Shevchuk's works this antithesis is created on the space and characters' demonization related to the sphere of religious images.

Such substitution of senses (or conversion of meanings) plays a key role in the novel "Confession". The plot of this novel is built on the recomprehension of the folk motive of a man's conversion into a werewolf. The whole story is represented in the form of confession, which the character (called Alien) accomplished after the curse had lost its power, and he had returned to being a human. Since he wanted to start his life with spiritual purification, he went to the church and asked the priest for

confession and absolution. During the confession it appeared that the priest had been a werewolf too. Moreover, he was not able to perform absolution as he threw the curse onto the Alien in order to release himself from the wolf's skin. The priest and the Alien exchanged their roles. The confession became the confession of the priest, and the Alien was the person who was obliged to forgive and to perform absolution.

Thus, it appeared that the priest was so far from moral perfection. He could not even accomplish a real confession and absolution. Therefore, the traditional image of sacral is rejected. Besides, the sacral space, in this case the church where the two characters met, in the novel it is represented as symbolic place of a sinner's stay, a peculiar purgatory.

Shevchuk portrayed the church as a dark and morose space, which is closely related to the feeling of suffering, anxiety, guilt and sin.

The author depicted one of the main characters – the priest in an ambiguous and a little bit paradoxical way in the novel confession. As the person who belongs to the church, he should be the moral authority and the provider for his parishioners, but all his life and worldview are stipulated by the categories of sin, fear and repentance.

We can make a conclusion that the priest is the embodiment of all weak, uncertain and immoral qualities. All his life was stigmatized by the sin and harm, which he was causing to other people. All these points prove that the image of the priest is definitely negative, and we can call this an embodiment of *anty-sacrum*. But Valeriy Shevchuk avoided simple definitions and clear differentiation between “kind” and “wicked” characters.

The clear division of the categories of sin and sanctity, kindness and wickedness is rejected in the novel *Confession*. The story of the priest shows that kindness and wickedness, sin and repentance are connected with each other inseparably.

Returning to our question, whether we can include the image of the priest and the space of the church into symbolism of *anty sacrum*, we should assert that the plot of the novel does not yield to such clear definitions. The author refused from definite, black-white divisions into kindness and wickedness or sin and sanctity, etc. Instead of

this, the author portrays the deep picture of individual and spiritual searches, the source of which is sin, and which through absolution lead to full understanding of life. The borders between the sacral and antysacral are getting less distinct. Despite the fact that the priest belongs to the church, he is not the embodiment of the moral ideal and he has nothing in common with the sphere of *sacrum*. He was portrayed as a weak unsteady person. In the primary chapters he seemed to be a definitely negative character, but later he appeared to be a person, who is on the way to the truth, who is looking for the truth, who dramatically struggles with defects of his own character. This struggle does not finish with the complete victory, but it leads to the change in the worldview of the character.