

## THE ORGANIZATION AND LOGIC OF DOCTRINARY DISCOURSE

Maria Nicolescu

**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to point out the main characteristics of doctrinary discourse in terms of structure and organization, as well as the type of argumentation used (conventions, subject matter, persuasive techniques), emphasizing the similarities with scientific discourse. Doctrinary discourse offers an abstract and partial view of divinity, as conceived by a particular religious group. It is a referential discourse, its statements constantly targeting the divine nature of God and His manifestations. The proof takes the form of Biblical evidence, which has the role of axioms in mathematics: truth taken as granted and used as such.

Although at first sight, faith and science are usually perceived as opposite concepts, a closer look at scientific discourse proves that they are mingled in a more intricate way than that apparent at first sight<sup>1</sup>. As Rom Harre (1990) claims, any scientific discourse is built on faith in the writer or speaker of discourse, as a reliable member of the scientific community, from which the force of the speech derives.

Doctrinary discourse relies even more on faith as no theological statement used in reference to God can be proved to be true or false. Logic and facts cannot be used to argue any claims, and so the only valid source of authority remains the word of God as recorded in the Bible, and in the case of the Orthodox Church, the Holy Tradition.

The corpus analyzed consists in written Orthodox doctrinary texts, typical of this genre. This paper aims at disclosing the stylistic features characteristic of this particular discourse, focusing on its structure and organization (conventions, subject matter, persuasive techniques).

The **communicative purpose** of doctrinary discourse is to inform a relatively restricted community – namely that of theologians – about the official view of the Church on a specific issue. The doctrinal text aims at presenting in a systematic manner the dogmas of the respective Church – which define in detail its specific beliefs and ideas and help it differentiate itself from other religions as well as different Christian confessions.

Besides informing, the doctrinal text also tries to provide proofs to sustain its points although the domain of religion hardly admits empirical or logical evidence. That is why most of the arguments will be based on the authority of the Bible and of the earliest Church Fathers.

The organization of doctrinary discourse reflects the requirements for clarity, objectivity and comprehensiveness characteristic of scientific discourse. Thus, the text observes the conventions regarding the title, the introduction, the conclusion, the mechanisms of footnoting and bibliography.

**The title** indicates the topic in a concise and accurate manner, yet it also has to be comprehensive in including all the significant aspects: *Creation of the Spiritual World, Creation of the Material World, Sin in the Life of the Human Race* etc. The nouns in the title are in most cases indefinite since they refer generically to a specific issue.

**The introduction** announces very clearly the topic under consideration. As the first sentence occupies a prominent position in the economy of the paragraph, it usually contains the main idea or ideas to be developed in connection to the respective topic: *“Scripture and experience both teach us that sin is universal, and according to the Bible the explanation for*

---

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive argumentation of the way in which scientific discourse is based on faith, see Harre (1990).

this universality lies in *the fall of Adam*.”<sup>2</sup> This topic sentence is very dense, containing in a condensed form a great deal of information, to be later expounded on. The theme position, that is the first element occurring in the clause, is occupied by an indefinite noun indicating the prime source of authority used in religious discourse: *Scripture*. Biblical evidence is reinforced by empirical evidence, as the first noun is coordinated with a second one, also indefinite: *experience*. The theme of the second clause, *sin*, which is again placed in a prominent position, represents the topic of the chapter, which is entitled *The Transmission of Sin*. The third clause has in theme position a prepositional object, which reiterates the source of authority: *according to the Bible*. The focus position, that is the last element of the last clause, is occupied by another important concept for the chapter: *the fall of Adam*, presented as the cause of man’s sinful state. As can be seen from this short example, the key positions in the economy of the clause are taken by elements that are important for the topic under discussion.

The analysis of **the thematic development** of the introductory paragraphs reveals the frequency of pronouns and abstract nouns in theme position: *the discussion of the decrees, this, it, the doctrine of creation, it, God, all things, the knowledge of it, the problem of the origin of the evil that is in the world, that, it, that, the power of evil*, etc. This tendency is justified by the abstract nature of doctrinary discourse, which deals with an abstract object: religious dogmas. The frequent occurrence of pronouns reflects another tendency of introductory paragraphs, namely that of having a chain structure. The chain structure occurs when “the sentences appearing in succession are linked most obviously only to the previous sentence”<sup>3</sup>; it is a more rambling structure in which cohesion is obtained by repeating vocabulary or using pronouns to refer back. The advantage of using a chain structure in the introductory paragraph is that it allows the author to bring together a variety of issues.

**The content** is presented in an organized, systematic manner, each main point being preceded by a title-like heading, which expresses in a condensed form the topic of the respective point. For example, the chapter dealing with creation in general is divided into four main points, some of which are also segmented into sub-topics. The first one is entitled *The Doctrine of Creation in History* and it is a survey of previous opinions on the subject, being similar to the move in scientific papers which presents previous theories on a subject. *The next point is Scriptural Proof for the Doctrine of Creation*, which comes to offer the Scriptural evidence in support of the dogma of creation; it is followed by *The Idea of Creation*, which uses Biblical evidence to develop this topic and present the view of the Church, along with arguments deconstructing the opposite theories. The last point is *Divergent Theories Respecting the Origin of the World*, which comments on and brings counter arguments against the main theories on this topic.

In many cases, the headings and sub-headings introducing the main points and sub-points are presented in parallel form, either as noun phrases (*The Existence of the Angels, The Nature of the Angels, The Number and Organization of the Angels, The Service of the Angels* etc) or as full sentences (*The theory of evolution cannot take the place of the doctrine of creation. The theory of naturalistic evolution is not in harmony with the narrative of creation., The theory of naturalistic evolution is not well established and fails to account for the facts*, etc). Notice that in the last example the parallelism implies not only similar clause structure, but even similar negative form and the same subject.

The same systematic manner of presentation is reflected in the contents of the paragraphs, in many cases, the various arguments, aspects or cause-effect relations being numbered or

<sup>2</sup> Berkhof (1991: 237).

<sup>3</sup> Goatly (2000: 21).

marked by letters, so that the reader should find it easy to go through the text and pick up the main points.

Moreover, **the topic sentence** at the beginning of each paragraph presents the main idea developed in the respective paragraph. Each paragraph has its own main topic; the paragraphs are rather long, especially when it comes to the presentation of various theories, as each of them is dwelled on in an individual paragraph headed by the title of the theory in point. Sometimes the ending sentence of a paragraph is a general conclusion on the respective topic, elaborating on the main idea. Thus, there is symmetry in content between the first sentence announcing the topic and the last one, presenting the conclusion. For instance, the paragraph dealing with the existence of angels starts with the following sentence: “All religions recognize the existence of a spiritual world.” and ends with “No one who bows before the authority of the Word of God can doubt the existence of angels.”<sup>4</sup> From a statement of fact, the existence of angels becomes a strong assertion, based on Biblical evidence. The use of impossibility *can* makes the sentence true beyond any doubt, a reality impossible to deny.

The analysis of the paragraph structure reveals a combination of **chain structure** with either **stack** or **balance structure**. The stack structure consists in a list of arguments grouped together to support a certain position. The paragraph begins with a topic sentence followed by a stack of comments enlarging upon it and ends with a restatement of the main point. The arguments are clearly presented, even marked by letters, as we previously stated. The stack structure is mainly used when the author presents Biblical arguments supporting a certain issue and wants to overwhelm the reader by the abundance of evidence. The balance structure implies the weighing of descriptive facts, of pros and cons and occurs when the author presents a theory in opposition to another, or when he brings arguments and counter-arguments to dwell with a certain controversy. We will exemplify this type of structure by quoting a short paragraph excerpt:

“They [the angels] are *spiritual and incorporeal beings*. This has always been disputed. The Jews and many of the early Church Fathers ascribed to them *airy or fiery bodies*; but the Church of the Middle Ages came to the conclusion that they are *pure spiritual beings*. Yet, even after that some Roman Catholic, Arminian and even Lutheran and Reformed theologians ascribed to them *a certain corporeity, most subtle and pure*.”<sup>5</sup>

Notice how the focus position is constantly occupied by the topic of the paragraph, the nature of angels, which is the center of discussion: *spiritual and incorporeal beings, airy or fiery bodies, pure spiritual beings, a certain corporeity, most subtle and pure*. This fulfils the expectation that the topic should be placed in a prominent position and that the focus position should be occupied by new information. The first two sentences announce the topic and present it as a subject of controversy. Each of the following sentences brings forward a new view on the topic, which is presented in opposition to the previous, being introduced by an adversative conjunction or by a concessive adverbial: *but, yet*. The paragraph continues with arguments supporting one side or the other, but in the end Biblical evidence is used to settle the case and present the view of the Church as the only solid position supported by the Scripture.

Not only the systematic organization of doctrinary discourse makes it similar to scientific writing, but also the arguments employed to persuade the reader. **The logical argument** is the most frequently used in the doctrinal text to persuade the reader of the truths it advocates.

---

<sup>4</sup> Berkhof (1991: 143).

<sup>5</sup> Berkhof (1991: 144).

However, all the rational models and types of argumentation essentially depend on the evidence provided by the Bible. Every hypothesis and logical proposition seeks its justification in the Holy Word so that the truths presented in all the logical demonstrations can only be accepted if the Bible's axiomatic value is recognized. The Scripture is advocated to be the repository of absolute truth from which all the other truths have to be inferred. That is why the doctrinal text can only persuade those who already accept and believe God's word.

The detailed analysis of the logical types of argumentation will prove this basic dependency of the doctrinal text (and in fact of any religious text) on the authority of the Bible.

Thus, **the cause and effect model** is very frequently employed to present a Biblical truth but the logical inference leading from cause to effect can hardly be accepted if we do not accept the Bible as revealed truth. Every time the author presents us with the consequences of a 'fact' he relies explicitly on the Biblical assertions, which he brings as evidence:

"With respect to the origin of sin in the history of mankind, the Bible teaches that it began with the transgression of Adam in paradise [...] Adam yielded to the temptation and committed the first sin [...] by the first sin Adam became the bond-servant of sin [...] As a result of the fall the father of the race could only pass on a depraved human nature to his offsprings."<sup>6</sup>

The entire paragraph is scattered with references to the Bible which are used as evidence in support of this theory: "Through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin; and so death passed into all men, for that all sinned"; "So then as through one trespass the judgment came unto all men to condemnation"<sup>7</sup> etc. In the same way the last part of the text, presenting the consequences of sin is entirely based on the cause and effect model, and the supporting quotations from the Bible.

The cause and effect model is also used when the author wants to present a hypothesis or to explain something, but in the absence of any clear scriptural evidence he acknowledges that his logical inferences are at best probable: "It is *far more likely* that the tree was so called because it was destined to reveal [...]"<sup>8</sup> or "he (the tempter) addressed himself to Eve, *probably* because [...]"<sup>9</sup>.

**The hypothetical - real model** is also based on the Biblical support; whenever the author rejects a hypothesis he does so because it is contradicted by the authority of the Holy Book. The pattern he uses is the same: first the presentation of the hypothesis, its refutation and the basis for refutation (always coming from Biblical evidence), then another hypothesis which he more or less validates depending on the arguments the Bible provides in support of the respective hypothesis.

Another type of logical argument used in the same manner is what rhetoric calls '**modus tollendo ponens**': either p or q is true; p is not true, therefore q is true. For instance, this argument appears in a condensed form when the author proves that God cannot be the author of sin. Here the logic might be reconstructed as follows: either God or somebody else is the author of sin; the Bible teaches us that God is not the author of sin, therefore somebody else must be the author of sin. Note again that the validity of this argument essentially depends on accepting the incontestable truth of Biblical evidence.

---

<sup>6</sup> Berkhof (1991: 221).

<sup>7</sup> Berkhof (1991: 221).

<sup>8</sup> Berkhof (1991: 222).

<sup>9</sup> Berkhof (1991: 223).

**The syllogism and the enthymeme** are other arguments employed as logical proof in support of the theories advanced. We will choose two examples for analysis. The first is related to the fall of the angels and the second debates sin in the context of the theory of evolution. The former is a syllogism and can be formulated as follows: Anyone who aspires to be like God in power and authority commits a sin (major premise); some of the angels aspired to be like God in power and authority (minor premise); therefore, those angels sinned (conclusion). The premises are asserted as true on the basis of the Bible's authority, the author explicitly quoting from the Bible to prove the validity of his assertions.

The second example is an instance of enthymeme, which is a contracted form of syllogism in which one of the premises is missing. The argument can be stated as follows: There is no sin in the absence of moral consciousness (major premise); Animals do not have moral consciousness (minor premise, not explicitly stated); Animals do not sin (conclusion). The argumentation is further continued through logical inferences to prove that the evolutionary theory cannot account for the paradisiacal fall: "[...] man could not very well derive sin from his animal ancestors, since these had no sin. This means that the impulses, propensities, desires and qualities which man inherited from the brute can not themselves be called sin"<sup>10</sup>. **The logical inference** is a common device frequently used in doctrinary discourse and its source lies either in a Biblical quotation, or, as we saw in the above example in a previously demonstrated statement based on commonly accepted knowledge.

We conclude our analysis of the logical argumentation with the remark that logic is only an auxiliary means of demonstration in this text, being required by the norms of scientific discourse; by itself it can not prove anything, its power and validity being entirely based on biblical evidence by which it is sustained, confirmed and reinforced.

Maria Nicolescu  
University of Bucharest  
e-mail: corniro@yahoo.co.uk

## References

- Berkhof, L. (1991). *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich: WMB Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
Goatly, A. (2000). *Critical Reading and Writing*. London and New York: Routledge.  
Harre, R. (1990). Some narrative conventions of scientific discourse. In C. Nash (ed.), *Narrative in Culture*, 81-101. London: Routledge.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Idem, ibidem*, p. 225.