

# "VISNU THE GREATER" AND "VISNU THE SMALLER", OR ON THE CONTINUED WIDENING OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION'S ZONE

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It was in 1800 when Immanuel Berger published his *History of Philosophy of Religion, or Teachings and Opinions of the Most Original Thinkers of All Times of God and Religion, Historically Expounded*, which turned to become the first attempt at historical exposition of philosophy of religion in history of philosophy. The author was only a beginner in Evangelical theology, and now only a few German experts are acquainted with his work, but his work has become a very important hall-mark. It is true that in 1772 the Austrian Jesuit Sigmund von Storchenau introduced the term *philosophy of religion* (in German) into philosophical circulation and in 1774 another member of the same Society of Jesus, François Para du Phanjas, reintroduced it (in French) in their books under this title<sup>1</sup>, and then the term under discussion was “handicapped” and worked on by the Kantians (beginning with Karl Reinhold and up to earlier Fichte) but when a history of some discipline is being published it means already its starting recognition in a competent community. But this very fact, however significant on its own, was not an only remarkable trait of Berger’s book. In his introduction he expressed strong reluctance to define his subject because of his misgivings about immediate criticisms from those of different opinions of its content, inasmuch as there was no consensus on it among the main authorities<sup>2</sup>. It is only natural that such a consensus is still

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1 For more details see: Vladimir K. Shokhin, “The Pioneering Appearances of Philosophy of Religion in Europe: François Para du Phanjas on the Nature of Religion”, *Open Theology* 1, no. 1 (2015).

2 Immanuel Berger, *Geschichte der Religionsphilosophie, oder Lehren und Meinungen der originellsten Denker aller Zeiten. Über Gott und Religion: Historisch dargestellt*. (Verlag der Langischen Buchhandlung, 1800), II.

less obtainable more than two hundred years after Berger's pioneering book when innumerable authorities have worked on the field and hold to different understandings of its subject matter. Especially as there are no legitimate reasons to "foul out" main players.

Indeed, as all other designations of philosophies of *X* (I call them "philosophies of the genitive case"), like philosophy of science, philosophy of history, philosophy of law, philosophy of education and so on, "philosophy of religion" can be construed from the grammatical point of view in three ways, i.e. as the cases of *genitivus subjectivus*, *genitivus objectivus* and of both. My way of dividing of this meanings, as Kirill Karpov correctly interprets me, is to differ between (1) philosophy-*in*-religion, (2) philosophy-*on*-religion and (3) the eclectic model. I stress it again that from the linguistic point all these interpretations are legal and no one has right to say that any of them is wrong, and the same would be the case also with other philosophies of *X*. We can study science, art, education etc. as multidimensional phenomena of human culture, with their languages, evolution and developments, can (and even ought) give them definitions or at least an account why these definitions cannot be good, correlate them with other areas of culture etc., or can be interested in philosophical intuitions, evident or concealed influences on or sympathies and antipathies of outstanding scientists, artists, teachers, or combine the first studies with second ones and call all these mixtures philosophies of science, art and education without transgressions of the grammar in connection with these terms. So we have to do with informal criteria of preferences among these models of understanding of formally equal rights.

Model (3) has been most popular among historians of philosophy of religion from Berger's times up to these days because it permits one to sit on all chairs at the same time. In short, it is the same as to combine the study of God, Religion and Theology under one umbrella, and that seems comfortable. There is a difference between analytic and continental varieties of this approach inasmuch as Anglo-American philosophers of religion consider in general arguments for the existence of God, study of Divine attributes, the Providence, the problem of evil, afterlife and other theological topics the core of their discipline and the languages of religion, as well as interreligious relations or correlations between religion and other areas of culture as secondary increments to this core, while with the most part of their German-speaking colleagues we have usually theological studies in the expressed religiological

context<sup>3</sup>. As I look after the literature on the subject, I cannot avoid impression that continental influence on analytic philosophy of religion becomes progressively stronger, for even such topics as definitions of religion begin to have access into analytic anthologies and other genres of texts on the subject, formerly ignored there<sup>4</sup>. This trend seems reasonable and progressive in my eyes, because, to give a parallel example, it is much more suitable for philosophers of history to concentrate their efforts today more on the significance or possible purposes of the historical process and the factors fundamentally responsible for historical development, the measure of objectivity in historical writings or kinds of truth acceptable in historical accounts of events (i.e. philosophy-*on*-history) than on, e.g., investigation of Napoleon's concealed philosophical tastes or the measure of authentic influence of Voltaire on the minds of Friedrich the Great, Catherine the Great and other less significant characters (i.e. philosophy-*in*-history) or directly on Seven Years War, establishing of Declaration of independence and so on. But still more reasonable would be in our time of progressive specialization of knowledge to avoid such confusion of topics in principle. Philosophy of religion is one of the most popular disciplines of philosophy having much wider appeal to the public than philosophy of science and it would be more educative for a wide audi-

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3 To give only a few examples, such an authority as Bernhard Welte stressed that it is the question what religion is in its essence as a form of human existence that is the starting point of philosophy of religion and only thereafter one is advised to come to God as the principle of religion, cf. Bernhard Welte, *Religionsphilosophie*, ed. Klaus Kienzler and Bernhard Casper, *Gesammelte Schriften / Schriften zur Philosophie der Religion* (Frankfurt am Main: Knecht, 1997), 54–55. With Richard Schaeffler philosophy of religion is methodologically constituted by transcendental teaching of God, analysis of religious language (the language of prayer in the first place) and phenomenology of religion, cf. Richard Schaeffler, *Religionsphilosophie* (Alber, 1983), 217. Wilhelm Trillhaas introduced philosophy of religion into the system of disciplines of *Religionswissenschaft*, defined its first task as understanding religions in their own meaningfulness without their reduction to science, art, morality and other forms of culture, and emphasized its critique of religion in the sense of “collating” its empirical body with its essence, cf. Wolfgang Trillhaas, *Religionsphilosophie* (de Gruyter, 1972), 15–19.

4 One could refer here to (as to a noticeable example) William Wainwright's *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* wherein topics of religious (in)tolerance, comparison of different religious traditions and even problems with definition of religion are introduced along with Divine attributes, arguments for the existence of God, validity of mystical experience. The editor himself connects the future of philosophy of religion with progressing dialogue between Anglo-American and Continental discourses, cf. William J. Wainwright, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 10.

ence had it not undoubtful similarities with that idol seen by Nabuchadnezzar the King whose head was made of gold, chest and arms of silver, legs of iron and feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay (Daniel 2: 32–33).

Model (1) wherein philosophy of religion is understood consistently as philosophy-in-religion is rarely presented these days in its pure version inasmuch as the eclectic model (3) is getting popular. But it by no means has taken a back seat because its roots are deep. And here we really have one important difference from philosophy of science, though I believe it is not of that character which is stressed by Karpov. These roots are of pragmatic type. While philosophizing on science has never had a need to prove its right for existence, the rationale behind publishing theological books under the cover of philosophy of religion has been (beginning with the very first steps made by Storchenau and Para du Phanjas) to come into dialogue with and receive a positive resonance in the secular society, and now, when philosophical theology has not still succeeded to obtain the official philosophical status in the progressively secularizing society (including philosophical society<sup>5</sup>), it seems much more safe to present it as a pure academic discipline. This real reason of why the whole or partial equation philosophical theology = philosophy of religion stirs up understanding and sympathy but it leads to methodological puzzles. It is much more popular in analytic than in continental tradition, and in my latest book dealing with philosophical theology and referred to by Karpov I differ varieties of this model of interpretation. In position (1) we have verbal identification of philosophy of religion as philosophical theology<sup>6</sup>, in (2) this identification is not verbalized but actually acknowledged

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5 It is of significance that we have no chance to find out in spite of very swift growth of anthologies and collection of papers entitled as and dedicated to the discipline under this name, an entry called “Philosophical Theology” in Anglo-American philosophical encyclopedias. For example, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* only “Philosophy of Religion” and “Philosophy and Christian Theology” are admitted (it is silently but very clearly presumed in the second case that there is no such theology which can be regarded a philosophical discipline). Still of more importance is that there is no chance to find out this unit also in an American index of philosophical disciplines, be it core areas or even applied philosophy (where business ethics, medical ethics, organizational ethics etc. are accepted).

6 So, according to William Alston, “the philosophy of religion comprises any philosophical discussion of questions arising from religion” William P. Alston, “Religion, History of Philosophy”, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Vol 8*, ed. Edward Craig (Routledge, 1998), 238. The identity of the contents of two areas of philosophy was emphasized also in William J. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion* (Wadsworth, 1988), XI.

according to the very subject matters of this discipline<sup>7</sup>, in (3) philosophical theology is regarded as a subdivision of general philosophy of religion, the latter being responsible for more general topics (such as arguments for the existence of God) and the former for more special ones (as the Christian dogmas in detail<sup>8</sup>), while (4) presupposes that difference is by no means in subject matters but only in personal attitudes to it<sup>9</sup>. My colleague Karpov sympathizes with both two latter positions and it is his absolutely lawful right to do it, but what about justifications of all this approach?

Usually, analytic philosophers of religion don't charge themselves with core methodological issues, the best example being provided by many-volume *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion* by Graham Oppy<sup>10</sup> who in the introduction disclosed that he took as an example Russel's *History of Western Phi-*

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7 Examples are innumerable. To give an impression what it is like, one can recommend to look in one introduction to philosophy of religion where the author, having recognized that it is not too easy to define what this field is (at least it is much more difficult, in his words, than to demarcate chemistry from needlework) embarked without further comment on presenting its subjects wherefrom he isolated (as the most important ones) "the discourse on God", the problem of evil, three (not more) arguments for the existence of God, the real substance of religious experience and Divine attributes (omniscience and eternity are singled out without explanation why the other are omitted). See: Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1982).

8 A good and very authoritative example of this approach is provided by *Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, where it is stated outright that philosophical theology is regarded (as something self-evident) as a part of a more general discipline, i.e. philosophy of religion. In so doing the editors coordinate their project with another one, i.e. Wainwright's *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*. So they declare that they paid more detailed attention to the problem of evil and theodicy because in Wainwright's anthology these matters were only touched. See Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 3–4. But I also inferred from this correlation that arguments for the existence of God were excluded from the handbook of philosophical theology up and down because they were discussed in detail in the mentioned handbook of philosophy of religion (see: Wainwright, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, 80–138). And this is at least one (but robust) reason for excluding this topic from all anthologies on philosophical theology met by me.

9 See already John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian theology* (Charles Scribner's sons, 1966), 39–40. From the latest supports of this approach I'd single out Gerald G. O'Collins, "The Philosophical Theology of Stephen Davis: Does It Coincide with Fundamental Theology?," in *Christian Philosophy of Religion: Essays in Honor of Stephen T. Davis*, ed. C. P. Ruloff and Stephen T. Davis (Notre Dame Univ. Press, 2015), 346.

10 Graham R. Oppy and Nick Trakakis, eds., *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

*losophy* without any mention *why* he presented his series as history of rational theology from the Greeks up to the present time. And here we have a typical case. It is of great concern these days to compare differences between analytic and continental styles in philosophy in order to establish a dialogue between them, and some detailed apologies of analytic philosophizing on religion in the face of continental challenges emerge now<sup>11</sup>. But I believe that not so much apology as understanding is needful. One of main difference is, in my opinion, that analytic philosophizing is much less interested in methodology than in results of investigation (as it goes with natural sciences), while, e.g., philosophical phenomenology is centered just on methodology being much more indifferent to concrete results. Whether a bridge between these philosophical traditions in general is possible is not too clear, but I'll try to show in the most general terms below how the very "philosophical practice" on the terrain of philosophy of religion could contribute to their meeting.

In general, differences are willingly emphasized, often without substantiation. One of such remarks deserving attention was presented by Richard Swinburne (by the way in Russian) when he differed analytic and continental attitudes in such a manner that in the latter case (he referred to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) *philosophy of religion* was used for "full description of experiences, beliefs and practices of different religions of the world", i.e. did not differ from mere empirical religious studies, while his interest (as of an analytic philosopher) lies in quite different area of interpretations and justifications of the basic religious (i.e. theistic) propositions<sup>12</sup>. An implied upshot is clear: the continental tradition does not meet our expectations when we are talking about philosophy in connection with religion because the real task of philosophy in this context is to justify theistic claims. Swinburne, certainly, ignored that beginning with Fichte's and Hegel's understanding of philosophy of religion "in the Continent" had nothing to do with empirical studies of religion (the dialogue between two main areas of philosophy is rendered difficult also by mutual conscious ignorance of the other side). But there is also another difficulty with the whole model under discussion: the identification of philosophy of religion as

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11 One of them deserving attention is presented by Michael Rea in Oliver Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 1–25.

12 Richard Swinburne, "Philosophy of Religion in Anglo-American Tradition", in *Philosophy of Religion: An Almanac (in Russian)*, ed. Vladimir K. Shokhin (Nauka, 2006–2007), 95.

philosophical theology goes against the patterns of rationality, one of them being William Ockham's principle of parsimony according to which there is no need to multiply essences without necessity. And here we just multiply such an essence as philosophical theology without any theoretical necessity (about practical one see above), and in the modern version of it very sympathized by Karpov we have also an Oriental parallel, this time with the Hindu model of trimûrti ("the three forms" of Divinity, called often "Hindu trinity") when Viṣṇuits, e.g., identify Brahman as the greater Viṣṇu (cf. theological philosophy of religion in general) whose subordinates are Brahmā, Śiva and just the smaller Viṣṇu (cf. philosophical theology)<sup>13</sup>.

This "multiplying of Viṣṇu" leads to many logical gaps, one of them being that the Divine attributes are separated from arguments for the existence of God (which are simply omitted) in all anthologies worth of mention on analytic philosophical theology (see above), in contradiction to both rationality (these arguments and attributes being dependent on each other) and historicity (with both Aquinas and the second, i.e. normative, scholasticism of the 16<sup>th</sup> — 17<sup>th</sup> centuries attributes were discussed strictly after the arguments). Puzzling is also Karpov's offer (this time it is his own invention) that even defining of religion is a task not of a mere philosophical theology but even of Christian philosophical theology. According to my knowledge, all undertakings entitled as "philosophical theology" and "Christian philosophical theology" are dealing first and foremost with Christian doctrines (the Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, resurrection of the dead and sometimes some others, like the Fall and Eucharist), and I haven't seen any collection of papers under this title where dealing with religion (including its definitions) took place. And why just Christian philosophical theology (and not any other<sup>14</sup>) should be charged

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13 One of the earliest mentions of the three highest gods of Hindu pantheon as manifestations of Brahman is presented in the *Maitrī Upanishad* (V.2), that is in the beginning of the 1st millennium A.D., while "sectarian" interpretations of this model were elaborated only in the Purānic, i.e. medieval Hinduism.

14 Elsewhere I mentioned such a difference between natural theology and philosophical theology that the latter can be found out everywhere when philosophical justification and interpretation of religious propositions takes place, while the former may be suitable only in the Christian tradition where epistemic gap between verities acceptable for reason and those which can be received only by faith in Revelation was much deeper than in all other religious traditions. See: Vladimir K. Shokhin, "Natural Theology, Philosophical Theology and Illustrative Argumentation", *Open Theology* 2, no. 1 (2016), 807–808.



with such a burdensome obedience as to cope with such a pure “secular” task as counting which from numerous types of types definitions of religion (genus-differentia definitions, extensial, ostensive, essential, functional and etc. ones) are more correct than others? So my colleague’s argument for further widening of philosophical theology’s subject matter curriculum according to his advice could most likely be only “Why not?”

I believe that model (2) advocated by me is lacking transgression of logic and rationality of the aforementioned types and, in addition, continues efforts to put in order correlations of philosophical fields dating back already to two heirs of Plato, Xenocrates and Aristotle<sup>15</sup>. It does not enforce different sciences of religion and “sciences of spirit” (John Stewart Mill) crowd under the same umbrella without necessity. It leaves philosophical investigations of religion on its proper place without intermingling it with metaphysics on the one side and confessional theology on the other. It really should have critical analysis of definitions of religion in its logical core in agreement with rationality (just as definitions of art, culture or law are situated in the corresponding “philosophies of X”), and this job is enormous inasmuch as there are whole families of such identifications up to this time<sup>16</sup>, but this does not mean that it is the only thing this disciplines has to do with religion (as Karpov seems to interpret me). Elaborations of classification of the main types of religious world-outlook (classical theism, non-classical types of theism, pan(en)theism, acosmism etc.), of religious attitudes (designated usually as exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, relativism and their mixtures), of different types of correlations between religion and society (clericalism, laicism, secularism,

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15 The first one proved to become the founder of the horizontal scheme of philosophical fields (logic, physics and ethics, the scheme elaborated later by the Stoics in detail), the latter of the vertical scheme (ethics and politics were erected above poetics and rhetoric, theoretical disciplines above ethics and politics, and the first philosophy (later metaphysics) above the other theoretical ones).

16 One of helpful contemporary classification of this families (religious, philosophical, socio-economoc, sociological and psychological approaches to the phenomenon of religion) is presented in Peter B. Clarke and Peter Byrne, *Religion Defined and Explained* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1993), 79–203. An authoritative criticism of most prominent definitions of religion along with appeal to use Wittgenstein’s theory of “family resemblances” instead of definitions in the proper sense is presented in Victoria S. Harrison, “The Pragmatics of Defining Religion in a Multi-Cultural World”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59, no. 3 (2006), without, it should be acknowledged, analysis of difficulties connected also with implementation of Wittgensteins’s model.



“postsecularism” etc.), of different conceptions of religious experience (essentialism, constructivism, cognitivistic “attributionism”), such are only some subjects of this discipline according to this model. As the reader can judge, here classical procedures of *analytic* philosophizing (critical testing of definitions and classifications in the first place) are presupposed without theoretically unreasonable invasion on the territories of other philosophical and theological disciplines in accordance to “*continental core belief*” that philosophy of religion should be about religion. In such a manner “practical dialogue” of two big philosophical traditions can be accomplished on the ground of at least one philosophical field (see above).

To conclude discussion of correlation between philosophy of religion and philosophical theology I'd stress again that their main differences have to do only with their subject matters and not world-outlooks. Karpov acknowledges my recognition of such an option that a philosopher of religion *could be* also a person having personal access to religious experience and in theology without damage for his speciality. I say more: it would be *preferable* for him (her) to be such a person in the same measure as for philosopher of science to be even a little bit a scientist, for a philosopher of law a lawyer, for philosopher of literature to have some experience in belle-lettres etc., inasmuch as one working on philosophy of *X* has to be competent in *X* in order to be qualified in his (her) specialization field<sup>17</sup>. But if someone who writes, say, a history of literary criticism in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century would include in his volume also the contents of novels by Fielding, Sterne, Swift and other writers right up front, he could scarcely be acknowledged as a person competent in his tasks and understanding of his work.

Where Karpov is right it is in his recognition of difficulties in landmarking of philosophy of religion and religious studies, inasmuch, I'm sure, as the first competency is much closer to the second one than to theology. I don't agree that *Religionswissenschaft* can provide sufficient disproofs of the conception of

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17 It is a long-standing stereotype (very popular also in Russia) that to be a competent professor of religious studies one has to hold to the position of “methodological atheism”, which means the presumption of exclusion of any transcendental agency within the causes related to the origin and development of religion. I cannot realize why a person who regards a human being only a product of blind natural forces and mechanisms of evolution (unexplainable on their own) has undisputed privileges in understanding of even primitive religions which are manifestations of human spiritual nature and needs.

pramonotheism because the primordial state of human religious consciousness is beyond evidences from artefacts<sup>18</sup>. Nonetheless, it is true that empirical data provided by religious studies can influence inferences of philosophers of religion as, by the way, the latter can and I dare to say even ought to organize the “interpreting milieu” for these data<sup>19</sup>. There are also areas where a philosopher of religion and religious studies professor have common terrain, e.g. in demarcation between the world religions (more species are being classified under this category today than yesterday) and national or ethnic religions or between traditional religions and new cults wherein both definitions of religion and empirical criteria are needful. But here we have the same case as with demarcation of competences between epistemology and cognitive sciences, philosophy of law and theories of law, philosophy of education and methodologies of education and so on. Our time is the time of speedfully progressive specialization of knowledge, conditioned by both theoretical and practical interests, and attempts of philosophies (that also multiply swiftly) to retain their positions besides and together with adjacent disciplines. And here, it is true, many metaphilosophical and metascientific methodological efforts are needful to balance competitive and mutually dependent competences.

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18 As Karpov appeals to theology I'd like to recall St. John Damascene's understanding of Eden as both physical (as the garden) and spiritual reality, in the second case the world of contemplations (Exp.fid. II.11). According to this discourse the first human beings, having been much more perfected than their descendents scarcely needed physical artefacts for their communion with God, which is, in line with Lactantius' etymology of *religio*, at least a religious (see footnote 16) definition of religion.

19 To give a very fresh example I'd refer only to work of one postgraduate of my university who uses Hegelian scheme of development of religion for understanding the evolution of ancient cults in ancient Anatolia where the primitive crude and evil chthonic deities developed into bright and benevolent ones in accordance with development of their personal aspect.

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