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## Józef Tischner and Leszek Kołakowski on liberation theology

Józef Tischner and Leszek Kołakowski are undoubtedly the two most recognisable Polish philosophers in contemporary times. Though Leszek Kołakowski is also well-known outside Poland, mainly because he worked at the University of Oxford and published mostly in languages other than Polish from 1970, his writings can be seen as a synthesis of global thought directed towards the Polish national consciousness. Many factors were at play here, no doubt, but the key underlying fact was that Kołakowski had to leave Poland against his will and that is why he was returning to his homeland, as I believe, through his creative work.

Tischner's thought, on the other hand, is still to be discovered worldwide. His ideas, though shaped in the difficult reality of Poland's transformation in the 1980s/1990s, reach beyond the Slavic boundaries to a significant extent. Born in the Polish land, his philosophy expands to encompass the entire globe mainly through the open-ended idea of the human being whose intellectual and spiritual structure escapes the limitations of artificial social or political boundaries.

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These are, therefore, two contrary ways of thinking within one culture: one is directed externally, the other internally. However, both thinkers focus their studies on the human being within the philosophical dimension. Barbara Skarga wrote that people are peculiar beings who carry an ethical challenge in themselves.<sup>1</sup> This very challenge can be identified in the reflections of both Kołakowski and Tischner.

In my article, I wish to trace the intersection of reflections faced with this challenge. It is the intersection of the Christian thought and the leftist perspective as well as the meeting point of the thought emerging from the inside with the thought acting from the outside, i.e. Tischner versus Kołakowski. It is a way of philosophical thinking intertwined with human affairs that distinguishes Tischner's style. In the words of Jarosław Jagiełło: "[...] the basic model for Tischner's understanding of humankind is not the human ego, but dialogue. This model also provides the key for the deep insight into the ethical experience as such. [...] The encounter with another human being forms the primal space for shaping one's own humanity."<sup>2</sup> I would like to set this encounter in the context of both thinkers' interests focusing on the philosophy of politics, political theology or directly on a specific social idea which is referred to as liberation theology in the nomenclature of humanities and social sciences (though not necessarily in its extreme meaning as the South American movement of armed struggle for Christian values, but definitely as the leftist active re-interpretation of those values).

Further on, my purpose is to compare the two perspectives on liberation theology and discuss their coherence. There can be no doubt that both Leszek Kołakowski and Józef Tischner reflected on the aspects of liberation theology on multiple occasions. It must be admitted that Kołakowski does not make any direct references, but his book titled *Jezus ośmieszony*<sup>3</sup> [Jesus ridiculed] contains obvious implications related

<sup>1</sup> Cf. B. Skarga, *Człowiek to nie jest piękne zwierzę*, Kraków 2007, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> J. Jagiełło, *Wprowadzenie. Tischner wobec wartości*, in: *Człowiek według wartości*, red. J. Jagiełło, W. Zuziak, Kraków 2006, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony. Esej apologetyczny i sceptyczny*, Kraków 2014.

to liberation theology. Tischner is much more straightforward in several of his texts.

Firstly, I wish to specify the contemporary understanding of liberation theology. Then I will look at how it was conceived by professor Józef Tischner and Leszek Kołakowski. It will allow me define their stance towards the difficult issue of the political engagement of Christianity.

Historically, liberation theology belongs to the consequences of the so-called awakening of the Third World in the 1960s in Latin America. In 1971, Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian theologian, published his seminal book: *A Theology of Liberation*. The ideas it postulated were soon taken up by theologians in Asia and Africa. Surprisingly, liberation theology is defined as a theology surpassing denominations and developed by Catholics and Protestants alike. It derives from the experience of poverty and underdevelopment in the Third World countries.<sup>4</sup> With respect to this experience and its sociological analysis, the Bible and the Church tradition were studied in order to identify inspirations for the liberation practice which strives to change the reality in such a way as to accentuate the interests of the poor and the oppressed.<sup>5</sup> The notion of “liberation” is crucial. It consists in a synthesis of the biblical message enunciated by the prophets and Jesus with specific historical actions aimed at the transformation of the status quo which is believed to defy human dignity.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Kronika chrześcijaństwa*, Warszawa 1998, p. 425.

<sup>5</sup> “Ultimately, liberation theology had to become a spark of conflict. It contained in its core a new pastoral sensitivity targeted at poor people, absent and staying away from Jesus; it posited itself along the borderline between two worlds of one Church: on the one hand, devout, wealthy and socially well-situated people, and on the other hand, the destitute who are excluded from the religious community and from social justice. As demonstrated by some researchers, this controversy emerged from political circumstances rather than pastoral foundations. Lulled by the presence of respectable Catholics who obediently filled the pews, the Church seemed temporarily unaware of the pulse of the suburbs where the incidents of social unrest were frequent. This situation of pastoral convenience was sometimes used by politicians to involve the Church for the purposes of their own propaganda. Thus, liberation theology emerged as an outcome of the social and pastoral stagnation of the Catholic Church in South America, the ambiguous influence of politicians and the evangelical pursuit of bringing the marginalised people closer to Christ” (J. Tomaszewski, *Powrót teologii wyzwolenia w jej katolickim charakterze*, “Nurt SVD” 140 (2016) 2, p. 208).

(It can be seen, for instance, in the literal quotes from the Bible<sup>6</sup> and their merger with leftist values related to Marxist philosophy: “He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51–53). Another example: “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. [...] The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty” (James 5:1–4). From the very start it was not a “pure theology,” but a theory that, by definition, preceded practice. Theologians who advocate this theory believe that the historical experience of “liberation” is a step towards the Kingdom of God.

Importantly, it can be observed in the contemporary reflections of European thinkers regarding the activity of the Church that the example of liberation theology is perceived as a complex social process which identifies the sources of its doctrine in Hegel’s dialectic and, subsequently, in Marxism. Undoubtedly, it was the dialectic mechanism (i.e. the fierce antagonism in which one side is glorified, while the other is condemned) became the reason why liberation theology found no acceptance by the Church. Christ welcomed everyone as his brothers, he gave the greatest sinners the chance to convert and he never condemned anyone.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the generally held opinion is that liberation theology symbolises transformations in the Church and in the area where the Christian community coincides with the society at large. Therefore it is perceived and conceived more as a political movement than a theology per se. Perhaps it was for this reason that the Church leaders, including Saint John Paul II and pope emeritus Benedict XVI, warned against this ideology. However, one must consider the historical and geographical process in the related part of the world in order

<sup>6</sup> All biblical quotes come from the New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.\*

<sup>7</sup> An example could be Mary Magdalene or the Good Thief.

to understand the meaning and purpose of liberation theology. As Spanish colonies, the countries in Latin America were exploited, but very well managed at the same time. They functioned on the basis of the European feudal system with all its consequences, mainly the exploitation of the poor and the weak. That is the reason why spreading the Gospel in Latin America has always been combined with the radical defence of dignity and freedom of the weakest individuals. Their independent existence and fundamental human rights were threatened and violated by the powerful and oppressive conquistadors. Christianity could grow and expand in Latin America, because the words of the Gospel were spoken in one breath with the manifesto of liberty.<sup>8</sup> It seems, therefore, that the essence and foundation of liberation theology lie in the evangelical love of the poor and it draws its inspiration from the demand of general justice rather than from the ideological class struggle manifested in some specific mutation of Communism transplanted into the Church.

In my article, I deliberately delineate only these aspect of liberation theology. They are sufficient for the purpose of interpreting the views of Józef Tischner and Leszek Kołakowski. I refrain from touching upon other issues, including those which are poorly documented or resemble conspiracy theories, e.g. the idea that liberation theology was initiated by the KGB.<sup>9</sup>

In the writings of Father Tischner, direct references to liberation theology can be found in *Rekolekcje paryskie*<sup>10</sup> [Parisian retreat], a collection of sermons and conferences from the period he spent in the capital of France. There can be no doubt that by only considering Tischner's social activity and engagement, without reading his texts, one could give him the label of "liberation theologian" (though it would be a major simplification). As the author of the ethics of solidarity (a unique explication of the Christian ethics of labour), he agitates for respecting the dignity

<sup>8</sup> See more in J. J. Tamayo, *La teología de la liberación. En el nuevo escenario político y religioso*, Valencia 2009, pp. 221–223.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Koehler, *Spies in the Vatican: The Soviet Union's Cold War Against the Catholic Church*, New York 2009, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> See more in J. Tischner, *Rekolekcje paryskie*, Kraków 2013, pp. 253–286.

of the poor and the oppressed. Tischner is a philosopher of human rights with all the responsibility that ensues.

His work is the philosophy of the harmed, the destitute and the persecuted. It is embedded in the foundation of human dignity and the ethics of labour, closely related to the social reflection of Karol Wojtyła. This was confirmed in 2006 by professor Rocco Buttiglione (collaborator of Pope John Paul II). He says in one of the interviews: “Even before the fall of the Communist Bloc, Latin America was under a great influence of the Polish trade union called *Solidarność* [Solidarity]. At that time we (with the Pope and his collaborators? – P. Z.) strove to build a bridge between *Solidarność* and Latin America. Everyone was very enthusiastic about the fact that this worker’s movement struggling for liberation had Christian roots instead of any Marxist basis. The expectations it aroused were never fulfilled, even in Poland, but it was a great stimulus back then. Latin America could break the chains of dictatorship, but it was not the work of the guerrillas – both the revolutionary left-wing and the fascist right-wing failed. Latin America was liberated through the major movement that defended human rights. The tyrannous generals in Argentina, Chile and Brazil fall one after the other. The period of 1978–1989, during the pontificate of John Paul II, brings the end of Communism and all dictatorships in Latin America.”<sup>11</sup> This description is very similar to Tischner’s image of liberation theology. He derives the solidarity of the working people from the Letter to Galatians – “Carry each other’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2)<sup>12</sup> – and points out that the source of the Eucharist is the toil of the farmer who grows grain and vine. Christ (God) is incarnated through human work. On the other hand, in *Etyka solidarności* [Ethics of Solidarity] Tischner focuses on the figure of the Samaritan with the essential question: “who is my neighbour?”<sup>13</sup> It seems that this book could have been (though unfortunately it was not) the moral foundation for the

<sup>11</sup> A conversation with Rocco Buttiglione, *Jan Paweł II, Franciszek a teologia wyzwolenia*, “Niedziela” 2013 nr 27, after: <https://prasa.wiara.pl/doc/1625589.Jan-Pawel-II-Franciszek-a-teologia-wyzwolenia/1>.

<sup>12</sup> See more in J. Tischner, *Etyka solidarności*, Kraków 2005, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> J. Tischner, *Etyka solidarności*, op. cit., p. 19.

political and economic transformation in Poland after 1989. Regrettably, Tischner's message regarding the dignity of human labour was soon ignored. The new economic system quickly repeated (though in a different form) the errors of the ethics of labour typical of the previous system. Latin America followed a nearly identical scenario.

*Rekolekcje paryskie* contains an extremely interesting text concerning liberation theology. Tischner analyses a topic which is virtually absent from Polish religious reflection. Probably the reason was that the Holy See officially criticised liberation theology during the pontificate of John Paul II (perhaps due to the serious mistrust by the Polish Pope and the Polish Church towards the synthesis of Marx and the Gospel). Tischner writes: "At that time, in 1968–1969 and later, many members of the clergy engaged in the armed struggle against the oppression in Latin America. However, these people were essentially thinking along the lines of Marxism, so Polish people were not willing to lend an ear. That is why my encounter with liberation theology back then left no trace. Everything that smacked of Marxism was instinctively repellent to us. Later on it had to change to a certain degree, since liberation theology is too significant in contemporary theological reflection to be ignored."<sup>14</sup> Aware of the mental and cultural differences between Poland and Latin America, the author of *Homo Sovieticus* focuses only in Poland and on the attempt at "transplanting" liberation theology into his native land. He makes it clear during the conference on liberation theology (*Wokół teologii wyzwolenia*) on 12 May 1989. It was one of Tischner's three conferences devoted to the need for a new political theology for Poland after the democratic transformation which was still far from complete and fully successful at that time. Tischner treats the notion of "liberation" as the crucial value: "By its very name, liberation theology reminds us of the fundamental value and significance of freedom. Freedom is the condition of maturity and humanity."<sup>15</sup> Freedom creates the possibility conditions for responsibility, without it one cannot be condemned

<sup>14</sup> J. Tischner, *Rekolekcje paryskie*, op. cit., p. 264.

<sup>15</sup> J. Tischner, *Rekolekcje paryskie*, op. cit., p. 266.

or saved, so – Tischner concludes – “liberation is directly related to salvation of people”<sup>16</sup> and the duty of a Christian is to liberate slaves in the context of social relations. Until this moment Tischner admits that liberation theology is justified. Moreover, he indicates that it brings an essential value to the Christian consciousness.

As argued by Tischner, the basic thesis of the significance of liberation for salvation gives rise to two specific “recommendations:” firstly, the necessity of revolution for social liberation, i.e. a social revolution as well as an ethical revolution in order to change the moral system; secondly, the poor as the highest social value and the absolute nature of obligations towards the poor: all means are acceptable in the process of liberating the poor.<sup>17</sup>

Tischner tries to understand liberation theology and emphasises its context which is often disregarded by others. One can justify a revolution, including an armed revolution, only when one has not experienced such a revolution. He writes: “[...] one of the key issues in liberation theology is the question whether the Catholic ethics allows for a revolution. It is a heatedly disputed topic. For instance, the Catholic ethical system has tolerated defensive wars and insurrections, while showing serious reservations towards revolutions. At the moment, liberation theology has managed to inspire some concessions in the Catholic ethics and revolution is now acceptable as the ultimate resolution when there is no other option to eliminate the social harm.”<sup>18</sup> However, Tischner points out the key difference between Eastern Europe and Latin America: in the post-Soviet states the revolution did not bring liberation, but another type of enslavement leading to the “labour disease” as diagnosed by Tischner.<sup>19</sup>

Here Tischner confronts liberation theology with his own ethics of solidarity. He underlines the key difference, i.e. theology wants to be

<sup>16</sup> J. Tischner, *Rekolekcje paryskie*, op. cit., p. 267.

<sup>17</sup> See J. Tischner, *Rekolekcje paryskie*, op. cit., p. 269.

<sup>18</sup> J. Tischner, *Rekolekcje paryskie*, op. cit., p. 270.

<sup>19</sup> More on this topic: J. Legięć, *Człowiek w filozofii pracy Józefa Tischnera*, Kraków 2012, pp. 174–178.



theology, while ethics wants to be ethics. As the sphere of interpersonal communication, ethics strives to respond to the destruction of relations between people as well as relations between people and nature and people and values during the period of real socialism, i.e. after the revolution. Liberation theology attempted at giving responsibility back to people through social changes, while the ethics of solidarity tried to rebuilt responsibility destroyed in the course of these changes.<sup>20</sup>

Though in 1989 Tischner makes it clear that liberation theology is not the answer to Polish dilemmas, he does not reject it without any reflection. Adopting a post-revolutionary perspective, he refrains from condemning the social revolution in Latin America.

The author of *Myslenie według wartości* [Thinking according to Values] draws a conclusion which provides a smooth transition to the understanding of liberation theology by Kołakowski: "Liberation theology believes that the actions intended to liberate people constitute the key mission of the Church. [...] Therefore, liberation theology comprises an element which could be identified as a second version of political theology. There – in the situation mentioned by Carl Schmitt – religion, and theology in particular, permeated social life, as if without the participation of consciousness, similarly to water moving from one receptacle to another. It influenced social life indirectly, through the tuning of imagination and the way of thinking. Here – in the case of liberation theology – the situation is different: politics and economic engagement become the basic calling and task of a Christian. Without this engagement, it is impossible to cultivate a complete person, and only a complete person has the right to salvation."<sup>21</sup>

While reading *Jezus ośmieszony* by Leszek Kołakowski, one is struck by his conservative rejection of liberation theology based on the strict distinction between *sacrum* and *profanum*. This perspective is best expressed by Misza Tomaszewski: "In the Polish Church [I would extend it to Poland in general and to the Polish way of thinking in the context

<sup>20</sup> See J. Tischner, *Rekolekcje paryskie*, op. cit., p. 270.

<sup>21</sup> J. Tischner, *Rekolekcje paryskie*, op. cit., p. 260.

of Kołakowski – P. Z.], liberation theology is generally brushed aside as a failed experiment. It allegedly consisted in the naive attempt at integrating Christian inspiration with the Marxists ideology, leading to a reductive political interpretation of the Bible, a reductive structural understanding of sin and a reductive class-based vision of the Church. The historical, social, political, economic, pastoral and theological aspects of liberation theology were usually disregarded. No distinction was made between its moderate representatives, e.g. Gutiérrez and Càmara, and revolutionaries such as Father Camilo Torres who died fighting alongside Columbian guerrillas.”<sup>22</sup> This line of thinking can be found in the writings of Kołakowski who, by adopting a distanced perspective, sees the internal contradictions and tensions within the Church. However, Kołakowski does not reflect on the validity of the concept as such. He defines a problem which manifests references to the theory of liberation theology. “How many times one can hear such remarks: Christianity is in decline, since it has turned out to be unable to make any secular matter its own. The Church is advised to actively support this or that, e.g. feminism, agrarian reforms, political revolutions, rights of homosexuals, disarmament, in order to regain what it has lost. Illusions! It is as if Christianity could save itself as Christianity by supporting a cause, even if the cause is good and valid, because it is popular.”<sup>23</sup> And he continues: “Of course, the Church cannot avoid responsibility in earthly and temporal matters; it cannot remain silent, if such matters involve moral choices, under the pretence that it only deals with eternal salvation; it cannot do so, because one attains eternal salvation by acting in this world, because it would be madness to maintain that the Church could separate itself from social and political conflicts in which its voice may support a morally valid cause. But it is not the lack of sufficiently conspicuous engagement that harms the Church; on the contrary – it is the complete identification with any temporal cause, so as to give the impression that the Church has

<sup>22</sup> M. Tomaszewski, *Błogosławieni ubodzy. Teologia w służbie wyzwolenia*, <https://magazynkontakt.pl/blogoslawieni-ubodzy-teologia-w-sluzbie-wyzwolenia/> (10.07.2021).

<sup>23</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony*, op. cit., pp. 32–33.

forgotten about the necessarily inevitable nature of earthly matters and about the difference between the endorsement for moral reasons and the alliance with a political force, movement or party which supports the same cause at any given time. Why do we need Christianity if it is just a political lobby?"<sup>24</sup> In his cool-headed approach, Kołakowski calls for the separation of church and state (everywhere, including Poland and Latin America). He is right in referring to the scene in which Jesus said that one should give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God. Thereby Jesus avoided the trap set by the Pharisees when they asked him whether one must pay taxes (or rebel), but we cannot ignore this incident, as it is emphasised by Kołakowski: "There is nothing random or arbitrary in Christianity and in the life of Jesus. Everything is given at once, with no consideration to the temporal sequence, and everything is significant [...]."<sup>25</sup> Otherwise (if we ignore the separation of church and state) the boundaries become obliterated and one option will overpower the other. What shall we be then?<sup>26</sup> We shall be a civilisation: "[...] which thinks, and correctly so, that is quite decent, which proclaims faith in human rights, which ensures civic freedoms and welfare unheard of in history before, which is technologically prolific, which has sciences develop, which cultivates art, which provides everyone with access to education, which has built gigantic and effective systems of communication and information, which tolerates pluralism, diversity of opinions, tastes, religions, philosophies, styles and fashions. Let us reflect on this civilisation and on how it differentiates between good and evil since it liberated itself from absurd Christian superstitions, even if not completely, then to a large extent."<sup>27</sup> It would seem this description is either ironic or too bold, which makes it unconvincing. Where is the place for the emergence of liberation theology within this approach? Why should it emerge at all? What Kołakowski calls the

<sup>24</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony*, op. cit., pp. 33–34.

<sup>25</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony*, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> Here Kołakowski presents an unusual approach considering the essay was written in the 1980s. This is where I find the "external perspective."

<sup>27</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony*, op. cit., pp. 27–28.

liberation from superstitions, from the sense of guilt and from personal responsibility makes us blind to other human beings, their needs and expectations. It lets us stop wondering “who is my neighbour.”<sup>28</sup>

This is a completely different kind of liberation. It is a theory which makes Tischner a practician of liberation theology. A practician who provides people with a concrete tool, the ethics of solidarity, without any philosophising.

Interestingly, these two vantage points differ, because Kołakowski sees the Church and Christianity through the prism of the clergy, leaders and bishops. Tischner, on the other hand, sees us all as the Church. It is not Christ with a machine gun, but the voice of the poor, the hungry and the oppressed that forms Tischner’s vision of liberation theology. That is why Tischner comes closer to the ordinary people in his approach than Kołakowski. It is confirmed by his specific philosophy based on dialogue and the adopted perspective of the Gospel. As rightly noted by Miłosz Hołda: “For Tischner it is the Gospel that constitutes the point of reference, when he defends the significance of the supernatural hope in human life, when he argues that people should not be seen via the «windows of the system,» but should be treated individually, following the example of how Jesus looked at people.”<sup>29</sup>

The conclusion of the above analysis may come as a surprise. It would seem that in relation to liberation theology Tischner is more leftist than Kołakowski, though it should be the other way round. To return to liberation theology, it has never been unequivocally condemned despite widespread criticism and rejection, e.g. by John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The official stance of the Church was presented in *Libertatis nuntius* which says: “The warning against the serious deviations of some «theologies of liberation» must not be taken as some kind of approval,

<sup>28</sup> No doubt Kołakowski was well aware of the fact. This theme finds an interesting elaboration by Anna Borowicz. See more in A. Borowicz, *Wartość w sytuacji granicznej u Leszka Kołakowskiego i Józefa Tischnera*, in: *Między potępieniem a zbawieniem. Myślenie religijne Józefa Tischnera*, red. J. Jagiełło, W. Zuziak, Kraków 2004, p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> M. Hołda, *Antropologia minimalna i świadectwo. Józefa Tischnera filozofia wychowania*, “Paedagogia Christiana” 41 (2018) 1, p. 126.

even indirect, of those who keep the poor in misery, who profit from that misery, who notice it while doing nothing about it, or who remain indifferent to it.”<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, a question arises: if Jesus was spreading the contemporary version of liberation theology, would not Barabbas end up on the cross? But is this what Christianity is all about? Leszek Kołakowski seems to have an answer ready: “If it is not God and Jesus that people seek in the Church, then it has no special mission to pursue.”<sup>31</sup> The rest is politics.

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<sup>30</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation,”* [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html) (10.07.2021).

<sup>31</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony*, op. cit., p. 35.

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## Abstract

### Józef Tischner and Leszek Kołakowski on liberation theology

The article is devoted to the “meeting of thoughts” of Rev. Prof. Józef Tischner and Prof. Leszek Kołakowski. The meeting of Christian and leftist thought in the context of liberation theology understood not radically, as a South American movement of armed struggle for Christian values, but as actions of leftist ideas in regard to values present among people of the Church. Both Leszek Kołakowski and Józef Tischner have repeatedly taken up themes related to liberation theology. In the article I will define the role and place of both thinkers in relation to the fact of Christianity’s involvement in politics.

## Keywords

liberation theology, revolution, solidarity, society, the Church and politics