

**Radosław Tyrła**

AGH University of Science and Technology

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8069.13.1.06>**Is Atheism a Religion? On Socio-Anthropologic Cognitive Imperialism and Problems That Follow**

**Abstract** The aim of the article is to show problems of a conceptual nature with defining non-religious people, as well as some ethical consequences of these problems. In the beginning I point to the frequent phenomenon of treating atheism as a kind of religion. I identify the sources of this phenomenon in a tendency among sociologists of religion to use inclusive and functional definitions of religion. From the point of view of the researcher of non-religion and non-religiousness it is a problem. Therefore, I call for using in this context definitions of religion suggested by researched actors themselves, which often have substantive character. In research practice it usually means using self-declaration as a definitional criterion of non-religion.

**Keywords** atheism, non-belief, definitions of religion, constructivism, ethics of scientific research

**Radosław Tyrła**, PhD in sociology, an assistant professor in the Faculty of Humanities at AGH University of Science and Technology in Kraków. His academic interests are focused on sociology of religion and non-religion, sociology of knowledge, sociology of social movements and sociology of medicine (currently he is working on the research project on anti-vaccination movement). The author (in Polish) of the following books: *A Taxon Too Many: Race as a Debatable Category* (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2005), *Opposite Poles of Evolutionism: Arms Race between Science and Religion* (Kraków: NOMOS, 2007) and *Everyday Life Without God. A Sociology of Atheism and Unbelief* (Kraków: NOMOS, 2014). The last one was awarded by The Stanisław Ossowski Prize in 2014.

**Contact details:**

Akademia Górniczo Hutnicza im. Stanisława Staszica w Krakowie, Wydział Humanistyczny  
ul. Gramatyka 8a, 30-071 Kraków  
email: [rtyrala@agh.edu.pl](mailto:rtyrala@agh.edu.pl)

We have to resist pretending that actors have only a language while the analyst possesses the *meta*-language in which the first is 'embedded'. As I said earlier, analysts are allowed to possess only some *infra*-language whose role is simply to help them become more attentive to the actors' own fully developed metalanguage, a reflexive account of what they are saying. (B. Latour 2005: 49)

The purpose of this article is to present problems with defining non-religious people, as well as the various dimensions of the consequences of the problems. Both theoretical and practical in nature, said problems stem from a long-lasting and still inconclusive dispute over how to define religion. I have come across these issues personally over the course of my research into non-religious people. I would thus not only like to sketch the dispute's framework, but also present how I have dealt with the problems.

**Atheism as a Religion-like Phenomenon?**

There is a pictorial joke one can find on the Internet. It is somewhat interesting in the context of my considerations. A man opens his front door to a couple of people distributing leaflets. They hand him one, but the paper is blank. The surprised man asks what this is all about, to which the two reply: "We are atheists."

The point of the joke lies in inserting non-religious people into a religiously contextualized frame. In this particular case, it revolves around Jehovah's Witnesses' evangelization strategies; also quite familiar in our Polish reality. The adherents' door-to-door preaching serves to persuade others to their beliefs. The difference is that here we speak of atheists. As people who distance themselves from off types of religions, they should not be practicing any religious forms of evangelization. In the joke, the blank piece of paper symbolizes exactly the lack of a religious stand. It is symptomatic, since speaking of atheists as people who are religious in their own specific way and of atheism as something religion-like, and as paradoxical as it may sound at first, is more common than one might assume.

The idea of "religion-like" atheism occurs frequently in all sorts of discourse. In fact, it is so frequent that an attempt to catalogue its examples would yield a multivolume monograph. It will suffice that when Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk undertook the task of classifying the 50 most often recurring stereotypes (or as the authors describe them: "myths") on atheism, the idea of atheism as another type of religion took a primary position in their work (see Blackford and Schüklenk 2014: 18-24).

As far as the best known examples of such an approach are concerned, we must mention such important 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant theologians as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich or Harvey Cox, who broaden the scope of meaning of "what-is-religious" to the point of leaving almost no margin for a non-religious sphere to exist (see Demerath 1984: 363; Guja 2009: 145). It is here that one might seek sources of all subsequent examples of inventing religions or "churches without God," such as Sea of Faith launched by Anglican priest Don Cupitt (see 1998) or the French intellectual (and a committed atheist) Alain de Botton's "Atheism 2.0" project. They both presume that a religion is a capacious enough form of social life that in the post-secular world it also incorporates atheists, who feel the need of ritual, connection and symbolism. We come across a similar approach in the last book by philosopher Ronald Dworkin entitled "Religion without God" (see 2014).

A slightly different reasoning to support the thesis on atheism's religion-like character abridges to pointing out that atheists too employ cultural codes and elements specific to religious organizations: they unite into communes (semi-churches); organize their own rituals (humanist weddings, dedication ceremonies or secular funerals); have their own symbolism (there is a number of such atheistic and freethought symbols – see Tyrła 2014b). There is even a demand for "atheist devotional objects" engaging that symbolism, especially in the form of T-shirts, mugs, bumper stickers et cetera (see Omyliński n.d.).

Indicating these types of formal similarities between atheism and religion often aims to criticize

and devalue the former's claim to uniqueness and a dissimilarity to religion. It also causes atheists' resistance as they counter this attitude, regarding it as an indication of the incomprehension of the gist of atheism<sup>1</sup>. That in turn, breeds the aforementioned ethical problem condensed into the question of whether a (non-)religion researcher, or any other publically vocal member of society, has the right to label anyone against their will; even if such a researcher should be convinced he or she is sufficiently equipped with the theoretical tools to do so. In this case, such a theoretical tool, considered by many religion sociologists as sufficient justification to treat a non-religion as a form of religion, is the functional strategy of defining religiousness.

### The Debate over Defining Religion

Discussing the issues of defining religion, Günter Kehrler begins with the fairly pessimistic and discouraging statement that "none of the problems that religion sciences deal with has been as it is to resolve, the problem is worth devoting increased consideration, and it is worth doing so at the very start of any (non-)religion sociology deliberation."<sup>2</sup> I pre-

<sup>1</sup> In this article it is not my purpose to discuss a slightly different case of the so-called "atheistic religions" status. Michael Martin (see 2007), as much as he firmly self-declares as a supporter of treating atheism as something qualitatively completely remote from religion, he still recognizes the religious character of such religions acclaimed as atheistic as Jainism, Buddhism and Confucianism. He is conscious of various types of problems if not an inner contradiction of the oxymoronic statement that "atheistic religion" poses. This issue, however, goes beyond the premise of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Not all agree with this approach to the matter. And so, according to Weber, "to define religion, to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study" (Weber 2002: 318). Eventually Weber never completed the presentation he mentioned with any definition of religion. Despite that, his profound analyses of world religions still inspire. As much as

suppose that the definition of non-religion depends on the way religion is defined. Due to their dialectic relationship, the concepts of religion and non-religion are mutually conditional; and in the semantic sense as well.

The concept of religion resembles that of, for instance, culture. Each one of us uses them on a daily basis, in a way that is mostly intuitive and fairly adapted to a given context. But when it comes to providing their definitions it appears not so easy a task. It has caused, both religion sociologists and religious experts, headache; and still does. In the course of the evolution of those fields there have been many, often decisively divergent, definitions of religion. It would appear later that some of them have similarities, and so could be grouped into categories. We can then speak of the various strategies of defining religion. The most passionate and significant debate from the point of view of non-religion studies occurs between the supporters of two such strategies: the substantive and the functional defining of religion (Kehrler 1997: 19–32; Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2004).

Those who support the substantive definitions of religion<sup>3</sup> focus on attempts to answer the question of what religion is. In this case the religion-defining criterion is its content. Typically, they try to isolate the factor that determines the essence of religion.

I seek those optimal definition strategies in this study, I do, however, realize that sociology of religion and non-religion may function despite a lack thereof.

<sup>3</sup> Among them, to name a few, are Peter Berger (although his case is not indisputable; Irena Borowik brings attention to the sections of his idea where he happens to define religion also through the prism of its function – see Borowik 1997: 23); Steve Bruce; Roland Robertson; Karel Dobbelaere and Mircea Eliade.

Various kinds of entities, objects or types of reality: gods, deities, spiritual individualities, *sacrum*, sacred things, transcendence, meta-empirical reality, supernaturalism, final things, sacred cosmos, and meta-natural reality (Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2004: 67). Another distinctive element of this religion defining strategy is a dichotomous view on reality. Usually, we come across a vision of the world split into *sacrum* and *profanum*; the sacred and the profane; the meta-natural and the natural; the meta-empirical and the empirical; the supernatural and the innate; where the former in each duo is always selfsame with a religious element. It should be noted that such an approach to defining religion is close to its common perception, at least in the Western culture, owing mostly to Christian influences. Christianity fulfills all the requirements to be recognized as a religion in the substantive sense (due to the clear identifiability of such substantive elements as God, the sacred or the supernatural).

The substantive approach is not, however, devoid of weak points that have long exposed it to criticism. Formulating his own definition of religion, Émile Durkheim already criticized any attempts to define it through the prism of the concept of supernaturalism and the concept of deity. From today's perspective, we can acknowledge that these definitions appear to Durkheim as overly ethnocentric. They do describe Christianity well, but can by no measure be applied to a number of non-European religions. And so, the concept of supernaturalism, as the French classic puts it, "it is certain that this idea does not appear until late in the history of religions; it is completely foreign, not only to those peoples who are called primitive but also to all oth-

ers who have not attained a considerable degree of intellectual culture" (Durkheim 1990: 21). The scientific revolution conditioned dividing the world into the meta-natural and the "natural." With the revolution the category of "the natural order of things" was formed, which meant considering reality in the categories of laws and causality. As a result, the empirically experienceable and scientifically explainable "natural" realm was created. Whatever did not fulfill the requirements and settled beyond this realm became "that-which-is-supernatural." Except, one must remember that the boundaries between the two have not been given once and for all. They shift, mostly due to advances in scientific explanations of reality. Durkheim takes on an even more straightforward approach toward the tendency to define religion via concepts of deities and ghosts. She simply points to the religions that do without them, such as Buddhism and Jainism.

As a result of this and a volume of subsequent criticism, the substantive criterion lived to see a competing approach: the functional definition of religion.<sup>4</sup> The latter seeks the religion-defining criterion not in its content, but in the functions it carries. It stressed the significance of religion in both individual life and the life of societies at large. Maria Libiszowska-Żółtkowska reviews the possible functions that a religion can bear. She lists the following: sense-creating, existential, integrating, normative, bond-creating, identity-mapping,

<sup>4</sup> The main representatives are Thomas Luckmann, Robert Bellah (similarly to Berger, he uses a mixed definition, functional-substantive), J. Milton Yinger, Clifford Geertz and Andrew Greeley.

identifying, regulative, and legitimizing (Libiszowska-Żółtkowska 2004: 67). This point of view acknowledges as a religion, any system of related meanings, that in a social dimension can fulfill any of those functions. Thomas Luckmann's definition is generally considered one of the best examples of this type of approach to defining religion. He describes religion as any form of the transcendence of biological nature by the human organism through creating binding and general universes of meanings (Luckmann 2006). From this perspective, pretty much any ideology could be regarded as a religion, including those that are "commonly" recognized as secular. This is where the fundamental influence of the strategy choice to define religion is brought to light. As Kehrer puts it: "choosing a definition is not so much a matter of personal taste. From the functionalist point of view Soviet Communism, for instance, appears to be a religion; from the substantive perspective, however, it does not reveal traits typical of a religion" (1997: 31).<sup>5</sup>

Here we reach one of the most significant differences between the two defining strategies. Substantive definitions are generally exclusive; functional definitions tend to be inclusive. And on the one hand, that inclusivism determines the power of functional definitions, but on the other, it exposes its adherents to serious charges posed by "substantialists." Contrary to substantive definitions, functional definitions cope well with ethnocentric charges (Europocentric in particular) since they require

<sup>5</sup> Poland has had book monographs analyzing Soviet communism in terms of a religious phenomenon published; "Para-religion Communism" by Marcin Kula (2003) and "Faith of The Soviet Man" by Rafał Imos (2007) are worth mentioning in particular.

no supernatural entities (implicitly understood as analogous to those present in Christianity) to qualify a semantic system as a religion. This fact may attest to the superiority of functional definitions. Conversely, at the same time, this strong argument is the functionalist strategy weakness. One may raise an objection that it excessively broadens the perception of what is religious and thus loses its delimitating qualities. Peter Berger describes the peril:

There are, after all, modes of self-transcendence and concomitant symbolic universes that are vastly different from each other, whatever the identity of their anthropological origins. Thus little is gained, in my opinion, by calling, say, modern science a form of religion. If one does that, one is subsequently forced to define in what way modern science is different from what has been called religion by everyone else, including those engaged in *Religionswissenschaft*—which poses the same definitional problem all over again. I find it much more useful to try a substantive definition of religion from the beginning, and to treat the questions of its anthropological rootage and its social functionality as separate matters (1997: 225).

The traditional approach to religion stems back from functionalism, distinguished religion and its functional alternatives (e.g., science or sport) that took over its functions, but were not religions themselves. Whereas Karel Dobbelaere (2003: 144) remarks that when we define religion in the functional manner, speaking of functional alternatives to religion proves impossible. For every such alternative will essentially prove to be some form of religion.

## Toward an Optimal Definition

It is neither my task nor ambition to resolve which of the definitional strategies described above is better, assuming of course such resolution is at all possible. But, one should consider which of the strategies to define religion is more adequate in the case of research into non-religiousness and non-religious people. I tend to lean more toward the substantive definition for two reasons.

**First reason: inability to use the functional definition.** As mentioned before, according to the functional definition, any semantic system or ideology may be regarded as a religion, including those of a secular character. Following this train of thought, with no effort any ideology created to negate religion could be considered a religion as well. As Kehrer puts it:

Would it then be impossible to adopt an understanding of religion broad enough to embrace any kinds of references to sacred things, or in other words, things of highest significance to the agent or agents. Through that we could reach a definition whose scope would make the mental construct of a society *sans* religion impossible (1997: 29).

In the sense of functional definitions then, non-religious people actually are religious, just in a different way. This mode of defining religion makes it downright impossible to isolate the non-religious as a separate social category, divergent in the quality sense from the religious. The "religious" and "sacred" is defined so broadly that any substantially non-religious viewpoints become pushed outside the socio-

logical field of vision; and even if that should not happen, they must be re-conceptualized according to new, "pan-religious" rules.

Non-belief and irreligion become delegitimized at their epistemological roots. Applying such an imperialist perspective results in preventing the analyses of non-religiousness and non-believers phenomena already at the stage of formulating a research problem and conceptualizing key ideas. Nevertheless, it is impossible to conduct research into the phenomena. You can assume that the stake in the game of definitions is not only purely a scientific desire to pursue truth or methodologic purism but rather the fight, that involved sociologists are more or less aware of, is on; it is the fight to legitimize non/religious viewpoints that are at stake. Functional definitions serve to boost self-esteem and add further meaning to a religious standpoint; substantive definitions are a remedy to the possible effects of such treatments.<sup>6</sup>

An extremely revealing example of such ideological conditioning within the sociology of (non-)religion is provided by Ryan Cragun and Joseph H. Hammer, who form a thesis on the "Pro-Religious Hegemony in the Sociology of Religion" (see 2011). According to them, religion and its manifestations are the main

<sup>6</sup> I have not conducted systematic analyses of the religious standpoint or denomination adherence of sociologists declaring for various types of religious definitions, but I suppose that the functional and inclusive definitions supporters will more frequently be religious people (one can treat such statement as a hypothesis introduced for the sake of possible future research into the issue). The fact brought up at the beginning of this article attests to that; many of those mentioned who support defining atheism as a "religion-like" phenomenon are clerics or theologians. On the other hand, substantive definitions are generally used by non-believers, including publications by social movement activists.

frame of reference (axiological as well) for sociologists of religion. For the most part, sociologists of religion, more or less consciously, represent a church denomination, and so, an ideologically entangled point of view. Thus religion and the state of “being religious” seems to them as some (implicitly desirable) norm, and anything beyond that norm turns out to be a deviation. According to the authors, it shows up primarily in the terminology used by sociologists of religion. As much as the terms pertaining to religiousness or substituting one religion for another (exciter, (dis)affiliate, (dis)identifier, switcher, convert) are semantically non-evaluative, those relating to non-religiousness or forsaking one’s religion (apostate, deserter, defector, dropout, loyalist) are burdened with negative connotations. The authors suggest that we stop using those terms and replace them with new, non-evaluative ones. Craun and Hammer do not just conclude at the diagnosis of the American sociology of non-religion, but they also seek reasons thereto. The two believe it is institutionally conditioned. They bring up the fact that from among the four biggest and most significant organizations uniting sociologists of religion from all over the world, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR), the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR), the Religious Research Association (RRA) and the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR), three were set up as religious organizations (ASR and ISSR) or as church-launched scientific institutions (RRA); with the Catholic church in the lead. In that sense, they were religious or pro-religion at the very source, which affected their operation even when they professionalized into secular organizations. Lack of changes in the body of members granted the con-

tinuity. Accordingly, in its character the sociology of religion created by members of these organizations is often explicitly or implicitly a “religious sociology” or “denominative sociology.” What about the fourth organization? Even though the ISSR did not have even a short religious episode at its origin, nevertheless, a majority of its members are also members of the other three organizations. Thereby it carries out the same program policy as the other ones (see: Tyrała 2014a: 49).

Thus, for epistemological and so fundamental reasons, functional definitions prevent us from speaking of non-believers and non-belief. The problem also rests in the fact that their vision of non-religion is in overt contradiction with how non-believers perceive themselves. After all, according to the theorem by William I. Thomas, “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” In keeping with the theorem then, a reason to recognize a non-belief as a non-religion would be the sheer fact that non-believers disagree with treating their non-religiousness as a form of religion. Dobbelaere supports this approach by proposing a thesis where we must avoid predefining religion in the course of sociological research. He writes:

Sociologists should keep clear of any ideological positions. They can do it under the condition that they avoid defining religion. They should, however, analyze definitions of religion formed by social categories subject to their research (2003: 151-152).

Other religion researchers seem to agree. According to Inger Furseth and Pål Repstad (2006: 22), religion sociologists should not construct definitions of religion

that diverge too far in their meaning from the commonly used ones. They deem attempts of the sort as an expression of unreasonable cognitive imperialism, which could cause communication problems and even conflicts between the scientists and society. The authors find a clear example of such practices in labeling secular humanism a religion, but in no way justifiable because this is hardly the understanding that humanists openly declare to have of themselves. Furseth and Repstad even suggest the unethicity of using such a definition strategy, particularly in this case.

N. J. Demerath III is just as critical toward attempts to define irreligion as a form of religion. He sets out with a critique of Paul Tillich and Karl Barth’s theological definitions of religion that he believes too inclusive. In Demerath’s opinion such definition interventions lead to a counterintuitive conclusion that every human is religious, and an atheist is the most religious one. He comments on the matter:

From my sociological point of view, this is a form of territorial aggression that yields but a semantic victory. Because a sociologist thrives on seeking and explaining divergences present among people, from the cause-effect point of view, he or she does not lean toward defining seeming differences as philosophical similarities nor toward rejecting a common understanding by turning to sophisticated erudition. To the extent in which a believer and a non-believer think they differ, that difference is sociologically real, no matter what theology has to say (Demerath 1984: 363).

The issue of differences between sociological and philosophic-theological strategies of defining an atheist or non-believer comes forth.

Also according to James Beckford (2006: 35-57), a supporter of a constructionist approach to religion, researchers should not attach themselves to a specific definition of religion. He begins with an observation that in the course of history religion has taken on a countless variability of forms. He detects a lack of consensus on the definition of religion in contemporary societies in particular. Every definition has a normative character (and thus will cause somebody harm). Beckford notices that even within one society, collective subjects such as legal institutions, the state, mass media, schools or healthcare facilities create their own concepts of religion and use them for their own purposes. This leads the author to the following conclusion: “It is better to recognize that a universal definition of religion is unattainable” (Beckford 2006: 46). Instead of continuing the aimless search, he proposed his own solution:

From the point of view of social studies it would be better to abandon the theory of universal characteristics of religion and quit the search. Instead we should turn to analyzing various situations in which people create, give or question religious meanings (Beckford 2006: 41).<sup>7</sup>

I think this kind of strategy is the best starting point when it comes to analyzing and researching non-religiousness.

**Second reason: the necessity of using a substantial definition (in the Polish situation where**

<sup>7</sup> In the cited ideas of Thomas, Demerath, Dobbelaere and Beckford it is easy to discern echoes of Max Weber’s approach. He proposed a perception of meanings from the point of view of actors of the social life.

**non-religiousness is contextualized by Catholic religiousness**). Going along with Beckford, the next step should be to establish which definition of religion is used by Polish (but not only) non-believers. Taking into account their functioning within Western culture, they are surrounded primarily by Catholics. Not unlike other Christian denominations, Islam or Judaism, Catholicism, as aforementioned, is easily defined in substantive terms and thus from the non-believer standpoint religion is a construct of decisively substantive character. This means that they would rather define their own non-religiousness in terms of rejecting beliefs in various categories of supernatural beings. Results of various research into self-defining non-belief in the Western world confirm this. Representatives of the community tend to describe their non-religiousness as a lack of belief in God (in various forms), non-material or supernatural beings (see Bullivant 2013; Tyrała 2014a: 159-178).<sup>8</sup> In their eyes, the very rejection of religion perceived in substantive terms makes them, non-believers. That is who they believe they are and one can presume that they live according to such a self-definition. I then decided that adopting such a presumption will optimize my own research into non-believers functioning in the context of Christian religious culture. I claim that the culture that representatives of the communi-

ty under my scrutiny come across determines the choice of this particular definition instead of any a priori of terminological arrangements.

### Research clues

In the text, I refer to my research entitled "Non-believers in Contemporary Poland as a Cultural Minority." The research consisted of two stages: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative part that involved an online questionnaire survey was conducted in late 2008. It was non-representative. The questionnaire was distributed mainly via websites and internet portals targeting non-believers (chiefly but not only, *Racjonalista.pl*). Due to surprisingly lively respondent reactions, I received over 7500 responses. I decided to conduct quantitative research mostly because of the lack of any number data on various aspects of Polish non-believers' functioning. The 59-question survey included personal data questions and five topical blocks: identity, viewpoint, discrimination, social movement and morality. The qualitative part of research included 28 in-depth, partially structured, interviews I conducted with non-believers in 2009. The respondents' availability determined their choice. Again, I primarily turned to the site *Racjonalista.pl*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> One might find an additional confirmation of the fact that non-believers perceive religion exactly in substantive categories in, say, the "Religion" entry (Stopes-Roe 2007) of "The Encyclopedia of Unbelief," a monumental work edited by Tom Flynn (2007). It aspires to be a kind of main reference work, written on non-belief from the point of view of non-belief. In the entry, religion is defined solely via a reference to supernatural entities, especially a God in a personified form. It is then a definition of remarkably substantive character, served in the form that nearly 100 years ago Durkheim submitted for criticism.

<sup>9</sup> It should be added that the decision to use a non-probability sampling stemmed from the lack of possibility to use a sampling frame as none exists for the researched group. Consequently, the results of my research cannot be generalized onto the entire population of Polish non-believers. The social-demographic profile of an Internet user does not overlap with the social-demographic profile of a statistic Pole. Young people with post-secondary education and from larger cities prevail among Internet users (zob. Batorski 2009).

Conducting research into non-religious people in Poland, I used the terms "non-belief" and "non-believer."<sup>10</sup> I regarded every person that declared themselves a non-believer as such. A mere self-declaration was the necessary and sufficient condition for non-belief.<sup>11</sup> I did not create any a priori lists of requirements a person should meet. I did not ask any filter questions, for instance, if the respondent actually believed in God (in the personified or non-personified form) or any other symptoms of supernaturalism; if they thought themselves a member of any church or denomination unit; if they practiced any religion or experienced any religious emotions. I was simply interested in the consequences of non-belief declaration: if the person's viewpoint was thoroughly secular; if they had any religious views or dogmas; if they were non-practicing; if they joined any religious rituals; if they followed a religiously grounded morality or rather some sort of autonomous ethics. The respondents would individually add meanings to the "non-believer" label.

In my opinion, this self-declaration is the way to define non-religiousness in a form that is non-invasive toward self-definitions of the researched non-religious people. Thanks to such a definition strategy, we do not impose our own preferred conceptualization onto anyone and can follow the respondents' reflection. We also avoid potential conflicts that may stem from labeling non-religious people religious. It often raises their negative emotions that may result in

<sup>10</sup> A detailed justification of the reasons that caused me to choose this particular term (and not one of many already existing ones such as: atheist, agnostic, rationalist, humanist, irreligious person, etc.) can be found in my studies (see Tyrała 2015).

<sup>11</sup> I am not a pioneer on the Polish ground. The strategy of defining non-believers via their self-declarations was already in use in the Polish sociology in the 1980s by Mirosława Grabowska and her team (Grabowska 1990: 57).

a number of inconveniences in the research process (reduced inclination or refusal to participate, or even various forms of aggression addressed against the researcher). The reason that I myself have not come across such violent reactions is likely partially due to the fact that I did not enforce any narrow definition framework, but instead allowed the respondents a vast freedom in describing and interpreting their own non-religious sub-worlds.

One might consider what I have gained and lost employing this definition strategy. Let us start with the gains. Here I include the fact that my research involved respondents representing all shades of non-religiousness, among them those I did not expect in the beginning. As a result of my research sampling method, it eventually encompassed a number of people that might seem to have little to do with non-belief nor atheism; for example, 21.3% of respondents declared a belief in a form of supernatural force other than a non-personified God and 19.9% admitted to believing in a human spirit (for detailed data see: Tyrała 2014a: 241-277). Had I preliminarily assumed that the non-believer should be free of such beliefs, then those types of respondents would never be included into my sampling. It turned out, however, that not only did they make it in but they also comprise nearly one fifth of the studied group. A fact known on the Polish grounds from other research was thus confirmed, that a considerable subgroup of non-believers have no problem with including elements of religious or spiritual nature into their viewpoint (see Vernon 1968; Pasquale 2007). Eventually, I arrived at considering this counterintuitive result an illuminating effect of my conceptualizing choices.

A similar thing occurred in the case of my research via in-depth interviews into my respondents' spirituality (see: Tyrała 2013). In no way did I predefine, direct nor limit their responses, acknowledging whatever they declared to be an expression of their spirituality as such. Even when it led to results not completely accordant with common expectations relating to the term. And so my respondents claimed as elements constituting their spirituality the following: emotionality, expressions of interpersonal and aesthetic sensitivity, higher emotions (friendship, love). Those were ways to conceptualize spirituality as something "daily" and "banal." You could doubt whether they in fact are expressions of "actual" spirituality, usually associated with something less ordinary, transgressional or transcendent. Nevertheless, I assumed that expressions of the phenomenon I investigate could involve everything that – to use Paul Heelas's wording (see: 2002) – serves as "deepening the self," however, the methods of such deepening will be highly individualized. If, according to my interlocutors, being moved by a movie or celebrating their own emotionality are manifestations of their spirituality, I accepted them as such. Even if they were manifestations of a spirituality of "minimal threshold."

One could also pose a question about my losses upon employing this strategy. Mainly, you lose control over your research sampling, particularly as far as respondent verification is concerned. Depending on the self-declarations of respondents' non-belief constitutes a certain act of trust on the part of the researcher. It has its consequences, both in the quantitative and qualitative sense. Let me use a clarifying example. When the lack of belief in God (in a personified form, in particular) is taken as the defining characteristic of non-belief/

atheism, then the sampling in research is designed so that people of the sort do not enter by using, for example, a filter question about (non-)belief in God. In case of the research strategy I chose to engage that that solution was impossible. The question on (non-)belief in a personified God in my research did not serve filtering, but was one of the questions included in the survey questionnaire and in the dispositions for the interview. Due to that 3.6% of survey respondents, declared non-believers – stated that they believe in a personified God and another 5.6% stated they had difficulties in determining who they believe in. In spite of these declarations seeming contradictory to any known to me, common or "expert understanding of non-belief/atheism, in the case of my research I could not doubt such answers nor remove the respondents from the sampling.

### Conclusions

Prior to concluding my considerations, I would like to state that the dilemmas in question are not specific solely to sociology of religion. The issue of sociologists arbitrarily defining ideas, often in contradiction with common definitions and intuitions, pertains to other sociological subfields as well.<sup>12</sup> Tomasz Szlendak, for instance, describes analogous problems that sociologists of family deal with on a daily basis (2011: 95-115). For a number of years the binding family model was the nuclear family, one that consists of two spouses of opposite genders and their child/children living together under the same roof. But with progressive changes in

<sup>12</sup> Emil Durkheim can be thought the "father" of such approach in sociology. In "The Rules of Sociological Method" he exhorted to studying sociological facts "from an aspect where they appear separate from their individual manifestations," which one could understand as the deed of foundation for treating scientific definitions within sociology as superior against the common one; the supremacy of *etic* over *emic* (see Durkheim 2000: 74-77).

the family shape and general approach to family life, the model turned out ever less adequate. For instance, according to that approach, homosexual couples raising children were not considered families. According to that approach your family dog or cat could not be considered a family member in spite of being frequently treated as such by their human cohabitants, as research shows (see: Konecki 2005). Due to all those dilemmas, in the 1990s Jon Bernardes adopted the Thomas theorem for family research needs (later even described as the "Bernardes theorem"). The new version states: "we must entirely reject the concept of 'the family' as created in our social sciences, as theoretically inadequate and ideologically engaged, and as a consequence of the rejection research only into what the actors of social life will themselves consider a family and family life" (Bernardes 1993: 40; see Szlendak 2011: 105). Despite the facts that this approach has not been employed by all sociologists of family, it has not been free from criticism and it is not an ideologically neutral approach, one must admit that it does solve certain significant aporias present in the field. It has encountered resistance mainly among sociologists of a more conservative attitude, professing a more traditional vision of the family, prophesying its crisis, uninclined to expand its definition enough to include homosexual families or house pets. Just as it does on the religious field, it distinctly shows that definition debates rarely have an ideologically neutral character and can be interpreted as a type of game played by representatives of the various interest groups, often conflicted as far as a general outlook, politics or religion are concerned.

In both cases, research into the family and the example discussed in this article, following the meanings ascribed by studied actors (in both cases amounting

to using self-declarative strategy) solves the problems that alternative solutions do not handle (although, as I have shown, they incidentally generate new ones). In my opinion, in the case of research into non-believers this approach turned out most effective because by using it I discarded the most perturbing research dilemmas in the three significant dimensions of my analyses: epistemological, conceptualizing and ethical.

In the epistemological sense following the actors, that is, non-believers applying a substantive understanding of religion, means that irreligion becomes "recovered" and it even becomes possible to consider and scientifically articulate it. As I have mentioned before, using functional definitions of religion trims irreligion at its epistemological roots since they are definitions inclusive enough to automatically throw it in the "that-which-is-religious" bag. And that takes away its autonomy. Such mode of defining religion prevents isolating non-believers as a separate social category qualitatively divergent from religious people. In the conceptualizing sense, following the actors solves the dilemma of defining non-religious people for research purposes. It, so to say, inflicts a self-declarative strategy as the optimal one instead of the strategy that predefines non-religious people by using a list of markers that the researcher determines in advance. Despite, as I have mentioned, not being problem-free, this approach still yields exceptionally interesting research results. Finally, following the actors turns out to be the optimal approach in the ethical sense. By using it we protect the respondents against a situation in which they are restrained by the power of scientific authority to a definition with which they do not identify and which often serves as a negative framework. By using it we make the researcher-respondent interaction more symmet-

rical. It is for those three reasons I have made every effort to avoid treating non-believing respondents as

## References

Batorski, Dominik. 2009. "Korzystanie z technologii informacyjno-komunikacyjnych." Pp. 281-309 in *Diagnoza Społeczna 2009. Warunki i jakość życia Polaków*, edited by Janusz Czapiński, Tomasz Panek. Warsaw: Rada Monitoringu Społecznego.

Beckford, James. 2006. *Teoria społeczna a religia*. Cracow: NOMOS.

Berger, Peter L. 1997. *Święty baldachim. Elementy socjologicznej teorii religii*. Cracow: NOMOS.

Bernardes, Jon. 1993. "Responsibilities in Studying Postmodern Families." *Journal of Family Issues* 14(1):35-49.

Blackford, Russell and Udo Schüklenk. 2014. *50 mitów o ateizmie*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo CiS.

Borowik, Irena. 1997. "Socjologia religii Petera L. Bergera." Pp. 7-25 in *Święty baldachim. Elementy socjologicznej teorii religii*, edited by Peter L. Berger. Cracow: NOMOS.

Bullivant, Stephen. 2013. "Defining 'Atheism.'" Pp. 11-21 in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cragun, Ryan T. and Joseph H. Hammer. 2011. "'One Person's Apostate Is Another Person's Convert': What Terminology Tells Us About Pro-religious Hegemony in the Sociology of Religion." *Humanity and Society* 35:149-175.

Cupitt, Don. 1998. *Po Bogu. O przyszłości religii*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo WAB.

de Botton, Alain. 2013. *Religion for Atheists. A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*. London: Penguin.

Demerath, N. J. III. 1984. "Program i prolegomena socjologii irreligii." Pp. 362-373 in *Socjologia religii. Wybór tekstów*, edited by Franciszek Adamski. Cracow: WAM.

religious people. With passing time, I still view it as the optimal solution.

Dobbelaere, Karel. 2003. "Socjologiczna analiza definicji religii." Pp. 139-153 in *Socjologia religii. Antologia tekstów*, edited by Władysław Piwowarski. Cracow: NOMOS.

Durkheim, Émile. 1990. *Elementarne formy życia religijnego. System totemiczny w Australii*. Warsaw: PWN.

Durkheim, Émile. 2000. *Zasady metody socjologicznej*. Warsaw: WN PWN.

Dworkin, Ronald. 2014. *Religia bez Boga*. Warsaw: Aletheia.

Flynn, Tom, (ed.). 2007. *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Furseth, Inger and Pål Repstad. 2006. *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion. Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Aldershot, Burlington: Ashgate.

Grabowska, Mirosława. 1990. "Wywiad w badaniu zjawisk 'trudnych' Przypadek polskiej religijności." *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 1:51-64.

Guja, Jowita. 2009. "Główne problemy filozoficznej krytyki religii." *Studia Humanistyczne* 7:133-146.

Heelas, Paul. 2002. "The Spiritual Revolution: From 'Religion' to 'Spirituality.'" Pp. 412-436 in *Religions in the Modern World. Traditions and Transformations*, edited by Linda Woodhead et al. London, New York: Routledge.

Imos, Rafał. 2007. *Wiara człowieka radzieckiego*. Cracow: NOMOS.

Kehrer, Günter. 1997. *Wprowadzenie do socjologii religii*. Cracow: NOMOS.

Konecki, Krzysztof T. 2005 *Ludzie i ich zwierzęta. Interakcjonistyczno – symboliczna analiza społecznego świata właścicieli zwierząt domowych*. Warsaw: Scholar.

Kula, Marcin. 2003. *Religiopodobny komunizm*. Cracow: NOMOS.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social – An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Libiszowska-Żółtkowska, Maria. 2004. "Definicje socjologiczne religii." Pp. 66-69 in *Leksykon socjologii religii. Zjawiska – badania – teorie*, edited by Maria Libiszowska-Żółtkowska and Janusz Mariańskired. Warsaw: VERBINUM.

Luckmann, Thomas. 2006. *Niewidzialna religia. Problem religii we współczesnym społeczeństwie*. Cracow: NOMOS.

Martin, Michael. 2007. "Atheism and Religion." Pp. 217-232 in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, edited by Michael Martin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Omyliński, Janusz. n.d. *Ateizm stał się już religią?* Retrieved September 10, 2015 (<http://natemat.pl/32659,ateizm-stal-sie-juz-religia>).

Pasquale, Frank L. 2007. "The 'Nonreligious' in the American Northwest." Pp. 41-58 in *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*, edited by Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar. Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society & Culture.

## Citation

Tyrała, Radosław. 2017. „Is Atheism a Religion? On Socio-Anthropologic Cognitive Imperialism and Problems That Follow.” *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 12(1):128–141. Retrieved Month, Year ([www.przegladsocjologiijakosciowej.org](http://www.przegladsocjologiijakosciowej.org)).

## Czy ateizm jest religią? O socjoantropologicznym imperializmie poznawczym i wynikających z niego problemach

**Abstrakt:** Celem artykułu jest ukazanie problemów natury konceptualizacyjnej z definiowaniem osób niereligijnych oraz etycznych konsekwencji tych problemów. Na początku wskazuję na często występujące zjawisko traktowania ateizmu jako rodzaju religii. Źródłem tego faktu upatruję w spotykanej wśród socjologów religii tendencji do stosowania inkluzywnych i funkcjonalnych definicji religii. Z punktu widzenia badacza nie religii i niereligijności jest to problem, dlatego też postuluję używanie w tym kontekście definicji religii postulowanych przez samych badanych aktorów, na ogół mających charakter substancjalny. W praktyce badawczej przekłada się to na wybór autodeklaracji jako kryterium definicyjnego niereligijności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ateizm, niewiara, definicje religii, konstruktywizm, etyka badań naukowych