

Marek BłaszczykNicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
marek_blaszczyk@onet.eu

In the face of the impossible. Existential sources of post-secular thought

ABSTRACT

In this article, the problem of “the experience of the impossible”, which seems to embody the “religious stage of existence” most fully is tackled, i.e., within the relation of the individual to God (Absolute). The category of “the impossible”, undoubtedly one of the fundamental categories of modern post-secular thought (Caputo, Lévinas, Marion), is outlined here in the perspective of existential philosophy, and more specifically – its existential (especially Kierkegaardian) sources. The aim is, therefore, to attempt to show something that is unimaginable because it exceeds “the order of reason”, the cognitive capacity of the human intellect on the one hand, while on the other hand it is at least seemingly inexpressible, because it escapes the objective, scientific handling. Therefore it is argued that the experience of the impossible, including his affirmation, is primarily a problem of existential-religious nature, requiring a “leap” beyond what is seen as rational, socially valid, and even ethical from the human perspective.

KEYWORDS

Human being, the impossible, reason, faith, absurd, paradox, religious experience, existentialism, post-secularism

STRESZCZENIE

Wobec niemożliwego. Egzystencjalne źródła myśli postsekularnej

W niniejszym artykule podjęty zostanie problem „doświadczenia niemożliwego”, które najpełniej zdaje się urzeczywistniać w „religijnym stadium egzystencji”, to jest w relacji jednostki do Boga (Absolutu). Kategoria „niemożliwego”, niewątpliwie jedna z fundamentalnych kategorii współczesnej myśli postsekularnej (Caputo, Lévinas, Marion), zarysowana tu zostanie w perspektywie filozofii egzystencjalnej, a dokładniej – jej egzystencjalnych (zwłaszcza Kierkegaardowskich) źródeł. Celem naszym będzie więc próba ukazania tego, co z jednej strony niewyobrażalne, bo przekraczające „porządek rozumu”, poznawcze zdolności ludzkiego intelektu, z drugiej zaś – przynajmniej pozornie niewyraźalne, bo wymykające się przedmiotowemu, naukowemu ujęciu. Będziemy tym samym argumentować na rzecz tezy, iż doświadczenie niemożliwego, w tym jego afirmacja, jest przede wszystkim problemem egzystencjalno-religijnym, wymagającym „skoku” poza to, co z ludzkiej perspektywy jawi się jako racjonalne, społecznie obowiązujące, a nawet etyczne.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: człowiek, niemożliwe, rozum, wiara, absurd, paradoks, doświadczenie religijne, egzystencjalizm, postsekularyzm.

In this article, the problem of the “experience of the impossible”, which seems to embody the “religious stage of existence” is tackled within the relation of the individual to God (Absolute). The category of “the impossible”, undoubtedly one of the fundamental categories of modern post-secular thought (Caputo, Lévinas, Marion), is outlined here in the perspective of existential philosophy, and more specifically – its existential (especially Kierkegaardian) sources. Our aim shall, therefore, be to attempt to show something that is unimaginable because it exceeds “the order of reason”, the cognitive capacity of the human intellect on the one hand, while on the other hand, it is at least seemingly inexpressible, because it escapes the objective, scientific handling. We will therefore argue that the experience of the impossible, including its affirmation, is primarily a problem of existential-religious nature, requiring a “leap of faith” beyond what is seen as rational, socially valid, and even ethical from the human perspective.

In the first part I shall shortly present the specifics of post-secular thought, pointing to its existential sources. In the second, referring to

diagnoses of Søren Kierkegaard, I will stress the significance of the philosophical experience of human subjectivity. In the third part we will look at the relationship between “problematic” religious existence (the religious stage of existence), interpreting the attitude of the biblical Abraham in the context of the “passion of the impossible”. The considerations shall be closed with a presentation of the significance of Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy for contemporary post-secular thought, especially the radical hermeneutics of John D. Caputo.

Post-secular thought and existentialism. Introductory remarks

One must notice that post-secular thought, ever more boldly explored by contemporary humanists of all walks of intellectual life, is essentially heterogeneous, eluding all attempts at unambiguous conceptualization. It is most commonly characterized as the return to the religious sphere, as its horizon is marked by such terms as “the return of the *sacred*” (Daniel Bell), “desecularization of the world” (Peter Berger), “the revenge of God” (Gilles Kepel) and the “return of the gods” (Friedrich Wilhelm Graf). The term “post-secularism”, keeping in mind its ambiguity and semantic capacity, can be regarded as “one of the *wandering concepts* of the humanities, which, though without a common theoretical denominator, indicates a tendency to re-take the subject of religion in a number of research areas, from sociology, to theory of politics, literature, cultural studies, to philosophy.”¹ Given the various spaces of post-secular reflection, the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts, it is not only difficult to clearly define it, but also to appoint its representatives. Post-secular thought is often associated with authors whose works significantly differ in terms of both methodological and ideological (world-view) terms. It shall suffice, for example, to name such authors as Charles Taylor, Michel de Certeau, Slavoj

1 M. Matlak, D. Wolska, *Postsekularyzm jako wędrujące pojęcie. Wprowadzenie*, „Prace Kulturoznawcze”, 1(21)/2017, p. 11. For more on this topic cf. M. Warchala, *Co to jest postsekularyzm? (Subiektywna) próba opisu*, „Krytyka Polityczna”, 13/2007, p. 178-190; Idem, *Postsekularne konstelacje nowoczesności. O historycznych związkach religii i nauk społecznych*, „Stan Rzeczy”, 2(5)/2013, p. 75-92; P. Burdziej, *Socjologia postsekularna?*, „Studia Socjologiczne”, 2(197)/2010, p. 89-107; P. Bogalecki, A. Mitek-Dziemba, *Drzewo Poznania. Wprowadzenie do myśli postsekularnej*, [in:] *Drzewo Poznania. Postsekularyzm w przekładach i komentarzach*, ed. P. Bogalecki, A. Mitek-Dziemba, Katowice 2012, p. 25-51; E. Drzewiecka, *Myśl postsekularna w badaniach slawistycznych. Próba spojrzenia*, „Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis”, 9/2014, p. 29-44.

Žižek, Roberto Unger, Alain Badiou, Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo, Jürgen Habermas or Jacques Derrida, to see how different intellectual orientations (including political and religious) they represent. In fact, there are atheists among them, along with proponents of Marxism and nihilism, but also theists, non-confessional defenders of religion and the Judeo-Christian heritage.²

Post-secular thinkers agree, however, on one matter: they have a critical attitude towards the specific modern secularism that – through the Weberian postulate of “disenchantment of the world”, made human reason the philosophical “principle” of cognition and understanding of reality and the world phenomena, shunning all that is irrational, unscientific, and existential/religious.³ We can add: shunning all that appears as aporetic, absurd and paradoxical from the point of view of “pure reason” (Kant), in one word: impossible. Post-secularism, sharing the post-modern criticism of modernity (and contesting the intellectual vision of the world, the superiority of knowledge over faith, the primacy of the lay over the religious), indicates at the same time a crisis of the enlightenment reason and all the “master narratives” (Lyotard) built upon it, thus the idealistic, speculative philosophical systems. It would therefore seem that we are dealing with the rehabilitation of the “order of the heart” (to refer to Pascal’s famous term), recognition of faith as “equal” a source of cognition in relation to the human intellect.⁴ But tellingly, post-secular thought does not involve any “naïve” return to religion (pre-modern religiosity that refers to the figure of God-Creator, merciful God-Father, and a sense-providing Providence), rather, it signifies complexity, searching for new alternative forms of spirituality, more private, non-confessional, and non-institutional – adopted to the challenges of the modern world. Additionally, it searches for forms, to quote the words of Jürgen Habermas that “cooperate with the enlightenment”.⁵ Post-secularism, which is worth emphasizing, not only raises the problem of the socio-cultural importance of religion, but also tracks down the more or less hidden (implicit) themes

2 Cf. G. McLennan, *The Postsecular Turn*, “Theory, Culture, Society”, 4(27)/2010, p. 3-20.

3 Charles Taylor rightly stresses that secularization does not mean a complete disappearance of religion, but rather, developing new conditions of its functioning. Reflecting upon the political secularism, Taylor also speaks, which is especially interesting in the context of these considerations, about secularism as the disintegration of the institutional forms of religion, and thus the weakening of the Orthodox form of faith. Cf. Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge 2007.

4 Cf. M. Błaszczuk, *O problemie relacji między filozofią a teologią. Preliminaria*, „Idea”, XXIX/1, 2017, p. 77-96.

5 J. Habermas, *Wierzyć i wiedzieć*, [in:] *Przyszłość natury ludzkiej*, Warszawa 2003, p. 103-115; Idem, *Między naturalizmem a religią*, Warszawa 2012. Cf. also T. Adorno, *Rozum i objawienie*, „Kronos”, 1/2007, p. 28-33.

and the religious assumptions (“crypto theologies”), which seem to lie at the heart of any, even the most secular (secularized) philosophy.⁶ In this sense, it allows one to go beyond the dichotomy between “religion” and “secularism” permanently rooted in the tradition of European philosophy, making individual religious experience an important subject of academic discourse.⁷

The roots of post-secularism are most often believed to be found in the romantic and modernist thought, and in the views of the so-called critical theory (Frankfurt School): Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, on top of Walter Benjamin (Habermas cited above seems to be their heir). These positions are widely known and commonly shared, which is reflected in numerous publications undertaking this topic.⁸ Not denying their equity, let us try to set a “new” interpretative path⁹ by “suspending” the past conceptualizations of the post-secular thought and look at it “from the outside”, searching for its sources in existential philosophy, especially Kierkegaard’s. This trick seems to be interesting for at least several reasons.

First of all, existentialism, just as post-secular reflection, is not so much a non-uniform current in philosophy (or philosophy and literature), as a multi-faceted cultural phenomenon, which is outside philosophy, encompassing theology, religious studies, psychology, and art.¹⁰

6 Cf. A. Bielik-Robson, *Na pustyni. Kryptoteologie późnej nowoczesności*, Kraków 2008, p. 7-9.

7 On the potential post-secular perspective in the study of literature and culture, cf. K. Jarzyńska, *Postsekularyzm – wyzwanie dla teorii i historii literatury (rozpoznania wstępne)*, „Teksty Drugie”, 1-2/2012, p. 294-307; E. Drzewiecka, *Spotkania pod Krzyżem. O myśli postsekularnej w badaniach nad literaturą nowoczesną*, „Kultura – Media – Teologia”, 26/2016, p. 52-74; A. Bielik-Robson, *Literackie kryptoteologie nowoczesności, czyli o pierwszeństwie świata*, „Wielogłos”, 2(24)/2015, p. 13-28; A. Kołos, *Postsekularyzm a literatura. Przykład Edwarda Stachury*, „Ogrody Nauk i Sztuk”, 1/2011, p. 284-292.

8 Cf. e.g. M. Warchala, *Romantyzm i narodziny myśli postsekularnej*, „Logos i Ethos”, 1(36)/2014, p. 73-85; A. Bielik-Robson, *Powrót mesjańskiej obietnicy, czyli postsekularyzm w sensie ścisłym*, [in:] *Deus otiosus. Nowoczesność w perspektywie postsekularnej*, ed. A. Bielik-Robson, M.A. Sosnowski, Warszawa 2013, p. 337-350.

9 That proposal for interpretation, it seems, is not so much new as newly raised. As Ryszard Nycz argues, citing the words of Henryk Markiewicz, “the new is usually the long-forgotten old.” R. Nycz, *Nowa humanistyka w Polsce. Kilka bardzo subiektywnych obserwacji, koniektur, refutacji*, „Teksty Drugie”, 1/2017, p. 22. Recalling the existential source of post-secular thought, I wish to also draw attention to the importance and unprecedented timeliness of existentialism, thus contesting the idea that it is a long outdated current in contemporary philosophy.

10 Cf. e.g. K. Toeplitz, *Egzystencjalizm jako zjawisko kulturowe*, Gdańsk 1983; W. Barnes, *The Philosophy and Literature of Existentialism*, New York 1968; T.R. Flynn, *Existentialism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2006; K. Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin 1919; H. Spiegelberg, *Phenomenology in Psychology and Psychiatry*, Evanston 1972; A.L. van Kaam, *Existential Foundations of Psychology*, New York 1969; M. Żelazny, *Filozofia i psychologia egzystencjalna*, Toruń 2011.

“Existentialism”, Karol Toeplitz says, “is not a philosophy in the traditional sense of the word, but an inconsistent reflection on matters of a unique human being”.¹¹ Rollo May, in turn, notes that existentialism is an expression of the depth of today’s emotional and spiritual problems, which reveal themselves in almost all aspects of culture.¹² Secondly, this heterogeneity of existentialism results in the fact that (as is the case of post-secular thought) to this day a wide variety of its interpretations and ways of classifying philosophers associated with it has accumulated. Sometimes both religious (theistic) thinkers and atheistic thinkers of “neutral” ideological standing are associated with existentialism, as well as “seekers” of their own, individual path of spiritual development.¹³ Thirdly, a common denominator of post-secularism and existential philosophy (Kierkegaardian) seems to be a critique of enlightenment reason (panlogism), an aversion to construct abstract, speculative systems of thought (“master narratives”) and – consequently – a return to religiosity. It should be noted that existentialism was originally a religious current (St. Augustine, Pascal), and not an atheist one, as it is mostly defined for the sake of the philosophical works of Jean-Paul Sartre, a leading representative of this current: “historically, existentialism has Christian provenance; one would even say: it is one of the most typical attitudes for Christian feeling and understanding of life”.¹⁴ Kierkegaard, as we shall see, speaks about the private (non-confessional) religiousness of the individual through denying the official, institutionalized Christianity. As he emphasizes, only in personal, intimate contact with God can one realize the truth of human existence (as subjectivity). Faith, which the philosopher recommends, however, is of a special kind, because it does not bring a desired state of human happiness and relief, but rather increases the sense of insecurity, fear and despair. It is worth noting that such post-secular thinkers as Jean-Luc Marion and John D. Caputo make references to the diagnoses of Kierkegaard. Fourthly, both post-secular thought and existential philosophy show the specificity of human existence (being-in-the-world), problematizing the individual existential experience (including religious experience). Placing man at the

11 K. Toeplitz, op. cit., p. 6.

12 R. May, *O istocie człowieka. Szkice z psychologii egzystencjalnej*, Poznań 1995, p. 56.

13 On the possible method for classification of philosophers of existence, cf. P. Wójs, *Filozofowie egzystencji*, [in:] *Oblicza egzystencjalizmu*, ed. M. Błaszczuk, Kraków 2017, p. 17-30.

14 T. Terlecki, *Egzystencjalizm chrześcijański*, [in:] *Krytyka personalistyczna. Egzystencjalizm chrześcijański*, Warszawa 1987, p. 47. Cf. P. Roubiczek, *Existentialism. For and Against*, Cambridge 1964, p. 9-10; W. Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, New York 1975, p. 49-50; W. Barrett, *Irrational Man. A Study in Existential Philosophy*, New York 1958, p. 17; F. Heine-mann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, London 1953, p. 2-3; M.A. Fox, *The Remarkable Existentialists*, New York 2009, p. 14-15.

center of their interests, they seem to be looking for new forms of rationality (*phronesis*), which would lay out the meaning of that experience. This motif, only signaled here, is also characteristic of the contemporary hermeneutic reflection.¹⁵

Signaling the similarity between post-secularism and existentialism, I want not so much to pay attention to the fact that the post-secular thought appears as a creative continuation of ideas born from the bosom of existentialism. I would rather look at the specific issues of the impossible (and more specifically, the affirmation of religious experience of the impossible); which – in my opinion – has its main source is in the existential reflection of Kierkegaard.

Towards human subjectivity

Søren Kierkegaard was undoubtedly one of the first thinkers who revealed the importance of subjective existential experience. The nineteenth-century theologian and philosopher is in fact against all intellectual systems, trying to capture human existence as a general formula. Stubbornly and persistently seeking the truth of individual existence, the sense of individual existence, he directs his criticism mainly against the speculative, idealistic philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel, which he considers to be a “classic” manifestation of the “systematization of systems”. As Emmanuel Mounier notes: “Kierkegaard stood against the Hegel’s absolute system, a systematization of the system, which opposes the absolute Existence.”¹⁶ Kierkegaard criticizes the systemic philosophy (and also “scientific” reflection based on possibly the most general assumptions and concepts) especially due to the fact that it mostly marginalizes and even “loses” the fundamental philosophical question, which is the individual human being, individual

15 More on the topic of hermeneutic rationality (*phronesis*), cf. M. Januszkiewicz, *W poszukiwaniu sensu. Phronesis i hermeneutyka*, Poznań 2016, p. 9-32; Idem, *Phronesis: racjonalność hermeneutyczna*, „Przestrzenie Teorii”, 25/2016, p. 81-94.

16 E. Mounier, *Wprowadzenie do egzystencjalizmów*, Kraków 1964, p. 221. Interestingly, some researchers of Kierkegaard’s thought claim that he knew Hegel’s philosophy mainly from secondary sources. The Dane’s “fight” with Heglism was therefore not an exposure of a qualitative difference which in his opinion exists between speculative philosophy and Christianity. Cf. N. Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel*, Princeton, New Jersey 1980, p. 75-91; J. Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, New Jersey 1983, p. 105; G. Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard’s Thought*, Princeton 1971, p. 58-59. On Kierkegaard’s criticism of heglism cf. also J. Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge 2003, p. 448-523; T. Kupś, *Koncepcja egzystencji Sorena Kierkegarda w kontekście filozofii niemieckiej*, Toruń 2004, p. 128-142; A. Szwed, *Rozzum wobec chrześcijańskiego Objawienia*, Kęty 2011, p. 442-545.

human existence. For, in fact, according to the author of *The Sickness Unto Death*, it is not subjected to conceptualization and it cannot be closed within diligently abstracted intellectual concepts, but it always eludes all categorical frameworks.

The Danish philosopher, as one of the first anti-essentialist thinkers showing the philosophical importance of what eludes systemization and science, i.e., the subjective experience of being-in-the world, seeks to “the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.”¹⁷ Already a brief reflection on the above statement allows us to note that the primary purpose of Kierkegaard’s philosophizing was the search for meaning of individual existence and the truth about the human condition. It is not surprising, therefore, that Søren Kierkegaard (also called the Socrates of the North) is widely recognized as the father of existential philosophy.¹⁸

Kierkegaard, whose thought and personality was, to a large extent, shaped by the atmosphere of his family home (the influence of his father, strict religious upbringing, obsession with sin and death¹⁹), was particularly interested in man’s relation to the Absolute, namely: the relationship between the mortal individual, marked by ontological insufficiency and the infinite God, transcendental relative thereto, ungraspable by human reason. The author of the *Practice in Christianity*, according to which man is the synthesis of time and eternity, freedom and necessity, and more broadly in the further part of this discussion, I do not want to accept any form of mediating elements of that synthesis. Kierkegaard, wanting to place man in an “absolute relationship with the Absolute”, therefore, looking

17 Cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Dziennik (wybór)*, Lublin 2000, p. 41. Cf. also Jaspers, *Aneignung und Polemik*, München 1968, p. 301. Kierkegaard seems to say here that the truth of a single existence, far beyond the framework of the totalizing system, happens only in subjective cognition. Cf. D.J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, Cambridge 1996, p. 105-106; M. Gabriel, *Subjectivity and Religious Truth in the Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard*, Macon, Georgia 2010, d. 90-129; J. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard*, New York 2008, p. 56-66. Cf. also M. Domaradzki, *O subiektywności prawdy w ujęciu Sorena Aabye Kierkegaarda*, Poznań 2006.

18 Existentialism researchers even unanimously recognize Kierkegaard as the precursor of 20th century philosophy of existence. See. e.g. R. Harper, *Existentialism. A Theory of Man*, Cambridge 1949, p. 44; H.J. Blackham, *Six existentialist thinkers*, London 1956, p. 1-2; M. Warnock, *Egzystencjalizm*, Warszawa 2006, p. 15; J. Wahl, *Krótką historią egzystencjalizmu*, Wrocław 2004, p. 17. See. also P. Rohde, *Søren Kierkegaard. The Father of Existentialism*, Copenhagen 1983.

19 For more on this topic, cf. J. Kossak, *Egzystencjalizm w filozofii i literaturze*, Warszawa 1976, p. 68; A. Rogalski, *Tryptyk miłosny*, Warszawa 1977, p. 22-80; P. Rohde, *Søren Kierkegaard*, Wrocław 2001, p. 52-82. Lev Shestov even says (in accordance with the spirit of Kierkegaard’s writings), that biographical stories (especially the influence of his father and the unhappy love to Regina Olsen) pervade in almost all works of Kierkegaard. Cf. L. Szestov, *Ateny i Jerozolima*, Kraków 1993, p. 273; Idem, *Kierkegaard i filozofia egzystencjalna*, Warszawa 2009, p. 72, 87-90.

for individual authenticity, probably the most fully identifiable with a tragic sense of the absolute paradox – the paradox of faith. As Antoni Szwed accurately concludes: “the paradox of the absolute is not a simple logical contradiction, violating the law of non-contradiction, but is something that reveals the secret area, beyond the reach of reason. The paradox sets the boundaries of reason and the need to use negative terms. It is, therefore, an act of opening for the divine transcendence. This in turn is sensed in the experience of amazement with the presence of something, which rational reflection is not able to comprehend. The absolute amazement leads to that what is divine, what reason is not able to figure out, but rather closes itself to, rejecting amazement and faith emerging with it”.²⁰ As we shall see below, Kierkegaard’s man, contesting “the order of reason”, will turn to the non-definable experience of faith, affirming something which, at least from a human perspective, is absurd and impossible.

In the face of the impossible. The experience of faith

Kierkegaard, as we know, distinguishes three stages of human existence (aesthetic, ethical and religious), which seem to constitute man’s relationship with the world (the possible) and God (the impossible) problematic. Let us add, citing the philosopher, that the transition between these stages is radical – it is a “leap” someone has make into a different form of existence.²¹ At this point, due to the limited space, I shall briefly characterize “religious existence”, which – as Kierkegaard notes, shows through a personal relationship with God as the true vocation of man: “Transition to the religious stage of life is the inevitable fate of every human being, if they do not want to turn a blind eye to their actual position in the world.”²² Only here – through the internalization of what is irrational – Sense can be found in the absolute terms. The price man has to pay, however, for the unveiling of the “madness of reason” and thus complete abandonment of

20 A. Szwed, op. cit., p. 525. Cf. T. Plużański, *Paradoxs w nowożytnej filozofii chrześcijańskiej*, Warszawa 1970, p. 85-102; N.H. Soe, *Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox*, [in:] *A Kierkegaard Critique. An International Selection of Essays Interpreting Kierkegaard*, red. H.A. Johnson, N. Thulstrup, Chicago 1967, p. 207-227; H. Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, Edinburgh-London 1959, p. 60; C.S. Evans, *Kierkegaard. An Introduction*, Cambridge 2009, p. 139-166.

21 For more on this topic, cf. S.N. Dunning, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness. A Structural Analysis of the Theory of Stages*, Princeton 1985, p. 32-140; K. Toeplitz, *Kierkegaard*, Warszawa 1980, p. 47-89; M. Gabriel, op. cit., p. 14-59.

22 A. Miś, *Filozofia współczesna. Główne nurty*, Warszawa 2000, p. 97-98.

“thinking according to ethics” in favor of the specific experience of faith, which is oriented towards the inconceivable and infinite as a source of existential anxiety. In other words, ethics is of a general nature, while religion of individual, personal and existential. Ethics, based on “clear” criteria, seems to be “predictable”; referring to the finitude of human being-in-the-world, it leaves no room for the paradoxical and aporetic. Religion, in turn, on the contrary, confronts the individual temporal existence with the infinite, almighty God, revealing a perspective of eternity. Placing man in the face of the Most High, for whom “nothing is impossible”, demands taking the “leap of faith” beyond the obvious and rational. Thus he calls for challenging and ethical order and approval of the absurd (impossible) as the Absolute.²³

Kierkegaard, which is worth noting, distinguishes two types of religiosity – religiousness A and religiousness B. The first of them – he says – is the most common form of the faith, characteristic of most human beings. It does not require breaking with the natural order of creation – the human being, wanting to “justify” their existence, is directed by divine commandments and precepts (responsibilities). Religiousness “A” gives the individual a sense of certain “existential comfort”, a sense of certainty about the existence of God, His intimacy and love, while recognizing its own smallness, mortality and sinfulness. Religiousness “B” on the other hand, says Kierkegaard, requires a total abandon of reason, any objective, widely respected truths and values; it is a “leap” out of the mundane (earthly) world, beyond what the individual knows well and finds predictable; it is a “leap” beyond all human and limited. For where the human mind encounters aporias, where it encounters absurd, faith sees an opportunity there, because for God “nothing is impossible”.

However, most importantly, religiousness “B” also generates a fear of emptiness, hidden behind any metaphysical quest. Basically, it is the fear of “the possibility of impossibility”, which – from a human point of view – seems to be always the ineffable mystery. That kind of religiousness is therefore paradoxical, since it makes us realize the gap, the infinite gulf between God and man, between what is absolute and what is individual in relation to the Absolute, between the Sense and the infernal desire thereof. Kierkegaard wants at the same time to say that it is impossible to know or understand the intentions of the Supreme, Who thinks according to other categories than human ones. Finally, the object of faith here is what is

23 Cf. J.A. Prokopski, *Søren Kierkegaard. Dialektyka paradoksu wiary*, Wrocław 2002, p. 111-127; M.J. Ferreira, *Faith and the Kierkegaardian leap*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. A. Hannay, G. Marino, Cambridge 1998, p. 207-234.

essentially distant and totally absurd.²⁴ Let us add that religiousness “B”, according to Kierkegaard, has a specifically Christian provenance. We can even venture to claim that the author *The Sickness Unto Death* contesting all the institutionalized forms of the “Christian world”, was first of all interested in how to be a “true Christian”.²⁵

Faith which Søren Kierkegaard speaks about is undoubtedly a major challenge for the human being. This is because it does not bring relief, but increases the fear and despair.²⁶ The sense which it offers seems to be absurd from the human perspective, and the possibility becomes impossibility. As “a human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity,”²⁷ elements of absurdity and paradox appear as inseparable elements of that faith: “This we believe by virtue of the absurd.”²⁸

For Kierkegaard, the figure of Abraham, analyzed in *Fear and Trembling* is a specific symbol for the religious man. Abraham, by crossing the aesthetic and ethical stages became “but Abraham was greater than all, great by reason of his power whose strength is impotence, great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness, great by reason of the love which is hatred of oneself.”²⁹ That “knight of faith” is, for the Danish philosopher, a person who is not only aware of the dramatic nature of his existential situation, but also – despite anxiety consuming him – can persevere to the end, which later will be rewarded. Indeed, Kierkegaard argues that the story of Abraham includes a “teleological suspension of ethics” (challenging the moral socio-cultural order) in favor of faith and, as such, places the individual at the epiphany of impossibility, in the face of the extra-rational, absolute sense. So here is the paradox: either Abraham, rising with the power of the absurd above the general is a murderer (son slayer), which deserves

24 Cf. J.A. Prokopski, *Egzystencja i tragizm. Dialektyka ludzkiej skończoności*, Kęty 2007, p. 45-56; R. Thomte, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion*, New York 1969, p. 56.

25 Cf. p. Kierkegaard, *Wprowki do chrześcijaństwa*, Kęty 2002, p. 38; Idem, *Dziennik*, p. 386-387. More about Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity (and the essence of being a Christian), cf. A. Słowikowski, *Wiara w egzystencji. Teoretyczny wymiar chrześcijańskiego ideału w pismach pseudonimowych Sorena Kierkegarda*, Warszawa-Toruń 2015.

26 More information on the Kierkegaard's category of despair, cf. A. Hannay, *Kierkegaard and the variety of despair*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p. 329-348; W. Kaftański, *Rozpacz jako życie w śmierci w myśli Sorena Kierkegarda*, [in:] *Wobec śmierci*, ed. A. Grzegorzczak, A. Kaczmarek, Poznań 2012, p. 81-94; P. Lubańska, *Pascal i Kierkegaard – filozofowie rozpaczcy i wiary*, Kraków 2001, p. 51-79.

27 S. Kierkegaard, *Bojaźń i drżenie. Choroba na śmierć*, Warszawa 1982, p. 146.

28 Ibidem, p. 36.

29 Ibidem, p. 15.

condemnation; or, by answering the call of God, he is a believer (“knight of faith”), and then ethics shall be suspended and the rights of reason transcended. As Tadeusz Płuzański comments: “the life of Abraham is in the highest degree paradoxical, so that it is not quite thinkable at all. It is about the value of the absolute, which is measured at the same time the value of the absurd. For the absurd just a need to be able to realize the superiority of the individual over generality. Abraham gets Isaac back by virtue of the absurd. This paradox defies mediation.”³⁰

Kierkegaard’s faith, as we can see, is associated with uncertainty and risk: “there is no faith without risk. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the interior and the objective uncertainty. If I can objectively recognize God, then I don’t need to believe, but because I just can’t do this, I have to believe; Desiring to keep the faith, I have to constantly look to keep an objective uncertainty, to reach the very bottom of this uncertainty, and despite all this – to believe”.³¹ The uncertainty of success – in the words of Pascal – is no lesser than the certainty of what the individual risks. That existential dilemma is particularly reinforced by the fact that the subject of faith, as we have said, seems to be radically distant, incomprehensible, and absurd in relation to man. The God an individual is looking for and to Whom it aspires, turns out to be a hidden God (*Deus absconditus*), silent and inaccessible, which enhances the individual’s existential uprooting, its ontological loneliness.³² Kierkegaard, like Pascal once, does not want to settle for affirmation of human finitude, rather, he wants to show the human being in the face of what from the perspective of human reason appears to be absurd. The author of *Disease unto death* repeatedly emphasizes that faith – being the paradox of human existence – is the biggest passion of man (“man is the supreme passion of faith”³³), which directly relates to what is absolute and eternal. As Andrzej

30 T. Płuzański, *Człowiek między ziemią a niebem*, Warszawa 1977, p. 118. It is worth noting that the “absurd” (like “paradox”) is not a synonym for Kierkegaard’s “nonsense”, but is a mystery that falls outside human reason and therefore something which – as the inexpressible – remains outside its boundaries. More on Kierkegaard’s understanding of “absurd” and “paradox”, cf. C. Fabro, *Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard’s Dialectic*, [in:] *A Kierkegaard Critique*, op. cit., p. 185-186.

31 As cited in E. Kasperski, *Kierkegaard. Antropologia i dyskurs o człowieku*, Pułtusk 2003, p. 444.

32 Karl Jaspers, interpreting Kierkegaardian man’s existential human turn to the religious, marks bluntly that “being the exception entails ... terrible loneliness.” K. Jaspers, *Rozum i egzystencja*, [in:] *Rozum i egzystencja. Nietzsche a chrześcijaństwo*, Warszawa 1991, p. 31-32. About loneliness of the Kierkegaardian man, cf. T. Kupś, *O samotności chrześcijanina (Egzystencja religijna w ujęciu p. Kierkegarda)*, [in:] *Zrozumieć samotność. Studium interdyscyplinarne*, ed. P. Domeracki, W. Tyburski, Toruń 2006, p. 147-162; R. Harper, *The Seventh Solitude. Metaphysical Homelessness in Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche*, Baltimore 1967, p. 19-35.

33 S. Kierkegaard, *Bojaźń i drżenie. Choroba na śmierć*, p. 135.

Słowikowski establishes: “This belief has one reference – God, in relation to Whom man acquires the right view of his life, finds the truth and self-fulfillment. This reference, however, requires great sacrifices and austerities, as it requires from the human being to deny temporality, which is all the existing content of human life, in favor of eternity. It tells him to negate himself in order to be able to gain himself, in his real existential turn towards God”.³⁴

Kierkegaard, therefore, wishes at all costs to situate man, as he writes, “in absolute relation to the Absolute”, which – from the point of view of rational truths that constitute ethical standards is undoubtedly absurd. Abraham found himself in this situation. In order to follow the order of God, he was forced at the same time to violate applicable ethical principles, and therefore go beyond the temporal and as such, the general. The thinker of Copenhagen clearly accentuates the fact that only one who implicitly trusts in God and is not afraid to entrust themselves to Him – even if His commands seem to be “immoral” – can be regarded as a paragon of Christianity: “The paradox of faith is therefore the hope that nothingness shall not triumph. ... faith is absurd, but in the face of it you should not run away, but come back to it”.³⁵ Only perseverance in the absurd (in faith) can make the impossible come true. In the case of Abraham it is the recovery of Isaac.

Faith, according to Kierkegaard, is thus the biggest paradox. It requires a “leap” beyond reason and that which is specifically human. Therefore, it requires not just abandoning what is rational, known and widespread, but also that which – from a human perspective – is seen as ethical and objective. “What a tremendous paradox faith is”, says the author of *Fear and Trembling*, “a paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well-pleasing to God”, since faith is where it begins, where thinking is over.³⁶

Instead of a conclusion

Kierkegaard, by analyzing the biblical parable of Abraham, shows that between God’s order and human morality, there is a peculiar, insoluble conflict, that can find justification only in the paradoxical nature of faith

34 A. Słowikowski, *Dialektyka samotności według Kierkegaarda*, [in:] *Zrozumieć samotność*, op. cit., p. 68-69.

35 J.L. Krakowiak, *Absurd. Pytanie o sens ludzkiej egzystencji*, Warszawa 2010, p. 213. Cf. L. Szestow, *Kierkegaard i filozofia egzystencjalna*, p. 126-137.

36 S. Kierkegaard, *Bojaźń i drżenie. Choroba na śmierć*, p. 55.

(*credo quia absurdum*). This faith, as we had the opportunity to see, demands the suspension of teleological ethics, which involves giving up, and even abandoning, the socio-cultural norms of “the order of reason”. This means that there is a radical divide between the ethical and the religious stage of human existence that, simply put – there is no way to measure divine orders with “human measures”:

divine orders cannot be processed and evaluated from the perspective of human morality, just as they cannot be recognized by the human mind. These orders can therefore seem wicked, and the Author can pass for being bad, but this is only due to the scarcity of human perspective.³⁷

Faith, argues the philosopher, is, therefore, to reason, as an individual (subjectivity) is to the general (universality).³⁸ This generality must, however, be transcended in order to, by becoming oneself, i.e., by reaffirming one’s independent existence, be found in “the absolute relation to the Absolute”. The postmodern (radical) hermeneutics, focusing on the issue of God and religious experience (the experience of the impossible), which is particularly worth emphasizing, refers to Kierkegaard’s diagnoses as well.³⁹ On the one hand, it is represented by the authors who affirmed this experience (Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Luc Marion, John D. Caputo), on the other, by ones focusing on the hermeneutics of what is possible (Gianni Vattimo, Richard Kearney). We are primarily interested in the first group of researchers. Lévinas, for example, criticizes the existing philosophical tradition of the West due to its “monologousness” and advocates its paradigm of “totality”, which requires philosophers to navigate around the area of what is possible (rational, predictable and calculable). That “totality” is contrasted with Lévinas’ “infinity”, which directly seems to understand what is impossible (religious). The adoption of the perspective of

37 K. Pomian, *Niewczesność i współczesność Kierkegaarda*, [in:] *Człowiek pośród rzeczy*, Warszawa 1973, p. 113.

38 Cf. S. Kierkegaard, *Jednostka i tłum*, [in:] *Filozofia egzystencjalna*, ed. L. Kołakowski, K. Pomian, Warszawa 1965, p. 51-58.

39 Cf. M. Januszkiewicz, *Kim jestem ja, kim jesteś ty? Etyka, tożsamość, rozumienie*, Poznań 2012, p. 188-201. Januszkiewicz, analyzing the religious turn in postmodern hermeneutics, emphasizes that “the post-secular era can reasonably be called the era of the death of the death of God” (p. 194), which does not mean a “naive” return to the era of the sacred. Marcin Jaranowski pays attention to relationships between postmodernism and religious thinking. Cf. M. Jaranowski, *Transcendencja jako ocalenie. Søren Kierkegaard a problem teologii postmodernistycznej*, Kraków 2007. The philosophical turn to the post-secular era, as noted by John D. Caputo, (the position is also shared by Januszkiewicz cited above), was made by the nineteenth-century forerunners of existentialism – Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Cf. J.D. Caputo, *On Religion*, London and New York 2001, p. 49-56.

the “impossible”, we must add, means questioning “the order of reason”, which is, for the man of the West, an undisputed source of cognition.⁴⁰ Marion, like Kierkegaard, argues, however, that God eludes scientific, objectified discussion, and any human categorizations and conceptualizations. God, writes the French philosopher, is God precisely because He extends beyond the intellectual human cognitive abilities, beyond what the human perspective sees as possible (predictable, probable). God begins where the possible ends for us⁴¹ and thus, where human reason cannot reach, where it encounters aporias, contradictions and paradoxes. God experienced in the religious experience opens the impossibility horizon, which, for the individual, involves the affirmation of the “loss of land under their feet”. Caputo, in turn, explicitly notes (following Kierkegaard) that the experience of the impossible is in fact a religious experience, demanding the suspension of the rational, ethical and socially valid.⁴²

Let us pause for a moment at the thought Caputo, whose proposal for radical hermeneutics adopts the goal of restoring “the primary difficulties of life”.⁴³ The author of *Radical Hermeneutics*, referring to the philosophy of Kierkegaard, deprives the human existence of the rational, metaphysical grounding, showing it in the face of the ineffable mystery (the impossible). He formulates at the same time the question of ethics anew, which – because of its difference from the traditional Judeo-Christian morality – is called post-metaphysical. The American philosopher is primarily interested in religious experience, which – as we have said – makes one able to overcome the ethical norms constituting “the order of reason”, placing the human being in the face of the impossible. On the sidelines, let us add that the religious perspective also opens for the individual due to deconstruction, which – according to Caputo – refers to the primordial experience of the impossible.⁴⁴ It allows at the same time – in the post-secular spirit –

40 E. Lévinas, *Całość i nieskończoność*, Warszawa 1998.

41 J.L. Marion, *The Impossible for Man – God*, [in] *Transcendence and Beyond. A Postmodern Inquiry*, ed. J.D. Caputo, M.J. Scanlon, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2007, p. 25.

42 Cf. J.D. Caputo, *Against Ethics. Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1993, p. 3-5; Idem, *On Religion*, p. 109-117.

43 J.D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics. Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1987, p. 1. For more about the radical hermeneutics of Caputo cf. Ł. Czajka, *Święta anarchia. Wprowadzenie do radykalnej hermeneutyki Johna D. Caputo*, Poznań 2014; N. Leśniewski, *Projekt hermeneutyki radykalnej Johna D. Caputo*, „Ruch Filozoficzny”, 2-3/1996, p. 379-388; Idem, *O hermeneutyce radykalnej*, Poznań 1998, p. 117-163; M. Januszkiewicz, *W poszukiwaniu sensu. Phronesis i hermeneutyka*, p. 231-259. More on the criticism of the project of radical hermeneutics by Caputo cf. e.g. A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*, Kraków 2000, p. 340.

44 Cf. J.D. Caputo, M.J. Scanlon, *Apology for the Impossible. Religion and Postmodernism*, [in] *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. J.D. Caputo, M.J. Scanlon, Bloomington and Indianapolis

overcoming the rationalist (secular, scientific, atheistic) worldview. Caputo, like Kierkegaard, opposes reducing religion to ethics, because religiosity – he emphasizes – is not limited to “official religion”, but often also takes various non-confessional, non-institutional forms. The author of *On Religion* speaks about “religion without religion”, concluding that religion can be “found” both in a historically set religious system (theology), and outside of it”.⁴⁵ The concept of “religion without religion”, explains the philosopher, does not mean a lack of ontological experience (absence, insufficiency, scarcity), but an ecstatic “excess” of religious it, which – because of its diversity – escapes confessional religions. As Łukasz Czajka rightly comments: “*without* the deconstructive *religion without religion*, there is therefore not a lack of it, but rather an excess which cannot in itself accommodate denominational religions.”⁴⁶

To demand the impossible, as noted already by Aristotle, is to discover the weakness, the insufficiency of human reason; it is a desire to go beyond the obvious and predictable.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, the biblical Abraham harbored just such a desire. Endowed with an “impotent force”, “foolish wisdom” and “insane hope”, he waited for the arrival of the impossible.⁴⁸ So we can say not without reason that the affirmation of the impossible, as well as experience thereof, is primarily an existential-religious problem, demanding the abandon of the specific intellectual tradition of the West (Western philosophical culture) of the rationalist worldview and “scientific” vision of the world. Speaking the language of Kierkegaard: the “leap” beyond the earthly logical order, and also beyond what appears from a human perspective as ethical and social requires overcoming the aporia encountered by reason. The Bible itself teaches us about it, as it contains numerous examples confirming this thesis. Let us not forget the most representative ones: “For no word from God will ever fail” (Luke 1:37), “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27), “The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths” (PS 135:6), “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived’

1999, p. 3-4; J.D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1997, p. 1-3.

45 Cf. J.D. Caputo, *On Religion*, p. 3: “some people can be deeply and abidingly *religious* with or without theology, with or without the religions. Religion may be found with or without religion. That is my thesis.”

46 Ł. Czajka, op. cit., p. 84.

47 Cf. Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, Warszawa 1956, p. 81: “for choice cannot relate to impossibles, and if anyone said he chose them he would be thought silly”.

48 Cf. J.D. Caputo, *On Religion*, p. 7-10. Cf. also Idem, *Against Ethics*, p. 1-19; Idem, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 188-212.

the things God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2: 9), “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate” (1 Corinthians 1:19).

It turns out that the affirmation of the impossible means the affirmation of the “absolute relationship with the Absolute” that those may be capable of if they be ready for the “teleological suspension of ethics”, and so – in general – for challenging their existing, temporal existence. In other words, a religious person, rejecting common standard logic, “ready” for the coming of “the unexpected”, because the prospect of faith opens up the completely different horizon of understanding of reality and of themselves and their place in the world. It allows one to believe that the impossible (from the point of view of a human being) can, in fact, be possible (to God). Kierkegaard writes:

for the understanding continued to be in the right in affirming that in the world of the finite where it holds sway this was and remained an impossibility. This is quite as clear to the knight of faith, so the only thing that can save him is the absurd, and this he grasps by faith. So he recognizes the impossibility, and that very instant he believes the absurd; for, if without recognizing the impossibility with all the passion of his soul and with all his heart, he should wish to imagine that he has faith, he deceives himself, and his testimony has no bearing, since he has not even reached the infinite resignation.⁴⁹

While the human reason, coming to the end of its cognitive ability, stumbles on the aporias and limitations that situate the human being in front of the wall of the impossible, religiousness allows us to see a possibility in this impossibility orienting it towards what is non-conditioned, mysterious and unexpected. Coldly calculating – operating inside the area of the possible – the instrumental reason is here contrasted with the religious attitude, exceeding any limits and faults: faith is the losing of one’s senses to find God.⁵⁰ “The impossible”, Kierkegaard would say, is possible only in the religious experience (experience of faith). The human being, turning towards God, exceeds its temporality (finite) nature in the direction of what is transcendent, indefinable, beyond the scientific, objective in human terms. To put it another way, “the impossible”, to which the being turns in the act of faith, is inconceivable by the human mind and inexpressible in human conceptual categories precisely because it essentially is “beyond human measure”. The impossible” is therefore impossible from

49 S. Kierkegaard, *Bojaźń i drżenie. Choroba na śmierć*, p. 47.

50 *Ibidem*, p. 176.

the human point of view, the being existing within the limits of its finitude; for God “the impossible” is possible *sub specie aeternitatis*.

In the light of the observations made above, we can state that the importance of Kierkegaard for post-secular thought, including radical hermeneutics of Caputo, seems to be unquestionable. The author of *Fear and Trembling* was one of the first philosophers to venture for an in-depth reflection on the issue of religious experience (the experience of faith), which – transcending what is possible (ethical and aesthetic) – orients the individual toward that which is impossible.

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Marek Błaszczyk, MA – Adam Mickiewicz University graduate, research interests: philosophy of existence, philosophical anthropology, hermeneutic philosophy.

