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Can Interdisciplinarity Be Overcome in the Political Science of Religion?

Abstract: The article presents the problem of interdisciplinarity as a crisis of modern science. As a solution, it is proposed that a common methodological basis should be developed for science in general, which should begin with defining man as a spiritual and corporeal being. This basis makes it possible to develop an integrated model of science in general. This issue is of great importance for religious studies, including the political science of religion.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, crisis of science, political science of religion

Abstrakt: W artykule ukazano problem interdyscyplinarności jako kryzys współczesnej nauki. Jako rozwiązanie podano konieczność wypracowania wspólnej podstawy metodologicznej dla nauki w ogóle, którą jest w punkcie wyjścia zdefiniowanie człowieka jako istoty duchowo-cieleśnej. Ta podstawa umożliwi wypracowanie integralnego modelu nauki w ogóle. Kwestia ta ma istotne znaczenie dla badań religii w tym politologii religii.

Słowa kluczowe: interdyscyplinarność, kryzys nauki, politologia religii

Interdisciplinarity is the most emphatically highlighted value in contemporary science. One of its varieties is the equally often emphasized transdisciplinarity. Since the beginning of its existence as a research practice, interdisciplinarity has given rise a number of doubts, however. There are three – largely independent, if not mutually contradictory – sources of resistance to the category of interdisciplinarity: a) opposition to the “noticeable practice of financing research”; 2) if “interdisciplinarity is considered an answer to the idea of closed disciplines of science, with their separate objects and methods of study”, it is criticized for unjustified violation of borderlines between individual disciplines; 3) “when a complete redefinition of the borderlines between individual sciences, or even their abolition,

is postulated, interdisciplinarity is considered to be an incomplete proposal which does not overcome problems resulting from the traditional understanding of disciplines as isolated and autonomous” [Tabaszewska 2013: 114-115].

A brief definition of interdisciplinarity says it is “an individually performed confrontation of one’s own discipline with another (or others)” [Hejmej 2008: 87; as quoted in *ibid.*: 115]. The goal of such a confrontation is to get a better understanding of the studied phenomenon. It is pointed out that “understood in such terms, interdisciplinarity does not contravene the conviction about the existence of relatively separate disciplines and the need to appreciate their respective methodologies” [Tabaszewska 2013: 116]. In this approach, every scholar representing a particular discipline of science draws upon another, less important one. This flaw in the understanding of interdisciplinarity was to be overcome by multidisciplinary, transdisciplinarity, and finally by adisciplinarity.

Transdisciplinarity was supposed to overcome the apparent opening of scientific disciplines as a radicalized version of the interdisciplinarity project. In this approach, theories kept expanding, while applications of theoretical discourse became more and more dispersed. Researchers were supposed to aim at a utopian, integrated description of their study object. The interdisciplinary approach failed to provide a perspective broadening the field of study. Instead, this goal was to be achieved by transdisciplinary studies. They were supposed to enable going beyond individual disciplines and challenging traditional divisions. Transdisciplinarity, unlike interdisciplinarity, deals with those areas “whose assignment to a particular discipline is not clear-cut, or which do not yield to the accepted divisions between individual disciplines” [*ibid.*: 118]. Thus, the difference between transdisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity consists first of all in a different approach to the existing borders between disciplines. Interdisciplinarity “examines the borderlands between disciplines, drawing on non-contradictory methodologies” [*ibid.*: 117]. The concept of transdisciplinary research is supposed to enable “studying those phenomena which are located in between individual disciplines of science, and which cannot be assigned to any of them, or to any one discipline existing as an inalienable part of more than one of them”. Concepts relevant for more than one discipline, but not functioning in them in the same way, have been investigated by Mieke Bal [Bal 2002], who used the example of traveling concepts situated in the borderland between discourses, while remaining ever beyond their field of interest. It should be recognized, however, that by applying the phenomenological method it could be

demonstrated that travelling concepts are not necessarily situated in the borderland between discourses, and much less beyond their field of interest. Mieke Bal claims that concepts perform the function of mini-theories.

It could be argued that the progressive specialization and departmentalization of sciences has pushed scientific research in the direction of interdisciplinarity, which ultimately resulted in even greater fragmentation. We are now facing huge numbers of papers and theories marked with the label of interdisciplinarity. And the word itself works like a magic charm which is supposed to legitimize any activity aspiring to scientificity. The label of interdisciplinarity is now replacing the notion of science.

Difficulties with inter-, multi-, or trans-disciplinarity show that these fashionable terms are functioning in relation to the crisis of science and the excessive fragmentation of scientific disciplines within particular areas of knowledge. This crisis has been brought about by a crisis of the philosophy of science, which provided the basic categories necessary to define the foundations of scientificity.

The Humanistic Breakthrough

To provide an example, let us limit ourselves to the significant – in our opinion – moment when the distinction between natural sciences and humanities was first pointed out. This took place during the anti-positivist breakthrough at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Wilhelm Dilthey was the first to discuss the problem of the foundations of humanistic studies. He pointed out the distinct nature of natural sciences and the humanities in 1883 [Dilthey 1922]. His most important work on the subject is *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* [Dilthey 1910]. Their distinctiveness was also emphasized by neo-Kantians of the Baden School - Wilhelm Windelband and his student Heinrich Rickert. Dilthey claimed that unlike in the positivist ideal of science which included only natural sciences, humanities were real sciences which differed from natural sciences. He saw this difference in their respective objects of study. The object of natural sciences is nature, while the object of humanistic sciences is the historical and social reality. Humanities are concerned with individuals, people, nations, social systems, the artefacts of culture.

Windelband, on the other hand, stressed the distinction between humanities and natural sciences resulting from their respective methodologies. He asserted that natural sciences established laws, while humanistic sciences established facts. The

former were general in nature, the latter – idiographic. Rickert situated humanities among other sciences based both on their separate methodologies and their respective objects. This way, the division of sciences into natural and cultural ones was established.

Today, we would say that the humanistic turn had been brought about by the crisis of science at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. The separation of humanities from natural sciences in view of their different objects of study was at that point a creative solution to the crisis of the then contemporary science.

Nowadays, attempts at emerging from the crisis of science arise from the fact that the far-reaching specialization and the unprecedented advance of knowledge within particular sciences hinder their mutual communication, while the expanding scopes of individual sciences lead to solutions referred to as inter-, multi-, trans-disciplinarity, etc. We believe that such attempts result from a failure to realize that the source of this excessive fragmentation of science is the lack of consent about the definition of man.

As an example, let us look at cognitive sciences which, aside from the senses, also study the brain and the mind. Cognitivists deal with language, perception, thinking, awareness, decision-making, and intelligence. Cognitive sciences are referred to as interdisciplinary studies, situated on the borderlands of many disciplines, including linguistics, cognitive psychology, neurobiology, philosophy of the mind, logics, artificial intelligence, and physics [cf. Duch 1998; Bremer 2016: 7]. Can this multidisciplinaryity be overcome? We believe it can, once we agree that man is a complex being, and that one of the essential elements of the human nature is the integral unity of body and spirit. Man is a corporeal and spiritual (psychosomatic) being. What consequences result from this definition for the theory and methodology of scientific research?

Looking for solutions to the unforeseen difficulties encountered in her attempts at a new inter-discipline which she calls “cultural analysis” [Bal 2002: 4], as a remedy Mieke Bal suggests that we need a fundamental change in the way we think about methodology within individual disciplines. She writes: “it is possible to overcome the three major – indeed, potentially dangerous – drawbacks of cultural studies [...] Within an interdisciplinary setting, coverage – of the classics, of all periods or ‘centuries,’ of all major theories used within a field – is no longer an option. Nor is ‘sloppy scholarship.’ If a different alternative can be articulated, the divide,

which is the second drawback, can be lessened. The creation of a methodological common ground [...] is the only unified answer” [ibid.: 8]. This search for “a methodological common ground” should begin with defining the essence of man. A corporeal and spiritual being cannot be studied as though he was made up of two autonomous and independent parts. On the one hand, the human body is studied by biological studies; on the other, the spirit is studied by the humanities and social studies. This fragmentation and reduction of the human being to one of these inseparable parts results in reductionist scientific theories suffering from a drawback which results, if not from erroneous assumptions, than at least from a reductionist concept of the essence of man. An awareness of the insufficiency of studies within such frameworks in individual sciences has led to inter-, multi-, trans-, or a-disciplinary models. We believe that in order to overcome these attempts at emerging from the crisis of science, we must assume that man is, in essence, a spiritual and corporeal being, and can only be studied as such. This applies equally to all of man-created reality.

The difficulty that arises here, however, is well-known to science, namely: how can the subject be simultaneously the object of study? An answer to this question is sought both by philosophy and by cognitive sciences. We will not dwell on this problem of the theory of cognition here, however. We are interested in a model of science in general; not a model of any of the particular sciences, but a model which needs to be developed for science as such, when we consider man as an integral corporeal and spiritual being.

We believe this approach to be of great significance, as studies on man defined in this way also have considerable practical consequences. Such studies will have a revolutionary impact on the whole of both the individual and the collective life of man. Already the Greeks realized this fact when they emphasized the integral development of the human body and spirit, and we are just as aware of it today. This is demonstrated by such concepts as psychosomatics [Gapik 2013], or psychodermatology [Makowska, Gmitrowicz 2014], etc. Publications which provide reasons for recognizing the need to build a theory of science founded on the definition of man as a psychosomatic whole are many. By accepting an anthropology based on such a definition of man, we can found science on new assumptions and ensure unity between sciences. I believe we are closer to this ideal than we think. Interdisciplinary approaches have contributed to the achievements of many sciences whose development had been inhibited by boundaries and methods. Interdisciplinarity has been an attempt at remedying

this standstill, which has brought considerable achievements, but failed to resolve the crisis; for this, we need an in-depth reflection on what the crisis actually consists in. The above definition of man opens up new opportunities for research. They will be fruitful to the extent that they are preceded by an effort to build a theory which provides a basis for developing appropriate methods of studying man as an integral being, and of his products as those of a corporeal and spiritual whole. We can see entirely new possibilities of research here, which may bring sciences together. And not only sciences in the area of humanities and social sciences, but also both of these areas and that of biological or theological studies.

To conclude this part of our reflection, let us refer to Thomas Aquinas for whom man was a unity of body and soul [Krapiec 1979; id. 1991: Chapter XII; id. 2009]. Personalism focuses on man as a person and warns against any reductionism or dualism in understanding man: “When talking about an integral view of man in personalism, one must take into account all that constitutes man as a human being, avoiding the traps of both reductionism and dualism. If this can be achieved, we may say that we are dealing with the human person, with a real man. Man conceived in a reductionist or dualist way is neither a person nor a man” [Daszkiewicz 2010].

A New Approach to the Study of Religion

This new approach is also a rational way of overcoming reductionism and the problematic interdisciplinarity in the study of religion. Man understood as a spiritual and corporeal unity no longer needs, as a religious being (*homo religiosus*), to be the object of studies reserved solely for representatives of such sciences as theology, the history of religion, or religious studies [Bronk 2009: 35, 159 *passim*]. Man as a corporeal and spiritual being is, by definition, a religious being even when he tries to assert his identity in opposition to religion.

It may legitimately be asked on what grounds it is claimed that man as an integrated corporeal and spiritual being is religious? An answer to this question may be provided by referring to the findings of Mircea Eliade.

Let us quote one of the experts on his work: „One of Eliade’s main ideas is the belief that man’s religiousness is ultimately not historically conditioned, and does not consist solely in that without religion man is unable to solve any of his fundamental existential problems. Eliade makes a more radical claim, namely that being

religious is inherent to man's nature (*conditio Humana*), and that a non-religious man would simply not be a man (which in Eliade's anthropology is an unthinkable situation). The term "religious man" is, in a way, a pleonasm: the essence of what differs man from all other living creatures is the religious dimension. (Religious) man is the only creature capable of a non-rational (intuitive) understanding of that dimension of reality which is entirely different from the temporal world, and of consciously participating in this dimension. As can be seen, Eliade is radically normative here; he is not satisfied with revealing the fundamentally religious structure of man, but wants to show practically how man should live so that his life may be meaningful and fearless.

Understood this way, the history of religion is not only a historiography, and a historian of religion is not simply a historian. He deals not so much with man's religious behaviours (the study of which he leaves to others), as with the traces and manifestations of the sacrum, irrespective of their cultural setting. Eliade charges contemporary historians of religion with being interested more in the history of religion than in **religion itself** [emphasis added by K.G.]. Similarly, he believes, ethnologists have wasted too much time on reconstructing the history of the cultures of archaic people instead of trying to understand them.

An important characteristic of Eliade's method is his opposition (expressed, among others, in his flagship article *History of Religion and New Humanism*) **to reductionism in the study of religion, i.e. the reduction of religious to non-religious meanings: economic, sociological, cultural, psychological, political, or other** [emphasis added by K.G.]. He saw an example of the reductionist approach in Nietzsche's deception of the European intelligentsia with his idea of God's death; in Marks's subordination of the spirit to the laws of economy; and in Freud's reduction of the great variety of ways in which man exists to sexual behaviours. The task of the history of religion is to say something about religion in a non-reductionist way, to show that it is a **religious fact** [emphasis added by K.G.], and not merely a historical, psychological, social, ethnic, philosophical, or theological one. To this end, a scientist of religion (*a learned generalist*) must have as much general knowledge as possible, while at the same time being a specialist in a particular religion" [Bronk 1998: 264-265].

The study of religion confronts us with the significant challenge of trying to understand the meaning assigned to various aspects of reality in different cultures, in which religion is the key to understanding their history. Christopher Dawson wrote:

„Religion is the key of history. We cannot understand the inner form of a society unless we understand its religion. We cannot understand its cultural achievements unless we understand the religious beliefs that lie behind them. In all ages the first creative works of a culture are due to a religious inspiration and dedicated to a religious end. The temples of the gods are the most enduring works of man. Religion stands at the threshold of all the great literatures of the world. Philosophy is its offspring and is a child which constantly returns to its parent” [Dawson 2013: 37-38; cf. Werner 1999: 69]. This causes considerable methodological problems both in the context of general methodology and of detailed research into particular aspects, such as, for example, the understanding of time in and outside of religion, sacred and secular time. An example of a major misunderstanding in this area are the works of Mircea Eliade, who has been wrongly classified as a phenomenologist of religion, and his approach described as ahistorical. If we consider the phenomenological approach to be a method of studying religion, i.e. say that phenomenology is one of the methods of studying religion, it will become obvious that Eliade called himself a historian of religion, and his approach cannot be called either ahistorical or anti-historical [Topolski 1972: 112 f.]. It is in religion, therefore, that the peculiarity of the approach resides, in this case to time, which – as in the case of linear time – has a different meaning as sacred to a religious person, and a different one as secular in popular usage [Eliade 1993: 114]. Eliade directs our attention to the fact that time is understood differently in different cultures, pointing to the different meaning they attribute to reality [Werner 1999: 74].

In the discipline I represent myself (cultural anthropology), we have realized for a long time now that our attempts at understanding people of different cultures have failed. [This seems to have been fully understood by C. G. Jung, who claimed that a Christian of the Western culture can never become a Buddhist, for example, due to his having been influenced by a different religious tradition, or a different culture.] Consequently, not only ethnocentrism is an obstacle on the road to a proper description and understanding of a different culture or religion. Eliade claimed that the religious man should be understood in the categories of his religion and in accordance with criteria proper to his culture. For Eliade, the evolutionist approach in the study of religion was unacceptable, since the basic concepts of evolutionism – development and genesis subordinated to the idea of progress – were not appropriate in studying the history of religion. According to Eliade: “There is no such thing as a ‘pure’ religious datum, outside of history, for there is no such thing as a human datum that is not at the same time a historical datum. Every religious experience is expressed and transmitted in a particular historical contest.

But admitting the historicity of religious experiences does not imply that they are reducible to non-religious forms of behavior” [Eliade 1984: 7]. In Eliade, recognition of the historicity of religious experience results from the distinction between the object of this experience, referred to as a (non-historical) *sacrum*, and the historicity (secularity) defined culturally in terms of time and space. Scholars emphasize the value of this concept of situating religion in time, because it is an important attempt at solving the problem of the “conceptual incompatibility of different cultures” which “resumes the search for [...] a model of global history” [Werner 1999: 78].

We believe that the crisis of contemporary science related to the attempts referred to as inter-, trans-, or by any other name which may be coined in the future in relation to disciplinarity, may be overcome if we agree that the subject and object of our knowledge is an integrally corporeal and spiritual being.

We realize that our reflections may appear subjective and are open to discussion. We strongly believe, however, that interdisciplinarity can be overcome with a properly identified and defined object of study. In the classical methodology of sciences, a theory was built and an appropriate methodology was selected based on a well-defined object of study. We are of the opinion that there is no escaping the same also in the case of a discipline as young as the political science of religion.

Is the study of religion in political science characterized by any particular features other than the fact that literature on the relationship between politics and religion and vice versa is so extensive that it needs a special discipline to be encompassed?

In our opinion, religion is a peculiar object of research, dealt with by religious studies. One of these studies is the political science of religion. This statement merely asserts the fact, however, that such a science exists and, being a discipline of social sciences, belongs to religious sciences, in accordance with one of the proposed definitions of the term “religiology” [Bronk 2011: 39-49].

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