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Sources of the Possibility of the Contemporary turn towards Religion

Abstract. *The return of religion in the philosophical reflection can be observed in the contemporary world. Thinkers like Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo or Charles Taylor can substantially exemplify that phenomenon. In this paper, we would like to focus on some of the aspects of modern and contemporary philosophy of religion and also on the sources that made it even possible. That is why at first we point out three critiques of religion present mostly in the XVIII-th and XIX-th century. Then we will inquire about the two main ways of understanding religion in the contemporary philosophy and about its source.*

Keywords: *religion, return, Rorty, Vattimo, Taylor, modernity, contemporary philosophy*

Introduction

On the twenty-third of March 1933, president of the United States Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the prohibition-related amendment. From now on, beer and wine would be available. This event has ended the “sobriety” period which lasted almost twenty-four years. After signing the document Roosevelt said “I think now would be good time for a beer.”¹

¹ The exact date of this event is not known. Sources give contradictory information – there are dates of 12th of March (the day of the first on air speech given by Roosevelt), 23th of March (the day of signing the amendment), and 5th of December (the day of ratifying the amendment).

If we modernized this story, we could paraphrase the words of the American president and say: I think now would be good time for religion. It is because in the contemporary world we can repeatedly hear about the return of religion, about the philosophical turn towards religion or about the return of religion in the society.² “It is often said that religious experience is an experience of leave-taking. But if this is true, the journey undertaken is most likely one of return. Perhaps not by its essential nature, but *de facto*, given the conditions of existence in modernity [...] religion comes to be experienced as a return”³ – writes Gianni Vattimo. Just like alcohol in the prohibition period in the United States, religion in the times of Enlightenment or Positivism was something “forbidden.” Alcohol, however, (just like religion in the mentioned periods) was still present even in spite of the ban, in spite of the apparent unacceptability. Maybe it is simply because one and the other are so essential for society. One cannot get rid of it with the help of police and certain bills. In ancient Rome, when Christians were oppressed, one could rather observe an increase of the number of this belief’s followers than a decrease in spite of the legal bans.⁴ Of course, the Enlightenment or Positivism “banned” religion ideologically and not legislatively. However, it seems that an essential acquiescence to be a religious man both in the era of the persecution of Christians and in the age of reason and science was similarly absent. Still, religion had its ups and downs but was constantly present. In this article, we will inquire about the importance of mentioned eras of the Enlightenment and Positivism (or in the broader sense – the philosophy of the 18th and 19th century) for the phenomenon of the contemporary return of religion. We will try to show two main forms of religion existing in the contemporary society and in the contemporary philosophy.

1. Critiques of religion

The 18th and 19th centuries in the history of philosophy are, to a large extent, efforts focused on the critique of religion. However, it has to be said that those critiques were conducted from many perspectives and concentrated on different aspects of religion. Three critical ways present in the 18th and 19th centuries in the West can be differentiated: the first, oscillating mostly around the Enlightenment, criticized religion from the morality perspective (I will call this a moral critique), the second, ascribed to the 18th and 19th centuries, was focused on religion understood as a false awareness (I will call this a materialistic critique) and the third connected with the Positivism criticized religion as metaphysics (I will call this a scientific critique).

² By religion I understand Christianity, following some of the authors mentioned in this text.

³ G. Vattimo, *Trace of a trace*, in J. Derrida, G. Vattimo, and others, *Religion*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 78.

⁴ See G. Vattimo, J. D. Caputo, *After the Death of God*, Columbia UP, New York 2007, p. 5.

1. The first way of the critique of religion, represented by such thinkers as Kant, Lessing, Fichte and Hegel,⁵ presented religion as a social practice focused on rite and worship – or to use the language of the aforementioned thinkers, on superstition and magic – and also as full of misunderstanding regarding the true message of the Bible which is the moral practice. Describing the condition of the (contemporary to them) religion they claimed that the whole community of the Church is focused on a legislative approach towards God and Church's commandments and on the apparent faith which in fact has no specific results. Believers want to do only what they have to do in their relation to "God" (that is, for example, attend the Mass, receive the sacraments, etc.) and nothing more than that. They do not see or do not understand the main message of Jesus who, according to the aforementioned thinkers, spoke primarily about morality and about internal transformation. Lessing blames the Apostles of Jesus for that, because they "transferred other doctrines whose truth was less evident, whose benefits were less substantial."⁶ A believer can go to church and pray earnestly and then commit immoral acts without seeing the contradiction with the message of Jesus. Kant says that „the more useless such self-torments are and the less their purpose is the universal moral improvement of the human being, the holier they seem to be.”⁷ That image of community is presented in the writings of the mentioned philosophers. However, the critique of religion made by them was hostile not towards religion as such, but towards the believers and the interpretation of the Bible which was present in their times. To be specific, the critique was focused on the clergy as morally corrupt, the prayer as a faith in the possibility of causing supernatural effects by natural methods, the sacraments, pseudo-service to God, and on the Church in general. However, as we will see, Kant, Lessing, Fichte and Hegel did not limit themselves to the critique of religion but they actually proposed its improvement.⁸

2. The second way of the critique of religion to which we can ascribe the representatives of the hermeneutics of suspicion: Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche⁹ saw

⁵ See e.g.: I. Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, transl. W.S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., Indianapolis/Cambridge 2009; G.E. Lessing, *Education of the Human Race*, transl. J.D. Haney, Teachers College Columbia University, New York 1908; G.W.F. Hegel, *The life of Jesus*, transl. M. George, Manchester UP, Manchester 1981. One could also include Feuerbach, for he had similar ideas connected to the moral character of religion and to the critique of religion from the moral perspective. However he did all this, alike the representatives of the second critique, from the materialistic point of view and he also saw religion as a false awareness. Therefore I will not cite his views here, because of the difficulties with its classification.

⁶ G.E. Lessing, *Education...*, § 63.

⁷ I. Kant, *Religion...*, pp. 186–187.

⁸ One can find more on the topic of moral religion in: M. Chlewicki, *Kant, Fichte i wczesny Hegel o religii moralnej*, „Przegląd Filozoficzny – Nowa Seria” R. 20, 2011, No. 1(77); M. Chlewicki, *Kant a problem filozofii religii*, Bydgoszcz 2012.

⁹ See e.g.: K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, transl. J. O'Malley, Oxford UP, Oxford 1970; Z. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, transl. J. Strachey,

religion as a false awareness, that is as a practice which is said to express something while in fact it expresses something completely different. This perspective is in most cases connected with materialism. The discussed way tried to grasp the “true” meaning of religion and by that unmask its actual meaning as apparent. Marx saw religion as an “opium of the people,” a superstructure built on the base constituted by material means and relations of production. Religion was used to keep the working class within the ideology which prevented the revolution and thus allowed exploitation of the workers by their masters – the capitalists. Because in fact there is no God. There is only matter and class conflict. Therefore, religion cannot be a cult of God. It can only be a false awareness, an ideology. „Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness”¹⁰ – writes Marx. Freud presented a similar view, because he also claimed that religion is not what it seems to be. However, the father of psychoanalysis conceived religion as in fact an obsessive-compulsive disorder, an illusion which allows to express pathological impulses. An apparent relation of man and God is a metaphysical and pathological relation of father and child. A believer, just like a child, both loves and is afraid of his God, father. “Everything was the son-father relationship. God was exalted the father, and the longing for the father was the root of the need for religion.”¹¹ Religion based on this relation allows the child to have a sense of safety and recompense for the sufferings of life. However, this is nothing but an illusion, because the „religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all the other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushingly superior force of nature.”¹² On the other hand, Nietzsche discerned in religion a phenomenon constituted as an expression of the morality of the slaves, that is a phenomenon which exalted “values” like: humility and charity. Those “values” are, according to the German philosopher, in contradiction to the only real value which is power. Thus, under the guise of kindness, religion helps the oppressed people feel that being oppressed is the right state of matters, while in fact the right state of matters is to be in power, in control. “What is good? – whatever augments the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself, in man [...] What is more harmful than any vice? – [...] Christianity...”¹³ – claims Nietzsche. It is quite certain that the Masters of Suspicion did not acknowledge the existence of something immaterial, transcendent. They wanted to see religion as it actually is

W. W. Norton & Company Inc., New York 1961; F. Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, transl. H.L. Mencken, Alfred A. Knopf Inc., New York 1920.

¹⁰ K. Marx, *A Contribution...*, p. 3.

¹¹ Z. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion...*, p. 22.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 21.

¹³ F. Nietzsche, *Antichrist...*, § 2.

and not as it seems to be. They criticized, in contrast to the thinkers of the first way of critique, religion as such and not just some aspects of it. Along with rejecting religion in general they did not propose anything that could make religion wanted in any form.

3. The third critical way, represented by positivists and scientists such as Comte and Vienna Circle, was focused on the critique of metaphysics.¹⁴ However, it also affected religion, because metaphysics was often associated precisely with religion. The above-mentioned thinkers held the position that metaphysics cannot be a subject of science, for it consists of unverifiable sentences. For example, the question about the existence of God was senseless because of the impossibility of access to the subject of recognition and in particular because of the impossibility of empirical access, therefore also because of the impossibility to verify, to empirically check the thesis concerning for example the existence of God. "In the domain of *metaphysics* including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative results *that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless*"¹⁵ – writes Carnap. Neurath would sympathize with these words and say that „The Vienna Circle is making a particularly vigorous efforts to [...] eliminate everything that is ‘meaningless’, i.e. all metaphysics.”¹⁶ Therefore, the whole metaphysics was, in the minds of positivists and scientists, irrational and unscientific. And if metaphysics, then also religion, because it also consists of unverifiable sentences. Whereas the climate of opinion present in those times commanded immediate rejection of everything unscientific. It was caused by an especially intensified development of natural sciences like physics, chemistry, and biology, thanks to which the surrounding world gained a “better” explanation than the one proposed by religion. Since scientific explanations were empirically verifiable and they also allowed prediction of the future phenomena, something that cannot exactly be said about explanations of how the world works provided by religion. Therefore, science superseded metaphysics and thus also religion and was constantly proving that man cannot have any rational reason to support faith.

Shortly presented here, the three critical ways of the critique of religion arose in 18th and 19th century caused that religion was kind of “forbidden.” The believer could be recognized either as immoral (with the first way of critique), or as living in some sort of false awareness (with the second way), or as irrational (with the third). Despite that, still many people remained in contact with religion. As I was

¹⁴ See e.g.: R. Carnap, *The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language*, trans. A. Pap, in “Logical Empiricism at its Peak,” ed. S. Sakar, Garland Publishing, New York – London 1996; O. Neurath, *Physycalism*, transl. R.S. Cohen, M. Neurath, in O. Neurath, *Philosophical Papers 1913–1946*, D. Riedel Publishing Company, Dordrecht – Boston – Lancaster 1983; A. Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, transl. J.H. Bridges, George Routledge & Sons Limited, London 1907.

¹⁵ R. Carnap, *The Elimination of Metaphysics...*, p. 60.

¹⁶ O. Neurath, *Physycalism...*, p. 54.

trying to show – the status of religion was in those times like the status of alcohol in times of prohibition. However, prohibition (both in relation to alcohol and religion) did not last forever, thus the main question we need to ask is: how did it happen that today religion can return?

2. Overcoming of the critiques of religion

In order to answer the above-mentioned question, we need to trace further fortunes of the mentioned critiques of religion. Because, using the language of Hegel, every thesis has its anti-thesis, and thus the critique of religion needs to meet its opponent. Here I will present three possibilities of overcoming the aforementioned critiques of religion: the first will be aimed at the moral critique, the second at the materialist critique, and the third at the scientific critique.

1. The concept of religious experience was developed almost parallel to the moral critique. It can be recognized as a counter-concept towards the thought of Kant, Lessing, Fichte and Hegel. However, it has to be stressed that when it comes to the moral critique it was a fairly condensed and short event,¹⁷ but the concept of religious experience develops to this day. Representatives of this project are above all: Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Otto, and James.¹⁸ The main point of this concept is that the essence of religion is, differently understood, religious experience. While morality and community can be either completely irrelevant or important, they do not constitute religion as such. For “religion neither seeks like metaphysics to determine and explain the nature of the Universe, nor like morals to advance and perfect the Universe by the power of freedom and the divine will of man. It is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling.”¹⁹ The thought oriented on religious experience emphasizes the role of the experience of some kind of *sacrum* – for instance for Kierkegaard this *sacrum* would be God, while for Otto the Idea of the Holy. Religion is in fact that experience while everything beyond it is just an addition. Thus, we can see that the thing which is important for this concept is the individual and not – in contrast to the moral critique – a community.

2. Philosophical movement initiated by Husserl can be, if we look at it from a certain perspective, an answer to the materialist critique. For phenomenology examines phenomena as they appear. While making religion a subject of phenome-

¹⁷ Of course, the beginnings of the moral critique can be found already in Erasmus of Rotterdam. However the real development of this theory is 18th century. In the contemporary philosophy it is hard to find direct continuators of this thought.

¹⁸ See e.g.: F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, transl. J. Oman, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & CO., Ltd., London 1893; S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, transl. W. Lowrie, Princeton UP 1941; R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, transl. J.W. Harvey, Oxford UP, Oxford, 1923; W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Oxford UP, Oxford 1902.

¹⁹ F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, p. 227.

nological inquiry, we will not look for some hidden content which makes religion, but we will look at it as it appears to us. We will ask, what is the meaning of religion in culture and for the believers. One of the most prominent figures of that view was Max Scheler who – in contrast to Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche – did not look for some hidden meaning of religion. Scheler's inquiries lead him to conclusions radically oppose to the ones of the Masters of Suspicion to abandon religion at all. The author of „Vom Ewigen im Menschen“ speaks about the law according to which “every finite spirit believes either in God or in idols. And from it there follows this pedagogic rule of religion: the correct way of dispelling ‘unbelief’ is not that of guiding a man to the idea and reality of God by arguments external to his personal condition (whether by ‘proofs’ or by persuasion), but that of showing him invincibly [...] that he has installed a finite good in place of God [...]”²⁰ According to these words, religion is in some way intrinsic to man; it has always been, is, and will be present and cannot be abandoned. For in any case we will believe in something. If not in One God, we will believe in different kinds of idols.

3. The post-metaphysical thought expressed mostly in the philosophy of Heidegger and contemporary thinkers like Vattimo creates an opportunity for the return of religion in spite of the scientific critique. The accusations of senselessness towards metaphysics and thus towards religion are overcome in the post-metaphysical concepts which reinterpret religion stripping it from the metaphysical aspect. For religion, according to those thinkers, is connected not so much with the inquiries about God, but with religious experience and with the place of the religion in culture. On the grounds of this concept there is a sceptic attitude towards man's cognitive abilities and also there is an assumption about the lack of objective truth. Everything that is, is an interpretation. Therefore, philosophy has „to show that truth is never objectivity but always interpersonal dialogue that takes effect in the sharing of a language. Sharing a language does not mean sharing objectivities but agreeing on some preferences”²¹ – writes Vattimo's student – Santiago Zabala. The assumption about the lack of objective truth creates an opportunity to overcome the accusation of senselessness of metaphysics. Because, if metaphysics cannot, according to the critics, lead to the truth on the basis of the empirical invariableness of its thesis (and thus it is senseless), but we assume that there is no objective truth at all or that we cannot grasp it, then not only metaphysics cannot lead to the truth, but also everything else including science. Thus, we would need to call everything senseless. Instead, post-metaphysical thinkers propose the thesis that both science and metaphysics (and everything else) are interpretations of reality and are both in fact unverifiable. However, religion needs to be stripped from metaphysics. Saying that the aforementioned philosophers refer to the words of Nietzsche concerning the death of God. They point out that those words have to be understood as the death

²⁰ M. Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, transl. B. Noble, S.C.M. Press 1960, p. 267.

²¹ R. Rorty, G. Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, Columbia UP, New York 2005, p. 8.

precisely of the metaphysical God, the God who is and about whom we can speak. The world after the death of God is the world in which “the metanarratives have been dissolved and all authority has fortunately been demythologized, including that of “objective” knowledge.”²² Thus, when inquiring about religion, one has to focus on its non-metaphysical aspects.

The 18th and 19th century’s critiques of religion which made religion “forbidden” were overcome thanks to the concept of religious experience, phenomenology and hermeneutics, which made religion regain its intellectual credibility. It seems that the most serious critique was the one originating from science which was hostile in the largest area of philosophy. Because moral critique was aimed only at a certain part of philosophy of religion, materialistic critique – at religion in general, and the scientific critique – at the whole metaphysics. However, even the most serious accusations were dismissed thanks to new assumptions and reinterpretations.

3. Two ways of religion today

In contemporary philosophy we can distinguish at least two ways of the new understanding of religion. The first one refers to the concept of religious experience and the second focuses on the communitarian aspect of religion.

1. Contemporary culture is a culture of individualism. It shows itself in every aspect of social life starting with education through work ending with the “psychology” of personal development. However, how is this individualism understood in the contemporary context? It seems that it is not only a thesis that a society is a conglomerate of individuals and not a different kind of being, or that what is important is the good of individual and not the good of a collective. The phenomenon of individualism in the contemporary world is much more complex and it expresses itself most of all in the culture of narcissism and egoism. At its basis there is an assumption that man strives to fulfillment and unfolding his/her identity. As Taylor claims, the moral ideal of authenticity is connected inseparably with the contemporary culture of individualism. It accords crucial moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost [...].²³ My relation with my “interior” is the thing that matters. Whereas the interpersonal relations, being a part of a community, depreciate. In fact, they are still present only because they can be instrumentally used for developing the individual’s identity. Self-fulfillment as a main moral value concerns the lack of any kind of engagement both in social structures and interpersonal relations, because “it fosters a view of relationships in which these ought to subserve personal

²² Ibidem, p. 54.

²³ Ch. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, MA, and London 1991, p. 29.

fulfilment. The relationship is secondary to the self-realization of the partners. On this view, unconditional ties, meant to last for life, make little sense.”²⁴ What is more, today’s individualism is, according to Taylor, a cause of the intensified discussion over the notions of difference, otherness. For those notions in essence prove our individual character. Furthermore, they are the cause of such importance of secularization, multiculturalism, feminism, homosexuality, genderism, etc.²⁵ in the contemporary world. Those movements emerge because of the dominance of certain understanding of freedom – namely the freedom of being yourself, which also gains an ethical meaning as the highest value. Thus, what religion can grow on this kind of individualistic ground?

It seems that the most suitable understanding of religion in the contemporary, individualized world is the one focusing on the religious experience understood as an experience of an individual, and not of a community. That kind of theory of religion has its roots in the already mentioned philosophy of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard. Religion is associated with a feeling, experience of infinity, or to say it simply – the experience of God. The thing that matters is my individual contact with this infinity, for „in itself it [religion – A.T.] is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God.”²⁶ That kind of presenting religion contradicts its moral character – showed by Kant, for instance – which is necessarily connected with community. Supporters of the religious experience concept will argue that moral life is a part of morality and not religion, which main goal is contact with *sacrum*. On this basis other philosophers like Otto developed their thoughts. But in the contemporary world the most influential thinker seems to be the creator of pragmatism – William James. The psychology of religion developed by him and focused fully on the religious experience was the main source of inspiration for the contemporary thinker Richard Rorty. The American neopragmatist presents religion as in fact a certain kind of experience which he calls “romance”: “what matters is the insistence itself - the romance, the ability to experience overpowering hope or faith or love.”²⁷ Although, for Rorty, it is not important, whether this experience is a part of religion, politics, literature, or sexuality, for the experience itself has value. However, one can say that this feeling of overwhelming with hope, faith and love is a certain kind of *sacrum*, something transcendent, something beyond the surrounding, material world. With such individual-oriented views it is not strange that Rorty sees in religion, above all, a private, individual way of meaning-giving,²⁸ “search for private perfection.”²⁹ Despite the fact that for the

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 43.

²⁵ See ibidem, p. 37.

²⁶ F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, p. 36.

²⁷ R. Rorty, *Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance*, in *Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. R. A. Putnam, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, MA, 1997, p. 97.

²⁸ See ibidem, p. 93.

²⁹ R. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1999, p. 170.

believer the religious experience constitutes an “ultimate truth and reality,” religion cannot become a public thing. It has to remain a private matter. Dann supports this view – when he writes about Rorty, he says that “religion remains, but only as a ‘privatized pursuit of perfection.’”³⁰ The expression “perfection” used by Dann and before by Rorty corresponds with the culture of self-fulfillment, which we talked about earlier. Thus, religion can be a means to an end which is authenticity, but one must not forget that in that case religion is treated as instrumental as the before-mentioned community or relationship. Understanding religion as a private, individual pursuit of perfection causes that „With a private ‘religious experience’ [...] there is no proselytizing, and so there is no interest on my part that others also pursue it [religious experience – A.T.]”³¹ This form of religiousness preserves the freedom of other individuals in society and in the same time allows one to express their own authenticity. Without making somebody share their beliefs, the one alone can strive to self-fulfillment through religion.

That notion of religion fits well in the contemporary culture of individualism. However, is individualism the only and most important attribute which we can ascribe to the contemporary society? Referring to Taylor, we can notice that there is at least one more important notion which characterizes today’s world. Namely the notion of desacralization which is strictly connected with individualism and reflects the shape of the society very well. The author of “The Ethics of Authenticity” points at the “dark” side of individualism which „is a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society”³² or “people lost the broader vision because they focused on their individual lives.”³³ Losing the transcendence in the contemporary world also affects religion and thus, just like the mentioned concept of religion inscribes itself in individualism, it cannot inscribe itself in the losing of *sacrum*. It seems that, according to Taylor, there is no room for religion in the contemporary society. It is caused exactly by „the culture of self-fulfilment [which] has led many people to lose sight of concerns that transcend them.”³⁴ Thus, in today’s world, there is no place for the notion of *sacrum*³⁵ and what dominates is „modern experience, or inability to experience the spiritual, the sacred, the transcendent.”³⁶ Taylor is even willing to claim that the lack of transcendence is not only a “soft” expression of the current climate of opinion, but that it is a result of stigmatization, for “the strong

³⁰ R. Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, Columbia UP, New York 2011, p. 54.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

³² Ch. Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 4.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

³⁵ See Ch. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, MA, and London 2002, p. 53.

³⁶ Ch. Taylor, *Closed World Structures*, in *Religion after Metaphysics*, ed. M. Wrathall, Cambridge UP, New York 2003, p. 49.

sense that continually arises that there is something more, that human life aims beyond itself, is stamped as an illusion and judged to be a dangerous illusion.”³⁷ Then, if we reject Taylor’s thesis about desacralization of the society, and acknowledge that there is still a majority that recognize transcendence, we can accept the way of religion – described above on the example of Rorty’s concept – focused on individual religious experience.

2. In the contemporary philosophy the tradition of moral interpretation of religion expressed in the thought of Kant, Lessing, Fichte, and Hegel seems not so fruitful as the one which focuses on religious experience. It is hard to find direct continuators of the moral religion. However, as we will see, there is an indirect continuator of this tradition – an Italian thinker Gianni Vattimo. Despite the fact that in his writings we will rather not find any explicit reference to the mentioned philosophers, we can notice many similarities if we only look at the vision of religion constructed by him. Thus, just like the first way of religion originates from the tradition of religious experience, the second is derived from the philosophy of the moral interpretation of religion.

Philosophers of the 18th and early 19th century created a project of moral religion which was based on the thesis that what is most important in religion is morality. For the message of the New Testament emphasized, according to them, nothing else than the moral aspect of religion. Whereas the Church “founded” on the history of Jesus has to, above all, nurse the new morality proposed by the incarnate God. “But according to the moral religion (and among all the public religions that ever there have been, the Christian alone is of this sort), it is a principle that everyone must do as much as is in his powers in order to become a better human being”³⁸ – writes Kant. Moral interpretation of religion based on these assumptions has a positive and a negative aspect – the positive one focuses on the role of morality, acting because of the love of one’s neighbor, the true service to God, and creating the invisible Church, whereas the negative aspect focuses on the critique of religious ritual and cult, the pseudo-service to God, magical and delusional thinking, prayer and contemplation. What is more, the category of religious experience – which is a key notion for the way of religion described above – will either be criticized or will have no importance to the moral interpretation of religion. The German philosophers wanted to provide the believers with religion which will only demand a good moral action, only thanks to which one can truly be a servant of God and a follower of Jesus. However, in spite of the constant reminding that everything connected to religion is for the glory of God, the God himself takes no particular place in the discussed philosophy. Often, he is ignored whatsoever, or it is stated that we cannot really make claims about God. Religion is thus made more and more temporal and anthropocentric. Even the matter of salvation is, at least in

³⁷ Ch. Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity*, Oxford UP, New York 1999, p. 19.

³⁸ I. Kant, *Religion...*, p. 59.

Kant's thought, moved aside or ignored, because the truly moral action cannot be motivated by possible reward or punishment. The man who identifies himself with this way of religion must act, but act like if God didn't exist – only then he can truly be a good man. It sounds quite paradoxical. For religion is stripped from what constitutes religion, that is, the transcendental element, the element of *sacrum*, God. In spite of that, the discussed religion is to be, according to the mentioned thinkers, a true, common, good, and right religion.

The process of making religion more and more temporal, of depriving it of transcendence and *sacrum* is reflected in the contemporary Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo's theory of religion. He points out that currently we live in a secularized world, that is in the world, in which a scientific paradigm still (but not for long) dominates, in which any kind of *sacrum* does not exist anymore. However, in the *sacrum* Vattimo sees – he takes it from Girard – something connected not only with metaphysics, but, above all, with violence: “what is called sacred is deeply related to violence.”³⁹ Thus, the disappearance of *sacrum* makes the contemporary world break up with violence and at the same time brings it closer to the teachings of Jesus, because “if the natural sacred is the violent mechanism that Jesus came to unveil and undermine, it is possible that secularization [...] is precisely a positive effect of Jesus' teaching, and not a way of moving away from it.”⁴⁰ The message of Jesus discussed by Vattimo is not an “old” *sacrum*, but a “new” tradition of love, charity, and rejection of violence. It is clear how much the Italian philosopher stresses the moral aspect of religion. For what are these reflections on violence, on love and charity, if not a part of morality? Christianity returns, but in this new, as a socially-oriented form focused on the moral aspects of religion. “Christian inheritance that ‘returns’ in weak thought is primarily the Christian percept of charity and its rejection of violence”⁴¹. As we can see, the key category for Vattimo is the Christian charity which ought to be understood not as some attribute of God, but rather as a part of morality, that is, charity needs to be related to the interpersonal relationships. It is because the “weak thought,” which Vattimo represents, first, rejects metaphysics, and thus also a God of metaphysics, who “is some” or “is not some,” and second, because it remains skeptical towards the claims about God (not necessarily only in the metaphysical context). In Vattimo's considerations – alike the mentioned moral concept of religion – we will not find too many passages on God. However, he often mentions Jesus, but only thanks to the fact that Jesus was also a man. Indeed, Vattimo stresses a human nature of Jesus through the category of *kenosis* – the God's self-abasement. For only about the kenotic God we can speak. Italian thinker argues that religion returned, but it is a return to the values

³⁹ G. Vattimo, *Belief*, transl. D. Webb, Stanford UP, Stanford 1999, p. 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

which derived from religion and not to God.⁴² “Many ‘Christian values’ seem to be more popular than before: there is a general condemnation of racism, a pervasive humanitarianism [...] which rejects the idea of war, which is moved by the Third World’s misery, and calls for peace and solidarity”⁴³ – writes Vattimo. His insight in religion is just as reductionistic as that of the representatives of the moral interpretation of religion, because the “essence of revelation is reduced to charity [...]”⁴⁴ What is important in religion proposed by the Italian thinker is, above all, the return to the Christian moral values, creating the community of good people, and discovering the sense of the Bible today, for me. For Jesus reinterpreted the Old Testament for him in his times. Thus, the believer follows Jesus by reinterpreting the Bible in the historical and personal context, paying attention mostly to the values which are stressed in the Gospel. The only limit of this reinterpretation is love and charity, because „the only truth revealed to us by Scripture, the one that can never be demythologized in the course of time [...] is the truth of love, of charity.”⁴⁵ Whereas religious experience – understood for example in the Kierkegaard manner – is of no importance. The same applies to the religious ritual and cult. „How shall I relate myself in practice to what is called religion, Christianity, faith, and Christian morality?” – asks Vattimo. „Shall I go back to church – to the practice of sacraments and to the sermons in Sunday Mass – and take the Pope’s encyclical letters as guides for my job as philosopher [...]?”⁴⁶ The Italian thinker does not directly answer that question, but only mentions that he shows up in church just for funerals and weddings. This should be enough to define the place of ritual and cult in the theory of religion proposed by Vattimo.

We can observe many similarities between Gianni Vattimo’s theory and the moral concept of religion. For both of these ways of thinking the important thing in religion is morality, the attitude towards the others which is expressed in the notions of charity and love. The role of cult and ritual – and to some extent also God – is reduced, and their meaning is minimalized. Similarly, the category of religious experience and the relation with *sacrum*, or better – with transcendence, is not as important both to Vattimo and to the representatives of the moral concept of religion, as to the philosophers who derive their concepts from the tradition of Kierkegaard or James. It seems that also the moralist attitude towards Jesus is shared by Vattimo. For Jesus is – in Vattimo’s view – shown as the one who reinterpreted the Old Testament and put emphasis on morality. Pointing out the mentioned similarities should be enough to recognize Vattimo as the continuator – to some extent and *implicite* – of the representatives of the moral religion concept. I do

⁴² See G. Vattimo, *Trace of a trace*, p. 103.

⁴³ G. Vattimo, *Belief*, p. 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

⁴⁵ R. Rorty, G. Vattimo, *The Future...*, p. 51.

⁴⁶ G. Vattimo, *Belief*, p. 69.

not wish to claim that in essence the theories of Vattimo and of the moral religion thinkers are one and the same, but only that one can possibly find the sources or inspirations of the Vattimo's philosophy of religion in the moral concept of religion. For there are of course differences, on which we will not debate here. Let us limit ourselves to just one. Despite the fact that Vattimo would agree with the statement that religion has a moral character, he would argue with, for instance, the Kantian view of the shape of this morality. The Italian thinker claims that it is expressed in the notion of love which has quite unequivocal character and also which is an explicit call for action. Kant, on the other hand, would recognize categorical imperative – which is not so unequivocal and so explicit when it comes to action – as the essence of morality. „Reading the signs of the times with no other provision than the commandment of love, which cannot be secularized, because (if you will) it is a ‘formal’ commandment, not unlike Kant’s categorical imperative, which does not command something specific once and for all, but rather applications that must be ‘invented’ in dialog with specific situations in light of what the holy Scriptures have revealed.”⁴⁷ It is worth to stress that Vattimo treats the notion of love as a nonmetaphysical, nonlogical, and nonexperimental claim.⁴⁸ However, he would probably use one of those terms if he were to describe the Kantian imperative.

Ending

In the contemporary world, we can observe the return to religion. The epochs in which it was “forbidden,” either because of the primacy of reason and scientific worldview, or because of the suspicions directed towards religion, are the things of the past. For both the moral critique and the materialistic and scientific ones were overcome thanks to the theory of religious experience, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. Those philosophical currents developed rapidly in the 20th century and in the contemporary philosophy reopened the way for reflection on religion. Today, in the postmetaphysical philosophy, there are at least two main currents of the reborn religious thought – neopragmatistic concept of religious experience presented, for instance, by Rorty, and the theory of religion focused on values and morality which is represented by, for example, Vattimo. Of course, this differentiation can, in some aspects, be too arbitrary and artificial, because both those philosophies often interpenetrate. However, it allows a better understanding of how the concepts created a long time ago are developed in the contemporary philosophy and also of the theories presented by the mentioned philosophers. It seems that there is also a possibility of going beyond these two ways and creating some sort of synthesis. A seed of this concept we can find in the thought of a Polish thinker

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 66.

⁴⁸ See R. Rorty, G. Vattimo, *The Future...*, p. 51.

Tomasz Węclawski. In the book titled *Wspólny świat religii* he claims that „Experience and sense of community is therefore in itself a ‘religious’ experience, at least because it is an experience of feelings and values which is created not only from a simple connection of forces and from the sum of experiences of the people who constitute a community, but it is always also ‘something more’ than the sum of everything brought to it by the participants.”⁴⁹ Thus, in the community, there is sort of a transcendental element which goes beyond the community itself and beyond the single members of it. Religious experience conceived in this manner can constitute a link between an individualistic religion of experience and a social religion of morality. True, Węclawski writes these words when thinking about the matter of secularization and privatization of religion. However, do we need to persistently hold on to that context? For when relating his words to the discussion on the shape of the contemporary religion we can receive an interesting possibility of presiding further investigations which link both of the mentioned ways.

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⁴⁹ T. Węclawski, *Wspólny świat religii*, Znak, Kraków 1995, p. 243. Transl. by A.T.

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