

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION – CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

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Abstract. Taking as a starting point the historical "fact" of the research in the field of the religion problem, we shall try to determine, on the one hand, the object in front of the researcher, and on the other hand, his instruments, corresponding to the disciplinary position from which the approach is done. We take very seriously, therefore, that outlined above, namely the couple discussing religion/religions of the phrase "philosophy of religion/religions."

Keywords: philosophy of religion, religious experience, sacred, scientism.

The claims of this study did not aim, as it seems at first sight, a kind of conceptual analysis of the issue terms of 'philosophy of religion ', although bending the forms of singular/plural of those terms is concerned, but only as part of a strategy that goes beyond the strictly analytical type of research of these two terms. Our main purpose in this article concerns the attempt to detect, based on the concepts in question, possible explanations for the different types of reports on the complex issue of "religion"; ultimately, we will try to outline the legitimacy of the most relevant claims and their limits.

Firstly we will index below, from the apparent conceptual problem of our phrase, following discussions on the subject which is considered by the researcher ("religion/religions", etc.), the main types of approaches to the problem of religion – the historical-anthropological perspective, the phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective (M. Eliade and Codoban), and the most current view, related to the scientist vein, that of the "evolutionary science of religion" and the social sciences perspectives.

The effervescence in researching the issues of religion/religions was caused, in the last stage of the Western research on this matter, by (as Eliade noted) Rudolf Otto's book *Das Heilige* (1917) – *The Sacred*¹. The originality and fascination caused by this volume consist primarily in the manner of approach "religion", as our historian and scholar of religions emphasizes "instead to lean on the *ideas* of God and religion, Rudolf Otto examines the modes of the religious experience". Theologian and historian of religions, Otto "had managed to

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¹ Rudolf Otto, *The Sacred*: this volume appeared in the last edition in the translation of Ioan Milea in 2005, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House.

highlight the content and features of this experience, going beyond the rational and speculative side of religion and insisting on its irrational side."¹

So, taking as a starting point this historical "fact" of the research in the field of the religion problem, we shall try to determine, on the one hand, the object in front of the researcher, and on the other hand, his instruments, corresponding to the position from which the approach is done. We take very seriously, therefore, that outlined above, namely the couple discussing religion/religions of the phrase "philosophy of religion/religions." How emphasizes Eliade in the beginning of the introduction of his early book *The Sacred and the profane*, a fundamental aspect of the research in the field of "religion" is the way that the ongoing prospect identifies its subject: reporting can be done, in the first instance, to "religion" (in singular), or to "religions" (plural) or, as we shall see, to "religious phenomenon", "religiosity", "religious experience". Depending on how our choice is justified and explained, the type of approach is also proposed; finally, according to this mode will depend, in fact, the entire research and the "nature of the results" of this research.

One of the reasons for above can be set as minimal conditions related to the method is, of course, no lack of attempts to approach the field of philosophy of religion, but also, as one of our historians and philosophers of religions said, the very "extreme intrinsic complexity of religion itself"²: really, "a particular religion is, at the same time and paradoxically, something too vast and too complicated and also too limited and too univocal, in order to be taken as a starting point of religious philosophy approaches."

Not by chance I have raised A. Codoban's perspective regarding elements of "propaedeutics" in addressing the issue of the "philosophy of religion." Besides the fact that the philosophy of religion is a late appearance in the history of western culture, besides the fact that, in these terms, the phrase "marks the transition from a subjective relationship between the courts - religion *and* philosophy - assigning an attributive relationship - philosophy *of* religions"³, Codoban's justification for the variant of "plural" - the *philosophy of religions* is just talking about what I have said at the beginning of this study: on the mode of defining and determining/constructing the object of the "religion" research not only depend the specificity of the approach, but also, going farther from it, the circumscribing of the area results in a rigorous report with the corresponding field research, with the angle in which stands the author's disciplinary approach.

In this respect, we shall discuss three classes of interrogations regarding the issue of "religion" (relevant perspectives), three types of positioning to religious

¹ M. Eliade, *Sacrul și profanul*, translation by Brîndușa Prelipceanu, Bucharest, Edit. Humanitas, p. 11.

² A. Codoban, *Sacru și ontofanie*, Iași, Edit. Polirom, 1998.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

matters which can be grouped with other sub-classes, so as to cover, as I said, the scope in which is treated religion today.

The first class refers only to the relationship philosophy-religion, philosophy of religion/religions: there will be questioned the relationships between philosophy and religion from the perspective of their mutual relations - here our relationship will be presented through the studies of anthropology, history of religions and the phenomenology of the sacred as hermeneutics (will also be taken into consideration our authors, like Eliade and his followers contemporary to us: A. Codoban); theological perspective is only to be mentioned, it is not at all problematic, precisely because it works only "inside" of religion.

In the second class, we meet the approach from the "outside" of the religious phenomenon, from the standpoint of natural and social sciences (psychology, sociology, etc.); these approaches have often acquired the label of "denial": for sciences, their underlying rationality would be the sublimation of the logic of science in an attempt to "deny" anything you can not stand in a scientific experiment which is meant to confirm the initial assumptions. This approach would be (for many of the phenomenologists of religion and structuralist anthropologists) the essence of atheism which, for the scientist truth, denies himself the very referent of the object of the philosophy of religion – *the religion*.

The third class we will discuss is based on the Kantian perspective on the possibility of religion conceived "only within the limits of reason". If, in what concerns the other perspectives, there is a direct report to the "corpus" of religion (in theology), or a mediated one - by historical approaches, "morphological" approaches (Eliade), anthropological approaches, phenomenological approaches and hermeneutical approaches -, in this last class, we have to deal with a process specific to Kantian transcendentalism, but indirectly: questioning the conditions of possibility of religion, only after determining the scope of the intellect - and according to it - as responsible of scientific knowledge (with or in close cooperation with sensitivity). As shown, with the volume of Rudolf Otto, is posed the question of some other ways of appropriation of the object "religion": not by reference to "ideas" or "sacred" texts etc. - fashion exposed to failure because of the specificity of the object - but by reference to the "religious phenomenon" as such, to the "religious experience".

Codoban's adherence to the plural term "philosophy of religions" speaks of "the respect for the uniqueness and diversity: emphasizing the plurality of religions allows us to transcend the usual ethnocentrism and eurocentrism of most of the philosophers of religion." And, furthermore, "philosophy is to inquire human experience in general and, for it is not reduced to the European's, philosophy of religion have to do the same as, for example, philosophy of art, where there is no eurocentrism."¹ A second argument for this option is that "in the

¹ A. Codoban, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

center of our approaches lies the sacred, not the divine." The difference between the sacred and the divine would be equivalent to the difference between a philosophy of religion and a philosophy of religion "which is often a religious philosophy."¹

As a first observation, we believe that the positioning of our author is a correct one, with the addition that a philosophy of "religion" (singular) does not imply, however, necessarily, this philosophy to be "religious" - otherwise, Codoban himself takes caution to introduce the adverb "often" (not to anticipate the presentation of the three classes of approach - of Kantian origin - we shall find a different way from those of Codoban's dichotomy).

Rejecting the positions of an "interdisciplinary" research in the field of religion, believing that they are rather "a sign of a pathological situation in these disciplines, than of an epistemic solution to it, for it is the slogan of a federalization of human knowledge with the aim to occupy the place of philosophy." Our author argues that "collaboration between philosophy of religion and Humanities is problematic, primarily due to the difference in level of discourse: philosophical discourse evolves at the sense level, while the discourses of sciences, of social and human disciplines, at the significance level. Therefore, "the problem of cooperation between philosophy of religion and other disciplines would become the problem of articulation processes within the approach itself of the philosophy of religion, and the possibility of its resolution lies in the methodology."²

Recognizing the importance of methodology in the formula "theoretical platform" in the sense developed by Eliade, to become aware of procedures and techniques used by the philosopher and historian of religion in order to appropriate the religious phenomenon, A. Codoban takes as a starting point for his theory on the philosophy of religion the three-step scheme of Eliade. We do not insist on carrying on furthermore with the theory of our scholar, but we shall present shortly, with the intent that we presented in the beginning, the three methodological steps of the scheme formulated by Eliade and mentioned by Codoban in his book: the first step must be historical, because - emphasizes Codoban - "there is no religious phenomenon beyond its historical context. The product of this approach is a "morphology of the sacred"; the second is a phenomenological step: "placing the religious phenomenon – as an original and irreducible phenomenon - this process studies the typology of hierophanies - and cratophanies - as central to the experience of *homo religiosus*"³; the third is the hermeneutic step. It "addresses the trans-historical significance of the religious

¹ Idem. Here Codoban cites some works of major Anglo-Saxon authors, just in virtue of emphasizing his own adherence.

² *Ibidem*, p. 20.

³ Idem.

phenomenon." "Hermeneutics understand this message as it is perceived by the *homo religiosus* and question the living meaning of the sacred for modern man."¹

Besides the two-way correlation of the "philosophy of religion"², Eliade's scheme present in Codoban takes methodological valences significant only in the reign of the *significant* rationality. Here, our author distinguishes between strictly "operational" rationality, appropriate to natural sciences and also to Humanities, and what he calls "significant rationality", highlighting the tradition of structuralist anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, the paramount importance of preserving the meaning and the significance of the original symbol. "The phenomenology of religious experience concerns the meaning, the types and the structural connections within and between types of religious experience. It tends to lead us to the fundamental structures of religiosity, empirically ingrown in historically different religions. It provides the starting point and the base of support for what should be, in its natural exercise, a hermeneutics of experience."³

We observe, following the presentation of this class of reports (of philosophical type) to religion, that these exercises are done somewhat tangential or in symbiosis with religious significance and validity. Even the results obtained by the historian of religions and by the philosopher anthropologist are recovered in the space of a phenomenology of the "religious experience" in order to reveal the sacred trans-historical phenomenon in a hermeneutics of "religiousness". From this point of view, the phenomenology on which A. Codoban builds its own continues the tradition of N. Soderblom, R. Otto and M. Eliade as a purely descriptive, without normativity, not historical or sociological and without being an immediate basis for theology. As we have shown, it takes advantage of a "significant rationality", which incorporates coherently in its methodological articulation.

A completely different situation we meet with the class addressing religion as an "issue" to socio-human sciences in general and, in particular, to one of the newest scientific perspective on religion: "the evolutionary science of religion" from the evolutionary field of scientific origin. According to this (last) perspective is criticized not only the anthropological approach or the historical approach of religion; there are also rejected – by means of "essentialist" reporting

¹ M. Eliade, „Méthodologie et histoire des religions”, in: *La Nostalgie des Origines*, Gallimard, Paris, 1991.

² In this formula, of the double meaning, A. Codoban sees an instruction whether from the religious request to philosophy - where it is shown that philosophy can be powerful as a rational approach to religion, if instructed by the latter - , or from the philosophy to religion with intention to "undertake a purification of religion by philosophy, on behalf of the religious demands of reason". If in the first sense the author of the approach is presumed to be a believer at least implicitly, in the second (from philosophy to religion) even our author says that the approach takes place "in the name of the religious demands of reason" (*op. cit.*, p. 17).

³ A. Codoban, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

to religion – perspectives as the one preferred by psychologists who believe that religion is an exclusively human behavior or sociologists-anthropologists such as Guthrie¹, who sees the essence of religion in anthropocentrism². Taylor is criticized because "he reduces the foundations of the world of religions to the concept of animism", and even E. Durkheim, who believed in a "progressive" tradition and claimed that science will triumph, finally, upon religion, is "corrected" in his socio-cultural evolution of religion described as a process related to the concept of social progress³.

As shown, these perspectives, which Codoban calls "parallel" to those we have introduced into the first class, are reporting from the "outside" of the religious phenomenon (considered as such) practically denying it and overlapping a reductive and austere grid of what philosophers of religion call the "scientist-type operational reasoning." We consider necessary to present the position of the "evolutionary science of religion" represented here by James W. Dow, a writer in vogue today, which proposes, in the study cited above, a "modular" grid - inspired by Kant (he says) - and seeks to explain the appearance of the (considered) religious phenomenon.

Using the hypothesis, the observation and the experiment, the mathematization, etc., tools of science that are essentially related to either formal sciences or natural sciences, Dow believes that their use in the social sciences and in the study of human (including religious) behavior is not wrong. Moreover, religious phenomena, religious behavior can best be defined by avoiding vague and intuitive elements or unobservable and subjective meanings and/or senses. Wallace is brought into question, saying that there are categories of behavior that can show that religion is defined as an observable behavior; although each culture has no necessarily only one concept of religion to describe all this behaviors, however, these behaviors reveal something that exists in most cultures. Wallace's definition of religion as a "behavior" is, he says, more practical and operational than those definitions which refer to meanings. Myths and meanings are part of religion, but the observed behavior accompanying them seems to be the allowing Westerners to perceive something that is acceptable as "religious". Hence, a definition of religion or religious behavior refers to a collection of behaviors that are unified only in the Western concept. This behavior has not evolved as a whole at the same time as a response to a single environmental change. Such an aspect is considered by these authors as a beginning argument to think that "religion is a

¹ Guthrie, Stewart, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, in: James W. Dow, *A Scientific Definition of Religion*, <http://www.anpere.net/2007/2.pdf>.

² The response to that perspective is that events described as "religious" can be found also at pre-human individuals - we'll come back with examples.

³ James W. Dow, in the recent study we have in mind, complains that Durkheim failed the idea that religion can occur via the mind, the brain, independent of society.

beautiful blend of ideas and behaviors with several independent origins outside religion as such. These behaviors involve many independent evolutionary origins from outside religion as such. Therefore, a historical-essentialist approach is not appropriate to this matter." A systematic approach may consist in a scientific investigation of "why" and "how" religion comes into existence as a human behavior.

Natural selection, variation and adaptation through learning from the environment are elements of Darwinism and evolutionary science in explaining the historical process of becoming man; from this point of view, to a complete elucidation of the evolutionary history of religion, it appears as a kind of *irrational adaptability*. The question these thinkers seek to answer is "what science knows about religion and how religion should be defined in order to be eligible for a scientific approach?"

Unlike Otto, authors such as Dow believe that religion should be aimed at defining of the observed (religious) behavior. It is necessary, then, a preliminary hypothesis to guide the whole research (the evolutionary, we add). He describes this hypothesis in the form of three steps: a) a knowledge of unobservable agents b) a sacred category classifier c) a reason for public sacrifice. Each of these three is a center for modern anthropological theorizing type. Although these three come together in "popular Western conception of religion", his article suggests that they are to be dealt with separately, given that they involve "independent complexes of development", which requires non-unitary approach: they should be investigated as separate types of religious behavior. Dow says: "Science has provided an understanding of human culture and of the natural world and human behavior; however, religious behavior logic is a complicated one: science needs to address this object as a complex of phenomena that do not respond directly to brain observable reality. For science: the cause of religious behavior does not lie in myth, but in understanding the cause for which human beings do and believe what they do and believe." An argument in favor of the evolutionary claim would be that religion is not exclusively human behavior. There are other species that communicate symbolically and have rituals (pre-human elements that exist in religious behavior). This would lead to the idea that other species have a religious-like behavior, at least in terms of pre-human elements. However, no other outside perspective can offer explanations of human consciousness on such events other than evolutionary perspective. Similarly, unlike Otto, Dow believes that irrational consists in the fact that individuals do not develop solutions to adapt to situations of rational type.

Thus, the provisional definition of religion is based on three modules (accustomed to the language and vocabulary of evolutionary psychology) involving a large range. They can be called *complexes* indicating the variety of behaviors to each of these modules relate; they have in common that, and so they

are called modules, they are solutions to particular problems of survival and reproduction – so, they have a high adaptive role. These modules evolve differently in different time, now offering three different ways to identify religion: types of behaviors produced by each of these modules can be considered religious.

Behavior towards sacred is provided through a moral purity continuum of the sacred object on which the report takes place. Evolutionary-adaptive role of the sacred is revealed by Roy Rappaport (1999): "sacred is controlling how human groups interact with their environment. Sacred signals coordinate groups to respond to changes in environmental control."¹ Durkheim also wrote about it: "sacredness was central in defining religion."

As the last class (the last view of the three) is concerned, it is not based on any studies or results of anthropologists, historians of religions or religious scholars, nor comprehensive interpretations of phenomenological hermeneutics of structuralist origin, nor on socio-human sciences efforts (psychology, sociology, etc.), nor on modules or hypothesis of "evolutionary science of religion" presented in detail above. The Kantian position concerning the issue of religion (although it is developed long before the others) is not necessarily invoked here because it would be more appropriate in determining the higher valence and more accurately religious phenomenon, or at least not on the content of the theory as such.

But rather through an interpretation of how Kant outlined the theory on intellect and reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*². It is known that Kant sees religion "within the limits of reason". Of particular interest here is that the issue concerning the conditions of possibility of religion tells us including about the type of reporting on it: directly or indirectly from the standpoint of the religious phenomenon; if it is put in these terms we can say that the Kantian approach is reported, of course to reason as the place of ideas that religion "works" with: the idea of God, of immortal soul, etc. This approach is not a direct one, nor Kant was concerned with the relationship with the phenomenon as such, much less with the empirical data about the source of the senses.

What interests here in particularly is that the German philosopher proceeded "from principles", in synthetic fashion, inquiring our intellect and reason as places of categories and speculative ideas. This does not mean that experience is meaningless. It only means that, after Kant, the possibility of religion itself is not a primitive need for adaptability, nor a need to share the sacred or the need to communicate messages through symbols and rituals and ancient tradition, nor is the church dedicated to the history. Kant understands religion "as a natural

¹ Rappaport, Roy A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, in: James W. Dow, *A Scientific Definition of Religion*, <http://www.anpere.net/2007/2.pdf>, p. 8.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Nicolae Bagdasar, Bucharest: "Cogito", 1998.

disposition", as *a priori* location of our being in relation to the universe of experience provided by intellect in collaboration with sensitivity and whose ranges (otherwise infinite) can be completed only in reason, in the valences of *the unconditioned* in the series of conditions of experience.

In this perspective, transcendental, religious philosophy no longer requires "plural" for religion, since the object is not represented by the vast and inexhaustible phenomenon of sense, significance and meanings of religious "gestures" or by the sacred hierophanies in the archaic or secularized world, but by the very reason.

In conclusion, all kinds of approaches presented in the philosophy of religion or in conjunction with it provide different data and views in relation to the others, catching different and specific areas in its efforts to approach this issue as complex. Each of these perspectives is a data source and a horizon of understanding the issues risen in the philosophy by the status and opportunity of religion. However, the excessive claims of the scientific vision must be reported, for, while using the tools of scientific rigor, the nature of the formulation of the hypotheses in philosophy of religion feeds rather from beliefs that do not pass through the filter of "scientific-operational" reasoning issues that can not be reduced to this; also the absolutism of the human *psyche* (in psychology) or of "*zoon politikon*" (in sociology), and the getting-over of any contribution of the natural sciences in the explanatory field of those phenomena that *can* be explained in a qualified and appropriate disciplinary frame, make the philosophy of religion/s to be more necessary than ever. In the space opened by the philosophical thought, are rising the conditions for the appropriateness of each of the positions that sometimes are in dispute. From this point of view, the "Kantian lesson" can be instructive here: the autonomy of the areas of spirit guarantees a cooperation of sciences, philosophy and humanities without starting endless and hopeless wars.

