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PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AS A WAY TO SKEPTICISM¹

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Abstract. The article aims to answer the question whether philosophy of religion can fulfil its research goals, that is discover the essence of religion, find out if any one of them (and, if need be, which one) is true and if faith and religious behavior are rational. In the face of a multitude of religions it is difficult to point to any common elements which makes it harder (if not impossible) to discover the essence of religion. Trying to prove the consistency of the concept of God as an object of religion and either His/Her existence or non-existence faces similar problems; this makes it impossible to conclusively decide whether religion is true or not. Therefore, it is also difficult to settle whether religious faith (or lack thereof) is rational or irrational. However, this failure does not deny the cognitive value of philosophy of religion, which can analyze various religious doctrines as it relates to their consistency, truthfulness, or the rationality of following them.

I. PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

There are commonly known problems with understanding and practicing philosophy since none of its definitions is universally accepted by philosophers. This is the reason why philosophy is treated lightly by the representatives of other branches of science. It is difficult to treat seriously a branch, lacking not only a specific set of accepted (and real) claims but also an agreement on its objects, tasks and methods to achieve them. The situation is made even worse by the fact that some philosophers defend absurd theses, for example, that the objects we see are illusions (subjective projections of the mind and not an objective reality); meanwhile those who believe such claims to be false are unable to prove so. This could suggest that philosophical problems are not serious. This assessment is a result of not only paradoxical claims made by philosophers but also cognitive ambitions of philosophy, which seeks final and absolutely certain solutions to fundamental problems like the nature of existence or the criterion of truth.

Similar troubles are linked to philosophy of religion which has an additional problem of the complexity of religious phenomena. Therefore, the first question should be what do the philosophers of religion study, what for, what methods do they use and also whether their work is necessary to understand religion (that is, does philosophy of religion contribute something essentially new to the knowledge about religion). If philosophy of religion is to have a point, it must study an aspect omitted by other sciences (like psychology of religion, sociology of religion, history of religion or comparative religious studies).

Philosophy of religion is often practiced as natural theology attempting to justify the main religious claims only by reason (without references to faith). It is therefore apologetics aiming to prove that a

¹ A first and shorter version of this paper was originally presented at the *Second International Krakow Study of Religious Symposium „Religions: fields of research, method and perspectives”* in 2013. I am very grateful to the participants for all useful comments during the discussion. I am most indebted to Ralph W. Hood Jr., Uzi Rebhun, Hans Gerald Hoedl, David Zbiral and Krzysztof Mech. The paper was translated by Agnieszka Ziemińska.

specific religious doctrine is coherent and true². Philosophy of religion is also practiced as criticism of religion, undermining the point of specific doctrines and rituals³. This is the reason why philosophy is often seen as a threat to religion and the philosopher is considered an atheist or a godless person. However, regardless of the differences, both models (apologetic and critical) show that philosophy depends on everyday beliefs, our worldview or even emotional factors. Philosophers do not want to admit this problem, proclaiming the notion of knowledge based on unbiased arguments of reason; they also often consider philosophy to be the most important science, the base and condition of the rest (this was the position held by Edmund Husserl). However, philosophy of religion is neither the most important area of studies of religion nor its basis; and yet it takes on important issues ignored by other sciences concerning religion.

The basic problem of philosophy is linked to the question about the essence of religion: what religion really is. This question also appears in other areas of studies of religion, for in order to be able to study it, a psychologist of religion must be able to distinguish between religious actions and attitudes from the non-religious ones; much like a sociologist or a historian. However, a psychologist defines the essence of religion differently than a sociologist, historian, or philosopher; since the latter seeks a constituting feature of religion or necessary and sufficient condition of being religion.

The next problem considered on the ground of philosophy of religion, is whether religious claims (doctrines) can be true or justified (and if yes, than which one is true and the most credible). This issue is directly linked to the question of the nature and existence of the main object of religious cult, especially to the question whether the concept of this object is consistent.

Finally, the third group of issues taken on the grounds of philosophy of religion, concerns the question whether human religious behavior is rational.

Philosophers attempt to solve these problems not empirically but only by conceptual analysis; they are not interested in detailed differences between historical religions, but in their essence. They do not examine the differences between different images of God, but the essential content of the concept of God and His/Her existence. Philosophers also do not ask what role do specific religions have in history and how they are used, but whether religious faith is rational.

By taking on these issues, philosophers confront their hypotheses not only with facts but also with logically possible situations, which never occurred. They use thought experiments which aim at falsifying (or correcting) definitions or hypotheses. This method, broadly used by Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophers, comes from the nature of philosophy itself, dissatisfied with partial and hypothetical solutions and seeking universal (including all possibilities) and absolutely certain (immune to all counterarguments) truths.

The main goal of philosophy of religion is an essential description of religion, however philosophers often also attempt to explain the existence of religion. From this perspective, the important question is whether religion is just an accidental phenomenon, characteristic for a specific periods in human history, or a phenomenon that is irremovable, coming from human nature. On occasion, ambitions of philoso-

2 In this tradition we could mention such contemporary philosophers as Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga or Peter van Inwagen.

3 In this tradition we could mention such philosophers as Bertrand Russell, Paul Edwards, Kai Nielsen or Anthony Flew (before his conversion).

phers are even bigger, and concern judging religion as a source of fanaticism or moral advancement and the demand of its cultivation or elimination from public life⁴.

In the paper I will omit the issues concerning explaining religion (why it exists) and focus on its description (the definition of religion) and evaluation (in the aspect of rationality of religious behavior). The main task of my paper is to answer the question whether philosophy of religion can achieve its goals.

II. DEFINITION OF RELIGION

The definition of religion should include all and only those phenomena which constitute the essence of religion. Therefore, the definition has to be essential (including a set of constituting features of religion) and should give us a criterion (to distinguish religion from other phenomena). The definition should apply to not only historic religions but to its all possible forms, even those which do not exist yet, or even never will exist; because, if they are possible religions then they must be included to the definition. The definition of religion has to fulfill the same conditions that are required of definitions of other phenomena. However, the question, how to construct it, remains.

One of the methods (an a posteriori definition) is referencing the observation of the phenomena being defined; it is comparing different religions in order to find similarities between them. If a group of necessary and sufficient features is established, we can say that an essential definition of religion is achieved.

This method, however, is problematic because the necessary condition of isolating religious phenomena as an object of observation is previous knowledge of the essence of religion. If one distinguishes religious phenomenon from others, than it means he/she already has an essential definition of religion. The condition to define religion based on observation turns out to be previous knowledge of this definition; it is a vicious circle.

Another method of defining religion (an a priori definition) would be based on an abstract concept of it without reference to existing religions. This method would be similar to construct the idea of a square in geometry, since it is known, that no square objects fulfills this definition; they are all just imperfect visualization. Unfortunately, it does not seem to be a good way to define religion, because it is difficult to describe what religion is, without referring to its historical forms. By ignoring experience, it is easy to construct a definition which is too broad (including also those phenomena which are not religions) or too narrow (overlooking phenomena which are religions); in extreme cases one could be left with a definition without an example in the real world.

These problems appear when defining not only religion, but also other phenomena like art, sport knowledge or human nature⁵. Everyone who wants to study them has to know their definition as a condition of distinguishing them from other phenomena. Paradoxically, however, a definition (especially an essential one) can only be the result of an exhaustive knowledge of the phenomenon. In order to avoid this dilemma, we initially assume a common and unfocused definitions, specifying them in the course of studies; but this definition is not, of course, essential definition.

4 This problem was currently posed by the new atheists, like philosopher Daniel Dennett or biologist Richard Dawkins.

5 Some similar problems with the definition of knowledge were discussed by Roderick M. Chisholm.

Because of the mentioned problems we should ask, whether the initial assumption that an essence of religion (as a set of its necessary and sufficient features) exists is justified. It suggests that a perfect religion, which is a religion in the strict sense, exists (or is possible). This means that other religions are only religions to the degree to which they resemble the perfect (or the most developed) religion⁶. This hypothesis is problematic because attempts to create a perfect religion usually turn out to be a totally false picture of religion; an example could be the atheistic religion or the natural religion (also called the religion of reason, religion without mystery or without revelation). However, even abandoning the idea of a perfect religion it is impossible to abandon the belief that an essence of religion exists. The reason for this is the fact that every person studying religion makes this assumption, since they distinguish between what is and what is not the subject of their studies. Therefore, even if historians refuse the existence of a perfect religion (or even the group of features constituting an essence of all actual and possible religions), they still use it in their study in the form of some kind of definition of religion. Paradoxically, refusing a universal essence of religion is also an essential thesis; in that case the essence of religion is that it has no essence.

These types of speculation may appear unnecessary or even superficial and ridiculous, especially since in practice we accurately distinguish religion from other phenomena (like politics, science or art). However, it is not so simply, because essentialism is the condition of human thinking; in every phenomenon we must distinguish what is important (and necessary) from what is unimportant (and unnecessary). Even without being able to discover or define the essence of religion, we assume that it exists, because there are some reasons that we call Buddhism, polytheism or Roman Catholicism, religions. Searching for the essence of religion does not come from philosophers' stubbornness but from the real phenomena which we describe as religious phenomena. Despite the differences, the world of religions is not extremely pluralistic, since it does not exclude the possibility of similarities between religions. Even a pluralist, who believes that there are many quite different religions, is an essentialist because he/she describes all religions with the same name.

Wittgenstein's theory of language games, according to which the meaning of our concepts depends on the way they are used, could be an attempt to break the deadlock. For example, let's take the concept of a game. The game of football is different from the game of chess, but they are both games by family resemblance, just like the game of polo, bridge or basketball. The concept of religion is also a family concept; it may be difficult to find shared features between Islam, Buddhism and Roman Catholicism, but they are similar enough to be called religions.

This solution is not satisfactory because in the case of family relations there are more and less typical examples. Certainly, being a parent is a closer relationship than being a nephew or a niece. Similarly, there can be more typical examples of being religion, which could be its essence. But, even if there are no typical examples of religion (like there is no typical example of a game), they are all called religions, because of the similarities between them. Therefore, they have similar traits, considered to be the essence of religion, which suggests that the theory of family resemblances is also a form of essentialism.

6 In the western tradition philosophers of religion usually take the monotheistic religions as a model of religion.

The problem is that we are unable to discover the feature that would be shared by all religions. Even if sacrifice or prayer seem to be present in all religions, they certainly do not exhaust their essence; defining religion as a sacrifice or a prayer would be too narrow. This suggests that essentialism is a necessary assumption in studying religion, but it leads to skepticism in the case of definition of religion.

III. TRUTHFULNESS OF RELIGION

The next problem is linked to the question whether religion (and, if so, which one) is true. It is complicated because of different definitions of truth.

The realist (also called correspondent or classical) definition of truth – saying that those claims consistent with facts are true – is the closest to our everyday intuitions; the statement “God exists” is true if God really does exist, and false if He/She does not. However, the problem is that in the case of religious statements concerning the existence of God or the afterlife, we do not know how to check if they are true.

Also the coherence theory of truth, which says that a group of claims is true if it is consistent, is troublesome. This condition could be fulfilled by several religions, also those which exclude each other, and only one of them can be true in the sense of being complaisant with reality.

The problem of the truthfulness of religion is equally difficult to solve on the base of pragmatic definition of truth, which says that what brings positive results is the truth; these could mean both objective rules of action and a subjective feeling of a meaningful life. No matter whether God does exist or not, faith in Him/Her can motivate us to do good; therefore, it is pragmatically true. The problem is, however, that in this sense all religious doctrines can be true, because each of them could fulfill somebody’s expectations or emotional needs. It is also possible that the same doctrine could be useful to one person and harmful to another, which would mean it was true and false at the same time.

Mostly, the problem of whether religion is true, is discussed on the grounds of the realist theory of truth. First and foremost it concerns the existence of the object of religion. It can be illustrated with the example of a theistic God but a similar reasoning can be employed in the context of different religious doctrines.

III.1. Consistency of God

In the Middle Ages one started with proving the existence of God and then described His/Her attributes. However, since Leibniz, proof of God’s possibility is considered as a condition to prove His/Her existence; if it turned out that God is inconsistent, than He/She could not exist.

Apart from consistency, God also has to have traits which make Him/Her worthy of worship. Unfortunately, by ascribing Him/Her traits important from a religious point of view (like the love for humanity) one tends to fall into anthropomorphism and mythology. For example, how could we compare God’s love with human love? However, if we only ascribe to God metaphysical traits (like the necessary existence), we deprive Him/Her from religious meaning. Despite Christian philosophers’ struggles, a necessary being does not have to love humans or even be a person. On the philosophical ground, one

cannot assume that Christ is the true image of God because one can only believe in His divinity and proof of Christ's consistency (God and human at the same time) is impossible.

There is a similar problem linked to the concept of a philosophical absolute. If it is an infinite being (in the sense of an infinite number of attributes and their infinite power) than it is inconsistent (current infinity is impossible) and inconceivable (we do not know what infinite kindness, power or mercy is). If it is a finite being with empirical traits like corporality and spatiotemporal location, then it is easy to check that it does not exist; the concept of God is therefore consistent but objectless.

The hypothesis that all attributes ascribed to God are metaphors and should not be taken literally, is an attempt to avoid this problem. However, every metaphor, if it is to be understood, should be possible to translate (at least partially) to the language of empirical concepts. Therefore, if such a translation is impossible then the concept of God lacks content and is incomprehensible.

III.2. Existence of God

The problem of God's existence appears even at the level of concepts, since if He/She is an inconsistent being, then He/She cannot exist; if He/She is a consistent being, then He/She may exist (but we do not know whether He/She really does). The question of God's existence would be answered positively on the level of the concept only if one could prove that one of His/Her attributes is a necessary existence. Such attempts (called ontological arguments) are based on the assumption that God is the most perfect being possible and therefore has to exist (if He/She did not exist then He/She would not be the most perfect being possible)⁷. However these arguments are fruitless because it is not known whether the concept of God as the most perfect being possible, is consistent⁸.

Another way to solve the problem of God's existence is referencing empirical testimonies, which are supposedly proving or disproving it. The theistic argument is the existence of the world (the world could not create itself) or its ordered structure, which cannot be a result of chance. However, these arguments are not conclusive. The argument from order is based on doubtful premises, since, there is not only order in the world, but also chaos and cruelty. The fact that some species of animals are food for other species is hardly evidence that the world was created by an almighty and merciful God. Also the rationality of the laws of nature could come from natural causes. Similarly, one cannot conclude that God exists based on the fact that the world exists, because it could be explained by the hypothesis of chance or its own autonomy and eternity.

Proving that God does not exist is equally difficult. The most important argument is the fact of evil; if there is a God who cares about creatures, then He/She should not allow the horrendous evil, especially in the form of natural disasters, suffering and death. However, this argument is not conclusive because it is possible that God allows evil for a greater good, with which He/She will bless His/Her

⁷ Recently, Brian Leftow tries to defend the validity of the Anselmian version of the ontological argument. See, for example Brian Leftow, "The Ontological Argument", in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (OUP, 2005).

⁸ Criticism of the various versions of the ontological arguments is presented in Graham R. Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* (CUP, 1995).

creatures in a future life⁹. It could also be argued that evil is the source of religion, because only faith in God allows one to bear it.

The currently broadly discussed God's hiddenness (especially by John Schellenberg) is an additional problem. If He/She exists, loves us, and wants all the best for us the same time knowing, that the greatest good for us is to know Him/Her, then it is difficult to understand why He/She remains hidden. In that case, atheism seems better and more rational position, because if God as an absolutely perfect being did exist, He/She would rid the world from evil and would not keep us doubtful about His/Her existence; if He/She has not done it, it means He/She does not exist. However, even God's hiddenness does not disprove His existence; it is possible that He/She has revealed Himself/Herself even though we cannot see it, or that He/She has an important reason for remaining hidden.

If we have proof neither for nor against God's existence, then both faith or lack of faith in Him/Her go beyond the available evidence. We may know that one of the statements: "God exists"/ "God does not exist" is true, but we do not know which one; therefore we have reached skeptical conclusions.

Skepticism may have the form of a thesis claiming that no people know whether God exists or not, because the human mind is unable to solve this problem. This thesis seems doubtful because the only evidence for it is our current lack of knowledge. Just because so far, we have been unable to answer this question does not mean that we will not answer it in the future, or that the human mind is unable to answer it.

Skepticism can also be universal thesis, claiming that no mind knows, and can know whether God exists or not, because it is an unsolvable problem in its nature. This means that if God does not exist, then no one can know it; similarly, if God does exist, also no one (even God Himself) can know it. However, this thesis cannot be proven.

Apart from all these (and others) problems with skepticism, it can be in accordance with both faith and lack of faith in God. It is possible for a person who does not know whether God exists, to believe in God's existence, and to practice religion just like it is possible for such a person to not believe in God's existence and not practice religion. However, neither faith nor lack of faith in God can answer the question if religion is true.

Of course, one could argue that from a religious point of view philosophical arguments are unnecessary and the requirements of God's consistency and the proof of God's existence are too strong. For a person who believes in God, the truthfulness of religion is not what is important; rather the feeling of safety and life's meaning. Religion is therefore not a description of the world, but trust in God.

I am afraid, however, that this argument is false because trust in God assumes that God exists; if God does not exist, God cannot help. The problem of God's existence is therefore key to the truthfulness of religion, even though we cannot solve it. In this case, the question of whether religious practices are rational, arises.

⁹ This kind of theodicy is developed in Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Clarendon Press, 1998). Another kind of theodicy was defended in Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil: The Gifford Lectures 2003* (Clarendon Press, 2006).

IV. RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR

Judging religious behavior depends on the criterion of rationality. According to the ethics of beliefs defended by W. K. Clifford, only those claims which are proven can be considered true. Therefore, if there is no evidence that God exists, faith in Him/Her is irrational and morally wrong.

Unfortunately, not only religious beliefs but also many common (and even scientific) convictions do not fulfill such strong criteria of rationality. A person following Clifford's rules could accept just a few truths, which would paralyze her actions. Moreover, the lack of proof for God's existence does not negate the rationality of religious cults because humans are celebratory animals, living in a world full of symbols, no matter if those symbols refer to some real and transcendent objects. We must also recognize, that following Clifford's rules, lack of faith in God is equally irrational and morally wrong, since we have no proof of His/Her non-existence.

On the other hand, according to William James in significant cases one is allowed to follow emotions, and consider whatever brings more benefits to be true. Therefore, if a certain religion fulfills people's expectations, gives them a feeling that life is meaningful or hope for eternity, then they are allowed to consider such religion as true. Similarly, if religion brings more damage than good to individual and to society, then practicing it is not only irrational, but also evil from a moral perspective.

Even with this assumption, it is difficult to assess if religion brings more damage or good. New atheists claim, that every religion is not only false, but also damaging, bringing fanaticism and wars. On the other hand, however, we could say, that some religious people are able to sacrifice their lives in defend some important values. The Polish monk – Father Kolbe – could be an example; before the Second World War he sympathized with national-catholic ideology, and yet in the concentration camp in Auschwitz he gave his life for another prisoner.

Unfortunately, historical testimony cannot answer the key question: does evil or good coming from religious motivations is a result of the religion's essence or the character of its followers? Based on the observations of religious history we cannot prove that religion is in itself a source of evil or a source of good. History may show what religion was used as a justification for, and how its followers were behaving but it does not say if religion itself brings more harm or benefit. This means that on the issue of whether religious behavior is rational (and also on the demands of elimination or propagation of religion) we must remain skeptics.

V. MEANING OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

So far, the conclusions are rather pessimistic, since the main problems of philosophy of religion remain unsolved. Even though we know that statements like "God either exists or not" are true, we have no means of deciding which alternative is true; so philosophy of religion fails, because it cannot answer for its main questions. In this situation we should ask, if these questions are serious scientific problems.

In response, one could state that when it comes to science, questions which are currently impossible to answer are still accepted, if it is possible, that they can be answered in future. But, even if we will never find the answers to some questions, they should not be eliminated, since they point to an important aspect of religion.

Philosophers may not be gathering empirical knowledge, but they bring conceptual tools which can help us to understand problem of the truthfulness, consistency and rationality of religion. If this task is to be successful, however, one has to abandon ambitions to study religion as such, concentrating on specific religious doctrines. If there is no perfect or essential religion, just specific historical religions, philosophers should not study fiction, which they consider to be the essence of religion, but should concentrate on the consistency, truthfulness and rationality of specific religions.

A similar situation takes place in the philosophy of science; it is difficult to study science as such, but it is possible to practice with benefit, philosophy of physics, philosophy of biology, or philosophy of mathematics. Similarly, one should study philosophy of Christianity, or philosophy of Islam rather than philosophy of religion. It does not mean that philosophy of Christianity should be its apologetics or criticism; quite contrary, it should be, as far as possible an objective analysis of its consistency, truthfulness and rationality.

Of course, one cannot exclude the possibility that such research will result in skepticism. However, skepticism, even as the last word in philosophy, is not fruitless since it modifies the original understanding of the object of studies. Consistent skepticism is (or at least should be) also a skepticism aware of its limitations; this means that a skeptic is (should be) skeptical also towards skepticism. Therefore, skepticism is a natural, critical standpoint, taken by every scholar not only towards different branches of science or theories constructed by their colleagues, but also towards their own ideas. From this perspective, philosophy is not a separate area of research, but a critical self-knowledge of every scientist, no matter which branch of study of religion they represent.

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