

AN ENGAGED STUDY OF RELIGION: ACTIVISM, CRITICAL RELIGION AND POTENTIAL RADICAL RELIGIOUS STUDIES CURRICULA

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The activist approach remains a neglected area in the study of religion(s). By activist, we mean a socially engaged yet non-confessional stance that focuses on the scholar dealing with the relationship between religion and the public sphere. While other disciplines are incorporating the socio-political and socially transformative potential of academic knowledge production into their curricula, the field of the study of religion(s) is lagging behind. The (dis)engagement and rejection of activist approaches in the study of religion seems to be determined by paradigms of knowledge production, the dominance of understanding and explanatory approaches, the programmatic socio-political neutrality of the religious studies scholar imposed by the discipline, and claims to the specificity and uniqueness of the object of study. However, as we attempt to show, several modes of engagement can be identified that lie between the scholar's attitudes of engagement and programmatic neutrality in the study of religion(s), namely translating, deconstructing, meditating and transforming. We propose that these modes should be included in the spectrum of approaches that straddle the critical and activist study of religion. We argue for the radical mode of engagement as a further step in developing the link between research and activism in the study of religion. In doing so, we focus on the scholar(s) of religion as an authority figure, an agent of power distribution, capable of proposing reformulations, accompanying negotiations, and supporting processes of reordering the contemporary post-secular public sphere. This article is an invitation to discuss the activist approach within the scientific study of religion. We also hope to stimulate debate on more radical forms of the activist approach, which we would call "the radical study of religion(s)".

KEYWORDS: engaged study of religion, critical study of religion, activism, modes of engagement, ideology, Catholicism, Poland

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING THE FIELD OF ANALYSIS

With this article, we hope to start a more detailed and very necessary debate on the social and political responsibilities of scholars dealing with religion today.¹ In order to do so, we will consider different possible forms of scholarly engagement, focusing on their socio-political implications and their potential for social transformation and the deconstruction of reified categories associated with “religion”. We wish to identify and discuss the various modes of engagement that can be found in the contemporary study of religion and to scrutinise the encompassing conceptual frameworks they may fit in, such as the critical study of religion and the activist approach. Our aim in this article is to commence a discussion about a potential “Radical Study of Religion(s)” curriculum and agenda that would move beyond the intellectual tradition of the critical study of religion as it is currently practiced in the scientific study of religion and towards the activist approach modelled after similar approaches in the social sciences.

Our starting point is to consider activism as the kind of engagement that can shift power relations and thereby introduce social change even on a local or small scale. We contend that when implemented reasonably, scientific knowledge produced in the field of the study of religion(s) can have a substantial impact on current patterns of social imagination leading to intellectual and practical transformations at different levels of public social and religious lives. However, it is crucial to distinguish our proposition for the activist engagement by scholars of religion from other activisms already present in the field of “religion”. It is important to note that this article does not deal with any form of confessional activism aimed at social justice or the common good which has been properly analysed elsewhere (see Tsypylma and Kormina 2023). The area of activism we will concentrate on is defined by the scholar who studies religion, the body of scientific knowledge on religion and its relevance for social, political and public transformation. Therefore, our reflections focus on the public sphere and the academic who approaches religion from a scientific perspective. Given its breadth, we situate our argument in the extensive debate around the epistemologies and development of the secular and post-secular public sphere. We wish to start the debate about the role of the scholar of religion in negotiating, translating, and ultimately forming the post-secular, building on Habermas’s claims about the place of religion as inherent to contemporary configurations of the public sphere (Habermas 2006, 2008) and later debates on reciprocal formations of the religious and the secular within the formal and informal dimensions of the public sphere (Mahmood 2009, 2010; Asad 2003; Mapril et al. 2017). The latter have significant

1 For a thorough overview of the discipline, which also discusses the differences between the American and the European traditions of religious studies see Stausberg (2016).

consequences for contemporary governmentality, deliberative democracy, the formation of citizenship, and the definition of civic rights and obligations, as demonstrated by Cristina Lafont (2013).

In our perspective, “radical” refers to a self-aware and deliberate civic means of involvement by religious scholars who draw on their experience in order to shape the public sphere and public discourses. In such a position, religious scholars abandon their programmatic disciplinary socio-political neutrality and assume the role of an authority figure, an agent of power that can propose and/or enact reforms in the public sphere. In the context of the study of religion, “radical” would denote non-confessional engagement introduced from beyond the religious sphere that has the potential for leading to solutions that have a transforming impact on religious groups and individuals’ lives. This could be accomplished by developing and fostering new fields of imagination and spaces for encounters between religious actors and representatives of the secular public sphere. This may also require action to limit certain hegemonic claims or unilateral discourses. We consider being radical as a form of activist approach. Since acting in accordance with socio-political convictions has been actively discouraged in religious studies, we frame such activist engagement as radical. If, at this point, our argument may seem utopian, further on, we will discuss a number of cases that, in the Polish context, we consider as having potential for activism and radical engagement.

We begin by acknowledging the ambiguity of the relationship between neutrality and engagement in the study of religion. According to McCutcheon (2003), research on “religion” is far from neutral, highlighting the difficulty of navigating through and between different worldviews, the challenges of self-positionality, and the tension between self-conviction and scientific involvement. However, many scholars argue that the scientific study of religion is programmatically neutral, overlooking the question of the social and political involvement of the scholar of religion. We are interested in reversing the logic of the issue of neutrality, and our goal is to explore how the scientific study of religion can be practiced beyond — and most importantly, against — the programmatic neutrality in relation to social and political processes. We argue that the study of religion is fully biased, inherently engaged, and hence potentially appropriate for the activist engagement of the scholar.

First, we are interested in a number of elements that make the study of religion biased, including the formation process of the scholar as an academic subject, local scientific knowledge formations, and the dominant paradigms that organise local knowledge. By doing so, we hope to raise a discussion about the seemingly disengaged nature of knowledge production within the scientific study of religion(s), which has long been seen as a fundamental conviction within the discipline. We aim to dispel this assurance by using the example of the genealogies of the scientific study

of religion in Poland. In particular, we will show how the production of academic knowledge on religion is guided by the changing scientific paradigms as well as the local forms of cultural heritage and religious traditions. We suggest that the academic discourse on religion can substantially influence social imaginaries of religion and shape public debates and performances. This, in turn, can stimulate and influence social and political actions, such as the choice of specific approaches to religious education, the state policies on religious pluralism, or the use of religious sciences in the technologies of atheisation of society, as was in the case in Poland during socialism. This section of our reflection aims to identify a number of fields in the production of scientific knowledge on religion that are inherently socially and politically engaged.

Secondly, we wish to take a closer look at the scholar of religion as a figure who is socially, politically, and religiously involved both in the local socio-political environment as in the shaping of socio-political and religious realities. To illustrate our arguments, we will present a number of cases in which scholars trained in the academic study of religion(s) have been involved as experts in legal proceedings. By doing so, we attempt to shed more light on the multiple possibilities of scholars of religion for social and political engagement and their practical implications. Most importantly, we wish to draw attention to the mediating role of the scholar of religion, who can have the capacity to invert power relations, translate religious and social imaginary in both directions, and mediate between religious and non-religious actors when the public and counter-public spheres need to be reconfigured. Therefore, we aim at reflecting upon the scholar of religion as a potentially significant figure engaged in the distribution of power among particular groups and societies, in citizenship formations, and thus involved in the local governmentality.

Finally, while we seek to understand the individual, social and political implications of the different modalities of the relationship between neutrality and engagement in the scientific study of “religion”, our primary goal is to identify, define, and analyse various modes of engagement present in the field of the study of religion(s) as they appear in particular scientific approaches, such as the critical study of religion and activism. In our view, activism is certainly a spectrum of different forms of engagement that we refer to as modes. The critical study of religion(s) approach is a significant intellectual tradition focused on deconstructing both the reified categories associated with religion and the representations of structures of power, social order and relations that exist in the socio-religious imagination. Thus, it involves modalities of translation and deconstruction in the study of religion that are capable of changing the patterns of social imagination and of the perception of particular processes and structures as well as having transformational effects in social life. However, the critical approach is rarely applied by means of the deliberate engagement of the scholars of religion.

In terms of further theoretical developments of the discipline of religious studies, we are particularly interested in identifying these modes of engagement that have not yet been clearly defined and are deemed peripheral. In our view, a prime example of these unacknowledged, transformative or radical, modes of engagement is activism — which in its most extreme form, we would call the radical study of religion.

This critical paper is based on our extensive experience as scholars of the scientific study of religion. While we cannot yet identify as “radical scholars of religion”, our critical examinations of the current developments in the study of religion have spurred us to question established modes of approaching and researching religion.² We draw upon our experience as teachers of religion at the Institute for the Study of Religion of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. One of us used to head the Institute and worked to change its rigid scientific nature. Now he is a driving force behind the next World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), the leading forum for the academic study of religion(s), to be held in Kraków in 2025. We are both involved in reassessing and deconstructing the implications of the study of religion in the modern period. Moreover, we have both been hired in multiple judicial and various other cases where the expertise of the scholar of religion was deemed dependable and significant or where it was legally mandated. Recently, we established a study group focused on activist knowledge production and practice within the field of religious studies.

In this article, we combine two distinct perspectives: that of a social scientist studying religion in Poland, Africa and in Lusophone contexts, and that of a historian of religions. By doing so, we aim to dissolve the artificial boundary between historical and social sciences prevalent in the study of religion. This boundary, in our opinion, impedes the discipline’s progress and hinders the understanding of the complexity of its research topics.

Our analysis is focused on Poland, as we have identified it as a valuable case study for several reasons. Primarily, the study of religion in Poland not only reflects global trends in the discipline but also presents a diverse and unique analytical material, shaped by the specificities of its historical development and its current social context. The formation of the Polish study of religion(s) in the communist era and its current position in the socio-political context of the alliance between the state and the hegemonic Catholic Church have had significant impact. Therefore, in order to

2 Natalia is currently leading two research projects using the activist approach. The RUM project (<https://rum.project.uj.edu.pl/>) aims to map and categorise “religion” in Polish cities. The output of the project will be published in the form of interactive, open-access maps intended to stimulate debate on public “religion”. In turn, one of the dimensions of the PentActors project (https://pentactors.project.uj.edu.pl/en_GB/) tests the activist involvement of the secular scholar of religion working with Pentecostal communities in Poland.

strengthen our case, we consider the global and local genealogies of the study of religion in Poland. We suggest that the Polish case can serve as a starting point for further reflection and comparison that can help in developing a sound activist and radical study of religion programme. In this, our perspective both from within Poland and more broadly from East Central Europe, appears to be essential for us. We wish to examine how scholars working in different social and religious contexts would respond to our observations and experiences. Thus, we aim to reverse the common academic practice we have seen of scholars struggling to apply theories devised in sensibly different contexts, notably in multiethnic and religiously diverse societies.

IDEOLOGICAL (DIS)ENTANGLEMENTS: “RELIGION” AND THE GENEALOGIES OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN POLAND AND BEYOND

According to the dominant historiographical narrative, the study of religion(s) emerged as a consequence of the secularisation of knowledge in the context of modernisation processes in the West (Molendijk 2005; Molendijk and Pels 1998; Strenski 2015). The discipline was finally established in the second half of the nineteenth century when the chairs of liberal Protestant theology were transformed into chairs of Comparative Religion (Molendijk 2005). Despite efforts to distinguish the new scientific approach from the confessional one, the study of religion(s) shared its subject matter with theology, namely “religion”. Ironically, the object of study was defined theologically. Jonathan Z. Smith aptly described the differences between theological and scientific approaches as “the debate between an understanding of religion based on *presence*, and one based on *representation*” (Smith 2001, 132). It is therefore important to make a clear distinction between an approach that views “religion” as a *sui generis* category, which characterized the mainstream study of religion until the early 1980s (Grottanelli and Lincoln 1998; Kippenberg 2002), and a subsequent critical approach in which “religion” has been seen as an abstract concept and analytical tool created for research purposes (McCutcheon 2003; 2019).

The evolution of this academic discipline has had a direct impact on its present state, encompassing various modes of (dis)engagement. The period from 1870 to 1925 was crucial in shaping the study of religion(s). Friedrich Max Müller, one of the founders of the new discipline (Science of Religion or *Religionswissenschaft*), expressed hope that its development “will change the aspect of the world, and give new life to Christianity itself” (Müller 1867, xix). At the same time, new disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and the psychology of religion have emerged, exploring “religion” not as an isolated essentialised category but as a part of a broader socio-political context (Grottanelli and Lincoln 1998). Beyond the evolutionary scheme that

placed “religion” in the human past and predicted a future based on science, other thinkers attempted to liberate humanity from “religion” by theorising it as an illusion and a consequence of more fundamental social forces, seen in the case of Karl Marx, or, according to Sigmund Freud, as a result of psychological processes (Strenski 2015).

However, the belief in the existence of religion as a *sui generis* reality has persisted. In the classical period of the study of religion, the phenomenological approach to religion became dominant. Researchers following this paradigm developed a procedure for studying “religion” from the perspective of believers. While its primary objective was to grasp the meaning of religious phenomena from an insider’s point of view, phenomenology focused on understanding the religious individual, *homo religiosus*, making sense of life through their sensitivity to the manifestations of the sacred. Romanian scholar and writer, Mircea Eliade, insisted upon the dominant position of phenomenology and firmly believed in the mission of the History of Religions. Specifically, the study of religion was intended to initiate the New Humanism and the restoration of the spiritual centre of the modern world (Eliade 1961). This type of nostalgic post-romantic engagement was based on Eliade’s worldview that developed during his time as an activist in the pre-war Romanian fascist Legion “Archangel Michael”.

In Poland, the study of religion(s) (Polish: *Religioznawstwo*) has developed within a context of several paradoxes. The hegemony of the Catholic Church is the first of these. While the study of religion in the West has its origins in the development of liberal Protestant theology, in Poland, we are confronted with the phenomenon of “Catholic religious studies”, which stood in opposition to the emerging comparative history of religion advocated by local free thinkers (Hoffmann 2004). A second peculiarity, common to all Eastern-European countries after the Second World War, was the presence of a state based on atheist ideology (Bubík and Hoffmann 2015). The state propagated “scientific atheism” as an official worldview, while at the same time actively opposing the Catholic Church and attempting to restrict its ideological influence. The support of the “scientific” study of religion by the Communist Party and the state apparatus associated the discipline with atheistic Leninist-Marxist ideology. This kind of politically supported atheistic engagement cast a long shadow over the future of the study of religion(s) in Poland and discouraged any activism based on Marxist methodology, which is generally associated with the majority of non-confessional activist approaches in academia. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church maintained its role as an independent institution due to its hegemonic position and influential cultural dominance. Church institutions, such as the Catholic University in Lublin, survived the Stalinist era and became an important reference point for decades to come.

In 1957, a group of freethinkers took the initiative of founding the Atheist Intelligentsia Club (the name clearly referred to the Catholic Intelligentsia Clubs that had been formed a few weeks earlier on the wave of the Polish October of 1956). The founders of the club were representatives of the new communist intelligentsia, mostly students and staff of the University of Warsaw, and those involved in the freethinkers' movement, which had been dissolved during the Stalinist period. The rebirth of the freethinkers' movement was crowned by the creation of the Polish Society of Freethinkers and Atheists — a state-sponsored organisation promoting rationalism and atheism. The Polish Society for the Study of Religion was founded in the same intellectual circles (Bubík and Hoffmann 2015).

The development of the study of religion(s) in Poland as a scientific discipline was to some extent dependent on the need to provide teachers for scientifically based Religious Education (RE) in public schools. In the 1980s, the communist authorities initiated the teaching of religious studies in secondary schools. In this context, the creation of the Institute of the Study of Religion(s) at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the Jagiellonian University in 1974 was a milestone. Postgraduate Studies in Philosophy and Religious Studies were established on the initiative of philosophers from the Jagiellonian University and activists from the secular movements of the Communist Party. The main purpose of the new department was to meet the urgent need for training teachers and cultural and educational activists (Szyjewski 2021).

The change of political system in 1989 had significant consequences for the further development of the study of religion(s). First, many of the scientific centres established by the Communist Party were closed, and some scholars were determined to pursue new careers as political scientists, sociologists, or psychologists in the rapidly developing higher education system. Second, the Polish Society for the Study of Religions adapted to the new situation by opening up to cooperation with Catholic religious scholars. One consequence of this development has been the constant blurring of the boundaries between confessional apologetics and the study of religion. Third, the scientifically based Religious Education in secondary schools was abandoned, undermining the teacher-training centres. Instead, the confessional Religious Instruction (RI) provided by the Catholic Church was introduced in secular schools. The scientific study of religion(s), however, did not find a way to disseminate knowledge under the new conditions. The only introductions to the study of religion(s) published in Poland after 1989 were written by Catholic scholars with a religious agenda (Bronk 2003).

Paradoxically, between the Scylla of ideology and the Charybdis of theology, the Polish Society for the Study of Religions has attempted to join the mainstream development of the discipline. As a result of the initiative of a few individuals, two meth-

odological conferences of the IAHR were organised in Warsaw, making an important step in the creation of a contemporary discipline (Tyloch 1984).

The past ideological entanglement between the repressive policies of the communist state and the study of religion(s) has strongly influenced contemporary modes of engagement in the study of religion(s) in Poland. Today, the activist mode of engagement, predominantly inspired by Marxist thought and practice, is suppressed among Polish scholars of religion. Instead, after the fall of state communism, Polish scholars of religion emphasised the need to respect “religion”. This is unexpected because the study of religion(s) is arguably the only humanistic field in Western academia (including Poland) whose subject matter is protected by law and enjoys certain benefits (Smith 2004), such as certain preferential legal solutions for religious organisations. Consequently, expertise in the discipline can lead to the granting or the withdrawal of economic privileges, the protection of religious communities and associations, and the well-being of believers. In most Western legal systems, the accusation of blasphemy has been replaced by the protection of “religious feelings”. The special status granted to “religion” by legal systems and cultural traditions suggests that our discourse on “religion” should be respectful. However, as Bruce Lincoln emphatically stated, respect is a religious, not an academic, virtue (Lincoln 1996).

THE ENGAGED STUDY OF RELIGION: TOWARD A TRANSFORMATIVE MODE OF ENGAGEMENT

While the genealogies of (dis)engagement in the study of religion may explain the current (dis)continuity in the practice and, in particular, the framing of the activist modes of engaged scholarship on religion, in what follows we present several contemporary cases in which engagement takes a practical, applied form. With these cases, we would like not only to reflect on the socio-political implications of the religious scholar’s personal convictions, but also to draw attention to the importance of the corpus of scientific knowledge about religion that the scholar can use while participating in socio-political processes in Poland.

In Poland, scholars of religion are often involved in expert work for regulatory state structures such as legal proceedings. This is stipulated by the Polish Penal Code, which contains a section — Chapter XXIV — defining crimes against freedom of conscience and religion. These are divided into three main articles: 194, 195, and 196, which are currently being used in a number of court cases in Poland. The first one addresses discrimination based on religious conviction and may refer to cases where access to the free choice and the practice of “religion” is restricted or hindered, as well as the right to non-denominationalism and atheism. Article 195 deals with “malicious” interference with the public performance of a religious act by a church

or any other lawful religious association as well as with funerals, celebrations, or mourning rites. Article 196 may be seen as the most problematic, as it refers to a person who “offends the religious feelings” of others by publicly insulting an object of religious worship or a place intended for the public performance of religious rites. Judgments in these cases can have serious consequences. If an act is qualified as an offence under one of these articles, the perpetrator may be fined, deprived of liberty, or imprisoned for up to two years.

While similar provisions can be found in the penal codes of many countries around the world, in Poland, according to police statistics, the number of denunciations and prosecutions has increased significantly in recent years, coinciding with the rise to power of the right-wing populist political faction. Proceedings related to “religion” began to reflect the worldview and ideological cleavages present in Polish society. If in 2010, the number of proceedings initiated under Article 196 was 52 and the number of offences established was 48, these figures started to increase significantly after 2015. In 2017, these figures were 70 and 60 respectively, reaching 130 and 97 in 2020.³ Last year, in 2022, some members of the right-wing political group *Solidarna Polska* (“Solidarity Poland”) began lobbying for a restriction of the provisions of the Penal Code, in particular Article 196. Politicians from this group emphasised the ineffectiveness of the current provisions, which they said had contributed to an increase in crimes against believers on the grounds of their religion.⁴ However, the parliamentary project was not supported by the ruling party, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (“Law and Justice”), and politicians from *Solidarity Poland* launched a petition for the civil project “In Defence of Christians”. With 380,000 signatures, the document was submitted to the parliament in October 2022.⁵ A few months earlier, the centrist political party *Nowoczesna* (“Modern”) had announced the introduction of a bill to remove Article 196 from Polish law.

These cases show how, in Poland, a legal judgement related to “religion” is deeply intertwined with political agendas and particular worldviews. Articles 194-196 are the basis for legal reasoning, although they are based on subjective premises, such as “offending religious feelings” or “malicious interference”, categories that require interpretation in each new case. Thus, the interpretation of the alleged perpetrator’s act may depend on the context, the pressure of governmental power structures that enforce and suppress civil liberties, the worldview and level of engagement of the

3 <https://statystyka.policja.pl/st/kodeks-karny/przestepstwa-przeciwko-5/63492,Obraza-uczuc-religijnych-art-196.html> (accessed 15.01.2023).

4 *Solidarna Polska*, Twitter post 14 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/SolidarnaPL>

5 [https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki9ka.nsf/Projekty/9-020-881-2022/\\$file/9-020-881-2022.pdf](https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki9ka.nsf/Projekty/9-020-881-2022/$file/9-020-881-2022.pdf) (accessed 05.01.2023).

expert called upon to explain the case, the expert's personal agenda, and, finally, the expert's theoretical choice of reasoning and justification.

Two of the many examples that have appeared in the public media in recent years illustrate the entanglement between the study of religion and social criticism. The first case concerns the event organised to mark the anniversary of the head of the main Catholic radio station in Poland, Radio Maryja, a well-known controversial public figure, priest, and businessman, Tadeusz Rydzyk. Organised by a group of activists, the "commemoration" took the form of an artistic happening in front of the headquarters of Radio Maryja and aimed at criticising the irregularities of the Catholic Church in Poland, which, according to the protesters, were embodied by Tadeusz Rydzyk. The activists pointed to the Church's accumulation of capital and its hegemony over social life in Poland. They listed several "sins" of the Polish Catholic Church such as conceit, arrogance, and hypocrisy. The means used by the activists were typical of a carnivalesque, festive logic: masquerade, exaggeration, irony, and sarcasm. The first part of the event was reminiscent of the popular May/June celebrations of the Polish Catholic Church, such as Corpus Christi. Several people formed a processional group, some wearing cassocks. A group of women carried an image mounted on a stick resembling a maypole, which they called the "Queen Vagina" (*Królewska wagina*). It was a crowned image of the vagina and bore a passing resemblance to the image of the "Sacred Heart of Jesus", later interpreted by the critics as the monstrosity. According to feminist activists, the intention of the image was to empower women in the context of the patriarchal culture of the Polish Catholic Church. A significant part of the performance was a list of the Church's greatest sins, combined with the declaration of "apostasy", which the activists claimed could free people from membership of such a disreputable institution as the Polish Catholic Church.

In Poland, the declaration of apostasy is being discussed and performed with increasing frequency — an important fact in a country where the majority of the population are automatically counted as members of the Catholic Church by virtue of infant baptism. The event has triggered pro and con statements, debates, and polemics, reflecting the polarisation that exists in Polish society and is often referred to as Poland's culture war (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Some of the protesters were accused of violating Article 196 on offending religious feelings, in particular with the "Queen Vagina", other reinterpreted Catholic symbols, and the figure of Tadeusz Rydzyk. Although the event was legally registered and protected by the police under the freedom of civic expression and freedom of speech, several performances of the event were perceived as contradicting these civil rights and were prosecuted. The responsibility and the expertise of the scholar of religion was to navigate between the manipulation of various Catholic symbols, which was unacceptable for some

Catholics who found it offensive, and the obvious tendency hidden behind the accusation of suppressing certain forms of social protest, criticism, and freedom of expression in relation to the religious worldview. In this case, the expert opinion went against Catholic claims that were interpreted as a way of suppressing social protest and criticism. The expert's position was clearly informed by the constructivist model of "religion", which places this category in a limited socio-religious space that should not infringe upon or violate fundamental civil rights such as freedom of speech and expression. The performances were interpreted as a carnivalesque type of artistic activity that allowed the use of tools such as irony, parody, and exaggeration under the rule of *licentia poetica*. According to this perspective, the expert associated the manipulation of religious symbols with social imagination, creativity, the reproduction of popular culture, and freedom of speech.

Another similarly mediatised case was that of the "Rainbow Mary". It concerned the distribution in the city of Płock of stickers depicting a reworked image of Our Lady of Częstochowa, one of the most popular images of Mary among Polish Catholics. The image is historically associated with Polishness and the Polish-Catholic connection. Some activists added a rainbow halo to the original image. The act was a reaction and commentary to the use of anti-LGBT elements in the traditional Easter decoration of the tomb of Jesus at St. Dominic's Church in Płock.

While the authors of the "Rainbow Mary" were prosecuted but acquitted, the justification for the verdict was based on the expert opinion of a scholar of religion (Archiwum Osiatyńskiego 2021).⁶ Among other things, the acquittal was justified by arguments drawn directly from the religious worldview, which made the legal analysis unduly dependent on various elements of religious doctrine. For example, the judge stated that the reworked image did not depict sexual acts between non-heteronormative persons, and that only such acts could be considered sinful according to Roman Catholic teaching and therefore subject to legal action. It was also said that the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church does not exclude non-heteronormative people from the community of believers. Both arguments led to the conclusion that the rainbow added to the halo did not offend Catholics and, implicitly, that it did not contravene official Catholic doctrine. Such an understanding appeared in another argument, in which the judge explained that the Catholic Church does not regulate in any formal and unambiguous way how the image of the Mother of God and the Baby Jesus is to be presented. Therefore, the alteration of the image by the activists does not violate the internal regulations of the Catholic Church. Problematic statements in the acquittal were combined with arguments based on the "understanding", approach, derived from the phenomenological tradition in the study

6 <https://archiwumosiatsynskiego.pl/wpis-w-debacie/tecza-symbol-dumy-osob-lgbt-nie-niesie-ponizajacych-tresci-uzasadnienie-wyroku-slowo-w-slowo/> (accessed 02.01.2023).

of religion, which apparently prioritised an emic understanding of religion based on Catholicism. As a result, although the judge recognised the cause and purpose of the act as embedded in social protest, the justification of the final judgement derived its premises from a religious worldview.

The case of the evangelical pastor Paweł Chojecki, the owner of a local Internet TV channel, who publicly criticised Catholicism, illustrates different dimensions of the serious engagement of the scholar of religion. For several months, he repeatedly referred to certain elements of Catholicism, such as the Virgin Mary or the Eucharist, using coarse and explicit language. His programme attracted attention and he was sued by several Catholics for “offending religious feelings”. Although part of the expert report commissioned for the purposes of the legal proceedings recognised that the pastor’s remarks arose from and were embedded in the paradigm of Protestant criticism of Catholicism, the expert went beyond the scope of the assessment. Using his legitimacy as a specialist of “religion”, the expert extended his competence giving an opinion on the tone and form of Chojecki’s utterances. Chojecki’s criticism was condemned and found offensive on the basis of the evaluation of the character of his communication. In addition, the expert gave an opinion on a matter outside his area of competence and made a number of mistakes, which were pointed out in a separate independent opinion prepared and made public at Chojecki’s request by the former Dominican monk Tadeusz Bartoś (Redakcja IPP 2021).⁷ As a result, Chojecki was threatened with several months’ imprisonment, which he subsequently appealed against. The seriousness of the situation lies in the legitimisation of any statement made by an expert on “religion”, which could ultimately have detrimental social consequences in the violation of freedom of expression and in the limitation of any criticism.

Another case relates to the impact on civil liberties — such as exercise of the right of some groups to self-organisation, self-determination, freedom of expression or even the freedom of belief. The expertise was prepared by a number of scholars working at the Institute for the Study of Religion at the Jagiellonian University, the oldest in Poland and one of its kind in the country (Banek and Czarnecki 2013).⁸ The report considered the application by members of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) for official state registration as a religious organisation in Poland. The expert opinion denied the group’s right to be called a “religion”. At an individual level, the experts wrote, the Church of the FSM could be considered a religion, as anyone is allowed to believe in whatever they wish. On an institutional level, however,

7 <https://idzpodprad.pl/aktualnosci/tylko-u-nas-prof-bartos-kontra-prof-przybyl-sadowska-w-procesie-pastora-chojeckiego/> (accessed 23.05.2023)

8 https://www.klps.pl/downloads/klps_ekspertyza.pdf (accessed 01.11.2023)

the experts argued that the application should be rejected because accepting it would have legal and governmental implications that could not be accorded to the explicit parody of religion. These arguments are weak for several reasons. On the one hand, the experts described the Church of the FSM as a joke religion and maintained that such a model should not be considered in religious terms. In doing so, the experts brought into play an obvious hierarchy in which only serious religions are allowed to be framed as such. At the same time, they explained what “seriousness” could mean in this case. The justification made it clear that “adult and reasonable” people could not believe in the FSM as the creator of the Universe, an omnipotent and omniscient being. Paradoxically, such a statement revealed the experts’ own biases for a Christian worldview. On the other hand, the experts based their definition of “religion” on a number of older works of Rudolf Otto, Cornelius P. Tiele, Natan Söderblom, and Joachim Wach. As a result, they focused on distinguishing “religion” from a non-religion by capturing it in Otto’s terms of *das Heilige* (the sacred). This concept, in Otto’s sense, has long been outdated as a heuristic tool in the study of “religion”, as it refers to essentialised and theological understanding of “religion”. As a result, this expertise has created a precedent for judging “religion” according to both inadequate and arbitrary categories.

With these cases, we have brought into the debate further modes of engagement by scholars of “religion”. Above all, we wanted to present some examples of how different kinds and levels of engagement by religious studies scholars can be put into the service of tasks of high socio-political responsibility. These cases show that the expertise of scholars of religion can have serious implications for both individual lives and social groups. More generally, it can shape certain social imaginaries and normative discourses about various religious categories and narratives that can be applied, whether in the implementation of social justice, civil rights, and support for minorities, or in the legitimisation of authoritarian governmentality, hegemonic worldviews or the personal agenda of the expert. In this sense, the scholar of religion becomes an important actor in the socio-political process, mediating between different power structures and understandings of “religion” as having legal, social, civil, and even national security implications (Jensen 2006). Such engagement can be understood as transformative and, as we argue below, it has the potential to be included in the radical study of religion curriculum.

ACTIVIST APPROACH IN STUDYING RELIGION: TOWARD THE RADICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

Building on the previous sections, we would like to reflect on how to make a place for activism in the study of religion(s). Our still incomplete definition of the activist

approach in the study of religion(s) should grow from the conscious socio-political engagement of the scholar and a specific and carefully applied theoretical corpus that is used to intervene in the socio-political process.

Looking at the relationship between activism and anthropology, which continues to be a widely debated issue, may be helpful in structuring our reflection. Indeed, there are a number of common points between the arguments about applied or engaged anthropology and our own aims in studying religion. According to some anthropologists (Warren 2006; Willow and Yotebieng 2022), the process of knowledge production can already be understood as a kind of transformative social engagement if we consider outputs such as reinterpretation, translation, and the deconstruction of established ways of meaning-making and thinking. In light of the legal procedures presented above, we should now agree that all cases in which the scholar of religion questions “religion” as a reified category are valuable for revealing and deconstructing the hidden social structures, relationships, and formation processes that lie behind common, locally binding notions of “religion”. Such endeavours, as we have seen, can have serious implications for dismantling established power structures and bridging or breaking down the connections between “religion” and other aspects of social life.

Going a step further, such an approach is related to what Charles R. Hale calls cultural critique in anthropology, “an approach to research and writing in which political alignment is manifested through the content of the knowledge produced, not through the relationship established with an organized group of people in struggle” (Hale 2006, 98). The rapidly developing sub-discipline of critical study of religion(s) operates within a similar paradigm (Goldstein 2020; Miller 2022) rooted in a constructivist theory of religion that privileges the translation and deconstruction of particular categories. We recognise that in the study of religion(s), such deconstruction, and the “disenchantment” it entails, may also have significant social implications, for example on processes of social imagination. When we speak of “disenchantment”, we do not necessarily mean secularisation, deconversion or apostasy. We rather refer to the raising of an awareness that allows one to reconsider one’s own positionality and level of involvement in relation to “religion”, reflect on the scope and meaning of specific categories of “religion”, and develop sensibility to public and hegemonic discourses on “religion”. We propose to call such an attitude the “religious science imagination” (Polish: *Wyobraźnia religioznawcza*, German: *Religionswissenschaftliche Vorstellung*) which is akin to similar concepts in anthropology (Mencwel 2006) and sociological imagination (Mills 2000). Following Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish’s radical imagination project (2014) we argue that imagination is crucial for the ability to create “something else, and to create it together” (Haiven and Khasnabish 2010, iii). Therefore, we consider “religious science imagination” as part of the activ-

ist project of shaping public sensibilities about “religion” in order to pave the way to discussions on public social practices between different religious and non-religious actors. Jonathan Z. Smith insisted on the role of imagination in the study of religion, pointing to the necessity to understand religion as an entirely constructed and abstract concept, imagined as real and operational by various individuals, groups and institutions, so that it is perceived as a shaping force of social structures and processes (Smith 2004). In our view, one of the key pillars of activist modes of engagement in the contemporary study of religion may be the involvement of the scholar of religion in the process of social actors developing such an imagination. This is mainly due to the educational potential that lies in this self-conscious deconstructive project that leads to the de- and re-configuration of “religion” and its socio-political entanglements.

The modes of engagement described above are hardly consistent with the activist approach in anthropology, according to which it implies engagement and knowledge production in association with particular communities or groups, where conformity to a given group’s worldview, its claims and emic concepts is crucial (Kirsch 2002; Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016). In the case of the study of religion, such a situation reveals the field’s specificity, because working in association with a community may involve supporting its theological understanding and confessional worldview, going against the foundations of the contemporary developments of the discipline, which is paradigmatically non-confessional. For this reason, we propose that considering the “vector of activism” is crucial in the conceptualisation of the activist paradigm in the study of religion. It is legitimate to ask where the locus of the applied activist’s power lies, and what the expected direction of activist action is. This has to do with the scholar’s orientation, goals, and self-positionality. Anna Willow and Kelly Yotebieng’s comment (Willow and Yotebieng 2022) on the hazy boundaries between anthropological research and activism in the case of applied anthropology can serve as a good example. While for applied anthropologists it is often difficult to draw a line between their activist and academic identities, for scholars of religion such division needs to be much clearer to prevent their possible confessional engagement.

Another important dimension to consider is the relationship between minority and hegemony, which appears to be especially significant when determining the activist mode of engagement of the religious scholar. As mentioned, the “vector of activism” may point in different directions depending on whether the scholar is working with a minority or the dominant religious group. In the former case, the engagement may be carried out with the aim of protecting the rights of a given group (see the examples of “pastor Chojecki” and “FSM”), whereas in the latter case, the vector may be directed towards safeguarding the secular sphere (see the examples of “Tadeusz Rydzyk” and “Rainbow Mary”). The former case would favour the mediating mode of the scholar’s engagement, protecting freedoms and rights of self-deter-

mination. This is precisely what the experts failed to provide in the arguments concerning the Church of the FSM. The latter case, on the other hand, would advance a regulatory and preventive policy, limiting the repressive practices that restrict social and civil liberties. In turn, the “Tadeusz Rydzyk” case could serve as an illustration of how the scholar of religion might use secular logic to draw an interpretative line against charges of blasphemy and “offending of religious feelings”. Despite the final judgment protecting civil liberties, the “Rainbow Mary” case could serve as a failed example where the expert missed the point and based the argument on confessional premises. As such, the case held the potential to change the public discourse and imagination about the ontology, place and function of religious images and objects in the public sphere. It also had the ability to serve as the precedent for future similar cases. Instead, the interpretation of the act was relegated to the religious realm. In this instance, the expert of religion had the opportunity to act according to the radical mode of engagement, but he did not.

It is legitimate to ask whether the study of religion(s) is prepared for a more radical mode of engagement, one in which the scholar of religion would be directly involved in, alongside, outside, or even in opposition to some dimensions of “religion” (for example, taking a stand on issues such as hegemonic, dominant religious institutions and their discourses, as in the “Tadeusz Rydzyk” and “pastor Chojecki” cases where a clear position against Catholic claims was urgently needed). Such involvement would not only work at the level of deconstructing reified categories and creating new imaginaries of “religion” in social life, but it would also likely be an audible voice calling for more radical social and political reconfigurations, and opening up new arenas where negotiations between religious and non-religious actors could take place. We suggest that a radical activist mode of engagement would initiate a new dimension in the study of religion, in which the figure of the scholar of religion would take on a diagnostic role, identifying cleavages in the social spaces that affect religion and need to be redesigned in order to better negotiate the reconfigurations of the public sphere, the protection of civil liberties, the redefinition of the social contract, and the work toward multiple forms of social, economic, and legal justice. Such a stance would also pose new challenges for religious institutions, groups, and individuals, who would be encouraged to rework and rethink the boundaries of their religious imaginary and practice in relation to the public and counter-public spheres. The limits and threads of the radical approach need to be further explored. The question arises as to whether a radical curriculum in religious studies is possible without undermining the founding idea, which still persists in various disciplines dealing with religion, of the hyper-particularity of the object of study and engagement, namely “religion” itself.

CONCLUSION

We hope that our reflections on the activist approach to the study of religion(s) will stimulate a more in-depth and complex debate than we were able to present in this short scientific contribution. Tackling this issue is urgently needed both for religious studies and other disciplines that study “religion”, such as anthropology and sociology. While the social engagement of the scholars is increasingly being discussed in academic circles, the study of religion has been slow to follow suit, lagging behind current developments in rethinking the idea of the university, the production of scientific knowledge, and the social responsibilities of scholars. We acknowledge, however, that the activist approach to the study of religion(s) poses new challenges to “activist scholarship” and requires the construction of new ways of navigating between religious and non-religious actors, and between different models of religious presence in the public sphere. As we have shown, in the case of the study of religion, the academic production of knowledge, the dominant scientific paradigms that govern the operational corpus used to reflect on “religion”, the local religious and cultural heritage, and the local socio-religious landscape significantly shape the attitude of the scholar and their modes of engagement. The wide range of activist modes in the activist approach to the study of religion(s) could also be considered as the specificity of this field of study.

Most importantly, we would like to add that although we are speaking from Eastern-Central Europe, our academic belonging is grounded in the European tradition of the study of religion. This fact limits our capacities to reflect on an activist approach to the study of religion while being “outside Europe”, where the activist vectors described above may have different locus and directions. Even if the activist mode in Europe is mostly used in post-secular negotiations of power relations, it is still largely rooted in post-Enlightenment constructs of separation between secular and religious spheres (see Mahmood 2009). Future debate on the place of activism in the study of religion(s) therefore needs to cover a far wider range of contexts and cases, especially when it comes to multiethnic and religiously diverse societies.

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