



One God – Many Religions? The Role of Negative Theology in Contemporary Interpretations of Religious Pluralism

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Abstract: The article discusses the role of negative theology in contemporary interpretations of religious pluralism in an analytical and synthetic way. One of such interpretations is the pluralistic theology of religion. In view of the problems encountered due to such a way of looking at religions, a different direction of interpretation is proposed in the article. Accepting the validity of the basic intention of negative theology, the author presents a thesis that a Christian theology of religious pluralism can be based on Trinitarian theology as a kind of “matrix” of religious experience. A systematic criterion was used in the elaboration of the subsequent steps: (1) The faces of transcendence, (2) The pluralist hypothesis, (3) *Via negativa*, (4) The limits of negation, (5) Experience and language, (6) The nature of transcendence, (7) Toward a Trinitarian interpretation of religious pluralism. The presented model of Trinitarian interpretation of religious pluralism can be called an integrative model. It is based on the assumption that it is possible to demonstrate certain similarities between the properties of the individual Persons of the Trinity and various ideas and concepts of Ultimate Reality found in different religions.

Keywords: negative theology, religious pluralism, pluralistic theology of religion, Ultimate Reality, Trinitarian theology

There are different images of Ultimate Reality in different religions. Where do those differences come from? How can they be explained? Isn't the source of religion the revelation or experience *of the same* God? Is it possible for God to once reveal himself as a personal „You” (YHWH, Heavenly Father, Allah), inviting a man to a salvific dialogue and community of life, and another time as an impersonal and nameless Reality (Brahman, Dharmakāya, Nirvāna, Shūnyatā), against which one can only remain silent? The purpose of the article is, first, to find an appropriate hermeneutic of religion to give a meaningful and theologically credible answer to the above questions. Second, to present the role that negative theology plays in contemporary interpretations of religious pluralism. Apophatism is one of the pillars of the so-called pluralistic theology of religion, according to which the plurality of religions is the result of culturally conditioned interpretations of one and the same Ultimate Reality, which, in itself, is incomprehensible and indescribable. In view of the problems encountered due to such a way of looking at religions, a different direction of interpretation is proposed in the article. Accepting the validity of the basic intention of negative theology, the author presents a thesis that a Christian theology

of religious pluralism can be based on Trinitarian theology as a kind of „matrix” of religious experience. God is the Triune God, therefore every authentic revelation or religious experience is of the Trinitarian nature. That does not mean that all religions contain some sort of „pre-phenomenon” or „archetype” of Trinitarian faith. It rather means that different images and concepts of God, as well as the way of experiencing the relationship with Him, are given different forms depending on which of the Persons of the Trinity (in the Christian sense) they are specifically oriented towards. It seems that such different understandings and approaches to the mystery of God have surprising counterparts in the great religions of the world.

1. The Faces of Transcendence

Essentially, in terms of religions, there are two opposing concepts of Ultimate Reality: personal (theistic) and non-personal (non-theistic). The personal concept is characteristic mainly of monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Their followers are convinced that there is a personal God, the creator of the world and a man, the giver of life and the basis of all existence. The term “person” can be understood in different ways. With regard to God, it indicates, first of all, that He is a being with cognition, power and will; therefore He also has the ability to enter into a dialogical relationship with a man.¹ Such an approach to Ultimate Reality resulted in various anthropomorphisms, which; however, began to be explained quite early as allegories and metaphors helpful for our way of understanding God. Consequently, the anthropomorphisms were not removed but corrected and given the appropriate meaning and sense. While it was done, it was emphasized that no symbols or images of God found in the Bible could be literally applied to God. As Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) wrote: “Know that the negative attributes of God are the true attributes: they do not include any incorrect notions or any deficiency whatever in reference to God, while positive attributes imply polytheism, and are inadequate.”² Consequently, one cannot know who God really is, one can only know who He is not. Such reasoning is called the path or negative/apophatic theology (Greek: ἀπόφασις, negation): it is the path to infinity through the negation of all that is finite. It begins when the human mind understands that it is not possible to define the mystery of God by means of any analogies, images and concepts drawn from the created world. The sense of inadequacy and limitation of the positive qualities attributed to God prompts the reason to rise above positive concepts. However, that does not mean their complete abandonment. God is the being the human mind senses in

¹ Cf. Kreiner, “Gottesbegriff,” 153.

² Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 81.

the creation and, at the same time, He is different, absolutely transcendent in relation to the reality of the created world.³

Non-personal concepts of Transcendent Reality are characteristic mainly of Eastern religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. Those religions are sometimes referred to as mystical or apophatic religions as they emphasize the transcendent nature of Ultimate Reality.⁴

Hindu ideas about Ultimate Reality focus on Brahman – the impersonal and absolutely transcendent force of the universe. In the Upanishads (thus in Vedism and Brahmanism), Brahman is the impersonal, all-pervasive spirit of the universe. Some Hindus emphasize that It is not emptiness, because It gathers all things within Itself. It is unknowable; although, on the other hand, It is the “pre-basis” of everything. Hindus also believe that It is present in every form of deity. However, despite Its *murti* (personal forms), Brahman ultimately has no attributes. It is an entity „without properties” – ineffable, immeasurable, inconceivable and amorphous. It represents a pure idea, principle, transcendence.⁵

Based on the teaching of Primordial Buddhism (Hinayana), from which the Theravada school – which still exists today – is derived, the Ultimate Reality is nirvana (Pali: *nibbāna*). It is the highest good of a man and means the „complete extinction” or „total annihilation” of violent desire and all passions; therefore, it is the achievement of a perfect peace of mind, supreme happiness. The Buddha spoke very little about nirvana and refused to define it. Like the monotheistic theologians following the path of negation, he preferred to explain what nirvana *was not*. Thus, he taught that it was „a realm where there is no earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air [...] No one is born there, no one departs or remains there [...] It is the end of all suffering (*dukkha*) [...] It is the non-born, the non-created, non-made [...]”⁶. Is nirvana the Buddhist equivalent of God? According to Steven Collins, nirvana should be understood as an unconditional, timeless and indescribable reality, which is also the ultimate purpose of all human endeavours. However, comparing it with the idea of God is inappropriate as it is nowhere referred to as “the origin or ground of the universe.”⁷ Christopher Gowans expressed a similar opinion: “The most important are that, unlike God, Nibbana is not the ultimate cause of the universe, and it is not a personal being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-loving. Hence, it is not a reality on which human beings depend or with whom they could form a personal relationship.”⁸

At the center of Daoism, on the other hand, there is the impersonal principle of Dao (Tao), which is the eternal and unchanging fundamental basis of the world.

³ Hryniewicz, *Hermeneutyka w dialogu*, 50.

⁴ Schmidt-Leukel, *Das himmlische Geflecht*, 64–71.

⁵ Cf. Nelson, “Krishna,” 309–328.

⁶ *Majjhima Nikāya* 63. As cited in: Thanippara, “Nirwana,” 286.

⁷ Collins, *Nirvana*, 176–177.

⁸ Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha*, 151.

“Dao” literally means a “way” or a “path,” although Its semantic scope is much wider. Dao is perfectly transcendent, therefore It cannot be described or expressed with the use of terms. It is nameless as each name means something existing in a certain way. Dao, on the other hand, eludes any distinction; It is the overriding principle. Nevertheless, Its “strength” or “power” (de) manifests itself in nature, which is expressed in the order of things.⁹

Thus, it can be seen that the field of religious beliefs is highly complex, heterogeneous and incommensurable. Moreover, in many cases, the beliefs are opposed to each other and a conflict arises between them. It is reflected not only in the sphere of subjective belief, where individuals choose a particular religion, but it can also lead to social conflicts and even religious wars. “Fields of Blood,” which mark the history of religion, are a telling testimony to the above.¹⁰ This raises the question of whether it is possible to create such a theory that would, on the one hand, analyze the main causes of the conflict of religious beliefs – show its social, cultural and doctrinal conditions – and, on the other hand, would indicate the way to overcome them. According to some philosophers and theologians of religion, such a theory is presented by the so-called pluralistic theology of religion. One of the main pillars of its theoretical edifice is negative or apophatic theology.

2. The Pluralist Hypothesis

The origins of pluralistic theology of religion (known as “pluralism” for short) date back to the 1970s and are associated with the first publications of John Hick from that period. Its main representatives – apart from Hick, who promoted the concept of the “Copernican Revolution” in theology – are Wilfred C. Smith, Paul F. Knitter, Raimon Panikkar and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, inter alia. The basic thesis of pluralism is that at the center of the world of religions, there is the unknowable and indescribable Divine Reality and religions are the space in which it is revealed in the form of personal and non-personal absolutes. Different Divine characters and different non-personal manifestations of *the sacrum* are various types of transformations of the „impact” of the Transcendent Reality on our minds. Transcendence, however, in its inner nature, stays beyond the reach of our conscious experience. It can neither be described nor understood since it goes beyond the systems of concepts and categories within which a man is capable of thinking. In that sense, it is trans-categorical, outside the scope of human perception.¹¹ One can only describe its “impact”

⁹ Ching – Chang, “Dao,” 82.

¹⁰ Cf. Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*, 3–4.

¹¹ Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 163.

on us. That impact is experienced, interpreted and expressed through concepts and perceptions specific to a given culture and religion. Consequently, all religions are culturally conditioned elements of one dynamic *Continuum*, and the factor that differentiates them is historical and cultural conditions. In that context, Hick quotes the Persian poet and Sufi, Rumi (1207–1273), who stated: “The lamps are different, but the Light is the same; it comes from Beyond.”¹²

Among the main theoretical and cognitive assumptions of the pluralistic theology of religion, the following should be mentioned: the concept of Transcendent Reality, the concept of religious experience and the specific understanding of truth and religious language.

As already mentioned, the “pluralists” assume that at the foundation of all the great religions of the world, there is one, incomprehensible and ineffable Ultimate Reality. The concept of Ultimate Reality is so broad that its content seems to go beyond not only the boundaries set for it by various theisms and philosophies related to God but also by individual religions. Also in that matter, the supporters of the pluralist option can refer to a rich philosophical and theological tradition. Karl Rahner, for example, speaks of a “mystery” that is “nameless and infinitely sacred.” That “sacred mystery” is given in the “where to” of human transcendence as “unmanageable and disposing, as inaccessible and receding away.”¹³ In Christianity, that absolutely existing sacred mystery is called “God.”¹⁴ Paul Tillich uses the term “the God above the God of theism,” which refers to an absolute faith that goes beyond the theistic objectification of God.¹⁵ Gordon D. Kaufman distinguishes between “real God” and “available God” while stating that the former is “utterly unknowable X” and the latter is “essentially a mental or imaginative construct.”¹⁶ Ninian Smart mentions “the noumenal Focus of religion which so to say lies behind the phenomenal Foci of religious experience and practice.”¹⁷ Langdon Gilkey assumes that all religious concepts, doctrines and images of God are culturally conditioned, and therefore “no cultural logos is final and therefore universal.”¹⁸ The American theologian uses such terms as: “the absolute,” “encompassing mystery,” “infinite mystery,” which are meant to designate some unspecified reality, non-relational, supra-cultural and supra-religious.¹⁹ According to Gilkey, the infinite can be conceptualized as God, and God, as a symbol, can be conceptualized in relation to the mystery that transcends Him.²⁰

¹² Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 153.

¹³ Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, 74.

¹⁴ Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, 76.

¹⁵ Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 190.

¹⁶ Kaufman, *God the Problem*, 85–86.

¹⁷ Smart, “Our Experience of the Ultimate,” 24.

¹⁸ Gilkey, “Plurality,” 48.

¹⁹ Gilkey, “Plurality,” 48–49.

²⁰ Cf. Kondrat, *Racionalność*, 265.

In the view of pluralists, such a way of understanding Ultimate Reality is a good starting point for formulating a hypothesis that the great religions of the world (Hick means the religions that emerged during and after the “Axial” era [approximately 800 to 200 BC])²¹ – each with its own temples, spiritual practices, cultural expression, lifestyles, laws and customs, doctrines, art forms, etc. – are the result of different responses of a man to one and the same Transcendent Reality. That reality, in itself, is beyond the reach of human conceptual systems and categories. Nevertheless, it is universally present as an essential basis of our existence. Interacting with the religious aspect of human nature, it has produced – depending on culture, language and even personality conditions – both personal and non-personal foci of religious worship and meditation (gods and absolutes), which exist on a common ground connecting the Real and the human mind.²² Therefore, such concepts as God, YHWH, Allah, Brahman, Vishnu, Krishna, Sunyata do not refer to different ultimate realities²³ but express human experiences and representations of the Real. According to Hick, all of them (personal and non-personal) are equally important and equivalent, as long as they result from the authentic attitude of believers towards Ultimate Reality.²⁴

3. *Via Negativa*

The theological justification for such an interpretation of religious pluralism is provided, according to the “pluralists,” by negative (or apophatic) theology, based on which one cannot say who God *is*, but only who He *is not*.²⁵ Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the most prominent representatives of that trend, expressed the above thought as follows: “The negations respecting things Divine are true, but the affirmations are inappropriate.”²⁶ This means that anything that something can be said about is not God.²⁷ For God completely transcends human concepts, images and imagination,

21 Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 24–25.

22 Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 100.

23 Based on the most extreme form of pluralism, referred to as “polycentric pluralism,” religions are completely separate and unrelated, each of them worshipping or responding to its own Ultimate Reality and constituting an autonomous path leading to its assumed goal. Schmidt-Leukel, *Gott ohne Grenzen*, 176.

24 See Hick, “Eine Philosophie,” 301–318.

25 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, 14, 2: “We are unable to apprehend [the divine substance] by knowing what it is. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not.”

26 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De coelesti hierarchia* II, 3.

27 Cf. von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, 84: “Evagrius is the author of the expression that summarizes the entire teaching on mystical cognition, from Philo to Maximus: ‘The mind is not able to apprehend God cognitively. If it does, it is certainly not God’. [...] Maximus also says: ‘If someone claims to have seen God and know what they have seen, they have certainly seen nothing’”

and thus remains totally inexpressible, incomprehensible and indescribable.²⁸ Hence the ultimate “word” to be used to mention God should be reverent silence.²⁹

Negative theology is not an original project of Christian thought and has its origin in Hellenistic philosophy.³⁰ Christian theology has always taught about God’s transcendence; however, the issue of God’s unknowability gained prominence only through Neoplatonic influence.³¹ Unlike in Plato, for whom God was difficult to comprehend and impossible to express,³² Gregory of Nazianzus declares that “while it is impossible to express (what God is), it is even more impossible to comprehend Him.”³³ The expression: *si comprehendis, non est Deus!*, taken over from the Greeks, goes from Augustine deep into the Middle Ages as: “that infinite cannot be comprehended by any mode of knowledge.”³⁴

From the 4th century, especially from Gregory of Nyssa, negative theology becomes “the crown” of Christian theology.³⁵ Its radical form can be found in the works of the aforementioned Dionysius the Areopagite, for whom the Godhead was beyond existence and unity. “It hath no name, nor can It be grasped by the reason; It dwells in a region beyond us, where our feet cannot tread. Even the title of ‘Goodness’ we do not ascribe to It because we think such a name suitable.”³⁶

Among the heirs of the ancient tradition of negative theology, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa are usually mentioned. In his commentary on Boethius’ treatise *De Trinitate*, Thomas Aquinas states: “God as an unknown is said to be the terminus of our knowledge in the following respect: that the mind is found to be most perfectly in possession of knowledge of God when it is recognized

²⁸ The concept of indescribability should be distinguished from that of incomprehensibility, most often associated with negative theology. For it is legitimate to say that since God is indescribable He is also incomprehensible. However, the incomprehensibility of God does not necessarily imply the indescribability of God. The thesis about the indescribability of God is therefore stronger than the one about the incomprehensibility of God. Cf. Kreiner, *Das wahre Antlitz Gottes*, 32.

²⁹ It is worth noting that the thesis of the incomprehensibility or indescribability of God ultimately leads to the adoption of the thesis that the set of properties (predicates) used to refer to God is an empty set, or to the statement that every sentence such as “God is (has property) x” is a false one (a radical form of negative theology). However, if the meaning of the word “God” cannot be established at the level of concepts, the suspicion arises that the word means nothing, and theology – as critical and responsible “talk of God” – is a groundless and meaningless undertaking. See Kałuża, *Granice apofazy*, 369–392.

³⁰ See Hadot, *Filozofia*, 239–252.

³¹ Hadot, *Filozofia*, 247: “It should be clearly stated that the theologians from the patristic period introduced apophatism into Christian theology using the arguments and technical vocabulary of the Neoplatonists. In particular, the influence of the Neoplatonist Proclus on the works of Dionysius the Areopagite is indisputable.”

³² Plato, *Tim.* 28 c.

³³ As cited in: von Balthasar, *Theologik*, 82.

³⁴ Augustinus, *Civ.*, XII, 18: “Neque ab hac fide me philosophorum argumenta deterrent, quorum acutissimum illud putatur, quod dicunt nulla infinita ulla scientia posse comprehendere.”

³⁵ Hadot, *Filozofia*, 246.

³⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* XIII, 3.

that His essence is above everything that the mind is capable of apprehending in this life; and thus, although what He is remains unknown, yet it is known that He is.³⁷ Although Thomas places great emphasis on the apophatic side of his theology, he differs from Dionysius the Areopagite in the thesis that attributes expressing perfection are predicated of God “not as the cause only, but also essentially.”³⁸ That is an extremely important point as the proponents of the pluralist option often refer to the works of Thomas Aquinas to support their radical apophatism.³⁹

Meister Eckhart also emphasizes the indescribability and unknowability of God: “If I had a God that I could get to know, I would never consider Him to be God.”⁴⁰ No one is able to, in the proper sense, define who God is. “God is beyond anything that can be put into words.”⁴¹ Similar statements can be found in Nicholas of Cusa, who argued that no word, even “ineffable,” could be rightly attributed to God. And if He cannot be called “Nothingness,” it is because “Nothingness” is also a name. He cannot be called “something” either as the word applies only to individual entities. Thus, God is “supra Nihil et aliquid.”⁴²

It is worth noting here that there is a significant difference between the “founding fathers” of Christian negative theology and its contemporary followers in the field of pluralistic theology of religion. For Dionysius the Areopagite, it was clear that apophatic theology was part of a broader project that included cataphatic theology, while the goal of transcending language was the glorification of God and mystical union with Him. The starting point of the “mystical apophase” is not the absolute unknowability of God (the Absolute), as the “pluralists” want, but the awareness that everything temporal that surrounds a man cannot be what they seek as it is finite and transient so it must be negated as such. In that sense, God’s transcendence precedes His immanence. However, the effort of a man in search of God – even if that search is carried out somewhat “in the dark” (cf. Acts 17:27) – cannot be deprived of objective justification as it would be no different from agnosticism capitulating at the beginning of the path.⁴³ In that sense, God’s immanence precedes His transcen-

37 Thomas Aquinas, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, I, q. 1, a. 2, ad 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod secundum hoc dicimur in fine nostre cognitionis Deum tamquam ignotum cognoscere, quia tunc maxime mens in cognitione profecisse inuenitur, quando cognoscit eius essentiam esse supra omne quod apprehendere potest in statu uie; et sic quamuis maneat ignotum quid est, scitur tamen quia est.”

38 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 6, corp.: “[...] huiusmodi nomina non solum dicuntur de Deo causaliter, sed etiam essentialiter. Cum enim dicitur *Deus est bonus, vel sapiens*, non solum significatur quod ipse sit causa sapientie vel bonitas, sed quod haec in eo eminentius praexistunt.”

39 E.g., Schmidt-Leukel, “Niemand hat Gott je gesehen?,” 279: “In a sense [...] Thomas and Hick agree with each other: a finite man can only get to know and experience the infinite God in a way marked by their own finitude, so the infinite essence of God remains to a man an incomprehensible mystery forever.”

40 Meister Eckhart, *Predigten*, II, 193.

41 Meister Eckhart, *Predigten*, I, 635.

42 Kolakowski, *Horror metaphysicus*, 64.

43 Cf. von Kutschera, *Vernunft und Glaube*, 73–74.

dence.⁴⁴ As Hans Urs von Balthasar notes: “The search has its origin in a certain pre-relation to the Sought-after, although that relation, especially in the biblical perspective, but also already on the basis of the pre-knowledge of the Seeker, contains some sort of a contradiction.”⁴⁵ In that context, Alois M. Haas speaks of a “mystical paradox,” where the last “word” about God (Christianity is a religion of the Word) is transformed into a reverent silence.⁴⁶ In Neoplatonism, as well as in Eastern religions such as Mahayana Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, that dual (paradoxical) reference to the inaccessible Absolute – total conceptual elusiveness on the one hand, and a constant, circling search that may temporarily end with “touching” and “finding” on the other hand – becomes the focal point of an increasingly ambivalent philosophy: no speculation can lead to mysticism, no mystical experience can be translated into speculation.⁴⁷ Therefore, as von Balthasar concludes: “if there is ‘silence’ at the end of philosophical negative theology, as the arrows of all concepts and words fall to the ground before reaching their target, there is another type of silence at the end of Christian theology: adoration that, due to the abundance of what has been given, is also breathtaking.”⁴⁸ The similarities and differences between the two forms of silence beyond all that can be uttered will have to be considered later on. It will be done in the context of the issue of religious experience, since it is mainly the category on which the apophatism of pluralistic theology of religion is based. The fundamental question that arises here is: how far can one go in negations without falling into logical contradictions and, above all, without losing the essential meaning of negative theology as a project of Christian theology?

⁴⁴ It is worth remembering that ignorance (*αγνώσια*), as discussed by Dionysius the Areopagite, is not an *a priori* assumption from which reflection on God should begin. It is rather a state of mind reached through the successive stages of getting to know God. Cf. Striet, *Offenbares Geheimnis*, 53–54: “Dionysius the Areopagite develops the concept of negative theology, the guiding principle of which is the belief in the unknowability and absolute transcendence of God. [...] At the same time, according to Dionysius the Areopagite, the unknowability of God is a conceptual unknowability (*‘begriffene Unerkennbarkeit’*). The assertion of God’s unknowability is not the result of ‘some vague irrationality’ (*‘einer diffusen Irrationalität’*). The statement [by Dionysius the Areopagite; KK] that God is incomprehensible, and that reason must therefore plunge into mystical ‘darkness’, is an opinion achieved through cognition and in connection with that cognition, and not an expression of agnosticism.”

⁴⁵ Von Balthasar, *Theologik*, 83.

⁴⁶ See Haas, *Mystik als Aussage*, 127–171.

⁴⁷ See Hochstaffl, *Negative Theologie*, 65–81.

⁴⁸ Von Balthasar, *Theologik*, 98.

4. The Limits of Negation

As already mentioned, the radical form of negative theology is expressed in the belief that any sentence such as “God is x” is a false one.⁴⁹ Consequently, the language of religion has no cognitive value, but a pragmatic-expressive value at most, which means that its task is not to provide a man with some information about God, but to express religious feelings and arouse the appropriate attitude towards Him.⁵⁰ For God, in His essence, is indescribable and therefore unknowable – *Quid est Deus nescimus*.⁵¹

The metaphysical basis of the above statement is usually found in the transcendence of God, that is, in the ontological difference between God and the world, between the Creator and the creation. At first glance, that argument seems quite convincing; however, on longer reflection, it is easy to see the aporia hidden in it. Stating that type of difference presupposes exactly what is attempted to be denied on its basis, namely, the possibility of speaking of God, that is, His describability. As Peter Kügler notes: “The first problem is that by saying that ‘God is indescribable’ one actually describes Him. ‘God is indescribable’ is a description of God, therefore it is not true that God is indescribable. The sentence ‘God is indescribable’ is self-contradictory, thus it cannot be true.”⁵² That raises the question of the logical consistency of the thesis of God’s indescribability.

Hick is also aware of this problem.⁵³ He admits that “it would indeed not make sense to say of X that *none* of our concepts apply to it. [...] For it is obviously impossible to refer to something that does not even have the property of ‘being able to be referred to.’”⁵⁴ In his opinion, the property “being such that our concepts do not apply to it” cannot refer to that very property as this would lead to a contradiction.⁵⁵ Ultimately; however, Hick believes that those difficulties are merely “logical pedantries” that should not trouble anyone who, while constructing their theological system, refers to the statement about “ineffability of the divine nature.”⁵⁶

Hick’s key argument to solve the issue of the possibility of relating concepts to Ultimate Reality that goes beyond human thought categories is to distinguish between “substantial properties, such as ‘being good’, ‘being powerful’, ‘having knowledge’, and purely formal and logically generated properties such as ‘being a referent of a term’

49 Kreiner, *Das wahre Antlitz Gottes*, 32; cf. Stace, *Time and Eternity*, 33: “To say that God is ineffable is to say that no concepts apply to Him, and that He is without qualities. [...] And this implies that any statement of the form ‘God is x’ is false.”

50 Cf. Werbick, *Gott verbindlich*, 84–86.

51 Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad. 11.

52 Kügler, *Übernatürlich und unbegreifbar*, 125.

53 Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239–240.

54 Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

55 Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

56 Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

and ‘being such that our substantial concepts do not apply.’⁵⁷ According to Hick, apophatic thinkers claim that no *substantial* property can be related to the essence of God/Transcendence as it is completely unknowable and inexpressible to a man. That is the role of *via negationis* (or *via remotionis*): through negative statements about God or the divine, to lead to the conviction that no positive-substantial descriptions are able to convey His essence. In that specific sense, it can be said that no substantial properties (concepts) apply to Ultimate Reality.⁵⁸

Hick’s proposal is usually criticized for not specifying what exactly is the difference between the formal and substantial nature of the properties attributed to God/the Real.⁵⁹ In view of this apparent deficiency, Christopher J. Insole proposes to consider formal properties as those “which determine directly and solely what *other* properties can (or cannot) be ascribed to the subject,”⁶⁰ stressing that this is the only information that such properties convey (e.g., “it is inappropriate to predicate color properties”). Formal properties are not; however – as Hick argues – logically generated, unless one defines God as “x to which no substantial properties apply.” Yet, also here, logical rules alone are not enough to formulate such a claim. For some knowledge of God is necessary for one to be able to say about Him that “no substantial properties apply to Him.” Consequently, it turns out that certain formal properties are attributed to God based on the knowledge of His substantial properties.⁶¹ Insole thus demonstrates that to assign a formal property to God, one needs to know more about Him than when one wants to define Him using a substantial property. This is because formal properties determine which substantial properties can be attributed to an object. However, to be aware what substantial properties an object may or may not have, it is important to know (1) its ontological type (physical object, fictional, divine, etc.), (2) its ontological nature (simple, complex, personal, transcendent, immanent, etc.), our cognitive status with respect to that type of object, and (4) the type of properties that can be assigned (based on the knowledge of 1, 2, 3) to the object. The situation is different in the case of substantial properties. Here, it is not necessary to have such extensive knowledge.⁶²

⁵⁷ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

⁵⁸ Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239.

⁵⁹ Cf. Rowe, “Religious pluralism,” 139–150. William L. Rowe proposes his own terms for formal and substantial properties, formed based on the works of Hick. According to him “a formal property of the Real is some abstract characteristic the Real has that is a condition for our being able either to refer to it or to postulate it as that which is encountered through the personal deities and impersonal absolutes of the major religious traditions” (145). In turn, “a substantial property of the Real would be a property that belongs to its essential nature” (145). While doing so, Rowe criticises the statement of Hick that the Real completely goes beyond the network of human concepts. For it is impossible to utter that sentence without falling into a contradiction as the word “exceeds” used in it is also a concept. Thus, the aforementioned logical problem remains unsolved.

⁶⁰ Insole, “Why John Hick,” 28.

⁶¹ Cf. Insole, “Why John Hick,” 28–29.

⁶² Cf. Insole, “Why John Hick,” 29–30.

5. Experience and Language

Epistemology, which Hick makes one of the pillars of his concept of religious experience, plays a special role in justifying the pluralist hypothesis. In this regard, the British philosopher points to three main positions on the relationship between our experience of the world and the world we are aware of.⁶³

The first position is naive realism. It is based on our natural assumption that the world around us is exactly the way we perceive it. That belief works perfectly well in practice. Over the course of evolution, our senses have evolved to register only those aspects of the environment that we need to be aware of to survive and develop. However, the world we experience is actually only a small part of the whole being discovered by natural science. We hear only a small part of the sound scale – some animals are able to hear sounds above or below our hearing threshold. We also fail to capture most of the chemical differences in our environment. We are simply aware of the form of the world around us that suits our needs as the organisms that we are: formed by our inherited niche, both on a macro and a micro scale.⁶⁴

The opposing position is “idealism,” according to which the world we perceive exists only in *our* minds (or rather, in *my* mind, since others are also part of the world I perceive). The sophist Gorgias (c. 480–385 BC) is considered the founder of that view. Of a similar opinion, but without a solipsistic conclusion, was George Berkeley (1685–1753). That Anglican bishop and scholar claimed that there was a God, independent of our mind, who imposed our perceptions on us, guaranteeing their continuity and coherence at the same time. Since those perceptions are ordered, we call them the order of nature⁶⁵.

The third position, advocated by Hick, is a middle approach called critical realism⁶⁶. The prominent thinker of the modern era, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), is considered its precursor. The German philosopher affirmed the existence of a reality independent of us (realism), recognizing at the same time that it was not given to us in itself, i.e. outside of experience, but only in such a way that the innate structure of the human mind was capable of showing the influence of that reality on the consciousness of a man, that is, in the form of phenomena (critical realism). In other words, we are not able to know things the way they are. We only know phenomena, i.e. the objects within the field of experience. Things-in-themselves are outside the field of experience, they are not phenomena but, as Kant says, noumena (from Greek νοούμενον, “something that is only conceived, imagined”). Therefore, we are not able to get to know them⁶⁷. Consequently, Kant speaks of a “Copernican revolution,”

63 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 137–140.

64 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 137.

65 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 128; 137–138.

66 Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 138; cf. Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 57–59.

67 Cf. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 307.

to which leads the concept of cognition proposed by him: there is no object without a subject since the subject is the condition of its cognition.⁶⁸ To put it differently, the object is “constructed” or “constituted” (Edmund Husserl) by the subject from the impressions that come from it. According to Hick, that view is confirmed by modern sciences, especially cognitive psychology and sociology of knowledge, as well as quantum physics.⁶⁹ However, the basis of that idea was expressed centuries earlier by Thomas Aquinas in his statement: “The things known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”⁷⁰

Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal world and the world of noumena is of a philosophical nature; however, formally, it is strikingly reminiscent of Neoplatonic apophaticism (Plotinus, Proclus, Damascius), according to which an absolute principle cannot be the subject of knowledge.⁷¹ It is therefore not surprising that Hick makes the above one of the basic assumptions of his concept of religious experience. The British philosopher says directly: “the Transcendent is the noumenal reality of which the humanly thought and experienced objects of devotion are the phenomenal manifestations.”⁷² Therefore “the different [religious; KK] traditions are not reporting experiences of the Real in itself, but of its different manifestations within human consciousness.”⁷³ Elsewhere, Hick says that the various divine personages and the various impersonal manifestations of the *sacrum* are „different transformations of the impact upon us of the ultimately Real,”⁷⁴ meaning that “impact” is not to be understood in the literal sense (one body comes into contact with another one and thus affects it) but that there is an “aspect” within us which is “in tune” with the Transcendent. That aspect is like the image of God within us; or the “divine spark” – mentioned by Meister Eckhart; or the atman that we all are in our deepest nature; or the universal nature of Buddha within us.⁷⁵ It is that aspect of our being that is affected by the Real to the extent that we are open to that reality.

Therefore, Ultimate Reality, being itself beyond the reach of conscious human experience, does not fit into any systems of concepts within which we are capable of thinking. In a key passage on that issue, Hick states: “It follows from this distinction

⁶⁸ Cf. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B XVI–XVII.

⁶⁹ Nadeau – Kafatos, *The Non-Local Universe*, 41: “In quantum physics, observational conditions and results are such that we cannot presume a categorical distinction between the observer and the observing apparatus, or between the mind of the physicist and the results of physical experiments. The measuring apparatus and the existence of an observer are essential aspects of the act of observation.”

⁷⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 2: “Cognita sunt in cognoscente secundum modum cognoscentis.” Hick quotes that statement of Thomas Aquinas very often, e.g., Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 240–241; Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 163; Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 69.

⁷¹ E.g., Damascius, *Dubitaciones et solutiones* 7 (Ruelle, I, 11): “We prove our ignorance and the impossibility of talking about it.” As cited in: Hadot, *Filozofia*, 246.

⁷² Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 171.

⁷³ Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 171.

⁷⁴ Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 66.

⁷⁵ Cf. Hick, *The Fifth Dimension*, 67.

between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its personae and impersonae. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperiencable ground of that realm.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the British philosopher argues that the Real is the primal basis and source of the properties that *actually* apply to the *manifestations* of the ineffable Transcendent Reality, to the personal and non-personal „absolutes” that are the particular objects of worship, meditation, and mystical experience. Those objects are not fiction or pure human projection but are *authentic* manifestations of the Transcendent both inside and outside of us, deep within our being and within the religious communities where which they are worshipped.⁷⁷

Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, maintained in the presented form, aroused many controversies among both philosophers and theologians. While there is a general agreement on the postulate of the existence of one Ultimate Reality, the question of its nature turns out to be a considerable problem.⁷⁸ Kenneth Surin, for example, sees a serious difficulty in any attempt to formulate a trans-religious definition of God. In his opinion, the elimination of confessional elements in such an approach poses a threat of distortion of fundamental religious ideas⁷⁹. In turn, Harold A. Netland asks: “Given Hick's contention that the Real *an sich* transcends even distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong [...], what sense does it make to speak of an ethical criterion for distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate dispositional responses to the Real?”⁸⁰

However, interpreting religious experience based on Kant's distinction „noumenon” – „phenomenon” leads primarily to considerable theoretical-cognitive difficulties. As Armin Kreiner notes, the very distinction between the object „a” and its experience as „ φ ” may be meaningful; however, how does one know that $a = \varphi$ (in the sense: „a” is the *authentic* experience of „ φ ”)? The answer may be: if there are no rational reasons to question the validity of that equation, it can be assumed that indeed $a = \varphi$. We are also entitled to assume that someone else sees „a” as „ δ .” If there is no reason to doubt the veracity of that person's experience of „a” as „ δ ,” in that case, $a = \delta$. However, it is not true that $a = \varphi$ and $a = \delta$. The truth of a sentence is something other than a rational belief in its truth, hence there may be mutually exclusive beliefs that will be the subject of rational belief. However, as long as the contents of

76 Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 246; cf. Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 169.

77 Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 247.

78 Kondrat, *Racjonalność*, 271–272.

79 Surin, “Revelation,” 340.

80 Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 227.

those beliefs contradict each other, they cannot be true at the same time.⁸¹ As a result, the pluralistic hypothesis promoted by Hick – that the same noumenal reality corresponds to different experiences of Transcendent Reality – separates the noumenon (“God in himself”) from the phenomenon (“God for me”) so much that it is impossible to ultimately verify whether a given religious experience is really a “dialogue with reality” (Richard Schaeffler) or merely a projection.⁸² Hence the critical questions: How can “a” be *authentically* experienced as „φ” when „a in itself” is not „φ”? How can the interpretation of „a” as „φ” become a catalyst for salvific action consisting in the transformation of self-centered existence (*self-centredness*) into God’s reality-centered existence (*Reality-centredness*) if „a in itself” is not the same as „φ”? According to Kreiner, the main epistemological problem that the pluralistic hypothesis must face is directly related to the mysterious nature of the Ultimate Reality. „The more radically and consistently the ineffability of the incomprehensibility of the Transcendent is emphasised, the more convincing the pluralistic hypothesis developed by Hick will appear. And vice versa – the more optimistic the cognitive possibilities (as opposed to the possibility of experience) of the human spirit are assessed in relation to God’s reality, the less credible the aforementioned hypothesis will seem.”⁸³

6. The Nature of Transcendence

The dispute over the limits of negation is in fact a dispute over the nature of Transcendence. As mentioned, in Christianity, apophatic theology is part of a broader project, a part of which is also cataphatic theology. The indispensability of positive theology results, among other things, from the need to preserve semantic rules. For if we say that the object of religious reference is an incomprehensible and ineffable Mystery, we must first know what kind of reality we are talking about to be able to attribute such properties to it. As Peter Byrne aptly observes: “We know enough to know we cannot comprehend the transcendent.”⁸⁴ Therefore, the Ultimate Reality that religions speak of cannot be an absolutely “unknowable X,” some arbitrary “something” to which such properties as “unknowability,” “indescribability” or “ineffability” are randomly assigned. Otherwise, negative theology will necessarily lead to religious nihilism or even atheism.⁸⁵ Especially from the perspective of faith, the word “God” is not just a nameless cipher of infinite Transcendence, but the One who can be called by name, to whom one can say, “*Elohejnu*

⁸¹ Kreiner, “Philosophische Probleme,” 128.

⁸² Kreiner, “Philosophische Probleme,” 129.

⁸³ Kreiner, “Philosophische Probleme,” 131.

⁸⁴ Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism*, 141.

⁸⁵ Scheler, *Problemy religii*, 108.

we-Elohej-abothejnu” – „Thou, our God and God of our fathers.” Thus, whoever believes is aware of what and who they believe in.⁸⁶

From the biblical perspective, God’s transcendence is related to His immanence. The theology of the chosen people is not speculative in nature, but it was born from the experience of God present in their midst and acting in their history. The Hebrews experienced God’s immanence and at the same time, as part of that experience, discovered that God is transcendent, i.e. completely different from the order in which He acts. God’s otherness in relation to the creation is indicated primarily by His names: El Elyôn (“God Most High”), El Olam (“Everlasting God”), El Shaddai (“God Almighty”), Abir (“Mighty One”), Adônai (“Lord”), Yahweh Sabaoth (“Lord of Hosts”). Especially as YHWH (“I am he who is” or “I am the one who exists”⁸⁷), God remains a “mystery” – a “Wholly Other.”⁸⁸ On the other hand, the names indicate God’s presence and activity in the world. This is also the essential difference between the God of the Bible and the God of Greek philosophy. For the Greeks, God can abide in his transcendent nature, and thus in His true divinity, if He remains outside finite reality and is inaccessible to it. Consequently, the God of philosophy does not know that something else exists, and therefore never acts in the cosmos (Aristotle), or only enters into a relationship with it through the mediation of lower beings – Demiurge, Nous or Logos (Platonism) – thus protecting His transcendence. This Greek way of looking at transcendence never entered the Hebrew understanding of God, precisely because the Israelites’ understanding of God’s otherness was born out of the experience of His real presence among them, His action in time and history.⁸⁹

Nevertheless, the relationship of God’s immanence to transcendence (and vice versa) is not arbitrary. As Thomas G. Weinandy aptly notes: “From within biblical revelation then, the immanence of God takes epistemological precedence. It is only because God first revealed himself within the created order, within time and history, that he came to be known as someone who, in some sense, is transcendent.”⁹⁰ In turn, ontic precedence falls to the transcendence of God: “God revealed himself within time and history, and thus came to be known, only because he is the kind of God he is, that is, as one who is transcendent, and yet, capable of acting within the historical lives of persons and nations.”⁹¹ The nature of God’s immanence is

⁸⁶ Cf. Wendel, *Gott*, 93.

⁸⁷ Samuel Terrien (*The Elusive Presence*, 119) prefers another translation of God’s name: “I shall be whoever I shall be” – and formulates a conclusion: “According to this interpretation, the name indeed carries the connotation of divine presence, but it also confers upon this presence a quality of elusiveness. The God of biblical faith, even in the midst of a theophany, is at once *Deus revelatus atque absconditus*. He is known as unknown.”

⁸⁸ On the biblical theology of God’s names, see Feldmeier – Spieckermann, *Der Gott der Lebendigen*, 17–52.

⁸⁹ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 44.

⁹⁰ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 42.

⁹¹ Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 42.

therefore dependent on the nature of God's transcendence, which the Hebrew people came to know through God's presence and activity in the world. This statement not only rules out radical apophaticism, but also guarantees the unity of the object of religious reference. "While there is an epistemological priority in the manner in which God is known and an ontological priority in the manner in which God is, and so can be known, the God who is transcendent is the same God who is immanent and vice-versa."⁹²

Ultimately, as Dionysius the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas teach, the way to God must be threefold: the way of causality (*via causalitatis*), the way of negation (*via negativa*) and the way of eminence (*via eminentiae*). If we grant God ontological precedence as the Ultimate Reality, then the direct conclusions that follow from this run along *via negativa*. This is because the First Cause, which creation theology identifies with the God of faith, must be completely different from everything else: it must be transcendent to all the features of the world that testify to metaphysical limitations and imperfections. Therefore, *via causalitas* (which is the starting point of theological reflection, as it allows us to establish the ontological relationship between God and the world) leads directly to *via negativa* as the negation of everything that is incompatible with God as First Cause and Pure Act. However, negative judgments about God are made on the basis of previous positive claims about God's metaphysical primacy. This means that *via negativa* logically presupposes the minimal positive knowledge required by *via causalitas*; otherwise, the negation process would be incoherent, since there would be no basis for determining what must be negated about God.⁹³

From the point of view of Christian theology, the impassable boundary of apophaticism is Christology. This is because the essence of the Christian confession of faith in Jesus as Christ is contained in the conviction that in Him – in His words and deeds – God *himself* has given himself to man as absolute, irrevocable and imperishable love (ἀγάπη). Jesus – in all the glory of His personal being – was actually (and not just symbolically or metaphorically) the „place” of the historically concretized presence of God-Agápē. If, therefore, in Christ God has revealed himself to man, then negation cannot be the last word in theology. For negation is impossible to love – *Negationes non summe amamus*.⁹⁴ This, of course, does not mean that God's self-revelation in Christ makes God henceforth cease to be a „hidden God” (*Deus absconditus*). Even the highest theophany, which is the Incarnation of the Word, cannot

⁹² Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 42. Weinandy emphasizes that the Hebrews believed that the God they experienced, who entered into a relationship with them and acted in their midst, was God as He truly is, not some stripped-down revelation tailored to human capabilities. This statement is radically different from the one made by Hick as part of his interpretation of religious pluralism.

⁹³ Shanley, *The Thomist Tradition*, 47.

⁹⁴ Ioannis Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, dist. III, pars I, q. 2, a. 10: „Negationes etiam tantum, non summe amamus.”

deprive God of His mystery. In this sense, negative theology still retains its value; however, its place, function and reach within the Christian doctrine of God remain an open question.⁹⁵

7. Toward a Trinitarian Interpretation of Religious Pluralism

It seems that a good “base theory” for an adequate interpretation of religious pluralism is Trinitarian theology.⁹⁶ Not only does it allow for the integration of the various images and concepts of Ultimate Reality present in different religions, but it additionally takes into account the tension that exists between positive (cataphatic) theology and negative (apophatic) theology. This does not mean, of course, that all religions feature some kind of “pre-phenomenon” of Trinitarian faith through which they could achieve a kind of supra-religious unity. The point is merely that different images and concepts of God, as well as the way of experiencing the relationship with Him, are given different forms depending on which of the Persons of the Trinity they are specifically oriented towards. It seems that such different understandings and approaches to the mystery of God have surprising counterparts in the great religions of the world.⁹⁷ Following this pattern, one can distinguish three basic types of religious experience and the corresponding concepts of God or Ultimate Reality.⁹⁸

The first type of religious experience portrays God as an unfathomable mystery, eluding human cognition and conceptualization. God is “Wholly Other,” infinite, “nameless.” No one can behold His face. One can even say: God *is not*, He has „no *ex-sistentia*, not even being.”⁹⁹ For since He is the source of all being, He alone cannot be it. In this sense, He is “Nothingness,” “Beyond-Being” – a reality that cannot be defined by any concepts or images, as it transcends all possible categories.

Such an approach is characteristic especially of the so-called apophatic religions, according to which the Ultimate Reality is in such absolute transcendence that it is

⁹⁵ Cf. Kałuża, “Jezus jako obraz Nieprzedstawialnego,” 115–116.

⁹⁶ See Bernhardt, “Trinitätstheologie,” 287–301; Bernhardt, *Monotheismus und Trinität*, 290–322; Kałuża, “Teologia trynitarna,” 277–312.

⁹⁷ Raimon Panikkar (*Das Göttliche in Allem*, 55) talks of “homeomorphic equivalencies” that determine the similarities between religions. Of course, indicating the existence of such similarities or analogies calls for more detailed analyses based on empirical material (holy books, works of theologians and religious thinkers, the world of symbols, rituals, liturgies, etc.), which could confirm the thesis promoted here. This study does not have the space for such analyses. It is worth adding that the traditionally practiced theology of religion is today increasingly being supplanted by so-called comparative theology which, by definition, takes into account the results of religious studies. See Kałuża, “Czy teologia komparatywna zastąpi teologię religii?,” 319–358.

⁹⁸ See Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott*, 506–511; Kessler, “Religiöse Grunderfahrungen,” 28–51; Kałuża, “Między ekskluzywizmem a pluralizmem,” 32–37.

⁹⁹ Panikkar, *Trinität*, 74.

only possible to speak of it in a negative form. Here one can point to the Buddhist experience of nirvana, as well as the special mystical experience present in many of the world's religions, where the last word about God is reverent silence. Trinitarian theology points here to the mystery of the *Father*. The Father is not only the infinitely remote primordial source of all creatures but also the Trinitarian divine being. He is „the incomprehensible, bottomless mystery of self-giving.”¹⁰⁰ It is in this sense that He is „silence.”

The second type of religious experience captures God as a (transcendent) Person, emerging from the abyss of silence and speaking to man. God is someone “with whom it is possible to speak, engage in a dialog, establish a connection [...]; He is the Divine ‘You’ who is in relation, or better: He is a relation to man and one of the poles of his entire existence.”¹⁰¹ God acts and creates; through Him, everything happened; in Him, all things have their beginning. Above all, however, He is the God of revelation, the God who can be called by name.

This way of understanding Ultimate Reality is characteristic of theism, and its differing realizations can be found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. What is important here is the opportunity to establish a “personal relationship” with God (e.g. through prayer) and to walk the path He has set for us. Trinitarian theology points here to the Person of the Son.¹⁰²

The third type of religious experience captures God as “the interior of all being.”¹⁰³ The word “interior” here means the innermost whole, in which God and the cosmos – thus everything – form a unity. In this context, Raimon Panikkar speaks of “cosmotheandric” reality, which he sees, among other things, in the experience of *advaita* (nonduality) and in the hymnal formula *saccidānanda*, which describes the essence of Brahman.¹⁰⁴ From the point of view of Trinitarian theology, it is possible to say: “God is the deep, inner heart of all being, that ‘point’ where all particularisms, differences and ‘self-existences’ are overcome and made familiar.”¹⁰⁵ This image of Ultimate Reality is mainly inherent in Far Eastern religions. In the West, we find it in some strands of mysticism, especially where the main role is not so much a dialogue with God, but a “consciousness” of immersion in the immeasurable depths of the Absolute, and even losing oneself in it (e.g. Meister Eckhart).

Christian Trinitarian theology points here to the mystery of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who creates the bond between the Persons of the Trinity and creation. In Him all differences become one. If the Father is the source and the Son is the stream flowing from Him, then the Spirit is “the ultimate end, the measureless

¹⁰⁰ Greshake, *Wierzę w Boga Trójjedynego*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott*, 508.

¹⁰² Greshake, *Wierzę w Boga Trójjedynego*, 92–93.

¹⁰³ Panikkar, *Trinität*, 88.

¹⁰⁴ See Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, 54–77.

¹⁰⁵ Greshake, *Wierzę w Boga Trójjedynego*, 93.

ocean in which the river of divine life reaches its full perfection, quietyens and completes itself [...]. There can be no ‘personal relationship’ to the Spirit [...].”¹⁰⁶ Entering the path of the Spirit, we reach the extra-ontic foundation of all things. Therefore, contemplation *in* the Spirit is devoid of all intellectual content – it is beyond all categories.

Thus understood, the model of the Trinitarian interpretation of religious pluralism undoubtedly has its advantages. First and foremost, it helps integrate the different images and concepts of Ultimate Reality present in the world’s various religions. The inclusion of negative theology, which is integral to this model (mainly within the first and third types of religious experience), further demonstrates that non-personal concepts of the Absolute characteristic of the so-called apophatic religions (some strands of Hinduism, early Buddhism, Taoism and others) need not be regarded as contradictory to the personal concepts inherent in the so-called prophetic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). Moreover, it turns out that also within prophetic traditions, such as Christianity, one can find non-personal concepts of Ultimate Reality (e.g. Meister Eckhart) that do not necessarily conflict with the personal concept that dominates the tradition. A similar phenomenon can be observed in some apophatic traditions, such as Buddhism, which also developed personal forms of religious reference later in its development (e.g. amidism). Perry Schmidt-Leukel, who has analyzed this phenomenon in detail, has proposed a fractal concept for interpreting religious pluralism in this context. At its center is the belief that typological distinctions, by which differences between religions are defined, are often found in modified form within the same religious tradition. Religions are thus neither the same nor radically different; rather, they are similar precisely in their internal differentiation.¹⁰⁷ This is undoubtedly an original and interesting way of looking at the diversity of religions, but nevertheless, in the opinion of the author, it is not sufficient to provide a theologically legitimate (and not just formally adequate) explanation of the similarities between religions. The Trinitarian perspective seems more promising here, especially since it takes into account the Christian interpretation of Ultimate Reality, thus avoiding the creation of a kind of “global theology,” unrelated to any particular religious tradition.¹⁰⁸

More broadly, the model for interpreting religious pluralism proposed here fits into the paradigm of open inclusivism. It makes it possible, on the one hand, to talk about the true knowledge of God/Ultimate Reality in non-Christian religions, and, on the other hand, provides an opportunity to positively evaluate these religions against the backdrop of a single, albeit internally diverse and multifaceted salvation history. The differences between religions are not merely the expression of cultural

¹⁰⁶ Panikkar, *Trinität*, 92–93.

¹⁰⁷ Schmidt-Leukel, “Eine fraktale Interpretation,” 134–150.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Hick, “Straightening the Record,” 190.

differences and the result of a more or less arbitrary interpretation of always already conditioned religious experience, whose “object” (God, the Absolute, the Real) in itself is unknowable and indescribable, but have their origin in God himself, who “at many times and in various ways” (Heb 1:1) spoke to man, revealing himself and His saving intentions to him. While such an understanding of plurality and diversity is not immune to the temptation of syncretism and relativism, in principle it provides a good foundation for developing an open yet deeply Christian hermeneutics of religious pluralism.

Conclusions

Different religions have different concepts of Ultimate Reality. In some of them, it is understood personally as YHWH, God or Allah, in others non-personally as Brahman, Nirvana or Tao (and many other examples). This diversity often leads to conflicting religious beliefs. This conflict is revealed not only in the realm of objective belief, which concerns the meaning of religious language and the basic structure and ways of justifying religious claims, but also in the realm of subjective belief, which concerns the situations in which individuals make a decision about their choice of a particular religion. This fact can also be an obstacle to interreligious dialogue and, in extreme cases, become the cause of doctrinal conflicts. Therefore, an increasing number of theologians and philosophers of religion raise the question of the theoretical possibility of partially overcoming the conflict of religious beliefs by formulating appropriate assumptions, theses, claims and postulates that make it possible, on the one hand, to understand the essence and genesis of religious pluralism, and on the other hand, to build a theoretical basis for dialogue and exchange of spiritual experiences between religions.

One such proposal is the pluralistic theology of religion. Its representatives are convinced that the plurality of religions is the result of different human reactions to one and the same Transcendent Reality. This reality, in itself, is beyond the reach of human conceptual systems and categories, and can therefore be understood and interpreted differently. Consequently, concepts such as God, YHWH, Allah, Brahman, Vishnu, Krishna, Sunyata, do not refer to different ultimate realities but express human experiences and representations of the Real. According to the “pluralists,” all of them (personal and non-personal) are equally important and equivalent, as long as they result from the authentic attitude of believers towards the Real. Among the arguments to justify this view of religions, a special place is given to negative theology. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the “founding fathers” of Christian negative theology and its contemporary followers in the field of pluralistic theology of religion. For Dionysius the Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas, it was

clear that apophatic theology was part of a broader project that included cataphatic theology, while the goal of transcending language was the glorification of God and mystical union with Him. Meanwhile, “pluralists” so separate God’s transcendence (“God in himself”; νοούμενον) from God’s immanence (“God for us”; φαινόμενον) that they are forced to reject any possibility of knowing God as He really *is*. In this perspective, speaking of divine revelation as *self-revelation* (in the sense of *autorevelatio et autodonatio*) becomes essentially impossible. Hick makes no reference at all to the concept of revelation, which presupposes the ability of Ultimate Reality to act intentionally (and thus its *de facto* personal character). Instead, he seeks to justify „that there is an inbuilt human capacity to be aware of the universal presence of the Transcendent, in virtue of its immanence within our own nature [...] which is, however, always manifested in particular culturally and historically conditioned ways.”¹⁰⁹ As a result, the various religious traditions do not describe the experiences of the Real in itself, but its various manifestations in human consciousness.¹¹⁰

From the point of view of Christian theology, the impassable boundary of apophaticism is Christology. This is because the essence of Christian belief in Jesus *as* Christ is contained in the conviction that in Him – in His life, death and resurrection – God *himself* has given himself to man as unconditional, irrevocable and imperishable love. Consequently, Jesus is not just a „symbol of God” (Roger Haight), but the „place” (sacrament) of his real *self-giving* to man. With all this in mind, the article proposed a different direction for interpreting religious pluralism. Its basis is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Importantly, Trinitarian dogma also takes into account the mysterious nature of the Ultimate Reality, but apophaticism is here integrated into the broader framework of revelation theology, so that God’s transcendence is not separated from His immanence. Adopting this kind of bipolarity is necessary to maintain the integrity of Christology, without which one cannot talk of the uniqueness of Christianity as a fully revealed and salvific religion.

Contemporary theology of religion is familiar with various models of Trinitarian interpretation of religious pluralism.¹¹¹ The model presented here can be called the integrative model. It is based on the assumption that it is possible to demonstrate certain similarities between the properties of the individual Persons of the Trinity and various ideas and concepts of Ultimate Reality found in different religions. Such a synthesis does not necessarily have to lead to a syncretic combination of different images of God or paths to God, but can be seen as an invitation to see the “absolute” and the “unconditional” in the perspective of the three dimensions that are revealed in every authentic religious experience. This is possible because, according to the Christian faith, God *himself* has appeared in this way and allowed himself to be

¹⁰⁹ Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 164.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, 171.

¹¹¹ Kałuża, “Teologia trynitarna,” 281.

experienced. Consequently, interreligious dialogue need not be limited to showing differences between religions as having their justification in Trinitarian differences, but it can lead to the discovery of the mutual perichoresis of the three fundamental images of God/Ultimate Reality to which religions bear witness, and provide encouragement to realise them within one's own spiritual and religious tradition.

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