



Philosophy of Religion

Principles for Cognizing the Sacred

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ABSTRACT: Today we need a scientific analysis of basic world views which expresses genuine understanding of the sacred. Such world views hold the main principles for cognizing reality. A 'substratum' understanding of the Sacred is characteristic of mythology and magic, wherein all spiritual phenomena are closely connected with a material or corporeal bearer. Functional understanding of the Sacred is developed by the earliest civilizations in which the spiritual is separated from the material. For example, Plato, Aristotle, and Neoplatonism created European functional theology. Substantial understanding of the Sacred appears in Christianity. Here we find the synthesis of substratum and functional peculiarities which are looked upon as "creaturous," revealed by God to man and integrated in their fundamental unity as the basis for variety. It is only unity which avoids the mixing of the three images of an object-substratum, function, and substance-that allows us to cognize a true object. In reproducing the Sacred as such, we can show the Sacred as the unity of the mysterious and the obvious, the static and the dynamic, and the passive and the active.

In our eventful time with unstable international conflicts and politics characterized by an pervasive enthusiasm for occultism and lack of spiritual depth, we need a renewed interest in the scientific analysis of basic world view concepts that can express a genuine understanding of the Sacred. Such concepts express the main principles for cognizing reality. They help us to systematise the information about our surrounding world, and to determine not only how we conceive ourselves and the world, but also the specific logic of linking such statements with the reasons for our behaviour. *Gnosiology* is meaningful only with a definite ontology, and a definite understanding of the Ultimate as Sacred.

During the Soviet period, «idealism» and «materialism» emerged as a departure from ideological philosophy. For example, V.P. Kuzmin distinguished between «systematical» and «meta-systematical» understanding of objects. He also showed the appropriate stages and levels through which one could develop a true understanding of an object's essence.⁽¹⁾ A.Tchanyshev emphasized naturalistic and anthropomorphic principles for cognizing the essence of objects,⁽²⁾ whereas B.T. Grigorian, through the principles of objectivism and subjectivism, made it possible to comprehend the notion of essence with regard to human beings.⁽³⁾ Yu.A. Shreider juxtaposed naturalistic and individualistic principles for cognizing the world.⁽⁴⁾ S.N. Smirnov emphasized functional and structural principles for the development of a scientific interpretation of objects.⁽⁵⁾ S. Petrov distinguished between structural, functional, phenomenological, and substratum-substantial principles,⁽⁶⁾ B.M. Kedrov between functional and substratum principles,⁽⁷⁾ while A.R. Sokolov worked

mainly with functional-substantial principles.⁽⁸⁾ In the works of the authors mentioned above, one can discern the will to deny the dogmata of State Marxism in favour of a dialogue with Western philosophical and Church traditions.

Today there have emerged quite new possibilities for such dialogue, although there remains a number of basic problems to be solved. One of the most important, is the problem of unity between gnosiological methods in theology and natural science. Is there any common epistemological ground between the wisdom of the Church, and the wisdom of secular tradition?

I intend to give a constructive analysis of the following notions: *substrate*, *function*, and *substantion*. The latter term refers to the principles for knowing the Sacred. One may attempt to comprehend the Sacred through the alternative concepts of «magic» and «religious»⁽⁹⁾ with a clear-cut distinction between the pagan (to which magic belongs) and the Christian (the «religious»⁽¹⁰⁾). On the other hand, one can emphasize the basic unity within the cognition of the Sacred and assume a basic identity between paganism and Christianity due to the isomorphism between spiritual cultures. In this case, paganism is understood in terms of the «pre-Christian» so that «magic» have much in common with the «religious.» In this latter case, the lower (paganism) is understood in terms of the higher (Christianity). This point of view is quite different from that of the Marxists', who identified religion with magic by interpreting the higher in terms of the lower.⁽¹¹⁾ In fact, the Marxists' view can be seen an attempt to deny the very essence of being «human.» One can distinguish between three contemporary cultural «images» of what it means to be a human being: the neo-pagan, the Christian, and the secular. The Marxist way of interpreting the higher in terms of the lower can also be considered as an attempt to deny any useful dialogue between the representatives of these three cultural types.

Secular culture often considers historical progress on a linear scale. It begins at a «magical» stage, continuing through the «religious» stage, until it finally reaches the «scientific» stage.⁽¹²⁾ Christian culture, on the other hand, rather interprets history as a conversion from an original perfect state, to a fallen and sinful state,⁽¹³⁾ and subsequently to the renewal of religiousness in which there is the constant danger of falling back into the non-religious and secular stage. Another side of this interpretation incorporates the world's transition from a magical stage to an ethical stage, either through the teachings of the Church or scientific insight.⁽¹⁴⁾ Magic reduces everything to itself; it has no other method.⁽¹⁵⁾ In fact, the essence of being «human» is understood in light of what is considered to be «sacred» in culture itself as the cult of *mind*, *science*, *supernatural*, the *immanent Person* or *natural powers*.

It is necessary to analyse the principles for cognizing the Sacred according to the three types of world-orientation: archaic (magic and mythological), Christian (personal and symbolic), and secular (scientific and humanistic). The discovery of any similarity between these types will allow us to affirm that «being human» is essentially unchangeable, and to see how its unity is preserved within each image. The meaning of «being human» is in itself unique and independent of specific cultural images. Such a perspective will imply a paradigm change in the way we understand the meaning of «being human» because it means a transition from a typological paradigm which understands the essence of «being human» in terms of conforming to pre-conceived ideals, to an ecological paradigm of a pluralistic nature, in which each individual will have an «ecological niche» due to their non-reducible mode of being and their unique significance. This does not imply any «chaotic pluralism,» in which everything is accidental and nothing has any meaning.

The archaic world-orientation displays a *substratum* principle for cognizing a phenomenon's essence and conceives the *Sacred* in terms of mysterious powers, spirits, demons, or gods. Its most important peculiarity is the sense perception of an object, an

emotional attitude to it, a spontaneous conviction that it is impossible for the mental and the physical to exist as separate entities, and also that everything is in a sense animated and alive. Fetishes, amulets, protectives and idols, all these things express the idea that there is a fundamental identity between the human being and the natural world and that this identity include both the dead and the living. The whole world is seen as a «psycho-physical system.»

The ontogenesis of the archaic world-orientation doesn't merely develop on its own accord. Its development looks like a system of «initiations» or transformational conversions depending on special conditions: a «new birth» interpreted as a substratum renewal of the total psycho-physical system, including the mythological and magical mentality as well as elements of social and natural skill of knowledge. These elements form an active substratum which represents a functional element that distinguishes the human being from non-human beings, i.e., meaning the principal identity of their structural organization.

The «psycho-physical» – the functional and substratum – character of an individual is initiated, sanctioned, and regulated by a supra-individual system such as a group or a tribe in an archaic society. It is the substance of an individual, a marginal basis for his/her display of substratum and functional peculiarities. And even more, it is usually comprehended as something visible and bodily substratum such as «meat», «blood», «eyes», «breath», «heart», etc. Thus, the archaic world-orientation is based on revealing the visible, the bodily and obvious «substratum» notions of a substance, of all its forms of expression. This archaic orientation focuses on an object's characteristics, that which is «sacred» and mysterious, the «magic power», the «soul», the «demon» of an object, its inner «Ego» - in short, its anthropomorphous subjectness. Pre-Socratic philosophers like Protagoras and Xenon, thought in terms of being and intelligibility. Democrit and Epicur thought in terms of atoms, which in modern times became a mechanical conception of matter as substance. This idea was also used by Descartes and Leibniz as displaying different versions of the substratum approach, the principle for interpretation of reality and cognition of new phenomena. The substratum approach is based on the spontaneous conviction of the fact that every action has some «actor», an acting object, a sensible object, while the «functional» approach, appearing in the early philosophical systems, is based on the conviction of the existence of particular invisible objects must be cognized through the mind, not through feelings.

Anaximander's «Apeiron» and Pythagoras' «Numbers» – became the first concepts in the history of philosophy about a principally new nature of «actors» (substrate) who gave birth to the world that can be perceived. Perception was the result of the «sacred-rational» element of cognition. «Numbers», «Apeiron» or «God» were conceived as «imaginary» and «rough» as distinct from "true" and «light» character of real substances as conceived by Plato. From Plato's point of view, the «heavenly» (light) substrate is opposed to the «earth» (rough) substrate, the latter being faceless and chaotic in general. The sophists and sceptics had a relative and utilitarian understanding of substance. They contrasted it to the sacred understanding of substance as a functional element and affirmed a secular, earthly character of functionality based on the new understanding of man's intentions and opinions as fundamentally pluralistic and subjectivistic. From this point of view, the sacred functional element looks like *one* of the opinions only, profitable for a definite group of people, i.e., it is the function of circumstances.

Thus, civilization is characterized by the appearance of three types of notions for the essence of the sacred as well as of the corresponding three principles, which direct the gnosiological activity of man: the naturalistic (or function-substratum), the Platonic-idealistic (or substratum-functional), and the pluralistic (or subjective-functional). All three principles are different according to the notion of the substance of that which is sacred. For

naturalists, the sacred is nature, a sensible element, a physical object, as the sources of characteristics expressed in terms of functionality and process. For Platonic philosophy, the sacred is in principle non-physical, non-material, non-sensible. In this way they affirm a principal «functionality», «independence», and immanent activity of the sacred, its ability to cause not only external characteristics of the object, but also the characteristics of the object's sensible and physical substratum. For pluralists, the sacred stops being universal. It loses its universal significance and rational-sensible dependence, as it turns into one of the functions of man's life, of sacred individuality, or arbitrary activity.

Hence the sacred is being transformed by civilization into something «naturalistic» as it gradually loses the features of being human. It «de-anthropomorphises» itself, it becomes «supra-naturalistic», «divine», gradually losing the features of «arbitrariness» and «subjectiveness». Whether the sacred is conceived in principle as anthropomorphic or as non-anthropomorphic, they both affirm the existence of the sacred. The conception is opposed by the de-ontologised pluralistic understanding, which desacralises man's life and regards man's cognition as «imaginary», arbitrary and subjective.

It was Aristotle who tried to realize the synthesis of the naturalistic and the ideas (as formal causes), of the objective and the subjective aspects of the sacred. The subject rises from the «imaginary» up to the «essential» understanding through the comprehension of hylomorphic aspects of things (the unity of their dual nature). Aristotle introduces three different meanings of the word «substratum»: «in one meaning it is matter, in another shape, in the next, all what consists of them both».⁽¹⁶⁾ Substratum (or subject) is any object (total combination of matter and shape), so far as it is the base of our language or subject matter; in so far as it is the basis for the sensible comprehension of an object or shape, and the basis for a mental comprehension of the object.

Aristotle regards the sacred as the self-thinking mentality, the World Intellect, the shape of shapes, standing in absolute opposition to the «primary matter», to the sense basis of existence. This makes existence ambivalent, «hylomorphic». Only the affirmation of the sacred as a Personal God by Christianity changes the general character of its understanding radically. In Christianity, God is regarded as Creator, the only substance of all that which exists. God is the origin of «creaturehood», the element of all «substratum» and «functional» peculiarities of objects as true Existence.

Democrit and Plato alienates the pluralism of subjectivism from Existence as well as the totalitarianism of necessity from subjectivism. Christianity presents a contrasts to those alienated categories, by virtue of the fundamental unity of person and Existence in Christ as God, the second person of the Trinity. The history of formulating the dogma of the Trinity reflects the transition from the Pagan to the Christian understanding of Man which includes the faith in the existence of a personal God.

The Trinitarian issue, having been much debated during a number centuries, reveals the depth and specific character of a new world-view. Leaving aside the details of the Trinitarian discussions, let us point out the three typologically different ways of understanding the Trinity: a substratum one (Tertullian), a functional one (Arius), and a substantial one (Nicean). Tertullian based himself on the Stoics' idea about the corporeality of all that which exist, including God. Consequently, Father, Son and Spirit, were the three bodily individuals of the same nature, similar to three lamps, or three fires.⁽¹⁷⁾

Arius proceeded from his strict monotheistic view, tried to show in a logical way, how the nature of Christ can be derived from God. Christ is Son because he comes from God the Father. He based himself on Origen, who had proceeded from a complete bodilessness, or non-substratum view of God, i.e., from a purely functional understanding of the Divine.

This is a point of view very much like Neo-Platonism. Father, Son and Spirit are thought in terms of hierarchical beings in which the Father is the highest being as functional «image» (hypostasis). In this connection, the hypostatic Oneness was denied, because in Antiquity it corresponded either to a logical order, in which both Father and Son were good, or to a «substance» (substratum) which were common for different creatures.⁽¹⁸⁾ All those versions reduced Christianity to the Pagan ancient philosophic conceptions, twisting the unique features of the new wisdom.

Niceans were facing the task of overcoming both «Tritheism» and Origen's monotheism that demanded changes in the language itself. The new language should be able to express a new view of the world. The Trinity is not the three individuals of the same substratum kind, and not the three gods with different functions, not the three faces, or masks of a single god, and not a subordinated God in which God as Son and Spirit is close to the level as created beings. They used a Greek term «hypostasis» and distinguished it from «ousia» (essence), as signifying that which is specific apart from the universal or common. In Western philosophy, both terms have been translated into Latin as «substantia», signifying that which is specific, and expressed by means of the term «persona» (person). Here we deal not with any play on words, but with their ability to express accurately the substance of notions, with their inevitable «being loaded» with a definite conceptual underlying idea.

Methodologically it meant reaching a new level of understanding the problem, a transition from a linear logic to a systematic, integrated and many-sided one. The Greek language having been improved by philosophers for centuries, had matured into a basis for a new spirituality. The Trinity is mysterious and incomprehensible, and consequently, there is no system of categories ready to describe it. The substratum and functional systems of explanation are deprived of their universal significance and self-sufficiency. Logical procedures began to act as parts, as elements of something larger than itself. There occurs a breaking out from the antique faceless understanding of existence, which turns into an understanding of the personal, an understanding with a face that loves and is full of life.

The Trinity is the three unique (non-subordinative) hypostatic beings of Father, Son and Spirit, who exist as a unified substance, as an integrated and full Divine Life (not according to a logic order of substantial identity).⁽¹⁹⁾ All the three hypostases are incomparable images of one and the same existence, and each of them gets its fullness from the other two, thus resembling a rainbow, which is one and multicoloured simultaneously. In the 20th century, positivistic philosophy was struck by the fact that our common logic actually depends on a transcendental logic.⁽²⁰⁾ As one realize this dependence, it has become necessary to elaborate a terminological set for describing and explaining the Transcendent as far as it is possible, and to emphasize its qualitative difference from the created order. Thus the methodology of describing and explaining the objects which are systematically different, has been worked out.

Nicean Christianity is able to elaborate the methodology for cognizing the world as constituted by qualitatively and systematically different objects which are unique among themselves. Consequently they are equal, but unique, hypostases, particular forms of the common substance, of the organic Absolute. Substratum and functional views are not denied at all, but they become the means for reaching the unity in terms of their fullness and mutual dependence.

The novelty of the Christian approach to existence, a true «substantiality» or world-comprehension, based on the language of Revelation as Absolute means of communication for humankind and its existence, makes it an eternally alive and self-renewed means for a person's self-determination in eternity,⁽²¹⁾ for humankind's self-determination in nature, for the noosphere's self-determination in the biosphere. One should be aware of a definite relativity in some «substratum» or «functional» inevitable subjective interpretations of

meanings within the language of Revelation. The historical development of Christianity, accompanied by «schisms» and bloody battles between different confessions, led to the appearance of a secular «culture», a humankind that lives apart from the church.

Secular culture proceeds from «anti-clericalism» to humanism, to deifying every object of nature in general. Scientism naturalises and desacralises nature and society when «knowledge is power» is used to transform existence, while freedom is a «cognized necessity» of existence. Existence, being unknown, becomes a depersonalised «uncognized», a complete inhuman «naturalism». Nature and man find themselves «discharmed» and «de-humanised» by some functional substratum primary elements, e.g., by the dialectical materialism's conception of the function of matter and motion.(22)

Gradually the mechanistic «reductionism» and «universality», as well as «scientific totalitarianism» are opposed by non-confessional, theoretic and universal «theism», «idealism», «organicism», «wholism», and the alike forms of functional approach. It was Leibniz who started the scientific use of the very notion of «function» – he regarded it as a mathematical dependence between the rows of phenomena which cannot be linked – this is «psycho-physical parallelism», the alive as an «ideal automation», «monads».

The notion of function is comprehended today in its three main meanings: (1) The correspondence of unconnected rows of phenomena, (2) A «phenomenon» of some «substance» (correspondence between the «external» and the «internal», the «actual» and the «potential», the «accidental» and the «necessary», etc.), (3) The cause for some phenomena (the correspondence between the «process» and the «composition», the «dynamic» and the «static», «time» and «space», the «active» and the «passive»).

Only Modern Time and secular culture have created a functional principle for the cognition of existence. This principle is opposed to the substratum principle. In scientism, the notion of «substratum» acted as a specific principle for the cognition of existence. This attracted the attention of researchers to the discovery of the sensible, of the visible cause for our judgment on objects, to the description which is withstanding the arbitrariness and subjectivism of individual opinions on objects. At the same time this notion was connected with «physicalism», i.e., naturalistic interpretation of an object's phenomenon as the display of an object's composition, substance, and matter. Accordingly this principle was regarded as the criterion for scientific work and verifiability, thus giving us the opportunity to systematise all the wealth of accumulated knowledge. Besides, it became the paradigm of modern science, a gnosiological (epistemological) order which enabled one to describe the elementary objects according to this or that branch «secondary nature».

The appearance of an actually «functional» approach is connected with the difficulties of a purely substratum interpretation of the world with the discovery of peculiar «systematical» (in addition to additive substratum ones), non-additive, wholistic characteristics.(23)

The functional approach was also connected with looking for special non-substratum, non-substantial, non-material cause for those characteristics. In ancient times there were no purely «functional» relationships, Plato's «ideas» are substratum as well as the Neo-Platonics' «wholeness». Only Leibniz' «mathematical idealism», Kant's formal Deism, and the «desubstantivism» of the early 20th century physicians and their discovery of «matter's disappearance», the splitting of the atomic nucleus, of substance regarded as only a function or a derivative of non-substantial primary elements as the true non-substantial basis for existence – led to the affirmation of a systematic and structural-functional approach as the «substratum» paradigm was replaced by the systematic one in modern science.

The functional approach is a principle for revealing non-additive, systematic, wholistic phenomena of objects, as well as non-elementary causes for phenomena of this kind. It is regarded as an anti-reductionistic, anti-elementaristic and anti-physicalistic methodology, which had the shape of «idealism», «theism», «organicism», «wholism», etc., including the marginally deontologised «systematical» or «structure-functional» approach.⁽²⁴⁾ As a whole, both approaches, the substratum and functional ones, allow us to give two additional «descriptions» of any object, or the existence in its marginally desacralised form. The analysis results in the possibility of manipulating the elements and constructing a new functional and virtual world. The secularisation of the substratum was replaced by the secularisation of mathematics. The substratum as a principle was turned into a variant of functional systems in general. Existence was deontologised and lost its definiteness.

Mathematical sacrality of the modern systematical approach, as well as «objectivistic» functionality are opposed to by the «anthropic» («subjectivistic» or «personalistic») functionality, affirming a fundamental identity of man and objects as active, independent open systems. This is the very way of ontological affirmation of non-reductionistic methodologies, which take into consideration «systematical» and «qualifying» effects, as well as the necessity of a «special language», i.e., specific categorial systems for adequate expressions. Ontological «scientism» and «materialism» of the substratum approach was contrasted with «organicism» and «personalism» of the functional view.

This allows us to distinguish one more (the third) fundamental principle for cognizing the sacred and the existence as a whole, the unity of substratum and functional (systematic and active) elements of objects – the substantial principle. It may be named «a gnosiological Christianity» as distinct from «a gnosiological paganism» of the substratum and functional approaches. It shows itself as the principle of monism, unity, togetherness, self-substantiation of one's own characteristics, independence, self-organization, and deep unity of an object's characteristics.

Substantion, apart from substratum and functioning, looks like a mysterious something, standing in opposition to the rationally and empirically given characteristics. Substratum and functional peculiarities are not able to see the whole object and give purely «descriptive», superficial knowledge. The only unity, avoiding the mixing of the three «images» of an object – substratum, functioning, and substantion – allows us to cognize a true object, to reproduce the sacred as such, to show it as the unity of the mysterious and the obvious, of the static and the dynamic, of the passive and the active.

NOTES

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(4) Yu.A. Shreider, «Illegitimate Alternative» in *Novy Myr*. 1990, N.7, p.264.

(5) S.N. Smirnov, «Elements of Philosophic Contents in the Notion of 'System' as a stage for Developing Cognition and Social Activities» in *Systematical Analysis and Scientific Knowledge*. Moscow 1978, p. 69-70.

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