

Philosophical Approaches to Religion in the Perspective of the Concept of “Human Essence”¹

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The emergence and development of modern *philosophy of religion* (in the middle of the 17th century) and of the sciences of religion, or *religious studies*, (in the middle of the 19th century) were among the expressions of modern Man’s emancipation from dependence on God. The new philosophy of religion produced a series of epistemological models for explaining the essence of the religious phenomenon.

We reconstruct some aspects of the theoretical patterns of the concept of religion, as formed by key philosophers, theologians, sociologists who took the “human essence”, “human nature” as the conceptual core of their approach to religion. In addition to their differing methodological identities, as shown by the variety of their approaches to religion, these authors also differ in their evaluation of religion. The definitions of religion /”what does really “religious believer” mean?”/ are viewed as grounded on: 1/ differing epistemological models “surmounting” religion; 2/ five models of philosophy of religion: the *speculative* (Hegel), the *critical* (Kant, Tillich, Troeltsch, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, etc.), the *phenomenological* (Scheler, Eliade), the *linguistic* (Frege, Wittgenstein, Evans, etc.), and the *hermeneutic* (Ricoeur); 3/ the “schizophrenic split” /P.Tillich/ between reason and faith, philosophy and theology, the method of explication

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and the method of comprehension; 4/ ambivalence-focused interpretations of religion, shared by certain classic, modern, and post-modern thinkers.

Specialized knowledge on religion emerged in the 19th century after the industrial revolution and as a result of the ideological need of colonialism for a study of religions in the framework of the general history of mankind; these factors stimulated the appearance and development of the history of religion and comparative religious studies. The view that philosophy and theology are “extra-scientific” interpretations of religion, with a “a personal stake” in the matter, as opposed to the synthesis between the cultural-historical and the phenomenological approach, perceived as scientific approaches that overcome the one-sidedness of philosophy and theology, is another possible way of interpreting this relationship; this variant has been analyzed by the Italian scholar C. Prandi.

In this chronological chain of conceptions (spanning from the last quarter of the 18th century to the last quarter of the 20th) we have included representatives of various cultural-philosophical currents: the so-called speculative philosophy – transcendental idealism (I. Kant); “objective” idealism (G. W. F. Hegel); Romanticism – the “sentimental theology” of F. Schleiermacher; the philosophical anthropology of L. Feuerbach; the historical materialism of K. Marx; the “comprehending” sociology of M. Weber; the philosophical-historical interpretation in the works of A. Toynbee; the psychoanalytic approach of S. Freud and its evolution in the works of E. Fromm; the existential variant of a “theology without God” in the works of P. Tillich. In the context of these thinkers and approaches we have also examined, in a comparative perspective, the approaches of a number of other philosophers of religion and religious philosophers, or scholars in the humanities, who philosophized on religion, such as: F. Nietzsche, S. Kierkegaard, H. Bergson, J. J. Rousseau, M. Buber, G. Simmel, N. Berdyaev, P. Berger, and others.

In the conceptual-chronological chain, constructed for the purposes of our analysis, different epistemological models have been included, most of which are examined in the beginning of the introductory theses: the speculative, the inersive, and the genealogical model; among the authors presented here, some practiced the method of explication, others, the method of comprehension, and Max Weber, though linked with the latter, supported a “third” course. Among the thinkers who constructed the concept of

religion in terms of, and against the backdrop of, the concept of Man, of “human nature”, there were philosophers and theologians; we have included representatives of various branches of specialized knowledge on religion: psychology, sociology, history. Within the framework of the philosophical tradition itself, a variety of currents is presented here: there are representatives of German idealism, of historical materialism, of philosophical anthropology, of existentialism and psychoanalysis, of Romanticism and Historicism.

In addition to their differing philosophical identities, as shown by the variety of their philosophical approaches to religion, these authors also differ in their evaluation of religion: some are acceptant of it, others reject it, still others view it as a functional element of the social world. For instance religion holds a respectable place in its value and theoretical importance in the philosophy of Hegel and in Toynbee’s philosophy of history; it has an important functional potential in the sociological conceptions of M. Weber, and partially in the works of I. Kant and E. Fromm. Most of these thinkers did not give it a central place in their views, except, of course, for the religious philosophers and theologians among them: for Schleiermacher and Tillich religion is the most general and essential dimension of culture and of humankind. But even for these two thinkers the innermost, profound value focus and epistemological focus is Man and his place in the world. This conceptual focus is most explicitly demonstrated in L. Feuerbach, but it also defines the values and essence of the philosophical systems of Kant, Hegel, the religious-philosophical views of Schleiermacher and Tillich, even those of Weber and Toynbee. The philosophers and theologians examined here built their understanding of religion according to their specific, differing interpretations of “human nature”, of which they held religion to be a manifestation: the relationship of interconnectedness, of mutual manifestation, of mutual endowing, indicated by Schleiermacher and Hegel; religion as a functional element with regard to the sphere of morals – I. Kant; religion as a forming factor of the spirit of Western civilization – M. Weber; as an integrating/disintegrating factor, a pacifying one in the perspective of historical clashes and historical change – A. Toynbee; as a cultural phenomenon formed by and forming human character – E. Fromm; as an expression of “ultimate concern” in Man, as Man’s borderline being and situation, and as the innermost essence of culture.

In addition to these universalistic and functional approaches to religion from the perspective of its role for humankind and for Man's place in the world and in history, special attention has been devoted to the critical approaches. The views of L. Feuerbach, K. Marx, and S. Freud can be defined as critical-inversive (Feuerbach), critical-negative (S. Freud), and critical-rejecting (K. Marx). The basis of this classification is, once again, the understanding of these authors regarding human nature and the role of religion for the latter. For instance, the critical pathos of Feuerbach stems from his concept of God and religion as alienation, as an illusory projection of the generic essence of humankind, which must be overcome by Man so as to harmonize this essence with his actual existence. This same idea is placed by K. Marx within a social-historical context where the surmounting of the religious illusion involves perfecting societal relations and is linked with the rationality, transparency and humaneness of these relations. For S. Freud, who interpreted Feuerbach's approach in the light of psychoanalysis, religion was an illusion characteristic for the undeveloped, infantile stage of ontogenesis and phylogenesis, an illusion that provided a sense of security and being protected, by projecting the figure of the protective father onto God.

In the views of these authors the concept of "human essence", of "human nature", plays the role of a humanistic value imperative, which must be implemented in actual human existence; this is a philosophical trend that strives to embody the transcendent in the immanent not only in thought but in reality as well. On this basis concrete practices are proposed for implementing this process. In the case of Feuerbach, this is the disclosure of the secret of theology in terms of the secret of anthropology in this thinker's own philosophy and by establishing love in human relations; in the case of Marx this is the attainment of transparency and rationality in social relationships through scientific and technological progress and revolutionary change; for Freud there is education and the upbringing of people aimed at emancipating them from dependence and fear - this change is to be a general cultural process as concerns phylogenesis, and a psychoanalytic treatment as concerns ontogenesis. Thus, in the thought of these three authors, religion in general and religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon was criticized and rejected as a manifestation of the compensatory mechanism employed at an underdeveloped, inferior

stage of the cultural-historical development of the human essence; in other words, it was seen as the alienation of this essence.

Radically different is the theoretical and value status of the concept of Man, of individual and of “religion” in Hegel and Schleiermacher: in their views on the mutually connected and mutually manifested pulsation of Man, nature, society, and God, the full, absolute harmony between all these is attained; in the case of Hegel this happens in thought; and in the case of Schleiermacher, in “contemplation”, feeling. The actual conditions of this interrelation throughout history represent a road along which this absolute harmony is to be attained (according to Hegel); or they must become a part of this type of “contemplation” through the catching example and testimony of the “virtuosos” in the matter. Thus, according to Hegel’s expression, this is the creation of a “mythology of reason” and a “mythology of feeling”, which are self-sufficient alternatives of the empirical order (Schleiermacher) or have in some miraculously way become embodied in this order (Hegel). In these system, albeit in the form of mythologies, and in fantasy (“oh, if you were not in me, divine fantasy...”, wrote Schleiermacher in his *Monologues*) it is of the nature, of the essence of humankind to be a harmonious component, of equal standing, within the universe. But unlike Hegel, who found this mythology embodied in reality, in the Christianity, Law, and the State of his time, Schleiermacher spoke dejectedly and despairingly about Man and the world outside “fantasy”, outside the “mythology of feeling”. Human essence and religion, when viewed in this perspective, become a value imperative, a model, and ideal that provides a critical “perspective” for evaluating the real, empirically given individuals and religions. It is no coincidence that both thinkers (especially the early Hegel) leveled strong, indeed devastating, criticism at historical persons and religions.

Although an eminent Protestant theologian of the 20th century, just as Schleiermacher was in his time, Tillich proceeded from a different understanding of Man and human nature, and hence proposed a different understanding of religion and God, and an anthropological imperative for Man radically different from Schleiermacher’s. The comparison between the two enables us to see the heuristic qualities of our approach, which allows us to rise above the confessional specificities and restrictions of the models being studied and to analyze them from the perspective of their common and deepest

value foundation, i.e. their understanding of Man. On the other hand it makes possible to overcome the one-dimensional confessional approach to religious philosophy by revealing the differences in the views of philosophers and theologians belonging to the same religious confession, differences determined by the specifics of the philosophical-anthropological core of their ideas. In view of this goal, the analysis has no need, and makes no claim, to present the problem in the light of confessional distinctions (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, etc.) or of the internal differences within a confession. The religious philosophers discussed here are included in the chronological “chain” in the perspective of their specific views on Man and human nature, views that provide comparability with the other perspectives presented here.

P. Tillich considers human existence to be a state of “fallenness”, a falling away from the human essence, which is only given as a possibility, a potential that annihilates itself in the transition to existence; religion is an expression, a manifestation of this state. It is a state of “ultimate concern” linked with the finitude of Man, with the collisions of human existence; hence it manifests, spiritualizes and is “concerned” about this non-essential state of human existence. In this framework the imperative becomes impossible that draws humanity to the Romantic “contemplation” of the harmonious and interlinked cosmos, where humans are an equal component. Of course, the ethical-anthropological imperative that follows from Tillich’s views is to courageously accept this non-essential existence, tragic and ridden with collisions, this “dejectedness”, or to accept oneself such as one is: “I am what I am” in Fromm’s words.

With this imperative and this concept concludes the chain of interpretations of the concept of “Man”, “human nature” and the concept of “religion”. The sequence began with the proud moral imperative of Kant, who defined Man as the aim, and God as the means, for realizing the moral law. For Kant morality is the essence of humankind and human nature is obedient to the moral principles created by rational nature. Religion and God are significant and meaningful as a moral religion, i.e. as spiritual means for inciting to moral deeds, means that are effective through their sway over Man’s heart. For Kant the only truthful religion is the moral one, while actual religion, that of the cult, of the Church, is false, useless and even harmful.

According to their approach to the human essence – speculative, historical, or existentialist/psychoanalytical - these authors, who tied these epistemological knots, are united in three thematic blocs, each of which in a unique way marked some of the fundamental directions and trends in the development of philosophy and the humanities since the end of the 18th and down to the last quarter of the 20th century.

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Quite a few contemporary authors, motivated by the post-modern spirit of pluralism and tolerance, try to show the compatibility between theological and philosophical approaches to religion and its definition, thus hoping to overcome the “schizophrenic split in culture” (P. Tillich) between reason and faith. A number of prominent 20th century philosophers have viewed this stance positively; among them are Habermas, Marcuse, Derrida, Gianni Vattimo and others. Richard Rorty also believed that the intellectual grounds for the war between science and theology have been swept away with the expansion of anti-historicism and anti-essentialism in philosophy and the social sciences.

In modern times phenomenology and hermeneutics have proposed a radically new philosophical approach to the phenomenon of religion, which refuses to philosophically “surmount” it; this trend attempts to interpret religion by tracing its inner logic, its specific invariants and language, its attitude to Man. Researchers have found shortcomings in these new approaches, in which - they believe - the philosophical horizon is lost. These authors stress the imperative need for a multi-dimensional approach to the complexity of religion; that the principle of religious pluralism should be grounded through a philosophical approach that transcends specific religions; and that, on this basis, an “ethics of dialogue” between religions should be built, of the kind that could hardly be achieved in the framework of the separate branches of specialized study of religion, nor within the limits of theology, which is usually connected with a specific religion.

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