

ON THE APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF NARRATIVE IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION¹

Serdziuk Bahdan

Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences
(Bratislava, Slovakia)

The article examines the practical applicability of the concept of narrative in the anthropology of religion. It emphasizes the importance of narrative as an emic reflection of religion for the research direction studying lived religion. It draws boundaries of what we can consider narrative as a unit of analysis. It emphasizes the usefulness of combining social constructivism and ethnographic approaches in analyzing narratives in the religious field.

¹ The study was funded by the grant VEGA: 2/0104/23 Mariánska úcta na Slovensku v 21. storočí v kontexte "okúzlenia" postmoderných spoločností v postkomunistickej Európe (etnografická perspektíva):

The study was funded by the Doktorant SAV - APP0455: Marian devotion in post-communist Belarus: lived religion and the official church.

In the social sciences, the second half of the 20th century was marked by a shift in research interest from the study of macroscopic “phenomena” and “processes” to the study of local, more “human” manifestations of social reality. In religious studies, this was manifested, in particular, in the formation of a research direction that pays attention not only to the texts of theologians and “official” rituals, but first and foremost to lived religion. The anthropological concept of “lived religion” is a holistic, interdisciplinary approach aimed at studying religion in the understanding, experience and practice of individuals and groups included in the context of life [3, pp. 153–155]. This is precisely the “invisible religion” that T. Luckmann called for studying [5]. An important aspect of this approach is the primacy of the emic approach. The authors seek to convey religious experiences, practices, and beliefs as the believers themselves view them. The interdisciplinary approach allowed anthropologists of religion to step into the territory of historians and linguists and see that the emic perspective can be reflected in the respondents' narratives. That is, it is the narrative that has become one of the main units of analysis in the direction of lived religion.

But what is considered a narrative? What are its characteristics? Many lances have been broken among linguists in an attempt to find a universal definition of narrative. In the case of the anthropology of religion, it is critical to have a theoretical foundation that allows us to practically identify narrative as a unit of analysis.

Although there are some differences in the definition and structuring of narrative among authors, the parameters of narrative studies developed by linguists can be summarized as follows: narrative = story/fabula (the basis of the narrative, which allows us to distinguish narrative from non-narrative texts) + plot (text/discourse + narration). Narratology has formulated the essential, but not obvious, characteristics of storytelling: 1) narratives are the main way of giving meaning to human actions by organizing seemingly unrelated and independent elements of existence into a unified whole; 2) narratives are sensitive to the temporal mode of human existence - they organize our experiences in time, sequencing events and actions into a single, coherent temporal image, or plot [1, p. 44].

In linguistic studies, the definition of narrative proposed by V. Labov is considered classic: narrative is “one of the ways of representing past experience using a sequence of ordered sentences that convey the temporal sequence of events ... narratives function as equivalents of individual speech acts, such as an answer, a request, a claim, etc.” [4, pp. 30-32]. The necessary linguistic features of narrative are: 1) the presence of subordinate clauses corresponding to the temporal organization of events; 2) the attribution of the narration to the past tense; 3) the presence of certain structural components – description of place, time of action, characters, complication or conflict, evaluation (expression of the author's attitude to what is happening), resolution of the complication (completion of the narration and its attribution to the “here and now”) [4, pp. 42].

Having defined the boundaries of the narrative, an approach for its analysis should be chosen. There are several theoretical perspectives used in analyzing narratives in religious studies. In the context of analyzing narratives in the study of lived religion, authors resort to an ethnographic approach (C. Bell, R. Orsi, M. McGuire, etc.). The ethnographic approach considers narrative as an integral part of the everyday life of religious communities. Unlike textual analysis, this method focuses on how narratives

function in real practice. Key aspects of ethnographic narrative analysis include: 1) Fieldwork and interviews (researchers collect narratives through conversations with representatives of religious communities, record oral histories, and observe ritual practices); 2) Contextual analysis (narratives are studied in their natural environment, taking into account social, cultural and historical specifics); 3) Performance studies (examines how stories are conveyed and changed depending on the audience, the situation, and the social role of the storyteller); 4) The dynamic nature of narrative (analyzes how religious narratives transform over time, adapting to new conditions and challenges); 5) Symbolic and emotional component (particular attention is paid to how narratives convey not only information, but also emotional experiences, faith, collective fears and hopes). Thus, the ethnographic approach allows us to study narrative not only as a text, but also as a living process in which the bearers of tradition participate. It examines narrative as practical knowledge embedded in everyday religious experience.

However, the theoretical direction of lived religion could benefit from integrating social constructivist approaches (P. Berger, T. Luckmann) into the analysis of narratives, where narrative is understood as a tool for constructing social reality, and narratives ensure the stability of certain values and norms through their reproduction [5]. This approach can be especially useful for analyzing collective ideas and the formation of religious identity. The concept of "social construction of reality" implies that religion does not exist in isolation from society: its forms, meanings and practices are constantly reproduced and changed depending on the social context. Narrative in this approach is considered as a means of normalizing and explaining religious experience, legitimizing traditions, and also as a tool for adapting religion to changes in society.

Thus, the combination of social constructivism and the ethnographic approach allows us to consider narratives as simultaneously socially constructed and dynamically reproduced in real practices. If social constructivism explains how religious narratives form and support certain social structures and identities, then the ethnographic method makes it possible to study the real process of their reproduction in a local context. This synthesis is particularly useful in the study of lived religion: on the one hand, religious narratives can be analyzed as structured forms of knowledge transmitted through collective traditions; on the other hand, ethnographic analysis allows us to record how they are adapted, changed, and experienced at the individual level. This approach helps to identify the mechanisms of legitimization, transformation, and interpretation of religious meanings in the modern world.

To conclude, the study of narrative is a fruitful area for interdisciplinary research, as it combines approaches from various humanities and social sciences. Linguistics and narratology study the structure and stylistic features of narratives, anthropology analyzes narrative as a way of transmitting cultural experience, and religious studies considers it in the context of the formation of beliefs and religious traditions. Combining these perspectives allows for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of construction and transformation of religious meanings, as well as for identifying the relationship between individual experiences, collective memory, and social dynamics. As for the analysis of narratives, social constructivist and ethnographic approaches can offer relevant analytical tools for the study of lived

religion, allowing us to consider narrative as a dynamic and multi-level form of constructing religious reality.

Literature

1. Троцук, И. В. Нарратив как междисциплинарный методологический конструкт в современных социальных науках / И. В. Троцук // Вестник РУДН. Серия: Социология. – Москва, 2004. – №1. – С. 41–53.
2. Berger, P. The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge / P. Berger, T. Luckmann, Garden City : Anchor Books, 1966. – 219 p.
3. Hughes, A. W. Religion in 50 Words: A Critical Vocabulary // A. W. Hughes. – New York : Routledge, 2022. – 320 p.
4. Labov, W. Oral Versions of Personal Experience: Three Decades of Narrative Analysis / W. Labov // Special Volume of a Journal of Narrative and Life History. – Mahwah, 1997. – Vol. 7. – P. 34–56.
5. Luckmann, T. The Invisible Religion / T. Luckmann. – New York : Macmillan, 1967. – 130 p.