

# *Perspectives of the philosophy of Religion*

*“Don’t worry, you will not lose the religion of your fathers. Pure reason does not undermine religion, but rather its distortions. You will lose your prejudices and keep religion. The more you approach it in the light of reason, the more it will have a lasting and solid foundation in the future. Since intellect is compatible with religion, it will become holy and a need of mankind. But if you go into conflict with it, posterity more wisely – thanks to its gradual progress, which with all your usurpatory power you are unable to hinder – will one day look at your names with the same contempt with which today it dubs the names of the Torquemada, the Embser and all the ‘Pfaffen’ who, once upon a time, exercised your role.”<sup>1</sup>*

*It is 1788, in the aftermath of the infamous ‘Edict of Religion’ of the Prussian Minister of Culture, Johann Christoph von Wöllner – which, as is well known, was destined to put a not exactly intrepid Immanuel Kant in ambush – when Andreas Riem publishes his polemical little writing ‘Über Aufklärung,’ now available in a valuable Italian version, edited by Hagar Spano.<sup>2</sup> In it, Riem – who the year before, six years after the death of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, had published, under the pseudonym Christoph August Schmidt, a review, from the ‘Nachlaß’ of the Saxon philosopher and playwright of as yet unpublished fragments of Hermann Samuel*

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<sup>1</sup> A. RIEM, *Über Aufklärung. Ob sie dem Staate – der Religion – oder überhaupt gefährlich sey, oder seyn könne? Ein Wort zur Beherzigung für Regenten, Staatsmänner und Priester*, Berlin 1788, 19–20.

<sup>2</sup> ID., *Sull’illuminismo. Se sia, o possa divenire, pericoloso per lo Stato, per la religione o in generale. Una parola per governanti, uomini politici e preti, di cui far tesoro*, edited by H. SPANO, Preface by D. KEMPER, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2020

Reimarus –<sup>3</sup> offers, in the peculiar form of a ‘Streitschrift,’ a one-off polemic writing, a sort of ‘Plädoyer,’ a defensive speech in favour of the prerogatives of the Enlightenment against all the treacherous attacks against it. It is therefore, in all respects, a chapter of that which, with particular reference to the orientalist and historical-critical exegete Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, has been effectively defined as the “Forgotten Enlightenment,”<sup>4</sup> a meta-reflection of the Enlightenment on itself (‘Aufklärung über Aufklärung’), on the values and limits of a historical climate, which, at the same time, aspires to present itself as a category of the spirit.

Hence the vibrant emphasis and the passionate appeal for a ‘Religion nach der Aufklärung,’ a ‘religion according to the Enlightenment,’ at the centre of which to place, in the words of Dilthey, an ‘idealism of freedom’ based on the famous hermeneutic distinction, brought to honour by Lessing, but, on closer inspection, also present in Voltaire’s ‘Catechism of the Gardener,’ within the ‘religion of Christ.’ In other words, the religion that Jesus Christ, as a man, recognised and professed, and that every woman and every man can, generally speaking, have in common with Him, and the ‘Christian religion,’ that is, the religion that accepts, as dogmatic truth, that Jesus was more than just a man. Indeed, he was Christ, which therefore makes Him, in the light of this inalienable premise, the object of His own veneration.

The methodological scope of this hermeneutic distinction can indeed be extended beyond the confines of Christianity and applied to every founder of religion.<sup>5</sup>

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The relationship of religion with the Enlightenment (intended, therefore, as a category of the spirit) has no choice but to present itself as an essentially open problem. On the one

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. C.A. SCHMIDT (ed.), *Übrige noch ungedruckte Werke des Wolfenbüttischen Fragmentisten. Ein Nachlaß von Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, reprint Ausgabe 1787, Wentworth Press, Marrickville NSW 2018, in which we see the introduction by Fausto Parente to H.S. REIMARUS, *I frammenti dell’Anonimo di Wolfenbüttel pubblicati da G.E. Lessing*, edited by F. PARENTE, Bibliopolis, Naples 1977, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. G. D’ALESSANDRO, *L’illuminismo dimenticato. Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827) e il suo tempo*, Liguori, Naples 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. G. GHIA, *Destino dell’uomo e religione secondo l’illuminismo*, Le Lettere, Florence 2020.

hand, it is obviously a question of dealing historiographically with the distrust of the Enlightenment towards dogmatically established and institutionalised religion, often seen as one of the main architects of man's persistence in his guilty 'state of minority'.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, however, it is a question of dealing historiographically with the mistrust of the dogmatically established and institutionalised religion towards a climate of thought that seems, not without 'Pelagian' arrogance, to want to rely solely on human strength.<sup>7</sup>

In reality, it is a question, (as is evident), of a mutual distrust that has seen – and still sees – many attempts to get closer; among them all, perhaps the most paradigmatic example remains that of the relationship, albeit at a distance, between Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm von Humboldt.<sup>8</sup> It is in fact to the latter that, in all probability, the former thinks of the prototype of the "Gebildeten unter den Verächtern der Religion" to which, as we know, his famous 'Discourses' of 1799 are addressed; a certain von Humboldt, however, who – even if, in his own sonnet of 1815, confessed, – and not without a degree of satisfaction, with his own "gewählte Einsamkeit" ("chosen solitude"), that he was "ein armer heidnischer Mann Der die Kirchen nicht leiden kann" ("A poor pagan man who cannot suffer the Churches") – still had to recognise the presence in himself of the "nostalgia for something unattainable," the attraction towards an "Infinity that can never be possessed and grasped."<sup>9</sup> He was thereby adhering to that conception of the 'Unbegreiflichkeit Gottes' (inconceivability, or elusiveness, of God) which is, as is well known, one of the philosophical-religious 'topoi' of the 'Goethezeit.' Even more so, however, the unsuspected closeness between Schleiermacher and Humboldt in many respects is revealed when the latter, in the heart of a discussion on the relationship between religion and poetry, affirms that "all the great tragedies of antiquity and modern age are based

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. V. MATHIEU, *L'idea dell'Illuminismo in Kant e in Rosmini*, in P. PELLEGRINO (ed.), *Rosmini e l'Illuminismo. Atti del XXI Corso della «Cattedra Rosmini»*, Sodalitas-Spes, Stresa-Milazzo 1988, pp. 81-92.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. E. TROELTSCH, *Il significato della storicità di Gesù per la fede*, in ID., *Religione Storia Metafisica*, edited by S. SORRENTINO, Libreria Dante & Descartes, Naples 1997, pp. 347-385.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. G. MORETTO, *Umanità e religione tra Schleiermacher e Wilhelm von Humboldt*, in ID., *Filosofia e religione nell'età di Goethe*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1997, pp. 155-193.

<sup>9</sup> W. V. HUMBOLDT, *Briefe an Johanna Motherby*, Brockhaus, Leipzig 1893, p. 54.

on the conception of the dependence of the finite man on an infinite power.”<sup>10</sup> He is thus echoing the notion of the ‘*schlechthinnige Abhängigkeit*’ (‘absolute dependence’) rendered by the Schleiermacher of the ‘*Glaubenslehre*,’ the original reason for the birth of religion.<sup>11</sup>

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Now, as we know, the Schleiermacherian notion of ‘absolute dependence’ was destined to be met with both simple and banal irony, (with the help of the famous ‘*argumentum e cane*’) of Hegel’s ‘*Vorrede*’ to Hinrichs’ *Philosophy of Religion*, all centred on the antithesis between the ‘animal’ tapping of the divine, typical of the “natural man,” and the ‘pneumatic’ tapping of revelation, typical instead of the “spiritual man.”<sup>12</sup> Such a distinction, due to its ideal-typical universality, was also evidently aimed at affirming itself as a hermeneutic key to understanding the general approach given each time to the problem of a philosophy of religion: in other words, must the philosophy of religion examine the possibilities of an objective knowability of the divine, that is, to produce knowledge, preceding (as in the case of Thomas Aquinas) or surpassing (as in the case of Hegel) theology? Or, by following the seductions of negative theology, must it start from the assumption of the unknowability and ‘elusiveness’ of the idea of God and be ready to follow the germination of intuition and the religious sense in the depths of the individual soul (this, for example, is the case of those who are religious a priori and the

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<sup>10</sup> ID., *Über das Verhältnis der Religion und der Poesie zu der sittlichen Bildung*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. v. C. BRANDES, Ausgabe der Preußischer Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin 1841-52, Bd. VII, p. 658.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. G. SCHOLTZ, *Religione come dipendenza. La genesi di un concetto fondamentale della filosofia della religione*, in D. VENTURELLI, R. CELADA BALLANTI, G. CUNICO (eds.), *Etica, Religione e Storia. Studi in memoria di Giovanni Moretto*, Il melangolo, Genoa 2007, pp. 93-114.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. G.W.F. HEGEL, *Preface to Hinrichs’ “Religion in Its Internal Relationship to Systematic Knowledge”*, in *Hegel, Hinrichs, and Schleiermacher on Feeling and Reason in Religion. The Texts of their 1821-22 debate*, edited by E. VON DER LUFT, Mellen Press, Lewiston-New York-Lampeter 1984, p. 122-124.

'liberal religious thought' of those such as Cusano, Spinoza, Lessing, Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher and Troeltsch)?<sup>13</sup> Or, indeed, must we recognise, as decreed by Karl Barth, the anthropomorphic arrogance inherent in the philosophical will to reflect on religion which would replace, for the divine reality presented to us by revelation, an image ('Bild') of God, constructed for our use and consumption, so that instead of the 'Gottesdienst' ('divine service') to which one is introduced by faith, religion would rather introduce a 'Götzendienst' ('idolatrous service')?<sup>14</sup>

Antonio Rosmini, despite the eclectic multiformity of his production, certainly cannot be said to have made an explicit contribution to the foundation of a philosophy of religion, (his being, rather, a Christian philosophy innervated by a pregnant ontological-Trinitarian synthesis). He does, however, represent a symptomatic case of how the three aforementioned tendencies can – although not without encountering aporetic problems – peacefully coexist within a unitary perspective. Rosmini expected the objective knowability of the divine to be capable of producing knowledge, mainly with his great project of "Theosophy" – an unfinished project, and therefore, as such, a real 'Lebenswerk' –; in that very singular essay entitled 'Of the divine in nature,' the Roveretan approached the idea of 'religious a priori,' in other words, the universal recognition, in the ideal being, of something immediately divine, whatever the name (God, JHWH, Allah etc.) with whom such a presentiment of the divine was then, historically, objectified; and finally, in the 'Theodicy,' Rosmini did not fail to emphasise, in this forerunner to Barth, the infinite qualitative distance between man and God, a distance, however, destined not to translate into quietistic fatalism, but to reclaim a *parte hominis*, an inexhaustible concentration of worldly ethical efforts.

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In general, in the aforementioned antithesis between the a priori intuition of the 'natural' man and the knowledge, mediated by revelation, of the 'spiritual' man, one can grasp, and trace, the presence of another, much more radical antithesis: that is, between an approach aimed at seeing in the intuition of the religious a 'prius,' both in the temporal and substantial

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. R. CELADA BALLANTI, *Pensiero religioso liberale. Lineamenti, figure, prospettive*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. K. BARTH, *Church Dogmatics*, I.2, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh/Scotland 1963.

sense, with respect to the historicisations of dogmatics and revealed forms, and an approach that instead places the starting point for any reflection on the divine in the scriptural canonisation and dogmatic of revelation and faith. This is the antithesis synthesised by Karl Jaspers in the famous debate with Bultmann on demythisation, with the conceptual couple 'Liberalität/Orthodoxie': "The dividing element par excellence between 'Liberalität' and orthodoxy concerns one's position on the idea of revelation. Whether God is localised in space and time, just once or in a sequence of acts, manifested here and now directly, represents a faith that fixes God in an objectivity in the world. [...] 'Liberalität' does not believe in such a revelation."<sup>15</sup>

Whatever position one wants to assume in this antithesis, it remains incontrovertible that, due to the multiplicity of problems, perspectives, resolute principles and methods that characterise it, it is very difficult to understand, today, the philosophy of religion as a univocal field. Rather, it presents itself as a 'discipline in fragments,' a terrain of dialectical encounters (and sometimes even clashes) – and, precisely and for this reason, productive.<sup>16</sup>

One can, however, try, by following a fruitful indication by Walter Jaeschke,<sup>17</sup> to focus, 'via negationis', on at least four areas in which the philosophy of religion, 'iuxta naturam suam', does not end, thus highlighting the potentially infinite inexhaustibility of this discipline.

Let us look briefly, at the details of these four areas:

- 1 First of all, the philosophy of religion is not simply a religious philosophy, since it is not based on confessional convictions (therefore it is not 'Christian,' 'Jewish,' 'Islamic' philosophy, etc.), but rather it is that form of questioning philosophy, the object of which is, in fact, religion as a universal dimension.

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<sup>15</sup> K. JASPERS, R. BULTMANN, *Il problema della demitizzazione*, edited by R. CELADA BALANTI, Morcelliana, Brescia 1995, p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. R. SCHAEFFLER, *Phänomenologie der Religion. Grundzüge ihrer Fragestellungen*, Alber Freiburg/München 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. W. JAESCHKE, a.v. «Religionsphilosophie», in J. RITTER, K. GRÜNDER (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Bd. 8, Schwabe, Basel 1992, coll. 748-763.

2 Secondly, the philosophy of religion is not only about a philosophical theology, because its object is not 'God,' even if it were the 'God of the philosophers.' But, if anything, the 'space' from that figure of a (possibly) inhabited God, or indeed, 'religion in itself': "certainly, under certain systematic conditions," as Walter Jaeschke points out, "the philosophy of religion and philosophical theology can come together to the point that the philosophy of religion itself becomes a particular field of philosophical theology – as, for example, in Hegel's system. This, however, is an extreme case that cannot erase the difference in principle that exists between a form of philosophical questioning oriented to the idea of God and one oriented to religion. These two objects are different and from them completely different methodological problems also derive for the two disciplines dedicated to them. Thus, for example, the problem of access to the respective object presents itself, for philosophical theology, in a totally different way from the way in which it presents itself for the philosophy of religion – with all the ensuing consequences."<sup>18</sup> Now, in an era in which, especially in the philosophical-analytical climate, the investigation into the rational plausibility of theism, possibly somewhat purified – under the forms of a renewed rational theology or an equally renewed speculative theism – of any confessional reference, seems to encounter a particularly favourable conjuncture and to herald philosophically relevant and promising developments.<sup>19</sup> There is no doubt that a statement such as this by Jaeschke might arouse more than one objection or perplexity. Nonetheless, it seems to us that what it contains as a warning for a concentration of the philosophy

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<sup>18</sup> W. JAESCHKE, *Filosofia della religione. Una disciplina in frammenti*, in F. GHIA, G. GHIA (eds.), *Pensiero religioso liberale. Temi e prospettive*, «Humanitas» 61 (5-6/2006), pp. 859-875: p. 860. Naturally, Jaeschke's allusion to the Hegelian philosophy of religion as "philosophical theology" is legitimised by the culmination of the evolution of the individual historical religions by the philosopher of Stuttgart in the concept of the Christian God who, in the hypostatic circuminsession of the "immanent trinity," represents to the highest degree what religion in itself is for him, that is, "self-awareness of the spirit" (Selbstbewußtsein des Geistes).

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. A. AGUTI, *Morale e religione. Per una visione teistica*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2021. From the same, see also *Filosofia della religione. Storia, temi, problemi*, La Scuola, Brescia 2014.



of religion on its object, on its 'res', that is, on the 'religious' as such, might usefully be taken into consideration as a 'regulatory idea.'

- 3 Thirdly, the philosophy of religion is not a theology, nor is it exhausted in it, insofar as the latter is not perceived as a peculiar form of philosophical questioning, but rather as a scientific explanation and exposition of the texts, of the doctrinal concept, of the history, of the institutional forms and of the cultic practice of a particular and historical religion, codified in dogmas, rites and liturgies.
- 4 Finally, the philosophy of religion is not merely an empirical science of religions, neither is it intended as a phenomenology of religion, nor as a history of religions, as it differs substantially from them by the very nature of its method: unlike the phenomenology of religion, the philosophy of religion, does not in fact aim at an overall and adequate presentation of the phenomenological framework of the religious. And, unlike the history of religions, neither does it aim at the historiographically consistent description of a religion or, basically, of the totality of religions. The philosophy of religion certainly has the onerous task of taking the knowledge acquired in these ways extremely seriously. However, as a philosophy, it also has the duty to always simultaneously bring out, as an element prior to empirical research, what religion it is, or what its essence is.

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From the picture outlined so far, it appears – we think – with clarity that, even in the face of the perspective multi-vocality of its conformation, the philosophy of religion strongly claims its autonomy, specificity and peculiarity with respect to the various 'special philosophies:' an autonomy that cannot fail to translate into the fruitful. And, indispensable for this autonomy is the intertwining between theory and history, or in the already mentioned irreducible tension between the regulatory (and never constitutive) dimension implicit in a delimitation on the essence of religion and the historical dimension – a practice that cannot fail to move, for the determination of its essence, from the analysis and comparison with the actual and active forms of manifestation of the religious. Hence, the importance not only sociologically relevant, but also and above all philosophically decisive, of highlighting the connection between philosophy of religion and interreligious dialogue, to whose historical-conceptual localisation the 'Focus' of this issue of "Rosmini Studies" is dedicated, collecting, appropriately



reworked and integrated, some of the contributions presented at the conference of the Italian Association of Philosophy of Religion held in Genoa in 2019.

It should be noted that the Italian philosophical panorama represented, especially in the twentieth century, a particularly favourable scenario for the systematisation of the philosophy of religion as an autonomous discipline,<sup>20</sup> as can be seen, even ‘ad oculos,’ by quickly reviewing, and without any pretence of completeness, some of the different paths traced by the various ‘schools’: from the ‘Genoese’ school (Alberto Caracciolo, Giovanni Moretto), characterised by a marked transcendental structure aimed at delineating, through the figure of a ‘religious a priori,’ the traits of a ‘liberal religious thought,’ to the ‘Urbino’ school (Italo Mancini), which opposes the claim of the exhaustiveness of religious philosophy with the foundation of a theological epistemology based on the notion of ‘divine a priori.’ Then there is the ‘Bolognese’ school (Teodorico Moretti Costanzi, Tina Manferdini), which, with accentuated ‘neo-Bonaventurian’ inspiration, emphasises the dialectically fertile field of tension between religion as a universally human phenomenon and the ontologically interpreted Christian faith, while in the Pisan school (Antonio Carlini, Vittorio Sainati) which, starting from a reinterpretation of the inspiring motifs of classical metaphysics, hermeneutically elaborates a ‘critique of theological reason.’ And finally, the ‘Turin’ school (Luigi Pareyson), which proposes a hermeneutic of the religious as an ontology of freedom in the face of the scandal of evil and suffering, to the ‘Roman’ school (Enrico Castelli, Marco Maria Olivetti), which, starting from an existentialistic and phenomenological analysis, endeavours to delineate the incoercible historical value of the philosophy of religion as a discipline in its own right.

In conclusion, one cannot fail to notice how the multi-perspective value of the various and individual philosophical approaches to the problem of the religious therefore goes hand in hand with the multi-perspectivism of values and culture that increasingly, and eminently connotes, the contemporary ‘society of disenchantment.’<sup>21</sup> In fact, as Gunter Scholtz rightly pointed out, “the modern sciences of the spirit are in no way separable from a pluralistic culture and from the awareness of the multiformity of cultures. On the contrary, they have their

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<sup>20</sup> Cfr. O. BRINO, *Autocoscienza e invocazione. Confronti filosofico-religiosi nell’Italia del Novecento*, Trento University, Trento 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. F.W. GRAF, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter. Religion in der modernen Kultur*, Beck, Munich 2007<sup>2</sup>.

*foundation in this and require such pluralism. And this is not to their detriment, but indeed, to their merit: they work against the obtuseness of those who believe that one cannot or should not cross the boundaries of their own conceptual modalities. The comparison and contrast with what is extraneous does not imply in the first instance the relativisation of the current norms, but also follows an ethical norm. And norms are implicit in the recognition of pluralism. In no way does pluralism mean ‘anything goes’.”<sup>22</sup>*

(f.g.)

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<sup>22</sup> G. SCHOLTZ, *Zwischen Wissenschaftsanspruch und Orientierungsbedürfnis. Zu Grundlage und Wandel der Geisteswissenschaften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, pp. 11-12.