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УДК

THE PROBLEM OF METHOD IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

Dr. Tatiana Litvin*

Keywords: philosophical theology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, Bible Studies, methodology of humanitarian knowledge, Marion, Bultmann, Ricoeur, Judaism, Christianity.

In the article the main trends of modern philosophical theology are considered in the perspective of methodological tasks. Based on the diversity of the post-secular philosophical situation, the place of theology often turns out to be not only in the series of theological disciplines, but also acquires features of interdisciplinarity. Theological studies aimed at solving the problems of humanity, history, and time, combine hermeneutics and philosophical anthropology, philosophy of language and psychological methods, often becoming an experimental space for applying of humanitarian approaches. In the paper the ideas of theologians and philosophers of the Bultmann and post-Bultman periods are compared.

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УДК

ПРОБЛЕМА МЕТОДА В СОВРЕМЕННОМ БОГОСЛОВИИ

Т. В. ЛИТВИН

Ключевые слова: философская теология, феноменология, герменевтика, библеистика, методология гуманитарного знания, Марион, Бультман, Рикер, иудаизм, христианство.

В статье рассмотрены основные направления современной философской теологии в ракурсе методологических задач. Исходя из многообразия постсекулярной философской ситуации место теологии зачастую оказывается не только в ряду богословских дисциплин, но и приобретает черты междисциплинарности. Нацеленные на решение проблемы человека, истории, времени, теологические исследования объединяют герменевтику и философскую антропологию, философию языка и психологические методы, становясь зачастую экспериментальным пространством применения общегуманитарных подходов. Сопоставляются идеи теологов и философов бультмановского и постбультмановского периода.

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What is contemporary theology? The answer to this question could change the entire map of the humanities and give a new impulse to intercultural communication. Theology as a reflection on Christian doctrine and as a tradition of knowledge of the highest truths is not always considered as something important for the scientific outlook of the early 21st century; but precisely because of its paradoxical nature, it is relevant in the topical sphere of intellectual culture and political debate. The purpose of this article is to analyze the current situation of methodology in the field of theological studies for the form in which the methodological question remains valuable for research into religion as conducted in Christian countries.

To achieve this goal I lay out three issues. The first objective is the analysis of the scientific status of modern theology. The second objective of the study is to systematize the philosophical methods of the twentieth century already included in theology, and to conduct a historical and comparative analysis of these methods. The third objective of the article is to develop criteria for a method that is necessary for early twenty-first century theology. The hypothesis of this study is the assumption that the influence and effectiveness of method for theology does not depend on the socio-cultural or political context in which this method is developed, but rather on philosophy and the degree of philosophical elaboration of the method, its internal validity and system.

Under theology I mean not only the traditional dogmatism, but also other areas that have become relevant or not lost influence in the twentieth century. In particular, biblical studies, philosophy of religion, and comparative theology border on or are in constant dialogue with systematic theology. Even as sources of discussions, they can be considered as part of theology, because they spread and promote the Christian faith. These areas can be considered as part of theological science based on the fact that their ideas are the result of various forms of religious reflection which strengthen the academic status of theology. Also by theology I do not mean any narrowly confessional values, but I consider those areas that are within the purview of all faiths and philosophical sciences.

The issue of the scientific status of modern theology seems polemical and the first task under this objective should be to analyze opportunities to respond to them. What is religious science in the modern academic community where the very notion of science is under constant revision? In the philosophy of science the problem of delimiting the criteria of scientific rationality has been

studied for several decades, at least since the beginning of post-positivism, and even earlier, and remains one of the central issues of debate early in the 21st century. The famous principle of falsifiability by Carl Popper (Popper 1963, 36) expresses the expectations that the scientific community had of scientific theory and thus the possibility of reasoned criticism spelled out in any research at the level of hypothesis. In the latest period of science there is equalized valence of subject and object, as well as socio-cultural context and the formation of scientific knowledge, but the principle of falsifiability remains a criterion not only for natural sciences, but also for the humanities if they may lay claim to being scientific. Can such an idea of science be applied to theology? And if yes, which results for religious reflection and for religion in general has this equality in rights? Or does theology as a dogma not permit criticism, and is it then inherently unscientific?

Answers to these questions are not easy for many reasons. If we ask them in the context of developing rules for academic disciplines, that is, in the context of the problem of what should be the sum of knowledge in the branch of “theology”, such a concept of theology as an academic field may involve a variety of directions and requirements. The confessional, geographical, and socio-cultural features of theology can be understood by the varying competencies of graduates. An example is, firstly, the Russian situation of recent years. Russian discussions related to theology as an academic discipline¹, and the policy of religious education in general, have been gaining popularity. However, the educational standard of “theology” that is accepted as an alternative to “religious studies”, includes both Orthodox theology and the general history of Christianity, depending on whether this is in a Christian university or in Faculties of Philosophy at state universities. In other words, a common understanding of the nature of theology does not exist. We can refer to another experience, that of religious education in United States where we see even more complex concepts of what knowledge students should receive. Depending on the denomination, type of ownership of the school, or time of founding of the university, departments and faculties in American theology can greatly differ from each other. The idea of unity is not only not debated, but in fact has been considered as false in itself.

This flexible variety is of course a consequence of many historical developments and is consistent with modern demands, but it does not add a sufficiently scientific character to theology. In general, it is not possible to rely on interfaith and cross-cultural differences in teaching theology in order to add weight to its scientific status. This difficult conclusion is further aggravated by discussions that are taking place on the border with religious studies:

¹ More about Russian theology today: Kishkovsky (2008, 161–175).

who should teach theology, is profession of faith required for faculty and administration and, if so, which faith? Even a cursory look at these discussions takes us further away from scientific criteria, though such are the demands of theological degrees, and thus curriculum guides.

What is the meaning of the term “science”, and how is it applicable to theology? The conclusion which seems to be optimal for a given objective should be as follows: theology belongs to a humanitarian discipline such as philosophy that has its own history and historical justification. Modern theology has inherited the same fragmentation as philosophy and solutions should be sought in the cause of this fragmentation by employing the experience of 20th century philosophy as a practical guide for the theology of contemporary post-secular society. The scientific criteria of natural science are often built upon empirical verification. However, does the term “empirical” mean only laboratory experimentation? Empiricism that is based on the knowledge of experience is not only a technological theory, but also a form of knowledge proven on the basis of historical experience, on the life experiences of millions of people. The big advantage of theology is its historicity and the involvement of historical experience in the formation of arguments. Also, if we consider the history of theology, the medieval scholastics in particular, we will see that some scientific ideas owe their existence namely to theology. For example, the idea of infinity in mathematics was developed by Nicholas of Cusa (Nicholas of Cusa 1997) by means of theology². There are more parallels from the category of fundamental questions about the origin of the universe, because the idea of beginning and end was borrowed by physics from Judeo-Christian concepts.

Theology is a science that can consist of not only ontology and metaphysics (the analogue of higher mathematics in the natural sciences) but also practical (in this sense “empirical”) areas such as homiletics, ecclesiology, ethics and the like. And its scientific status may be established as undoubtedly as the scientific status of philosophy, but only if we include the history of theology in the denotation of theology and recognize historical experience as a part of empirical verification.

This conclusion entails switching to the second problem, in which the revision of philosophical methodology of the twentieth century is necessary. First of all, modern hermeneutics belongs to the methodology of theological studies, including in varying degrees all methods of textual analysis. It should be emphasized that both in the history and especially in the present state of Humanities the boundary between biblical hermeneutics and philosophical hermeneutics is very thin. Christian exegesis, like Christian science as a whole

² More about: Nicholas of Cusa (1997, 28–29, 158–160, 206). See also: Moore (1990).

is formed by the fusion of two traditions, the Hellenistic and the Judaic. Biblical hermeneutics goes back to the Old Testament period as schools whose origins were in the times of the Babylonian captivity, and to the allegorical method of the Alexandrian school. The last in the history and methodology of hermeneutics is undoubtedly the most important for philosophical thought through the works of Philo of Alexandria, in which Judeo-Alexandrian allegorical interpretation reached its completion (Runia 1986). The allegorical method was not only a technique and interpretation of anthropomorphisms and commandments which were obscure to the Gentiles, but it was a constitutive element for later theological schools and thus demonstrates that we must discuss its unique worldview and philosophical synthesis. The allegorical method was prevalent in the Catholic theology of the Middle Ages up to the restrictions imposed on it by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas turned to the theology of Augustine, by which the epistemology of Neoplatonism became the method of knowing God and understanding the Word. From a Christian perspective, the sacrament of the Incarnation of the word (John 1:1) obtained judgment and understanding on the basis of faith by Augustine, illuminating the very mystery of language and revelation. In the philosophical reflection of this sacrament it is necessary to distinguish between the ancient idea of the Logos in his cosmic potentiality and embodiment of language in concrete historical-semantic content. Since the basic principle of interpretation of Scripture is the principle of inspiration, the moral and didactic sense should only be supplemented by the historical. Language should be used only to serve theological purposes. Until the Reformation, biblical hermeneutics blended the ambiguity of the mystery of Revelation and of philology of limited human understanding. Before the Reformation Christian theology expressed itself in the Latin language, and after it established two religious languages: Roman Catholic and Evangelical Protestant. Already this philological difference led to different approaches to biblical hermeneutics, which served as the ground for philosophical methodology.

In the hermeneutics of the twentieth century both philosophy and theology, in particular in the form of biblical studies, were more closely intertwined. The protestant philosophers L. Schleiermacher and then H.-G. Gadamer (1990, 478–494) established the potential of hermeneutics as a basic method in philosophy and in the humanities in general. G. Ebeling suggests the idea of hermeneutical theology: hermeneutics is an intermediary between historical-critical and dogmatic theology, reconciling the traditional exegesis with post-reformational reflection. Language as a means of expression for human spirituality has a special function for theology. Ebeling assumes the main features of theological language as the absolution, responsibility, and foundation for explanation and understanding. A theory of theological

language is necessary as a separate religious reflection that can solve the problem in the modern understanding of “Babylonian” culture (Ebeling 1978, 43). We also find in the works of protestant philosopher R. Bultmann the continuation of philosophical hermeneutics, and also of the ideas of W. Dilthey (Bultmann 1950, 47–69), where hermeneutics not only provides ways of understanding texts, but is the basis of historical science as such, which in turn becomes the method of understanding history. Gadamer and Bultmann were influenced by the phenomenology of Heidegger, so the problem of understanding becomes not so much an epistemological problem as an existential challenge, creating a special kind of sense of “event”. Partly because of this phenomenological dimension, which transforms hermeneutics into a philosophical anthropology, P. Ricoeur suggested the idea of hermeneutics of the subject in the second half of the twentieth century, that takes into account all the traditions. But the hermeneutics of subject does not intend to theology, but embraces psychoanalysis and social theories.

The second half of the twentieth century was also a time of eclectic hermeneutics, an era which continues today. During this period approaches of analysis and work with the text were tested for the interpretation of the Bible — experiments of French structuralism and postmodern approaches, reader-response theory, feminism, hermeneutics of liberation, and postcolonial hermeneutics belong to the latest biblical hermeneutics. Absence of unity was caused not only by different confessional goals, but also by the postmodern crisis of philosophy that affected the position of the humanities in the continental tradition. The analytical tradition also includes this methodological arsenal, using in addition the achievements of analytic philosophy of language. Despite the historical difference in the formation of continental and analytic approaches, in the postmodern period they converge.

However, there is an exception to this rule, namely the phenomenology of J. L. Marion, in which he returns to the ideas of Descartes and Husserl and performs the “theological turn” (Marion 1991). His philosophy is very systematic, almost in a Cartesian sense³. Marion builds the unity of aesthetics of icons with phenomenology of perception, and the theology of the gift of grace with the metaphysics of free will. Each part of the system has connected to another, and Husserl is similar to Malevich and Descartes to Levinas. Since the task of my article is not to include an exhaustive analysis of the philosophy of Marion, I limit my criticism to one essential point — the systematics of Marion does not solve the problem of the postmodern crisis, but rather emphasizes it. The transcendental subject becomes aesthetic subject and questioning of God takes the form of artistic experience. I agree that the contemporary Christian

³ Selected critics: Geschwandtner (2007), Horner (2005), MacKinlay (2009).

can be himself (or herself) not only in the walls of the Gothic church, but this is hardly enough for the formation of a system of knowledge, in my opinion. Aesthetics cannot replace ontology, no matter how strong the critique of metaphysics in a secular age might be.

In general, the outcome of the second problem is the following: contemporary hermeneutical methods of theology recapitulate the crisis and fragmentation of philosophical methods, which is typical for continental and analytic theology, including Protestant biblical studies. Abandonment of the traditional rationalism leads not only to a wider range of approaches (e.g., feminism is a definite plus in the arsenal of methods), but also increases the gap between faiths, which in my opinion weakens Christian theology among academic disciplines and contemporary intercultural dialogue with other religions.

Accordingly, the third objective of our research is to develop criteria of possible methods that will contribute to a discussion concerning the methodological problem of modern theology. Which of the above approaches have been more influential in the twentieth century? It is obvious that despite all the disadvantages it is an approach that in some extent includes phenomenology, namely the approaches of Ricoeur and Marion. The benefits of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of subject are that he relied on anthropological analysis. In other words, he did not subtract the 'live' person out of consideration and a balanced approach to psychoanalysis and he makes use of a special attention to language and its many layers. Accordingly, Ricoeur's study of patristics, such as the anthropology of Augustine, remains a relevant example of the application of methods of the twentieth century to the analysis of classical texts⁴. However, a disadvantage of the theory of Ricoeur is that the hermeneutical question, "conflict of interpretations" switched into a plan of social criticism and Ricoeur this resolves this "conflict" with Marxism (Ricoeur 1969). This decision is interesting in terms of social philosophy, but in terms of the philosophy of religion, it diverges and turns hermeneutics into a tool of political rhetoric, increasing secularization even more, in my opinion. As for Marion, his transcendental project is undoubtedly on a larger scale than that of Ricoeur and includes French phenomenology and philosophical anthropology. It is recognized in philosophy and theology as the most systematic. But namely this Cartesian character leads to systematic disadvantages of Marion's philosophy. As was noted above, Marion's philosophy does not reconcile systematic eclecticism and emphasizes the contradiction even more, but here it is important to add that the scale of Marion leads to dogmatism, which returns the twentieth century to the disadvantages of medieval metaphysics.

⁴ Cf.: Laughery (2002).

How can there be a method in which negative data is minimized? Undoubtedly, the mere synthesis of theories of Ricoeur and Marion, minus the above mentioned disadvantages, could be such a method⁵. I agree especially with the idea that phenomenology allows for giving the status of a “living” science to contemporary theology. It is a science that is not becoming a natural science, but retains the autonomy of the spiritual experience. In other words, the method of phenomenological hermeneutics, including not the existential analysis of Heidegger, but rather the phenomenology of consciousness by Husserl, could be an effective approach to textual and doctrinal problems.

However, there is another aspect that strengthens contemporary Christian Science. As already noted, biblical hermeneutics historically originated from the synthesis of Hellenistic philosophy and practices of Old Testament interpretation, and this extends to the synthesis of theology as a whole. So besides clarifying the current state of philosophy the (Hellenistic successor), it is important, in my opinion, to pay attention to modern Judaism. Of course, in early Christianity, the relationship with Judaism had well-known features (as, indeed with heresies, which largely helped in polemics to create dogmatism). But Judaism in the early 21st century is completely different in comparison to the first centuries of Christianity, having passed historical and political transformations. However, the dialogue with Judaism in contemporary Christian theology is often absent. In what form should this dialogue take place — in the form of criticism from the standpoint of post-secular society, in the form of interference, or in the form of cool politeness? The answer can be obtained only after recognition of the need that is currently not being articulated in the issues of most Christian disciplines. One of the philosophers of the twentieth century, Edith Stein, a convert from Judaism to Catholicism, has created a special phenomenological anthropology that belongs as well to a list of Catholic theological theories, as to the tradition of Jewish philosophy. Philosophical works such as those of Stein are rare, and in fact, a unique combination of contemporary theological positions and insightful interpretation of phenomenological science tasks, thereby forming an independent view on the essence of the art of thinking and religious activities (Stein 1994,10). These works consist of a correlation of criticism and dogmatics, explication of the experience of faith and of experience of empathy, the “factuality” and “eidetic” are considered in the context of common goals and integrity in the construction of theoretical science of cognition. The question of intuition is the item that brings Thomas Aquinas’s scholasticism and the phenomenology of Husserl together (Stein 1993, 46–49), and in many ways, this is the key notion for the understanding of the methodological approach

⁵ To an idea of philosophical theology see: Litvin (2013).

by Stein. This notion is decisive for determining the nature and objectives of knowledge, the intuition defined as “essential vision” (*Wesensschau*) of immediate data of consciousness. Such a synthesis of traditional metaphysics and phenomenology, including taking into account the criticism of Judaism, would be the basis of phenomenological hermeneutics, given thereby, as well as the history of Christianity, as the challenge to the contemporary society of globalization.

Thus, we can conclude that the hypothesis is confirmed — philosophical eclecticism leads to methodological disunity and loss of scientific status. However, contemporary theology is very varied and it is impossible to talk about the postmodern crisis of the late twentieth century, as well as inappropriate to assert the only correct method. But the analysis of the current state of methodological discussions leads to the conclusion that the synthesis of philosophy and theology right now may be the most interesting, if in addition to the Hellenistic the Jewish part of Christian history may be revised.

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