

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL STATUS OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

Sergey Nikolayevich Astapov

Institute of Philosophy and Social and Political Studies of the Southern Federal University,
Rostov on Don, Russia

Abstract

Epistemology of religious beliefs appeals to heterogeneous for religious consciousness research operations and reduces religious beliefs to propositions of doctrinal texts. The solution of this problem seems possible if instead of religious propositions analysis to realize analysis of religious discourse. Representation of religious beliefs is conditioned by main elements of the religious discourse structure: participants of the religious communication, aims, values, precedent texts. Religious discourse aims to motivation to religious activity, producing and reproducing of religious senses, strengthening of religious faith. Therefore, cognitive status of religious discourse has to be researched in the context of cultic communication. Faith in religious discourse dominates rational knowledge, and the idea of the sacred being determines meaning of religious propositions. Unity of faith and rational reasons manifests by different ways in different types of religious discourse.

Keywords: *epistemology, religious beliefs, religious discourse, religious communication, philosophy of religion*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM AREA OF EPISTEMOLOGY IN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Epistemology of religious beliefs is the most developing sphere of researches in modern philosophy of religion. The subject-matter of epistemology includes “the nature, conditions, and extent of human knowledge” [1, p. ix]. Therefore, the nature, conditions, and extent of knowledge about relations between people and supernatural beings ought to be the subject-matter of epistemology in philosophy of religion. However, the ontological status of supernatural beings is questionable; that is why the first place in epistemological researches of religion belongs to determination of validity and cognitive value of religious beliefs (i.e. views on the world and its elements through “a prism” of religious experience), which obtain an objective form in propositions of a language.

Epistemology investigates a content of religious knowledge after standards of a content of science. Orientation to such standards produces various difficulties in appraisal of a religious beliefs role in cognition. The most radical statement concerning cognitive value of religious beliefs belongs to the great Russian materialist V.I. Lenin, who called religious beliefs “a barren flower growing on a living tree of human knowledge.” [2, p. 322]

Modern analytical philosophy, which in preference conducts epistemological researches of religious beliefs, on the first stage of its evolution arrived to conclusion, which likewise Lenin denied cognitive value of religious propositions. They can not be verified by empirical data (A. Ayer), or they do not have factual content (A. Flew). Epistemologists of the second part of the 20th century consider religious propositions “language games”, which do not fix facts, but indicate rules for using of names signifying non-empirical reality (L. Haikola, D. Phillips), or analogs of regulative principles (J. Whittaker), or “models” – symbolical representations of such aspects of reality which can not be perceived immediately (I. Barbour, E. Schoen). Thus, negation of cognitive status of religious propositions was changed by assertion about specific role and certain frames of them.

Epistemological explication of the cognitive status of religious beliefs through ascertainment of cognitive value of their content demonstrates its low efficiency and undergoes criticism. Two factors produce and reproduce this situation. The first, epistemology of religion beliefs in existing ways of cognitive status grounding appeals to heterogeneous for religious consciousness operations: detection of “a pure religious experience” sphere, conceptual description of religious beliefs content, analysis

and verification the content by scientific methods. This operation keeps elements in the structure of religious knowledge which are common for religion and science, i.e. common, universal elements of knowledge, and strikes off specific for religious consciousness elements. The second, religious beliefs are reduced to propositions extracted from doctrinal texts. This operation reduces variety of religious ideas to doctrinal ideas. The overcoming of these difficulties seems possible if instead of religious propositions analysis to realize analysis of religious discourse.

2. DISCOURSE IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATIVE SITUATION

The term “discourse” came into philosophy of religion from philosophy of a language and social philosophy where it was actualized by Michel Foucault. Foucault understood a discourse as a complex of language practices forming ideas about an object, existence of which is presupposed by the practices. Foucault invokes to turn from investigations of propositions denotata to unexpressed significations of propositions which can be reconstructed through context; historical, economical, political etc. He called these reconstructions “discursive practices”. Thus, Foucault puts foundation for the common philosophical conception of discourse as “a speech deep in a social context.” [3] The communicative approach for investigations of discourse caused the definition: “discourse is a text deep in a situation of real communication.” [4, p. 271]

According to the communicative approach, discourse is a speech practice of individuals of the same social group who turn out in a typical communicative situation. There is the rigid hierarchy of communication participants the specific feature of communicative situation where is realized religious discourse. Besides that the hierarchy exists in social group of believers (religious organization), it is established between an individual and a supernatural being (God or gods, angels, demons, spirits etc.). It is insignificant that existence of the supernatural beings can not verify empirically – any communicative situation in religion presupposes existence of them. There are two types of religious communication:

- 1) cultic communication – addressed to a supernatural being immediately;
- 2) non-cultic communication – communication among believers about a supernatural being.

If the first type supposes a supernatural person as an important participant of communication, then at the second type a supernatural being is a precedent, condition, reason or simply an occasion for communication. That is why understanding of religious communication and discourse is impossible without ownership of confessional background knowledge.

In linguistic researches the term “background knowledge” means “a knowledge belonging to all participant of a communicative act about realia of a material life, realia of the situations and connotations which are beyond signs indicated by them – knowledge which is necessary for adequate and full interpretation of generated propositions.” [5]

This conception of background knowledge can not be used for epistemology, since the conception points to necessity for all participants of communication to have the same knowledge, but it does not point to character of the knowledge and its role for propositions generation in communication and estimation of them.

That is why epistemological researches define background knowledge as a kind of implicit knowledge which is called for a cognitive situation. This knowledge “does not demand to look to itself, to be examined ... it is a precondition giving boards for reasoning and communication.” [6, p.37-40] Concerning religious consciousness background knowledge is, first of all, world outlook formed by the certain religious tradition.

Thus, any researcher of religious discourse must take into consideration background knowledge, which is not expressed by participants of communicative situation obviously, in propositions.

Background religious knowledge consists of:

- 1) idea on the Most High (God or the Supreme Being);

- 2) ideas on other supernatural beings;
- 3) ideas about correlation between the supernatural and the natural worlds;
- 4) ideas about improvement of a man, society, the world;
- 5) ideas about the end of existence or eschatological ideas;
- 6) ideas on demands of the supernatural being for people;
- 7) ideas on due cultic activity.

There are two hierarchies of these ideas: the straight order is built on the theoretical level of religious consciousness, but everyday religiosity, “popular religion” accepts the invert order – where due actions towards the supernatural being take the first position.

At the same time, background knowledge is not knowledge in a specific sphere. Concerning an individual it is the knowledge of all that is connected with his everyday life, it is possession of information in “neighbouring districts” for his professional activity, it is his maximum large knowledge. Therefore, background knowledge is the syncretic knowledge where information having different nature, received from different sources is blended.

Immediate religious knowledge in the complex of believer’s knowledge takes the main place, since it is knowledge on “other reality”, experience of which has status of ultimate knowledge – an individual believes that the reality which opens itself for him is super-reality: if to compare it with empirical reality of everyday life, then latter will be non-expressive and insignificant. Therefore, any information in background knowledge which is directed against knowledge received in religious experience and acknowledged by religious tradition will be ignored by a believer. However, in situations of everyday life irrelevant to religious experience “common sense” takes more important place than this experience, besides a religious individual does not understand the contradiction in knowledge or cognitive dissonance – the cause of this situation is heterogeneous syncretism of religious knowledge.

If to proceed from these positions, then the cognitive status of religious discourse has to be determined as a result of investigation of cultic communication; non-cultic communication has to have significance of minor importance for the process of the status determination than cultic one. The cultic communication, since it is emerged from everyday concerns and occurs in important, often in critical times of believer’s life, and since it is specified from other communicative situations by extreme tension and intensity, gives the essential material for analysis of religious discourse. However, cultic communication has two specific features, which lower value of this material. Firstly, a speech towards a supernatural being is characterized by its strong erecting and a great number of cliché. Secondly, appellation to the supernatural being can be speechless, silent – e.g. in mystical contemplation. That is why non-cultic communication must not be ignored.

3. SPECIFIC FEATURES OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

So, “discourse as a practice is a part of social and cultural interaction, that is communication of people in one or another social group in a typical communicative situation” [7, p. 94].

The basic elements formed the subject-matter of epistemology (knowledge, thought, belief, fact) and epistemological operations (verification, falsification, truth value, finding of euristical importance) demonstrate their high dependence on religious discourse, which is the sphere of religious beliefs realization. Representation of religious beliefs is conditioned by main elements of the religious discourse structure:

- 1) participants of the religious communication;
- 2) chronotope – spatial and temporal characteristics of communicative situation;
- 3) aims;

- 4) values;
- 5) strategies – ways of realization of project formed according to aims;
- 6) material – the elements of content;
- 7) precedent texts;
- 8) discursive formulas. [4, p. 318]

The main aim of religious discourse is not concluded in transmission of some information, in religious activity there is drawn its main aim. The other aims, common for different types of religious discourse, are producing and reproducing of religious senses, strengthening of religious faith. That is why even stories about miracles, which scientists considered improbably for reality, take their place in modern religious discourse, according to the aim of it.

There is religious faith for this discourse the highest interpersonal value. At the same time scientific discourse, which is indifferent to faith, considers faith exclusively in the gnoseological aspect: either as non-verified knowledge or as the psychical state of readiness to certain way of activity in situation of a choice, when an individual does not possess information, which could be enough for a rational solution.

According to religious consciousness, faith is a sort of knowledge. Russian philosopher S.L. Frank calls it “knowledge-confidence” or “faith-truth”. This sort of knowledge, according Frank, is roused by real presence of the object of knowledge in consciousness of an individual, it forms essence of religious experience. In other words, faith has a character of intuition. Religious faith, in contrast to everyday faith or a faith of scientist, has orientation to the least of probably, since rational thought considers nothing is less of probably, than to state existence of a supernatural being and its manifestations in the form of a miracle. Despite the fact that a slight number of people (i.e. mystics) possess an experience of meeting to supernatural beings, religious faith is widespread. The cause of it is contained that religious experience exists not only in the form of personal experience of an individual, but in the form of common experience of confessional tradition. [8]

Religious consciousness is based on hierarchy of ideas, each of them receives special semantic content in discursive practices of the certain confession. The main idea of them is the idea on the sacred being. This idea is irrational and can not be verified or be considered as the factual idea. However, faith dominates knowledge in religious discourse, and the idea of the sacred being determines meaning of religious propositions. This circumstance brings out dogmatism of religious consciousness, stereotyped scheme of religious discourse, a great number of cliché in religious speech.

Standards of verification concerning religious discourse must be based on the statement that a truth is considered not as correspondence of a proposition to realia of the circumambient world, but as correspondence of a proposition to the “sacred knowledge” which is fixed in religious doctrines and common experience of religious tradition. Attempts to use logical procedures of verification in analysis of religious discourse are apprehended by religious consciousness as senseless and alien to its essence.

For instance, the proposition “God is Our Heavenly Father” can not be verified by logical, empirical or experimental methods, therefore, its epistemological status in this context has to be recognized as “it is irrelevant and unavailing to cognition”. However, in theistic discourse this proposition has the status “it is true”, since it is coherent to statements of sacred scriptures (e.g. of the Bible in the Christianity). In other words, a proposition takes relevance, availability and the meaning “truth” if it is coherent to some doctrinal statement.

Usage of a language in religious discourse should be distinguished from usage in other discourses by adaptation of “natural” language words to designation of supernatural beings and relations with them. In religious speech words denoting objects, relation and processes of the circumambient world are used for denotation of supernatural world entities. This is a cause that words in religious speech obtain specific connotations, but do not lose previous denotations – they become symbols having protection against understanding of them in a straight, literal sense.

For instance, the proposition “God is Our Heavenly Father” contains the predicate “Our Heavenly Father”, where the word “Father” has to be considered an element of religious experience analogical to an element of everyday empirical experience which is signified by this word. At the same time in religious discourse the word “Father” has “protection” in the form of attribute “Heavenly”. The word “Heavenly” is the image, which enjoins to apprehend not the denotatum known in everyday usage, but the meaning indicating to transcendence of the signified object.

The specific condition for investigations of the epistemological status of religious discourse is formed by genres of religious speech. Religious consciousness states priority of knowledge received in revelation over other forms of knowledge. Communication with a supernatural being is the basis of religion. Therefore, the basis of religious discourse has to be noticed in a speech of the supernatural being, and the main genre of religious speech has to be considered the mystical speech genre. It is presented by two kinds in theistic religions: revelation and prophecy.

Despite this fact epistemological researches of religious beliefs appeal, as already was noted, to doctrinal texts, i.e. to such genres of religious discourse as dogmatic, didactical and, more seldom, to genre of commentations. These genres differ from other genres by its high logical organization of a text (a speech), inclusion of reflection and argumentation in them. Possession of these qualities approximates them to epistemological standards of scientific texts. Prophetic texts and revelations, vice versa, differ by noticeable spontaneous speech, presence poetical elements and illogical passages.

It seems that epistemological researches of texts in the mystical genre is not possible, since thought, contained in them, does not find stable formulations. Dynamics of thought, flow of meanings are expressed in paradoxes and oxymora. Both of them are combinations of mutually exclusive elements – if to see them in aspect of logical rules or common sense, they appear as “the obvious incredible”, i.e. they demonstrate the negative dialectics of oppositions.

Nevertheless, investigations of texts presented in the genre of mystical speech are very important for epistemology of religious beliefs, since the genre lies in the basis of religious communications: paradoxes and oxymora generated in mystical speech are transmitted to the theoretical level of religious consciousness into texts belonged to dogmatic genre. The main Christian dogmas (on the Trinity, the Mother of God (Theotokos), God incarnate (Theanthropos) etc.) were formulated through oxymora and paradoxes.

For instance, let see the Chalcedonian definition of Theanthropos: “...we all unanimously teach that our Lord Jesus Christ is to us One and the same Son, the Self-same Perfect in Godhead, the Self-same Perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man; the Self-same of a rational soul and body; co-essential with the Father according to the Godhead, the Self-same co-essential with us according to the Manhood; like us in all things, sin apart; before the ages begotten of the Father as to the Godhead, but in the last days, the Self-same, for us and for our salvation (born) of Mary the Virgin Theotokos as to the Manhood; One and the Same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten; acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person and One Hypostasis; not as though He were parted or divided into Two Persons, but One and the Self-same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ...” [9]

Theologians state the nature of dogmas is irrational or, as they say, “over-rational” and does not admit the rational explanations. Understanding of dogmas requires the specific discourse – negative (apophatical) one which keeps rejection from the explanations and leads to silent contemplation of God. However, what is inexpressible in propositions that can not be a property of a group or society. Therefore, it can not be discourse – “a speech deep in a social context”. The statement of theologian about rational inexpressibility of the essence of dogmas is, by itself, an instance of proposition, made in theoretical religious discourse.

4. TYPES OF THEORETICAL RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

Epistemological studies of discourse in different situations of religious communication must include discourse of theoretical religious thought. This sort of religious discourse is investigated through texts, aimed to explanation and justification of religious statements by means of various theories. The texts form specific area of communications – between an author of a text and a reader. There are three types of theoretical religious discourse to depend on theoretical systems, which are used for religious statement explanation: theological discourse, discourse of religious philosophy and discourse of speculative mystics. They all are represented by genre of commentations, less frequently – by didactical genre. The main genre of theology is dogmatic one.

Theology is based on the uncomprehended mystery of God. From the point of view of theology a reason, when it meets one of aspects of this mystery, must stop reverentially its activity, to fall silent from its explanations in order not to turn away from the Divine truth. According to the Christian theology, absoluteness of God does not permit to cognize his essence. Only accidental properties of God are comprehensible through analogies of his creatures. That is why the Christian theology contains two ways of knowledge of God: the rational (positive) way – the cataphatic theology, and the mystical (negative) one – the apophatic theology.

Religious philosophy has an intension to explain all being through rational deductions, to find rational arguments for the propositions, which express religious experience. It is discourse of explanations and proofs, “discourse of a reason” in the strict sense. The content of religious faith forms by one of two ways: either through antinomies, expressing the negative dialectics of oppositions, or through analogies and more precise descriptions, containing reservations, directions to impossibility of straight understanding.

For instance, let compare the Chalcedonian definition with its philosophical explanation made by Anselm of Canterbury. The Anselm’s text: “Therefore the God-man, whom we require to be of a nature both human and Divine, cannot be produced by a change from one into the other, nor by an imperfect commingling of both in a third; since these things cannot be, or, if they could be, would avail nothing to our purpose. Moreover, if these two complete natures are said to be joined somehow, in such a way that one may be Divine while the other is human, and yet that which is God not be the same with that which is man, it is impossible for both to do the work necessary to be accomplished. For God will not do it, because he has no debt to pay; and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, in order that the God-man may perform this, it is necessary that the same being should perfect God and perfect man, in order to make this atonement. For he cannot and ought not to do it, unless he be very God and very man. Since, then, it is necessary that the God-man preserve the completeness of each nature, it is no less necessary that these two natures be united entire in one person, just as a body and a reasonable soul exist together in every human being; for otherwise it is impossible that the same being should be very God and very man.” [10]

Another instant can be seen in Russian religious philosophy of the first part of 20th century. Many Russian religious philosophers (S.N. Bulgakov, P.A. Florensky, S.L. Frank etc.) are able to keep the contradictory unity of faith and reason, expressing it by antinomies, but they often do not keep it in attempts to accomplish the non-contradictory knowledge on the Christian dogmas.

Mystical discourse – the discourse of religious poetry, symbols and metaphors is independent of norms of the religious tradition, and does not convey traditional point of view on relations with the supernatural. Speculative mysticism is approximate to philosophy, since it solves the same task – explanation of mystical experience by rational means, and this solution is achieved through using known concepts, approaches and theories. However, speculative mysticism is distinguished from philosophy through absence of criticism. Speculative mysticism using achievements of philosophy, combines elements of different philosophical theories eclectically, it compiles different arguments, which are received sometimes from opposite one another theoretical approaches. Speculative mysticism is distinguished from theology by absence of the aim to strengthen an individual in his faith. Moreover, discourse of speculative mystics is distinguished from two others types of theoretical religious discourse by its picturesque and metaphorical style.

Neither discourse of speculative mystics nor discourse of religious philosophy expresses completeness of the religious thought: mystics is subjective and does not transmit the experience of the religious tradition, philosophy is critical and does not transmit the experience of a meeting to the supernatural. That is why the Christian theologians perceive them (philosophical and mystic discourses) as the divergent ways of the religious thought (the heresies).

5. CONCLUSIONS: SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE RESEARCHES FOR EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Knowledge does not consist of statements which an individual or a social group, or society could use for solution of any problems arisen in a life. Religious faith in the supernatural world aides to decide problems of various situations of everyday life and forms readiness to resist various misfortunes. Orientation to ritual acts forms not only knowledge of steady ties of processes (laws), but also knowledge of existential expectations. Therefore, whole knowledge can not reduce to statements on natural laws and laws of society evolution formulated according to natural laws which are discovered by everyday experience and scientific investigations. An individual and a social group exist in different communications, and religious communications does not take the last place among them. If the postulate of the supernatural world and dependence of human life on it forms the certain life strategy and determines communications among individuals, it must be considered important for cognition, and its epistemological status must be researched in the context of communications among the individuals and social groups.

The value of religious attitude to the world is not defined exclusively by knowledge of the world. Cognitive activity is determined not only by information and skills, but also by expectations and hopes. They play a role of presuppositions in cognition, existential preconditions of knowledge.

Religious perception of the world in the highest degree is uncovered communications among people. Therefore, religious propositions find the complete meaning only in communications: and the research of religious discourse is more effective, then logical investigations of the propositions.

At the same time it means for epistemology of religious beliefs that its present subject-matter has to be widen. However the perspective of this widening is fraught of a loss of the subject-field of epistemological researches. It means that epistemology will change orientation from logical investigations to sociolinguistical one, nevertheless that problem of cognitive status of religion beliefs can not be lost by philosophy of religion, since this problem is a problem of a truth – one of the main problems of philosophy.

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