© EKATERINA V. NOVOKRESCHENNYKH

Tyumen State University
katherinenovo@yahoo.com

THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE: DISCOURSE OF RELIGION OR DISCOURSE ABOUT RELIGION?

SUMMARY. This paper analyses the problem of religious discourse from the semiotic point of view. The author underlines the difference between religious and theological discourses. The religious discourse is wider: its elements can be found within belle-letters, journalistic, scientific styles. Moreover, it has a double-sided character: on the one hand, religious discourse includes discourse of religion (inner discourse, practice of believers), on the other hand — discourse about religion (outer discourse, beyond religious practices). The problem arises on the border of these discourse areas, when the subject-discourse bearer combines both sides. To exemplify such a problematic area, the paper presents religious philology — a trend in post-Soviet philological research, which contained not only ethical but also conceptual-methodological grounding of a philologist on the doctrine of the faith. This approach shows a significant drawback connected with an attempt to substitute a thorough analysis of a text by its ideological correction. The author comes to the conclusion of necessity of another approach, semiotic in nature, to the study of religious discourse, religious objects and practices. Such kind of approach concedes multiple interpretations. To exemplify a semiotic research of a religious sanctity, this paper analyses the work Lecture on the Holy Trinity of Andrey Rublev by J.-M. Floch (1947-2001), the Paris School of Semiotics representative.

KEY WORDS. Religious discourse, semiotics, religious philology, Paris School of Semiotics.

The title of this article has originated from the theme of the 34th International Semiotic and Semiolinguistic Conference "Langages et signification "("Languages and meaning"), Albi (France) — "Discours d'autorité et discours de l'autorité"("The discourse about power and discourse of power")*. The purpose of our work is to identify the problem of religious discourse and its description in the semiotic aspect.

What is religion and what is its discourse, its language like? What is the discourse about it like? We will note here that religious discourse (Fr . Discours religieux) is not the same thing as theological discourse. Religious discourse is a much broader concept, which is stated by the researcher P.-M. Baud, in particular, in the preface to the proceedings of the International Conference "Religious Discourse: the serious and parodic in theology and in literature" ("Le discours religieux, son sérieux, sa parodie en théologie

---

* This conference is held annually, and the participation of Tyumen State University representatives in it has become a tradition in recent years.

et en littérature") (Metz, France, 1999), "Le discours religieux n'est pas propre a la théologie" ("Religious discourse does not belong to theology") [1; 7].

The outstanding semiotician and thinker of the 20th century A.M. Piatigorsky testified in his article "Some words about the study of religion" that 94 % of European citizens answered in due time (this article was first published in 1994) that religion is "faith in something". But as regards a number of religions, especially not related to world religions, this statement does not make sense: "If an ancient Indian or an ancient Iranian (they had common roots) had been asked, "Do you believe in Indra?" it would have been an idiotic question. Indra exists. In the phenomenology of our expression "I believe in" there is a very interesting, almost magical undertone: if I do not believe in it, it does not exist. An ancient Indian would have said that it has no slightest importance for the existence of Vishnu whether I believe in him or not" [2; 49].

The birth of the concept of religion itself outside any specific ritual, outside specific practices (in this context, the word "practices", Fr. les pratiques is not an occasional word, but a term of semiotics), i.e. religion in general occurred much later — in the 17th century, when the concepts of "culture in general", "humanity in general", "society in general" were originated [2; 46]. Just then the language of religion, metalinguistic description of religion, were originated, being far beyond religious practices, since it is known that in order to give any complete definition of anything, it is necessary, if you follow the brilliant logic of M.M. Bakhtin, to imagine it in the completed form — since only in this form any object is comprehended — just like a human himself, while he is alive and is subject to change, he cannot make any holistic and complete judgment of himself [3].

Thus, it appears that a person being inside the religion, a "practitioner", would not be able to judge himself from the inside in a way that would fully satisfy a scholar, and a scholar (unbeliever), in turn, comes to reductionist judgments, insufficiency of which is related to the lack of practice, the lack of completeness of religious experience, the lack of empathy. In this sense, faith is the primary thing for a believer, and language, speech, discourse are secondary things. A.M. Piatigorsky wrote in the same work: "The ritual prescribes rules for language use in religion up to the marginal situation when the whole meaning of a text, passage, phrase or word appears in their ritual expression (utterance , singing, whispering , etc.) , i.e. in the cult action, reducing the semantics of a religious text . Religion is always "primarily" modeled according to the ritual (i.e. to itself as a ritual) in relation to which its natural language is a matter of fate or chance" [2; 46]. In other words, religion, in a sense, is overcoming language and at the same time overcoming discourse. By itself, language without faith, without love is, according to Apostle Paul's words is "sounding brass" and a "tinkling cymbal" (1 Cor., 13:1), as, in fact, "tongues will cease" together with our incomplete human knowledge, which will be "done away" (1 Cor. 13: 8-10) [4].

At the same time, though axiomatizing the secondary language, religion exists through language, through the discourse given to it or created by it. Therefore, in the Christian religion the Scripture is written in human languages, the gift of sermon is given to the apostles in many human languages; in the polemics following the Scripture, in the long and complicated verbal disputes, in the fight against heresies the discourse of tradition was created.

The ambivalent status of the language, words, inscriptions (their secondary source property on the one hand, and their own sacral character*on the other) creates a lot of controversy in science, journalism and in everyday communication: what words, for example, have religious nature and in what context they should be written capitalized where they are not, if the baptism should be called a sacrament of or a ritual, etc. Let us give two examples.

According to the authoritative academic reference book "Rules of Russian orthography and punctuation" edited by V.V. Lopatin , "the interjections *ей-богу* (by God), *боже* (God), *боже мой* (my God), *господи* (my God), *господи боже мой* (my God), *бог ты мой* (my God), *боже сохрани* (God forbid), *боже упаси* (God forbid) should not [...] be written with a capital letter, **except those cases where the forms of God, Lord, express appeal to God** (hereinafter the accentuation is ours. E.N.) . In some cases, the choice of spelling depends on the context. Thus, it may be written *слава Богу* (thank God) **(if the context indicates that the speaker really thanks the Lord)**, and *слава богу* (thank God) (if the context makes it clear that an everyday conversational form is used: В тот раз он, слава богу, пришел вовремя! (Then he, thanks God, came in time!)). But in the combination *не слава богу* 'unfortunate' the capital letter is impossible (*У него все не слава богу* (He is very unfortunate))" [6; 157].

How can we reliably distinguish what is said by a believer and what is said by an atheist who is used to using fixed expressions not considering this use to be a violation of the commandment "do not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (Exodus 20:7), which just as such does not exist for him? [4].

We now turn to the example from imaginative literature and its analysis. A.M. Lyubomudrov , the researcher of Christian motifs in Russian literature warns against wide use of the terms "Christian literature", "orthodox literature" in relation to masterpieces of Russian literature , including F.M. Dostoevsky, because Christian motifs and elements still do not make the literature "orthodox" in the truest sense. Strictly speaking, orthodox, or ecclesiastical, literature is assigned to show the history of churching of the personality [7].

By all means, orthodox literature exists and is created by faithful artists on the basis of their worldview. However, in our opinion, if a Christian writer has a primary ideological purpose of clear reconstruction of becoming a Christian hero, there is a risk of formation of non-natural "orthodox realism" (by analogy with socialist realism). According to S.G. Bocharov, such ideological attitude "canceling the dead Soviet ideology and confronting it [...] retains its known function, leading and guiding role" [8; 590]. Such attitude may lead an artist to such self-censorship and self-revision which — we will again use S.G. Bocharov's words –would "dull" and "neutralize" "the searching sting of distraught lyrics" [8; 596], and the resulting work would be deprived of the genuine artistry, since, according to the words of the religious philosopher of the 20th century, Father Sergiy Bulgakov, art "should be free from religion (of course, this does not mean — from God) as well as from ethics (but not from the Good)" [8; 589].

---

* * The sacral meaning of the written word as an icon element, in particular, is emphasized by B.A. Uspensky[5].

Moreover, if an artist, a creator of a text is free to embody separate elements of Christian literature as well as their negation, or, alternatively, their full expression in the form of the churching serial line in his work — what should a scientist, a researcher do? How should the scientist save his ecclesiasticism without losing the scientific character? Or how should he save scientific character without losing ecclesiasticism?

S.G Bocharov wrote in the article "On religious philology", "A religious person reads the literature differently, and a religious scholar considers and investigates it differently. The scholar refers to his religious attitude as a theoretical argument which is ultimately decisive, it is raised to conceptual difference, and even — to conceptual superiority" [8; 585]. Staying in his "conceptual superiority", a religious literary critic involuntarily looks for the author's "weak" points in terms of his professed beliefs and even tries to "correct" them. Experiences of "religious philology", as this relatively new trend in the post-Soviet area is called by S.G. Bocharov, represent a "pious project of reinterpretation" of literary texts" [8; 588]. In other words, this is a project of "purification" of the text from excesses and bringing it to the doctrinal ideal.

The fact is, however, that even if a researcher's amendments are in favor of the truth (or what he thinks the truth is), they should not cancel the rigorous analysis of the text under consideration. Disagreeing with an author, even arguing with him, the researcher is still obliged to carry out the analysis of the text. There is no point, of course, of going to the extremes of deification of an artist and his creations and saying that the text has a "presumption of innocence". No, it does not have it, but it has a "presumption of the given"

And here two questions naturally appear: 1) Is religious discourse a discourse about religion, a discourse of religion about itself or a combination of both? 2) Is it possible for a scientist (philosopher, theologian, linguist who studies the language of religion, cultural studies scholar, etc.) to combine the view from the inside and the view from the outside, i.e., in Bakhtin's terms, to combine the "author" and the "hero"? Is it possible, in other words, to reconcile these points of view? Don't these points of view exclude each other, since, in the words of Christ, "but let your communication be, Yes, yes; No, no; for whatsoever is more than this comes of evil"? (Matt. 5:37) [4]. Our tentative answer is yes, it is possible to study from the "inside" as well as from the "outside", and both of these views have the right to exist. Religious discourse, thus, has a bilateral character. However, neither linguistics nor semiotics, nor literature, nor religion are required, and, may be, have any right to set the ambitious task of combining different points of view into one, i.e. the task of combining these points artificially.

We agree with the eminent French semiotician of the Greimas School J.-M. Floch who said that while doing a semiotic analysis of a religious shrine, it is possible to study this phenomenon simultaneously from different perspectives. This careful and thoughtful in a positive sense scholar in his book "Interpretation of the "Trinity" by Andrei Rublev" (Fr. "Lecture de la Trinité d'Andrei Roublev") he attempted to explore the icon "Trinity" by Andrei Rublev in five possible dimensions: plastic (dimension plastique), pre-iconographic (dimension pré-iconographique), iconographic (dimension iconographique), iconological (dimension iconologique) and iconic (di-

mension iconique). He noted that semiotics is not normative or evaluative, but descriptive. He notes that "the multiplicity of ways of interpretation does no harm to the meaning, provided that this multiplicity is organized semiotically" ("[...] la multiplicité des voies interprétatives ne nuit pas au sens, a condition que cette multiplicité soit elle— même organisée sémiotiquement ...") [9; 77].

The first four levels of the icon analysis (or its decryption, if we refer to the term of Floch himself — décryptage) does not necessarily require participation in religious practice, and express, as we move from one level to another, either an outside perspective of an absolute stranger who is not familiar with the iconographic tradition, or a perspective of an art critic, or a Bible textual critic, or a perspective of a historian. The latter level, the iconic, is the very practice of prayer and communion with God, including practice of prayerful silence, i.e. in a sense abandoning the language. This latter mysterious communion with the icon often does not need, due to the right not to need, the first four levels of the analysis.

To summarize, we will say that the semiotic aspect of religious discourse contains the perspectives of a stranger as well as of a historian, of a Bible scholar and of an artist, looking for inspiration in the eternal image, and the perspective of a praying person.

REFERENCES

1. Beaude, P.-M. Le discours religieux, son sérieux, sa parodie // Le discours religieux, son sérieux, sa parodie en théologie et en littérature: actes du colloque international de Metz (juin 1999) / sous la direction de Pierre-Marie Beaude et Jacques Fantino. Paris: CERF, 2001. Pp. 7-12.

2. Pjatigorskij, A.M. Some Words on the Study of Religion // *Izbrannye trudy* [Selected works]. Moscow, 1996. Pp. 43-52. (in Russian).

3. Bakhtin, M.M. Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity // *Jestetika slovesnogo tvorchestva* [Aesthetic of the Written Word]. Moscow, 1986. Pp. 9-191. (in Russian).

4. The Bible: In the Old Church Slavonic, Russian, Greek, Jewish, and Latin languages // Azbyka.ru: Orthodox Encyclopedia «Azbuka very». URL: http://azbyka.ru/biblia/

5. Uspenskij, B.A. The Semiotics of the Russian Icon // *Semiotika iskusstva* [The Semiotics of the Art]. Moscow, 1995. Pp. 221-294. (in Russian).

6. *Pravila russkoj orfografii i punktuacii. Polnyj akademicheskij spravochnik* [Rules of the Russian Orthography and Punctuation. Complete Academic Guide] / Ed. by V.V. Lopatin. Moscow, 2011. P. 157. (in Russian).

7. Ljubomudrov, A.M. Orthodoxy and Ecclesiasticism in Belles Letters. *Russkaja literatura — Russian Literature*. 2001. № 1. Pp. 107-124. (in Russian).

8. Bocharov, S.G. On Religious Philology // *Sjuzhety russkoj literatury* [Russian Literature Plots]. Moscow, 1999. Pp. 585-600. (in Russian).

9. Floch, J.-M., Collin, J. Lecture de la Trinité d'Andrei Roublev. Paris: Presses universitaires françaises, 2009. 211 p.

10. Kasatkina, T. Literature after the End of the Age. *Novyj mir — New World*. 2000. № 6. URL: http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2000/6/kasat.html. (in Russian).