



Robert T. Ptaszek

## Contemporary Believer in Face of the Plurality of Religions

### TWO PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

Globalization is changing the world at a rapid pace, including the world of religion. As a result, a believer deals with many religions, religious movements, and forms of new spirituality in addition to the religious tradition in which he or she grew up. In this situation, a religious person—because, like every human being, he or she is a rational being—seeks a rational criterion that would allow him or her to choose, or to affirm, the religion according to which he or she may lead his or her life.

At this point, I must stipulate that I do not intend to discuss the widespread and somewhat crude belief that only science is rational, while anything else, especially religion, is not; so, either you do science or you descend into the pits of irrationality. It is not so much science *per se* as the human person that is rational, or at least capable of intellectual cognition and rational thinking—not without some impressive results. Suffice it to mention the content-rich studies on the epistemic foundations of theism,<sup>1</sup> which are set in the broader context of the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Alvin Plantinga,



Western philosophical tradition, also not poor in content when it comes to thinking about religion.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this second view of rationality, that is, rationality recognized as a feature, or inherent ability, of the cognizing subject, sits at the center of my considerations.

And so, the situation of being a rational, cognizing subject facing a plurality of religions opens one's intellect to a number of issues. In this article I want to discuss two of them, particularly interesting from the point of view of a believer who (like me) deals with philosophy on a daily basis. Without a doubt it is true that, in his search, such a believer can refer to the body of knowledge that has been built up by various disciplines involved in the study of religion. However, my experience tells me, and written results of experiences of other rational cognizing subjects also suggest that, philosophy can be particularly helpful in this quest.

Therefore, with the help of philosophy, I am going to discuss two issues. The first concerns the relationship between science and religion, and the second is about attitudes towards the multiplicity of religions. Since both issues are broad and multifaceted, in this paper I will focus on answering two particular questions. They are as follows:

1. Why should believers, and, in particular, followers of Jesus Christ of the Catholic persuasion, do science today?
2. What could be the attitude of a believer towards the plurality of religions?

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*Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism: Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. Cornelius F. Delaney (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979); *Experience, Explanation and Faith: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anthony O'Hear (London: Routledge, 1984); *Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Anthony O'Hear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 1–5, ed. Graham Oppy and N. N. Trakakis (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2013).

### Several reasons why believers, and catholics in particular, should do science today

The title of this part may suggest that I attempt to justify my own activities. After all, being a philosopher of religion and a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Lublin, I consider myself a scholar. Today, however, when putting the emphasis on the alleged conflict between science and religion is still, for some reason, a fashionable thing to do, my academic and scholarly status is often undermined. Such an approach makes itself felt, especially across humanities today. The very scholarly and academic status of the humanities, as well as their usefulness for the benefit of societies, are questioned, challenged, and contested worldwide. The extent of the problem is evident in the case of Japan. In 2015, the Minister of Education of that country enacted an order by which all Japanese state-run universities were obliged to gradually shut down all of their higher education courses in humanities and social sciences.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, this is the wrong path, although I really intend to look into the issue of the relationship between science and religion from a more practical than theoretical perspective. To make my considerations more precise, by science I mean disciplines based upon epistemological naturalism and natural-mathematical sciences focused on developing technologies, which often go today by the name of “techno-science.” The paradigm behind these sciences is a well-tried one and, of course, it is naturalistic. It assumes that an adequate description of the

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<sup>3</sup> The matter was widely reported by the media. For example, *Time* magazine reported on it in a short article by Nash Jenkins, titled *Alarm Over Huge Cuts to Humanities and Social Sciences at Japanese Universities*, accessed February 12, 2024, <https://time.com/4035819/japan-university-liberal-arts-humanities-social-sciences-cuts>.

natural world is obtained based on the experimental method, language of mathematics, and falsificationist approach to standing theories.

My purpose in this part is to list the benefits that may come from the fact that these sciences will be cultivated by a Catholic, that is, someone who is otherwise convinced that the knowledge of causal relationships governing this world are just not enough for a rational, cognizing subject to be content with, and that such subjects should also get an idea of the end-purpose of this world's existence.

Such an indication of the subject matter clarifies why I am not going to discuss the other kind of naturalism, namely the ontological one. I would like to emphasize that there is no transition between epistemological and ontological naturalism. Science does not possess the apparatus allowing for research, and the subsequent competent discussion on that which transcends the material world. This means also that there is no apparatus allowing for calling into question the existence of that which is immaterial. This is precisely why all the declarations about the naturalistic vision of reality as the only one that is "scientific" remain invalid.

The issue raised is important because, as I have already mentioned, the relationship between science and religion is now fashionably referred to as "a conflict." Moreover, it is being repeated not only by authors like the famous "Four Horsemen of Atheism": Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris, who have built up their prominence upon systematical repetition of this thesis. The need for 'liberating science from the slavery of religion' is voiced today by many scientists, for instance, by Steven Weinberg, a Nobel Prize winner in physics.<sup>4</sup> And because, as a philosopher representing the Lublin school of realistic philosophy, I am not very sus-

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Agnieszka Lekka-Kowalik, "Nauka w poszukiwaniu boskości?" [A scientific quest for the divine?], in: *Uniwersalizm chrześcijaństwa wobec alternatywnych propozycji współczesności* [Christian universalism and alternative contemporary pro-

ceptible to intellectual fashions, I would like to address these statements before I move to positive declarations.

I think that there cannot be any real conflict between properly understood science and religion. At most, there can be a conflict between scientism<sup>5</sup> (which I define as an excessive trust placed in science) and religion. Due to time limitations I am going to put forward only one argument, sufficient enough in my opinion, to demonstrate the error of taking such a position, and to explain its cause.

Since the period of the Enlightenment, the intellect has been deemed to be the source of knowledge that provides, or even contains, the set of theses the acceptance of which is obligatory for any person who wants to be considered an educated one. Such a definition of intellect invited some to juxtapose science, as based on “rational cognition,” and religion, as representing “blind faith.” This definition, however, was incorrect, because, first of all, it was a cursory one, and secondly, its relevance stood on the appeal to authority: first, you need to accept this particular view of the intellect, and only then will you be respected (by us, the enlightened ones) as an educated person. In this regard, the organic growth of the enlightened class was not far from the way religious communities acquired their neophytes: acceptance, and therefore an act of will, preceded intellectual reflection on what exactly was accepted. In the act of faith, which is an act that sets in motion

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posals], ed. Robert T. Ptaszek and Marek Piwowarczyk (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2012), 303.

<sup>5</sup> Without giving this attitude the name of “scientism,” Richard P. Feynman (1918–88) pointed it out in his lecture “What Is Science?” (1966), addressed to American science teachers: “I think we live in an unscientific age in which almost all the buffeting of communications and television-words, books, and so on—are unscientific. As a result, there is a considerable amount of intellectual tyranny in the name of science.” Two years later, this lecture was published in *The Physics Teacher*. Available online at [https://profizgl.lu.lv/pluginfile.php/32795/mod\\_resource/content/0/WHAT\\_IS\\_SCIENCE\\_by\\_R.Feynman\\_1966.pdf](https://profizgl.lu.lv/pluginfile.php/32795/mod_resource/content/0/WHAT_IS_SCIENCE_by_R.Feynman_1966.pdf) (accessed February 20, 2024).

all human faculties, including imagination, emotions, memory, intellect and will, the latter takes precedence (giving thus the act of faith its distinctive flavor of a “choice” that has been made). However, intellect persists and the search for understanding never stops: faith always seeks understanding. This is how theodicy arises, and even more so, theology, with its rational method and purely intellectual character (eventually becoming, in its mature and rigorous form, a powerful support for faith).<sup>6</sup>

As we know from philosophy, intellect is a human cognitive power. To put it in a simplified way, it is a tool whose main task is to collect the incoming data and put it in order. When given the empirical data, intellect will generate sets of theses that make up a science. But when intellect is provided, besides the empirical data, with the content of a reliable revelation, the result of its work will be the creation of a rationally constructed theological doctrine. This type of knowledge can exist and function without any real conflict between it and the body of knowledge provided by empirical sciences. There is no difference between the two sets of theses in terms of their structure and rigorous rules for their elaboration. They differ only in the accepted sources of knowledge. And therefore, if Catholic theology puts forward arguments justifying the reliability of its sources (and this certainly can be done),<sup>7</sup> it should be considered a rational knowledge.

After supplying these necessary clarifications, I would like to point out the three main benefits of the situation in which a religious person, a Catholic to be exact, is being involved with the empirical sciences by occupation.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), nos. 16–23 (Chapter II: Credo ut Intellegam) and nos. 24–35 (Chapter III: Intellego ut Credam), accessed February 20, 2024, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html).

<sup>7</sup> As demonstrated, e.g., in the book by Piotr Moskal, *Apology for the Catholic Religion*, trans. Dominika Bugno-Narecka (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2013).

A BROADER PERSPECTIVE  
FROM WHICH SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IS PERCEIVED

The need for such a broadened perspective can be clearly felt especially in natural-mathematical and social sciences concerned with the human being. Such a perspective helps protect science from the attempts, occurring more and more often today, to explain any human action on a purely natural level. They result, among other things, in research aimed at the discovery of biological elements (such as genes or areas of the brain) which condition or even determine human relationships. An example of this may be the never-ending (and rather ineffective) search for biological agents causing love or genes responsible for choices regarding human conduct (loyalty, betrayal, etc.).

The vantage point of a religious person can also help understand the role of religion in human life. It is important, as today we deal with numerous misunderstandings related to that issue. In modern medical sciences, for instance, religious faith is being treated as one of the sources of mental disorders. I think that Robert Delfino was right when he wrote:

Lifting the ban on the supernatural would probably ... [open] the possibility for greater interdisciplinary synthesis...

It is thus worthwhile to

engage in dialogue with science about various metaphysical possibilities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert A. Delfino, *Replacing Methodological Naturalism*, accessed February 12, 2024, <https://www.metanexus.net/replacing-methodological-naturalism>.

#### TAKING INTO CONSIDERATION THE MORAL ASPECT OF CONDUCTED RESEARCH

Today with the ever-increasing popularity of the postulate that “science should be free of values,” this issue is of particular importance. It is indeed difficult to consider the final meaning, the end-purpose of scientific research an irrelevant detail. This is especially so in the circumstances when such research may lead to global control or global destruction. As long as techno-science was not capable of providing human beings with tools allowing for such actions, the issue of the moral evaluation of scientific research, although an important one, was somewhat less essential. But today, when science may lead to irreversible changes or even the destruction of the entire humankind and the planet Earth, the question regarding the proper aims and goals of science is of significant importance. Furthermore, the moral stance of a scientist who, for example, refuses to work on a device or technology with which someone else might end the existence of our species seems to be a desirable attitude. And since morality is one of the key elements of religion, I think that it is safer for humanity as a whole to let religious people do the science, because what matters for them is much more than the direct, utilitarian result of their scientific research.

#### INTEGRITY AND RELIABILITY OF CONDUCTED RESEARCH

We live in an age of rivalries, which applies to scientists as well. Competition as such is not a bad thing, as long as it is a fair competition. Today, however, when a successful application for a scientific grant is often the only way to get the research done, the desire to win by any means may become a temptation one cannot resist. As a result, we see a growing number of research projects that do not comply with the aforementioned standards of integrity and reliability. In this context, again, a scientist with a well-established religious attitude would



not accept principles such as “the ends justify the means” or “win by any means and at all cost.” There is much greater possibility that this person’s research will be conducted according to the rules that ensure high standards (provided of course that he or she will actually get the grant, which, unfortunately, might not be so obvious in light of what I have just said).

As a conclusion of this part, I will refer once more to the words of Delfino. He states that:

The scientific community is faced with a dilemma. Either it abandons methodological naturalism or it abandons realism. A choice must be made. My suggestion is that they abandon methodological naturalism and replace it with the principle of methodological neutralism. This new principle also has some added bonuses. First, it should be acceptable to the scientific, religious, and philosophical communities. Second, it should also allow for greater dialogue between science and religion.<sup>9</sup>

I think that such a dialogue will ensure, without hampering the advances of science, a good, or at least more reasonable, use of the results of scientific research.

### **Religious diversity as the object of philosophical investigations**

In today’s world, we are confronted with a multiplicity of religious communities emphasizing their aspirations to be the only true religion. This situation generates controversy, but also inspires discussions among researchers representing particular disciplines of religious studies. Because they examine the world of religion from different per-

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<sup>9</sup> Delfino, *Replacing Methodological Naturalism*.

spectives, they usually come to quite different conclusions. Significant divergences arise especially with regard to the evaluation of religious diversity itself. Today, there is a wide range of different views on this issue: beginning with the view that it is detrimental (because it leads to relativism in matters of faith) up to the idea that the plurality of religions enriches the inherently pluralistic world of human ideas.

Contemporary religious diversity manifests itself in many ways. Perhaps its most interesting form is the so-called “privatization” of religion. This phenomenon was described in detail by the German sociologist Thomas Luckmann (1927–2016) in his book *The Invisible Religion* (1967).<sup>10</sup> Luckmann demonstrated that people increasingly use the ideas contained in the doctrines of different religions, as well as scientific and pseudo-scientific concepts (such as magic or astrology) to create their own, that is, individual and private religious environments. The final effect of the privatization of religion is that a person simultaneously accepts the principles of several religious doctrines, often attempting to combine mutually exclusive views (for example, the Christian vision of the Last Judgment and the theory of reincarnation).

Philosophical investigations provide material that allows us to organize and better understand the issue of religious diversity. First of all, because with the help of philosophy, that is, in a rational way, it is not only possible to study religious doctrines, but also to point out important differences between them. In other words, philosophy is able to show that not all the “offers” available today on the “free market of religious services” are of the same value.

I believe that such evaluations, based on purely rational cogitation, can be helpful in religious studies. At the same time, however, these philosophical considerations can lead a religious person to quite per-

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

plexing conclusions. And this is what I want to talk about in more detail.

### **Positions regarding diversity of religions**

Without further ado, we can say that confronted with today's religious diversity, human being faces four options:

1. Naturalism
2. Exclusivism
3. Inclusivism
4. Pluralism.<sup>11</sup>

Because each of them has its own limitations, I want to present them (with a little help from philosophy) in most clear and precise manner.

The position of naturalism is the easiest to present, for it is an extreme and reductionist position. It is based on the assumption, accepted without due justification, that there is no supernatural reality, so all religions speak of something that does not exist. On this basis, the naturalist claims that all religious beliefs that deal with transcendent reality are erroneous or, at least as far as their truthfulness concerned, unjustifiable. In contrast, naturalists explain the widespread tendency among humans to accept religion by appealing to psychological or natural-world mechanisms such as projection or evolution.

Of course, a man of faith will not accept such a position. He therefore has two other choices.

First, he can become an exclusivist. This paradigm was until recently quite popular. It can still be found in some strands of

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<sup>11</sup> These positions, expounded from the point of view of the Lublin Philosophical School, are accurately characterized by Piotr Moskal in his book, *Filozofia religii* [Philosophy of religion] (Pelplin: Wydawnictwo Bernardinum, 2020), 204–209.

Christianity and is also present in Judaism and Islam. There are two main varieties of it: doctrinal exclusivism and soteriological exclusivism.

The doctrinal exclusivist claims that the doctrine of only one religion (that is, his own) is entirely true, while the doctrines of all other religions are false. The soteriological exclusivist, on the other hand, believes that only his religion offers effective means of salvation. He also claims that followers of other religions will not achieve salvation.

It is worth noting that in Western civilization there have been many outstanding thinkers-exclusivists such as the Swiss Evangelical-Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), or the American Catholic philosopher Alvin Plantinga, born in 1932. However, a religious man who subscribes to this position today can easily gain a reputation as an intolerant fanatic.

Since this is neither a comfortable nor an easy situation to accept, a believer may somewhat weaken his position by becoming a religious inclusivist. In this paradigm also, as in exclusivism, a distinction is made between doctrinal inclusivism and soteriological inclusivism.

The doctrinal inclusivist believes that the revelation that is the foundation of his religion contains the full truth about man, God, and the relationships between them. He acknowledges, however, that certain elements of truth can also be found in other religions. The soteriological inclusivist, on the other hand, claims that his religion offers the most effective means of salvation. He will agree, however, that other religions may contain some salvation-relevant elements (e.g., ascetic or prayer practices), and that the followers of these other religions can somehow achieve salvation as well.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> An example of such inclusivism can be found in how the axiom *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* has been expounded in the 20th-century Catholic dogmatics: nobody is denied of his or her chance of salvation, but the Church is declared to be the only agent of this salvific work—even if not known or completely unheard of. This pertains to all people of

To be clear, I want to declare that this is my position on religious diversity. As a Catholic and at the same time a philosopher, I am a religious inclusivist. I do claim that my religion is the only way to salvation, and that Jesus Christ alone is the Savior, but I also claim that His salvific work extends not only to Christians but to followers of other religions as well.

I am aware that expressing such views may expose me to accusations of discrimination against other religions (or at least disrespect for them). So, I feel obliged to explain why I cannot become a religious pluralist.

The pluralist position is the youngest of the four discussed here. It has been around for approximately one hundred years. It was pioneered in the 1920s by such well-known scholars as the German Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and the American William Hocking (1873–1966). On the other hand, the most prominent representative of pluralist philosophy and theology of religion was undoubtedly the Englishman John Hick,<sup>13</sup> who passed away in 2012. As with the previous paradigms, the pluralistic paradigm can also be referred to as doctrinal pluralism and soteriological pluralism. Those two pluralisms are closely intertwined.

The doctrinal pluralist holds that all major religions are equally rational and justified. To a religious man this sounds, at least at first, quite convincing. However, the assessment of pluralism changes when

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all times and places who “without blame on their part” have not heard the Good News. The issue is discussed in more detail in Joseph Ratzinger, “Poza Kościołem nie ma zbawienia? [Is there no salvation outside the Church?],” in *Opera omnia*, vol. 8, pt 2 (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2013), 975–999. This paper was originally published in German as “Salus Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Est,” *Documentatie Centrum Concilie*, Series I, no. 88 (1963).

<sup>13</sup> Two works by Hick in particular address this issue: *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

such a person realizes that, from the pluralist's perspective, being rational or justified is not the same as being true. Thus, according to this conception, although religious beliefs turn out to be justified, this does not mean that they are true in the classical sense.

The soteriological pluralist believes that all major religions offer the same effective means of salvation or liberation, even though they understand this ultimate goal differently.

John Hick justifies his position by pointing out that, in his view, any language describing divine reality has only a figurative and mythological sense, not a literal one. Thus, a universal divinity that exists in some unknown way is experienced and described in different ways in different religious traditions.

To illustrate his point, Hick refers to the example of blind individuals experiencing an elephant. The one who touches the elephant's leg experiences the elephant as a tree; the one who touches the elephant's trunk senses a snake; finally, the one who touches the tail thinks he is dealing with a rope. According to Hick, the same is true of the multiplicity of religions. Followers of different religious traditions experience divinity in the form of Brahma, Shiva, Krishna, God of Torah, Allah, or Christ.

This in no way means that Hick propounds polytheism, or states that there is one God, called by different names or titles in different religions. Nor does it mean that these gods are an illusion. What then are the gods of the various religions? According to Hick's position, they are the human response to the encounter with what is the ultimate, true, yet unknowable reality.

### **In place of a conclusion**

As I have shown, the pluralistic paradigm is relativistic in nature. Thus, in accepting this position, a religious man faces a fundamental

problem. From the perspective of religious pluralism, it is impossible to find a satisfactory answer to the question: why should I follow my religion if it is just as valuable as all the others?

Meanwhile, it is necessary to remember that, from the point of view of a religious man, what he believes in is a fundamental issue. He takes his religion seriously. So if, for example, he is a Catholic, it means that he has a legitimate hope of attaining salvation, or, according to the famous French thinker Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), he hopes for “an infinity of infinitely happy life.”

The religious man, therefore, tries to make his decision to choose the true religion in the most sensible and rational way possible. For he believes that, in his life, he is pursuing an ultimate goal which is not finite but eternal. Eternal would also be the consequences of a possible mistake in this matter. Yet religious pluralism does not provide him with effective tools to decide this matter. Therefore, the religious man, especially one who wants to be guided in his religious choices not only by faith but also by the light of reason, will rather become an inclusivist. To be one responsibly, however, he must find as many rational arguments as possible for the truth of his religion. But how to look for them and whether it is possible to find them at all is a topic for another article.



**The Contemporary Believer in Face of the Plurality Of Religions.  
Two Philosophical Issues**

**SUMMARY**

This article discusses two philosophical issues the globalization ushered in in modern society: (1) Why should believers, and in particular Catholics, do science today? (2) What could be the believer’s attitude towards the multiplicity of religions? A proper understanding of the relation between science and reli-

gion is key to the first issue, and in addition, in a realistic approach, one can also see the concrete benefits of such a development. As for the second issue, the believer vis-à-vis religious diversity has four options: naturalism, exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Each has its drawbacks: in the case of naturalism and pluralism the very meaning of professing one's faith is undermined, albeit on different grounds, while exclusivism and inclusivism differ in their level of (actual or merely perceived) disregard for other religions. Inclusivism (doctrinal and soteriological) is the option that stands out as the most intellectually mature in this set.

**Keywords:** philosophy of religion, religion, science, religious pluralism, religious naturalism, exclusivism, inclusivism

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