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## Research Approaches in the Study of Religion

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Studia Humana nr 13, 26-35

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2015

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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## Research Approaches in the Study of Religion

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### *Abstract:*

Despite development of secular ideas and concepts in the Western world, we can observe increasing interest in the study of religion. However, this popularity of the study of religion and different research approaches has caused that in some sense scholars that were studying religion came to a dead point. Here I show that the most optimal research approach in the study of religion is pluralistic, integral paradigm which connects old traditional methods with naturalistic, cognitive and sometimes experimental approach.

*Keywords:* religion, method, cognitive science of religion, content analysis, naturalism, phenomenology.

## 1. Introduction. Pluralistic Approach in the Study of Religion

Since the modern times, religion is understood as a cultural phenomenon which can be explained by science [37, p. 151]. However, scholars interested in this topic, first philosophers and then also psychologists, sociologists or anthropologists, developed different methods and approaches. In this paper I briefly discuss some key elements appropriate for the most popular and important research approaches within the study of religion. The main aim of this topic is described in the journal “Method & Theory in the Study of Religion” launched in 1989. From time to time new books focused on the questions of not only methodology, but even of definition of religion, are published. Consider for instance: „What is Religion?” of Jeppe Sinding Jensen [21], “Religion, Öffentlichkeit, Moderne: Transdisziplinäre Perspektiven” of Judith Könemann and Saskia Wendel (eds.) [23] or „The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods” of George D. Chrystides and Ron Geaves [6]. There are much more books in recent years which present this topic [26], [5], [36], [7], [42].

Religion is the research subject which can be found on the intersection of two research approaches: quantitative and qualitative [35, p. 6]. When we want to choose the most optimal research approach, we should take into account reliability, validity and generalizability of our research data [35, p. 7]. The most effective approach is not the only question in case of studying the religion, but first of all it is the philosophical, metaphysical and epistemological questions that cover reality of religious contents. This is why we observe dichotomy between two basic research

approaches: *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*. This latter approach is rather widely accepted nowadays. However it seems that religion should be analyzed by mixed approach which includes not only explanation (domain of *Naturwissenschaften*) but also some kind of understanding (approach suitable for *Geisteswissenschaften*). Now religion is analyzed rather as a phenomenon associated with the human physiology and nature more than as a cultural phenomenon [1, p. 7]. Development of the study of consciousness and mind is applied to the study of religion, especially by Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). In the light of CSR, this correlation between human consciousness and physiology in the context of religious beliefs and experiences seems very significant. Saint Theresa's visions in some sense have shaped the nature of Spanish Catholicism [1, p. 10]. This example shows how important is mixed research approach which in the same manner includes historical analysis as well as the study of consciousness that includes looking for the neuronal correlates of religious beliefs and experiences.

Jensine Andresen and Robert K. C. Forman suggest using methodological pluralism within the study of religion which includes four following approaches: doctrinal analysis, social expression, subjective experience and scientific (objective) research [1, p. 11]. These four fields of analysis of religion seem especially important by the reason of cultural and social biases which in some sense are natural effect of socialization. For instance, European and American scholars are educated in historically Christian societies and they can understand the most significant and basic elements of Christianity often as practitioner participants. What's about other religious tradition, when scholar is out of particular religious culture [19, p. 47]? How can the western scholar really understand the core of religious beliefs of believers of other religious traditions? Religions were developed as a result of particular, actual needs of local inhabitants. According to one of hypothesis about origin of monotheistic religion based on so called *moralizing High Gods* these three religions were developed in the Middle East by very practical reason. In this region sources of the water are very poor and the authors of this hypothesis suggest that idea of the supernatural and powerful judge was needed to fairly control access to the water [2, p. 2]. Of course, this explanation is only one of the many hypotheses about origin of religion. Its utility consists in underlying that people of different cultures and regions may have different reasons for acquisition of this or that religion as well as the same religion.

In this context it is worth to remember about possibility of politicization of religion. Political reasons are one of them which introduce great difference among possible motivation for acquisition of religions. Maybe religion is in some sense specific phenomenon which should be analyzed by scholars in some sense associated with religion which is their research object. Another question is current secular and post-secular nature of the Western society. In this relatively new context, traditional religions are often replaced by references to spiritual experiences which are in some sense independent from religious conceptual framework [9, p. 537]. This social phenomenon requires careful separation between religious (traditional, institutional) and spiritual (not institutional, often taken from other traditions) concepts and values.

Religion is common human phenomenon but its cross-culture ubiquity causes many different versions of religions and kinds of its understanding. This pluralism causes that it is important to propose universal or at least integral approach to the study of religion [9, p. 524]. We can observe current tendency to mix different approaches which traditionally were developed separately within the study of religion. In this place let me briefly consider the basic research approaches which also today are used as the most popular and standard research approach to explain or/and understand religious beliefs and practices.

## 2. Content Analysis

More naturalistic approach is based on experiments and surveys. More humanistic one prefers textual analysis. One of them is content analysis. Within the content analysis we should remember about cognitive biases and epistemological questions. First of all it is worth to keep in mind the question of subjectivity [24, p. 112]. It appears that this “reader-dependence” of texts meanings may be especially troublesome in the case of religious texts. We know how different may be interpretations of the same “sacred” texts. “Reader-dependant” bias affects the way of interpretation and understanding of religion. Consider the following example in *the Gospel according to Matthew*. Jesus said: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (10:34) [41]. On the one hand, today probably none of the Christian leaders will interpret this phrase literally, as a call to battle. On the other hand, this phrase was one of the most cited biblical phrases to justify religious conflicts in the modern Europe. Scholar within the study of religion should discover the real and primary meaning of this text. He should explain why literal meaning of this text is other than its official interpretation. He should present at least three kinds of meanings: intention of its author, meaning for reader/believer and practical consequences for believers, religion, and society. In this case we can observe other problematic question: selection of appropriate contents. What parts of analyzed „sacred” texts can we evaluate as a basic and representative for particular religion? For instance, texts which are focused on violence or those focused on altruism? How can we know when analyzed text has metaphorical meaning, when was used to achieve some particular aims and when is representative and should be understood literally? This postulate is very simple and evident but at the same time is almost impossible to real introduction. We know how important is the impact of other factors as education, socialization, actual political or economical context, actually dominant basic ideas and concepts, etc. Consider following case. Islam is religion of peace. Despite this doctrinal core, some scholars identify Islam with violence and aggression. This approach is appropriate for some “new atheists” in US, i. a. for Sam Harris [15, p. 12].

This is why scholars of religion should include geographical and historical factors which intensively shape and determine religious contents. These out of essential factors affect both practice of believers and concepts introduced by the authors of religious texts as well as kinds of interpretations of some religious beliefs and behaviors.

How can we discover the „real” core of religion when we see a lot of differences cross culture and history? In the Polish case, Polish Catholicism is other than Italian, Mexican or Filipino. The Polish Catholicism was other in 17th century (in the period of religious unification of the state against external enemies) than in the period of the Polish People’s Republic (1952-1989, PRL in Polish). After 1989 this Catholicism lives another way. On the one side, we have official doctrines, on the other side, we should refer to particular periods and regions and explain these great differences among one religion. Even if scholar is aware of this time and place dependence, it is difficult to understand and more to explain „real” and „model” religious behaviors and beliefs. Many factors in the same place or period modify the nature of religious experiences and beliefs (age, profession, sex, health, social status, education, etc.).

We can confront official documents with everyday life practice of believers but differences between them cannot be settled in favor of the former or the latter side in terms of orthodoxy and apostasy. In the study of religion, similar as in all others disciplines which are based on analysis of the past patterns and phenomenon, scholars meet the problem of “correct” and “true” reconstruction of religion [19, p. 47]. In this context we come back to the most basic issue of the definition of religion and its understanding in the light of its historical, social and cultural dynamics. Is religion historically closed or open? When someone chooses the first solution he should show which period is this correct and fundamental one. The second solution removes this difficulty however it introduces the problem of relativism, conventionalism and high cultural diversity. Consequently,

every believer theoretically could have private religious point of view and this individual approach should be treated as the same valid as all others interpretations. In the case of The Roman Catholic Church we can indicate on dispute which began after II Vatican Council. Until today we see two basic parties: one of them interpret this reform as a correct solution, other party underlines the break of long ecclesial tradition. We can see also other two approaches. On the one side, the Council is interpreted as an introduction of modernism and Enlightenment into the Church. On the other side, the same Council is understood as a continuation of traditional teaching [29, pp. 6-10]. This one sample shows how difficult is trial to objectively evaluate contents in the religious matters.

One of the forms of textual analysis, associated with the content analysis, is discourse analysis. This approach may be used as some kind of supplement for content analysis within the study of religion. Consider the following example made by Titus Hjelm: What's the matter when newspaper writes about „Muslim terrorists” and why nobody writes about „Christians terrorists” [17, p. 134]? From time to time we can see practical consequences of some news (the case of *Charlie Hebdo* or Danish Cartoonist). This approach implies the concept of cultural policy and public theology. Both of them are particular cultural tools which in implicit or explicit manner shape social consciousness and imagination in reference to religious issues. Recent example of implicit cultural policy was “strategic canonization” developed by John Paul II who wanted to introduce positively associated religious contents into global secular world. Among the most important figures of this policy were “international celebrity saints”: Padre Pio and Mother Theresa [4, pp. 441, 451]. Current new strategy presented by pope Francis is also a kind of cultural policy, the same as the opposite approach appropriate for the Church cultural policy before The Second Vatican Council [39].

Discourse analysis explains the causes and the nature of social construction processes. In this field it strictly connects with content analysis: what does sacred text mean? What is its social, political or psychological aim? Why does one believer understand it in one way and other believer in another way? What are the practical consequences of these texts and of different kinds of their interpretations and understanding? Finally, how is shaped the social „image” of religion? Discourses create identities, relationships and beliefs [17, p. 136]. This approach may explain the impact of social and political factors on the religious contents. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, current cultural trends require today (policy of pope Francis) a different strategy than conservative cultural policy developed until 1958 when the Church was understood still as a metaphysically the only true political institution more than cultural and social element of current complex world.

### **3. Field Research**

This approach seems necessary for the relevant study of religion. When someone wants to fully understand the real core of religion, he should go beyond texts and official statements of religious authorities and believers and go to everyday life practice of believers [16, p. 217]. This is third important level, next to official doctrine and impact of social, political or cultural factors. Religion, as well as other cultural phenomenon, was developed in particular time and place as some kind of cultural adaptation. Religion was needed for local people and could fulfill some practical functions: psychotherapeutic on the individual level, and ethical and social on the group level (for example, dynamic correlation between in-group trust and inter-group conflicts and aggression). Judaism, Christianity and Islam were developed by particular people, often they were used in political and ideological way. Probably the sacred texts could be sometimes modified to achieve some aims. This is why these sacred texts can say more about their authors and the life of their believers than about religion itself.

Religion is still shaped by people and is a flexible phenomenon. When scholar wants to understand and explain religion, he should analysis not only texts, but first of all real practice of

believers. Why do today some people take Christianity as their religion? Jesus was a poor man who lived about 2000 years ago in the region occupied by the Roman Empire. Why today for example the rich American who lives in New York can take this religion? Exclude all questions associated with alleged psychoterapeutical potential of the image of poor Jesus, as consolation for unemployed, homeless or ill individuals. Consider that this American is free from these problems. Why does he take this religion instead of a lot of others? To explain this phenomenon and many other issues, field research seems accurate research approach. It is used to explain dynamic and living, real nature of religion which should be understood as a phenomenon which is not statistic and historically closed.

Religion is culturally evolving phenomenon which expresses aims, features and desires of currently living people. Some elements appropriate for previous life style may be inaccurate in the current social and cultural framework. This inadequacy especially refers to moral and ethical issues as well as to political matters. Consider the following case of the Roman Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council. The Council has introduced new solutions which earlier were condemned, as the concept of religious freedom, the unity of religions or ecumenism. In the official political area the Church showed that these new strategies are consistent and justified by the sacred texts. However, opposite previous solutions were also justified in the same way (texts, tradition and the Magisterium of the Church). Texts analysis and phenomenology are not allowed to explain this context of the core of religion because sacred texts still are the same despite radical doctrinal or legal changes. Field research is used to explain what the real causes of changes of religious attitude toward the world are.

CSR provides another argument for field research. “Theological (in)correctness” hypothesis shows that many believers often modify official dogmas or others doctrinal elements [31]. These strategies are often in moral and ethical issues, however not only. Field research can show what does religious experience mean and how believer understands religion. This approach could explain why the same sacred text is a motivation to altruism for one believer and in the same time for suicide terrorism for another one.

Graham Harvey sees three basic elements of the research field applied to the study of religion. The first field is the believer’s activity. The second one are beliefs about their activity. The last one focuses on beliefs and understanding of the researchers which take religious activities [16, p. 218].

### **3. Grounded Theory, Hermeneutics, History and Phenomenology**

There are in this outlined methodological landscape other important and popular approaches to the study of religion. Grounded theory (“constant comparative method”) seeks to build appropriate theory on the base of analyzing cases. Steven Engler enumerates three basic reasons for its application: 1. the lack of knowledge about some kind of phenomenon; 2. uselessness of existing theories and 3. an intent to use another theory instead of these ones previously applied [8, pp. 256-257]. This meta-methodological paradigm precedes in some sense a development of every new method. It seems that especially in the case of CSR and naturalistic approach last two reasons were crucial for adaptation of cognitive and neuronal approach to explaining “old” religious phenomenon.

Hermeneutics of religious texts should explain whose interest was promoted in the texts in the past and whose interest may be promoted today [14, p. 278]. Not only writers create texts compatible with their particular interests. Interpreters in the next generations may change literal meanings of texts by introduction of new interpretations, especially symbolical and metaphorical explanations. Hermeneutics could be supplemented by field research to better understand and to explain current beliefs and motivations of believers. This approach refers i. a. to key words used in official religious texts. Consider again the following example in the Roman Catholic tradition. The

Council introduced new concepts as common human dignity, ecumenism and religious unity which before the Council were rejected and interpreted in specific way [39].

Hermeneutical method requires in some sense an application of a historical approach, especially to reconstruct genealogy and reasons of religious texts and rituals. This stage is common for history and hermeneutics. Historical perspective can explain whose interests and what motivations were realized by particular texts or rituals in particular time and place [28, p. 292]. For example, in the Roman Catholic Church you can analyze why some part of Catholics accepts today in vitro method despite traditional catholic teaching about the origin of life. Historical paradigm can explain this and many others dichotomies between official dogmas and ecclesial decrees, and believers personal attitude. In this context it is worth to remember John Locke's comment that Ten Commandments were given only for Israelites, not for all the mankind. His suggestion presents practical political and social meaning of religion.

Phenomenology gives a common background for described approaches and can explain incompatibilism appropriate for some religious people. Phenomenology focuses on three following elements: allegiance, identity and preference [33, p. 334]. These levels can imply opposite contents which are adapted by believer. Naturalistic approach which usually rejects phenomenology cannot explain some topics without phenomenology.

#### **4. Comparison**

Comparison, developed since 19<sup>th</sup> century by the British researches [34, p. 23], is now the basic approach within CSR. Comparative approach includes i. a. discourse and content analysis, hermeneutics or phenomenology [34, p. 34]. When CSR scholar wants to show common cognitive natural base for religious beliefs, he usually does compare various religious beliefs and religious traditions. He must decide whether a particular feature is a domain of nature or a domain of culture. On the one hand, comparative approach began the process of naturalistic analysis of religion. On the other hand, until today this approach is used to show that one religion is the better one than other, however that is not the aim of comparison method. One of the main reasons to develop comparative approach was to show similarities and connections between Christianity and other traditions. This is why tendency to looking for the best religion by their comparison is side-effect of this method [34, p. 33]. Some scholars, as e.g. Émile Durkheim see an analogy between comparison method and "indirect experiment": comparison is understood sometimes as a kind of experiment in other sciences [34, p. 25].

#### **5. Cognitive Science of Religion, Evolutionary Approach and Experiments**

CSR explains origin and nature of religious beliefs by explanation of natural human mind and neural processes [25, p. 50], [38]. CSR may be interpreted as a complex of methods which general aim is to explain all religious phenomenon and beliefs by comparing them or reducing them to natural, cognitive correlates. Boyer's "parasitic" nature of religious beliefs expresses this cognitive approach: religion always uses natural human mechanisms [25, p. 51].

Lluis Oviedo indicates on internal limitations of cognitive methodology. First of all, CSR especially within its standard model does not include other important factors of believers, as his education, culture, etc. [25]. However, this approach is going modified i. a. by Armin van Geertz who underlines that our cognition is encultured and embedded what is especially important in the field of religion [10], [11], [12], [13].

CSR is associated with the evolutionary approach, especially with evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary perspective is today some kind of common scientific and research framework [30, p. 2]. This approach is especially useful in the field of the study of human natural morality [40].

Jesper Sørensen reminds that CSR took its thematic framework from the comparative study of religion that is the question about common popularity usually the same religious beliefs and

phenomena [32, p. 466]. CSR requires some kind of reductionism because the aim of CSR is to explain religious beliefs and phenomena by mechanisms and processes appropriate for “normal” beliefs and phenomena. Religion is understood as a particular kind of beliefs and phenomena in general [32, p. 468]. CSR proposes some methodological tools which are commonly used to explain religious phenomena. Let me enumerate some of them: MCI hypothesis; intuitive ontology, physics, biology and psychology; HADD (agency detection hypothesis); “theological (in)correctness” hypothesis; ToM. All of them are the research tools which can explain particular areas appropriate for the origin and transmission of religious beliefs. However, religion seems too complex phenomenon which should not be explained in the terms of the simplest basic functions of human mind and body.

Look at the following particular case. One of the problematic questions may be the concept of theological (in)correctness, the basic one within CSR. How can we talk about flexible ideas and beliefs when religious individual modifies subjectively official religious beliefs? How to measure the real impact of formal religious beliefs and ideas in the context of this natural cognitive “deformation”? This unilateral framework of the first standard model of CSR is still extended about others research perspectives. This is the main assumption of the dual inheritance theory (gene-culture coevolution).

In Brno (Czech Republic) scholars in the study of religion measure experimentally within CSR some figures associated with origin, development and transmission of religious beliefs. There is the only experimental research centre on religion in the world: LEVYNA - Laboratory for Experimental Research of Religion at the Masaryk University. Some of the research project titles present very experimental nature of these scholars: „Feeling the Keeling” (Eva Kundtová Klocová), „Where are my legs?” (Silvie Kotherová), „Disgust and fear interactions in rituals” (Vladimír Bahna), „Ritualized action and prosociality” (Radek Kundt) [18]. On the one side, it seems natural that experimental methods were introduced also into the study of religion. On the other side, this approach evidently needs to be completed by others perspectives, i. a. these ones mentioned above. Experimental method in the study of religion has at least one advantage over others approaches: experiment is used to test hypothesis and to show their falsifiability [3, p. 169].

Other interesting application of this method within the study of beliefs, especially religious beliefs of children is used to create a substitute of the “primitive” human being in the pre-culture period. This step seems especially useful within the CSR which is focused on discovering and analysis of first, natural human cognitive tendencies and biases in the terms of theistic and atheistic ideas and beliefs. However, Justin Barrett underlines that children intellectual perspective and kinds of meaning differ on adult’s perspective [3, p. 173]. Explanation of alleged human natural tendency in the terms of his theistic or atheistic attitudes implies many other contexts and, first of all, is impossible because of no access to consciousness of these primitive humans.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study of religion often refers to two general research approaches: positivism and reductionism [20, p. 42]. Despite this naturalistic tendency it appears that religious matters require not only explanation of religious objects, but also interpretation and understanding of religious subjects [20, pp. 46-47]. This subjective approach is underlined especially by feminist methodology in the study of religion which shows that scholars always engage their private point of view [22, p. 63].

Other important question is the complex nature of religion itself [27, p. 70]. Its particular components are different and require specific research methods. Political or economical strategies of the great religious institutions are something different than individual meditation of one believer. Both of them are equally important parts of the same phenomenon: religion.

Within the study of religion we have a great risk of at least three pitfalls. One of them is idealism when scholar interprets some idea or belief as a leading motif which determines development of religion. Other cognitive and methodological bias is objectification that is an



assumption that analyzed reality is highly ordered and structured. The last one is an ideology when scholar's point of view is determined by some particular ideas, ideology, etc. [27, p. 71]. This last case is associated with particularly preferred philosophical perspective. Scholars who are naturalists may have more tendencies to naturalistic and atheistic interpretation of religion than scholars – dualists. This is why CSR is sometimes understood as a naturalistic research program which determines all future research results.

Religion is the very complex social, cultural, psychological and political phenomenon which should be analyzed by reference to pluralistic mixed research approach.

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