

Antoni Jackowski

Geography of Religion

The geography of religion is one of the youngest disciplines of geography, forming part of the broadly understood geography of culture, anthropogeography, or the so-called humanist geography (P. Deffontaines 1948, R. Henkel 2001, C.C. Park 1994, G. Rinschede 1999, J.M. Rubenstein 2002, E. Wirth 1979). Specialists in religious studies treat it both as “a geographical discipline studying the impact of religion on the geographical environment” and as “a discipline of religious studies researching the impact of geographical factors on religion” (A. Bronk, 1996). The first person to use the term ‘geography of religion’ was Thomas Browne, an English writer, scientist and physician, in his work *Religio Medici* (1642).

The interdisciplinary character of the geography of religion, using a vast historical background, certainly does not allow a clear classification of the science as geographical or religious studies. Modern scientists agree that the geography of religion studies the dependencies between religion and the geographical area. Although they stress that “as a branch of geography, it deals with the impact of religion and religious societies on the geographical environment, and as a branch of religious studies – with the role of concepts and groups” (K. Hoheisel, 1987), they also admit that drawing a clear border between both research approaches is impossible, or at least very difficult.

For a long time the mutual relationships between religion and the geographical environment have been a subject of analysis for both geographers and specialists in religion. The latter stress that the geography of religion is one of the most neglected areas of the religious studies. According to G. Lanczkowski (1980), this is a result of little interest in the geography of religion, mainly due to the lack of methodological grounds. The interdisciplinary nature of the geography of religion, using its rich historical background, definitely does not allow for a clear classification of this science as a geographical or religious science. Religious specialists themselves treat the geography of religion “as a geographical discipline studying the impact of religion on the geographical environment” and as “a branch of religious studies researching the impact of geographical factors on religion” (A. Bronk, 1996).

The development of geographical studies in this area occurred in the 19th century, when geography began to move away from research limited mainly to the environment, commencing research on various aspects of human activity, especially related to all the phenomena of migrations; thus also including migrations resulting from religious motives (especially German geography). Simultaneously, the main trend of geographical interests still focused on the traditional problems of relations between the natural environment and various aspects of human life and activity, also including religious phenomena (origins of such studies date back to the antiquity). A significant role in the process of shaping the geography of religion as a separate geographical discipline was played by the works by F. Ratzel (especially his *Antropogeographie ...*, 1882-91) and C. Ritter.

While tracing the achievements of the geography of religion, one may notice a decisive prevalence of religious studies, especially as concerns the attempts to sketch the theoretical grounds. In such proposals, however, the very issue of geography as science is often neglected, hence such ideas were not always accepted by geographers. Special objections were raised against the attempts to treat as synonyms to the geography of religion such terms as 'religious studies geography' or 'religious geography'. Only recently have geographers become active in this area.

The intensification of research in the geography of religion was recorded in the late 1930s and immediately after World War II. Many geographers began noticing the importance of religious phenomena in the geographical area, trying to define their role (e.g. M. Büttner 1976, 1985, P. Deffontaines 1948, P. Fickeler 1947, R. Henkel 2001, K. Hoheisel 1985, 1988, E. Issac 1965, R. Matlovič 2001, S. Monti 1983, C.C. Park 1994, G. Rinschede 1999, M. Schwind 1975, D.E. Sopher 1967, and E. Wirth 1979). In Polish geography, these subjects were raised within the so-called 'Geography of aspects of spiritual culture' (B. Zaborski, A. Wrzosek, 1939). S. Nowakowski (1939), which claimed that the "Geography of religion has a broad task which aims not only at a descriptive or static cartographic statement on the spread of a religion over the world, not only at showing which religions occur in a given country, or a given area, but goes much beyond that. The geography of religion is not limited to the spread of religion in cultural nations. It also deals with learning about the history of the religion of ancient nations, as such primary religions are the lowest stages [...] of which the religions of cultural nations developed with time." As the main research studies of the geography of religion he enlisted: "research on the relations between religion and nature, searching for the reasons for establishment of religious beliefs in the conditions of impact of nature". A. Jackowski (1991) draws attention to the necessity of considering in the research into the geography of religion, the vast historical context. The lack of relating to the past actually makes it impossible to appropriately interpret the religious phenomena occurring today. Anyway, the geography of religion is often treated as historical geography (in Poland e.g. E. Romer 1969). The German religious specialist, G. Lanczkowski (1980) wrote directly that the "geography of religion, although not

exclusively so, is mainly historical geography". The geography of religion is also considered as a humanist science by the Polish specialist in religion, A. Bronk (1996), who treats the "geographic environment of religion" as a cultural and social environment.

The subjects of interest of the modern geography of religion especially include the following research issues: the geographical environment and religion; the sacred landscape (*Sakrallandschaft*), sacred space (including transformations of the natural and cultural landscape as a result of the development in the religious function); the spatial development of religion (in various spatial scales); pilgrimages and the development of the geographical horizon of societies; religious migrations (including migration types, their spatial scope, directions, dynamics, social structure, etc.); religion and types of settlement (including the typology of settlement units with a religious function, the impact of religion on the development of a settlement network, pilgrimage districts, municipal religious centres, spatial development and spatial structure of worship centres, functional structure, development of infrastructure in worship centres, etc.); the impact of religion on the development of various branches of the economy (e.g. agriculture, industry); religion and tourism (including "religious tourism"); religion and environmental protection; the regionalisation of religious phenomena; and religious cartography.

In the first period of development of the research on the geography of religion, the interests of researchers especially focused on relations between the natural environment and religion. Such studies date back to the antiquity. In all religions, the natural environment has played a significant part in the development of beliefs. Studies were also conducted that aimed to explain the spatial distribution of worship centres in reference to particular elements of the environment. They refer both to the geographic aspects of the location of such centres, and to the natural conditions for their development. Such research involves on the one hand physiographic elements, and on the other hand entire geographic systems (e.g. mountain ranges, river basins, seaside areas). Religion is related to the establishment of a *sacred space*, (e.g. *haram* in Islam, *mandala* in Hinduism and Buddhism, *sacrum* in Christianity). One of the basic components of pilgrimage migrations is the *pilgrimage space*. The performance of each pilgrimage requires the crossing of some *sacred space* (A. Dupront, 1977, A. Jackowski, I. Soljan, E. Bilska-Wodecka, 1999). While examining the history of particular religions and beliefs, one may indicate the traces of worship granted by primary peoples to the untransformed landscape. The creation of characteristic landscapes (e.g. deserts) in many mythologies and beliefs is assigned to acts of supernatural beings, such as giants. Religious topography observes a principle that all that is outstanding in the landscape is extraordinary. Close relations between the natural environment and beliefs are observed in some religions even today. It is best reflected in India, where mythology is strongly observed in the modern worship of sacred rivers and sacred mountains. In the religious practices of Hinduism, worship has always been granted to sacred places related to mountain peaks, rocks, river

courses, rivers, sea areas, forests, etc. Some geographers talk about the *sacred geography* of sacred places (e.g. D.L. Eck, C. C. Park, P.B. Rana Singh). In the history of beliefs and religions, a significant role was played by sacred mountains. *The Bible* often mentions the desert. Theologians notice the importance of the problem of the desert as necessary to appropriately understand some aspects of the Biblical message. There is even a *biblical theology of the desert* (S. Hałas SCJ, 1999). Groves and forests are believed to be the oldest sanctuaries in human history. The tree of life is a common element of the legends and myths of many peoples of the world. In Buddhism, the tree of special importance is the banyan tree (*Ficus religiosa*), traditionally called the "Tree of Wisdom". It was under this tree in an Indian village of Bodhgaya that Buddha experienced his revelation. Buddhists believe it to be the oldest historical tree in the world. Many religions also worship animals. Up to the present day, the worship of animals is especially vivid in India.

Evolutionism, so popular in the 19th century, resulted in the perception of the genesis of religion primarily in the adaptation of man to the environment. Some specialists in religion willingly related the type of religion to the climate (e.g. M. Weber). However, many modern studies on the geography of religion warn against a determinist treatment of the environment in its relations with religion (A. Bronk 1996, E. Issac 1965). It is stressed that in the modern world, clear relations between religion and the environment have been preserved only in the areas related to the traditional tribe religions. In the studies of religion, there has also appeared the term of 'the ecology of religion' which is to be a 'new geography of religion' created under the influence of 'the ecology of culture' and dealing with 'research on environmental integration of religion and its consequences'. Its occurrence was explained with the care of the natural environment (A. Bronk). The idea of 'the ecology of religion' was recognised by some societies of geographers (e.g. M. Büttner, P. Fickeler). However, most geographic societies do not identify themselves with such proposals, remaining with the traditional name: 'the geography of religion'.

Modern studies in the broadly understood geography of religion are performed mainly in geographical centres in Germany, France, USA, Canada, India, and Japan. In 1976, the International Geographic Union established the International Working Group on the Geography of Belief Systems. Since 1985, in Bochum, a specialist international magazine *Geographia Religionum* has been published (ed. M. Büttner and G. Rinschede). In Poland these problems are dealt with by the Department of Geography of Religion, instituted in 1994 by A. Jackowski at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Management of the Jagiellonian University.

The achievements of the geography of religion are dominated by studies related to various aspects of pilgrimages. In this area, geographers definitely outdo religious specialists. This refers both to the theoretical studies (e.g. S.M. Bhardwaj, D.P. Dubey, D.L. Eck, R. Henkel, A. Jackowski, R. King, M.L. Nolan, C. C. Park, G. Rinschede, I.M. Shair, A. Sievers, P.B. Rana Singh, or H. Tanaka), and studies related to particular regions or worship centres (especially Fatima, Jasna Góra, Lourdes, Mecca, Varanasi,

India or Japanese Shikoku). In Poland, such studies are conducted mainly in the Kraków centre (e.g. A. Jackowski, I. Sołjan, E. Bilska-Wodecka, L. Kaszowski OSPPE, or D. Ptaszycka-Jackowska). The research refers to the macro scale (pilgrimages throughout the world and in all religions), and to Poland, with particular regions (especially the Carpathians) and centres (especially Jasna Góra in Częstochowa, Kraków-Łagiewniki and Kalwaria Zebrzydowska). Since 1995, The Department of the Geography of Religion at the Jagiellonian University has published a scientific magazine under the title of *Peregrinus Cracoviensis* (12 issues by the end of 2001), the only European magazine of such nature. In the years 1994-2001, the Institute of Geography and Spatial Management of the Jagiellonian University featured a 'Pilgrimage Discussion Seminar'. Recently, geographers have been increasingly more willing to deal with problems related to the so-called religious tourism.

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Antoni Jackowski, Ph.D., Professor
Institute of Geography and Spatial Management of Jagiellonian University
The Department of Geography of Religion
64 Grodzka St., 31-044 Cracow