

Introduction to the issue

A comparative perspective in the study of religion has recently been taken up more and more often. It goes along with a growing awareness of cultural and religious plurality as well as of the importance of religion in terms of its role in the social, political, and economic processes of the contemporary world. This also gave an impulse to organize the two-day international seminar on “Comparative Methodology in Religious Studies” held in Kraków on 23–24 May 2013, at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, Department of Philosophy and Sociology, in co-operation with the Editors of *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal*. During the seminar a variety of methods applied in the comparative study of religion were discussed. The participants considered which of them seemed to be most beneficial or useful for a better understanding of the subject matter, and for capturing the uniqueness and divergence between Abrahamic, Indian (Dharmic), and other religious traditions. Some criteria for a proper comparison in the field of religion were defined and justified during this discussion. The presenters took into account both the sociological context of the analysis and philosophical consideration of the most fundamental questions within comparative methodology.

Some of the papers discussed during the seminar together with a few other ones submitted to the journal constitute a major part of this volume addressing the leading theme *Comparative study of religion: methods and applications*. This section contains seven articles, including three initial ones which demonstrate the unfailing vitality of the phenomenological method. The first paper by Åke Sander entitled *The phenomenological method revisited: towards comparative studies and non-theological interpretations of the religious experience* serves as a kind of introduction to the current debate on the methods applicable in the comparative study of religion. The author briefly refers to two central themes that have dominated in recent studies, that is the claim that the long taken-for-granted so-called secularization thesis was all wrong, and the theme of the so-called “return” or “resurgence of religion”. His concise overview of the most popular textbooks about religious studies reveals a variety of ways in which religion is studied nowadays — theological, sociological, psychological, anthropological, philosophical, *etc.* — and a number of optional theoretical or ideological perspectives which are

adopted in religious studies, such as gender, postcolonial, postmodernist, inside/outside, hermeneutical, to name the most popular ones. As Sander aptly remarks, comparative religion can, very broadly, be carried out either from the texts or from the actual living human beings. What he recommends in the conclusion of his paper is a non-theological interpretation of the religious experience based on the phenomenological method. Thus, the student of religion with a comparative approach should rather rely on phenomenologist's (etic) re-description of the informants' (emic) descriptions of their experiences, instead of concentrating on what the texts say the believers are supposed to do. Sven Sellmer, the author of the subsequent paper entitled *Phenomenology as an instrument of critique*, supports a similar methodological perspective by offering a neophenomenological interpretation of religious experience, inspired by Hermann Schmitz's definition of "phenomenon". Sellmer believes that phenomenology may fruitfully criticise two common strategies undertaken in the study of religion, namely reduction and construction. On the one hand, the phenomenologist must object that in reducing experiences to more fundamental processes without a preceding phenomenological analysis the reductionist will lose large parts of any potentially important information. On the other hand, in order to describe the underlying experience more adequately, the phenomenological researcher has to remove as many constructions as possible, including the tacit presuppositions and ready-made concepts, *etc.* In this way one does not only produce a description that is more adequate or "closer" to the genuine experience, but one can also pave the way for a reliable comparison and cross-religious or cross-cultural dialogue. The third article by Marcus Schmücker entitled *The relevance of "givenness" for the Indian religious traditions* is an excellent example of the application of a particular comparative method. Schmücker makes use of Jean-Luc Marion's philosophy of donation in reconsidering the constitution of the "I" and the concept of givenness in the philosophical and theistic currents of Indian tradition, especially in that of Advaita Vedānta. The author emphasizes the relevance of givenness and self-givenness in understanding subjectivity and the experience of god. The next paper *The purpose of non-theistic devotion in the classical Indian tradition of Sāṃkhya-Yoga* by Marzenna Jakubczak focuses on the psychological and pedagogical aspects of religious experience. The author offers a functional justification of "religious meditation" as it is conceived in two schools of classical Hindu philosophy, Sāṃkhya and Yoga. Special attention is paid to the practice called *īśvarapranidhāna* interpreted by Jakubczak as a form of non-theistic devotion. Although the analysis is confined to one current of Indian tradition, some conclusions referring to the egocentric bias of any devotional engagement may be universally relevant and useful in the comparative study of religion, regardless of the metaphysical or theological background of the particular religious practice. In the fifth paper entitled *Rabindranath Tagore on a comparative methodology of religions*, Asha Mukherjee seeks to bring the original concept of

a universal religion, the so-called “the religion of Man”, developed by the eminent Bengali thinker of the early twentieth century. Following Tagore’s idea of human nature, the author makes a point that the study of religion is in principle comparative, not in a judgmental evaluative sense, but in terms of describing and analysing comparable elements or phenomena from various religious traditions, using the same criteria in each case. Mukherjee discusses Tagorean rediscovery of human aspiration for transcendence manifesting itself through transcending the limits of one’s self-centered being towards an ideal of perfection which may be described as the “divinity of Man”. A unique contribution of the great Bengali philosopher to the comparative methodology in religious studies is also summarized by Iwona Milewska, the author of the next article. In her paper *Dharma and religion in Tagore’s views*, Milewska concentrates on a clarification of the crucial distinction between the Western idea of religion and the Indian concept of *dharmā*. A general examination of both terms and the juxtaposition of their multiple meanings as presented by Milewska is concluded with Tagore’s suggestion that they may ultimately lead to the common end, despite their different cultural roots and the various circumstances in which both concepts developed. The last paper addressing the leading theme of this issue is co-authored by Ashok Kaul and Chitaranjan Adhikary. In their article entitled *Lived religion in a plural society: a resource or liability*, the authors present a narrative on the creative tension within the religious modern and postmodern. Kaul and Adhikary trace a process of decentring through multi-polar power centres and make some interesting comments on the role of religion in the postmodern global order. They recognise religion as a new organizing principle in the face of multi-polarity, trans-nationality and sweeping pluralisation of peoples. The authors refer, among others, to some case studies of the Indian religious experiences to capture the pluralized religious discourse, and to illustrate the process of globalisation and the progressing commercialisation of the religious rites.

The subsequent three papers do not address the leading theme of the volume, though they may also contribute to comparative studies. In his linguistically erudite research paper entitled *Needing the other: the anatomy of the Mass Noun Thesis*, Lajos L. Brons discusses “othering” as the construction and identification of the self or in-group and the other or out-group that results in attributing relative inferiority and/or radical alienness to the other/out-group. The author verifies The Mass Noun Thesis claiming that all nouns in certain languages are grammatically and folk-ontologically similar to mass nouns in English. As Brons maintains, the Mass Noun Thesis being a case of sophisticated othering is rooted in a conflation of grammatical and ontological conceptions of mass and count nouns that is applicable to the language of the interpreter/self but not to the languages of the relevant others, and that othering in this case is driven by a need to create some radically alien other to support a scientific or philosophical theory. Paweł Galkowski, the author of the next paper entitled *Persuasive argumenta-*

tion as a cultural practice, traces the relation between argumentation and cultural practice. When doing so he tries to define argumentation on the basis of an informal logic tradition, especially in terms of verbal and social activity involving the use of everyday language. He further explains persuasive argumentation as a form of cultural practice that may be understood adequately only within the context of a given cultural system. Galkowski completes his paper with the analysis of argumentation in the context of culture theory and humanistic interpretation. The last article by Katarzyna Szepieniec compiles two great twentieth century philosophers — Edmund Husserl and Lev Shestov. The author of *Husserl and Shestov: a philosophical antipodes* offers the general characteristics of the relationship between these two thinkers. Her analysis, largely inspired by Cezary Wodziński's research on Shestov, shows clearly that a remarkable friendship connecting both figures did not affect the similarity of their views. On the contrary, she locates them at the opposite poles of the contemporary philosophical scene. Although both thinkers strongly believe that the fate of European culture and of the European understanding of what it is to be man are decided in the realm of philosophy, their philosophical projects remain in contrast to each other.

In the column "Polemics & debates" there is included a short paper by Peter Drum entitled *Moral tragedy*. The author argues that resolutely good people can be assured of a contentment of the soul, contrary to some moralists who claim that there are tragic situations where even good people cannot but suffer morally. In addition, the current volume of the *Argument* contains a Polish translation of Titus Burckhardt's paper — *Wartości wieczyste w sztuce islamu* [Perennial values in Islamic art] translated by Jakub Daniš. This is followed by three book reviews by Tadeusz Gadacz, Magdalena Hoły-Łuczaj, and Renata Trela. The volume is closed with two conference reports by Katarzyna Haremska and Agnieszka Rostalska.

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