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# Spiritual Art in Soteriological Education

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## Abstract

This conceptual article examines the proposed role of "spiritual art" in soteriological education, understood as a Christian approach to spiritual and moral education oriented towards reflection on salvation. It asks how selected artistic works can be interpreted within a Christian theological framework and translated into classroom activities. The discussion draws on educational literature, biblical passages, and illustrative examples from mythology, painting, and film: the cleansing of the Augean stables, Vincent van Gogh's *Pietà*, and an exchange concerning ingratitude in *Waterloo*. The analysis distinguishes explicitly sacred subject matter from Christian readings introduced by an interpreter and separates these readings from documented claims about creators' intentions. It proposes a teaching procedure involving observation, contextual understanding, supported interpretation, comparison of alternative readings, and reflection. In classrooms involving different beliefs, the procedure distinguishes understanding the Christian framework from affirming its religious premises. The article argues that using art

within soteriological education requires transparent interpretive reasoning and a clear distinction between proposed activities and demonstrated outcomes. No questionnaire findings or individual student analyses are reported; the educational effects of the proposed procedure remain to be evaluated. The article also outlines conditions for educational application, including curriculum design, teacher preparation, and pilot implementation.

**Keywords**:Soteriological Education, Spiritual Art, Christian Education, Theological Interpretation, Art Education

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## 1. Introduction

Soteriological education (SE), as developed in the author's work, is a Christian approach to spiritual and moral education oriented towards reflection on salvation and the relationship between human life and God. Within this perspective, education concerns not only professional preparation and conduct but also the spiritual purposes through which individuals understand their responsibilities and aspirations. Salvation is treated here as a theological commitment informing this educational approach, rather than an outcome that the present article claims to measure.

The author has explored SE in earlier publications, including a discussion of soteriological education through spiritual art (Totskyi, 2015) and an examination of SE in professional and technical education (Totskyi, 2024). The present article returns to the role of

art with a specific interpretive and pedagogical question: how can selected artistic works be read through a Christian theological framework and translated into classroom activities whose reasoning is explicit and open to discussion?

This question requires distinguishing the religious content of a work from the meanings introduced by an interpreter. An explicitly sacred work may present recognisable Christian subjects, while a mythological narrative or historical film may provide material for a Christian reading without having been created for that purpose. In either case, a theological interpretation should identify the details supporting it and distinguish its claims from documented evidence about the creator's intentions. The possibility of a meaningful Christian reading does not, by itself, establish that a work contains a concealed religious message.

The article's central argument is that the proposed educational role of "spiritual art" should be articulated through this distinction and through a transparent procedure of observation, contextual understanding, interpretation, comparison, and reflection. Rather than treating a theological reading as a conclusion students must reproduce, the procedure invites them to examine how it is constructed and where its limitations lie. In educational settings involving different beliefs, engagement with the Christian framework should permit questioning and disagreement without requiring religious affirmation.

The discussion develops this argument through three illustrative examples: the cleansing of the Augean stables, Vincent van Gogh's *Pietà*, and an exchange concerning ingratitude in *Waterloo*. These examples provide different relationships between artistic content and Christian interpretation. They are used to clarify an approach to teaching, rather than to demonstrate effects on learners.

The article is therefore conceptual in scope. It does not report questionnaire findings or individual student records, and it makes no empirical claim that the proposed activities produce spiritual growth or moral transformation. Its purpose is to explain the interpretive basis of using art within SE and to formulate a teaching procedure that can subsequently be examined in practice.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature considered here addresses the conceptual foundations of spiritual and moral education, its religious and philosophical orientations, and its proposed implementation in educational settings. These areas provide a background for examining the role of artistic interpretation within soteriological education (SE). Spiritual and moral education is treated as the broader field, while SE represents the particular Christian orientation adopted by the author.

At the conceptual level, Antonets (2009) discusses Sukhomlynskyi's educational thought in relation to spiritual and moral values, while Babii (2009) examines the meaning of moral education. Bekh (2009) considers the spiritual dimension of personal life, and Plivachuk (2016) addresses spiritual and moral education in relation to the formation of students' values. These works establish the relevance of values and personal development to the discussion, but those concerns should not automatically be equated with the theological aim of salvation that defines SE.

A second area concerns the religious and philosophical foundations of education. Kudryk (2008) examines human transformation in Ohiienko's religious and philosophical thought, while Luchkevych (2008) discusses the philosophical and religious foundations of

Comenius's pedagogy. These subjects situate the present article within a discussion of how religious understandings of human life inform educational purposes. Marianski's (2008) examination of moral dilemmas among Polish youth introduces a related concern with the questions and choices encountered by young people. The present article approaches such reflection from a Christian perspective without treating that perspective as a premise shared by all learners.

A third area concerns educational practice. Milchevska and Yeromina (2018) discuss interactive methods in spiritual and moral education, while Mykhalchuk (2020) examines monitoring as a function of managing this educational process. For the present article, these topics raise two distinct questions: how classroom activities can be organised and how their outcomes might be assessed. Proposing an activity does not demonstrate its effectiveness, and a framework for monitoring development does not constitute evidence that development has occurred.

The author's previous publications provide the immediate background to the discussion of SE. The 2015 publication addresses soteriological education through spiritual art, while the 2024 article examines SE in professional and technical education (Totskyi, 2015, 2024). Earlier publications also address the diagnosis of spirituality and criteria of spiritual and moral development (Totskyi, 2013, 2014). These works should be distinguished from the present article's analysis: their classifications and diagnostic proposals are not used here as evidence of the educational effects of artistic interpretation.

The focus of the present article is the relationship between a work's observable content, the Christian concepts applied to it, and the classroom activities derived from that reading. This focus requires distinguishing explicitly sacred subject matter from a Christian interpretation introduced by the viewer. It also requires separating an interpretation's theological meaning from a documented claim about the creator's intentions.

Accordingly, the article develops an interpretive framework and a proposed classroom procedure rather than reporting an evaluation of students. Its argument is that the use of art within SE should make the basis of a theological reading explicit, allow comparison with alternative readings, and distinguish reflective learning activities from claims about spiritual transformation. The literature discussed above provides context for this argument; it is not presented as an exhaustive review establishing the absence of comparable approaches elsewhere.

## 3. Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual and interpretive approach to examine the role of "spiritual art" in soteriological education (SE). Its guiding question is how selected artistic works can be interpreted within a Christian theological framework and used to formulate educational activities. The analysis concerns the reasoning underlying these interpretations and their proposed pedagogical application; it does not evaluate changes in students' spiritual development.

The discussion draws on the author's publications on SE, relevant literature on spiritual and moral education, biblical passages, and selected examples from mythology, painting, and

film. The examples—the cleansing of the Augean stables, Vincent van Gogh's *Pietà*, and a scene from *Waterloo*—serve as illustrative cases for examining relationships between artistic content and Christian themes. They encompass both an explicitly religious subject and subjects that can be given a Christian interpretation. They do not constitute a representative sample of artistic works, and the analysis does not establish that all art contains a hidden Christian meaning.

The interpretive framework distinguishes three elements: the content and context of the work, the Christian theological concepts used to interpret it, and the educational questions arising from that interpretation. The analysis first identifies the relevant narrative, visual, or verbal details. It then explains how those details may be related to such themes as purification, sacrifice, salvation, and gratitude. Finally, it considers how the proposed relationship can become a subject of classroom discussion and reflection. Biblical passages provide the theological reference points for these readings rather than empirical evidence of their educational effectiveness.

A distinction is maintained between an interpretation proposed by the author and a documented claim about an artist's intentions. A Christian reading of a work does not, by itself, demonstrate that its creator intended that meaning or was unconsciously influenced by a spiritual source. Claims about the work's historical context or the creator's intentions require identifiable supporting sources. Interpretive claims are assessed through their connection to specific details in the work, their consistency with the stated theological framework, and consideration of plausible alternative readings. The resulting interpretations remain open to disagreement.

On this basis, the article proposes a classroom procedure involving observation of the work, identification of details supporting an interpretation, discussion of a Christian reading, comparison with alternative readings, and reflective responses. These activities are presented as a pedagogical proposal requiring subsequent evaluation. In settings involving students with different beliefs, engagement with the Christian framework should allow students to explain, question, or disagree with an interpretation without requiring them to affirm its religious premises.

No questionnaire findings, individual student records, or participant-level analyses are reported in this article. Accordingly, these materials are not used as evidence for its conclusions. The article's methodological scope is limited to conceptual clarification, interpretation of selected works, and formulation of a proposed educational procedure. It makes no empirical claim that this procedure produces spiritual growth, moral transformation, or attainment of a particular level of SE.

## 4. Spiritual Art and Its Proposed Educational Application

### 4.1 Defining Spiritual Art Within Soteriological Education

Within the Christian perspective adopted in this article, soteriological education (SE) concerns reflection on salvation and the orientation of human life towards God. Art is considered here as a possible medium for such reflection. This proposed role does not establish that exposure to an artwork necessarily produces religious commitment, moral transformation, or spiritual growth.

For analytical purposes, a distinction is made between explicitly sacred art and other works that can be interpreted through a Christian theological framework. Sacred art presents identifiable religious subjects, narratives, or symbols. Other works may address experiences such as suffering, gratitude, responsibility, or renewal without explicitly referring to Christian teachings. These works can nevertheless provide material for a Christian reading when the interpreter explains the relationship between details in the work and the theological concepts being applied.

The term "spiritual art" is therefore used in this article to describe the educational use of works that invite reflection on spiritual questions. It is not intended as an exhaustive classification of art or as a claim that every work contains a concealed Christian message. A work's religious subject matter, the creator's documented intentions, and the interpreter's theological reading are related but distinct matters.

This distinction clarifies the basis on which artistic works are used within the proposed SE framework. The possibility of interpreting a work beyond its creator's stated intentions does not justify attributing an unconscious religious intention to that creator.

**4.2 Artistic Inspiration and the Limits of Interpretation**

The relationship between artistic creation and interpretation provides a philosophical background to this discussion. In *Ion* and the *Apology of Socrates*, Plato considers poetic inspiration and questions whether poets can adequately explain what they create (Plato, 2008). These discussions are relevant to the distinction between producing a work and articulating its meanings. They do not, however, establish that artistic inspiration is Christian in origin or that a particular theological reading represents the creator's intentions.

Within the present framework, Christian interpretation is an explicitly situated reading. Its credibility depends on showing how the interpretation relates to the work rather than merely declaring that a spiritual meaning is present. The interpreter should identify the relevant details, explain the theological connection, and acknowledge where the reading extends beyond what those details establish.

Hermeneutic reflection is used here to examine these relationships between a work, its context, and its interpretation. Biblical exegesis supplies a complementary discipline by attending to the context of the biblical passages used in the discussion. Neither activity is treated as a procedure that automatically reveals a single hidden meaning shared by every viewer.

**4.3 The Augean Stables as an Analogy of Purification**

The account of Hercules cleansing the stables of King Augeas by redirecting river water provides the first illustrative example (Mify Davnoi Hretsii, 2012). The narrative presents the removal of accumulated pollution through the intervention of a powerful external flow.

The author proposes reading this narrative as an analogy of spiritual purification. Within a Christian framework, the cleansing action can be brought into discussion with the imagery of living water and the Spirit in John 7:37–39 (Bibliia, 2009). The proposed connection concerns the relationship between pollution, cleansing, and renewal.

This analogy does not establish that the Greek narrative originally referred to the Holy Spirit or anticipated Christian teaching. Nor does the physical cleansing of the stables provide evidence about the process of salvation. Its educational value lies in the questions the comparison makes available.

A teacher could ask students which features make the analogy persuasive and where it becomes limited. For example, physical pollution can be removed by redirecting water, whereas Christian reflection on sin also involves questions of responsibility, repentance, and grace. Examining these differences prevents the analogy from being treated as a literal equivalence. Students may also offer readings centred on ingenuity, labour, or the resolution of an apparently impossible task.

### 4.4 Van Gogh's Pietà as an Explicitly Religious Example

Van Gogh's *Pietà*, based on a composition by Eugène Delacroix, provides an example with explicitly Christian subject matter (Vatican Museums, n.d.). Unlike the Augean stables, its relevance to Christian reflection does not depend on assigning a religious meaning to a non-Christian narrative.

The author's proposed reading focuses on suffering, compassion, and sacrifice. Within SE, the representation of the dead Christ and the mourning mother can become a starting point for discussing the relationship between human suffering and the Christian understanding of salvation. This is a theological application of the work rather than a comprehensive account of Van Gogh's artistic purposes.

The interpretation does not depend on identifying the figure of Christ as a self-portrait of the artist. Such an identification would require a separate examination of the relevant evidence. The educational discussion can instead begin with the religious subject and the details visible in the particular version of the painting selected for classroom use.

Students could first describe the figures, their relationship, and the composition. They could then consider how these details support a reading concerned with grief or compassion, before discussing the additional meanings introduced by a Christian account of sacrifice. This sequence makes the transition from observation to theological interpretation explicit.

**4.5 Waterloo as a Starting Point for Reflection on Gratitude**

The discussion of ingratitude between Napoleon and Ney in *Waterloo* (Bondarchuk, 1970) provides a different kind of example. The immediate context concerns political relationships and obligations. The author proposes using the exchange as a starting point for reflection on gratitude within a Christian framework.

The connection to SE is introduced by the interpreter: if gratitude concerns recognising what one has received, how might Christians understand gratitude in relation to life, grace, and the sacrifice of Christ? This question extends the discussion beyond the film's political setting. It does not establish that the filmmakers intended the exchange to communicate a Christian teaching.

The comparison also requires caution. Gratitude towards a political ruler and gratitude towards God cannot be assumed to carry identical obligations. Classroom discussion should therefore consider whether gratitude necessarily entails obedience, whether a benefactor's expectations are justified, and where the proposed theological comparison ceases to be useful.

These questions allow the example to support reasoned reflection rather than serve as a direct illustration of a predetermined religious conclusion.

### 4.6 A Proposed Classroom Procedure

The three examples support a proposed teaching procedure that makes observation, interpretation, and reflection distinguishable. The procedure has not been evaluated through student data in this article.

First, the teacher introduces the selected work and provides the contextual information necessary to understand it. Students describe what they see, read, or hear before being asked to identify a spiritual meaning.

Second, students propose interpretations and identify the details supporting them. The teacher asks them to distinguish information contained in the work from assumptions introduced by the viewer.

Third, the teacher introduces the relevant Christian concepts and biblical passages. Students consider how this framework changes their reading and whether the proposed connections are adequately supported. The teacher makes clear which claims concern the work's content, which concern documented intentions, and which are theological interpretations.

Fourth, the class compares the Christian reading with plausible alternatives. Disagreement becomes an opportunity to examine reasons and evidence. It should not be treated as proof of a student's spiritual deficiency.

Finally, students produce a short reflective response explaining an interpretation, its supporting details, and its limitations. Assessment can address the clarity of their reasoning, contextual understanding, and engagement with alternative readings. These responses should

not be presented as measurements of salvation or as demonstrated changes in spiritual development.

In Christian educational settings, this procedure may be placed within an explicitly shared religious purpose. In classrooms involving students with different beliefs, the teacher should distinguish understanding the Christian framework from affirming it. Students should be able to question an interpretation or articulate another perspective without being penalised for their religious position.

**4.7 Educational scope and limitations**

The author's earlier account places importance on the teacher's spiritual commitments and preparation (Totskyi, 2011). Within a Christian SE framework, these commitments help explain the purpose of the proposed educational practice. They do not replace careful preparation of sources, transparent interpretation, or respect for students' differing responses.

The examples illustrate ways of organising discussion around purification, suffering, sacrifice, and gratitude. They do not demonstrate that the proposed activities produce lasting moral change or movement through the levels of spiritual development discussed in the author's previous work (Totskyi, 2013, 2014).

Any subsequent evaluation would need to define the educational outcomes being investigated and distinguish them from theological claims about salvation. The contribution of the present discussion is limited to clarifying an interpretive approach and showing how it can inform proposed classroom activities.

## 5. Discussion and Implications for Educational Policy

### 5.1 Discussion

The central issue arising from the analysis is whether the Christian purpose of soteriological education can be maintained while allowing students to question the interpretations through which that purpose is expressed. Within SE, salvation gives education a theological orientation. However, this commitment does not by itself establish the meaning of a particular artwork or justify requiring students to reproduce the teacher's reading. The position advanced here is that a Christian interpretation can retain its theological character while making its reasoning available for examination.

The first objection concerns the application of Christian meanings to non-Christian works. Reading the Augean stables as an analogy of spiritual purification introduces a Christian interpretive framework that is not established as part of the myth's original meaning. The objection is valid if the analogy is presented as the narrative's original meaning. It does not necessarily invalidate a subsequent educational comparison. The distinction is between claiming what the myth originally signifies and asking what becomes visible when it is read alongside a Christian account of purification. The proposed comparison is defensible only insofar as its supporting details and limitations are made explicit.

This distinction also clarifies the problem of artistic intention. A Christian reading need not depend on claiming that an artist unconsciously communicated a religious message. Such a claim would require evidence beyond the interpreter's perception of a resemblance. The examples instead support a more limited argument: artistic content can become material for

theological reflection without establishing that the creator intended that application. Interpretive openness nevertheless does not make every reading equally persuasive. A proposed reading must explain its relationship to the work and address details that complicate it.

The second objection concerns the institutional legitimacy of SE in secular education. A Christian institution may articulate salvation as a shared educational purpose, whereas a secular institution cannot assume that all learners accept that purpose. The Toledo Guiding Principles situate teaching about religions and beliefs within concerns for accuracy, fairness, professional competence, and freedom of religion or belief (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [OSCE/ODIHR], 2007). These principles provide a relevant comparison for the present proposal, although they do not constitute an endorsement of soteriological education.

The implication developed here is that the purpose of an activity must be specified at the institutional level. Studying how a Christian reading is constructed is different from participating in education directed towards personal acceptance of that faith. Consequently, SE cannot be transferred unchanged from a confessional setting into a secular classroom merely by presenting it through art. In the latter setting, its Christian framework should become an explicitly identified subject of interpretation and discussion.

A possible criticism is that this adaptation weakens SE by replacing its concern with salvation with a general exercise in interpretation. This criticism identifies a genuine limitation. The classroom procedure proposed here does not reproduce the whole theological purpose of SE in every institutional setting. Rather, it distinguishes that purpose from the educational

activities that can be shared with learners who do not affirm it. The proposal therefore preserves a Christian perspective while limiting what an institution may assume about students' commitments.

The third issue concerns how disagreement is managed. Permission to disagree is insufficient if the teacher's preferred interpretation still determines assessment. Jackson's (2014) Signposts addresses moderated classroom dialogue and the inclusion of religious and non-religious world views. In relation to the present framework, these concerns support examining how discussion is organised, whose interpretations receive attention, and whether students can challenge the proposed analogy without academic disadvantage. The assessment criteria proposed in this article accordingly concern contextual understanding, supporting evidence, and reasoning rather than religious agreement.

This approach creates a further tension between theological aims and observable educational outcomes. Interpretive competence cannot demonstrate salvation, while agreement with Christian teaching cannot be assumed to demonstrate spiritual development. The classifications discussed in the author's earlier work therefore cannot function as established outcomes of the activities proposed here. An evaluation would need to examine defined educational outcomes while acknowledging that these do not exhaust the religious significance attributed to SE.

Finally, the examples do not demonstrate that emotional engagement with art produces lasting moral change. Their role is to show how reflection can be organised, not to establish its effects. The policy question is therefore not whether institutions should assume the

transformative power of spiritual art, but under what conditions they can responsibly pilot this proposed use. Clear purposes, transparent interpretation, appropriate teacher preparation, and assessable educational outcomes provide the basis for the policy implications developed in the following section.

**5.2 Implications for Educational Policy**

The discussion identifies a conditional basis for using the proposed framework in educational institutions. Its application depends on the institution's educational purpose, the responsibilities assigned to teachers, and the criteria used to evaluate learning. The policy proposal is therefore to develop and examine a defined teaching unit rather than adopt SE as a general requirement across educational systems.

Curriculum committees should first specify the purpose and setting of the unit. In a Christian institution, it may form part of an explicitly confessional programme. In a secular institution, the proposed activities should concern understanding and examining a Christian interpretation of art, with opportunities to consider other readings. This distinction should appear in learning objectives, teaching materials, and assessment criteria.

Teacher preparation should translate the interpretive framework into practical competences. Teachers need to verify contextual information, distinguish documented intentions from subsequent readings, and explain the details supporting a theological interpretation. They also need to facilitate disagreement without treating it as a failure of learning. These priorities connect with the professional preparation and classroom dialogue

addressed by OSCE/ODIHR (2007) and Jackson (2014), while their specific application to SE remains the proposal of this article.

Schools should establish assessment criteria before implementation. Student responses may be assessed for contextual accuracy, use of relevant details, clarity of reasoning, and engagement with alternative interpretations. Religious affirmation should not determine academic performance. Students should also be able to complete analytical tasks without disclosing personal religious commitments.

Implementation could begin with a limited pilot involving selected lessons and prepared teachers. School leaders and curriculum coordinators should review the suitability of the materials, teacher preparation requirements, and opportunities for students to question the interpretations presented. Where student data are collected for research, appropriate consent procedures and data safeguards would be required.

Evaluation should examine whether the activities meet their stated educational objectives and whether they are feasible in the chosen setting. Relevant evidence could include students' ability to distinguish factual claims from interpretation, support a reading with details from a work, and explain the limitations of an analogy. Such evidence would concern educational learning; it would not establish salvation or validate a classification of students' spirituality.

Decisions about continuation or expansion should depend on the pilot's findings. Revision may be necessary if materials obscure the distinction between interpretation and fact, assessment rewards religious agreement, or teachers lack the preparation needed to manage discussion. Wider application would require evidence of educational value and attention to the

institutional context. The framework thus offers a proposal for curriculum development and evaluation rather than a demonstrated policy solution.

## 6. Conclusions

This article has developed a conceptual framework for using selected artistic works within a Christian approach to soteriological education (SE). Its central argument is that theological commitment can guide reflection through art while the interpretations used in teaching remain explicit, supported by details in the work, and open to examination. The analysis distinguishes sacred subject matter, documented artistic intentions, and theological meanings introduced by an interpreter.

The Augean stables, Van Gogh's *Pietà*, and the exchange concerning ingratitude in *Waterloo* illustrate different relationships between artistic content and Christian reflection. Their educational application depends on explaining these relationships and examining their limitations. The proposed classroom procedure translates this requirement into observation, contextual understanding, supported interpretation, comparison of alternative readings, and reflection.

The discussion identifies a tension between the theological purpose of SE and the outcomes that educational institutions can assess. Salvation gives SE its Christian orientation, but interpretive understanding does not demonstrate salvation, and religious agreement should not determine academic performance. In settings involving different beliefs, the proposed activities therefore distinguish examining a Christian perspective from affirming it. This

distinction limits the institutional application of SE without denying its theological significance to those who share its commitments.

The policy implication is a conditional proposal for curriculum development. Institutions considering the framework should specify the purpose of its use, prepare teachers to distinguish evidence from interpretation, and establish assessment criteria that accommodate reasoned disagreement. A limited pilot could examine educational value and feasibility before decisions about wider application. The analysis supports these considerations for implementation; it does not establish the effectiveness of the proposed procedure.

No questionnaire findings or individual student analyses are reported. Further research should therefore investigate clearly defined educational outcomes, such as contextual understanding and the ability to justify and question interpretations, using appropriate instruments, transparent analysis, and relevant consent procedures. The article provides an interpretive framework and a proposed route from classroom practice to institutional evaluation, while leaving claims about spiritual transformation and the suitability of wider adoption open to further investigation.

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## Author Bio

Ihor Leontiiovych Totskyi is a Ukrainian teacher, researcher, and specialist in art education, pedagogy, and materials science for artists. He combines teaching with scientific and theoretical research on the spiritual and moral education of young people and the technology of painting materials.

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This article does not report new empirical data. The analysis is based on existing literature and publicly available sources cited in the text.

## Declaration of Generative AI Use

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