

ROBERT T. PTASZEK

## PHILOSOPHY ON RELATIONS BETWEEN RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

### PRELIMINARY REMARKS

In my paper, I want to answer the question of whether new spirituality constitutes a real alternative to religion. Before answering this question some preliminary remarks are needed. First, I will focus on the culture of Europe. Due to the fact that the foundations of European culture have been Christian, whenever I refer to ‘religion’ in my philosophical analysis ‘Christianity’ is what I mean. Secondly, my answer should be philosophical, i.e. based on comparing the natures of new spirituality and religion, and not sociological or psychological. Taking into account the plurality of philosophies, I should clearly indicate a basis for my analysis. The basis is constituted by a realistic (classical) philosophy as proposed and developed in the Lublin Philosophical School. This philosophy “looks to the rich ancient tradition of Plato and Aristotle. It considers the legacy of medieval philosophy: Augustine, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and others. It enters into dialogue with modern and contemporary philosophy, making special effort to develop methodological reflection concerning adequate cognitive tools used in the process of metaphysical cognition. The philosophy proposed preserves cognitive maximalism, that results from an autonomous object,

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method, and end of philosophical cognition.”<sup>1</sup> Realistic philosophy, in contrast to many modern philosophical trends, has a broad scope of research, which is not limited to the material aspect of reality. Thus, using concepts and methods of that philosophy allows the conception of human being, God and the relationship that binds God and human to be set down and analyzed. In result the realistic philosophy is able not only to describe, but also to explain the phenomenon of new spirituality. That is why we can understand differences between religion and spirituality by comparing images of reality on which the two are based.

The process that I am going to describe can be called ‘the quest for a real alternative to Christianity.’ The description of that process is a complex task to carry out. And it is so for a few reasons. The main one is the sheer length of time for which a worldview and an image of man that could be alternative to Christianity have been sought for. Practically the search for such an alternative started immediately and this is understandable once we recognize the fact that the message brought to the world by Jesus Christ was exceptional, and highly controversial from the very beginning.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it cannot be a surprise to anyone that right from the start Christianity has been accompanied by dissenting opinions on manner in which it should have been understood and implemented. Thus, throughout history we observe systematically emerging attempts to create alternative version of Christianity as well as alternatives to Christianity.

The second reason why it is difficult to describe ‘the quest for an alternative for Christianity’ is terminology. The terms: ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ are both ambiguous. Although we may disambiguate ‘religion’ by narrowing its notion to the single religion — as I take here Christianity — the case of ‘spirituality’ remains more complicated. Today ‘spirituality’ is a term used to name a variety of phenomena; and this problem remains, even if we limit ourselves to the term of ‘new spirituality’.

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<sup>1</sup> Mieczysław A. KRĄPIEC, Andrzej MARYNIARCZYK, *The Lublin Philosophical School* (Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2010), 6.

<sup>2</sup> As prof. Władysław Tatarkiewicz states, Christian teaching “could be recapitulated in three notions [...] knowledge, law, prediction, that is, knowledge of God, moral law, and prediction of life eternal.” Władysław TATARKIEWICZ, *Historia filozofii* [History of Philosophy], vol. 1 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1983), 17). But that was just an apparitional simplicity. Putting it all into practice had many difficulties. The main reason for this was that both, the person of Christ (God incarnate) and his teachings stirred up a revolution in the minds of people of that time. Let us take a look at some examples of these revolutionary (at that time only?) thoughts: treating God as Father, conviction that God is love, repeatedly stressed freedom and equality of all people.

In my considerations, I will focus on three issues. First, I will shortly sketch a history of the quest for an alternative to Christianity that has been taking place in European culture. I will then explain what ‘spirituality’ is, and show its role in this process. Finally, I will formulate arguments to support the thesis that ‘new spirituality’ failed to become a real alternative to Christianity.

#### QUESTS FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO CHRISTIANITY: A SHORT HISTORY

While reading lengthy works of historians of the Church one comes to the conclusion that searches for an alternative to Christianity have gradually changed over centuries. At first they created predominantly schisms and heresies deemed by their authors to be true churches of Jesus Christ in contrast to the Catholic Church. As a consequence the dispute between them and the Church was about which religious community one should join to gain salvation. The foundations of the faith have not however been put into question. Thus, they were not so much searches for an alternative to Christianity but rather searches for alternative Christianity.

The situation changed with the arrival of atheism. It is worth to remember that in our culture atheism is a relatively young phenomenon. Its spreading dates back only to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century atheism attempted—thanks to Ludwig Feuerbach and his followers—to style itself as a ‘scientific worldview’ which would overcome religious superstitions with the light of knowledge. Atheists claimed that humans were not created by God, but God was created by humans. These claims were absolutely contradictory to the Christian vision of the world, and therefore some confrontation between atheism and Christianity was unavoidable. This confrontation revealed that—contrary to atheists’ expectation—attempts to eliminate religion from human life do not make people free and happy. Moreover, such attempts infuse culture with some sort of chaos. A vivid example of that phenomenon in the contemporary European culture is questioning basic truths concerning human beings, such as criticism of biological sex or treating family as socially constructed. Social consequences of that questioning are already appearing, but analyzing them does not belong to the scope of my paper.

The failure of various projects of atheisation of society, such as The Soviet Union’s Communism, has led most of the critics of Christianity to a conclusion, that human beings have such spiritual needs which only

religion can effectively satisfy. They are, among many others, the need for an orderly vision of reality, and the need of universally valid standards and rules of conduct.. Probably the most notable expression of such a view can be found in Jürgen Habermas' postulate to rethink the role of religion in the Western culture of today.<sup>3</sup> Habermas claims: "Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In corresponding political debates, this potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, it is no surprise that currently—apart from different form of atheism and other extreme alternatives to Christianity—we are dealing with proposals of a much milder nature. The search for them began within the New Age Movement in the 1960s. From that moment on we may speak of a development of new spirituality.

#### CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND NEW SPIRITUALITY

A realist philosopher understands religion as a relationship between a human being and God. More precisely religion is seen as the entirety of inward and outward human actions with which one worships God.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the philosopher also submits that if we are to recognize any true religious relationship we must accept two propositions:

- (1) there is God
- (2) any human being is something more than material being—as created by God it is a being endowed with a soul.

Thus, religion so understood proclaims that death is not the end of human existence. While giving hope of life eternal, religion also becomes the central motivational force of all human actions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The postulate was formulated first time in his lecture entitled "To Believe and to Know." Jürgen HABERMAS, *Glauben und Wissen. Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2001* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen HABERMAS, *Between naturalism and religion. Philosophical essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 131.

<sup>5</sup> According to Thomas Aquinas the essence of virtue of religion is "nothing else but the worship of God" (*Summa theologiae*, II-II, 81, 2).

<sup>6</sup> As Gregory of Nyssa pointed out a human being "must become wholly God's possession, knowing well that he who has faith and purity of life has the power of Christ as well, and where

Spirituality is a more complicated matter to deal with. Most of all it is an imprecise term, and we use it today as the name that covers a diverse range of phenomena. For centuries Christian, European culture has been dominated by religious spirituality, and then the notions: ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ were nearly synonymous. Nevertheless in the context of Christianity “spirituality has preserved [...] certain degree of distinctiveness due to the fact that this term was used with reference to specific groups, mostly monastic, but also — to mystics.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, scholars agree that the “tradition of Christian spirituality, with all the riches of its many variants, lives on.”<sup>8</sup>

Today, along with the Christian spirituality we can see at least two other forms of it. The first is the New Age spirituality. It emerged on the turn of the 60s. of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of cultural changes in the West (especially criticism of religion for abandoning its own creative cultural role), accompanied by attempts to discover a new identity of a human being, inspired by those changes. Authors of the New Age spirituality wanted it to replace traditional religion. In their opinion it was possible, because, as they thought, “you can have spirituality without religion, but you cannot have religion, authentic religion, without spirituality.”<sup>9</sup>

The New Age Movement planned to establish a real alternative for Christian spirituality. By efforts of its adherents the new spirituality has become popular in Europe and North America. It was possible because, within the New Age, nearly everything that humankind has ever produced to answer the questions about where we come from, who we are, and where we go, was taken as one of the forms of this new spirituality. Those forms extended even to concrete actions aiming at human mental and physical development. As a result this ‘new spirituality’ has become understood so vaguely, that virtually anyone who felt skeptical about any traditional religion for any reasons could take from it an inspiration to self-reliant experiments and spiritual quests.

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there is the power of Christ there is also deliverance from the evil and the death that ravage our life.” Jordan AUMANN OP, *Christian spirituality in the catholic tradition* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1985), 49.

<sup>7</sup> Izabela TRZCIŃSKA, *O duchowości inaczej* [On Spirituality – Differently] (Kraków: The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture, 2014), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Fritjof CAPRA, David STEINDL-RAST, Thomas MATUS, *Belonging to the Universe. Explorations on the Frontiers of Science and Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 12.

Since the New Age Movement's nature was parareligious<sup>10</sup> the process of promulgation of the new spirituality, initiated by its adherents, has gradually led to its secularization. In effect the culture of Europe has witnessed the birth of a third current of spirituality, which defines itself as 'lay' or 'atheist' spirituality. This kind of spirituality has developed an entirely new system of references which has broken all ties with the sphere of religion

Highlighting these three kinds of spirituality is very important, because the affirmation of the propositions concerning God's existence and soul's immortality in the case of the New Age spirituality becomes dispensable, and in the case of lay spirituality—even unwanted. These are the crucial differences between these two forms of spirituality and Christian religion and spirituality.

The kernel of the abovementioned differences is that the two forms of spirituality—in contrast to Christian spirituality—do not have to put a human being in any perspective of supernatural reality, and do not have to be an expression of a person's religious faith. Instead, both of them refer to one's own subjective, psychological sensibility. This is also the source of their popularity—after all *psyche*, which is the vehicle of all impressions, emotions and thoughts, is owned by each and every single human being.

#### WHY NEW SPIRITUALITY CANNOT BE A REAL ALTERNATIVE TO CHRISTIANITY

Once we take into account the differences between Christian religion and new spirituality described above, it becomes clear why the latter cannot be a real alternative for the former. There are crucial differences between them, and they all come from two sources:

1. Christian religion develops and perfects a human being because it is an interpersonal relation between an imperfect human and the perfect God, who takes up the role of a standard-giver and a guide, as expressed in Christian terms: "the way, the truth, and the life."<sup>11</sup> Religion therefore brings a human being into contact with a more perfect reality. In contrast, new spirituality relies on individual searches confined to one's own subjective world.

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<sup>10</sup> *Religious* movements declare ways to salvation (meeting with God), while *parareligious* movements such as New Age limit themselves to set forth methods of perfection of the human spiritual potential.

<sup>11</sup> "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'." John 14:6. *New International Version*.

2. Treading the path of religion implies a clearly defined goal. In Christianity it is sainthood. Additionally, there is a spiritual counsel available with numerous guidelines and indications ensuring that the right path is followed, and corrections made when necessary. On the other hand, new spirituality leaves a human being to trial and error approach. People have to look for practices that would allow for their spiritual progress completely on their own. It is an exceedingly difficult task because searches like these are subjective by nature, and do not stay under rational control. For new spirituality does not rely on reason, but on feelings. Furthermore, the goals towards which people strive practicing new spirituality are being achieved by means hardly comparable with religious practice (for instance: use of psychoactive substance). Choosing this option will mean at best one's own consent to be confined within the sphere of subjective experiences, and to give up entering into any relationship with God, that is capable of perfecting him.

In this situation it is difficult to share the optimistic conviction of Hans Waldenfels: 'when a man experiences his own self in a new way, perhaps it will come to him that he does not exist by himself, and that the source of life is located elsewhere'<sup>12</sup>. Besides, even if such thoughts really preoccupied anyone practicing new spirituality, that person would still not be able to find a single argument for treating these thoughts as anything more than a subjective impression.

The differences described lead to the conclusion that new spirituality and Christianity differ in their goals, results and structures. Thus, the answer to the question I posed at the beginning of my paper is negative: attempts to replace Christianity with new spirituality, undertaken in our culture in the last few decades, are bound to fail.

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<sup>12</sup> Hans WALDENFELS, *Medytacja na Wschodzie i Zachodzie* [Meditation in East and West], trans. Andrzej Bronk (Warszawa: Verbinum, 1984), 8.

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#### FILOZOFIA O RELACJACH MIĘDZY RELIGIĄ A DUCHOWOŚCIĄ

##### Streszczenie

W latach 70. XX wieku na Zachodzie pojawił się i zyskał popularność parareligijny ruch New Age. Od tego czasu w kulturze Europy obserwujemy proces, który można opisać jako przechodzenie „od tradycyjnej religii do nowej duchowości”.

W artykule, odwołując się do filozofii religii rozwijanej przez Lubelską Szkołę Filozoficzną, autor dokładniej pokazuje zasadniczą odmienną nową duchowości i tradycyjnej religii (czyli – w naszej kulturze – chrześcijaństwa). Odmienną ta wynika z faktu, że podstawę religii stanowi otwarcie człowieka na Boga, a jej praktykowanie jest sposobem wyrażania wiary. Natomiast istotą nowej duchowości okazują się indywidualne poszukiwania człowieka, których celem ma być odkrywanie technik pozwalających na doświadczanie przeżyć przyjemniejszych i wzbogacających jego duchowe życie.

Tak zasadnicza odmienną powoduje, że żadna z form rozwijanej współcześnie nowej duchowości nie jest w stanie stać się realną alternatywą dla chrześcijaństwa.

*Streścił Robert T. Ptaszek*

**Słowa kluczowe:** filozofia, religia, chrześcijaństwo, nowa duchowość, kultura europejska.

#### PHILOSOPHY ON RELATIONS BETWEEN RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

##### Summary

With the rise of the New Age Movement in the culture of Europe in the 1970's, the process that may be summarised as a movement “from old religion to new spirituality” began.

In the text, Author defines more precisely (on the ground of realistic philosophy cultivated in the Lublin Philosophical School) what spirituality and religion are. The distinction “religion – spirituality” is a basis of my considerations. Religion is a complex of internal and external actions by which a man worships God whereas new spirituality does not refer to any transcendent reality, and is not a way of expressing a man's faith, but only provide experiences brightening up the human life.

This is a main argument for the thesis that attempts to replace traditional religion with new spirituality, undertaken in our culture in the last few decades, are bound to fail.

*Summarised by Robert Ptaszek*

**Key words:** philosophy, religion, Christianity, new spirituality, culture of Europe.