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On literal and non-literal meaning of religious beliefs

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Terminological remarks

The text refers directly to the central dogmas of the Christian religion, but indirectly also to the essential beliefs of other great religions. In each of them these beliefs are interpreted literally, not metaphorically. The meaning of the latter will be explained below. Religious beliefs or convictions become dogmas if the religious community accepts them in a permanent, unquestionable way and considers them substantial for its identity. In the definition of Catholic theology, dogma is "a statement of the Magisterium of the Church binding on the faithful, in which the truth contained in Revelation is clarified, referred to the Christian life and preserved in its unchangeable content". The dogma is considered a judgment free of error, binding in conscience and protected in its own wording, since this enables it to be rightly understood by the whole community. This does not mean, however, that dogmas are not open to interpretation and discussion, but always under the control of the Magisterium of the Church, whose instruments comprise the Pope and the collegiate bodies of bishops (*Breviarium Fidei* 2007: 591 - 593; Beinert 1998: 44, 230).

The "third way" Karl Jaspers calls the philosophical faith which affirms the existence of Transcendence, but treats all ideas and concepts about it as ambiguous ciphers. In this text, the "third way" includes not only Jasper's philosophy, but also the broader current of religious philosophy, which accepts the existence of God or at least the meaning of life sees in ethics and spiritual values, sympathizing with the Christian religion, but treating all its beliefs not literally.

Outline of the problem

Many philosophers of religion of the last two centuries have criticized the literal understanding of religious dogmas, and at the same time have not rejected them as meaningless. They proposed a non-literal interpretation, which Arthur Schopenhauer called allegorical, Karl Jaspers called cipher, while Paul Ricoeur, John Hick or Gianni Vattimo preferred the concept of metaphor. To a greater or lesser extent, the non-literal interpretation of Christian dogmas was also postulated in the 20th century by representatives of Protestant liberal theology, such as Adolf Harnack, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, John A.T. Robinson, John Shelby Spong and others. In the last few decades, philosophers, theologians and other religiologists proclaimed the idea of religious pluralism. John Hick, Paul F. Knitter, Rajmundo Pannikar, Perry Schmidt–Leukel and others have been postulating metaphorical interpretation. In the latter case, the fundamental equality of world religions as a means of salvation and, therefore, the need for a Copernican revolution in the philosophy of religion and theology is suggested. A number of authors who demand not a revolution but far-reaching reinterpretations of the traditional Church Creed also include contemporary authorities in religious issues such as Peter Berger and Hans Küng. Berger is one of the best-known sociologists of religion and theology today, and Küng is perhaps the most eminent Christian theologian in the world today. In Poland, Professor Wacław Hryniewicz (1989, 1994 et al.) demands a significant departure from the literal interpretation, which however does not go beyond the Catholic freedom of theological research.

Today, the question of non-literal or at least less-literal reading out religious beliefs has to be considered not only by philosophers but also by all thinking believers who have found themselves in a religiously pluralistic society. With their otherness, believers of other religions question the literalness, and what is associated with it, the exclusive truth of one belief system only.

In her doctrinal message, however, the Church defends the literal meaning, especially of her central dogmas, such as the Holy Trinity, the divinity and bodily resurrection of Christ, redemption, eternal life, final judgment. Literal meaning is also given to lower-ranking dogmas, about which there are religious differences in Christianity. These include the immaculate conception and assumption in heaven of Mary, the infallibility of the Pope, the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ during the sacrifice of the Mass and his constant presence under these forms, the divine establishment of the Church, the existence of the personal Satan and others.

The proposal for a non-literal interpretation of religious beliefs raises many questions. Would the Christian faith remain itself after two thousand years, changing understanding of its beliefs in a fundamental way? Can this faith give up the literal meaning of what it maintains not to be human, but revealed by God? Does not the metaphorical interpretation of religious beliefs mean the renunciation of any concept of truth in religion? What is the essence of Christianity, as well as of other religions: the doctrinal ("doxastical") or moral and spiritual layer? Wouldn't a faith that treats religious beliefs (with the exception of the very existence of God) more or less in the same way as metaphysical poetry, bring about extreme subjectivity and the impossibility of forming any religious community?

On the pages of this text it will be possible to answer only preliminary and only some of the above questions. Three questions will be considered: 1) What is the difference between literal and non-literal interpretation of religious beliefs? This difference will appear first in general and then on the example of the dogma of the divinity of Jesus Christ. 2) What are the reasons pointing out to the literal and non-literal interpretation of religious beliefs? 3) Can a non-literal interpretation be considered a broader paradigm and "subsuming" the essence of the literal one?

The difference between literal and non-literal meaning

Literal language is an opposite of the use of language in metaphor, metonymy, allegory or myth, but a relative opposite, subject to lively and usually very refined linguistic and philosophical discussions. Modern theories of metaphor in its broadest sense, developed especially in the cognitive linguistics, aim at demonstrating its omnipresence in language, also in language traditionally considered literal (Lakoff and Johnson 1988). To metaphor is also attributed a cognitive value, and not only an ornamental one, contrary to the predominant literary and philosophical tradition dating back to Plato: "A metaphorical statement...equips certain expressions included in it with a new sense, at the same time conveying through it a new interpretation" (Przełęcki 1969: 17). In Ricoeur's hermeneutics, the metaphor (myth, symbol) appears as a carrier of "surplus meaning", which causes "raising the sense to a higher level, shaping it in creative inspiration" (Ricoeur 1986: 335).

Research into metaphor has contributed in recent decades to a renaissance of rhetoric, which has become a kind of worldview and of the nature of truth. In this view, facts, procedures and values are shaped by man rather than provided by God or Nature (Fisch 2002: 440; Perelman 2004). In turn, the anti-essentialist philosophy of language, which is represented in various ways by Wittgenstein, Quine, Putnam, Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, Fisch and others, maintains the view of "procrastination" (deferring) the meaning of elements of language, denying the existence of permanent "lumps of meaning". Thus the full literalness of any concept, sentence or text does not exist (see, among others, Bińczyk 2007). In close connection with the hermeneutics of the metaphor remains the contemporary rehabilitation of the myth, which is one of the variations of the metaphor. The myth no longer presents itself – as

the thinkers Enlightenment maintained— as an error, superstition, an expression of primitive consciousness or at most "truth in disguise of a lie" (Schopenhauer), but as a thought-provoking symbol, always present in every form of cognition and cultural formation (Cassirer, Jung, Eliade, Kołakowski, Blumenberg, Motycka, cf. Klemczak 2006). There is no place here for the approximation of the above theories.

For the purposes of this text, it is sufficient to assume that a complete negation of the notion of literalness would also invalidate the notion of metaphor, so there is literal and non-literal (metaphorical, allegorical, cipher) use of language, while the essential feature of the former is the univocity of meaning within a given linguistic community, and of the latter is polysemy).

In relation to everyday language, literality is "the use of words in their usual dictionary sense to describe specific objects or situations that are in public access" (Jäkel 2003: 50). In another approximation "a literal language is a language used to talk about the world without the feeling that we suspend, violate or exceed the accepted conceptual categories, conventional ways of perceiving the world" (Pawelec 2006: 15). For example, the sentence "John took part in the pilgrimage to Częstochowa from August 3 - 15, 2008" is understood literally, that is, unambiguously, whereas the sentence "human life is a pilgrimage" has metaphorical and ambiguous meaning, because the similarity of human life to a pilgrimage is manifold. The literal meaning of its statements is also sought by the scientific language, first of all the scientific and legal ones, while the languages of humanities - literary, psychological, philosophical or theological - must reach for metaphors, because the emotional, aesthetic, concerning will or Transcendence, elements present in them are not subject to an unambiguous description. Apart from that, the literalness is different, when concrete empirical facts are stated, and on the other side when the scientific hypotheses and research programs are shaped. It must be said that literalness is gradual, but in each case is characterized by the assignment to a concept, sentence, theory, or story of one or more meanings within a given language community. This distinguishes it from metaphors whose meaning is polysemic and unclosed.

Related to the metaphor are concepts of metonymy, analogy, symbol, allegory, comparison, cipher or myth. The scope of these notions is not always clearly separated, sometimes partly or even completely overlapping. The concept of a symbol has the widest meaning, it is "a general category, covering all cases when a surplus (in relation to the literal - KW) value of the sign appears". (Dobrzyńska 1984: 155).

At the literal level, sentences are true or false as far as they relate to facts, while metaphorical sentences literally understood are false, which does not mean, however, that they have no cognitive value. As Nelson Goodman (1997: 28) notes, "a sentence, even if literally false, can be metaphorically true". The cognitive function of metaphors is sometimes to bring something less known closer to something more familiar and then to clarify the sense of what is less known, such as in a metaphor about life as a pilgrimage. At other times, as Paul Ricoeur (1986: 328 - 337 et al.) emphasizes, metaphors "give food for thought", lead to a new cognition, but in an ambiguous way, open to a new interpretation. "The metaphor is one great cognitive analogy ... is in fact an evasion of giving some kind of final cognition, hence it can function as an object of various interpretations" (Stępnik 1988: 105). The metaphorical interpretation is based on literal meaning, but treats it as a carrier of a deeper and manifold sense, which expressed literally would inevitably be shallow or narrowed down by its univocity.

Christian beliefs are understood literally

Since its inception, Christian theology has known the non-literal, spiritual meaning of Scripture, namely the allegorical sense (the Old Testament is a spiritual figure of the New), the moral sense (the life of Jesus is a model for the life of Christians) and the anagogic sense (the New Testament figuratively

announces eternal life - see St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 1, a. 10). However, the literal sense has always been, and still remains, the most important and founding meaning of the remaining senses (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 116). It took for theology many clashes with the claims of natural sciences or linguistics in some cases to abandon literal interpretation of sacred texts. For example, the biblical description of the creation of the world today is not interpreted literally, but figuratively: one day of creation could have lasted millions of years, according to the results of earthly evolution studies. The Church has accepted the theory of evolution, provided it is confirmed by natural sciences (see e.g. John Paul II 1985). As Protestant biblical scholar Hans W. Frei notes, in the last three centuries there has been a huge change in the way Christians read the Bible. A realistic reading of many of its texts has fallen, a figurative reading has been abandoned and no longer attempts have been made to covenant reality with the reality presented by the sacred texts, but vice versa - sacred texts with the reality presented by scientists and historians (cf. Wolterstoff, p. 77).

However, the fundamental Christian beliefs contained in Scripture and Tradition, formulated in formal dogmas and "doctrinal statements" of the Church's Magisterium, are understood literally. First of all, the central Christian dogmas: the creation of the world by God, the Trinity, the redemption of humanity from the consequences of original sin through the death of Jesus, the divinity and resurrection of Jesus, the final judgment, the eternal life, the divine establishment of the Church and of the sacraments, the communion of the saved - are, for all traditionally Christian believers, unambiguous historical truths and not myths that can be interpreted ambiguously. Catholicism also literally believes in many other things, for example, that during Mass the substance of bread and wine turns into the body and blood of Christ. The Catholic Church rejected the proposal of Dutch theologians to replace the word "transformation" with "change of meaning" or "change of purpose" in this dogma (*transsignificatio*, *transfinalisatio*, see Paul VI, encyclical *Mysterium fidei*, 1965). Literal faith takes place not only in Christian denominations, but also in other religions and creates a more general problem of truth in religion, for which there is no place for closer reflection.

The literality of Christian truths in the theological sense is specific. First of all, they remain under the cover of mystery, because they exceed the capacity of human reason. The divine element contained in them is not subject to any semantic literality, but at the most to a properly understood analogy. Secondly, the Church community's understanding of the truths of faith is not static, but has developed over the centuries. As already mentioned, Vatican Council II adopted the idea of developing an understanding of dogmas (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Revelation of God*, 1965, n. 51), which significantly broadened the possibility of ecumenical dialogue and dialogue with secular philosophies. Thirdly, the basic criterion for understanding either the sentences of Scripture or the content of dogmas is the theological contextuality, called the "analogy of faith". It is "the consistency of the truths of faith among themselves and in the whole plan of Revelation". (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 114). Individual sentences or fragments of the deposit of faith should not be interpreted randomly, but in the context of the whole of Revelation, which directs its interpretation towards a spiritual sense and prevents the literary character of the beliefs of so-called sects.

All this, however, does not mean that dogmas can be understood allegorically or metaphorically. They cannot be given a meaning open to a multidimensional and subjective interpretation, as allowed by a metaphor, myth or cipher, but only as recognized by the ecclesial community and in Catholicism by the Magisterium of the Church (cf. *Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 1972, *Breviarium Fidei*: 592). Jasper's postulate to keep the dogmas *im Schwebe* (being suspended, vague, open to various interpretations) meets with a fundamental disagreement here. In the philosophical, religious and theological interpretation of dogmas, although analogy is acceptable and even widely used, as Joseph Ratzinger, the current Pope, stresses, analogy is not a metaphor:

While the Greek or Indian myth only wants to spread a variety of images of the eternally elusive True, faith in Christ in his fundamental statements cannot be exchanged. He does not eliminate the fundamental boundary between man and truth, i.e. he does not remove the principle of analogy, but analogy is something else than a metaphor. It is always open to enlargement and deepening, but within the limits of what is available to man, it expresses the truth itself (Ratzinger 2005a: 63).

Literal and metaphorical sense on the example of the dogma of the Incarnation

According to the faith of the Catholic, Orthodox and Orthodox–Protestant Churches, the literal sense, in opposition to the metaphorical (mythological), applies primarily to the dogma of God's incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth. It means that God incarnated man only once in the history of mankind. The historical man, Jesus of Nazareth, was and remains true God and true man, uniting two natures - human and divine - in one, divine person. The word "true" means that Jesus is God *sensu proprio*, not in any figurative, allegorical or mythical sense. It is not enough to interpret that God was in Jesus "in the highest way" or "in the most special way". This view, expressed by liberal Protestant theologians such as Rudolph Bultmann and Paul Tillich, also by Catholic theologians such as Piet Schoonenberg, Hans Küng, Schmidt-Leukel and by the entire camp of religious pluralists headed by John Hick, was regarded by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in the 1972 Declaration as being "far from true faith in Jesus Christ". (*Breviarium fidei*: 588-590). Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, current Pope, leaves no doubt about this:

Homoousios (of the same essence as God the Father)...means that the word 'son' should not be understood in terms of poetic allegory (mythological, symbolic), but quite realistically. Jesus is truly the Son of God, and is not just called that. In this way, the realism of biblical faith and nothing else is defended; the seriousness of this new, emerging from outside event... This seemingly so exposed formula of *Creed, homoousios*, ultimately only says that *we should take the words of the Bible literally*, that it is *literal and not only allegorical* in its eschatological statements... Christ is not - perhaps extremely fascinating - an avatar of God, one of the various final forms of manifestation of the Divine, through which we learn to sense infinity. He is not an "appearance" of what is God, but *is God*. (Ratzinger 2005b: 77, 85, italics my).

If one believes in the divinity of Jesus metaphorically, it means that he was only a human being, not God, although through his words, actions and suffering God made himself present to people, not in an absolute and one-off way, but in a way that during the two thousand years of his life millions of people, mainly in the Western culture, were given a metaphysical and moral sense. What is more, the teaching and example of Jesus' life can inspire also people from other cultures, because at least some elements of Jesus' teaching and life can be universally important (for example, that "there is no man for the Sabbath [read: for the state, institution, organization, custom, law], but the Sabbath is for man". - Mk 2, 27). But people from other civilisations have their own sources of moral and spiritual inspiration. In them other characters - Muhammad, Buddha, Mahavira or Confucius - played a similar role to Jesus in the culture of the West. In this interpretation of Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth and the life". (J 14:6) are true only in a relative sense, limited in principle to the Christian cultural circle. In the global dimension, Jesus is not the only way.

Reasons behind the literal understanding of religious dogmas

The fundamental reason is that the Church, in her conviction, in defending the literal understanding of dogmas, defends the continuity of her doctrinal tradition. From the very beginning, believing Christians have been convinced that they believe not in myths like pagans, but in truths revealed by God, which have a historical basis and are fundamentally different from the products of mythological and poetic fantasy. Already in the text attributed to Saint Peter we read: "we did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (II P 1, 16). As stated by the well-known Canadian philosopher Louis Dupré (2003:231):

The first adherers of Jesus believed because of facts. Their mission depended basically on passing on what they considered to be facts, and they did not hesitate to base their entire faith on the historical nature of these facts. The robustness of the facts underlying their beliefs may be questioned, but the belief itself cannot be interpreted as mythically oriented.

Christian apologists of the first centuries literally understood the dogmas of their faith, than the Fathers of the Church and the great scholastics, led by St Thomas of Aquinas. And so it is today - believing Christians (and similarly believers of other religions) are convinced that they believe not in myths, but in historically grounded truths that have real reference to God, Christ and other people and supernatural facts. Believing that God revealed Himself through words and deeds in a specific place and time, that Jesus was the unique incarnation of the Son of God in man, that He bodily rose from the dead and ascended to heaven - these and other central dogmas of Christianity for two thousand years were understood literally in the above explained sense. It would seem, therefore, that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for believers to give up this literalness even for the promising and great idea of seeking a higher synthesis which would unite all the world's religions and humanistic concepts of the meaning of life. It would entail a sense of loss of existential ground, which for two thousand years has been the deepest spiritual support for Christian generations.

The second reason preventing the Church from giving up the literality of her teaching is the fear of religious and moral relativism. It is believed that non-literal interpretation puts the content of Revelation at the disposal of subjective interpretations that could not create community faith or universally binding moral norms. In the eyes of the Church, relativism in matters of faith and morality gradually leads to atheism and, worse still, to nihilism, which is considered to be the ultimate evil. Believers, not only the least educated, but also the creators of culture, want certainty, which can only be given by the unambiguity of dogma. Andrzej Kijowski, a writer, literary critic and screenwriter (1928-1985) expresses this in the following way:

Therefore, on the part of the Church, we must be certain of the doctrine. Confidence in its infallibility, certainty in its sacraments, and certainty in its Resurrection. Either the Church is infallible, or divine, or we need her no more than other institutions with noble purposes and "moral authority"; either Jesus Christ is truly and always present in the Eucharist, or the Mass is only a symbolic theater; either Jesus Christ truly rose from the dead, or if he did not arise, "our preaching is useless and so is your faith...and we are to be pitied more than all men". (cf. I Cor 15:14, 19).

The third reason for the traditional literal interpretation of dogmas may be that the connection between ecclesiastical doctrine and ethics and spirituality seems loose, just as in philosophy the dependence of ethics on metaphysics is still debatable. As Kant taught, practical reason is not a simple deduction from theoretical reason, but has a specific autonomy towards it, "as a gift alien to it, which has not arisen from its foundation". (*Critique of Practical Reason* b. 2, chap. 2, par. 3). Common sense also suggests that what matters is not so much what people believe in as how they live. It seems that there is nothing reprehensible about it, if people draw inspiration for moral attitudes and spiritual feelings from beliefs considered by intellectuals to be erroneous. Blaise Pascal, who interpreted Scripture literally, but also noticed that sometimes it was impossible, says: "When the word of God, which is true, is false literally, then it is true spiritually". (*Pensées* n. 555). For those who derive from religion above all moral and spiritual content, the literal meaning of sacred scriptures and ecclesiastical statements has always been of secondary importance; they considered their spiritual meaning to be essential. Saint John of the Cross, for example, supports his mystical theory at every step with quotations from the Bible, suggesting that he reads their literal meaning, and in fact gives them a spiritual one, often with literal meaning having nothing to do. Similarly to this day, sincere pious people continue to derive from the traditional interpretation of faith an encouragement to love, charity, humility, patiently bearing their cross etc., without asking themselves whether the origins of these attitudes are historical or mythological. Religious conservatives seem to be asking: Why should the

pious faithful be confused in their heads? Ultimately, what counts is ethics and spirituality, and doctrine seems secondary and related to them in an indirect and unobvious way.

Another, fourth reason why the Church defends the traditional - literal - understanding of her dogmas are doubts about the alternative. It is possible to refer to theology, *mutatis mutandis*, the methodological rule applied in the sciences, that the newer theory should contain all the essential values (explanatory, prognostic, in this case ethical) of the old theory and even more (cf. Grobler 2008: 120 - 133). Otherwise *melior est conditio possidentis*. Is this really the case with the proposal of the "third way"? The faithful, to the extent that it is voluntary and not only forced by ecclesiastical precept or custom, feel a spiritual good in that they participate in the life of the ecclesiastical community - in its faith, liturgy, sacraments, music, and pilgrimages. For them, sensual symbols and practices are tiers of the ladder on which the mind rises to purely spiritual contents: *ut per visibilia ad invisibilia rapiamur*, as one of the Mass texts says. Meanwhile, the faith of the third way, at least in its philosophical part, leads to a purely spiritual cult. The symbolic medium (sacraments, dogmas) seems unnecessary for educated minds (Schopenhauer believed that religion is a metaphysics for the common people). Symbolic medium seems to dissolve in the freedom of interpretation and consciousness that God is completely unknowable.

The "third way" is essentially a philosophy of religion and negative theology. Karl Jaspers' philosophical faith is a particularly striking example of this kind. According to the German philosopher, the fact that God is, is enough, and all images of God are ciphers to which the key has the individual heart, and not always, but only "in the sublime moments" of the spiritual ascent (*Philosophie* vol. III, 1956). A question arises, whether on the path of continuous negation of God's images one could resign also from this one surviving dogma that God exist? Indeed, the existence of God in Jaspers' philosophy is an accepted *a priori* dogma, credible only with persuasive reasons, such as the fragmentation and existential insufficiency of the naturalistic image of the world. The thesis that "there is no existence without Transcendence" is still stressed but not obvious. "The proven God- writes Jaspers - is not God. That is why only those who depart from God can seek Him" (1995: 28). The proposal of the German existentialist is elitist, affirming subjectivity and rational feebleness of faith, and consequently also negation of the Church. Although Jaspers paid a tax on the Church until the end of his life, because he believed that it was all the same necessary, he did not participate in Church life, and did not wish to have a Church funeral (Saner 1970: 119). He really only recognized the timeless and transcultural Church of noble, "existent" spirits. From the point of view of traditionally believers, the opinion of Fr. Stanisław Kowalczyk that Jaspers' philosophical faith "can only be taken up by the intellectual and ethical elite of humanity" seems to be understandable. (2001: 93).

Reasons for a non-literal understanding of religious dogmas

The basic reason, at least as far as the dogmas of the so-called prophetic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are concerned, is the derived from Enlightenment criticism of the concept of Revelation. This concept means that, regardless of manifestation in nature, God has spoken to people in a supernatural way, at a certain time and place, through "saving words and deeds". The philosophy of postulating a non-literal understanding of this concept formulates reservations about it, which can only be expressed in points here. A) The facts authenticating the content of Revelation (for example, the giving of the Decalogue on Mount Sinai to Moses, the resurrection of Jesus, the dictation of the Koran to Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel) cannot be empirically confirmed, they must be believed. As a result, faith in the content of Revelation itself is based on faith and not on historical facts. B) Revelations given to different religions are to a large extent contradictory to each other. Literally believed they were and still are one of the important causes of wars and conflicts between societies professing them. C) What God has supposedly revealed can be contrary to humanistic moral sensitivity,

such as eternal hell or the subordinate role of women in the Church. D) If God has revealed anything in an unambiguous way, that does not allow any further interpretation, it is proper for people to obey it. God becomes a competitor with human thinking and freedom, which diminishes the dignity of both man and God. E) Some of the contents of biblical Revelation (for example, human divinity, virginal conception, resurrection) are similar to the beliefs of ancient neighboring nations (Persians, Babylonians, Egyptians), but such beliefs in religious studies are considered myths. F) Historical and literary criticism of the Bible shows the non-historical character of many important biblical records. The divinity of Jesus, for example, is not mentioned in the three earlier so-called synoptic Gospels (Mark, Luke and Matthew), but only in the Gospel of St. John, which was written in the nineties of the first century (about 60 years after the death of Jesus) or even later and has a more theological than historical character. Critical exegetes agree that Jesus himself never preached that he is the Son of God in a literal sense (see e.g. Hick 2006). F) Many moral and spiritual teachings of Christianity, such as the Decalogue or the Sermon on the Mount, can be accepted on the basis of a natural moral and spiritual sensitivity, without resorting to the idea of Revelation. G) Non-literal understanding of the Revelation allows us to save what is morally and spiritually still valuable and valid in it, and to reject what appears to be anachronistic today. It is worthwhile to dwell on this point longer, because as much as it would be true, it would be sufficient for a "progressive revision" of the theological doctrine based on Revelation understood literally.

Does the non-literal interpretation "subsume" the literal?

The critique of the literal interpretation of Revelation by the philosophers of the third way - Schopenhauer, Jaspers, Hick, Ricoeur, Vattimo - is not destructive in their intention, but wants to elevate it to a higher level of understanding, and save its moral and spiritual inspiration. The literal meaning of the revealed dogmas is not to be simply rejected, but rather "subsumed" in a non-literal sense. Subsumption in science is talked about when the new paradigm does not completely invalidate the old one, but being a more "comprehensive" theory, makes it a locally useful subsystem. This is the case, for example, in relation between the physics of relativity and Newtonian physics. A more comprehensive theory is one that explains all the phenomena explained by earlier theories and, in addition, some phenomena not yet explained (Grobler 2008: 78). Ricoeur calls a philosophical attitude that does not treat myths literally, but at the same time sees them as having ambiguous meaning, a "second naivete". This is supposed to mean acceptance of myths, but conscious of their mythicity, myths assimilated by hermeneutical logos. Similarly, Tillich (1987: 64-72) defends the essential role of myths in religion, but on condition that they are "broken" myths, i.e. regarded as myths and not as factual truths. Thus traditional faith in the light of the "third way" does not appear as falsehood or illusion, but as a set of mental symbols that are true as an expression of faith in the unrestrictedly better possibilities of human existence and a referral to the ethical and spiritual life (Hick 2004: 374 - 375). In the third way paradigm, the directness and literalness of the content of Revelation is negated, but the existence of God and the possibility of religious experience are not contradicted. The transcendent dimension of the human spirit is recognized, and scientist positivism is not considered as the only source of knowledge. However, the contents of Christian Revelation, as indeed human and therefore subject to errors, must be evaluated from a broader human perspective, in which they are compared with the Revelations or the wisdom of the other great religions, as well as secular humanism. Revelation is not rejected, but reinterpreted. The Bible and the figure of Jesus Christ remain at the heart of the spiritual culture of the Christian world, with the prospect of their important role in the formation of a global spiritual culture. Revelation, however, becomes not so much the language of God as the wisdom of humanity. "There is no other revelation but the thoughts of the wise men; even if they obey the fate of all that is human, are subject to error and are often dressed in bizarre allegories and myths, then called religions". (Schopenhauer, *Parerga* II: 314).

According to Jaspers, Revelation is the effort of the human spirit to express "existence". The latter concept deeply links his philosophy to an authentic religion, because it is about the essence of freedom and the meaning of life. However, existence cannot be expressed directly, but only through paradoxes, symbols, myths, in short, through "ciphers" that clash with each other. In Jaspers' philosophy, a cipher is a widely understood, insubstantial symbol that sparkles with ambiguity because its meaning is suspended (*im Schweben*) between the objectivity of dogma and the subjectivity of interpretation. Jaspers believes that the very concept of Revelation is a code, the meaning of which is never unequivocally clear, but is available only in interpretation. "Ciphers are not cognition, but have the character of vision and interpretation... to preserve life, they must remain suspended...their speech is multiple and ambiguous, they become false when they appear as knowledge...the sense of ciphers remains inexhaustible, and their interpretation is basically made thanks to other ciphers" (1999: 187, 240). According to Jaspers, the dogmatization of cipher is the embodiment of Transcendence, against which he constantly protests. While affirming the truth of the cipher, at the same time he contradicts its literality, and this is to result not in subjectivisation and relativisation, but in an interpretation that transcends the literal "upwards", i.e. towards a Transcendence that is truly transcendent.

In some respects, the paradigm of non-literal religiousness seems to contain in itself what was valuable in the traditional paradigm and even more. These "more" are two windows opened much more widely than in the literal interpretation: one for Transcendence, the other for what can be initially called global religiosity. The concept of Transcendence is freed from the limitations of human concepts, and the Gospel, which gives up being the only way to salvation, leaves the way free for the Koran, Bhagavadgita, Dhammapada or Tao-Te-King. According to Hick the literality of the dogma about God's incarnation in man gave more bad than good fruits in the history of Christianity, and understood metaphorically had and can still have the power to attract people to God:

Thus the dogma of the deity of Christ – in conjunction with the aggressive and praedatory aspect of human nature – has contributed historically to the evils of colonialism, the destruction of indigenous civilisations, anti-Semitism, destructive wars of religion and the burning of heretics and witches. But on the other hand it is also possible to understand the idea of divine incarnation in the life of Jesus Christ mythologically, as indicating an extraordinary openness to the divine presence in virtue of which Jesus' life and teachings have mediated the reality and love of God to millions of people in successive centuries. Thus, whereas understood literally the doctrine of a unique divine incarnation in Christ has divide humanity and has shrunk the image of God to that of the tribal deity of the West, understood mythologically it can continue to draw people to God through Christ without thereby sundering them from the rest of the human family (Hick (2004: 372).

There is, however, a reason to doubt that the "third way" can be considered as a *subsumption* of traditional faith. The latter, in its historically and culturally predominant form, is not without temples, rites, songs, prayers and beliefs concerning life after death. How and if at all could this sensual-affective layer of religion be subsumed in the faith of the "third way"? There is no affirmative answer to this question in Jasper's or Hick's philosophy. It is rather a negative answer - a person who is aware of the mythicall character of religious beliefs does not practice rites, songs, prayers etc., but only philosophical or other kind of meditation. Once again it has to be said that this is an elite proposal for the intelligentsia, not for the majority of people who want to believe in something tangible and practice something precise. Therefore, it seems that is more appropriate for the relations between the two paradigms in question the model of autonomy and communication at the same time - for an indefinite period of time.

Final reflections

Both the reasons for and against the traditional literal understanding of religious Christian dogmas are serious. The proposal for a 'third way' implemented in practice on the basis of the Copernican revolution would be a shock to the two-thousand-year-old Christian tradition. The difference between the literal and non-literal meanings of dogmas, including the most important ones, is significant. In

non-literal interpretation, the traditional faith in the divinity and bodily resurrection of Christ and the notion of infallibility, not only of the pope or councils, but also of the Bible and Tradition, must disappear. Would this not lead to pernicious relativism, not only doctrinal but also moral, and to confusion in the inner life of Christians?

This danger is presented differently in theory and in practice. It seems that only very educated minds capable of self-determination can base their ethics and spirituality on relative truths, kept in suspension, devoid of an "archimedean point", and not on an authority that provides certainty. Therefore, Jaspers himself realistically emphasizes that "a person who gives up ecclesiastical forms without negative consequences can only do so if he or she has the strength for philosophical meditation" (1999: 203). How many people have such strength and ability? Rather few. The "ordinary" faithful cannot afford to resolve issues on their own, on which there is no consensus even among professionals in the field of theology and philosophy. On the other hand, however, the division into faith for the initiated and faith for the simple ones is also unacceptable. Moreover, in recent decades the ordinary faithful have, on an alarming scale, left the Church for various reasons, but one of them seems to be an undiscussed, unclear sense of the anachronism of his dogmas understood literally. Blood, suffering, death of the Son of God for the satisfaction of the justice of the Father, who is otherwise merciful, Revelation given to the "chosen", not given to most others, birth from a virgin, miracles, the real transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ - these and similar articles of faith, understood literally sound strange to contemporary man (cf. Hick 2006). It takes a lot of mental abnegation to understand them that way. In turn, with such an understanding millions of still believers traditionally bound in the past and today moral and spiritual attitudes, such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5, 23). Would it be possible in practice to violate Christian dogma without violating its morals and spirituality? - According to the author of this text, this question must remain open. In practice, both types of interpretation of religious dogmas - literal and non-literal - theoretically can and practically must exist side by side as two different and equal discourses conflicting in a constructive dialogue.

Staying true to one's own religion with openness to the values of other systems, be they religious or secular, seems to be the best solution for Christians living in a multi-religious and multicultural environment. Within this option no human being or group of humans has a monopoly on existential truth, but a definite system must be adhered to, if only to be able to assimilate values that are not present in it. This kind of attitude allows to avoid spiritual confusion. However, on the theoretical level it seems to be only a temporary solution. In a situation of accelerating globalization, one has to look for expression of a common spiritual center of humanity, if only because, as Hans Küng (2001) stresses, there is no peace in the world without peace between religions. This task, however, requires a gradual transition to a less literal interpretation of religious beliefs.

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