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Christianity as a Religion

ABSTRACT

The subject of this text is religion in general and Christianity in particular. The aim is to show the essence of religion and the uniqueness of Christianity. The research issues concern the essence of religion, which is indicated by its definitions and functions. The following questions are addressed: What is religion? What are its components? What elements constitute it? In the article, the methods of critical analysis of texts and phenomenological and synthetic analysis were used.

The proper understanding of religion as such, including Christianity, which is focused on the Triune God and Jesus Christ and man, has a number of implications in everyday life. Therefore, it is necessary to know the essence of religion and the nature of Christianity in order to unmask attempts at manipulating religion in social and political life. Getting to know Christianity as a religion can prepare one for intercultural, interreligious, and ecumenical dialogue. What is important here is theoretical preparation, which provides the basis for active, practical involvement in the process of dialogue and education, not only of the younger generation.

KEYWORDS
religion, definition of religion, Christianity, essence of religion, specific features of Christianity, uniqueness of Christianity, universal nature of Christianity

Introduction

The thesis in the title of this study, "Christianity as a religion," may seem overtly obvious. However, the verb "seems" suggests a certain difficulty in describing the essence of religion and presenting Christianity as an example. Religion is typically defined by

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people who believe in God, as well as by those who distance themselves from it or deny it altogether. Often, the latter group has experienced a religious phase in their life, which they have abandoned due to various events or reflections. Researchers who do not identify with any religion often believe that their statements about belief systems are more objective, as they are not influenced by personal, non-rational experiences.

Therefore, there are two narratives or "stories" about religion throughout history. One is given by believers, including zealots, saints, philosophers, and theologians. The other comes from atheists, militant anti-theists, agnostics, and humanists who are indifferent to religious experiences. Descriptions of religion can be conveyed with strong emotions, both positive and negative. Statements about religion are analyzed from the perspectives of various sciences, including psychology and medicine.

According to naturalistic interpretations provided by neurology or psychiatry, transcendence is considered a "product," of chemical processes and electromagnetic interactions in the brain and the human central nervous system. So-called neurotheology, which points to a purely biological source of religion, is gaining popularity among opponents of religion. Neurotheology aligns closely with the social and economic theory of the origins of religion, which has been popular in recent decades. According to neurotheology, God, deities, and the world of transcendence are merely the effects or "images" of various reactions occurring in the brain. Even if there is a higher being or Supreme Being, it only exists in the human brain and not "outside "it. Thus, neurotheology is the modern embodiment of mythology.

The debate over the essence of religion, and particularly its existence or non-existence, has raged for centuries. Often, defenders and apologists of religion are individuals who have an existential connection to it, and who find meaning in their lives or liberation from various forms of oppression through it. Religion has always been embraced by holy people—those who are acutely aware of their imperfections and who steadfastly pursue what is beyond or greater and more powerful than themselves. They understand religion to be the most comprehensive and reliable answer to questions about the meaning of human life, birth, suffering, and death.

Perhaps the greatest experts in religion are the mystics. They appear in nearly all religious traditions, both Christian and non-Christian. Their words bear witness to profound spiritual experiences, often conveyed through poetic language. Often, their silence speaks volumes about religion:

> Mystical experiences represent a distinct type of religious encounter. ... Mysticism is regarded as an experience that is not universally accessible and requires specific predispositions .... The mystic, in their pursuit, transcends or diminishes their own self and capabilities, striving to merge or unite—depending on the tradition—with the sacred cosmos, divine harmony, deity, the sacred, truth, the principle of existence and order, and so on. (Maciuszko 1992: 91)

Religions do not exist in isolation. There is no spiritual or material reality that exists as "pure religion." It always takes on a specific, embodied form, rooted in the here and now of reality and referring to an extra-sensory reality.

The term "religion," which originates from Latin, is widely recognized in various languages worldwide, particularly in Western cultures and regions influenced by them, such as the United States. Wherever humans have dwelled, religion has also been present, though not always designated by the term popularized by Latin civilization (Lanczkowski 1986: 29–35). Even cultures and civilizations divergent from the Western tradition have their own concepts for denoting the relationship between man (humanity) and God (deity), yet the phenomenon of religion is universal. "There has never been a culture in the past, nor does it seem there will be one in the future, that lacks religion," Erich Fromm asserted in his work *Essays on the Sociology of Religion* (Fromm 1966: 134). Similar sentiments have been expressed by other scholars who study religion.

Religion and its essence

Questions about the essence of religion are often straightforward: What is religion? What makes up religion? What are its components? Understanding these questions becomes clearer when we first explore a negative form of inquiry: What is not religion? These are complex questions, all the more so since they are not abstract but tied to specific issues and contexts.

What is not religion?

First and foremost, religion is not magic (Zmorzanka, Pindel 2006: 794–801), which can manifest in various forms, from "black" to "white" magic. In magic, the focus is on the human being. God, deity, or any other supernatural force essentially has no power. In magic, the human practitioner is the one who directs both human and non-human destinies. They act as the "stage designer," who arranges props and artefacts according to their own vision, and they wield divine forces that ultimately remain under their control. Through a series of ritual actions, the practitioner wants to dominate deities, higher beings, and even the world of spirits.

Magic is the negation of religion, for the latter canters on God, who is beyond human control. The will of God is the ultimate authority in religion. Magic, on the other hand, involves human efforts to control the divine. Magical elements can sometimes infiltrate religions, including those believed to have divine origins. When this occurs, it suggests an internal erosion or distortion of the religion. In such cases, the transcendent is brought into the realm of the mundane. There is a confusion of the ontological order. In magic, "the Great Unknown," meaning God or the deity as defined by various religions, becomes recognized and deciphered by the practitioner. There is no longer any mystery in the supernatural, for it is understood and manipulated by the human being.

Religion is not an ideology. When religion is used as a tool for social control and manipulation by religious leaders or other leaders (both global and local), it contradicts the essence of religion itself. This approach is a form of violence against religion, aimed at ruling over others without respecting their freedom. A religion that serves an ideological role by manipulating human emotions in order to achieve goals known only to the manipulators loses its true purpose. It becomes a sham religion, a quasi-religion, pretending to perform sacred functions. Ideologies often incorporate elements of religion and its doctrine as building blocks for a system that performs extra-religious tasks. Religion transformed into an ideology highlights its institutional dimension, with leaders who claim to have the authority of God himself. Such a transformation poses a significant threat to communities, as it justifies and legitimizes hatred, violence,

and cruelty (most evident during wars) or terrorism. In extreme cases, acts of hatred become almost acts of worship.

According to the utopian system of Marxism-Leninism, religion is merely a result or product of the social class struggle. Religion, this system believed, formed and came into being from the clash between the ruling classes and the masses of poor, powerless people. The "professors" of these totalitarian systems claimed that religions would disappear with the eradication of social classes and the formation of a single classless society with common property, including shared spouses and material objects (Sakowicz 2022: 245–263). Today, we can see that this was a completely false vision of religion.

Ideologues of dialectical materialism proclaimed for decades that religion is a "reflection of the real world that was made a fantasy" (Sakowicz 2015: 85–104). They believed that religions are dangerous for their adherents, as they transport them into a world of fiction, filled with supposedly imaginary facts. Consequently, religions were seen as a kind of asylum for the despairing: places of "refuge" and consolation in the face of traumatic experiences. The thesis of the naturalistic origin of religion, as the invention of a frightened person fearing not only a ruthless ruler but also natural phenomena, contradicts the idea of transcendence. This perspective is a kind of "confession of disbelief" set against a declaration of faith.

Religion is not a product of evolution. With the theory of biological evolutionism (Zon 1983: 1449–1451), which emerged in the 19th century, came the "mirror" theory of the genesis of religions, suggesting that religions developed similarly to living organisms (Sobczak, Zimoń: 1454–1457). This led to the belief in the linear development of religion, progressing through successive stages of "self-improvement" and increasing "subtlety": from polytheism to monotheism. Intermediate stages, in varying order, such as pantheism (the belief that the whole world is a deity or "god") or henotheism (the worship of one supreme deity among many), also emerged.

Although Charles Darwin was not an atheist, the evolutionist theory of the origin of religion eliminated God as the main "cause" of religion and negated its revelatory origin, which says that man is at the root of religion, and ultimately a source of evolution. According to evolutionism, religions are akin to biological organisms: they are born, develop, reach their full potential, give rise to new forms, and

eventually die. Thus, religions are absolutely subject to the law of life and death. Over time, this led to the development of the sub-discipline of religious studies known as the thanatology of religions, which describes the processes of the dying and annihilation of religions.

If religion is not magic, ideology, or a fiction generated by fear and trepidation of the unknown or the absolute, nor is it a product of evolution, then what is it?

What is religion?

Religion is "a phenomenon defined in various ways and described from many perspectives" (Bronk 2003: 393). Richard Pauli's *Das Wesen der Religion*, published in 1947, included 150 definitions of religion (Pauli 1947). Marian Rusecki, in his encyclopaedic article "Religion," published in the *Lexicon of Fundamental Theology* in 2002, mentions nearly 200 definitions of religion, adding that "many of them are close to each other" (Rusecki 2002: 1020). If another author were to note the existence of 300 definitions of religion, they would probably be right. To sum up, we may say that there are as many definitions of religion as there are people.

In antiquity and the Middle Ages, nominal definitions relating to religion were formulated, often linked to the etymology of the term. The philosopher and speaker Cicero (died in 43 BC) derived the word *religio* from the verb *relegere*, meaning "to read anew" or "to conscientiously observe." He defined religion as "the conscientious observance of all that belongs to the worship of the gods," with its essence expressed in discerning from the cosmos man's duties towards God. Religion, therefore, is "the scrupulous worship of the gods" (Berner 1997: 392).

The Christian writer and apologist Lactantius (d. 330) derived the term *religio* from the word *religare*, meaning "the reconnection of man with God," highlighting the bond between man and God as the deepest meaning of religion. St. Augustine (d. 430) derived the term *religio* from the verb *religere*, meaning "to choose again." For St. Augustine, true religion is that by which the soul reconciles itself anew with the God from whom it had previously separated. "The distinctiveness of the divine and human spheres," as assumed by Cicero, Lactantius, and St. Augustine, "would find its continuation in the

distinction (opposition) between the spheres of the sacred and the profane. The Latin concept of religion originally had a legal-administrative tinge typical of Roman culture, unknown to non-European cultures" (Bronk 2003: 394).

The legacy of ancient thinkers has been carried into modern and contemporary times. Although today there are non-nominal definitions of religion—such as functional, indicating the tasks religion performs beyond strictly religious ones (aesthetic or integrative for a community); inductive, presenting common features of different religions while ignoring differences; and analytical, discussing the essential contents of a given religion—the ancient intuitions about the concept of "religion" remain valid (Karas 2002; Maciuszko 1992: 63–81).

One of the most universal definitions of religion, applicable to almost all belief systems (except for Buddhism, which says nothing about gods) (Dajczer 1993), focuses on the relationship between man and deity. Religion is man's existential relationship to a Supernatural Being—this definition effectively and objectively distinguishes what constitutes a religion and what does not. According to this definition, a religion requires a subject and an object, and a reference between them, i.e. the relationship indicated above. "Speaking in the most general terms," Zofia Józefa Zdybicka states, "a religious act is a human act, i.e. a conscious and purposeful behavior of man in which his personal relation to transcendent (sacral) reality is expressed and constituted, especially to the personally understood God" (Zdybicka 1977: 170–171). In religion, the subject is always a person. They represent the starting point of what we define as religion. The human being, in their entire condition, their psycho-physical structure, and as a unity of soul, spirit, and body (as emphasised by realistic philosophy), being a temporal, transient, fragile, and weak being in an existential-metaphysical sense, is confronted with the object of religion: the supernatural Being. This "object" cannot be conceived in a reistic manner, as a thing, or something material. It signifies human point of reference, pointing to a transcendent reality: eternal, imperishable, powerful—omnipotent, being the source and *raison d'être* of existence; both essence and existence, which cannot be said of any living being, including man.

"The existential relationship of man" points to the human person. The Roman logician and philosopher Boethius (d. 524) defined a person as "an individual substance of rational nature" (Krąpiec 2006: 874). This term is unknown in other religious traditions. The concept of a human being (anthropology) varies in different religions, even in monotheistic ones (such as Christianity and Islam). A Buddhist will never say of themselves that they are a person. A Muslim will never claim likeness to God (Allah), as this would compromise the pure monotheism of which Islam is proud. Nor will a Muslim call God a person or address God as "Our Father."

The category of a person and all that constitutes it, developed by Christian philosophy and theology, allows for the recognition of personal dignity, inalienable value, sovereignty of being, openness, primordial solitude, incompleteness, contingency, and fragility of existence in every individual. In relation to transcendence, man—despite his ontic frailty—always appears as a valuable being. He turns to God, engaging all spheres of his existence: reason, will, and emotions. The harmony between these "components" of the person points to his integration, making him responsible for his life and, therefore, responsible for his religion.

The subject matter of religion—the Supernatural Being—is known by various names across different religious or philosophical traditions, such as God, deity, and Supreme Being (in the beliefs of primitive peoples). Different religious systems identify God in various ways: the Triune God (God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit), Yahweh, Allah, and Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu in Hinduism. Philosophy, which distances itself from divine revelation and seeks to explain religion and its reason for existence through reason, refers to the Absolute or the absolute being. The essence of man cannot be equated with the divine being, although some religious systems, such as Hindu thought or the contemporary syncretic New Age movement, attempt to equate man with the Supernatural Being.

The relationship between the subject (man) and the object of religion (deity) is inherently unequal. Man, guided by free will, reason, and emotions, reaches out towards the transcendent as an entity subordinated and subjected to it. This relationship is not one of partnership or rivalry.

The object of religion (God) cannot be understood in material terms. The Supernatural Being has no external (other than itself) source of existence. It has always existed and will always exist, characterised by the fullness of perfection, power, and holiness. It is the origin and purpose of all being. The philosopher of religion, Zofia Józefa Zdybicka, argues that

> Religion is a system of man's relation to some supreme being or highest value, consciously expressed through specific behaviors: recognizing dependence, desiring worship, and striving for the closest possible connection with this being. Religion always involves a reference, directing man's relation "towards" a religious object which, in some way, completes human existence. (Zdybicka 1973: 9).

Similarly, the phenomenologist of religion, Tadeusz Dajczer (d. 2009), states:

> Religion is the existential relationship of man to the Absolute, which man believes in, worships, and seeks for norms of conduct and salvation, expressed in social forms. (qtd. in Markowski 2013: 155–156)

Throughout the study of religion and various streams of Christian thought, there has been a tendency to contrast the concepts of religion and faith (Sakowicz 2020). Karl Barth (d. 1968), a Swiss Evangelical Reformed theologian and leading figure in Protestant dialectical theology, promoted a vision where religion and faith are seen as opposites. He argued that Christianity is not a religion but faith. In the Christianity initiated by God, founded by the Son of God—Jesus Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit (which is precisely why it is faith), man is in direct relationship with God. Here, God reaches out to man with a salvific initiative, and man responds in the way of faith and through faith. The self-revealing God motivates man to faith, whereas religion, according to Barth, is the bottom-up effort of man, who raises his hands upwards, searching for God, often in the dark, a state of wandering or being lost. Barth considered religions "the most absurd form of unbelief and idolatry, an expression of human pride and sin" (Dajczer 1990b: 46).

Each religious system has a number of functions. The most important is its theological role, which defines humanity's relationship to God, the Supernatural Being or deity. Religion also has the "secular" function of helping to integrate individuals within a specific

community, such as a national or ethnic community. It also fulfils an aesthetic role by cultivating an appreciation for beauty. Most importantly, every belief system contributes to forming and sustaining a community (Sakowicz 2007: 543–555). Religion plays a foundational role in shaping who people are. Even if someone identifies as a non-believer, they still benefit from the cultural impact of religion that has influenced the cultural environment they inhabit.

Religion is a part of culture (Sakowicz 2020: 219–221). According to the realistic philosophy upheld by the Catholic Church as "legitimate" and forming the "subsoil" of theology for centuries, values such as truth, goodness, beauty, and holiness (sacrum) are integral to culture and its primary currents. Truth is a value recognized and described by science. Culture is defined by morality, which is oriented towards goodness. Beauty belongs to the realm of art. Finally, holiness (sacrum) highlights religion as a domain of culture that is distinct from science, morality, and art.

Sociologist Émile Durkheim (d. 1917) argued that religion consists of doctrine, cult, morality, and institution. As the founder of the French sociological school, he viewed religion as a purely social phenomenon, tracing its roots, like those of morality and other intellectual categories and institutions, to social consciousness. Durkheim saw religion as a "product of social fear of unknown cosmic forces" (Jacher 1983: 375–376). He believed that religion and morality, through specific symbols, act as factors that consolidate communities. Durkheim equated religious phenomena with social structure and religious life with social life. According to him, society is the ultimate source of religion (Wroczyński 2001: 757–758). Although Durkheim attributed the origins of religion to naturalistic causes, his insights into the components of religion—doctrine, worship, morality, and institutions—can still be valuable to those with religious beliefs.

There is no religion without key doctrinal principles, or religious doctrine, such as God, deities, or the Supreme Being. Doctrine is what sets a religion apart from others and defines its uniqueness; therefore, it is by no means possible to put an equal sign between the doctrines of different religions. Doctrinal relativism is the greatest enemy of religion as such. Even though many religions use similar-sounding terms like God, revelation, salvation, man, and sin, they can by no means be directly compared. Religious doctrine can be

divided into three categories: "the theory of the deity (sacrum), the theories of the world, and the theory of man." In other words, it covers statements about the sacrum, the world, and humanity—essentially theology (proper), cosmology, and anthropology (Maciuszko 1992: 98).

Morality, as a part of culture, also plays a crucial role in religion. Every religion has its own set of codified or catalogued norms of conduct. These norms can be universal, i.e. they oblige believers to act decently and respectfully toward others regardless of their religious identity and affiliation. In particularistic religions, which bring together specific groups (like a tribe), the moral rules apply only within that group and do not extend to outsiders.

The practice of religiousness, or living out and practicing the mysteries of faith, is expressed through worship. This can take various forms, including prayer, sacrifices, penitential acts, asceticism, adoration, both spoken and silent forms of devotion, and the performance of ceremonies. As Janusz Maciuszko (d. 2020) explains:

> Worship is an inalienable part of religion and encompasses both individual and communal practices. It represents the externalisation, or the objectification—of internal religious experiences. The focus of worship is the sacrum in the forms inherent in different religions. Worship activities are directed towards these sacred elements with specific intentions, such as offering homage or making requests. Generally, there is a correspondence between the form of worship and the beliefs and norms of the society: activities that culturally approved. (Maciuszko 1992: 98)

The final component of religion is its institutional aspect, or what is commonly known as a religious organisation. Without an institutionalised form of religious life and practice, including a specific authority (often believed to be appointed by God, a deity, or the Supreme Being) over the community of faith, and without ritual specialists like priests, chiefs, or sorcerers, religion cannot endure over time and space. Joachim Wach, a sociologist and expert in religions (d. 1955), described this as the sociological expression of religious experience (Maciuszko 1992: 105). Janusz Maciuszko argues that: the communal and social institutionalization of religion is a response to the experience of the sacrum and is therefore a derivative of this foundational religious fact. Such processes are fostered by, among other things, factors like a shared community of worship and doctrinal

beliefs, common value systems among followers, approval of specific social structures and expressions, and the authority of religious leaders and reformers, including those who have passed away. Among these, the founders of religions hold a special place, as their teachings form the basis of the religion's existence and require a fundamental acceptance or rejection of their principles, since they normalize the entire religion (Maciuszko 1992: 105).

In summary, following Marian Rusecki (d. 2012), it can be said that:

> In the anthropological and philosophical sense, religion is man's set of references to the invisible sacred and the transcendent. Our existential contingency creates an internal demand for such references, leading us to intuitively sense the possibility of another world that provides a permanent basis and meaning for human existence, and to remain open to it. (Rusecki 2012: 1394)

Specific features of Christianity

In today's postmodern era in which relativism is one of the dominant trends, or even paradigms, all religions are often equated with one another. This view is supported by pluralistic theology, which challenges the traditional interpretation of Christianity given by traditional theology, firmly rooted in the thought of the scholastic philosopher and theologian, the Dominican friar St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274).

Building on earlier reflections, it is clear that Christianity is not magic, an ideology, a result of class struggle, or a reaction to fear or trauma from harsh rulers or natural phenomena. Nor is it a product of evolution destined for inevitable decline. Instead, Christianity reveals humanity's profound relationship with the Triune God, who has disclosed Himself in various ways: through the created world, through and in His creation; in the history of religion and universal history; within human conscience; through human speech; in personal life experiences; and, above all, in the Bible—the inspired Word of God recorded by the authors of the Old and New Testaments—and in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the God-Man.

Christianity, as a religion, is constituted by its distinctive Christian doctrine, which is both original and unique; its worship practices, including the celebration of the Eucharist (the sacrament of Jesus Christ's presence in the world) and other rituals; its lofty moral principles; and, finally, by the institution with a divine-human character—the Church founded by Jesus Christ. Christianity is a specific, original, and unique religion, often described in traditional theology as absolute.

The originality of Christianity

Christianity is both a monotheistic and a universalist religion. It asserts the existence of the one and only, all-powerful God and offers the prospect of salvation to all people. The core of Christianity is faith in Christ.

> The term "Christianity" comes from the title "Christ" (Greek *Christos* and Latin *Christus*), which refers to the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, recognized as the Anointed One and the Son of God, the Messiah, and the Savior of humankind. This is based on Peter's confession of faith: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Mt 16:16). Around the year 43, in Antioch of Syria, Jesus' followers were first called *christianoi* (Acts 11:26). The term likely originated in pagan circles and initially had negative overtones. However, adopted by the followers of the new faith, it began to signify their distinctiveness and identity. (Rusecki 2001a: 484)

The distinctiveness of Christianity from other religions is evidenced by several unique characteristics. Christianity maintains a balance between the transcendent and the immanent (Dajczer 1990a: 22–23). It is not a utopian doctrine detached from the realities of life, nor is it a form of monism that denies either the spiritual or material dimensions of existence. Unlike spiritualism, which views all that has been tainted by matter as alien and hostile, Christianity embraces both the spiritual and material aspects. Christianity is a religion revealed by God (Dajczer 1990a: 24–25). While other religions, such as Judaism and Islam, also claim divine revelation, this does not diminish Christianity's own claims. The revelation presented in the Old Testament by biblical Israel has not been nullified by Christianity. On the contrary, it remains valid, even though its

ultimate fulfillment is found in the revelation of Jesus Christ, which Judaism does not accept.

The distinct feature of Christian revelation is its divine-human dimension. Unlike other religions, including the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths such as Judaism and Islam, Christianity is founded by God Himself. Jesus Christ—the God-Man, as the incarnate Son of God and the second divine person of the Trinity (together with God the Father and the Holy Spirit), was directly involved in establishing Christianity. This religion did not evolve from the religion of biblical Israel according to natural laws. Judaism before Christ neither "conceived" nor "gave birth" to Christianity; rather, its founder is God's Legate: the Messenger, the Messiah. The grafting of an olive branch into a noble vine does not imply a genetic continuation of biblical Israel's religion.

Christianity did not originate in an undefined past. It is thoroughly historical, and alongside the *kairos* (the time of God's special, dynamic action), *chronos* (linear time from past, through the present, to future) plays a key role. In Christianity, there is no cycle of continual returns; time does not come full circle in which what has already been and, at the same time, what is will be again. Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, as God, exists beyond time, or above time. Yet, as a man, He inscribed His life within a specific temporal and cultural framework, adhering to the human experience of time. Jesus was born in a particular historical and geographical context. He did not die merely in a symbolic sense but actually on Golgotha, where the Cross united Earth and Heaven. He also truly rose from the dead.

Christianity is oriented towards the *eschaton*, "the new Heaven and new Earth." Christian eschatology, which refutes theories that speak of an infinite wandering of human souls, or endless reincarnation is another unique aspect the faith. Christianity leads both from here—from the Earth—and from Heaven. The liturgy celebrated on Earth foreshadows the eternal liturgy in Heaven. The central tenet of Christianity is the belief in a Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These are not three "gods" competing with each other and vying for people's favor. The Trinitarian dogma expresses a great, unfathomable mystery, revealing the essence of Christianity, underlining its communal nature, and most importantly, making the irrefutable argument that the driving force and defining

characteristic of Christianity is God who is love. Belief in the Trinity sets the criterion for identifying a Church or ecclesial community as Christian. Rejecting this fundamental truth disqualifies a community from being recognized as Christian.

Christianity is most clearly represented by Jesus Christ Himself. Through the act of incarnation, by taking on human nature, He became like every human being. He is not a deity like those of the Greek or Roman pantheons or the Hindu deities, some of whom became human and were subject to passions and weaknesses. A hallmark of Christianity is the Eucharist, the sacrament of Jesus Christ's presence in the reality of the world.

The cross of Jesus Christ is central to Christianity as a credible religion. It represents both the foundation and the culmination of the faith. All material and spiritual aspects of Christianity are concentrated in the cross as in a lens. The cross focuses in itself all other Christian symbols, giving them validity and power. Through His death on the cross, Jesus Christ liberated humanity from sin and its consequences, redeeming culture, history, and destiny. His death became the source of life, as the tormented Messiah conquered death through His own death. This redemptive act reached its peak in the glorious resurrection of Jesus, who, as the first to rise, gave to all people, to all mankind of all times, the universal hope of salvation. Even in the face of suffering, pain, despair, and hopelessness, a Christian's life has a paschal dimension, carrying the promise of victory and eternal love in God—the promise of salvation.

Christianity is embodied in churches and ecclesial communities. These are incorporated into the visible community of the faithful through the sacrament of baptism, which signifies immersion into the death and resurrection of Christ. The Church is not an organization that functions according to the rules of secular institutions. As the Mystical Body of Christ—an attribute no other institution in human history or non-Christian religion possesses—the Church embodies both the holiness and the sinfulness of its members. It recognizes that all those called to and gathered within it have been endowed by God, by virtue of the grace of baptism, with an inalienable dignity: prophetic, royal, and priestly. The one, holy, universal, apostolic Church is keenly aware of the immutability and indelibility of these marks, as affirmed by centuries of tradition.

The wealth of Christian thought and the treasury of its Tradition come from the teachings of the holy men of God who laid the foundations of the doctrine: the Church Fathers and the early Christian writers. Over the centuries, they have been joined by a host of saints and blessed ones, including the Doctors of the Church. In the early years of Christianity, the disciples of Jesus Christ, those faithful to His teachings, were called "saints." This term did not imply people without sin or guilt, but rather a community called to live according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Saints are humble individuals who understand the truth about themselves and know that their lives find meaning through their faith in Jesus.

Christianity is often described, even by those outside the faith, as a "religion of love." The daily practice of the commandment to love God and neighbour summarises the moral teachings of Christianity, as enshrined in the Old Testament's Decalogue and reaffirmed in the New Testament's Sermon on the Mount. Love of one's neighbour is not a matter of sentimentalism, irrational emotion, exaltation, or elevated thought. It is a daily, heroic effort to overcome self--centeredness and, at the same time, to reach out to others with generosity, kindness, and compassion.

The imperative to love one's neighbour highlights a world of human relationships, references, and interactions; a world liberated from blind tribalism. Christianity is not a tribal community in which neighbours are only those who share a tribal affinity. "There is no longer Jew or Gentile; there is no longer slave or free man; there is no longer male or female, for we are all one in Christ" (Gal 3:28). These words of St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, clearly point to the universal principle of loving others, including those from different "tribes," equally created out of the love of God, the one Father of all humanity. A unique imperative present in Christianity is the commandment to love one's enemies. This commandment does not spring from the naivety of believers in Jesus Christ. Fulfilling this commandment is a testament to one's freedom from aggression and violence. It affirms the power of goodness and the certainty that it alone is "capable" of overcoming evil. This corresponds to St. Paul's advice: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21).

The Bible is the "constitution" of Christianity and sets its foundation. The Holy Scriptures of the New Testament, referred to as Christus scriptus ("Christ written down"), serve as the norm for Christian life. The Bible is the "food" that provides spiritual strength and vitality. "Eat this scroll [book], and go and speak" (Ez 3:1). This sacred biblical imperative points to the necessity of internalizing the Word of God. The spirit of the Holy Scriptures shapes the thoughts, hearts, and personalities of Christians. Daily reading of the Bible strengthens faith and hope and inspires love. The Bible is foundational not only for a strictly religious-evangelizing mission but also for the cultural-creative mission that Christianity has always carried out. Proclaiming the Holy Scriptures has always been the foremost task of missionaries throughout Christian history. They preached the Gospel and simultaneously founded the Church, promoting the divine within the human.

From its inception, Christianity has had a teaching mission, and functioned as a pedagogical community that educates successive generations of followers of Jesus the Teacher. The theology that speaks of God's pedagogy in human life underscores the specific features of Christianity as a religion that leads its believers—like a teacher—to the fullness of humanity. The Bible is, therefore, a "handbook of education." Certain books of the Old Testament, such as the Book of Proverbs, can be directly regarded as pedagogical works.

Universalism of Christianity

Christianity is a universal religion (Budzik, Kijas 2000). The term "universalism," combined with the adjective "Christian," signifies the inclusivity of Christianity as a religion that seeks to embrace all of humanity. The religion of Christ encompasses the entire world, as pointed out in the letters of St. Paul, a Jew by origin who became an apostle to the Gentiles. According to Karol Klauza, the universalism of Christianity is "one of the essential features of this religion ... that reveals its universal nature, global cultural potential, and, in the existential dimension, its connections with all of creation." This universality manifests as existential universalism, indicating "the existential-soteriological nature of God's plan," and cognitive universalism, "which is crucial for understanding God's revelation, the mystery

of the incarnation, and the paschal events." Cognitive universalism encompasses "the participation of all creation, including humanity, in the hope of ultimate fulfillment in God" (Klauza 2002: 1288).

Christianity, as a universalist religion, is the religion of the world and all humankind. The Church, as such, is the sacrament of salvation for all people and a sign of their unity. Christianity has never been confined to a single cultural circle; it has evolved into a world religion characterized by temporal (historical) and spatial (geographical--cultural) universality. The universalism of Christianity (Sakowicz 2006: 337–340) is linked to the universal salvific will of God the Father and the universal work of redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ. The second Divine Person, Jesus Christ, through the paschal mystery (passion, death, and resurrection), redeemed humanity and the human culture in which it exists, fulfilling humanity in both individual and social dimensions. A Christianity that embraces the whole of humanity is inherently opposed to particularism. Its universalism is based on its supernatural nature, as emphasized by the apostolic fathers and apologists (St. Justin Martyr, d. 165; Athenagoras of Athens, d. 190; St. Irenaeus of Lyons, d. 202; St. Clement of Alexandria, d. ca. 215; Tertullian, d. 240; Origen, d. 254; St. Cyprian of Carthage, d. 258).

The rationale for universalism lies in the mystery of the Triune God: God the Father created and sustains the world, the Son of God redeemed it, and the Holy Spirit, who is present among Christians and mysteriously active in non-Christian religions, fulfils the work of Jesus Christ. Catholicism and Orthodoxy emphasise the universal (cosmic) nature of the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, while Protestantism highlights the individual, inner (subjective) experience of salvation through personal faith in Jesus Christ. Christianity, as a universalist religion, proclaims that all human beings, created in the image of God (cf. Gen 1:27) and destined to live with Him as His children, are loved by Him and called to love Him, "Who is Love." This universalism is expressed in the belief in the Parousia of Jesus Christ and the universal resurrection. It is evidenced in Christian morality, including the defence of human life, dignity, freedom, and justice.

Christian universalism is also reflected in the reinterpretation of the principle "Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus," which means "all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is His Body"

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994: 212 [no. 846]). Moreover, the Church acknowledges elements of truth and holiness in other religions, which it does not reject (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions "Nostra Aetate" 1986: 335 [no. 2]). From these premises, it is concluded that all people who discover the truth and fulfil love outside of Christianity belong to the Church (at least in their desire to do so) or are somehow attached to it and can therefore attain salvation, which is the gift of God's love, given through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross (Sakowicz 2008: 94–102).

Czesław Stanisław Bartnik (d. 2020) believed that "the absolute correlative of a universal religion, with all its salvific, existential and praxeological reality, is God—One, the Only One, Universal, and Inexpressible through specific things" (Bartnik 2002: 99). Addressing the issue of particularism versus universalism in Christianity, Bartnik notes:

> For almost two thousand years, Catholic theology espoused a soteriological exclusivism according to which only Catholics could be saved. However, this was a misinterpretation of Mark 16:16. According to the revised teachings of Pius XII and the Second Vatican Council, salvation can also occur in its own way within every religion and through every higher morality. (Bartnik 2002: 101)

This statement points to the shift from Christianity's particularism towards its universalism. It is important to add that the only saviour of all people is Jesus Christ.

* * *

Religion is a complex, heterogeneous phenomenon that has always been a part of human existence. There has never been a time in the history of humankind without religion. It performs a number of functions, not only strictly sacred ones that connect to transcendence in different ways, but also social, integrative, and aesthetic functions. The existential, historical, and cultural contexts of religion necessitate reflection on it and its expressions—behaviors that externalize belief systems and religious practices. The essence of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is the lifelong relationship between

humans and God (in the Trinity). God, who is Love, inspires love in humans for themselves, for others, and even for their enemies. The essence of Christianity is expressed in its revelatory dimension. Christianity did not come into being as a result of historical opportunism or blind determinism but from the salvific will of God fulfilled by Jesus Christ. It is He, the Son of God, who constitutes the unique characteristics of Christianity as a religion.

Christianity does not deprecate, reject, or negate other religions. Christians believe that Christ came into the world for every human being, for all mankind, and liberated everyone and everything through His saving passion, death, and resurrection. The Holy Spirit is present not only in Christianity but also, in mysterious ways, in non-Christian religions and in the consciences of their followers.

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