SCOPE OF ONTOLOGY IN THEOLOGICAL ISSUES THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY OF JOHN MACQUARRIE

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Abstract

According to English theologian John Macquarrie, the main target of Theology is to clarify foundations of religious belief. While realizing this conception Macquarrie meets difficulties, which enforce him turn to conceptual philosophical analysis. Concept of Being is key to both Philosophy and Theology, so it becomes the core of Macquarrie's meditations. As a result emerges original ontological theory, going back to Martin Heidegger's ontology and Rudolf Bultman's theological principles. Our intention is to demonstrate that Macquarrie's attempts to build a theological ontology go beyond Christian dogmas and therefore do not fulfil his mission. In this paper, we apply the hermeneutical approach to the analysis of philosophical, theological, and religious texts, which makes it possible to fully reveal the meaning of the fundamental categories (Being, God) in one sphere (Philosophy) through understanding their connection with other spheres (religion, Theology). It is shown that in John Macquarrie's symbolic theology, the connection between God and man acquires an ontological character, but the 'Living God' is replaced by an abstraction. According to Macquarrie 'god' manifests its pagan connotations overcoming the denominational confession. This work demonstrates that the Christian interpretation of Being is different from Heidegger's paganism, suggesting the rejection and transformation of things existent, their additional determinateness and the symbolic revelation of sacred being in human existence.

Keywords: being, theology, Macquarrie, symbolic, language

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1. Introduction

The main goal of Theology is "to clarify the positions of religious faith in a clear and consistent manner" [1]. Moving towards the goal, the English theologian John Macquarrie faces difficulties that force him to turn to the philosophical tradition. In this connection, the category of 'being', which is the main one in Western European philosophy, becomes the subject of detailed examination by John Macquarrie. Relying on Heidegger's ontological scheme and Bultmann's principles of demythologization of sacred texts, John Macquarrie was able to frame a question on which this paper is focused: *How can a language that allows a conversation only about things existent be expanded or changed so much that it is possible to talk about 'Being'?* An independent attempt to answer this and some other questions diverts the English theologian from the goal of Christian theology. John Macquarrie's ontological model goes beyond confessional certainty and causes harm to clarity and accessibility of religious faith.

John Macquarrie, Professor of Theology (1919-2007), is a participant of the group of existentially oriented English theologians, along with R. Niebuhr and P. Tillich. He is the author of more than a dozen monographs [2-5], the editor of the Dictionary of Christian Ethics [6], for which he wrote a number of articles, the translator into English of Heidegger's 'Being and Time' [7]. He is a very authoritative expert in the field of Theology and a regular contributor to the journal 'Process Studies'. In the intellectual environment, Macquarrie is known as an adherent of Christian existentialism. At the same time, he is "one of the few existential thinkers who do not refuse to identify themselves as both a Christian and an existentialist" [8]. In his works, primarily theological in nature, which does not devalue their historical and philosophical developments and purely philosophical intuitions, Macquarrie tries to include in Christian theology some important things that, in his opinion, are contained in existential philosophy and, above all, in Heidegger's fundamental ontology and anthropology. According to his own definition, Macquarrie develops the concept of 'existential-ontological theism', which is intended to replace traditional 'metaphysical theism' and revive rational, or natural theology. With regard to the latter, in the interpretation of its tasks, objectives, methods and deployment patterns, Macquarrie somewhat deviates from traditional patterns.

In the second half of the twentieth century, there is a clear gap between everyday experience and theological beliefs. Even inside the Church, modern people do not understand well what they believe. Science turned to be in a similar situation. The theoretical nature of scientific knowledge does not fit into the framework of everyday perception. In his works, Macquarrie [4] emphasizes that after radical criticism of traditional metaphysics, Philosophy, as well as Theology, can claim only a certain degree of probability in its statements. The statements, which are compatible with the everyday experience of people, are especially convincing. For 'bridging' between factual statements and theoretical propositions, Macquarrie proposes to focus on man and the features of his

existence. It is man who is the primary givenness of philosophical theology, because in the philosophical question of God we are talking about the foundations and the last sense of all being and man himself. And secondly, Macquarrie argues that in order to get out of this situation, a special kind of philosophy of nature is extremely needed, where Cosmology will be the centrepiece. Macquarrie believes that modern Cosmology is not as contrary to the theological attitudes as it was in the 19th century.

2. Literature review

In his book 'Principles of Christian Theology', John Macquarrie pays particular attention to ontological problems [3, p. 278]. Solving the theological tasks in the manner of apophatic theology, he examines in detail that being also must be distinguished from becoming and from the phenomenon [1, p. 114]. For the greater 'clarity' of the characteristic of being as a condition for the existence of one or another separate entity, Macquarrie resorts to the word *'making available'*. By 'making available', Macquarrie understands: "to make us fit for being", "to enable us to live", "to introduce into being" [1, p. 115]. A religious person perceives the provision of being as a self-giving of being, as "mercy of being pouring on us and lavishing us with itself" [1, p. 116]. Moreover, the English theologian uses the words 'presence' and 'detection': "Being, which is transcendental to any separate being, is thus 'completely different'; it is at the same time furthest from us and closest to us, because it is present in every being, including ourselves" [1, p. 116]. Thus, Being, described by us as "incomparable, providing itself, which is present and revealing itself in all the diversity of things" [1, p. 117], recalls us Being as it was understood and described in the fundamental ontology of Heidegger [8]. John Macquarrie almost blindly follows the thought of Heidegger, basing on it his natural theology.

Meanwhile, the object of faith, which is clarified by Theology, is the supernatural reality – God. And Macquarrie quite rightly notes that 'God' and 'Being' are not synonymous. 'God' is not a neutral name. It carries within it the existential relation of evaluation, inclusion, service, and the like. We could even say, Macquarrie continues, that "God" is synonymous with "sacred being" [1, p. 118]. Further, the English theologian insists on recognizing the sanctity of being and attitude to it as "acceptance and inclusion" [1, p. 118]. Thus, we see that the understanding of being as "incomparable" that provides itself and is "presence" and "detection" [1, p. 117] comes close to an understanding of being as divine. 'God' also acts as a symbol through which people and 'old theologians' denoted the presence of 'sacred Being' that they discovered and not realized. So, being – an 'incomparable' self-giving thing that is present in each separate entity and reveals itself in it and through it is divine – requires a believer to regard it as 'acceptance and inclusion', i.e. becomes a *'Sacred being'* or 'God' as it used to be called. "*'God' is a reality, or, as I prefer to express myself in the classical language of theology, God is Being.*" [9] We should also add that "God is not ens (in general); it is necessary to make a qualitative leap and God should be

considered as being (esse), as the very act of being that precedes all kinds of being and manifests itself according to the means of each particular being" [9].

In the philosophical theology of John Macquarrie we see the identification of Heidegger's being with the Christian God. Now we would ask whether Being by Macquarrie-Heidegger has anything in common with what a believer calls 'God'.

As is known, Heidegger himself has never understood God as being, which he often emphasized in his works: *"Being and god are not identical and I will never try to think about the essence of god with the help of being. ... Belief does not need being. When this is necessary, then it is no longer a belief. ... I think that being can never be understood as the essence and foundation of god, but the experience of God and its manifestation (when it is related to a person) are expressed in the measurement of being, which does not mean that being can act as a possible predicate of god."* [10] There is a misunderstanding: on the one hand, John Macquarrie, as a follower of Martin Heidegger, states his concept of being almost unchanged; on the other hand, he identifies this being with god in contrast to Heidegger. This misunderstanding is dispelled, according to Macquarrie, with a more thorough reading of Heidegger: "... when using the word 'God' the theologian by tradition does not mean 'being' but some 'thing existent' or 'other being' in addition to the world, not a particular being, but simply 'being' even if he calls his ens realissimum (the real essence) and considers it the most existential of all things existent... It can be said that the 'forgetfulness of being', which Heidegger considers to be characteristic of our Western culture, is expressed in the theological tendency to think of God rather as thing existent, and not being." [1, p. 119]

Following Heidegger in his struggle against the 'forgetting of being', Macquarrie calls for an understanding of God not as being, but as being "which should be more primary than any other" [1, p. 119]. In this case, Macquarrie appeals to the Greek Fathers, Saint Augustine and Angelic Doctor, and further to the point from which "Biblical and Christian revelation leads its perception of God as Being" [1, p. 157], that is, from the appearance of God to Moses in the burning bush that opened its name: "I am who I am". After a thorough analysis of this difficult place from the Old Testament (Exodus 3), the English theologian concludes that the expression "I am who I am" should refer to the coming process of existence or to existence in time and in history, and not to static being. Macquarrie joins scientists who understand the verb 'hyh' (to be) in a causal sense as: 'I call existence ...' or 'I will make it happen ...'. All this allows reading the well-known expression "I am who I am" as "I give existence to the one to whom I give the opportunity to exist", but "this is just: what we mean by transcendental Being" [1, p. 158].

For the complete understanding of reality, hiding under the name 'God', Macquarrie uses the expression 'sacred being'. This expression has two meanings: the ontological one, because this word denotes being, and the existential meaning, because it denotes the relation of the inclusion of faith in the sacred as the opposite of things of this world [11]. In the word 'God', these

two meanings coincide and become inseparable. "The statement 'God exists' can be expressed differently, namely: being is not alien to us, it is not neutral towards us, but it requires entering into the fullness of being through our faith in being and realizing the possibilities of our personality" [1, p. 125].

3. Methodology

Turning to the theology of Macquarrie, it would be appropriate to recall that the purpose of theology, as defined by the latter, is "the expression of the content of faith in the most clear and consistent form" [1]. The clarity that Macquarrie speaks of is different from the clarity of the cognizing consciousness; it is ontological, i.e., it is a gift that a person receives from God. Clarity is, first of all, the clarity of the presence of the most sacred Being, which allows seeing the presence of every kind of what is actually just there. And the sequence mentioned in the quoted statement is not a simple logical-semiotic coherence; it is a development of Sacred Being expressed by the logic of the development of the symbolic language of Christian life. It is the interpretation of this development, through the idea of sacred Being, that the leading works of John Macquarrie are devoted to. It is this logic of the development of the symbolic language that is of greatest interest to us, and the language that Macquarie introduces for interpretation and construction of his system is presented as a problem. Thus, the aim of Macquarrie's theology is to express the content of faith in the clearest and consistent linguistic form. This goal is important for the formation of a religious picture of the world and the organization of a religious way of life [12]. In particular, for a sermon, for the application of revealed texts to the reality of modern life, and, in general, for the recognition by the faith of one's own foundations, whenever a believer finds himself in a situation of misunderstanding [13].

So, there is a special kind of language at the centre of the problems in theology; this language has its roots in the pre-theological language of religion. This is the language of mythology. Mythology is represented by Macquarrie as a kind of "primitive theology" [1, p. 126]. Therefore, features of a mythological language, such as polysemy and metaphoricity, become symbolic in nature. "The most successful attempt to update the values that the myth tries to express is to recognize the method of demythologization developed by Rudolf Bultmann" [1, p. 129], Macquarrie said. Bultmann's goal is "not the elimination of mythological statements, but their interpretation; this method is hermeneutic one" [1, p. 129]. Following Bultmann's program of existential demythologization, Macquarrie aspires to give it an ontological nature: "the myth tells of our human existence, but it tells of this existence in connection with Being, with how much Being reveals itself. Myth strives to express not only self-understanding, but also understanding of being." [1, p. 130] At this point, Macquarrie approaches the important for all religious ontologically oriented topic: *"How can a language that allows a conversation only about things existent be expanded or changed so much that it is possible to talk about*

'Being'?" [1, p. 131]. Macquarrie, following Bultmann, sees the possibility of this in the principle of 'analogy', that is, the correlation of phenomena belonging to the existence of things existent indirectly with God or Being. At the ontological level, this relationship is impossible without symbols, the English theologian believes. *"Religious or theological language cannot do without symbols, especially without symbols rooted in myths ... the fact that these characters are now understood as symbols and can be discussed and explained in an alternative interpretive language shows that the one who treats them in this way, rises above the purely mythological interpretation of symbols."* [1, p. 131] An alternative, interpretative, i.e., theological language of symbolic theology is a special language with its own method of structure, with its structural elements – symbols. It is a non-objective, non-pretentious language, arising from the experience of bringing the community closer to God (that is, an existential situation), rooted in existence. What is important for him is the indirect nature of expression, through which the truths of faith are revealed for a modern person and Being is revealed.

4. Results and discussion

The principles of existential desymbolization, defended by Macquarrie, are demonstrated in action by the example of the desymbolization of the 'myth' of the incarnation. The incarnation is at the centre of any Christian theology, so the consideration of the approach to it clearly characterizes the theologian of any school of thought. The 'incarnation' is interpreted by Macquarrie as follows: "the Person is at the centre of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation who became the symbol of Being, the revelation of God. If someone objects to calling the existence of Christ a 'symbol', as this word leads away from the reality of the incarnation, then it should be recalled that God (Being) is presence-and-finding in the symbol and it is difficult to imagine what else could mean 'embodiment'." [1, p. 138] After this, Macquarrie considers it necessary to emphasize that personal images and symbols are of primary importance, since they are most involved in Being and are able to symbolize it in the most inimitable way' [1, p. 138]. Macquarrie, speaking of "complicity in Being" [1, p. 138], does not want to part with the existential attitude of Bultmann, who, in turn, relies on the traditions of religious hermeneutics, which go back to medieval hermeneutics and further to patristics. At this point, the tasks of the two theologians coincide: "interpretation of the Bible and the church sermon in such a way that this could be understood as a word addressed to man ..." [14]. "Theology", Bultmann says, "should translate the language of the dogmatic tradition, which is associated with the old world outlook, into the language of modern people" [14, p. 212]. Bultmann is the representative of the so-called 'dialectical theology'. Some theologians of this sphere (Bart, Brunner) believe that any interpretation of the Holy Scripture bears the seal of history and is formed on the historical socially-conditioned understanding of it. New interpretations arise with a change in external conditions. Hence the task of the

theologian is formed as a relentless explanation of the rational content of the text. "Religious consciousness is always concerned with the problem of an adequate transfer of a group of texts interpreted as 'sacred'. Since the meaning of the text is determined by its relationship to other texts through which it can be interpreted, a change in the cultural context is associated with the creation of new meanings. The need for their correction leads to the creation of an artificial interpretation context, represented by a swelling array of secondary texts (a kind of 'culture in culture'), which is the general rule of religious iconic behaviour." [15] Following Bultmann, Macquarrie lends an ontological tinge to his 'demythologization', insisting that the symbols that act by analogy and are aimed at detecting the presence of Being reveal this Being 'not in itself' but make available the representation of "Being in connection with us" [1, p. 131], i.e. the language of Theology always has an existential-ontological character.

The nature of this language is the best way to clarify the essence of the matter put forward by Macquarrie: *"How can these symbols somehow illuminate Being?"* [1, p. 131]; or otherwise: *"how Being can symbolically reveal itself in existence"* [1, p. 135]. From the discussion above, we already know what Being is in question; we also know what 'symbolically' means. Therefore, the question can be reformulated in a more general form, that is, the ontological status of the phenomenon of Being in existence, which is analogous to the theophany. The manifestation of being in the things existent and God to people establishes a connection between the heavenly and the earthly, the sacred and things of this world [16]. The language is responsible for preserving this connection which is called the Testament. In the language, *the existence of* being manifests itself. And the coherence of this language turns into a connectedness of the world of the divine and the world of people. The very link is not a simple logical-semiotic sequence, it is the ontological one [17].

So, the draft of philosophical theology of Macquarrie correlates with ontology and with symbolic theology. Symbolic theology, in this case, has nothing to do with any 'symbolism', since symbolic theology considers the issues of dogmatics, creeds, i.e. addresses the specific religious manifestations of God. "It is devoted to the interpretation of those great symbols and images in which the truths of faith are revealed – the triune God, the creation, the fall of man, incarnation, redemption, eschatology and all that relates only to the faith of the Christian church ... this is the core of all theology, what is usually called Dogmatic theology." [1, p. 100] Ontology deals with being as a 'neutral thing', philosophical theology – as 'sacred Being'. At the same time, philosophical and symbolic theologies are related to each other as a description and interpretation. In this sense, the word 'God' as a symbol provides an interpretation of what is described as 'sacred Being' and is neutrally described as 'being' [18].

In this relationship of ontology, philosophical theology to symbolic theology, 'Sacred Being' is represented as one of the many kinds of the general genus of Being. Secular, i.e. neutral being considered by ontology is relatively 'sacred' by another species. Here we come upon a clear miscalculation of the theologian because it turns out from his reasoning that God falls into the

subordination of Being. Macquarrie does not intend clearly to admit this; he repeatedly insists on the identity of Being and God. But all judgments end with the priority of ontology. In this sense, Heidegger's warning would be justifiable. Heidegger is right when he says that the identification of an understanding (Being) with faith (God) is always, ultimately, a matter of understanding [19].

If we recall the definition of theism given by Macquarrie – "the vision of the whole, or rather the story trying to explain the whole" [5, p. 138] and acting as "the expression of the content of faith in the clearest and consistent form" [1], then the essence of the above will be clarified somewhat. 'The vision of the whole' presupposes the clarity of such a vision, which is the clarity emanating from the truths of being. And the 'story' itself in its consistent form is threaded onto the structures of the community of the symbolically understood 'sacred being' unfolded in the experience. The 'lighted' world in this way is filled with meaning and fulfilled in it. The thing explained in a language derived from the truth of being only thus deduced to existence.

Obviously, such an explanation already implicitly answers the question of the nature of the connection between God and the world. Macquarrie himself speaks of the language that realizes this connection as "thing existent" [1, p. 135]. Thus, it does not lie between God and the world what Heidegger calls an 'ontological difference' i.e. we can characterize their relationship as an ontological one, relating to the order of things [20]. God, understood by the original community as the Logos, is not fundamentally different from the thing existent. Epiphany is thus an ontical act.

Such reasoning tears up the identification of God and Being, placing God in a position subordinate to Being. In other words, the question of identifying the understanding (Being) and faith (God) is ultimately the question of understanding. M. Heidegger, who foresaw this danger, wrote: "only from the truth of Being one can comprehend the essence of the sacred for the first time. Only on the basis of the essence of the sacred one can conceive of the essence of divinity. Only in the light of the essence of divinity one can conceive and say what should be called the word 'God'" [21]; further: "Whether God lives or remains dead, is determined not by the religiosity of people, especially not by theological excursions of Philosophy and Natural science. Whether God will be God, is determined by the constellation of Being and within it." [21, p. 258]

When translating this problem into a somewhat different area, the descents become even more vivid. Macquarrie assumes Theology and Ontology as a system of utterances (Tillich suggested something like this speaking about the dialogic coordination of Theology and Ontology). At the same time, they are correlated as descriptive and interpretative systems of utterances. But for the coordination of both systems, it is necessary that at least one of the theological statements be descriptive, and at least one ontological statement be interpretative. Thus, it would be impossible to draw a clear line between theology and ontology. Theology would 'assimilate' Ontology.

However, in later work Macquarrie makes hints at overcoming these obvious difficulties. Being and God are reduced to indistinguishability, while God loses all his predecessors traditionally attributed to him by the Christian community: Summum bonum (the highest good), actus purus (pure action), etc. However, it becomes unclear why two words are used to designate one cognitive object. Further, what place is given to belief in such ontological constructions? After all, as Heidegger says: "... you have nothing to do in ontology with faith" [22]. And how such a 'God' can be identified with the Christian one, it is obvious that Heideggerian existence has very pagan connotations. Of course, the symbolic language acquires an ontological status under this approach, answering for the existential structures of identification [23]. But is this language the language of the early Christian community? A positive answer to this question would be highly controversial.

5. Conclusions

The draft of 'Christian theology' by John Macquarrie is one of the variants of natural theology. Its tasks are defined as "to comprehend Being and the essential characteristics of God only through the natural light of the mind" on the basis of natural datum of human existence and the givenness of nature [24].

'The Christian theology' of John Macquarrie vividly confirms the thesis that "Biblical faith, in the long run, cannot escape the ontological issues raised by Philosophy" [4, p. 108].

The connection between God and man, performed symbolically in the theology of John Macquarrie, has an ontical nature.

There is a tendency to substitute the 'Living God' with abstraction in the philosophical theology of John Macquarrie, and 'god' of Macquarrie acquires very pagan connotations.

Nevertheless, despite a clear distortion of the dogmatic positions of the confession, Macquarrie affects the real problem. 'Sacred being' as an analogue of God can be interpreted ontologically because Heidegger's interpretation of the category of 'being' cannot claim a monopoly in any ontological approach. The Christian interpretation of Being is different from Heidegger's pagan judgments; it involves the rejection and transformation of existence, its additional determinability. If we proceed from the transforming power of Christianity, then the question of Macquarrie has a very definite significance for theology and is quite legitimate. The symbolic expansion of sacred being in human existence does not have human forms of realization that call into question the very essence, ignore the authority of Heidegger's Being.

Acknowledgement

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