



# Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion as A Kind of Apophatic Theology

*Jakub Gomułka*

Faculty of Philosophy

Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

## 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<sup>1</sup>. 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 17<sup>th</sup>-century invention”<sup>2</sup>; 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<sup>3</sup>. 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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame, IN, 1989, p. 357.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

at least two levels. The deeper, more important level (or levels) is called “the metaphysical”. It is easy to note that this concept of the metaphysical also involves the great 17<sup>th</sup>-century invention, the factual, as its reverse. The former is seen as the foundation or basis of the latter. There may be some deep and mysterious kind of causal connection between them (which should not be confused with factual causality), and this kind of connection may be used to render the religious idea of creation. Some contemporary philosophers of religion make use of the old Platonic material/ideal opposition, and others utilise the almost equally old Aristotelian-Thomistic substance/attribute scheme to express this intuition. There is a variety of attitudes taken by Christian doctrines towards the metaphysical component. Some of them, usually the new reformed churches, reject it. Others, like the mainstream theology of the Catholic Church, strongly accept it as a necessary requirement for self-understanding.

The third dimension, the ethical one, represents the stress on the ethical consequences of religious teaching, the “ethical fruits”. I guess it is hard for most people (at least in Europe) to imagine any religious doctrine devoid of this dimension. (Note that I still refer to the theoretical content, leaving aside the problem of its practical appliance: the “ethical fruits” are beliefs about what one should do, a certain set of commandments nested in a religious tradition). It seems that it follows from the role of religion as the main “framework” organising human life. There are philosophical standpoints which put particular emphasis on the ethical function of religious faith. Richard Braithwaite, in his *Empirist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*, pointed this out as the main and only unproblematic component of religious tradition<sup>4</sup>. Braithwaite himself belongs to the tradition of ethical reductionism in the philosophy of religion originated by Immanuel Kant. The late John Hick, a contemporary neo-Kantian, in his idea of the Real stresses the ethical dimension, but mixes it with certain metaphysical beliefs<sup>5</sup>.

The fourth component is the most elusive one. In the first approximation it represents the belief that God is beyond our perception, understanding and language. But my usage of the term requires further explanation. When I use the name “apophatic” to describe a distinct dimension in my model I make a conceptual shift. Traditionally, apophatic theology was always entangled with some metaphysical beliefs. (It was also usually linked with mysticism, but the issue of mysticism is beyond my scope here, as I am only considering the theoretical aspect of religious faith. When you try to look for a theory in mysticism, you always find a mixture of metaphysical content and apophatic attitude.) My model leads to “distillation” of the negative content of the apophatic, since all the positive beliefs may find their place in the metaphysical dimension<sup>6</sup>.

It is not easy to find thinkers and religious believers who deny the existence of the apophatic dimension of religious faith. The belief that God transcends our cognitive faculty (to a certain extent at least) is commonly accepted. However, some people

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. R.B. Braithwaite, *An Empirist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*, Cambridge 1955.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Oxford 1973.

<sup>6</sup> I thank Krzysztof Mech for his remark that I need to put this more plainly.

seem to accept it rather grudgingly, and try to diminish its significance<sup>7</sup>. I believe they are partly justified in their reluctance. Just imagine a religious faith, then remove everything that can be told: the factual and metaphysical content disappears, as well as the ethical teaching. What is left? Mere pointless celebrations, empty shells of practices devoid of their meaning. The apophatic dimension may be seen as a destructive force, a power of negation which leads to a form of religiously decorated atheism<sup>8</sup>. It seems to be paradoxical to hold certain beliefs about God, like the belief in incarnation for instance, and at the same time to claim that God is beyond our understanding.

However, the apophatic tradition in theology goes back to Neoplatonism, and is constantly present in Western culture. Although, as I mentioned above, the apophatic theology was always involved in the metaphysical dimension – in terms of my model – it obviously also contained the seed of the apophatic attitude. What is so attractive in this dimension of religious belief despite the danger it creates for the doctrine? Why take the risk of going into a paradox? Piotr Sikora expressed it brilliantly in his 2004 book *Słowa i zbawienie (Words and Salvation)*. He wrote:

Religious people who want to stay as they are cannot stop using the word “God”. The cult belongs to the essence of religion, and the attitude of worship requires the “object” of worship to be named if only to be focused somehow. On the other hand, the same attitude of worship requires the “object” worshipped to be worth of worship. It would not be worth of worship if it were less perfect than it is. But each object man can conceive is not worthy of absolute worship: since it does not transcend man absolutely, it would be more perfect. Hence, the religious believer cannot accept that God can be described adequately by the predicates formed by man<sup>9</sup>.

The apophatic dimension is open to draw extreme conclusions from. Since every single word is formed by man, including such words as “object”, “being”, and of course “God”, there is no word to say anything about God. There is no story about God one can tell. And, since there is nothing to say about God, there is no fact about God and no metaphysical content either. As a matter of fact, there is no ethical consequence either, since there is nothing one can draw any consequence from. The apophatic attitude brought to its extreme leaves us with nothing but ungrounded practices, celebrations and worship lacking its intention.

There are, of course, many philosophical and theological systems which include the apophatic component in a weaker form. I venture the claim that every deeply considered religious doctrine must develop this dimension to a certain extent. Christian denominations vary in this respect – it is said for instance that the Eastern Orthodox Church is more apophatic than the Roman Catholic Church – but most of them can share Sikora’s observation quoted above. Most contemporary philosophers of religion also endorse it. Hick, with his pluralistic theology, may again serve as a good example. By the way, the apophatic component, due to its tendency to negate or at least to sublimate the factual or metaphysical content of a particular religious tradition,

<sup>7</sup> Such an attitude is exemplified in my opinion by Swinburne. See footnote 3.

<sup>8</sup> Karol Tarnowski emphasises this danger in several of his papers. Cf. K. Tarnowski, *Wiara jako miejsce teologii negatywnej* [in:] *Tropy myślenia religijnego*, Kraków 2009.

<sup>9</sup> P. Sikora, *Słowa i zbawienie. Dyskurs religijny w perspektywie filozofii Hilarego Putnama*, Kraków 2004, p. 242 (my translation).

leads to the universalisation of this particular religious view, making it open for other traditions. Hence, I think, a bit of an apophatic attitude is necessary for inter-religious dialogue.

The apophatic dimension may be present as a component of a complex religious system of beliefs, and may coexist with other dimensions within this system. Sometimes it is emphasised, and sometimes it is a less important feature of such a system. However, there are philosophical and religious views which are focused on the apophatic dimension, understood in the extreme way which excludes the other dimensions. It makes no sense to attribute such a view to Pseudo-Dionysius – the traditional Neoplatonic apophatic theology is more than one-dimensional according to my model. But I think I can give a perfect example of extreme apophatic thought. This is the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.

## The Wittgensteinians

The Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is not part of Ludwig Wittgenstein's thought. It was the current of British analytic philosophy which emerged in the mid-1950s, when the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* was already dead<sup>10</sup>. The *spiritus movens* of this movement was Rush Rhees, a pupil and close friend of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and also one of the editors of Wittgenstein's posthumous works. The place of birth of the current was the Faculty of Philosophy (today non-existent) at University College of Swansea (today Swansea University) in Wales. This is why the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion was dubbed the Swansea School. Rhees worked there as a lecturer between 1940 and 1966, when he retired. Among the other most important exponents of the Wittgensteinians based in Swansea were Peter G. Winch (a lecturer and a colleague of Rhees), and two of Rhees's students: Roy F. Holland and Dewi Z. Phillips. Another close friend of Wittgenstein (and an important American philosopher), Norman Malcolm, was also considered to be a member of the School due to the similarity of thought and long-time cooperation with the Swansea circle. These five authors were also called the "Wittgensteinian fideists". This name is pejorative in intention. It was forged by the Canadian philosopher Kai Nielsen, a long-term critic and adversary of the ideas presented by Rhees and his friends. The Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion often declared self-restraint to fideism and were sometimes disinclined towards Nielsen's term<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> I am very far from the claim that there was no linkage between the thoughts of Wittgenstein and the ideas of the Wittgensteinians. This is obviously not the case, for the Wittgensteinian fideism was based upon many Wittgenstein's own remarks and conceptions regarding religion. Although the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* was not the only main source of inspiration for the Swansea School (the other source was Simone Weil), it can be said that Wittgenstein himself was a Wittgensteinian fideist in a sense. However, the current gained its shape, name and common recognition many years after Wittgenstein's death.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g.: D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion: Some Fashionable Criticisms* [in:] K. Nielsen, D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?*, London 2005, p. 41.

The grounds of the Swansea School outlook are a philosophy of language taken from the later Wittgenstein. Some undeveloped ideas of Wittgenstein's regarding religious life, the meaning of the doctrinal content and worship, as well as the religious works of the French thinker Simone Weil were also the source of their inspiration. Note that both Wittgenstein and Weil referred to the Christian religion in the first place. So the Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion focused mainly on Christianity and its troubles with the Western philosophy.

The "Wittgensteinian fideism" firmly rejected any metaphysical or factual interpretation of religious doctrines. They did not mean that the contents of the faith were irrelevant and – as a matter of fact – untrue stories<sup>12</sup>. Rather, they refused to treat them as any matter of fact, as descriptions of any factual or metaphysical reality. According to the Swansea School, the function of religious truths in believers' lives is different, and much more significant than the cognitive one<sup>13</sup>. Their function is to change the whole believer's form of life (*Lebensform* – a quasi-technical term in the late philosophy of Wittgenstein).

This may suggest that the Wittgensteinians stressed the ethical dimension of religious faith, but this suggestion is wrong. They perceived ethics as independent of religion. Both Rhees and Phillips often underlined the difference between moral and religious duties, although they also admitted vital linkages. According to Rhees, religious faith resembles moral beliefs because the substantial content of the former is recognition of one's own obligation towards God. However religious faith is different from morality, since God must not be understood as an invisible man<sup>14</sup>. It follows, therefore, that religious people have two separate areas of duties. This conclusion can be found in a couple of early papers by Phillips, where he claimed that morality can sometimes limit one's religious obligations and that there are situations in which religion gives us no morally useful answers<sup>15</sup>.

One may ask what the sense of religion is, and what the meaning of religious utterances is according to the Wittgensteinians. In my opinion this question finds its clearest answer in the works of Peter Winch. Winch, following Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*<sup>16</sup> and being focused on non-European religious traditions, stressed the practices and rituals involved in a given tradition. The rituals may seem to be "inconsistent" – just as Azande's practices of witchcraft – but as far as they work within a community and regulate people's everyday life they are all

<sup>12</sup> This standpoint has been taken by Richard Braithwaite in his essay. See footnote 4.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g.: R. Rhees, *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*, D.Z. Phillips, M. von der Ruhr (eds.), Cambridge 1997, p. 44–46; R.F. Holland, *Religious Discourse and Theological Discourse*, "Australasian Journal of Philosophy" 1953, Vol. 34, No. 3, p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. R. Rhees, *op.cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. e.g.: D.Z. Phillips, *Moral and Religious Conceptions of Duty: An Analysis* [in:] *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, London 1970, p. 191–197; D.Z. Phillips, *God and Ought* [in:] *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 223–232; D.Z. Phillips, *On The Christian Concept of Love* [in:] *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 233–254.

<sup>16</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* [in:] *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, J.C. Klagge, A. Nordmann (eds.), Indianapolis (IN) 1993.

right<sup>17</sup>. The strength of religious practices has nothing to do with the credibility of their “conceptual” or “propositional” content. All that matters is how deeply rooted they are in the community’s form of life. It can be noted that the idea of the possible conflict between religious and moral duties does not emerge from the perspective of Winch. But one should not conclude that Winch disagreed with Rhees and Phillips about this point. They all underlined the contingency of particular cultural and religious traditions. So, they might claim that our own tradition – due to its unique history – makes room for religious independent moral criteria, which serve as limitations to religious duties, while such room may not exist within other traditions (like that of Azande).

Phillips’s later view on Christianity endorsed a much more complicated relationship between religion and morality. According to him the ethical perspective was a kind of prerequisite of religious faith. One must have a moral sense to see the evil in the world, and this enables one to be a true Christian. Christianity is a response for the fact of moral contingency of the world. But it is not the only possible response. Phillips does not mean that the moral sense automatically pushes one to believe in (the Christian) God. The fact of moral chaos of the world can also lead one to atheism. In other words, a true (Christian) believer will be a moral person, but morality appears independently and before one’s religious belief, and does not follow from it. Nor must religion follow from the moral sense<sup>18</sup>.

The Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion saw their task in applying the therapeutic process ordained by Wittgenstein to religious faith and its understanding. The goal of the process was to cleanse the language of faith (as well as the language about faith) of confusing and vague elements. These confusing and vague elements had two main sources. The first was ancient philosophy. The first Church Fathers undertook the defence of their beliefs in terms of their intellectual adversaries – this is how the apologetics emerged. The Swansea School seemed to accept this activity as long as Christian thinkers simply defended their faith. But, with time, the terms of being, cause, soul or substance, taken from Greek and Roman philosophers, came into the inner discourse of Christianity. The terms became intellectual tools for the believers’ own needs and started to be used in interpretations of faith within Christian communities. All this – according to Rhees and his friends – resulted in many ambiguities and mistakes. The doctrine of faith became a mosaic of what made sense and what made just an illusion of sense, and the authentic Christian spirituality slowly transformed into a mere superstition. Once the alien language of philosophy had been given the permission to impose its own semantic structures on the language of Revelation, the latter began to lose its meaning and its original identity.

The second source of ambiguities in the religious language was, as the members of the Swansea School claimed (strictly following Wittgenstein on this point<sup>19</sup>),

<sup>17</sup> Cf. P.G. Winch, *Understanding a Primitive Society*, “American Philosophical Quarterly” 1964, No. 1 (1964), p. 307–324.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. e.g. D.Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and The Problem of God*, Minneapolis (MN) 2005, p. 175.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, transl. P.G. Winch, G.H. von Wright, H. Nyman (eds.), Chicago 1984, p. 72.

the fear for one's own existence. This fear leads to what Rhees ironically called the "popular religion". The "popular religion" brings a vision of life after death which is to dismiss the fear of death, and a vision of Divine Providence understood as an effective force influencing the individual lives which is to dismiss the fear of misfortune. It is, first of all, this fear which degenerates Christianity and reduces it to a bundle of superstitious beliefs. It is superstitious to understand Salvation as a happy-go-lucky "life after death" and God as the all-powerful ruler of the factual reality<sup>20</sup>.

The Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion claimed that Christianity, when understood rightly, is free from both sources of confusions: the fear and the philosophy. It does not need a pseudo-substantial promise of future life, and it does not appeal to dreadful imaginations of perennial punishment and hellfire. It is far from taking the soul as a thing existing in time or imperishable, as well as from thinking about God as an omnipotent being. "True faith", according to Phillips, understands the soul as a relation of man to God, and understands the belief in God as one of the possible reactions to the moral chaos of the world. "God is Love" should be the key to the reality of God for every true Christian<sup>21</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Wittgensteinians never thought of themselves as theologians; neither did they ever consider themselves apophatics. Their self-consciousness is probably the weakest point of their doctrine. They never admitted they had a doctrine in the first place. They thought they had just clarified the real sense of Christianity, the real meaning of Christians' utterances. However, their work, in my opinion, is rather a redefinition of Christian faith according to a few general intuitions they took from Wittgenstein and Weil. The intuitions say, for instance, that God cannot be known or understood in the usual meaning of these terms, that true religion has nothing in common with the fear of death, that religious beliefs have practical and not theoretical goals; they do not describe anything.

I take these intuitions as strictly apophatic: they led the Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion to create an extreme version of one-dimensional apophatic theology, not a philosophy. They paid full attention to the apophatic dimension and denied the religious nature of the other three dimensions. The factual and the metaphysical dimensions were rejected as superstitious; the ethical dimension was seen as independent of religion (though not unrelated).

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf. e.g. R.F. Holland, *op.cit.*, p. 151–154.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *op.cit.*, p. 199–201.