INTERPRETING RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AS BASIC COMPONENT OF SOCIAL VALUE FORMATION

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Abstract

The tolerance of today's society provokes complex processes of distorting religious values which in their turn bring value degradation of the secular society. Researchers in the fields of Sociology and religion actively study one constituent of the problem – value deformation of the secular culture, whilst giving little attention to the other – namely, transformation of religious values. The study of religious community is built on the interpretative row which is based on secular beliefs and principles of methodological atheism. However, there are at least three areas of interpretation of the same religious symbols: theological, scientific, in this case sociological, and secular. The used terminology is almost the same in all of those three areas, but the symbolic significance of these terms is ambiguous. So, speaking about the influence of values, mostly we can talk about the interpretation of these concepts-symbols. This paper attempts to reveal some interpretative zones of religious symbolism and how actively the symbols are able to influence the formation of value orientation within the society.

Keywords: religious symbolism, value orientations, interpretation, secular culture, society

1. Introduction

Any religion is marked with religious symbols which distinguish it from other religions. The concept of religious symbolism includes objects, acts, texts, images, speech formula, consciousness orientation, etc., characterized by religious meanings and messages which are different from their own properties and contents [1]. A carrier of religious meanings is the Holy Church. Its mission is to form the appropriate frame of mind and attitude in the believers. Interpretation of religious symbols determines the qualitative constituent of value orientation in the medium of believers, as well as in the secular society. According to Niklas Luhmann, "Each system observes and reacts to the others based on its own specific categories and interpretations of the world, and there is never any direct transfer from one system to another" [2]. In this article we will try to analyse how religious concepts are interpreted in various systems: in Church, in society, in

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social practice of advertising, in Sociology, and understand how close those interpretations interact and to what extent they influence each other.

2. The attitude to interpretation of religious symbols inside the Church

The sacred Scriptures represent a source of interpretation of Orthodox symbolism. However, the Bible is not a set of rigid, unambiguously interpreted instructions, but a whole fount of parables requiring explanation. Moreover, the text of the Bible has undergone several translations into various languages. To a certain degree, each translation meant an interpretation of the original text. In theological sciences, there are two disciplines that study interpretations of the Holy Scripture: Exegetics and Hermeneutics. Each of those disciplines tackles with specific tasks according to the designated problems of interpreting the text of the Bible. If Exegetics concerns itself with understanding and interpretation of the meaning of the Holy Scripture, than Hermeneutics analyses the vocabulary, grammar and expressive-stylistic qualities of the text. The two disciplines are united by the aspiration to correctly reconstruct the original meanings communicated to the humanity by Divine Afflatus. The Orthodox concept of Devine Afflatus includes the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition. It is the adherence to the Holy Tradition that builds up the retrospective of the experience of the Church, which, in its turn, allows finding out solutions to those problems of modernity which do not have an explicit reflection in the Biblical texts.

Besides, the Christian Church is composed of several confessions: Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. Each of those has got its own approach to interpreting Biblical texts. Thus, for the Orthodox Church this approach is Church Fathers' (patristic) exegetics. As Archimandrite Platon (Igumnov) points out speaking about the moral category of *duty*: "In the Orthodox teaching of moral duty there is no element of pride which is present in the practical Protestant deontology with its emphasis on personal dignity and self-duty of an individual... The practical morality of Catholicism is equally alien to Orthodoxy with its dividing into salvation and perfection, into Evangelical commandments and Evangelical counsels, into obligation and supererogation." [Archimandrite Platon (Igumnov), *Orthodox Moral Theology*, 2016, http://azbyka.ru/otechnik/bogoslovie/ pravoslavnoe-nravstvennoe-bogoslovie-igumnov, accessed on December 16, 2017]

The Orthodox exegetes argue that in order to get to the essence, the semantic core of the sacred text, it is necessary to take into account the 4 'levels' or 'semantic strata' present in the Bible:
1. the historical, or literary sense;
2. the allegorical, or typological sense;
3. the topological, or ethnic sense;
4. the anagogical, or mystical sense [3].

All the four levels are interrelated and mutually determined. They intertwine, and should be interpreted as something whole and complete. Such interpretation is only possible in the Church which alone is the keeper of the apostolic tradition of interpreting and understanding the text.

Secular religious scholars, in their turn, single out three approaches to interpreting biblical texts:

• The rational approach places the human mind above the Scripture. As A.A. Guseynov points out, the European culture "puts knowledge in the first place, and in the knowledge itself - its rational scientific form" [4]. According to him, rationalism seeks to limit morality to "the principle of sufficient reason. Christianity proceeds from an entirely different idea of man, assuming in him the presence of something that does not fit within the empirical framework of the world and cannot be the object of positive knowledge." [4]

• The mystical approach places feelings and sensory experiences above the authority of the Scripture. The intuitive experience of cognition of God is called 'mystical' because its inducement is considered to be beyond the means of language. The most exhaustive formulation of the essence of this approach was given by the anonymous author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing', a work written in the latter half of the 14th century: "...forget all the creatures that ever God made and their works, so that thy thought or thy desire be not directed or stretched to any of them..." [5]

• The dogmatic approach places the theological system above the authority of the Scripture. There are some theories inside this approach. The first is the theory of a single source. This approach dates back to the second century when patristic theologians started developing the idea of a sanctioned way of interpreting certain passages of the Holy Scripture in the context of historical continuity of the Christian Church, which was later called the 'traditional interpretation of the Scripture'. The second is the theory of complete denial of Holy Tradition. From the point of view of radical theologians of the 16th century, for instance, Thomas Müntzer and Caspar Schwenckfeld, every man under the guidance of the Holy Spirit can interpret the Scripture as he feels right. Thus the way was paved for individualism which places individual judgement of a single person over synodic judgement of the Church.

The distinctive trait of the views of the exegetes and religious scholars is that no believer will ever subject authority of the Holy Scripture to doubt, or, all the more, place human mind and feelings, or a 'theological system' 'above the Scripture'.

3. Acceptance of social ideas by the Church

However, the Church, as a social institution, is under the influence of overwhelming ideas that sweep the public opinion. Thus the 19th century's ideas of social justice gave rise to the movement of 'social Christianity'. Orthodox priests had found confirmation in the Bible for practical realization of certain

forms of economic and managerial relations in the society. From the immanent state of translation of spiritual and moral values, the Church had passed to active steps. As Vorontzova notes, "in his works of 1904-1907, Bulgakov separated socialism from Marxist ideology and divided it into economic and political, demonstrating thereby the possibility of a neutral economic socialism which was able to be conjoined with Christianity. <…> The philosopher believed that the connection of religious consciousness and economic activity should not only be attached to certain dogmatic, but would have had even stronger ties with practical aftermath of religion." [6, p. 20]

'Social Christianity' of S.N. Bulgakov and the Christian Brotherhood of Struggle members were different from the Protestant version presented in the works of V. Gladden, U.D. Bliss, F. Peabody, W. Rauschenbusch, etc. Russian Orthodox scholarly-theological school sought answers to the three questions which haunted the minds of those times: the attitude to the authorities and tsar; to social inequality and justice; to labour and politics. Things had come to a head and the necessity of changes was evident. But, the Marxists' idea of how radical these changes should be was just the thing opposed by the followers of the 'social Christianity' movement. American Protestant School focused on preserving the immutability of the principles of capitalism. Both Russian and American thinkers suggested using Christian ethics as the 'construction material'. Thus, using the same sacred texts, they found justification of their own ideas in interpretation of the former. Here, the purely theological study of the sacred Scriptures was interfered by the methodological confessional controversy and social theories.

Contemporary postmodern theories influence the Church to just such an extent. The main postulates of pluralism and tolerance lie in the basis of expanding the ecumenical movement. As Deacon Ilya Maslov points out: "The specific outlook of postmodernists, their image of the world includes as well the new image of Theology. This image <…> is historical, relative and personal." [7] Applying these categories of postmodernist culture to Theology means the following: the dogmata, the canons, the liturgy and the Bible itself are historically determined; the understanding of them should be changed. They are relative because they live in the context of a certain culture, which means that there is no once-and-for-all defined gauge of faith and godliness. Revelation is in the first place personal, not ecclesiastical, i.e., it is not granted to the Church as the People of God, but to each person individually, while each individual is himself a 'co-author' of God and builds relationship with God proceeding from his/her own convictions. It can be assumed that so fashionable today personal approach in Theology ('the theology of a person' as a direction of the modern theological thought), is essentially a version of liberal individualism acquiring pivotal meaning in the postmodern world [7].

Because the dogmatic differences between the Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church are not abstract, secondary or optional, ecumenical advance occurs on the behavioural level. The technologies of this policy are "not designed for a formal theological unification, but for the tactics of deep penetration on the level of profound basic values by means of 'love dialogue'" [A.

Chetverikova, *Meeting in Havana as a special operation of the Jesuits*, Institute of High Communitarianism, 2016, http://communitarian.ru/publikacii/ tserkovnaya_analitika/vstrecha_v_gavane_kak_specoperaciya_iezuitov_1502201 6/, accessed on February 16, 2017].

The main instrument of those technologies is the interpretation of concepts which transforms the basic ideas of Orthodoxy. The recent Holy and Great Council of Orthodox Church is a vivid example. The Bulgarian confessors have criticized this document: "On the whole this is a document of *terminology* openly contradicting the traditional Orthodox theology and language of the Holy Fathers. Sometimes *ambiguous expressions* are used, which do not aspire to specify the concepts, as it occurred at General Councils of Ecclesiastics, but, to the contrary, consciously cloud and blur them. There are even some obviously *non-Orthodox formulations*." [*Bulgarian Patriarch Neophyte confessors sent a letter of application for the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council*, 2016, Information-analytical portal 'Amen', http://amin.su/content/analitika/9/4410/, accessed on December 15, 2017]

Father Dmitry Nenarokov has subjected the texts of observations of the Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations (DECR) of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev), regarding the coming Council, to a thorough analysis. Those texts vividly illustrate the behavioural approach of the contemporary Theology: "Since the early 60s [of the 20th century] there has been preparation in progress to the Great Orthodox Council; it will not become the Eighth General Council of Ecclesiastics, because in the ancient Councils participated both the Eastern and the Western Churches; now the Western Church holds its own Councils, while the Orthodox Eastern Church - its own; that's why we do not call the coming Council 'the Eighth General/Ecumenical', but just call it Great Orthodox; unlike the General Councils at which there was always some dogmatic issue solved and some or other heresy denounced, the coming Orthodox Council will not make any dogmatic decisions - it is planned to raise questions concerning the current entity of the Orthodox Church; moreover this Council will not decide matters at all: it will just proclaim the decisions made by the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches in advance, in the stage of preparation to it." In his comments, Father Dmitry Nenarokov emphasizes that "the speaker distorts the meaning of the concept 'General Council of Ecclesiastics' as if he didn't know that the General Council is a council of the Christ-centred Church, to which the Western Church, having squinted towards popish Latin heresy, bears no relation whatsoever" [D.P. Nenarokov, *Antichrist step*, Information-analytical portal 'Amen', 2016, http://amin.su/content/analitika/9/4392/, accessed on December 16, 2017].

The technological games with interpreting the basic concepts resulted in a refusal of 14 heads of the Autocephalous Churches to participate in the Great Orthodox Council. Among those who refused to come, the largest Church is the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the Orthodox Churches of Bulgaria, Georgia and Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch.

4. Sociological approach in interpretation of religious values

Sociology as a science was initially planned as an objective scientific instrument of measuring and studying society. The guarantee of objectivity, impartiality was provided by mathematical methods used in data processing, and by methodological atheism and agnosticism in approaches to studying the institution of religion.

As for the methods, however precise and adjusted they might have been, it was clear to begin with that they could not exclude the effect of interpretation on the part of the first-hand researcher. Throughout the empirical study scholars set research parameters, give grounds for methodological approaches and shape out the obtained research results into a certain logical construction of interpretations, i.e. form interpretative boundaries. If we take a look at the actual names of the scholars whose works became pivotal in the formation of a certain worldview platform in regard with exploring the problem of interaction between society and religion, we shall see how greatly their interpretations differ from each other.

According to Habermas, there is one exception where religion may have a function, and this is in the communication process. Habermas argues that in some theological discussions (for example, Wolfgang Pannenberg, Jurgen Moltmann, Dorothea Solle) the idea of God is transformed into an abstraction that shares those characteristic traits that, Habermas believes, describe the ideal communication. The concept of God symbolizes the process that binds a community of individuals together that strives for emancipation [8].

In his system theory, Niklas Luhmann contemplates the independence of the basic functional systems, concluding that "decision-making regarding religious conviction and practice has also become private" power [2, p. 54]. As the effect of privatized religion on other social systems is increasingly lessening, its further development is possible outside the strictly religious realm, for example, in religious-political activity.

Using his notion of field, Bourdieu analyses Max Weber's theory of religious. Leaning on his theory, the explorer focuses on the problems of what Bourdieu terms "material and symbolic weapons of religious violence" [9, p. 128].

For Foucault, "religion is a central part of culture and that includes several different religious traditions. Second, Foucault believes that religious discourse is framed and positioned in and through the human process of power/knowledge." [2, p. 65] As Carrette points out, Foucault's work has been used in analyses of religion and power, religion and culture, and religion and the body [10].

"When examining modern societies, Giddens emphasizes that most situations in modern life are incompatible with religion as a pervasive influence on day-to-day life." [2, p. 67] "…Giddens looks at religion in terms of individual response to moral dilemmas. Thereby, he presents a narrowly individualized and rationalized picture of religion, which does not take into account its collective aspects." [2, p. 68]

Each of the presented platforms lays down the basis for singling out parameters and indicators of a sociological research. Thus, studying one and the same society at one and the same time we get different results of its evaluation. However, all these interpretations in choosing directions of research in the field of religion are united by a methodological atheism.

The term 'methodologically atheistic' with respect to Sociology was applied by Peter L. Berger [11]. According to I. Furseth and R. Repstad, "The term 'methodological atheism' stresses that Sociology uses immanent, that is, 'this-wordy' explanations, and excludes religious explanations. Methodological agnosticism means that Sociology is able to provide information about the dimensions and expressions of religion, but it is unable to make any claims regarding the truth of religion." [2, p. 198] Thus, any religion-related research remains the view of a secular scientist, and the picture created by this explorer can be viewed as some subjective superficial interpretation, not touching upon the deep-lying processes which take place in religious communities.

To illustrate, let us adduce the example of an empirical research by Sylvie Bacquet 'Religious Symbols and the Making of Contemporary Religious Identities' [12]. The main conclusion of this research is formulated in the following provisions: "Across Europe, law and policies on manifestation of beliefs, however, seem to be constructed on a majoritarian approach. As argued by Bhandar [13], human rights norms and values are defined by reference to Christian culture. Across Europe, the dominance of the Church is still evident, despite many countries' adopting a secular model and officially separating Church and State. In this context, perceptions of symbols have tended to be based on the assumptions that they are not essential, which is largely the case in Christianity where there is no particular requirement for members of the faith to display a particular symbol (belief-based)." [12, p. 127] The operative word in this conclusion is evidence.

5. People's interaction in communicative streams' crosspoints - social value orientation correction mechanism

The analysis of interpretative deviations in construing religious symbols which form value reference points of the society shows that social systems are disunited and blind; they are not able to integrate. Value symbolics play the role of systemic codes; while interpretations act as an instrument of decoding those codes in the communicational process of the systems. There rises a question, however: if interpretation widens the gap between the systems, how then do they continue to exist? What prevents the society from falling apart? What cements its integrality, considering that communicative streams of various social systems engage the same people?

In our view, perceiving interpretations of religious symbols has several levels. What we have been analysing is a stable variant fixed in concrete, also symbolic forms characteristic of other systems, or the inner tendencies of one system which is the patriarch of the researched values (in this case, the Church).

But there are latent processes of behavioural interactions between people who are involved in the communicational whirlpool of social life, while at the same time belonging to different social systems, with their respective interpretations [14, 15].

In the article 'The Communicative Constituent in the Social Effect of Visiting Orthodox Shrines' [16], we accentuated attention on the action mechanism of communicative streams crossing in one point. Orthodox shrines are not only places of pilgrimage, but also tourist attractions. In a 2015 research we revealed that visitors of Orthodox Shrines are clearly identified as believers and profane. This inner perception of self and others in relation to faith was reflected in the respondents' answers. Thus, along with Orthodox sacral symbols (canonized saints - 93%, monasteries – 91.3%) the 'unchurched' group cited such symbols as the George Ribbon (66.7%), and the Constitution (44.9%). The difference between these two groups was also observed their respective motivation for visiting the holy places:

- for the 'unchurched' people it was solace (54.2%) and detachment from the world (25%);
- for the 'churched' - solace (78%), communication with believers (36%), and sense of community (31.7%).

When offered a list of shrines and asked to specify which of those they considered sacred, the respondents' answers confirmed that for both, 'churched' and 'unchurched' people, the dominating religious symbol in their consciousness remained the Orthodox Church (96.3% for the 'churched', and 87% for the 'unchurched').

On the second place for both is the monastery (87.8% for the 'churched' and 55.1% for the 'unchurched'); on the third place for the 'churched' stands the holy spring and the places with holy relics (72% and 65.9% respectively), while for the 'unchurched' - the holy spring and places with relics which include secular burials, e.g. the Unknown Soldier's Grave (50.7% and 46.4% respectively).

The meaning of visiting the shrine for the 'churched' respondents is not so much recreation (48%) as spiritual work requiring selflessness and sacrifice (52%). While for the 'unchurched' it is a place for recreation (72%). Socially significant characteristics for the 'churched' prove the sense of unity (55%); the sense of peace (53.7%), decent behaviour (53.7%); inner tranquillity (59.8%) which in combination with other indicators provides absence of aggression (peacefulness - 51%). For the 'unchurched', such indicators as the sense of peace (50%), inner tranquillity (48.6%), and decent behaviour (44.4%) are also dominating though the figures are lower than for the 'churched' counterparts. Especially noted should be the lower percentage of absence of aggression - peacefulness (34.7%), meaning a greater propensity to aggressive behaviour. Quite representative were the answers to the question about the feeling with which people leave the holy places. For the 'unchurched', it is the sense of inner peace - 65%. However, the positive potential of the 'unchurched' people is revealed in the answer that after visiting the shrines they register the urge to do

good things for others - 43%. This indicator exceeds than the previous one of peacefulness - 37%.

Thus, crossings of communicative streams provide a correction of perception of religious symbols on the behavioural level of interpersonal communication. The decoded interpretation-clichés characteristic of different social institutions comes in touch with the real behaviour of the carriers of true religions values.

Thus our research revealed a passive positive energy in the medium of non-believers in regard to perception of religious values as reference points after visiting Orthodox shrines. Reinforced through communicative acts, this positive energy may develop and become a kind of vector, a value orientation point. Or else, it may not develop further, and this last scenario, in our opinion, is fraught with disheartening consequences.

6. The immanent influence of religious values on correcting value orientation in the society

E. Durkheim's concept of religion was a continuation of the ideas of the Enlightenment about domination of reason over religion because it was founded on his conviction that 'the society is a synthesis of human consciousness'. That notion became the bifurcation point in the society's perception of religion. Every new generation 'freed itself' from the 'religious burden', and to quote Patriarch Kirill, 'legitimized its lapse from virtue'. Nevertheless, religion continues to play the key role in forming value orientation in the society. This influence is not obviously didactic or legislative, but immanent. The Church's attempts to impose religious values with the help of official power structures result in the society rejecting these values. In 2011, Russian Orthodox Church worked out a project of the document 'Eternal values as the basis of Russian identity' prepared by the Synodic department headed by Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin. As declared by Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, the list became 'the cause of argument' between Russian Orthodox Church and 'a number of political parties' and 'social layers'. However, neither the religious, nor the secular community adopted this document. Reverend Pavel Adelgheim spoke out against the document saying that: "This document challenges the conscience of a Christian. As 'eternal' values, Christians see those that were proclaimed as such by the Word of God. It was natural to expect to find the Evangelical interpretation of eternal values in the OVCO's document. It is said to read a Church document which forces on the Christians political, social and other temporary values in the quality of 'eternal' ones." [P.P. Adelheim, *ROC abandoned Christian values?*, Lifejournal online, 2011, http://adelgeim.livejournal.com/60080.html, accessed on February 3, 2017] The civil community was not less astonished by the document, mystified as to the purpose of drawing up the list.

The Church believes that the immanent influence of religious values involves believers closely following Gospel-precepts. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13.8) – this phrase reflects the

essence of Orthodox traditions. The Church helps those who have gone astray and lost their identity, but it does not replace authorities and substitute values for anything of equal significance.

The fact that the Orthodox values have played, throughout the course of history of the Russian state, the main part in forming value orientations of the society, was pointed out by the leader of the party Fair Russia, Sergey Mironov: "Even in the times of the Soviet forced atheism, the ethnical principles of Christian community were not obliterated in our country. Moreover, the slogans of 'reforging' and moulding a 'new human being' were often used along with these same, though differently named, principles, with the purpose of social building. The tradition was exploited for the minimum without which the moral bracing holding the society together inevitably falls apart, despite any political control." [17]

The immanent influence of religious values on value orientation in the Western society is felt in the French parents' acts of protest against the subject 'The ABC of equality'. The resistance against this subject united French people of various origin: Catholics favouring private education and Muslims from less privileged parts now think together how to withstand this new pedagogy. As Andrey Baranov and Evgeny Poloyko note: "The Socialists' attempt to rewrite the law 'of the family' and legalize artificial fertilization for lesbian couples drew half a million people into the streets of Paris. The government backed down: reviewing the family bills was postponed." [A. Baranov and Y. Polyoyko, *In France, parents struggle against experiments on children in schools*, 2014, http://www.tvc.ru/news/show/id/31590, accessed on February 15, 2017]

7. Conclusions

Practically many scientists: political scientists, philosophers, sociologists, historians, cultural scholars, anthropologists - recognize the fact that the secular culture of any society is based on the tradition of dominating religion. Despite the turbulent nature of the modern processes - globalization, intensive migration - culture continues to lean on historically formed values of the concrete society where religious values remain the fundamental core. All the more acute, therefore, seems to be the issue of undermining the cultural roots with the technology of interpreting religious concepts, substituting their meanings. By destroying the Church, the society loses its grounds, erodes value orientations.

Interpretation of religious symbols depends on two angles of vision: the 'outside' one reflecting the modern sociological approaches, and the 'inside' one reflecting the theological approaches. The task, therefore, is to build a bridge between Theology and Sociology. As it results from the article, failure to solve this issue leaves the zones of interpretation enclosed within each system (religion, culture, practice, society); and dialogue based on understanding of the on-going processes remains impossible.

Acknowledgement

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