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POLYTHETIC, GRADED AND COMPLEX: AN APPROACH TO THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Definicja politetyczna, stopniowana i złożona – przykład podejścia do definicji religii na styku teologii i religioznawstwa

Streszczenie:

Artykuł zajmuje się zagadnieniem definicji religii między teologią i religioznawstwem. Na polu teologii w XX w. refleksja na temat religii cieszyła się znacznym zainteresowaniem, przy czym teologowie nierzadko korzystali z dorobku autorów z dziedziny religioznawstwa. Przez wielu jednak zauważone zostały niektóre tylko podejścia religioznawcze, a inne, jak np. antropologia religii, były pomijane. Dlatego tematem rozważań w tym artykule jest kwestia antropologicznej definicji religii jako inspiracji dla refleksji teologicznej. Tekst ma na celu pokazać, pod jakimi warunkami podejścia do religii właściwe antropologii religii mogłyby być do zaakceptowania przez teologię oraz przedstawić jedno ujęcie, mianowicie politetyczną definicję religii, jako możliwe rozwiązanie danego problemu. Główna część artykułu bazuje na terminach i teoriach religioznawczych, całość argumentacji jednak jest zakorzeniona w perspektywie teologicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: religia; antropologia; politetyczny; podobieństwa rodzinne;

Abstract:

The article deals with the problem of the definition of religion between theology and religious studies. In the twentieth century, theological reflection on religion has gained increasing attention and, in this context, theologians frequently employed ideas drawn from religious studies. However, their field of interest tended to be restricted to certain selected approaches, while other subdisciplines, such as anthropology of religion, often remained unnoticed. Hence,

the focus of this article is on the issue of the anthropological definition of religion and its implications for theology. The goals of this essay are: to present the conditions under which attitudes to "religion" drawn from anthropology of religion may be acceptable in theological reflection and to present the polythetic attitude as a possible solution to the issue. The main body of the article is based on terms and theories drawn from religious studies, whereas the overall argument is grounded in a theological perspective.

Keywords: religion; anthropology; polythetic; family resemblances;

Introduction

After the Second Vatican Council, the reflection on the relation of Christianity to nonChristian religions and on the phenomenon of religion in general has gained increasing attention within the Catholic theological discourse[1]. These topics have been frequently discussed in the fields of interreligious dialogue, fundamental theology, and theology of religion. For this reason, the issue of the definition of "religion"[2] has been raised in the theological discourse, as the implicit colloquial use of the term has been recognized as insufficient for academic purposes. Although some authors considered it adequate to address the problem solely from the "inner" perspective of Christian tradition[3], most theologians decided to seek inspiration in religious studies. There has been a general tendency in theology to draw on the classical phenomenology of religion or history of religion. However, religious studies as an academic discipline is exceptionally diverse. It contains an abundance of approaches and I would argue that many elements of the discourse may be of relevance also in a theological reflection on religion. For this reason, the focus of this essay is on the issue of the definition of "religion" in the encounter between theology and anthropology of religion (one of the subdisciplines of religious studies).

The goals of this essay are: to present the conditions under which attitudes to "religion" drawn from anthropology of religion may be acceptable in theological reflection and to present the polythetic approach to the definition of "religion" as a possible solution to the issue. The article is divided into three parts: the first section links the issue of the academic definition of "religion" with the world-view perspective of theology; the second part presents

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[1] In subsequent paragraphs, when making reference to "theology", I mean confessional, i.e. Roman Catholic theological discourse.

[2] I use quotation marks for the word "religion" when referring not to the phenomenal aspect of religion or religions in general, but to the term itself.

[3] Cf. Ł. Kamykowski, *Teologia religii: Pojęcie - natura – przedmiot*, in: *Teologia religii: Chrześcijański punkt widzenia*, G. Dziewulski (ed.), Łódź – Kraków 2007, p. 21-33 (followed by the discussion on pp. 55-62).

a "map" of definitional strategies for dealing with "religion"; and the third one demonstrates the outlines of the polythetic approach to "religion". The main body of the article is based on terms and theories drawn from religious studies, whereas the overall argument is grounded in theology.

1. "Religion" Between Theology and Religious Studies

If we seek to address the problem of the definition of "religion" in theology by means of dialogue with religious studies, we must take into account the specific nature of the field. The academic discourse labelled as "religious studies" consists of multiple subdisciplines which cooperate and intertwine. There is no general agreement concerning the methodology of religious studies and no generally accepted definition of "religion". Some scholars hold that "religion" is indefinable, sometimes pointing to the list of about fifty definitions of "religion" collected by J.H. Leuba[4]. However, J.Z. Smith observes that "[t]he moral of Leuba is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined… [in] more than fifty ways." Thus, when looking for a definition adequate for the theological discourse, we cannot avoid making choices.

What are the criteria for an adequate definition? Frequently, theologians opted for theories that emphasize the category of *sacrum* and view religion as a phenomenon *sui generis*. This seemed a safe choice because it avoided the reductionism of the "opium of the masses" or "collective neurosis" type. However, although the *sui generis* theories may work well for Christianity or Judaism, they become problematic when confronted with data from other traditions (for instance, the *sacrum*/*profanum* dichotomy has often been considered inapplicable in the case of primal religions; similarly, the *sui generis* attitude has turned inadequate for dealing with "crypto-" or "pseudoreligious" phenomena). Furthermore, such approaches have been frequently criticised for "theologizing" religious studies, because the boundary between the actual theory and its worldview basis is not clear[5]. For this reason, I would argue that, paradoxically, the "naturalist" definitions of "religion" developed in anthropology of religion may prove more convenient, which I will try to demonstrate in following paragraphs.

If *anthropology* can be described as "the science of the diversity of humans, in their bodies and their behaviour", then *anthropology of religion* is "the scientific investigation of the diversity of human religions"[6]. The focus of the study is on human religious behaviour, institutions, cognitive processes,

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[4] See J.H. Leuba, *A Psychological Study of Religion*, [s.l.] 1969.

[5] See e.g. D. Wiebe, *A Positive Episteme for the Study of Religion*, "The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies" 6 (1985) 2, p. 78-95.

[6] J.D. Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, New York – London 2007, p. 2.

etc. Hence, an anthropologist will be interested not in "religious ideas" or in religions as abstract systems of thought and conduct, but in human beings who create these realities.

As such, anthropology of religion is much closer to "hard sciences" than some other branches of religious studies[7], which allows for on an interesting opportunity: in relation to theological reflection it may be handled by means of methodological tools developed for dialogue with the sciences. A. Anderwald presents a list of criteria that enable treating theology and science as two separate fields with autonomous methodologies, which deal with different sets of questions[8]. The approach is grounded in the claim of the *Gaudium et spes* constitution of the Second Vatican Council emphasizing the "autonomy of earthly affairs"[9]. In this light, anthropology of religion along with other sciences may be understood as one of the auxiliary *loci theologici*, "theological places", which may become the source of data for further theological reflection[10].

In reality, anthropological approaches to religion *are* often reductive. Indeed, to a theologian's ear, statements like "religion… bubbles up from the mindbrain" or "a truly scientific study of religion is unashamedly reductive"[11] sound far from appealing. However, in order to deal with this issue, we may consider the approach of J.R. Searle who made a distinction between causal and ontological reduction[12]. While *causal* reduction occurs when we explain certain phenomena by the influence of causal powers of other entities (A is the effect of B), *ontological* reduction takes place when certain phenomena are described as consisting of "nothing but" objects or processes of other kinds (A consists of "nothing but" B; human body is "nothing but" a heap of biological material). Casual reduction is inevitable in scientific research, otherwise we could not explain anything. Ontological reduction, however, is not justified

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[7] Of course, this is a gross simplification, because the field of anthropology in itself is diverse; however, the discussion related to this issue is beyond the scope of this article. What I mean is that the focus of anthropology is rather on the "outer", observable phenomena than on "religious ideas" (as it is the case with phenomenology of religion and some other sub-disciplines of religious studies discourse).

[8] For a detailed account of the issue, see A. Anderwald, *Teologia a nauki przyrodnicze: Rola wiedzy przyrodniczej w dociekaniach teologicznych*, Opole 2007, p. 213-220.

[9] *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI, December 7, 1965, no. 36.

[10] See A. Anderwald, *O tożsamości teologii na tle relacji z naukami przyrodniczymi*, in: *Tożsamość teologii*, A. Anderwald, T. Dola, M. Rusecki (eds.), Opole 2010, p. 149-171 (p. 150).

[11] B. Saler, *Towards a Realistic and Relevant 'Science of Religion'*, "Method & Theory in the Study of Religion" 16 (2004) 3, pp. 213-215..

[12] See J.R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 111n.

because it violates the boundaries of the scientific methodological frame[13]. In this light, theological reflection may accept definitions of "religion" which try to – causally – explain religious phenomena in terms of human institutions. However, theology must object to the "nothing but" claims about religion that try to "explain it away".

As we have seen, the anthropological perspective seeing religious phenomena from the perspective of human behaviour and institutions may be considered acceptable to theology, provided that we eliminate the reductionist claims. Nevertheless, since not all scientific knowledge must be of interest to theologians, we may ask if the approach is not only acceptable but also relevant. If theology understood "religion" as an abstract system of ideas only loosely connected to the cultural and material aspect of human existence (the focus of anthropology), anthropological theories would be of no use to theologians. Thus, the necessary condition for employing "naturalistic" anthropological theories of religion is that we can formulate a "naturalistic" theological view of religion which could serve as a "common denominator".

In the Christian tradition there is a claim that man was created as *capax Dei*: "open to God", created "toward" him and for him. A. Gesché, a contemporary French theologian, goes even further than that and inverts the perspective: if we hold that man is open to God and that was created in God's image, we must expect that there is some intrinsic openness within the innermost life of God. There must be an archetype of *humanitas*, the reflection of which is present in our created humanity – something that made it possible for the eternal Word to take on human nature[14]. Man is drawn to God, but, symmetrically, God is drawn to man. In this perspective, the openness toward the ultimate source of our existence may be seen as the central feature of the human nature: God meant for us to be responsive and capable of transcendence toward „the other".

It is worth noting that the idea of the desire for God "written in the human heart" is the *leitmotiv* of the beginning of Chapter I in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*[15]. We read that "men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behaviour: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth"; hence, despite many ambiguities connected with the phenomena, man can be called a "religious being"[16]. In this way, the text

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[13] For further discussion of this issue see R. Woźniak, *Materialno-biologiczny wymiar obrazu Bożego w człowieku*, "Scientia et Fides" 2 (2014)2, p. 271-288; it is worth noting that the author adds one more dimension to the distinction made by Searle, namely the *theological* reduction – see pp. 279-283.

[14] See A. Gesché, *Le Christ*, Paris 2001, pp. 223-249.

[15] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*, Vatican City, 1997, p. 27-30.

[16] CCC 28.

of the *Catechism* relates human religious institutions and forms of conduct directly to the original human responsive openness to God.

In this light, from the theological perspective, we could venture to claim that deep within the human nature created by God, there is a specific trait which is the source of human creations and modes of behaviour that we describe as "religious". As theologians, we can assume that this trait is an expression of creative human openness toward God and that it makes human beings capable of transcending their boundaries toward "the other". Of course, this is just a dim and imprecise expression of certain general intuitions that would have to be traced down in Christian tradition and made explicit by means of theological methods. However, this is entirely beyond the scope of this essay. Thus, for our purposes, it will suffice us to sketch gross outlines of an attitude that would allow for introducing the anthropological definitions of "religion" into the theological discourse. It might be expressed as follows:

> In the ultimate sense, we may understand religion as an expression of creative and responsive human openness to transcendence, which, being grounded in human nature, has its source in the self-communication of God and which brings human beings to seek knowledge and to express their basic "God-ward" orientation both on the spiritual as well as on the physical level in various human acts and institutions.

In this way, questions concerning the ultimate origin of religious human religious inclinations would be reserved to the domain of theology because they lie outside the methodological frame of the sciences and cannot be verified by means of their methods. However, the human openness to transcendence is viewed as the source of human religious institutions, which are the focus of anthropology and, subsequently, can be handled by its methods. Thus, anthropology of religion would deal with issues relating to the observable aspects of human reality and – causally – explain the processes connected with them. The definition of "religion" should be in harmony with both sides of the framework, which provides a clue for the selection of an adequate approach[17].

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[17] In this perspective, theological reflection on religion and religious studies are viewed as two separate fields which, nevertheless, may co-operate and exchange ideas. However, the debate on possible relations between these two academic discourses is beyond the scope of this essay; for a detailed discussion of this issue, see Seweryniak H., *Teologia religii a teologia fundamentalna: Refleksja metodologiczno-pedagogiczna*, in: *Teologia religii: Chrześcijański punkt widzenia*, G. Dziewulski (ed.), Łódź – Kraków 2007, p. 183-201.

2. From the Lexical to the Polythetic Definition of "Religion"

In the previous section, we have outlined the circumstances under which the anthropological theories of religion may be relevant to theological reflection. However, if we wish to select one adequate definition of "religion", we must become familiar with basic strategies that were employed by religious studies scholars in the course of history. B.C. Wilson, in his article *From the Lexical to the Polythetic,* compiled a "map" of the field in which he distinguished several types of definitions: lexical vs. precising, nominal vs. real, and monothetic vs. polythetic definitions[18]. The first attempts at defining "religion" belong to the early modern period and may be called *lexical* definitions. They were formulated as vague and elastic expressions, which largely were the result of a spontaneous social consensus[19]. They are constructed by means of denotation: one simply points out a certain group of people (Jews, Muslims, etc.) and says that the acts they perform or beliefs they hold are "religion". It is worth noting that many academics – especially scholars in disciplines lying outside the field of religious studies – even today continue to use the term "religion" in the "lexical" way.

However, this attitude has not proven sufficient. Thus, in the modern period, thinkers began a quest for a consciously constructed definition of "religion" in order to make the colloquial meaning of the word more precise. For this reason, their definitions of "religion" may be called *precising* definitions. Unlike lexical definitions, a precising definition represents a "conscious construction of a definition in order to create a community of discourse"[20]. Most likely such definitions will be constructed by means of connotation, not denotation. This means that in order to form the class "religion", it is necessary to indicate the characteristic or characteristics that each member of the class must have to be labelled as "religion" (that is, Christianity or Islam belong to the category "religion", because they bear characteristics x, y, and z). For instance, we can mention the definition forged by E. Herbert, a seventeenth-century deistic thinker, who claimed that each case of "religion" must possess five specific characteristics (the belief in a Supreme Power, etc.). Another case of this attitude would be the famous minimum definition of E. B. Tylor, who defined "religion" as "a belief in Spiritual Beings"[21].

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[18] See B.C. Wilson, *From the Lexical to the Polythetic: A Brief History of the Definition of Religion*, in: *What Is Religion?*, T.A. Idinopulos, B. C. Wilson (eds.), Leiden – Boston 1998, p. 142-162. In fact, Wilson also writes at length about functional and substantive definitions; however, these categories are not essential to our approach, hence, I do not employ them in my argument in order to simplify its structure.

[19] Ibid., p.143.

[20] B.C. Wilson, *From the Lexical to the Polythetic…*, p. 143.

[21] Ibid.

The debate over the issue did not stop there. Some scholars of religion (such as R. Otto) stressed the primacy of religious experience. They claimed that religious experience is entirely transcendent, unique, and *sui generis* in its origin. More or less at the same time, however, a different line of thought appeared. Scholars such as S. Freud or W. Wundt, who did not accept the claims about the uniqueness of religious experience, asserted that the "religiousness" of certain experiences is caused merely by religious interpretation on the part of a subject. In this manner, the field of the academic reflection became polarized between the two camps and the conflict brought forth the old problem with *nominal* and *real* definitions[22]. Thus, although it is not our task to discuss the details of the real/nominal problem, it is necessary to sketch at least its gross outlines.

At the heart of this issue, there lies the old question referring to the relation between the words and the phenomena to which they are applied. Broadly speaking, whereas those who opt for *nominal* definitions claim that a term is defined "by an empirical process of affixing a name to an object," the followers of the *realistic* attitude hold that a definition is "constructed by signalling the metaphysical essence of an object"[23]. The difference may seem subtle, but it has far reaching consequences. In the first case, it is the subject who decides which entities fall under the definition and his choice is arbitrary. In the second case, the ground for affixing a name to an object lies in the metaphysical reality extrinsic to the subject. This is how *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes the difference: "To discover the real definition of a term X one needs to investigate the thing or things denoted by X; to discover the nominal definition, one needs to investigate the meaning and use of X"[24]. Thus, when applied to the term "religion", the realistic attitude suggests that there must be an inner condition for the religious phenomena to be called religion. The nominalistic attitude, on the contrary, claims that religious phenomena are those that we have decided to include under the label "religion".

According to Wilson, the earlier definitions of "religion" – both lexical and precising – could be classified as nominal definitions[25]. For example, if we accept Herbert's definitions based on five characteristic that each "religion" must possess to be labelled as such, it is we who decide which entities fall under "religion" (namely, those having each of the five characteristics) and which do not (that is, any other phenomena). The *sui generis* as well as the classical reductionist approaches, on the contrary, would belong to real definitions.

In this context, Wilson makes a further distinction between *positive* and *negative* real definitions. While the *positive* real definitions would assert that

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[22] Ibid., p. 148.

[23] Ibid., p. 149.

[24] *Definition*, in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [accessed at: https://plato. stanford.edu/entries/definitions/, 12.12.2018].

[25] B.C. Wilson, *From the Lexical to the Polythetic…*, p. 148.

there is some irreducible transcendent essence in the religious phenomena, the *negative* real definitions would claim that the essence of religion dwells in the human body-mind structures, social mechanisms, etc. Although the "negative" approaches often provided valid explanations of certain religious phenomena, their definitions of "religion" were, quite naturally, unacceptable to nonreductionist scholars (including theologians). The "positive" approaches, on the contrary, were recognized problematic from the methodological point of view because their basic assumption concerning the invisible transcendent "essence" of religion can hardly be verified: either one believes that the essence is there or does not. This became the ground for later protests of the "scientific" wing against "theologizing" religious studies[26]. It is worth noting that, surprisingly enough, the assumption of *sui-generists* may appear ambiguous also from the perspective of theology, because it blurs the boundaries between the disciplines and poses many problems (e.g. it is easy to think about the category of "Numinous" in the case of Judaism, where it does refer to God somehow, but it is doubtful what the term would relate to in the case of some abhorrent tribal practices).

For this reason, some authors preferred to avoid the issue of the "essence" of religion and to define it from the perspective of its function. The functional attitudes, however, were also criticised as reductive or as having little explanatory value because debates concerning the function of religion do not necessarily clarify how to use the term[27]. Other authors, on the contrary, decided to bypass the issue in a different way and to return to definitions based on specific characteristics of "religion" (Wilson quotes, for example, the famous M.E. Spiro's definition describing religion as a "belief in superhuman beings"[28]). Nevertheless, these definitions of "religion" have one drawback: in many cases they fail to work. We can always find a tradition that does not meet the criteria and yet, in a colloquial sense, it is thought of as religious (for instance, if we say that "belief in spiritual beings" is central to "religion", we must exclude Jainism and some forms of Buddhism due to their nontheistic doctrine).

The problem dwells in the specific relation between the colloquial use of the word "religion" and the academic definition of the term. While in some cases scholars are free to invent their terms arbitrarily without reference to popular discourse, in the case of "religion" it is not possible. In theory, we could draw a boundary between "religion" and "nonreligion" and say that, for example, only theistic traditions count, but since Jainism is legally considered to be an autonomic religion in India, the boundary would be artificial. Of course, we may

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[26] Indeed, scholars of religion sometimes complain that when they read works of the "oldschool" phenomenologists, they get the impression that *sacrum* or *das Heilige* in fact means "God", only the authors do not want to say it outright.

[27] Ibid., p. 155.

[28] See ibid., p. 156

call this case an exception, but when we look closely at religious phenomena, such "exceptions" lurk almost everywhere.

Thus, at certain point, the discussion about "religion" seemed to have come to a dead-end and some scholars suggested that we should do away with the term entirely[29]. A similar problem, however, had to be faced in regard to the definition of Hinduism and Buddhism[30], which became the point of departure for creating a new attitude. It was noted that the classical "nominal" definitions were *monothetic*, which means that each instance of the category had to have all characteristic to be accepted into the class. This did not work for the complex reality of "Hinduism" (or "religion"). Hence, the scholars developed an alternative model called the *polythetic* approach, which will be our focus in following paragraphs.

3. Polythetic ("Family Resemblance") Approach to "Religion"

The *polythetic* approach to the issue of definition is based on the concept of "family resemblance" classes. As mentioned above, by means of *monothetic* definitions we can form classes with sharp boundaries, which divide the reality into two segments (i.e. the group of objects that belong to the class and the rest of the world). *Polythetic* definitions, on the contrary, were developed as an alternative that makes it possible to create classes with fuzzy boundaries. This strategy draws on a passage from *Philosophical Investigations* by L. Wittgenstein concerning "games". Wittgenstein notes that when we look at "games" (board-games, ball-games, Olympic games, etc.), we can hardly find any one single characteristic that is common to all examples of the class:

> Don't say: There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games' – but look and see whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look![31]

What shall be the result of this examination? Wittgenstein claims that when we look at "games", we can see a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing"[32], but we are unable to find one common characteristic. The "games" seem to be dissimilar, and yet, they are called by the same name.

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[29] See B. Saler, *Towards a Realistic and Relevant 'Science of Religion'*, p. 221.
[30] See e.g. B.K. Smith, *Exorcising the Transcendent: Strategies for Defining Hinduism and Religion*, "History of Religions" 27 (1987)1, p. 32-55.
[31] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford 1958, I.66.
[32] Ibid.

To elucidate the problem, Wittgenstein uses the example of "family resemblances": when we look at members of a family, we can see that they resemble each other somehow. Their features overlap, but we may be unable to spot one common trait that all members of the family bear[33]. Rather, we can trace certain characteristics typical of the family. Yet no member of the group must possess all of these features. The similarities criss-cross and intertwine, but we can see that these people are relatives.

Analogically, when we wish to define a term, we can achieve this through developing a set of *typical* characteristics. In this case, the members of the class should possess *some* of the features, but not necessarily all of them. For example, if we have features A, B, C, D, E, then one member of such class will bear features A, B, D, another member characteristics B, C, D, E and yet another member features A, C, E. There are no sharp boundaries of the class – some of the members may have more features in common, some of them less – but, as Wittgenstein notes, we "do not know the boundaries, because none have been drawn"[34].

However, as B. Saler observes, Wittgenstein does not claim that "members of groups never share something in common. Rather, he holds that the same general term can be applied to diverse phenomena even when they do not share any one feature or specific conjunction of features in common"[35]. R. Bambrough, a twentieth-century British philosopher, notes that there are two possible mistakes we can make when dealing with such phenomena: either we can say that "all games have nothing common except that they are *called* games" or that "games *must have* something more in common than simply that they are called games"[36]. Those who opt for the former perspective, Bambrough claims, rightly hold that there is no single observable element common to all games, but wrongly conclude that there is no objective justification of the term. Their adversaries, on the contrary, rightly hold that there is an objective justification for the application of general terms, but wrongly conclude that there must be some additional common element.[37] According to Bambrough, Wittgenstein's

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[33] See ibid., I.67.

[34] Ibid., I.69; for instance, if we say that "the ground was quite covered with plants", we do not expect an exact definition of what a plant is or an exact number of plants that must grow on the actual stretch of ground, so that it could be called "covered with plants". Of course, we can draw a boundary if we want (we can say, for example, that "plant" is a living thing with roots and stem, which grows on the ground, in water or on other plants, and that "quite covered with" means not less than 40% of the surface), but it is not necessary.

[35] B. Saler, *Family Resemblance and the Definition of Religion*, in: *Understanding Religion: Selected Essays*, Berlin – New York 2009, p. 173.

[36] R. Bambrough, *Universals and Family Resemblances*, "Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (New Series)" 61 (1961-1960), p. 215.

[37] Ibid., p. 218.

approach is different: he denies the basic assumption of both views, namely the idea that there is no objective justification for the application of a general term, unless its instances have something in common apart from *being* instances of the term. Thus, the solution would be extremely simple, but far too obvious to be seen: in Bambrough's interpretation, Wittgenstein holds that "what games have in common is that they *are* games"[38].

To clarify the matter, Bambrough presents an example of an imaginary tribe of South Sea islanders who possess a rich language for speaking about trees. Their classification referring to trees is highly developed, but, surprisingly enough, they do not recognize species of trees as they are described by Western botanists. When we look at their gardens, we can recognize orange trees, palm trees or cedars. However, they apply the same name to trees that, from our point of view, belong to different species. According to Bambrough, both classifications may be genuine and, as such, they must be based on certain objective grounds. For example, the islanders may recognize house-building trees, boat-making trees, etc., because they are more concerned with the quality of wood than with the differences between actual species. In fact, Bambrough asserts that "*if* it is a classification *then* it is backed by objective similarities and differences, and that if it is *not* backed by objective similarities and differences then it is merely an arbitrary system of names"[39]. Thus, the number of possible classifications is potentially unlimited, but there is no genuine classification that is not based upon an objective set of similarities and differences.

To a student of religion, who is used to the colourful landscape of diverse "religious" phenomena, such an image of multiple entities marked by "family resemblances" should seem extremely familiar. Thus, it will not surprise us that Wittgenstein's path of reasoning has become very attractive for many religious studies scholars. We have seen that it is possible that there is no particular feature in common to all instances of a term, but if it is a general term, it must be based upon a set of objective similarities and differences. Therefore, in the case of "religion", we should also be able to trace certain characteristics that tend to be present within particular instances of the group. We can observe resemblances that criss-cross and overlap, but we do not have to seek something that is common to all religions. Rather, we can pick out a set of specific characteristics, some of which the instances of the class "religion" should possess (it may be the presence of beliefs in supernatural agents, a system of mythology, ritual life, etc.). In this manner, we can form a *polythetic* class that would be able to include all those seemingly dissimilar entities called "religions". The particular instances of "religion" may have no outer observable

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[38] Ibid., p. 216; italics mine.
[39] Ibid., p. 221.

feature in common, but they will resemble each other somehow, because, on the basis of chosen criteria, they form a "family".

In the case of polythetic definitions, we can form an *open* class, where "no one member of the class 'religion' contains all the characteristics"[40]. It will have no particular centre and the choice of characteristics will be arbitrary (i.e. there is no "ideal" case of "religion"). However, such definitions have a very limited explanatory value because there is no point at which the definitional chain should stop and, eventually, almost any system of beliefs and practices may be included under the term. For this reason, it appears more convenient to employ the *prototypical* approach, in which one ideal case possessing all characteristics will function as a "prototype". Such definitions will produce unbounded classes of objects, some of which will be more central, while some will be peripheral. There will be one ideal instance at the centre, which should serve as a model example, wherein all other instances shall be judged by means of comparison with the "prototype"[41]. The boundaries of the class will be fuzzy, but for scholarly purposes, it is not necessary to draw a sharp line between "religion" and "nonreligion"[42].

Since the search for a scholarly concept of religion is sometimes compared to a "clumsy process of translation"[43], the content of the term "religion" must seem familiar to those who receive the message. B. Saler notes that the actual form of a "prototype" depends on what we perceive as "typical". Thus, for instance, a European may feel that for the category "bird" a robin is a better example than a penguin[44]. Analogically, since the Euro-American discourse of religious studies draws on Western categories, most readers will consider the complex doctrinal theistic traditions like Christianity or Judaism "more religious" than e.g. Confucianism. As such, they will constitute "ideal" examples of religions. On their basis, we can form a *label*, i.e. an abstract list of attributes typical of "religion", by which we can assess particular religious traditions[45].

This is how B. Saler describes the features of a model of "religion" the outlines of which have been described above:

> A scholarly model of religion... should consist of a pool of elements that scholars associate with religions. Not all will be found in all religions. Some will be more typical of what we mean by religion than others, both in terms of distributions

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[40] B. Wilson, *From the Lexical to the Polythetic...*, p. 158.

[41] See ibid., p.159.

[42] See B. Saler, *Towards a Realistic and Relevant 'Science of Religion'*, p. 224.

[43] F. Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*, Malden 2006, p. 20.

[44] See B. Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: The Matter of Boundaries*, in: *Understanding Religion: Selected Essays*, Berlin – New York 2009, p. 177.

[45] See M. Southwald, *Buddhism and the Definition of Religion*, "Man (New Series)" 13 (1978)3, p. 370.

and weightings. And many will be found outside of the purview of what scholars
conventionally designate as religions. None by themselves are necessary for iden-
tifying religion, and none by themselves are sufficient for doing so[46].

Saler notes that, in this model, we may discern four important elements,
namely:
1) central tendencies;
2) fuzzy peripheries;
3) family resemblances;
4) typical features[47].

As we have seen, *central tendencies* imply that some cases of "religion" are
better examples of the category than others. The presence of *fuzzy peripheries*
indicates that there is no clear boundary between religion and non-religion,
which means that particular traditions will be assessed as "more religious" or
"less religious" and that some elements that we normally associate with "religion"
may be found outside the category. The structure of the category is based upon
"*family resemblances*", which, in turn, are based upon characteristics that are
typical of "religious" traditions.

In this way, we have described the general image of the approach. Its
structure, however, must be based on specific characteristics of "religion",
which form the label. M. Southwold has discerned twelve attributes typical
of religious phenomena:
1) A central concern with godlike beings and men's relation with them.
2) A dichotomisation of elements of the world into sacred and profane,
   and a central concern with the sacred.
3) An orientation towards salvation from the ordinary conditions of
   worldly existence.
4) Ritual practices.
5) Beliefs which are neither logically nor empirically demonstrable or
   highly probable, but must be held on the basis of faith...
6) An ethical code, supported by such beliefs.
7) Supernatural sanctions on infringements of that code.
8) A mythology.
9) A body of scriptures, or similarly exalted oral traditions.
10) A priesthood or similar specialist religious elite.
11) Association with a moral community...
12) Association with an ethnic or similar group[48].

Southwold himself admits that the list may be assessed as tentative and
incomplete, however, he does not think that it is an obstacle. If a critic points

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[46] B. Saler, *Towards a Realistic and Relevant 'Science of Religion'*, p. 230.
[47] See ibid.
[48] M. Southwald, *Buddhism and the Definition of Religion*, p. 370-371.

out that another characteristic should be added, then we can simply refine the concept or incorporate additional elements[49]. The list of attributes simply provides gross outlines of the label "religion", which is to serve as a point of reference to particular instances of "religion".

The polythetic approach to "religion" has several advantages. First of all, it enables us to view religion as a complex reality and not as a homogeneous system that could be reduced to a single need or inclination[50]. Such a strategy protects us from a reductionist attitude to religious phenomena that would try to "explain away" religion as a mere psychological defence mechanism or an element upholding the order of society. Furthermore, the approach makes it possible to study certain fundamental tendencies present within religious phenomena without having to assert that they are indispensable to each case of "religion" (thus, even if we say that a "belief in superhuman beings" is central to religion, Sinhalese Buddhism still can be included). At the same time, the fuzzy boundaries of the term allow for dealing with certain "nonreligious" phenomena which, nevertheless, share some of the elements of the label (e.g. behaviour of football fans, Western Yoga courses, etc.). On the basis of this approach, new questions arise, such as: Why do non-theistic Buddhists tend to seek contact with Buddha, who, according to their doctrine, must be defunct and unattainable? Why does the concept of God presented by non-ritualistic Quakers appear so "ungodlike" if a concern with God seems central to their tradition?[51] Why certain elements of the behaviour of football fans resemble practices typical of religious sects? These and many other problems arise when we watch the complex play of relations between particular elements of religious traditions. In this context, I would argue that many issues brought forth by means of the polythetic approach may be of interest not only to religious studies scholars, but also to theologians.

Conclusion

In previous paragraphs, I have sketched the outlines of the "polythetic attitude" as a case of an approach to the definition of "religion" drawn from the field of anthropology of religion, which could serve as a point of departure for further theological reflection on religion. I have demonstrated under which conditions it might be embedded within the theological world-view basis and described its methodological context. Now, I will briefly summarize the main features of the outcome of the reflection:

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[49] See ibid., p. 371 and the footnote 11 on p. 377-378.
[50] See ibid., p. 371.
[51] See ibid., p. 372.

The argument was based on the assumption concerning the relative autonomy of the created order and scientific methodology[52]. From this perspective, theology and anthropology of religion constitute two separate fields, which address different sets of issues. Theological reflection would deal with questions referring to the ultimate origins of the "religiousness" of man, the meaning of certain aspects of religious behaviour, etc. Anthropology of religion, on the contrary, would focus on the outer observable features of human religious institutions. The "common denominator" of both perspectives would be the assertion that the observable human religious behaviour is grounded in the invisible fundamental tendency of human beings to transcend their boundaries toward the Source of their existence. The general idea might be formulated as follows:

> In the ultimate sense, we understand religion as an expression of creative and responsive human openness to transcendence, which, being grounded in human nature, has its source in the selfcommunication of God and which brings human beings to seek knowledge and to express their basic "God-ward" orientation both on the spiritual as well as on the physical level in various human acts and institutions.

> These human institutions are described by the term "religion", which, by means of methods of anthropology of religion, may be constructed as a polythetic graded category organized by family resemblances. The class is based on a set of attributes – such as concern with godlike beings, a moral code, a set of beliefs, mythology or ritual practice – that may be obtained through observation of what we, lexically speaking, call religions. The list constitutes a label that may serve as a point of reference for any entity that is to be included into the class. The attributes are typical, but not distinctive of religion, which means that particular cases of "religion" must share some, but not necessarily all, of these characteristics and that some of these characteristics may be found also outside their typical religious settings.

The structure consists of two levels: while the first part belongs to the realm of theology, the second part is based on the polythetic approach to "religion", which has been linked to the theological world-view basis. Thus, both methodologies are kept separate and treated as autonomous fields. It is worth noting that such an attitude helps to distinguish questions related to the world-view from questions concerning the outer observable reality of human religions and, subsequently, to apply adequate methods to each set of problems (thus, the "ultimate" questions concerning religion would be restricted to the domain of theology, while the "horizontal" issues may be dealt with by means of methods of anthropology of religion or other subdisciplines of

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[52] See GS 36.

religious studies). However, there is one aspect of the approach that I find essential and that could serve as a point of departure for further reflection: From this point of view, theological reflection on religion does not have to be restricted to patterns of *religious ideas*, i.e. to religions as systems of doctrine and rules of conduct, but may approach the issue from a different perspective. It may become a meditation on thought and behaviour of *human beings* who, being created in the image of God, display their basic orientation toward the "Other" on multiple levels of their existence. The difference seems subtle, but may have interesting implications.

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