



Robert T. Ptaszek

The Need and Opportunities for Philosophical Studies on Religions and Religious Movements

Introductory remarks

In over 30 years of philosophical research on religions, I have observed that contemporary academic studies on religions are dominated by sociology, the science of religion, and the history of religion. Not many researchers are philosophers. One can therefore say that philosophy (called the “queen of sciences” for a reason) is on the periphery of those studies.

Of course, I appreciate and respect the achievements that social sciences, especially sociology, bring to the study of religions and new (or, according to the terminology I use, alternative) religious movements. As a philosopher, however, I believe that to understand religions and religious movements, even the most precise descriptions of particular communities, their functioning, and their impact on individuals and society are not enough.

And this is what social sciences do, treating religious communities as one of many social groups. However, this position loses sight of the

Robert T. Ptaszek, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
rptaszek@kul.pl • ORCID: 0000-0001-9418-5517



specificity of such communities, which is their aspiration to be religions.

Now, aspiring to be a religion requires doctrines to be proclaimed, and their rational premises to be formulated for people to make up their minds and join the particular religion. This is why an analysis of the doctrine, as well as rational evaluation of its content, are important not only for the researcher but also for the person who wants to be a part of a particular religious community. So, in order to learn why people join these communities, it is also necessary to examine their doctrines.

Until now the issue of religious doctrines has been predominantly the domain of theological disputes. This kind of research in religion, however, has been raising serious accusations: theology was deemed unscientific, and theologians—not impartial.

In contrast to theology, a philosopher is able to carry out research into doctrinal aspects of religions, religious movements, and spiritual communities without running the risk of raising objections similar to those held against theologians.

Therefore, I intend to show how philosophy can broaden the area of research on religions and religious movements. However, since the issues concerning the possibilities and results of philosophical research of religious doctrines are extensive and complicated, I will refine what I am going to talk about.

First of all, I will show what philosophy is used in this research. This is important because not every current of contemporary philosophy allows for conducting such studies. In my view, the best platform for explaining and understanding the phenomena of new religions and new spirituality is something I call “the realistic philosophy of being.”¹ This philosophical current has roots that go back to ancient Greece, and to the achievements of such philosophers as Aristotle and St.

¹ This way of philosophizing has also been called ‘Thomism’ or ‘neo-Thomism.’ Its main goal is to answer the question about constitutive factors of the existing reality that

Thomas Aquinas. In Poland, it has been creatively developed since the mid-20th century by the so-called Lublin Philosophical School.

The particular relevance of realistic philosophy to research on teachings (doctrines) of religious communities dwells upon the fact that this philosophy takes into consideration a variety of aspects of reality, including those which transcend empirical knowledge. That's why this philosophy has at its disposal a set of proper intellectual tools and procedures not only for delivering a description, but also for a rational and critical evaluation of the doctrines of religious communities.

For this reason, I will limit my presentation to showing what can be said about religious doctrines using the realistic philosophy of religion created and developed at the Lublin Philosophical School by Zofia Józefa Zdybicka and her students, one of whom I have the honor to be.

The second clarification concerns the subject of research. The issue on which I will concentrate in this presentation of philosophical research on religious doctrines can be expressed as a question: Are there objective, rational grounds for choices between religions?

It seems that the most important basis for such a choice—as with other ideas that people follow in life—should be the veracity of religion. This is supported by two arguments:

(1) Every religious movement maintains that it is the one that best understands and expresses the revelation coming from God, so it is its doctrine that is true and shows man the most reliable way to self-fulfillment (usually understood as salvation or liberation).

(2) People voluntarily enter a particular religious community and become involved in its activities when they consider what its doctrine preaches to be true. Therefore, all religious communities formulate

make it such as it really is. See: Mieczysław Albert Krąpiec, Andrzej Maryniarczyk, *The Lublin Philosophical School* (PTTA: Lublin 2010); Andrzej Maryniarczyk, *The Realistic Interpretation of Reality* (PTTA: Lublin 2015); Idem, *Rationality and Finality of the World of Persons and Things* (PTTA: Lublin 2016).

arguments to justify their aspirations for trueness. The knowledge of the doctrines of these communities therefore also includes an assessment of the value of these arguments.

However, the question of criteria affecting the rationality of religious choices is proving to be much more complicated. Let us see to what extent a realistic philosophy of religion can be useful in examining them.

What philosophy can say about the veracity of a religious doctrine

By undertaking research on the veracity of religious doctrines, the philosopher already sees a significant limitation at the starting point. In a strictly rational way, “it is impossible to justify the trueness of what is known only by faith.”²

Although this is a serious problem, the philosopher “can speak objectively about religious truths in a certain aspect, e.g., by stating their internal consistency or inconsistency with scientific data.”³ It turns out, therefore, that the study of religious doctrines conducted from the perspective of philosophy cannot directly concern the issue of their veracity. It must be limited to assessing their weaker attribute, which is rationality. The way in which the rationality of religious doctrine is understood and the methods by which it can be verified by a philosopher must therefore be defined more precisely.

² Piotr Moskal, *Traktat o religii* [A Treatise on Religion] (Lublin: RW KUL, 2014), 219.

³ Andrzej Bronk, *Podstawy nauk o religii* [The Foundations of the Study of Religion] (TN KUL: Lublin 2003), 339.

In my studies, I adopt the definition of the rational character of a religion formulated by Andrzej Bronk in his work *Podstawy nauk o religii* [Foundations of the Study of Religion]. He states:

[...] a religion is rational when:

- (1) its propositions (the so-called truths of faith) are reasonable and true, i.e., they refer to a transcendent world that actually exists, and
- (2) ... they are non-contradictory, and
- (3) make up a consistent system of statements.⁴

From the philosophical point of view, research on the first of the elements constituting such a rationality, which is the reference of the claims of a given religion to the transcendental world, can be carried out only to a limited extent. For they are the subject of quite a specific philosophical discipline, which is the philosophy of God.⁵ The specificity of this discipline comes from the fact that it examines a Being which by its nature cannot be the subject of empirical cognition. Therefore, the philosophy of God does not use empirical methods, but a rational-intuitive method. Its starting point is the really existing and cognizable, material and spiritual world (especially the human psyche). By analyzing these empirical facts, realistic philosophy ultimately comes to God as the necessary rationale for the existence of a contingent (unnecessary) world.

⁴ Bronk, *Podstawy nauk o religii* [The Foundations of the Study of Religion], 375. Bronk elucidated this issue from a wider perspective in his article: Andrzej Bronk, "Teologia i nauki przyrodnicze. (Uwagi na marginesie) [Theology and natural sciences (remarks on the margins)]." *Roczniki Filozoficzne* [Philosophical Annals] 39/40, no. 2 (1991/1992): 5–38.

⁵ It is a "philosophical science that speaks about the existence and nature of God based on the human mind, searching for the ultimate cause of the existing world." Stanisław Kowalczyk, *Filozofia Boga* [Philosophy of God] (RW KUL: Lublin 2001), 10.

Although the issues that the philosophy of God addresses include both His existence and nature/essence, it focuses on the former, because there is relatively little to say about the nature of God,⁶ while in philosophy it is possible to formulate rational arguments to indicate His existence.

In any case, a realistic philosophy of being can be applied in a greater degree to the task of verification of the other two criteria for assessing the rationality of religious doctrine. The doctrines of different religious communities may be the subject of such research. I apply the method presented in this paper primarily to the study of doctrines of alternative Christian religious movements referring to the Bible. The best-known religious movements in this category are Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the Seventh-Day Adventists.

Philosophical method of studying religious doctrines

My studies of religious doctrines based on the Bible, carried out within the framework of a realistic philosophy of being, cover four stages:

(1) The identification and characterization of the main sources of doctrines of individual religious communities, as well as the most important works containing their fullest possible presentations. This is important for several reasons. The first is the existence of differences between the declared and actual sources of these doctrines. For example, Mormons officially declare that the source of their doctrine, in

⁶ This is because the philosophy of God tries to define an infinite Being (and thus a Being completely different from all beings known to man) by concepts formed on the basis of those well-known beings. The only way to say anything about the essence of God in a meaningful way is to use analogical language.

addition to the *Book of Mormon*, is the Bible. However, reading the texts that present the doctrine of the movement,⁷ we find that it is based primarily on the *Book of Mormon* and the revelations of the Mormons' founder, Joseph Smith, collected in two volumes: *Doctrine and Covenants* and *Pearl of Great Price*. The Bible, on the other hand, is merely a source of quotations, often taken out of context, to support Joseph Smith's controversial views, which are inconsistent with Christian teaching.

Analyzing the way religious movements referring to the Bible use its content, one can also see that they make significant interpretation errors. I will mention just the two most important ones. The first error is that "they undermine the human aspect of Scripture, which leads to a literal translation of the Bible without taking into account its literary genres."⁸ The second major mistake is that some movements attempt to discover the esoteric message of the Bible. These movements "proclaim that they have... a key that enables the hidden (spiritual) meaning of the Bible to be read."⁹

It should also be remembered that the available publications often do not contain a final, comprehensive presentation of the doctrines of the communities studied. This is because the doctrines of many of them can (and indeed do) undergo constant modification. For the important source of these doctrines are the revelations that God is said to give continuously to these communities.

Moreover, despite the diversity of form and content, many texts presenting the doctrines of religious movements also have an apolo-

⁷ For Mormons, the main such text is *Gospel Principles* available on the Internet at: https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/06195_eng.pdf

⁸ Paweł Szuppe, *Nowe ruchy religijne z perspektywy teologiczno-duszpasterskiej Kościoła katolickiego* [New Religious Movements in the Theological and Pastoral Perspective of the Catholic Church] (Wydawnictwo Polihymnia: Lublin 2017), 209.

⁹ Szuppe, *Nowe ruchy religijne*, 211.

getic purpose. They are published with the aim of gaining new members for the movement. Therefore, there are various types of falsehoods in them. Doubts are especially raised by the information resulting from the common (not only among religious movements) tendency to emphasize their own achievements. For example, it causes the descriptions of the lives and activities of the founders of particular movements to often take the form of hagiographies, rather than the actual presentation of a person and his or her achievements.

(2) The reconstruction of the main theses that make up the doctrines of specific movements and the moral principles that apply to them, as well as the forms of activity of these movements that are the practical realization of these principles. This task is not easy. Although there are usually texts available which present their basic principles of faith, the detailed interpretations of these principles contained in the various publications of each community often differ. If we add to this the ongoing evolution of their doctrines, we can see how many problems have to be overcome by making such reconstructions.

(3) The determination, with the help of philosophy, of what image of God, man and their relations transpires in the doctrines of individual religious movements. At this stage of research, however, it is necessary to remember that the founders of particular communities usually did not have a philosophical education. Therefore, it must be assumed that usually they were not aware of the philosophical implications of the teachings they preached. Such a reservation is necessary, because otherwise, instead of limiting oneself to indicating the real philosophical conditions of particular doctrines, one can find such references of theirs which did not actually take place.

(4) The evaluation of the aspirations to veracity of particular doctrines. As I have already shown, it comes down in practice to verifying their rationality. The initial, most elementary stage of verifying the rationality of the doctrines of religious movements is to determine their non-contradictory status. The first step is to examine whether the

doctrines of individual movements meet the condition of internal non-contradiction (consistency). This stage of research is complemented by the verification of the external non-contradiction of these doctrines. To this end, it is necessary to establish that they do not contain statements contradictory to the knowledge of the world provided by the particular sciences. At this stage of research, inconsistent and unreasonable doctrines can be identified. Such a doctrine is, for example, that of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Their concept of God does not meet the criterion of coherence,¹⁰ and the view that the world has existed for only about 6000 years contradicts the basic knowledge provided by science concerning the Earth.

Realistic philosophy also allows for a more accurate verification of the doctrines studied. For this philosophy contains a rational and, at the same time, holistic concept of the world and man, as well as the image of God, whose revelation is contained in the Bible. It also explains what is the religious relationship of man with God thus understood and what are the foundations and consequences of such a relationship. The realistic philosophy of religion therefore makes it possible to check whether the doctrines of individual religious movements, which not only refer to the Bible, but also consider themselves Christian denominations, are built on such an image of God, man and their relationship. The failure of the religious movement to meet these conditions allows for a negative assessment of its aspirations to be such a denomination.

¹⁰ The first of *The Articles of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* is: "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." Such wording suggests that Mormons profess a Trinitarian faith (one God in three persons). But a closer analysis of their texts shows that those are three divine beings separate from one another.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us get back to the issue described in the title of this paper. Is it really worthwhile to use the results provided by the philosophical analysis of religious doctrines in the research of the contemporary world of religions, which is mostly carried out by sociologists today? After all, the main premise of this research is well-characterized by the declaration of famous American religious sociologists, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge:

Although we find no reason to suggest that supernatural reality does not exist, we also have no need to postulate in our theory the existence of the supernatural world... Furthermore, when we contrast many faiths and seek human causes for variations among them, we at least imply that none possesses the revealed truth.¹¹

This declaration shows that scholars who conduct research on religion today are not interested in the question of the veracity of religious doctrines. The starting point of their research is pluralistic: they put traditional religions (such as Christianity, which has been shaping Western culture for two thousand years) and alternative religious movements, most of which originated in the 19th and 20th centuries, on the same plane, and treat them in the same manner. Such an attitude is justified by the unproven thesis that

all differences between religions are of an apparent nature and are the result of differences in the cultural training that their followers have

¹¹ Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, *Teoria religii* [Theory of Religion], trans. Tomasz Kunz (Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos: Kraków 2000), 38.

undergone. It is therefore unacceptable to consider that some religion is more true than others.¹²

So it seems that scholars studying religions recognise the pluralism of religions as a value in itself. From this perspective, a critical analysis of religious doctrines may be seen as a threat to (or even a limitation of) pluralism and religious freedom. In fact, it is precisely religious freedom, considered today to be an overriding value, that enables the emergence and functioning of a “free market for religious services” in which individual religious and spiritual communities can compete and attract believers without any restrictions.

However, such a vision of a “free market of religion” raises serious doubts in someone who, like me, deals with philosophy. Such a person sees the difficulties and problems that have to be reckoned with when trying to draw the line of demarcation between rational religious doctrine and a substitute that does not meet the criteria of rationality. He believes, however, that it is necessary to indicate such a line, because

the democratising trend towards equal treatment of all religions and forms of religiousness does not seem right. Taken literally, it would mean approving of any form of religiousness (pseudo-religiousness?): criminal religions, justifying terrorism... or inciting the collective suicide of their members.¹³

¹² Bartłomiej Dobroczyński, “Duchowość w kontekście Ruchu Nowej Ery [Spirituality in the Context of the New Age Movement],” in *New Age – nowe oświecenie* [New Age: A New Enlightenment], ed. A. Brzezińska, K. Bondyra and J. Wycisk (Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora: Poznań 1999), 35.

¹³ Bronk, *Podstawy nauk o religii* [The Foundations of the Study of Religion], 306.

It is for this reason that the veracity (or, as I have shown, verifiable rationality) of the doctrines preached by religious communities to their followers is important. And it is not just about the supernatural aspect of these doctrines, that is, the possibility of achieving salvation described in them. After all, religious doctrine also influences the behavior of people in their earthly lives. Furthermore, it is the main source of ideas that shape the vision of the world and the overall standard of behavior of the person who accepts it. So it is worth knowing what a particular religious doctrine says both about man and the world. And what actions it proposes.

Therefore, I consider it valuable that, thanks to philosophy, that is, in a rational way and without entering into the field of theological interpretations of any revelation, it is not only possible to study religious doctrines, but also to point out important differences between them. In this way, philosophy shows that not all the “offers” available today on the “free market of religious services” are of the same value. I think that such knowledge can also be helpful in religious studies. Because thanks to it, the functioning of the contemporary world of religion and spirituality can be described in a more precise way.



The Need and Opportunities for Philosophical Studies on Religions and Religious Movements

SUMMARY

Today, academic studies on religions are dominated by sociology, the science of religion, and the history of religion. Not many researchers are philosophers. One can therefore say that philosophy is on the periphery of those studies.

However, to understand religions, even the most precise descriptions of particular communities, their functioning, and their impact on individuals and

society, are not enough. In order to learn why people join them, it is also necessary to examine their doctrines. Although theologians have long studied them, their research has met with serious accusations: theology was deemed unscientific, and theologians—not impartial. On the other hand, a philosopher can study religious doctrines without fear of such charges, as philosophy limits itself to rational considerations, does not refer to revealed truths, and does not proclaim any concept of salvation.

In this text, I show what results the philosophical research of religious doctrines leads to, taking as an example doctrines of religious movements, which—in the opinion of their creators—constitute an alternative to Christianity. With the help of philosophy, the criteria for distinguishing religion/Christianity from a religious movement can be narrowed down to the inconsistencies in the doctrines of these movements and their general, irrational nature. This can be verified by pointing out serious errors, which are mostly the result of the founders' own interpretation of biblical texts.

Keywords: philosophy of religion, religions, religious movements, religious doctrines, veracity of doctrines, rationality of doctrines

REFERENCES

- Bronk, Andrzej. *Podstawy nauk o religii* [The Foundations of the Study of Religion]. Lublin: TN KUL, 2003.
- Bronk, Andrzej. "Teologia i nauki przyrodnicze. (Uwagi na marginesie) [Theology and natural sciences (remarks on the margins)]." *Roczniki Filozoficzne* [Philosophical Annals] 39/40 No. 2 (1991/1992): 5–38.
- Dobroczyński, Bartłomiej. "Duchowość w kontekście Ruchu Nowej Ery [Spirituality in the Context of the New Age Movement]," in *New Age – nowe oświecenie* [New Age: A New Enlightenment]. Ed. A. Brzezińska, K. Bondyra and J. Wycisk. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, 1999, 33–43.

- Gospel Principles*, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/06195_eng.pdf
- Kowalczyk, Stanisław. *Filozofia Boga* [Philosophy of God]. Lublin: RW KUL, 2001.
- Krapiec, Mieczysław A., and Maryniarczyk, Andrzej. *The Lublin Philosophical School*. Translated by Hugh McDonald, Lublin: PTTA, 2010.
- Maryniarczyk, Andrzej. *Rationality and Finality of the World of Persons and Things*. Translated by Hugh McDonald, Lublin: PTTA, 2016.
- Maryniarczyk, Andrzej. *The Realistic Interpretation of Reality*. Translated by Hugh McDonald. Lublin: PTTA, 2015.
- Moskal, Piotr. *Traktat o religii* [A Treatise on Religion]. Lublin: RW KUL, 2014.
- Stark, Rodney, and Bainbridge, William. *Teoria religii* [Theory of Religion]. Translated by Tomasz Kunz. Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos, 2000.
- Szuppe, Paweł. *Nowe ruchy religijne z perspektywy teologiczno-duszpasterskiej Kościoła katolickiego* [New Religious Movements in the Theological and Pastoral Perspective of the Catholic Church]. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Polihymnia, 2017.
- The Articles of Faith of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/friend/2011/12/the-articles-of-faith-of-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints?lang=eng>