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Remarks on Some Aspects of Messianism¹

ABSTRACT

This is an English translation of a paper by Emilia Ehrlich OSU (1924–2006), a long-time secretary and close associate of John Paul II, published in Polish in 1982. Ehrlich reviews the history of Polish Messianism and propounds its original theological interpretation. She compares Polish messianic ideas with the biblical sense of Messianism as well as with the concept of the messianic people found in the documents of Second Vatican Council and developed by Cardinal Karol Wojtyła in his *Sources of Renewal*. The teaching of the three offices of Christ, as she argues, allows a new theological assessment of many claims of Polish Messianism.

KEYWORDS

John Paul II, Messianism, offices of Christ, theology of history, theology of nation, theology of suffering

1 The present lecture was delivered on 29 March 1982 [Polish original version *Uwagi o niektórych aspektach mesjanizmu* was first published in Italy in a local Polish journal “Wieczory Kasjańskie” 9–10 (1982), p. 1–22, and then reprinted in Poland by a nationwide monthly “Znak” 341 (1982), p. 592–609. In this translation, whenever possible, references are given to the English translations or to more accessible Polish editions – editor’s note].

THE PROBLEM

Nowadays Poles practice what biblical scholars refer to as “rereading” of the texts from the past, namely they delve into the works of the Polish bards and find in them meanings that previously may have gone unnoticed. New meanings are revealed in the light of new events. Since there are no available book publications, the most significant texts circulate in the form of manuscripts. They are rediscovered as an adequate expression of what the nation is currently experiencing.

Yet, at the same time, there revive old disputes, not only literary ones, namely the disputes between romantics and positivists; although today they may call themselves differently.

Juliusz Kleiner, a historian of literature, gives the following definition of Messianism:

It is the belief in the advent of a new era brought about by a chosen instrument under divine guidance. This instrument may be a particular person, an individual Messiah, or a community: a nation, a social class, a separate group of people. If the community called upon to the great mission is a nation, then national Messianism is being formed.²

The best illustration of *individual* Messianism is a poem by Juliusz Słowacki, well-known to us nowadays, namely *Amid Discord God Strikes*.³ Yet, today I want to speak about Polish *national* Messianism.

In my reflection on what might be called “neo-Messianism,” I would like to return to its historical sources and confront them with biblical and theological data. Is this a justified way of proceeding? Is it possible to treat Polish Messianism from the theological perspective?

According to Julian Krzyżanowski, another literature scholar, “in actual fact, these principles [of Polish Messianism] were the programme of action of every nation deprived of freedom and striving to regain it.”⁴ Krzyżanowski, therefore, understands Messianism in a political sense. The label of Messianism serves only to emphasize the ideology of the

2 J. Kleiner, *Mickiewicz*, Lublin 1948, p. 37.

3 J. Słowacki, *Amid Discord God Strikes*, transl. by L. Krzyżanowski, “The Polish Review” 24 (1979) no. 2, p. 5–6 (editor’s note).

4 J. Krzyżanowski, *A History of Polish Literature*, transl. by D. Ronowicz, Warszawa 1978, p. 224.

liberation movement. Hence, this is a “demythologized” Messianism. In this sense, one may speak of various Messianisms of African countries from the end of the nineteenth century,⁵ or for instance of the Messianism of a Hindu Rabindranath Tagore. Thus understood, Messianism agrees not only with liberation movements; there was also its imperialist variants, as evidenced, for example, by the English Puritan Messianism of the seventeenth century.

But can Polish Messianism really be put into one of these categories? The view of a foreigner who, last year, tried to acquaint the Anglo-Saxon reader with the background of Polish culture may be helpful in the assessment of the nature of Polish Messianism. What he found striking is perhaps so close to us that we do not notice it anymore. Prof. George Huntston Williams recognized Polish Messianism as a religious movement, for the following reasons (presented here only very briefly): First, the messianists believed that Poland, following the example of Christ, was subjected to suffering and resurrection in order to liberate all nations. Second, the future will turn out to be more prosperous than the past because the Spirit of God directs the fate of the nation. Third, the future will bring a renewal, rebirth or resurrection. This belief was shared even by Cyprian Kamil Norwid, who was critical of Messianism. Finally, universalism (which Williams calls “cosmopolitanism”) is expressed in the pursuit of the ideal of a reformed papacy and the extension of Catholicism to the whole world.⁶ Similarly, Władysław Tatarkiewicz, historian of philosophy, highlights theism and personalism of the Polish messianistic philosophy. Among others, August Cieszkowski emphasized its compatibility with Christianity, and Mickiewicz emphasized the moral factor.⁷

Therefore, it can be concluded that Polish Messianism is not only a masked liberation movement, but has a purely religious basis.

The second doubt concerns the very concept central to Polish Messianism. While for Józef Maria Hoene-Wroński the agent of salvation, that is the “messiah,” was to be philosophy itself, which would reveal

5 F. Laplantine, *Messianisme, III. Les Messianismes politico-religieux*, in: *Catholicisme, hier, aujourd'hui, demain*, eds. G. Mathon, G. H. Baudry, P. Guilluy, E. Thiery, t. 9, Lille 1980, p. 30.

6 G. H. Williams, *The Mind of John Paul II. Origins of His Thought and Action*, New York 1981, p. 43–45.

7 W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia filozofii*, t. 3, Warszawa 1978, p. 171–172.

the truth to mankind, for Adam Mickiewicz, who was a spokesman for the authentic national tradition, the “messiah” was the Polish nation, which would lead mankind to the truth. The nation fulfill this task, like Christ, through his suffering.

During his lecture at Collège de France on 21 May 1844, Mickiewicz read out a poem by Stefan Garczyński in which he compares the “secret power of our blood” to the impression of the image of Christ on Veronica’s veil. The martyrdom of Poland was supposed to be impressed on the consciousness of Europe. Mickiewicz concluded: “Here is the Ecce Homo of our epoch.”⁸ In the same spirit, Zygmunt Krasiński asked a question:

Is it not clear that the nation which died because it could not learn diplomatic iniquity, the nation which is suffering unspeakably from this iniquity, that nation will come to life, resurrect, and outstand in history because it will destroy the reign of this iniquity?⁹

Yet, Mickiewicz warns against understanding this analogy in a far-fetched way: “The nature of the Polish nation is not divine, like the nature of Christ; his soul, therefore, wandering on the abyss, is apt to err, and thereby must be obstructed in its return to its body, and delay the resurrection.”¹⁰ As Mickiewicz concludes, “Let us, then, read the Gospel of Christ.”¹¹

However, such vision of the role of the nation raised opposition in future generations. Konrad in Stanisław Wyspiański’s play *Wyzwolenie* [Liberation] considers this mysticism to be a historical deception:

8 A. Mickiewicz, *Les Slaves. Cours professé au Collège de France (1842–1844)*, Paris 1914, p. 349.

9 Cited by M. Zdziechowski, *U opoki mesyanizmu. Nowe szkice z psychologii narodów słowiańskich*, Lwów 1912, p. 388 [more precisely, Zdziechowski quotes Wojciech Dziędużycki’s remark inspired by Krasiński, see W. Dziędużycki, *Mesjanizm polski a prawda dziejów*, in: *Dokąd nam iść wypada? Mesjanizm polski a prawda dziejów*, Kraków 2012, p. 541 – editor’s note].

10 A. Mickiewicz, *The Books and the Pilgrimage of the Polish Nation*, trans. by K. Lach-Szyrma, London 1833, p. 24.

11 A. Mickiewicz, *The Books and the Pilgrimage*, op. cit., p. 24.

KONRAD: For what are we to be the Christ of nations? Only for the Passion and the Cross, and for the profit of others? [...] For the profit of others and the exploitation by those who will not be the Christs of nations, and...

MASK 15: You offend your people.

KONRAD: I want to save it from frauds.¹²

Moreover, poet Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer found Messianism a kind of romantic insanity:

Not of the image of Christ incarnated on Earth
 By some head gone insane and its visions,
 And not of the Messiah of nations, or sacrifice,
 Holy, piteous phantom [...].
 No, we dream of Poland awakened by
 The anger of the slave and the toil of the tough.¹³

Today it would be difficult to oppose these two ideas, since “the toil of the tough” is now considered as an authentic sacrifice (one can see here how we have progressed since the time of Tetmajer!). Nevertheless, the resistance to the fundamental concept of the “messianic nation” is still present. For instance, Jan Stanisław Bystron expresses his opposition to this notion briefly and bluntly, calling it simply “megalomania.”¹⁴

In order to take a position in regard to these discussion, we must turn to the sources of the messianic idea and follow its development, which has been taking place for almost three thousand years.

BIBLICAL MESSIANISM

Where did the term “Messianism” come from? Originally, it was not connected with the notion of the sacrifice, but rather with the highest positions in society. Hebrew *mašiah* and Aramaic *mešīha* stood for “the

¹² S. Wyspiański, *Wyzwolenie*, II, 775–780, in: S. Wyspiański, *Dramaty*, Kraków 1955, p. 441.

¹³ K. Przerwa-Tetmajer, *Polska*, in: K. Przerwa-Tetmajer, *Wybór poezji*, Wrocław 1991, p. 51–52.

¹⁴ J. S. Bystron, *Megalomania narodowa*, Warszawa 1995.

anointed one,” that is a prophet, priest or king. The anointing with oil meant God’s blessing and gave authority to perform a given function.

In the biblical nomenclature, the prophet was not a clairvoyant, foreteller of the future, but the one who spoke on behalf of Yahweh, revealed God’s prospects for the lives of individuals likewise the nation in all circumstances.

It was an exclusive right of a priest to offer sacrifices and pray for the people in the Jerusalem Temple, the only legitimate place of worship for Israel. But not everyone could be a priest: this function was hereditary in the Levi generation, in the families of Aaron, and later Sadoka. The priests were, therefore, an aristocratic caste. It should be noted that Jesus of Nazareth did not belong to it, so from the point of view of Judaism he was not a priest. The Epistle to the Hebrews explains why Christians see Him as the High Priest: not by the blood of sacrificial animals, but by sacrificing Himself, He entered the eternal Temple once and for all (cf. Hebrew 9:14).

Most often, however, the term “Yahweh’s anointed” was associated with the figure of the king. When the dynasty of David lost the throne as a result of the Babylonian captivity, there appeared an idea of the special role of this dynasty in restoring the glory of the lost kingdom. Thus the frequent references to “God’s anointed” in the Bible, conveyed by the Latin version of the Greek term “christos” in the Vulgate, primarily related to the current king, and then to the ideal king of the future. This tradition, which runs from the Books of Samuel through the Psalms to the last prophecies, is referred to by the question of the Apostles, addressed to Jesus after the Resurrection: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). This is what those who waited for the Anointed asked about and expected, first in the period of the Babylonian, then Persian, Greek, and finally Roman captivity. The community in Qumran, housing a kind of monastery of the strict sect of the Essenes from the second century B.C., expected even two messiahs. One was supposed to be a priest of the Aaronic family and was to lead the ideal worship in the purified Temple of Jerusalem, and the other, the royal messiah of the David family, was to restore the splendor of the former kingdom through military victory over the occupant.

That is why Jesus refrained from the title “Son of David” and “Messiah,” as the Gospel of St. Mark clearly shows. Jesus rather called Himself “Son of Man,” referring to supernatural vision of the prophet Daniel (Dn 7:13–14), but the term could also simply stand for “Man.”

Jesus wanted to avoid misunderstanding: His mission was not about the political kingdom of Israel, but solely the universal kingdom of God.

Now we have reached a critical point of Messianism, a kind of its ridgeline; from now on one current evolved in the direction of political liberation, while the opposite headed towards the supernatural understanding of the role of the Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth was a messiah only in the sense of supernatural redemption, as Prophet, Priest, and King of the Kingdom of God, not of the kingdoms of this world (cf. John 19:36–37). The way in which He carried out His work did not refer to the royal tradition of David, but to another biblical theme, namely to the vicarious suffering of the Servant of God, described by Deuter-Isaiah:

He has borne our infirmities [...]

He was wounded for our transgressions,

crushed for our iniquities; [...]

stricken for the transgression of my people [...]

made his life an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:4.5.8.10).

This is what Jesus, Christ or Messiah, did. His role is unique and exclusive, “there is one mediator between God and humankind” (1 Tm 2:5), who “obtained [the church of God] with the blood of his Own” (cf. Acts 20:28).

In this context, is it possible to speak of any nation, apart from Israel, as “messianic”? In order to answer the question about the admissibility of such a proposition more precisely, let’s look at the prehistory of Polish Messianism in order to trace successive emergence of its elements from the very beginning of Polish literature.¹⁵

THE PREHISTORY OF POLISH MESSIANISM

The specific location of Poland, playing from early Middle Age the role of the “Bulwark of Christendom” and the Eastern ramparts

¹⁵ When carrying out this historical review of Polish messianic thought, I rely mostly on the work of J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu do powstania listopadowego włącznie*, Kraków 1931 [many references, given by the author after Ujejski’s book, were provided to original modern editions – editor’s note].

of Europe, has undoubtedly suggested the biblical analogies. First the Book of Psalms, and then the whole Bible, read from the Renaissance, has depicted the God-chosen nation in the fight against the Gentiles to maintain true religion and at the same time its own existence. The analogy imposes itself.

Mikołaj Rej, many years before Fr. Piotr Skarga, drawing on a prophetic text, wrote: “Listen to what the Lord says openly, ‘For this ingratitude and your injustice I will give you to foreign nations, and I will transfer your kingdom to other nations, and to a foreign people you will serve.’”¹⁶ The first one who called Poles “the chosen nation” was, already in the middle of the sixteenth century, Stanisław Orzechowski, to whose ideas we will yet return. Fr. Skarga, extensively quoting Isaiah and Jeremiah, ended his threats with the consolation of the prophet Hosea:

Lord [...] has torn, and he will heal us;
 he has struck down, and he will bind us up
 After two days he will revive us;
 on the third day he will raise us up,
 that we may live before him (Hosea 6:1–2).¹⁷

Today, we have become so accustomed to the separation of church and state, and consequently to the separation of religious and political life, that it takes some effort to embrace the implications of a straightforward statement attributed to Skarga: “Poland is a fresco on the wall of Christianity.” Thence the destruction of the wall is the destruction of the fresco.

Szymon Starowolski, shattered by the Swedish Deluge, addressed the Poles with the paraphrased words of Isaiah:

I have no mercy on you, the Crown of Poland, until first [...] I will burn all the iniquities of this malicious people, until solely the gold of Christian virtue itself is left. Only then [...] I will give you the desired peace [...] and the throne of your anointed I will confirm [...]. For My almighty hand will always be present by him and My hosts [...] will come as support in every fight, whenever someone

¹⁶ M. Rey, *Zwierciadło*, t. 2, Kraków 1914, p. 35.

¹⁷ J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu*, op. cit., p. 35.

dares attack him. But first wash your iniquities with tears, [...] repent for sins, repent, and live honestly!¹⁸

In his collection of psalms *Psalmodia polska* [Polish psalmody], Wespazjan Kochowski saw freedom as a treasure contained in the ark of the covenant between God and Poland. In Psalm VII God speaks to the enemies of Poland: “human freedom is a special work of Mine,” and “The Lord has Polish freedom in His care.”¹⁹ Psalm XIV contains a motif which returned forcefully during the partitions:

If I did not keep the covenant, broke the contract, or betrayed anyone,
I would bring myself to justice [...].
But since I have never wanted anything that was not mine, violated
peace, or provoke war, why should these blows come upon me?²⁰

Poetic foretelling and prophecies, so popular in our times, also have an old genealogy. For example, at the time of the Mikołaj Zebrzydowski’s rebellion (1606–1608), a certain Marcin Paszkowski published *Wykład bogiń słowiańskich* [The tale of Slavic goddesses], which contains, among others, the following lines:

And then the prophecies will be fulfilled
made centuries ago through the mouths of God’s servants:
There will be one fold, one shepherd
and the golden age will return to people everywhere.²¹

A century and a half later, after the death of King August III Sas, *Wieszczba dla Polski w Roku 1763 napisana* [Prophecy for Poland, written in 1763] circulated in Poland. It has been attributed to a Carmelite, Fr. Marek Jandołowicz. This prophecy, among others, foretells:

18 S. Starowolski, *Lament utrapionej matki Korony Polskiej*, w: S. Starowolski, *Wybór z pism*, Wrocław 1991, p. 339–340.

19 W. Kochowski, *Psalmodia polska*, Kraków 2003, s. 25.

20 W. Kochowski, *Psalmodia polska*, op. cit., s. 39.

21 S. Pigoń, *Wergiliusz u kolebki polskiej poezji mesjanicznej. O tzw. Proroctwie ks. Marka*, Wilno 1930, p. 12.

The church on the rock will become great, [...].
 At that time all pilgrims will make their vows to God
 at the tomb, a precious tribute.
 A slave will be set free without a ransom [...].
 But first, you, Poland, not for long
 shall be covered with sad ashes.
 Your cunning neighbours will betray you [...]
 The sword will spill innocent blood abundantly,
 Many courageous brethren will die in vain [...].
 But the Highest will take pity on you for this suffering [...]
 And you, like the Phoenix, will rise from the ashes,
 and will become the pride of worthy Europe.²²

Until that time all the texts which introduced elements of national Messianism stemmed from religious, often biblical grounds. Contrary to this, in the Enlightenment, the precursors of Messianism relied on purely rational premises. Stanisław Staszic wrote in his outstanding work *O statystyce Polski* [On the statistics of Poland]:

Poland is the bulwark of Europe against raids from Asia [...] of Tatars, Turks, Cossacks, and Muscovites. Without reinstatement of Poland, without fixing this dam, Europe, and with it France, will never find lasting peace; Europe can never be peaceably organised.²³

Staszic saw Poland of the past as the bulwark of Christianity and civilization and Poland of the future as the founder of a Slavic federation, and consequently, a European federation. In each case Poland was for him the keystone of balance and a condition of peace in Europe.²⁴

But what is a nation as such? In 1821 Tomasz Kantorbery Tymowski wrote:

Brothers! Homeland is not the land,
 Not the shore where we saw the day,
 Not the sacred places where our ancestors lived [...].

²² *Profecja księdza Marka karmelity*, in: *Literatura barska*, red. J. Maciejewski, Wrocław 1976, p. 4-5.

²³ Cited by J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu*, op. cit., p. 96.

²⁴ J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu*, op. cit., p. 96.

It [homeland] is the nation as an inseparable whole,
 Equal in speech, and custom.
 On the shield of laws rests its permanence,
 It is not restricted to land.²⁵

Similarly, Maurycy Mochnacki wrote a few years later: "The essence of a nation is not a collection of people living within a space defined by certain boundaries, but rather a collection of their own ideas, feelings, and thoughts."²⁶

It is characteristic of Polish patriotism that the essay, which was intended to ultimately discredit Polish Romantic poets, contains a statement which became one of the basic principles of Messianism. Kazimierz Brodziński in his *O klasycyzmie i romantyzmie tudzież o duchu poezji polskiej* [On classicism and Romanticism as well as on the spirit of Polish poetry] calls Poland "the victim of Europe."²⁷ It is not our sins that has bring us to ruin, but rather our "faith and love of peace."²⁸

This very fragmentary review is enough to expose the elements constituting Polish Messianism, which have been present in Polish literature since the Renaissance. They give rise to the image of a religious nation, deeply rooted in Christianity, peaceful and at the same time self-critical, a nation that often suffers and prays. But is it enough to call this nation "messianic"?

THE MESSIANIC PEOPLE

We mentioned above the accusation of "megalomania;" indeed, one may ask whether it is not too audacious to attribute messianic features to a nation, whether it is not a kind of romantic madness or religious exaltation; or perhaps the excess of nationalism of an ambitious nation which was so and long humiliated that it fell into delusions of its divine greatness, since earthly greatness was denied to it.

25 Cited by J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu*, op. cit., p. 198.

26 Cited by J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu*, op. cit., p. 199.

27 K. Brodziński, *O klasycyzmie i romantyzmie tudzież o duchu poezji polskiej*, w: K. Brodziński, *Wybór pism*, Wrocław 1966, p. 338.

28 J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu*, op. cit., p. 180–181.

It is possible that one and a half century ago the answer to this question should have been affirmative. As we know, some of Mickiewicz's lectures on Messianism were condemned by the Church. It was hardly surprising given the distinct influences of Andrzej Towiański and the aggressive tone of some of passages.

Yet, I am not going to discuss here the exaggerations or unhealthy mysticism but only the very concept of the "messianic nation," which in various forms has been present in Polish literature for over four centuries, and is still ingrained in the consciousness (or subconsciousness) of Poles. How should it be understood? Is such a concept acceptable from the theological point of view?

I would like first to draw attention to the following text:

That messianic people has Christ for its head [...]. The state of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us. Its end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God Himself on earth, and which is to be further extended.²⁹

This text is not taken from Mickiewicz's *The Books and the Pilgrimage of the Polish Nation*, nor is it the work of any other of our bards. It is an excerpt from the second chapter of *Lumen gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, passed by Second Vatican Council in 1964, and speaks of the faithful of the People of God, namely the Church. It continues:

So it is that that messianic people, although it does not actually include all men, and at times may look like a small flock, is nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a communion of life, charity and truth, it is also used by Him as an instrument for the redemption of all, and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth.³⁰

²⁹ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, November 21, 1964, no. 9.

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, no. 95.

Is it legitimate to relate these texts to the Polish nation? The answer may be positive in as much as it is Christian, as long as it belongs to the Church; after all, it is also a “small flock” in comparison to other nations, but, as the Council says, it can be used by God as the instrument of salvation for all.

But it is not only the content of the conciliar documents that entitles us to apply these texts to Poles. For there is an extraordinary convergence between the chapter of *Lumen Gentium* and a work written exactly four hundred years before the promulgation of this Constitution by a Pole who, although remained under the influence of Luther and Melanchthon for some time, eventually returned to Catholicism, becoming its ardent promoter. In 1564 Stanisław Orzechowski published his work under the somewhat bizarre title *Quincunx*. These words are taken from it:

St. Peter the Great Apostle writes to Jews, as well as to us, by the grace of God, the baptised Poles: *Vos autem, genus electum, regale sacerdotium, gens sancta, populus acquisitionis, ut virtutes annuncietis eius, qui de tenebris vos vocavit in admirabile lumen suum* [“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”, 1 Peter 2:9]. These words serve all of us, Poles. Firstly, God has chosen us from the Gentiles and from pagan darkness to the peculiar light of His Church He has called us not for any of our merits, which we have none, but out of His mercy, which is great upon us, and He has made us a royal priesthood for Himself, that is, He has subjected our kingdom to the Priest whom He has also commanded us, Poles, with His word: *Pasce agnos meos* [“Feed my lambs”, John 21:15].³¹

Orzechowski, when called Poles a “chosen nation” for the first time ever, had a purely religious motivation. Thanks to the great and undeserved grace of baptism, Polish nation entered the Church. Therefore, the mandate of Christ addressed to St. Peter: “Feed my lambs,” embraced also Poles, entrusted to the care of the pope (whom Orzechowski called “the Priest”). The parallel conciliar text shows how God’s people become “messianic” or anointed:

³¹ S. Orzechowski, *Quincunx*, in: S. Orzechowski, *Wybór pism*, Wrocław 1972, p. 539.

Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men, made the new people “a kingdom and priests to God the Father.” The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices.³²

Orzechowski wrote further:

And [God] showed us the purpose of all that, [namely] why he called us, why he chose us, why he first gave us the priest, then the king in Poland: not for any other reason but that we should profess his great blessings, offering Him spiritual sacrifices on the invisible altar, that is in one’s heart, of which this visible altar is a sacred sign [...]. And if you want to know what a spiritual sacrifice is, listen to Augustine, who speaks: *Sacrificium est omne opus quo id agitur, ut sancta societate adhaeremus Deo* [“A sacrifice is any act that makes us cling to God together with the holy community,” *De Civitate Dei*, x, 6].³³

The Council emphasized the importance of faith: “For those who believe in Christ, who are reborn [...] from water and the Holy Spirit, are finally established as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people.’”³⁴ Orzechowski showed an authentic Christian perspective of the “messianic nation” in his excellent passage:

The Kingdom of Poland is a chosen people because it has the king, through whom God gives us numerous gifts in the Kingdom of Poland; for it has the priest, the keyholder of Heavenly Kingdom; for it has the altar, from which God accepts our sacrifices of a good scent. [...] The Kingdom of Poland also has true faith, *in qua spe vivit, charitate viget virtus crucis, mortis, sepulturae et resurrectionis Christi* [in which hope lives, and the power of the cross, death, funeral, and resurrection of Christ flourishes with love]. Finally, because of this faith it dwells in the Holy Church, under the authority of the priest of whom it is written: *Gens et regnum quod non servierit tibi, peribit, et gentes solitudine*

32 Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, no. 10.

33 S. Orzechowski, *Quincunx*, op. cit., p. 539–340.

34 Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, no. 9.

vastabuntur ["The nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish and those nations shall be utterly laid waste", Isaiah 60:12].³⁵

The first part of this text there contains an allusion to the prayer from Daniel's prophecy, in which the captive Israelites complain about the plight of the chosen people:

For we, [...] are brought low this day in all the world because of our sins.
In our day we have no ruler, or prophet, or leader,
no burnt offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense,
no place to make an offering before you and to find mercy (Daniel
3:37-38).

Orzechowski is grateful to God that the Kingdom of Poland has the King, the Priest and the Altar; it also has true faith and through this faith "lives in the Holy Church," under the rule of the pope. Perhaps it was the acquaintance with Protestant circles that made him sensitive to the importance of this communion with the Successor of Peter. In any case, the text can also be considered a prediction of fidelity to the See of Peter, which has characterized our nation for centuries. But perhaps the most striking is Orzechowski's passage about faith, thanks to which the Kingdom of Poland participates in hope and love from the power of the cross, death, funeral, and resurrection of Christ.

I think that these passages allow us to interpret the concept of the "messianic nation" in relation to Poles in the theological sense presented by the Second Vatican Council. Orzechowski's work is the first and at the same time an extremely profound approach to Polish Messianism. The next centuries did not add much to it. It has been subsequently enriched rather by the history and centuries of suffering.

THE MESSIANIC MISSION

Messianism, therefore, is not only a historical phenomenon characteristic of an epoch in which it happened to be fashionable. The Second Vatican Council presented the Church as a "messianic people," and this Messianism concerns and bounds all the faithful, including Christian

35 S. Orzechowski, *Quincunx*, op. cit., p. 541.

Polish nation. But how this Messianism should be understood and what does it oblige us to at present?

Let me refer to a work, though written ten years ago, was recently translated into the most popular languages and has circulated around world. A work written by one of the “Father of the Council” as a study on the implementation of Vaticanum II. Of course, I am thinking here of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła’s *Sources of Renewal* [*U podstaw odnowy*], which shows how the Council understands the messianic functions of the faithful.

Here, unfortunately only very briefly, I would like to draw attention to a few ideas, selected from the very rich content of the chapter entitled *Analysis of the attitude of participation*.

The primitive Church [...] experienced the Mission of the divine Persons at the moment it took place in history. The Christian of today is historically two thousand years away from that event, but shares in some manner in the Mission of the divine Persons. [...] Vatican II links this mission with threefold power of Christ as priest, prophet and king, while also showing how participation in that power determines the reality of Christian life. [...] By “power” we do not mean the “right to govern” [...], but rather a “task” or “office” (cf. Latin *munus in tria munera Christi*) together with the ability to perform it. [...] The Council teaches that the whole People of God and its individual members share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly offices that Christ took upon himself and fulfilled, and in the power which enabled him to do so. These offices are part of the Redeemer’s mission, and participation in them derives from the fact that the redemption continues to be a reality in the Church.³⁶

Now, “the Conciliar teaching allows us to think of participation in Christ’s threefold office not only in the ontological sense but also in that of specific attitudes.”³⁷ The first idea concerns participation in the priesthood of Christ. It is

³⁶ K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal. The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, transl. by P. S. Falla, London 1980, p. 218–220.

³⁷ K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 220.

a particular attitude, whereby man commits himself and the world to God. [...] This also implies the analogy with Christ's sacrificial attitude, and his priesthood is reflected here in a lively fashion, though the image of Christ the priest was imparted to the faithful [...] When man gives himself to God in this way, he rediscovers himself most fully.³⁸

It seems that Mickiewicz similarly understood what he calls "the office:"

For the government, according to Christ, was the cross on which a righteous man allowed himself to be fixed, and to expire in agony for the good of his brethren. Wherefore kings had been anointed like priests, in order that they might be participators in grace necessary for self-devotion.³⁹

The second messianic function is prophetic. "A prophet is one who [...] knows the truth contained in the word of God; he bears it in himself, imparts it to the others and guards it as his dearest heritage."⁴⁰ As Wojtyła explains further,

The essential point seems to be that "appreciation of the faith" (*sensus fidei*) [...] which [...] manifest itself through the people's "universal consent in matters of faith and morals" [...]. The people "receives not the mere word of men, but truly the word of God, [...] the faith once for all delivered to the saints;" it "unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgement, and applies it more fully in daily life" (*Lumen gentium*, 12). [...] The prophetic nature of the attitude of Christian testimony is centered in the sense of responsibility towards the gift of truth contained in Revelation. [...] "The laity become powerful heralds of the faith [...] if they join unhesitating profession of faith to the life of faith" (*Lumen gentium*, 35). [...] Christ, as Prophet, desires his Church to be "devoted to the Apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42) [...]. The obedience [...] to the supreme magisterium of the Church is the expression of responsibility to the word of God and to the gift of truth embodied in Revelation. The element of responsibility gives

38 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 225.

39 A. Mickiewicz, *The Books and the Pilgrimage of the Polish Nation*, op. cit., p. 29.

40 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 244.

to this obedience in faith the character of an active and committed attitude.⁴¹

This “prophetic nature” seems to be especially important in the life of a nations: it is inherently social, and practically concerns a whole range of issues such as means of social communication, the right to true information or the freedom of expression in compliance with one’s conscience.

The third messianic function, *munus regale*, combines the royal mission of Christ with the mission of His followers to attain “royal freedom.” While this task obviously means pastoral office in the Church, the Second Vatican Council “emphasizes a new approach.”⁴² It teaches that “Every Christian who conquers sin by imitating Christ achieves the royal self-dominion that is proper to human beings; by so doing he shares in the *munus regale* of Christ and helps to bring about Christ’s kingdom.”⁴³ So, what is meant here is the whole of morality, and by no means only its negative understanding. The Christian vision

is closely linked with the interpersonal and social aspects of the Gospel morality. This consists on “serving Christ in others,” so that Christians “may in humility and patience bring their brethren to that king” (*Lumen gentium*, 36). [...] “The Lord also desires that his kingdom be spread by the lay faithful: the kingdom of truth and life, the kingdom of holiness and grace, the kingdom of justice, love and peace” (*Lumen gentium*, 36).⁴⁴

Already at the very source of royal Messianism, in Psalm 72, social justice was shown as a basic messianic duty:

For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy. [...]
and precious is their blood in his sight

41 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 245–253.

42 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 262.

43 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 263.

44 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 263–264.

In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound (Psalms 72:12–14.7).

Sources of Renewal present further implications of the gift of royalty. It is closely linked with “God’s original command to man to subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28),”⁴⁵ in which “material” is subordinated to “moral progress.”⁴⁶ “By ‘impregnating culture and human works with a moral value’ (*Lumen gentium*, 36), [...] Christians act on themselves and others to bring about that kingship of man which is essentially realized through moral values.”⁴⁷ In this way:

Christ and the Christian encounter each other intimately in the priestly, prophetic and kingly mission, and it is this participation which forms the essential characteristics of the Christian. The features in which the Christian resembles Christ are interior ones but are also ‘missionary,’ since it is thanks to them that the mission of Christ lives on in mankind and in human individuals.⁴⁸

THE MESSIANIC NATION

Now we need to take a look at all the stages of the long journey we have made with the messianic idea in order to see where it has led us.

While distinguishing between political and religious Messianism and dealing exclusively with the latter, we do not, however, give up interest in the messianic mission of Poles as a nation. What entitles us to consider the specific Polish Messianism from the religious perspective is not only nor predominantly the approach of the Polish Romantic bards, but also the prehistory of this movement, starting with Orzechowski, who in the sixteenth century called Poles the chosen nation due to the grace of baptism, the gift of faith, and the fact of belonging to the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, the very biblical notion of Messianism, which refers to the mission of the “God’s anointed one,” namely the priest,

45 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 265.

46 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 266.

47 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 266.

48 K. Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal*, op. cit., p. 270.

prophet, and king, leads us in the same direction. Jesus Christ performed this mission through all his life, “taking the form of a slave” of Yahweh with unspeakable suffering. However, as the Second Vatican Council has beautifully demonstrated, He essentially gives His people a share in His threefold priestly, prophetic and kingly power, while at the same time shows these tasks and gives graces to fulfil them.

The Council, however, speaks of the “Messianic People,” with all the People of God in mind, whereas the Poles speak of their people as messianic. Is this justified? Yes, because if we can speak of the “Church which is in Poland” as an integral part of the Universal Church, similarly Poles who belong to the Church in Poland are integral part of the People of God. Since they constitute the vast majority of the nation, which for a thousand years has been Christian and in every generation reaffirmed its adherence to the Church, we can speak of the “Catholic nation.” Polish nation is, therefore, one of the many nations that together make up the great People of God of the Church, shown in Scripture as redeemed by Christ: “By your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God” (Revelation 5:9). According to Vaticanum II, this Christian nation can, therefore, be considered messianic, as it is part of the People of God, acquired with the blood of Christ, part of the messianic people – priestly, prophetic and kingly.

Such a view differs in several points from our national Messianism of the Romantic era. First, it shifts the emphasis from the evaluation of past national sufferings as “messianic” to the indication of duties and tasks facing the Christian and “messianic” nations. Second, it safeguards us against unhealthy “martyrdom” on the one hand, and against “messianic” triumphalism on the other. On the hand, we will never be able to say to ourselves that we have completed the enormous tasks that these messianic tasks put before us well; on the other, if there are any achievements, it is difficult to judge whose merit it is and what bears fruit here: most probably the grace and mercy of God. Third, by no means are we the only nation that has been chosen in this way: we share the tasks and privileges of the Messiah together with all other nations that make up one People of God. Similarly, to use a distant analogy, the medieval *Universitas* consisted of many “nations” sharing same duties and privileges. Only this nation can prove itself to be more “messianic” which understands its messianic tasks more deeply and performs them better. But one should always shun comparisons

and gradations of merit, in order not to end up with some absurdity of the Orwellian kind: "everyone is equal, but some are more equal."

The specificity of Polish romantic Messianism was the conviction of the special participation of the Polish nation in the Passion of Christ. This conviction cannot be considered fundamentally wrong: if, according to St. Paul, a Christian can complete what the Passion of Christ lacked (cf. Col 1:24), then when many Christians suffer in this way, one can undoubtedly speak of suffering on a national scale.

However, the proper reason why our bards called Poland the "Christ of nations" were the partitions. That was, according to all political and social standards, a true crime, a violation of the independence of the state, as well as its culture and traditions, entailing the real possibility of denationalization, and thus also of the loss of Catholic faith given the heterodoxy of Russians and Germans. It seems, however, that the messianic thesis of the bards lacked an adequate base, both in theology, and in national consciousness. The partitions were not a voluntary sacrifice of a nation for some higher cause, but rather a result of criminal conspiracy of the neighbours which Poland could not resist.

Today, enriched with one and a half centuries of Christianity and national history, we can rely more firmly on the foundation of the Church, which blesses our Christian priestly, prophetic and kingly Messianism.

This does not mean, however, that it deprives us of the "crown of thorns," and that our nation will not participate in the Way of the Cross. This is unquestionably implied by the messianic mission. The priestly task is to offer oneself to God for the good of the community; the prophetic is to bear witness to the truth of God (and we know from the experience of the Church that witnesses were most often martyrs!); the kingly mission is to extend the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of justice and peace, which is born of the truth for which Christ himself gave his life.

The messianic ideal is, therefore, no less demanding today than it was in the days of Mickiewicz.

Yet, with these enormous tasks we also receive the power to fulfil them and as much grace as God gives to the nations probably once in a thousand years.

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