Piotr Kostyło

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7484-9766

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz

The misery of the human condition and religion

Introduction

Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2014) and Józef Tischner (1931–2000) were Polish thinkers. In their works they described the condition of the society which remembered the atrocities of the Second World War, and longed for security, and at the same time its majority aspired to be a part of the so-called Western European culture. The life choices that both the philosophers made in their youth can be better understood precisely in this context – the aware-

Piotr Kostyło, a doctor with a habilitation degree, a university professor, the head of the Department of Philosophy of Upbringing and Citizenship Education at the Department of Pedagogy, Casimir the Great University in Bydgoszcz, an originator of "Biblioteka Myśli Pedagogicznej" [Library of Pedagogical Thought] publication series, the editor-in-chief of "Filozofia Edukacji" [Philosophy of Education], a translator of works by, among others, John Henry Newman, William James, Émile Durkheim and Henri Bergson. He specializes in philosophy of education. He is the president of the Polish Society of Pedagogy, and a member of Internationale-Ferdinand-Ebner-Gesellschaft. A student of Rev. Józef Tischner and Leszek Kołakowski.

ness of the recent apocalypse and the desire to protect oneself against one in the future. This is because, as Kołakowski said in one of his late interviews, apocalypse "is always possible."[1] At first Kołakowski looked for the rational order and security in Marxist philosophy and in the communist party which was implementing it. Tischner chose the path of priestly vocation and entered the seminary, thereby bearing witness

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[1] An Interview *O sztuce oswajania liberalizmu. Z Leszkiem Kołakowskim rozmawia Piotr Kostyło*, "Przegląd Powszechny" (1998) nr 4, p. 24.

to the images of God and man as contained in the biblical tradition and the Church teachings. These fundamentally different ideological choices served to order the world shattered by the war, and provided energy for work on improving it in the future. In the mid-1950s Kołakowski came to realize that the path he had chosen was wrong and so began to gradually depart from it, adopting the stance that might be called sceptical liberalism. Tischner remained faithful to his original decision, found a lasting support in religious faith and contrasted this faith with a variety of currents of contemporary philosophy, including Marxism.

The philosophical backgrounds and temperaments imparted to Kołakowski's and Tischner's thinking a universal dimension. As they followed in Hegel's footsteps, they both looked for possibilities of overcoming the phenomena hindering universal progress, which came to be expressed in the conviction – in the epistemological dimension – about the rationality, as well as – in the ethical dimension – about the possibility of lasting social justice. The then culture of Western Europe seemed to bear out these convictions. Still, the experiences gained in their surrounding localness, which was often perceived as irrational and unjust, served as the starting point for the concepts they put forth. For both of them the local context was provided by the encounter between traditional Catholicism and the Marxist ideas within the Polish culture after 1945. Both in the period of his ideological involvement with Marxism and in the subsequent period, Kołakowski was keenly interested in religious issues. At first his attitude to them was extremely critical, but over the course of years his position became more neutral and ultimately turned into surprising sympathy. Tischner's interest in Marxism was not so much motivated by his personal passion, as by the needs of the then Catholic Church in Poland, which wanted to get to know better and understand the atheistic ideology of Marxism, as well as engage in intellectual dialogue with it. Tischner was assigned this task and he performed it well. Ideologically, Tischner was unwaveringly opposed to Marxism, which can be evidenced by, inter alia, his critical stance on liberation theology.

The influence of both the philosophers' thinking went beyond the local dimension and earned its permanent place in the legacy of world

thought. This happened in large measure irrespective of the thinkers' personal endeavours. As regards Kołakowski, the disgraceful decision made by the communist authorities to exile him from Poland in 1968 proved to be of crucial importance. However, this painful experience allowed Kołakowski to earn his permanent place in the milieus of Western European and American scholars, where his texts published in English, and especially the three-volume edition of *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*, published in 1976–78, secured not only his universal recognizability, but also fame. The universalism of Tischner's thought manifested itself both in the context of his close ideological relations with the anti-communist "Solidarity" movement, which in the early 1980s aroused global interest, and in the context of his collaboration with Karol Wojtyła – John Paul II, who supported Tischner and promoted his thinking.

The present essay is devoted to various aspects of the misery of the human condition and their references to religion. The differences between the two thinkers in their attitude to the relation between these two phenomena are interesting, even though of greater interest is the evolutionary path taken by the views on this subject in each one of them. The starting point for Kołakowski and Tischner was the belief that in the lives of their contemporaries there should be some significant progress that would transport them from the local level to the universal one. As for the former thinker, the destination point was the disillusionment with the path chosen and the longing for the traditionally construed religious transcendence and the resultant comfort, and as for the latter one – the painful awareness that the universalism that we had been with difficulty striving after is a maze without an exit. Therefore, the end of the road did not confirm the initial assumption, common to both the philosophers, about the constitutive relation between the misery of the human condition and the Polish localness.

Can a humanist be religious?

In the deliberation on the misery of the human condition and its relationship with religion as viewed by Leszek Kołakowski I omit the period of the philosopher's unambiguous identification with Marxism. This identification, by Kołakowski's own account, lasted from the 1940s until the mid-1950s and came to a definitive end as he wrote the essay *Czym jest socjalizm?*[2] [What is socialism?] in 1956. I omit this period, because, firstly, Kołakowski himself was very critical about what he said and wrote back then. It was difficult for him to refer to those texts which he regarded as intellectually (and sometimes also morally) indefensible. Secondly, these texts are objectively offensive in their Marxist dogmatism, and it would be a sheer waste of time to argue against it. Therefore, I begin with the thinker's later statements.

In the 1959 essay entitled *Kapłan i błazen (Rozważania o teologicznym dziedzictwie współczesnego myślenia)* [The Priest and the Jester (Reflections on the Theological Legacy of Contemporary Thinking)] Kołakowski analyses the transformed presence of theological concepts in contemporary philosophy. In this context he mentions eschatology, theodicy, the issues of nature and grace, the revelation and the relationship between faith and reason. The topicality of these concepts is determined by human needs, and above all the need to come to terms with the misery of one's own condition. This misery makes people long for the state "in which merits and rewards, faults and punishments will even out, in which evil will be avenged and good will receive its pay, in which all the scores of injustice will be settled, or in other words – in which all our human values will come to be fully realized."[3] It is easy to see that the wealth of translations of theological themes into the language of philosophy is really tremendous, and the harshness of the disputes between contemporary philosophers corresponds to the sharp exchanges

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[2] L. Kołakowski, *Czym jest socjalizm?*, in: L. Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji. Pisma rozproszone sprzed roku 1968*, t. 2, Londyn 2002, pp. 172–176.
[3] L. Kołakowski, *Kapłan i błazen*, in: L. Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji*, op. cit., p. 263.

between ancient or medieval theologians. Kołakowski sums up these contemporary controversies as wrangling between supporters and opponents of the absolute, where the absolute is conceived of as the ultimate instance definitively resolving human doubts and fulfilling human hopes. Kołakowski calls the thinkers who guard the absolute priests, and those who question the absolute – jesters. As he writes, he himself is in favour of "a jester's philosophy, i.e. a position of negative vigilance against any absolute."[4]

Kołakowski can see that amidst everyday tribulations people need consolation that is always brought to them by priests; he can also see that the same people are afraid that by accepting the consolation they might be drowning their life in fiction. In this sense priests' activity is dialectical – they offer people peace in the name of the absolute while keeping them in a state of permanent disillusionment. What then is the real misery of the human condition: painful experiences of unfulfilled human life, or the references to naive consolations that can never remove this pain for good? The jesters who challenge the absolute do not offer cheap consolation. "The philosophy of the jesters is precisely the one which in every era exposes as doubtful that which comes across as the most unshakeable, reveals contradictions in that which appears to be clear and indisputable, holds up to ridicule the obvious furnished by common sense and finds rationale in absurdities."[5] It is about destroying the existing state of affairs, which is always dramatic, but sometimes paves the way for a real change for the better.

Such a change cannot be effected by priests, because – as the thinker notes – they guard the world which is no longer there, keeping people in a state of conservative inertness. From this perspective, it is the jesters, and not the priests, who deserve to be named humanists. In his reflections, Kołakowski does not get down to the level of the surrounding

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[4] L. Kołakowski, *Kapłan i błazen*, op. cit., p. 293. Interesting analyses of these issue can be found in Z. Dymarski's *Między kapłanem a błaznem. O tolerancji w kontekście kultury* [Between the priest and the jester. On tolerance in the context of culture], in: *Tolerancja a edukacja*, red. M. Patalon, Gdańsk 2008, pp. 72–80.
[5] L. Kołakowski, *Kapłan i błazen*, op. cit., p. 290.

local religiousness, but many references in the text, including the title priest, suggest that the human longing for the absolute, which is from the start doomed to failure, is, in Kołakowski's opinion, expressed above all in religious people's longing for God. Thus, religion takes on a negative meaning of social force which does not allow man to fully develop his capabilities and keeps him asleep.

Also, Kołakowski writes about man's miserable condition in *Etyce bez kodeksu* [Ethics without a Code], an essay of crucial relevance for the understanding of his concept of personal ethics, and especially of the place of responsibility in it. Kołakowski claims that the world we are entering is not a world that we might dream of. This world "is a place of torture and concentration camps, where people die of hunger and cold; it is a world of twelve-year-old prostitutes, old men tormented by their children and children abused by their parents."[6] As long as we live in the world, we accept it and assume responsibility for it. How do we do that? Kołakowski answers that two roads open up in front of us: the road of code ethics and the road of personal ethics. The first one characterizes conservatives looking for absolutely certain solutions to the moral dilemmas they are faced with. It is the road on which through "identification with the permanent and pre-existing order of the world"[7] we dispense with personal responsibility for the sake of the responsibility of the absolute that we feel we are a part of. Code and catechism provisions provide us with a sense of security. But following this road is only seemingly safe, because as people we are often faced with problems for which there are no pre-conceived solutions. What is more, according to Kołakowski, precisely such problems are crucial to our moral experience. Neither codes, nor catechisms bring solutions. In a situation like this the only road we can follow with a sense of complete responsibility is the road of personal ethics.

Like in the essay *Kapłan i błazen* [The Priest and the Jester], here too the dialectic of the misery of the human condition comes to the fore.

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[6] L. Kołakowski, *Etyka bez kodeksu*, in: L. Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze*, Warszawa 2000, p. 140.
[7] L. Kołakowski, *Etyka bez kodeksu*, op. cit., p. 147.

At first it seems that the misery directly follows from moral and physical evil in the world. Kołakowski does not deny that. Still, he also shows other manifestations of this misery. One of them is the loneliness and the feeling of being lost in the face of the question about how to live and what to become involved in. Unlike Martin Heidegger, Kołakowski stresses the importance of the direction of human involvement. How to find the right direction, and how to act like a human while following it? There are no straightforward answers to these questions, and that is surely another reason for looking at the human condition through the lens of its misery. But there is even greater misery than being existentially lost and lonely. According to Kołakowski it is man's escape from the world drama and into the arms of the omniscient absolute. Underlying this conservative escapism is the belief that either the world we live in is the best possible world, or it is full of evil and immorality, but there is nothing we can do about it anyway. Such thinking is an affront to human dignity and is lacking in humanistic realism.

The content of the essay can be read as expressive of Kołakowski's hostile attitude to religion and the support it offers to man. The image of a conservative and orthodox man as outlined by the thinker is full of almost overt irony and malice. Therefore, the cutting edge of criticism is directed by Kołakowski against the Catholic Church, which groundlessly offers the faithful simple signposts to appropriate conduct. Thus, argues the thinker, lifted from people's shoulders is the effort concerned with everyday life and its trials and tribulations, as well as human involvement in the improvement of the world is hampered.

Also, the text *Symbole religijne i kultura humanistyczna* [Religious Symbols and Humanistic Culture] is interesting with regard to analyses of the misery of the human condition. In it, Kołakowski expresses an original proposition. "If it is true that «fear gave rise to gods», it is not so in the sense that the first authors of this formula had in mind: not fear of nature, but fear of oneself as alienated from nature."[8] Kołakowski

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[8] L. Kołakowski, *Symbole religijne i kultura humanistyczna*, in: L. Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze*, op. cit., p. 234.

observes that as long as people live immersed in nature, the sufferings that they experience, disease, old age and death affect them badly and arouse opposition, but they do not require any particular explanation. That is just the way it is – organisms are born to live, they mature, get old and die. Hence, the misery of the human nature is not its mortality, but the fact that as it becomes more and more emancipated from the world of nature, it finds it more and more difficult to accept that which ultimately happens to it. The greater the distance between our lives and the world of nature gets, the more we need religious symbols. We create these symbols so that we can somehow console ourselves, as we can see, on the one hand, our growing dominance over the world of nature, but on the other hand our never-ending suffering and death.[9]

In the essay Kołakowski suggests that people reveal their misery precisely by creating and using religious symbols. This misery consists in not being able to come face to face with the truth that we are all going to die. In the domain of metaphysics these symbols play the same role as codes do in the domain of ethics – they offer (essentially illusive) conviction that we are secure. But are they really a source of security? In the 1960s Kołakowski was still convinced that they were not. He still found the misery of the human condition to be related rather to an escape from responsibility for the world in the face of suffering experienced by people, than to the very fact that suffering exists.

It is not nature through its irrevocable laws that determines the misery of the human condition, but religion which provides people with illusive hope whereby the last word is not one of nature's. At this stage of Kołakowski's criticism of religion there is no longer Marxist dogmatism, but there is a conviction about the immaturity of people who hold anachronistic views and are afraid to face the truth about their individual responsibility for the world, which after years of difficulties and disappointments has in store for them death that puts a definitive end to everything. In this attitude of his, Kołakowski is both a positivist

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[9] The interpretation proposed by Kołakowski has a lot in common with Henri Bergson's concept of fabulation function and its role in static religion.

and an existentialist, as well as a sceptic, because as he rejects religious people's immature notions, he offers them nothing that might at least in part compensate for the lost security, certitude and spiritual consolation. Kołakowski is already remote from Marxism, but that does not mean that he has come any closer to the Catholic thought. He believes that only those who courageously accept the truth about their condition can truly preserve their humanity; only they deserve to be called humanists.

Where will the Sarmatian melancholy take us?

While Leszek Kołakowski writes about the negative role of religion in people's struggles with the truth about their place in the world full of suffering, Józef Tischner focuses his attention on the problematics of hope. In the introduction to *Świat ludzkiej nadziei* [The World of Human Hope] he distinguishes hope in the theological and anthropological sense. The latter sense proves to be ground-breaking, as it provides Tischner's thinking with orientation not only in the 1960–70s, but in the subsequent period as well. In Tischner's opinion, hope in the anthropological sense combines with "attempts at dialogue with the world of contemporary thought"[10] and it opens the Polish Catholicism up to the breath of the personalist thought, as well as the idea of open and dynamic religion. For Tischner, this hope means that God and the Christian values are also present outside the walls and gates of the Catholic Church, and even in the concepts that might appear to be unfavourable to religion. Anyway, Tischner referred the concept of hope not only to the post-war Polish Church, but also to the entire society. After the Second World War, as it was faced with the prospect of many years' political bondage to communism, the society needed hope more than anything else. Tischner wrote about hope with anxiety, bringing into relief above all those aspects of the Polish attitudes that stifled hope or did not let it arise; he wrote about hope in the context of the tragic consequences

[10]   J. Tischner, *Wstęp*, in: J. Tischner, *Świat ludzkiej nadziei*, Kraków 1992, p. 10.

of its lack, as well as about the necessity to inspire and cherish it. The aforementioned introduction to *Świat ludzkiej nadziei* reads as follows: "Hope is both a basic experience and a basic value that reflection desires to express and support, as it is directed towards manifold matters in our lives."[11] In the scheme of localness, Tischner considered that the misery of the human condition manifested itself most fully whenever hope was lacking. The Polish attitudes of melancholy and "looking for hiding places" were the expression of this deficit. Overcoming them appeared to be the necessary condition for the survival of the society, as well as its attainment of the level of Christian universalism.

The attitude of melancholy and its destructive influence on human hope are addressed by Tischner in *Chochoł sarmackiej melancholii* [The Straw Man of Sarmatian Melancholy], the text opening *Świat ludzkiej nadziei*. "The world of melancholy is divided into two essentially distinct spheres: the upper one – ideal and utopian, and the lower one – everyday and prosaic. It is towards the ideal sphere of the world that man's most profound hopes, ambitions and dreams are directed [...] The prosaic sphere is the domain of drab everyday life, national, social and individual alienation."[12] Tischner discusses melancholy by referring to the work of several major representatives of Polish literature, especially Stanisław Wyspiański, the author of *The Wedding*,[13] the drama featuring the title straw man. The thing that Tischner cannot come to terms with is the divided consciousness of the melancholically-disposed Poles, who on the one hand cherish the unrealizable "dreams of power," and on the other hand are alienated from and lost in the reality of everyday duties.

Tischner writes that "melancholy is despair that did not have enough time to mature. The difference lies in the temporal aspect. The time of despair is the time without tomorrow. The time of melancholy is the time of degenerating tomorrow."[14] This means that melancholy-stricken

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[11] J. Tischner, *Wstęp*, op. cit., p. 9.
[12] J. Tischner, *Chochoł sarmackiej melancholii*, in: J. Tischner, *Świat ludzkiej nadziei*, op. cit., p. 16.
[13] S. Wyspiański, *Wedding*, trans. N. Clark, London 1999.
[14] J. Tischner, *Chochoł sarmackiej melancholii*, op. cit., p. 19.

people can still see some future, though it is neither bright nor inspiring. It is rather dull, silent and tired, like a queue in front of the butcher's in every Polish town back then. However, Tischner does not hold it against people that they lived in a drab world and stood in queues, because it was not their fault. But he does hold with people withdrawing from this world, giving it up in favour of beautiful and utopian chimeras. The thinker says that "melancholy is something more than just a frame of mind: it is awareness of failure."[15] It is an interesting theme, the understanding of which is easier in the context of *The Wedding*, but more difficult against the backdrop of life in communist Poland in the 1960s. The failure in Wyspiański's drama is when Johnny loses the golden horn, thereby forfeiting the hopes of a national uprising and regaining independence. What was the failure twenty years after the Second World War? What chance did the Polish lose then? That is not clear. It might seem that Tischner perceives melancholy as a permanent feature of the Polish localness, irrespective of external circumstances and almost ahistorical. Thus viewed, it is a legacy of the Polish Sarmatism, a painful and shameful feature of the national character. No matter how we conceive of melancholy, it destroys hope, thereby – in Tischner's opinion – compounding the misery of the human condition.

As he tries to comprehend the essence of melancholy, Tischner writes: "The pain of melancholy reveals two sides: the hurtful thing about the human being ill-adapted to the specific world is the entirety of his figure. There is nothing specific that hurts; the entirety hurts. Besides, this pain has one more property: a hidden voice of conscience that reproaches the very victim with the failure."[16] Let us stop at this point, because it opens up an interesting theme concerned with the religious context of Sarmatian melancholy. In the introduction to *Świat ludzkiej nadziei* Tischner distinguishes between the theological and anthropological sense of hope, as well as he announces that in his texts he will be dealing with the latter sense. While we do not undermine this declaration, we have a right

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[15] J. Tischner, *Chochoł sarmackiej melancholii*, op. cit., p. 20.
[16] J. Tischner, *Chochoł sarmackiej melancholii*, op. cit., p. 21.

to ask how the melancholically-disposed Sarmatian experiences his religiousness. Is it legitimate to say that he is looking for God in an idealized heaven, failing to see His presence in the real world? Perhaps the Polish religiousness is characterized by raptures on feast days and indifference on an everyday basis? Tischner had an opportunity to see such religiousness from close up for many years. It pained him to see that people adhered to it without hope in relation to their everyday life.

Tischner's reflections contained in the paper *Ludzie z kryjówek* [People in Hiding Places] are characterized by a similarly critical spirit. It was written under the influence of *Psychopatie* [Psychopathies], a 1977 book by Polish psychiatrist Antoni Kępiński. As he discusses the title issue, Tischner uses the language of psychiatry and philosophy, which means that he supplements Kępiński's analyses with his own philosophical and ethical commentaries. His judgement of the "people in hiding places" is very harsh. His accusation is that as they hide from the world, they cannot build healthy relationships with other people. He expects them to come "out of the hiding places" and face the hardships of the pilgrimage. Tischner believes that "people in hiding places" can do better, and the fact that they are not bravely marching forward follows from their indolence. Many years later, this Cracow-based philosopher is disappointed enough to voice very harsh judgements about a section of the society that he refers to with a collective name of *homo sovieticus*.

Let us begin with the question about how in the first place people got into their "hiding places." Tischner explains that "[in] a hiding place one hides from the world and others. The future offers man no promise of anything great, the memory of the past places only suffered defeats in front of his eyes, space does not encourage any movement."[17] This description has a lot in common with the earlier descriptions of melancholy, the difference being more profound drama. While at the social level a melancholic lives in dreams, "a man in a hiding place" gives up all socially vital activities. The reason for this giving up is the loss of hope, and the belief that in the outside world there is nothing good awaiting

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[17]   J. Tischner, *Ludzie z kryjówek*, "Znak" (1978) nr 1 (283), p. 57.

man. And so one needs to preserve and protect that which is left of life. "A hiding place is a place of anxious freedom concerned about the need to protect oneself."[18]

Like the Sarmatian melancholy, people taking shelter "in hiding places" are for Tischner an expression of the misery of their condition, which is all the greater as it results not from nature, which cannot be changed, but from culture, which has become a local heritage of the Poles with their own consent. "A characteristic feature of the people in hiding places is the fact that they themselves suffer and cause suffering to others. And worst of all, their suffering is as great as it is unnecessary."[19] As he shifts the analyses of "thepeople in hiding places" from the psychiatric plane to the philosophical one, Tischner poses a question about these people's responsibility. "At this point a crucial question arises: what is here the cause of what, are the people in hiding places creators of a specific sphere of communion, or does a specific structure of the sphere of communion act as a factor plunging people into their hiding place? As we have pointed-ed out the emotional sphere of fear, we have involuntarily emphasised the creative role of the subject. But the emotional sphere and its dominant features do not arise out of nothing. As specific music evokes in us certain emotion, so a specific structure of communion in which we find ourselves, most often unintentionally, can craft in us our emotionality and set its stereotypes."[20] Tischner does not provide a clear answer to the question about responsibility. Instead, he cites Kępiński's opinion from which it follows that it is social environment that is responsible for people looking for "hiding places." Tischner appears to have some doubts with regard to whether it is only environment that is to be held responsible.

The Cracow-based philosopher does not only think about the miserable condition of human life, but also about ways of overcoming this misery. He does not draw the reader's attention to the transcendent

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[18] J. Tischner, *Ludzie z kryjówek*, op. cit., p. 59.
[19] J. Tischner, *Ludzie z kryjówek*, op. cit., p. 58.
[20] J. Tischner, *Ludzie z kryjówek*, op. cit., p. 64.

reality, the "other world." His intention is not to comfort anyone solely with a vision of some future happiness beyond the grave, but he offers real hope of changing man's situation for the better already in this life, on earth, where greatness is intermingled with smallness, and that which is ultimately predominant is daily life and ordinariness. Even though such words are not exactly what Tischner penned, it is precisely in such ordinary life, without incense and ringing bells, that true God manifests Himself – as Tischner would say – and it is then that He is closest to man. He does not strive to dominate man, but He encourages him to become a pilgrim, to discover new spaces and times, but above all new people who are pilgrims too and who learn to trust. As long as people keep to their hiding places, they will not experience God like this.

Tischner openly says that "the resolution of the tragedy of people in hiding places is not an easy task. A lot of various forces need to be awoken in man, many factors need to be brought into harmony."[21] The thinker is convinced that the tragic situation of "the man in a hiding place" is not some kind of ill fate, or a situation with no way out. The way to begin is to discern that the world outside the hiding place does not have to be hostile, even though it is different from the one that the hiding man knows in his everyday life. This conviction of Tischner's was of a fundamental character, because it opened him up to an encounter with the universal European thought, which was often hostile to the Church and religion, but took a genuine interest in man's fate.

Shaking off the Sarmatian melancholy and coming out of the hiding places are the preconditions for overcoming the misery of the human condition, the way it presented itself to Tischner in the Polish localness. Carrying out this undertaking was supposed to open the Polish society, including the Catholic Church, to the universal values of Christian Europe, allowing religious faith to be experienced in an open and dynamic manner.

[21] J. Tischner, *Ludzie z kryjówek*, op. cit., p. 69.

A traditional religious consolation
and the empty maze of the West

While in Leszek Kołakowski's view the very fact of being religious depreciated man, questioned his humanist dignity and shifted him back in development, Tischner did not find religiousness to be the problem, but rather a certain type of culture that infected various spheres of human activity, including religion. It was a culture characteristic of people immersed in melancholy and looking for "hiding places."

Were the postulates addressed by both the thinkers in their early texts realized? Was Kołakowski's longing for people who could bravely face various life difficulties and challenges, without the support of the illusive hope offered by religion, fulfilled? After all, that is what the thinker expected, as he appealed to readers to trust the jesters more than the priests, to avoid conservatism like the plague, and to reject the religious symbols that kept them in the state of immaturity. Such was Kołakowski's programme to construct a truly humanist culture that would combine positivist knowledge about man with an existentialist message concerned with his vocation. In Kołakowski's opinion only the construction and consolidation of this culture would enable man to carry his condition with dignity and overcome his misery, which above all is not about us being victims (and unfortunately perpetrators) of manifold evil, but about shifting all this onto the absolute that we call God, because we are afraid to assume personal responsibility for all this. If these goals are attained, then we can lift our localness onto the level of universalism, and become a society similar to Western societies – one based on secular humanism and human rights.

Kołakowski's late texts prove that the programme that he outlined at the beginning had not been implemented. The majority of the Poles have not renounced religion (I am writing this in 2020) and have not become secular humanists. What is more, many of them still view religion as the mainstay in the face of the misery of their own condition – evil, suffering and death. In essence, it is not surprising. It is difficult to expect a philosophical programme of societal improvement – however

intellectually convincing it might be – to be able to substantially undermine the centuries-old culture, even if in many aspects it is irrational. That which is most surprising and unexpected in the process of Kołakowski's fight against religion is the essential change in the thinker's personal attitude to religion. This fact is well-known and frequently emphasized in texts on Kołakowski. However, as I write about the thinker's change in his personal attitude to religion, I want to emphasize that the religion that over the years the philosopher was becoming more and more sympathetic towards was not a religion open to the world, liberal in its dictates, and accommodating with regard to the expectations of contemporary people. It was rather a traditional religion which in many aspects referred to the period before the Second Vatican Council, and which unwaveringly invoked the dogmatic truths and brought consolation to people in their trials and tribulation.

In an interview which Kołakowski gave in 1998 he says: "To tell the truth, I hold it against the Church that somehow in its teaching it has ceased to emphasize that which has always been crucial: the misery of human existence. We are never removed from the possibility of catastrophe; catastrophe is always possible, and apocalypse is always possible. The Church has not promised happiness on earth, and in my opinion it should not. And there will be no happiness on earth, unless we construe happiness as a narcotic state, i.e. happiness that can be attained through intake of narcotics. I think that this very important part of the Church tradition is in a sense forgotten or relegated, and that is what I find regrettable. In my opinion it is a concession made to the idol of modernity, and this concession harms the Church."[22] Then, in the same interview he adds: "The point, however, is that human miseries do not only spring from hunger, wars, physical pain and disease. There is some more fundamental determinant of human destitution and misery. The Church has always been aware of this, but now it no longer talks about it. Still, it is very important; to remember this does not mean to condemn oneself to ever greater miseries, but to keep such a distance from the world that

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[22] *O sztuce oswajania liberalizmu*, op. cit., pp. 23–24.

is necessary in human life, which counteracts intoxication, and which prepares us for the fact of our mortality, that we will all die. That has become such a shameful thing – the fact that we will all die."[23]

The above two quotations show the radical change in Kołakowski's attitude to religion. As well as to understanding of the misery of the human condition. One might say that in his understanding of this misery Kołakowski returns to the early Christian centuries, and by extension to the theological tradition of Saint John, the author of the fourth Gospel, who emphasized the essential difference between the misery of this earthly world and the majesty of God. In the light of Kołakowski's words above it is easier to understand his interest in the thought of Saint Augustine, early Protestantism and Pascal. There remains the question about localness and universalism. As we remember, Kołakowski assumed that universalism required that one break free from the grip of religion, which thus would take on a dimension of localness. The above-quoted statements prove that in this aspect too the thinker radically changed his mind. It is the misery of the human condition that follows from our weakness and finiteness, and not the humanist valour that, in his opinion, ultimately deserves to be called universalism. There is nothing strange about the fact that man has a hard time coping with this misery, and seeks religious consolation. In Kołakowski's opinion, that is the universal function of religion.

And let us now ask about what has happened to Józef Tischner's longing. Did the subsequent years prove the rightness of his predictions with regard to the necessity for the Polish society to change, to get rid of melancholy attitudes and come out of "hiding places"? As we remember, Tischner suggested that the main problem the Poles were faced with in his lifetime was the lack of hope, which had its origins in cultivating melancholy attitudes and holing up in "hiding places" protecting us from the outside world. As a consequence, we live in dreams, "dreams about power," running away from that which is universal – the real and rational world. This running away from the world, hiding, keeping others

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[23] *O sztuce oswajania liberalizmu*, op. cit., p. 24.

at a distance, and many other forms of negative behaviour harmful to both anxious people and those who these people establish relations with are an expression of the misery of the human condition. This misery – irrespective of the degree to which it is to be blamed on the people "in hiding places" – downgrades their lives and prevents the fulfilment of their inherent human potential. As long as people experience it, they will not become mature persons, nor will they achieve the status of pilgrims. In Tischner's opinion, this misery is not like an ill fate; it is not a life punishment that subsequent Polish generations are sentenced to through the fault of their mothers and fathers. It can be overcome, and there is no reason why anyone would subject themselves to the suffering resulting therefrom.

As Tischner addressed the subject of human hope in his early publications, he noted that he was doing that in the anthropological and not theological sense. This allowed him to avoid dogmatic disputes and difficult discussions with representatives of the Church Magisterium. As he engaged, as a philosopher, in dialogue with the contemporary thought, especially German and French one, he could say much more and advance more daring theses. Thanks to this discussion Tischner went beyond the dimension of localness and became a universal thinker, who was read and quoted in Europe and beyond. Tischner found this universalism appealing from the cognitive point of view. It offered a prospect of attaining understanding of contemporary man, and enabled going beyond traditional categories of the Catholic anthropology, hardly understandable and useful after the Second World War. Besides, he bravely posed a question about the authenticity of man, his identity and emancipation. I believe that by encouraging Poles to give up the melancholy frame of mind and come out of the "hiding places," Tischner was hoping that the path they had chosen would take them to better understanding and cultivation of culture, as well as religion as part of it The purpose was social involvement, dialogue and cooperation with persons of different worldviews, the experience of open and dynamic religion, in a word – the ideal of Catholic personalism, so prominently featuring in the milieus that Tischner belonged to. Was the ideal attained?

Did people, encouraged by Tischner, go beyond their own localness and reach universalism? What did the philosopher himself think of this?

One of Tischner's last texts, his discussion of the book *Le Souci Contemporain* [Contemporary Concern][24] by Belgian thinker Chantal Delsol, provides some instructive insights with regard to the matter. The discussion features a theme of a severe crisis of the European culture, which is looking for its place like Icarus, who after the failed flight did not die, but fell back into the labyrinth. With this text Tischner concludes several decades of his reflections on the misery of the human condition. The misery turns out to be a universal experience, and it no longer shows only the face of the Polish melancholy, of the people in hiding places, or *homo sovieticus*. It is to be found in Western Europe, the place which for whole decades of the latter half of the 20th century was by Tischner, as well as most Poles, regarded as more civilized and standard-setting with regard to the universal.

But Delsol describes the Western European culture thus: "Over the two centuries we have believed that – in order to get out of the labyrinth of misery – we can radically change man and society, whether thanks to the philosophy of Progress, which since the times of Condorcet has promised to put an end to wars, disease, misery, or thanks to ideologies promising a bright future. Now the harsh truth is dawning on us – through human miseries in the East, and here through the return of destitution, illiteracy, war, epidemic – that our hopes were vain. We fall back down to the earth, where again we have no choice but to assimilate our human condition. But on the way we have lost the key to understanding. And so we can see the world of misery – we can no longer recognize it, nor find any meaning in it. The Western man at the end of this century is Icarus' grandson. He is asking what kind of world he has fallen into."[25]

This trend in the criticism of the Western culture has a long tradition and is not surprising at all. That which is particularly interesting about it is the juxtaposition of Tischner's early concepts with Delsol's

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[24] Ch. Delsol, *Le Souci contemporain*, Bruxelles 1996.
[25] J. Tischner, *Upadek Ikara*, in: J. Tischner, *Ksiądz na manowcach*, Kraków 1999, p. 295.

analyses. Would a culture like this be the one to serve as the destination of the pilgrimage of people liberated from the grip of melancholy and the closedness of the "hiding places"? Is this what the promised land of universalism looks like? What we have here is a disheartening image – Icarus, who has tumbled out of the sky and into the world, in which he lived before, but now cannot recognize any more. Like before, now he lives in a labyrinth, but he is not allowed to admit that – the official version is that, as people of the Western culture, we still march in harmony towards a bright future. Therefore, the situation is a hundredfold worse than the one before the flight; back then it was at least clear what Icarus' status was and why he wanted to get out of the labyrinth. Now the labyrinth appears to be completely out of sight.

The labyrinth in which the contemporary Icarus stays is empty. In it, there is no overriding idea that would cognitively organize people's activities, nor is there any supreme authority that would ultimately determine what is right and what is wrong. The following is what Delsol writes about our destiny in the labyrinth: "We can no longer just wait like an ideologue. Because in this sense there is nothing to wait for: no bright future will gush out of our rational projects. It is precisely because we are putting something like this into practice that we become dispirited. We need to learn anew the patience of hope by being vigilant in uncertainty. And believe anew in that which is unpredictable, and yet is not a utopia. This new attitude engages our condition of fundamentally incomplete being. The debt contained in the heart of responsibility to the world is not temporary, but constitutive. Vigilance is a spiritual state which forever treats but never fully cures – it is incapable of eradicating anything: it tirelessly repulses."[26]

As he read these words, Tischner could ask himself a legitimate question: is it not a paradox that the end of the road for people liberated "from hiding places" proved to be another hiding place? Has the universalism that we felt so determined to be striving after not shown that the only universal thing in this world is the desire to save that which

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[26]   J. Tischner, *Upadek Ikara*, op. cit., p. 311.

is dearest to a man living in his localness? The rest is just philosophical speculation.

Conclusions

Leszek Kołakowski and Józef Tischner can be rightly called educators of the Poles. In the difficult period after the Second World War, as they lived in a state dominated by a neighbouring power, the Poles needed guides. Both Kołakowski and Tischner were such guides. Neither of them paid complements to the Poles; on the contrary, both were very critical about the then condition of society, unanimously claiming that its further development required effort. Kołakowski suggested breaking free from the grip of religion, which in his opinion demeaned the faithful. Tischner called for abandoning the melancholy mentality and becoming involved in the matters of this world. In both cases, the thinkers were hopeful that thanks to such an orientation of efforts the Poles would be able to transcend their own localness and come closer to the universal.

The texts by both the philosophers are evidence that the things took a different course. Kołakowski's postulate concerned with the need to break with the religious tradition did not come to be realized. This tradition held strong. What is more, the better Kołakowski got to know the Western culture, the closer he came to religion, and traditional religion for that matter, which reminded man about his accidentality, sinfulness and mortality. Religiousness, which at first appeared to Kołakowski as a removable aspect of localness, over time took on a universal character, becoming the philosopher's shelter from the Western culture burdened with numerous faults and self-degrading. Kołakowski, who at first questioned religion on account of humanist values, eventually returned to its traditional and, one might say, conservative form, thereby testifying that seeking consolation in a situation of sin, suffering and death is the most human thing. Thus, in his conception, traditional religiousness became that which is most universal.

Tischner too, as he was looking for a universal and open version of Christianity in Western Europe, had to admit that his effort proved

fruitless. There he did not find religious enthusiasm, but cultural scepticism and indifference to spiritual matters. Instead of a positive attitude to the world and God, the West offered the Poles a vision of an empty labyrinth in which the only certain thing is that there is nothing certain. If so, then how do we know there is any universalism at all. Chantal Delsol's analyses, with which Tischner agreed to a high degree, show that taking to "hiding places" is not a local, but a universal problem. What is more, as the contemporary man takes to his hiding place, this does not need to be interpreted as his self-stripping of possibilities for an active life. In Delsol's opinion, a positive interpretation would be more appropriate – we take to hiding places to protect something that is most precious to us. This kind of treasure is always of a local character, but the need to protect it is universally understandable.

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Abstract

The misery of the human condition and religion

The present essay is devoted to various aspects of the misery of the human condition and their references to religion, as conceived of by Leszek Kołakowski and Józef Tischner. After a preliminary presentation of the two thinkers, the author discusses example aspects of the misery in question, showing at what points Kołakowski's thinking differed from that of Tischner. However, the author finds that the key issue is the evolution that took place in the views on this subject in each one of them. This evolution shows that Kołakowski's and Tischner's hopes for overcoming that which each one of them, in his own manner, understood as the misery of the human condition in the Polish localness were not fulfilled. Thus, Poles did not manage to attain universalism, as perceived by both the thinkers in the context of the Western European culture. This finding, however, involves a question about what in the contemporary culture, and particularly religion is local, and what is universal.

Keywords
misery of the human condition, religion, hope, localness, universalism