

The Three-Dimensional Perception of Reality in Evangelical Christianity

Eugenijus Liutkevičius (The Centre for Social Anthropology at Vytautas Magnus University)

Abstract. In this chapter, I set out to explore the transcendental perceptions among Baptists in Ukraine. I am concerned with how Baptist believers perceive the world. Particularly I am interested in how they perceived the world as consisting of a transcendent quality aside from the dimensions of space and time. To discuss the interaction of these three modes of perceiving I coined the term 'three-dimensional perception of reality'. This concept is defined as the believers' ability to incorporate narratives and symbols from the Bible into their everyday life, and interpret both personal stories and global events accordingly. This will be exemplified through my ethnographic cases.

Keywords: Baptists, Bible, Church, evangelicals, three-dimensional perception of reality, Ukraine, war.

Introduction

My research focus is on the development of the Ukrainian Baptist movement, as the hitherto closed and conservative Baptists became engaged in the broader society. In parallel with the changes occurring inside the Baptist movement, society itself was going through turbulence and transformations. While the religious doctrine remained the same, the rhetorical and hermeneutical practices surrounding it adapted to the occurring changes inside and outside of the Baptist community. The goal of my chapter is to flesh out how believers interpret(ed) events and changes, by linking the present-day events to Biblical events. I frame the constant sense of transcendence as a third dimension of reality, by adding it to the two more commonly shared dimensions, namely, the perceptions of time and space.

Methods

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Lviv, Ukraine from March 2016 to February 2017. Three Baptist communities were included in the

research as well as one Baptist seminary. The core method of my study was participant observation, which included not only observation of activities, but also direct participation in them. I participated in a wide range of activities: sermons, Bible studies, baptisms, weddings, camps, and a missionary forum. I was also fortunate to be invited into the homes of Baptist church members, thus participating and observing their everyday lives that were independent of church activities. The total number of informants exceeded 100 people. Approximately 15 of those were my key informants.

The main part of my data consists of my field notes, in which I wrote down events, activities, and conversations that I observed, heard or participated in. Observation and participation *in situ* supplied me with data, which provided me a means to learn ‘in the process’—that is, from the ‘insider’s’ point of view. By having access to the field site, I gained an opportunity to develop knowledge of how people make sense of, give meaning to, constitute reality, and interact on that basis (Bernard 2006; Denzin 1978; Jørgensen 1989).

My informants consisted of Baptist believers, pastors and missionaries. The observational and participatory fieldwork was complemented by interviews and documentary research. I conducted 12 semi-structural and 6 non-structural interviews on the basis of relations already established through months of fieldwork, each with carefully designed interview guides for each particular interviewee. The main part of the interviews was conducted with Ukrainian believers, along interviews with a few foreign (US) missionaries. The purpose of the interviews was mainly to supplement the countless conversations I had previously had with my informants.

My research was primarily conducted in Russian and Ukrainian. The language choice depended on the preference of the people, or on the language naturally spoken in a given situation. I had learned Ukrainian through an intensive personal course at the Ukrainian Catholic University. As I was already fluent in Russian, and the two languages bear many similarities, I was able to quickly progress in Ukrainian. English was used only when interacting with foreign missionaries. All the names used in the chapter are pseudonyms.

In this chapter, I present data from the community of *Internally Displaced Persons* (IDPs)¹. The group consisted of several Baptist families who left the

1 IDP – *Internally Displaced Person*; a person who has been forced to move within her or his own country as a result of a conflict or an environmental disaster. In this context, I shall use the term with reference to the evangelicals who have escaped the war in the eastern part of Ukraine. These refugees are called (and they also call themselves) ‘trans-migrators’ (rus. *Pereselentsy* [Cyrillic spelling: *Переселенцы*]).

occupied Donbas in 2015, shortly after their church was set on fire. Another family, who had decided to leave their home in Crimea after Russia annexed the peninsula in 2014, also joined the group. At the end of my research, the number of group members had doubled, as some more IDPs and locals joined it, and it became an officially registered Baptist community². This group gradually became the main community of my research. These people had travelled a long way from a coal-mining town³ in the East of the country, bringing with themselves fresh memories, experiences, emotions and thoughts about the war in Donbas, and they were willing to share these with me. I assume that our close relationship happened partly because we were non-natives of the City of Lviv, partly because I was able to interact in Russian with them, which is my first foreign language. I became more and more involved in this group, participated in their meetings, and had lengthy conversations with them.

Three-dimensional perception of reality

When thinking about a three-dimensional perception of reality, I do not have in mind the inhabited space of the three geometric dimensions – height, width, and depth. Rather, I think about it as three values that are closely integrated, even inseparable, but each with distinctive features.

One dimension that all people live in is the physical space which is understood as the way how we are placed and navigate in our surroundings. The other dimension is time. Here, I have in mind linear time, as measured and regulated by clocks and calendars. The dimensions of time and space are crucial for understanding and navigating in what we understand as *reality*.

My argument is that for a socio-culturally functioning individual, these two dimensions are not finite. Most of us take the two dimensions of time and space for granted but through adding the third perceptions of transcendence, time and space extend from physical reality to metaphysical reality.

- 2 At the beginning of my fieldwork, it was a group consisting of 15 grown-up Baptists aged 30 to 70. At the end of the fieldwork, the group had already increased to 30 grown-up members aged 17 to 75 representing the community.
- 3 On 28 August 2016, the members of the community greeted each other with the Miners' Day after the Sunday Church service. Some of the men in the Church had worked as miners previously, and some of the women had worked in mining services. The Miners' Day remained one of the major holidays in many cities of the former Soviet Union where the number of miners was high. This day is celebrated the last Sunday of August. The festival involves open air concerts and extensive festivities.

During my fieldwork, I found that the Baptist believers were incorporating transcendence as 'the third dimension.' These born-again Christians were seeking and learning to live with a constant presence of transcendence in such an intense way that it becomes integrated into the two other dimensions in the process of perceiving reality.

This adaptation of a different perception of life is indeed possible, and it can be seen if we make a comparison to how we understand and treat time. Today, many people see time as an economic and existential resource, which differs from how time was perceived prior to the externalization of time. As explained by Hylland Eriksen, the fact that we are able to measure time has made time independent of human experience. This perception of time differs radically from how time was understood and lived before the invention of the clock, where people had lived in an event-driven time structure (Eriksen 2007). Linear time has become a resource to manage and control. This perception of time makes people live in an entirely different reality than in the earlier clock-less society. Thus, altering one's perception of reality, whether driven by technologies, necessities, or a strong wish to do so, is indeed possible.

The same basis of an active engagement works in the case of incorporating transcendence into the perception of reality. The innovative aspect of the three-dimensional perception of reality is that it is concerned with the lived experience of faith, something which can also be applied to the study of different experiences of religious and spiritual character.

Transformation of the personality⁴

For Baptist believers, the key for comprehending this third dimension of reality is in the biblical texts. The biblical texts give a particular meaning to everyday events, and enable the believers to detect and sense repetitions of biblical events in their own lives, which leads them to understanding and (re)interpreting their lives accordingly. The specificity and complexity of the biblical texts open up the possibility for diverse interpretations. Through their interpretations of biblical passages, the Bible remains ever modern and relevant in their endeavors to interpret what happens 'here and now.' The three-dimensional perception of reality refers to the

4 The concept of the personality, or the personal identity, is understood here in a broad sense as a part and the consequence of modernity. That means that in modernity the construction of identity becomes much more complex than before. While, in the 'past', identity tended to be simpler and less flexible, being defined by class, gender and age in a more straightforward way, then, in 'modernity', the variety of identity schemes has grown. Identities become constructed and 'composed' of a stream of competing cultural discourses; they are chosen rather than ascribed.

believers' ability to incorporate narratives and symbols from the Bible into their everyday life, and interpret both personal stories and world events accordingly. In so doing they make the Bible 'ever modern' and relevant, as its stories are constantly repeated in part to boost morale, thus making the Bible 'alive'.

The learning process for starting (and never actually ending) personal transformation in evangelical Christianity is thus based on the Bible. Evangelicalism has a clear set of beliefs and commitments (Amstutz 2014, 30)⁵. And here, in the first place, stands the belief that the Bible is inerrant. Moreover, according to evangelicals, the Bible is God's revelation to humanity in which everyone (whoever seeks) finds all instructions for being guided throughout one's life⁶. In order to be able to use this ability, one has to learn to adapt the biblical texts to her or his own personal daily life events and worldview. That means no less than mastering the comprehension of biblical texts as a whole unit revealed by one person (God). Many of these texts are dark, incoherent, and disjointed (Auerbach 2003 [1953]). These features, on the one hand, make it not difficult to connect all the diverse parts together, but, on the other hand, they leave more space and possibilities for choosing and picking up particular parts of the texts, and thus interpreting and adapting them to fit one's 'here and now' realities. Learning to see and perceive the surrounding world and its events through the lens of biblical texts for a believer is the starting point for the transformation of his or her sense of reality.

This transformation goes together with the powerful symbolism of conversion, which is embodied in the ritual of baptism, explained as the death of an old person and the birth of a new one. Even more, the act of baptism is not simply a transformation that happens 'one day'. Transformational aspirations are deeply embedded in Pauline theology, which emphasizes the constant renewal of the person so that he or she can redirect their focus from the 'temporary' and 'seen' world toward the 'eternal' and 'unseen'⁷.

The work of this 'renewal' or the role of the leading guide on the way of transformation to transcendental dimension is attributed to the Holy Spirit. The

5 Here I speak about the definition of evangelicals which is based on their theology. However, there are other ways to make definitions such as by denominational affiliation, and by self-identification. Yet, the final two in my view are vaguer (for a discussion on the three types of definition, see Stiller, Johnson, Stiller, and Hutchinson 2015).

6 2 Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (New International Version).

7 "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16–18. New International Version).

Bible is the glue which binds the transcendental and physical worlds together. Born-again Christians have many practices which help them learn, share and contemplate each other's transcendental experiences. The purpose of these practices is to enforce the feeling that their transcendental experiences are real. Nevertheless, the ability to maintain the perception of both worlds as an indivisible reality is a difficult and consuming journey demanding specific skills.

Text is the way

Baptists, unlike Charismatic Christians, reject the possibility of a modern expression of miraculous spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues, healing, or prophesy. For them the gift of the Holy Spirit is charisma in its modest meaning, which can be limited to the ability to reach people during preaching, or evangelization. Their practices are less experimental and less demanding for the tangible, physical, bodily manifestations of transcendence.

For the Baptists the Bible always remains the main source which feeds the sense of living in three-dimensional reality. It is the central locus for transcendence and the main source for extracting the meaning of events in the living world. For them, all roads lead to scripture. However, acquiring the ability of extracting the meaning of events from the Bible needs a particular environment – a community of like-minded members that help to build the condition when the Bible is the guide to perceiving one's daily surroundings.

Crucial importance is given to the hermeneutical practices, the ability to incorporate narratives and symbols, and to extract and adopt the meanings from the Biblical texts to the everyday life.

Thus, believers learn the ability to apply and adapt the biblical texts as telling and giving instructions and explanations of the 'here and now' reality. At the same time, they learn to make transcendence with its focus towards eternity a part of their experienced reality. These skills do not eliminate the sense of one linear historical time; however, they adjust it to the three-dimensional perception of reality, which makes it more complex.

The practices for mastering the text

Starting to master the biblical text to the extent of making it speak to a particular person in and about her or his personal life needs more practice than the 'simple

reading' and trying to understand "what the text is saying to me." For sure, personal Bible studies involve daily reading, studying and contemplation on the text. Thus, becoming well acquainted with the Bible is pivotal, although this is *not* the only practice needed to be undertaken.

Testimony is another important practice which trains the ability of a believer to adapt the scripture to her or his personal life events. Testimony is a personal account or witness of experiences of transcendence – 'God's deeds' in the life of a believer. Every born-again Christian has her or his own 'identity card' – the story of one's personal conversion, which takes approximately 10–20 minutes to tell, which is told many times and is always available to be shared with other believers as well as with non-believers⁸.

Sermon is another significant practice. Sermon means learning by listening from the skilled master how both worlds – the tangible one and the transcendental one – are intertwined to one through the biblical texts.

Participating in small groups of Bible studies is another highly important activity. During these meetings, the participants learn how to reflect on biblical texts, share, compare, and discuss their own findings, understanding, and interpretations with those of the other participants.

I presented here briefly the key practices, though this is not the finite list of the practices in use in every Baptist community for making the Bible 'work' in the daily lives of believers.

Below I present three examples from my fieldwork that represent some aspects of my theoretical arguments.

The Holy Spirit in action

I have mentioned above that the transformation of the personal identity is attributed to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role as the leading guide on the way to perceiving transcendental dimension as ontologically real.

Baptist believers do not often (at least at the time of my fieldwork) share and discuss exactly how the Holy Spirit guides them in their lives. However, sometimes it happens, and I want to present an excerpt from a conversation which took place in a Bible Study session I attended⁹. During this session, there was a prolonged discussion about how the Holy Spirit works inside the participants:

8 It serves to the last as a part of evangelisation. See, for example, Harding 1987, 2000.

9 Fieldnotes 10 September 2016. My translation from Russian.

Jelena and Kirill were discussing how the Holy Spirit starts acting in you after you are born again¹⁰. Jelena referred to her own experience, and said that, from her point of view, for a long time after her baptism, she still remained “a baby in belief”¹¹. It took time and effort until she began feeling the Holy Spirit. Kirill argued that the Holy Spirit starts acting in you immediately after you are baptized. He started to feel the Holy Spirit after having learnt a major part of the Bible by heart. After that, the texts started to emerge for him in daily situations, where they could be meaningfully applied. After the Bible studies, I went to say goodbye to Kirill. “It was good of you to come” Kirill said with a smile, and asked me where in the Bible this is written¹².

Re-reading the Bible after conversion is a common practice among Baptists, and this is a practice that is encouraged by the community at large. The aim is not to dismiss the tangible world for the sake of transcendence, but, rather, a way to learn how to adopt the textuality of the Bible to one’s everyday experiences. According to Kirill, this constant engagement of reading and interpreting the text turns the Bible into a template for life. The text of the Bible becomes imprinted in the mind to an extent where it appears in the believer’s mind, when applicable to daily events. Baptists, however, do not attribute this ability to their own efforts and learning, but to the Holy Spirit which starts to act within them.

Who set the church on fire? Making sense of the war

My informants were ever occupied with interpreting the present-day events through the lens of the Bible. The IDPs who had fled the war in Donbas struggled to see their suffering and losses in the light of God’s plan. A conversation I had with Zakhar, an IDP from Donbas, illustrates this. He had on previous occasions told me that their church had been burned down. This prompted me to ask him who had set the church on fire. I had expected a simple answer, pointing to a certain person or group of people, but Zakhar’s response alerted me to how differently he had interpreted my question:

10 All names are pseudonyms.

11 Here, Jelena paraphrases the lines from the Bible: “Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:1. New International Version).

12 “So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us” (Acts 10:33. New International Version).

Whoever needed to do it... answered Zakhar¹³. The church had been threatened. The separatists had specifically threatened to burn the church down. They threatened many times, “[W]e will burn it down; we will burn it down; we will burn it down... It is a Trojan horse...” Such phrases¹⁴. Well, they only burned only the building, right? You cannot burn the Church. The Church has been, and it remains. The Church was originally in Jerusalem, but it was then persecuted and scattered around the world. The same happens today. It happened because God counted this church as ready for being sown, so people could sow, and bring the good seed further on, share it.

Here, Zakhar exemplifies how he interprets the event of the fire. It is not related to who actually lit the match, but what the larger reason behind the fire was. Here, he draws on his biblical alignment, by comparing the present-day event with the Bible-based events: the first Christian church in history was located in Jerusalem. It was persecuted, and it got scattered¹⁵. This comparison serves two purposes. One of these is to present me, a listener, to the larger scheme of God, what the actual purpose of the fire was. Here, his answer is that it happened because the Church was ready to be sown, and that the fire prompted this to happen. The believers escaped from Donbas and created new Churches. The second purpose is to draw a comparison between the temporary event with the biblical events, as narrated in the Bible. This has happened before (as described in the Bible), and the repetition of this shows a clear parallel to the Bible.

Encounters between different perceptions

My next example alerts to how the interpretations of the believers can sound strange or even inappropriate for non-believers.

The event was a Bible study class which took place a few days after the first members of the IDPs Church were baptized in Lviv. Two of the five people

13 Zakhar, as well as other members of the community, was very open and talkative on all topics when having an informal conversation, though more cautious during a recorded interview.

14 A Trojan horse is a stereotypical reference used in depicting evangelicals mostly in Russia, where many regard evangelical Christianity as a foreign religion, and evangelical believers as American agents working for the interests of their ‘hosts’.

15 See, for example, “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1. New International Version). Or “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews” (Acts 11:19; New International Version).

baptized were husbands of long-term members of the Church in Donbas. The wives recounted how they also, before the war, had prayed for their husbands' conversion. However, only the war was able to get their husbands to accept Jesus. One of the wives reached the conclusion of her narrative by stating that she now finally understood why the war had come to their place: in order for her husband to convert.

This interpretation was difficult to comprehend for Tamara, a non-believer who would regularly come as a guest. She gazed around the room, clearly shocked, trying to seek eye contact with others who would agree that this was sheer nonsense. However, not finding this confirmation, she just shook her head.

While the wife did not make any direct links to the Bible, she still interpreted her husband's conversion as God's plan and the way she was able to make sense of the war. She spoke in the evangelical language where this world reality is inextricably intertwined with transcendence. Tamara, however, was neither trained nor engaged in such interpretations, which made the version nonsensical, namely, that so many people had died and suffered due to the conversion of one man.

Conclusion

In this paper, my focus is on the way reality is being perceived by evangelicals, by drawing on the example of Ukrainian Baptists. I have argued that the manner in which they reflect upon, interpret and understand various events (personal as well as societal) depends on the ability to incorporate a third dimension of reality, apart from time and space. This dimension is marked by biblical stories which are regularly interpreted, and seen as repeating themselves in the believers' lives. In this way, Ukrainian Baptists not only live by the linear time marked by clocks and calendars, and not only in the immediate space surrounding them, but they are also living through a biblical time.

Other authors have likewise been engaged in understanding how evangelicals separate themselves from society in different ways. For example, Brigit Meyer in her monograph on Pentecostals in Ghana described how Christian evangelicals see themselves living in a different realm than the rest of society. This is done through discursive practices, ways of dressing, and through houses and furniture, all of which express a symbolic distance to non-believers (Meyer 1999). A thorough study by Susan Harding shows how Baptists in the U.S. make use of rhetorical skills and formalized speech in order to make God alive and perceptible

in their lives (Harding 1987, 2000). Luhrmann, who studied evangelicals in the U.S., emphasized how believers develop intimate spiritual experiences, thus making God real and tangible in their lives (Luhrmann 2004; see also Luhrmann 2012, 374). My study adds to this line of research by highlighting the experience of the believers' perception of reality, time and space. In my example of Ukrainian Baptists, all the biblical stories have connection with transcendence. The Bible thus serves not only as the expression of the eternal divine will, but also, at the same time, the Bible offers templates for interpreting the contemporary events.

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