Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion as A Kind of Apophatic Theology

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Abstract

In my article I present a conceptual model of classification of philosophical and theological conceptions of religion within Western philosophy and the Christian religious tradition. The model has four independent dimensions: the factual, the metaphysical, the ethical and the apophatic. The first and the second dimensions are cognitive, while the third and the fourth are non-cognitive. The fourth dimension should not be identified with the old tradition of apophatic theology because, according to the model, the latter is a mixture of two (or even more) dimensions. The second part of my paper is devoted to the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion developed by the members of the so-called Swansea School. My thesis is that, despite of their self-characterisation as philosophers, they present an extreme version of apophatic theology because their view on religion is, in the light of my conceptual model, one-dimensional.

Keywords: apophatic theology, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, Swansea School, Rush Rhees, Peter G. Winch, Dewi Z. Phillips

Słowa kluczowe: teologia apofatyczna, Wittgensteinowska filozofia religii, Szkoła ze Swansea, Rush Rhees, Peter G. Winch, Dewi Z. Phillips

The four-dimensional model

The term “Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion” is not widely known, so it may be that I should start this paper with an explanation of it. However, I will begin with something a little different, namely with a conceptual model of classification of philosophical and theological conceptions of religion. It should be noted that the model I present is not designed (at least not primarily) for any sociological research on religiosity in any population, including the population of theologians and philosophers of religion. It is designed to classify theoretical systems, not people. The model has been formed in order to deal with the Christian theological systems and the Western
philosophies of religion, and its possible usability outside these fields is problematic; however, I do not rule it out. Many Western philosophers of religion like to speak about religiosity and faith in general, with very little to say about other (namely, non-Judeo-Christian) traditions and cultures. I share their ignorance, but I will try to avoid their hastiness.

The model consists of four dimensions: the factual, the metaphysical, the ethical and the apophatic. Each dimension represents a distinctive component of a theoretical system of religious beliefs. I assume the dimensions are independent in principle; however, I do not exclude the existence of linkages between them – say, the negative linkage between the factual and the apophatic dimension. The word “factual” indicates that, beside its geographical limitations just mentioned, the model also has some temporal limitations. For, as Alasdair MacIntyre famously said, “facts, like telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were a 17th-century invention”; there is no easy way to apply this concept to the ideas of the ancient Greeks, St. Augustine, or even Aquinas, and hence any attempt to deal with them using my model requires a sort of construction.

What do these dimensions mean? The first of them, the factual, represents the set of beliefs that there is a causal connection between divinity and our well-known material reality. I share MacIntyre’s view that our religious tradition and our philosophy of God is much older than the concept of fact (as well as the concept of factual causality), but once the latter had appeared it affected the common way of thinking about the former. The vast majority of religious Christians believe that God has the power to intervene in the realm of facts. The factual component is obviously involved in the popular belief in miracles. It is also present in the literal interpretation of Biblical cosmogony. There are many philosophical systems which approve this component, some of which seem to attach great importance to it. There is also, of course, a great majority of Christian doctrines which contain it as well. Some of them may not stress it – the other components may be more important for them. But they usually entail a belief in at least one supernatural fact: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I suppose that most Christians treat this belief as a necessary condition of being a Christian.

The second dimension, the metaphysical, represents beliefs built on one fundamental assumption regarding reality: it is not “flat”, but hierarchically structured on

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1 Please note that my usage of the term “the apophatic” in this paper is customised. It does not correspond fully to the meaning of the apophaticism of the Church Fathers, though I believe it grasps and puts emphasis on one component of their thought. The doctrine of, say, Pseudo-Dionysius, was a mixture of the metaphysical and the apophatic dimension in the sense of my model. The model has a predecessor which I have presented on several occasions in 2011. The previous version contained three dimensions, namely the empirical, the metaphysical and the spiritual. I decided to divide the last component due to my current belief that there is a non-cognitive aspect of religiosity which may have nothing in common with the ethical or moral issues.


3 Richard Swinburne, a widely known philosopher of religion at the Oxford University, may serve as a perfect example of a fact-focused thinker. See e.g.: R. Swinburne, The Existence of God, Oxford–New York 2004; also: R. Swinburne, Is There a God?, Oxford–New York 1996. Another example of such a thinker is Roger Trigg, whose Reason and Commitment was in its greater part devoted to the critique of the Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion. See: R. Trigg, Reason and Commitment, Cambridge 1973.