

Oberhammer's Hermeneutics and the Variety of Religious Experience: Contemporary State and Philosophical Background

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ABSTRACT

Article concerns the hermeneutic conception of Gerhard Oberhammer. The author analyzes the main ideas of Oberhammer. The fundamental philosophical and theological presuppositions of his views are identified and clarified. The conception of Oberhammer is defined as pluralistic. It is shown the positive as well as negative sides of Oberhammer's conception. The author makes an attempt to come back to origins of pluralistic thinking mode on theology which leads to the Age of Enlightenment and especially to the theological movement of the second half of the 18th century in Germany the representatives of which called themselves as neologists. The main ideas of this movement are analyzed. It is noted in which aspects they influenced the further theology and religion studies the most.

Keywords: Oberhammer, Hermeneutics, Theology, Neology, Religion, Religious experience, Pluralism, Transcendence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term variety of religious experience is associated today usually with William James and his book of the same name *Varieties of the religious experience* [1]. The book was first published at the very beginning of the 20th century in 1902 and from that time and until now is hold for the classic work in the religious experience research area. The main merit of that work is that James succeeded to offer the methods of analysis of religious experience as such which has resulted in his deep considerations of different kinds of religious experience as well as stating that religions do not need to be identical and putting the questions about whether we can use religious experience as a source of the divine knowledge¹. And it isn't to deny the question is relevant also for contemporary religion studies although we must admit we have

significantly advanced in study of issues falling in this subject area. Nowadays it is often to hear not about William James studies but about John Hick's² or Perry Schmidt-Leukel's³ pluralistic conceptions of religious experience well known in West European theological community. The main point of their considerations is to go further in the research of religious experience of different kind and various cultural traditions and to define whether we can and if so, to what extent we are empowered to make values distinctions between

2. John Hick (1922-2012) is English speaking philosopher of religion, born in England, who worked then in the USA during the large part of his long time. While still alive was often considered as a patriarch of contemporary religious pluralism conception [3]. The number of his monographs and articles is hard to see. The writings of him the most relevant to the issue discussed in this article are *Faith and Knowledge* [4] and *God Has Many Names* (especially the chapter 6) [5].

3. Paul Schmidt-Leukel (born 1954) is perhaps now the most famous living German speaking theologian and philosopher of religion working in the framework of pluralistic conception. In the last years he actively engaged in comparative research of different religions with the emphasis on the comparison of Christianity and oriental religions (especially Chinese ones). For us however his main theoretical monograph *Gott ohne Grenzen* would be of greater interest [6].

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1. For the purposes of our research the most relevant chapters of this book are the Lectures XIX-XX [2].

religious experiences of different religious traditions. And we can say that this question is one of the most important for contemporary religious studies and even wider – for the whole humanity, still it is about fundamental foundations of interreligious dialogue and its possibility as such and tolerations of different religious views from the one hand as well as about fundamental foundations of our own faith and truth claims. In the article we would at first turn to the consideration of this problem by Gerhard Oberhammer, and then we would analyze the strong as well as the weak aspects of his position and identify the historical backgrounds having made possible the formation of his views.

2. TRANSCENDENTAL HERMENEUTICS OF GERHARD OBERHAMMER

Gerhard Oberhammer, a world famous indologist, was born in 1929 in Innsbruck (Austria). Since 1983 till 1997 was a chief of Indology Institute at the University of Vienne. Indology was and still remain his main emphasis. In this area he is well known and a really outstanding researcher what is already now, even during his lifetime is not questioned. His followers can be found not only in Vienne at the Indology Institute, but also in other countries. A working group for studying heritage of Oberhammer exists and successfully develops for several years already even in Russia. But the theological implications of Oberhammer's views are no less important. In this article we would like to draw attention to this particular aspect of his researches which is still not well represented in research literature, although some steps in this area have been already taken both in Europe as well as in Russia. However, we can state that the theological thought of Oberhammer is still underestimated.

The core of the theological conception of Oberhammer is formed by his methods of studying the religious experience. Hereby two great religious traditions are in center of his research interest, namely Hinduism and Christianity. The both of this are not of surprising. Hinduism has been drawing his attention because of his specialization in Indology. Since he was a Christian himself, Christianity was for him a point of his inner existential concern and as such could not but fall into the field of his research interest as well. In research literature we can find even a statement that the catholic faith of Oberhammer caused not his

inner interest to the question how religious experiences of Hinduism and Christianity traditions could be in a consistent manner reconciled but also the way how Oberhammer himself tries to do that since there is to found some and actually very clear similarities between his position and the contemporary doctrine of the Catholic Church [7]. However, the method proposed by Oberhammer is not applied only to Christianity and Hinduism but could be easily extended into other religious traditions as well.

The methods of studying religious experience of different traditions by Oberhammer is formed on the ground of contemporary hermeneutical and epistemological conceptions and named by Oberhammer himself as transcendental hermeneutics. The program article in which he expressed the main ideas relating to the subject is *Versuch einer transzendentalen Hermeneutik religiöser Traditionen*, published in 1987 [8]4. In this part we would like to take a closer look at some aspects of this work in comparison with some other philosophical writings of Oberhammer relating to the subject.

At first we need to consider the fundamental basic of Oberhammer's hermeneutical conception which leans on certain understandings of human being and his essential structure. According to Oberhammer a man is such a being which tends to go beyond the own existence. We can name it as a tendency to transcending. But it is not only a tendency, but also a need of a man. Actually it is the only one which makes a human being to a person. It becomes possible because of the fact that in this transcending it is the transcendence which a human being comes out to meet and which he actually meets. Only this relation to and with the transcendence substantiates a personality of an individual and offer a possibility to fulfill the essence and realize an inner potentiality of a person, since realization always presupposes an openness and coming out beyond of the own boundaries and if a man doesn't success in creating a relationship with the transcendence one remain in a some kind of isolation unable for openness already not only to the transcendence itself but also to the other individuals in the world around. Thus, the relation to the transcendence is really a core of essential structure of humanity as such in accordance with Oberhammer's views [10].

4. The other article of Oberhammer, namely, *Begegnung "als Kategorie der Religionshermeneutik* (1989) is also no much less important [9].

The problem occurs when we try to consider what this transcendence which is so important for human existence is. A man is a rational being, what means that we always need a concepts and notions to be able for orienting ourselves in the world. We tend to create some notions and conceptions even in the situation where it is just impossible. And the meeting⁵ with the transcendence is exactly such a case. Thus, in the strict sense we find ourselves in very uncomfortable circumstances. We meet something which is much greater then all we can imagine and in regard to which it is not possible (at least for us) to construct a consistent rational model. And we are aware of this. It is clear for us on the ground of certain immediate grasp of the transcendence. But we as rational beings could not function without rational descriptions of what we meet and experience in this meeting. And so we create such rational constructions despite of awareness we are unable to understand and to describe the reality which meets us and opens itself for us. Already Kant has discussed this problem at the very end of the 18th century. He thought that God (the generally accepted name of the classic philosophical tradition for the transcendence) belongs to the area beyond of the boundaries of possible experience which makes for us impossible to have a theoretical knowledge about this subject including the knowledge about the existence of God. The problem is that a man is such a being which tends to metaphysical considerations. Thus, a man cannot avoid metaphysical reflections and the only thing we can do in this regard is to take into account that we could not have a certain theoretical knowledge about the transcendental subjects and all our metaphysical constructions on the matter is only a so called transcendental illusion. The transcendental dialectics in the philosophy of Kant becomes such a means to prevent (but not to eliminate) the transcendental illusion. In the Critique of pure reason we read: “The transcendental dialectic will therefore content itself with exposing the illusion of transcendent

⁵ In strict sense the translation encounter would fit better because of etymological reason since Oberhammer himself uses the term *Begegnung*. But looking on the content of Oberhammer’s concept [11] and taking into account a certain theological tradition of naming the phenomenon of relation with God as meeting we prefer to use this translation option. More detailed research about Oberhammer’s interpretation of *Begegnung* concept and its relation to the concepts of other and subject and their importance for Oberhammer’s philosophical views see [12].

judgments, and at the same time taking precautions that we be not deceived by it. That the illusion should, like logical illusion, actually disappear and cease to be an illusion, is something which transcendental dialectic can never be in a position to achieve. For here we have to do with a natural and inevitable illusion, which rests on subjective principles, and foists them upon us as objective” [13].

Like Kant Oberhammer believes that this situation is not eliminable. The transcendence is something what is impossible to enclose within the boundaries of our human comprehension. But it is also impossible for human beings to reject from efforts to achieve the knowledge of the transcendence. And so the humanity tries again and again. And the result of these attempts we find in various religious traditions. Thus, each of these traditions has not in possession the knowledge of the truth as such. The only thing which they all really possess is different kind of describing the experience of meeting with the transcendence which remains as such incomprehensible in its fullness.

3. THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF OBERHAMMER’S CONCEPTIONS

The approach of Oberhammer has both positive as well as negative sides. The positives are perhaps more pronounced and evident for nowadays. In this part of my article I would like to draw my attention on them at first. And it seems to have at least two very important advantages. One of them is in full coherence with the contemporary Christian understanding what the faith is. That makes the Oberhammer’s approach attractive and applicable not only for contemporary religion studies and philosophy but also for theology as well. The fact that it is not possible for human being to know anything about the transcendence with certainty leads us to the conclusion that the way how we comprehends the transcendence is not determined and depends on ourselves and our will. That opens for us a wide space for our own personal relationship with the transcendence and the experience of transcendence is herewith always a deep individual act reflecting the whole personality of a man. The meeting with the transcendence is always my own meeting and my own experience which I could pass to the other people always only in a very limited extend and only in a metaphorical way which Oberhammer himself names

mythization [14]. That means that a man is essential free to establish an attitude towards the transcendence. And this attitude is inevitably connected with the personality of individual. In Christianity we speak about freedom of a man to response on the God's call to his creation. What kind of response a person gives depends ultimately on individual will of a human being. God calls his creatures and reveals himself in order to help the creatures come back to him. God is thus always considered as a taking initiative in the process of establishing the contact with the creatures. But God could never force the creatures to give an answer and even less to give an answer of certain kind desirable of God himself. In other words express Oberhammer on the higher theoretical level the same ideas about initiative of the transcendence which is always already opened to human beings searching a contact with it and freedom of human beings to accept this possibility and respond with their own openness to the initiative of the transcendence or not and decide instead to remain isolated from transcendence and thus from awareness of their true essence.

The second positive aspects we can highlight in Oberhammer's approach runs counter the doctrine of Catholic as well as Orthodox and Protestant Churches but on the contrary is in full accordance with contemporary democratization tendencies. And that's because the fact that Oberhammer doesn't make a value difference between various kinds of mythization or with other words between the different religious traditions in fullness of their dogmatic as well as ritual aspects. No religion has right to claim for absolute truth. Thus, we cannot differ which religion is more valuable, no matter what criterion is used to distinguish. Each religion is a kind of reflection and interpretation of whole life experience of some people and as such differs from all other religions because of number of certain historical and cultural characteristics. It is clear that such position has in contemporary democratic societies with their orientation on pluralism great chances to success.

This last positive aspect turns to be also a negative from the other point of view. The thing is that if this position cannot empower us to make a value differentiation and in this way can prevent us to come to underestimating of some religion traditions, then it could not also help us to make any other differences as well no matter under which criterion. Thus, we become unable to state that some religions fit better for our spiritual development and development of our societies and

the other are less useful or could be perhaps even dangerous. And here we tend to say that in this way we run into some kind of contradiction with our empirical life. Then all we see how dangerous could be sometimes different religious believes, for example those which accept and justify human sacrifices or killing heretics regarded as enemies of God and true religion. But if we consistently adhere to pluralistic position we could not find from the pure theoretical point of view justification why we hold one religion (one kind of interpretation of transcendence experience) better then the other. This problem arises in relation to all kind of pluralistic conception and the most famous discussions of the issue are carried out regarding pluralism of John Hick [15]. But the same question on responsibility of our religions could be posed also within the framework of any pluralistic strategy and it arises in Oberhammer's conception too.

Herewith it is to note that the problem has been seen by Oberhammer himself very clearly from the very beginning what bring him to attempts to give an answer on such kind of polemical objections in his writings. The solution he proposed is based on pragmatic understanding of truth. And we should admit that in this way the truth is relativized. Oberhammer tends to recognize that one religion can fit better to particular epoch or culture then some others. And even in one and the same culture we can see certain transformations of views regarding the matter what is true so the changes in religious sphere occur. But Oberhammer consists that these changes should not be taken as an approximation to absolutely true and objective knowledge about the essence of God [16].

4. THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF OBERHAMMER'S CONCEPTION

At the end of this article we could like to highlight some aspects of previous West European philosophical tradition what has made possible the formation of Oberhammer's position. Since Oberhammer is a philosopher of the second half of the 20th century, the previous tradition of philosophy goes back many centuries. In this article we turn only to those aspects which in our opinion are of fundamental importance. And so we need to come back to the Age of Enlightenment when the methods of historical critique of the Sacred Scripture began to develop. That is associated with the change occurring at this time both in relation to

the Sacred Scripture as such and interpretation of Christianity and understanding of what is essential for religion in general.

The main role in these process played so called neology movement. Neology is the self-name of the representatives of this theological movement and reflects well its ideas. All neologists saw their task in creating a certain new religious teaching that would correspond to the spirit of the time. Hereby the novelty of this teaching was understood in the Lutheran way as a return to the original foundations of the Christianity. Thus, the neologists regarded themselves as vocated to clean the Christian faith from errors and unfounded dogmatic positions. They tried to fulfill that task through separation in the Christian faith the aspects which were essential and the secondary ones what led them to a certain reinterpretation (and in some case even denying) of some basic Christian dogmatic assertion. The reason for such attitude was the conviction that Christianity as we know it is not the true teaching of Christ himself, but is its distortion carried out by the apostles immediately after the death of their teacher. In general, neologists supposed that the teaching of Christ was a kind of natural moral religion and consisted only in truths absolutely necessary for salvation. The doctrine of Christian Church however includes very many statements of ritual and dogmatic character which are as such in strict sense superfluous what means that confessing them and knowing them is not unavoidable for salvation. In order to identify this religion essence neologists turned to Sacred Scripture studies and subjected it to the significant criticism since presupposed that it includes among essential and absolutely necessary truths also various historical and cultural aspects. Their task these thinkers saw in separation of this secondary accidental and conditioned level from the fundamental ground [17].

What is the most important in the ideas of neologists in regard to our issue? At first it should be mentioned that it is only due the development of historic critique approach to the Sacred Scripture creating and development of contemporary pluralistic religion conceptions were possible. This approach laid in the 18th century the foundations of further movement in direction to pluralism because presupposed that we deal in religions and theirs scriptures not only with God's revelation in pure form claiming for universal and absolute truth but also with the certain human component. Scriptures are not only God's Word but also a word of human beings which received the God's revelation and

tried to express this religious experience in both verbal as well as nonverbal forms. The second not less important point is that neologists were very active in justifying the tolerance ideas. The ground for religious conflicts was seen by them in dogmatic doctrines and not in the moral component of different religions which is in main features equal in all of them and is only one which is really necessary and essential for religion as such. Thus, when we accept that dogmas level is not of the primary importance we knock thereby the ground out from under the feet of religious intolerance. Such kind of theoretical foundations is inevitable in case of pluralistic conceptions of any sorts.

5. CONCLUSION

Summing up we can say that the pluralistic conception of Oberhammer is really relevant for contemporary theological and philosophical studies of religious experience and is of interest from the research point of view. We also see that although we could not state that Oberhammer heritage draw few research attention since as an indologist he enjoys a well-deserved reputation but we should admit that the theological aspects of his thought are still not appreciated in a proper way. The conception of Oberhammer may well be considered as one of contemporary pluralism theory and as such has with them in common both positive and negative sides. But the negatives as well as positives of pluralistic theories became possible just due the changes in attitude to Sacred Scripture and Christianity which occurred in the Age of Enlightenment and lead us to recognition of a dualistic nature of religion since from that time religion could not be regarded as a business of God alone but should be seen also as a production of human efforts to interpret and transfer to the other the revelation of God given in a deep personal life experience and trough this response to God's call directed to his creatures.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Ludmila E. Kryshpov.

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