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*The historical dispute
over Polish Messianism
and John Paul II's thought*

ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the problem of historical role and impact of John Paul II's teachings on the dispute over Polish messianism which has been consistently present in the Polish literature and philosophy over the past two centuries. The article is an attempt to determine the pope's actual contribution to the development of the idea of Polish messianism, and evaluate the ultimate significance of this contribution within a broad perspective of the evolution of Polish political thought during the latter part of the twentieth and early decades of the twenty first centuries. The starting point in the discussion is the contemporary historical-philosophical research in this field, and the final conclusions are oriented towards the philosophical qualification of the most recent attempts to revive the messianist ideology on the basis of papal thought.

KEYWORDS

John Paul II, Polish messianism, Polish history, ideology, European Union, Marian devotion

BETWEEN THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE IDEA OF POLISH MESSIANISM

The unique phenomenon of Polish Messianism can be considered on several relatively independent planes of study. Messianism is commonly known in the Polish thought primarily as an element of the national literary tradition. Every primary and secondary school student in Poland at some point in their education becomes familiar with the historical and literary movement of Polish Romanticism, and learns that Messianism is an important ideological component of this current. By reading Adam Mickiewicz's poetic drama *Forefathers' Eve*, and *The Books of the Polish People and of the Polish Pilgrimage*, which are included in the list of set readings, and by learning about the ideological links between Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Andrzej Towiański's Circle of God's Cause, young people in Poland acquire a body of basic historical knowledge in this field generation after generation. In the same way, they become familiar with a rudimentary repertoire of concepts, literary motifs and imagery associated with the supreme idea of Poland as the "Christ of Nations."

An integral element of this education is a specific kind of critical distance inextricably linked to this phenomenon. Romantic Polish Messianism is presented – not without a reason, if one views this current from the perspective of social psychology – as a historical phenomenon of a compensatory nature which arose in the Polish émigré circles during the inter-insurrection period in the nineteenth century (1831–1863) in response to the loss of objective grounds for the hope of regaining political sovereignty. According to the currently dominant historical narrative, the idea of national Messianism successfully redirected the patriotic energy of thousands of Polish émigrés who left the country after the fall of the November Uprising (and millions of their compatriots who did not emigrate) from the real political domain into the ideal sphere of higher culture, into in the field of art (mainly literature), religion and philosophy. Consequently, this idealization is presented as something which, in addition to its objective contribution to the development of the Polish culture in that period made it possible to store and then expand the concept and collective consciousness of national independence in the difficult times when Poland did not exist as a state over successive decades of the nineteenth century, which entailed a decline in direct historical communication with the living

experience of generations still remembering free and sovereign Poland. This was particularly important in the circumstances of gradual loss of all privileges and civil liberties by Poles living within the territorial boundaries of Congress Poland which included Warsaw, the capital of pre-partition Poland, after 1831.

What follows is that, on the one hand, the ideology of national Messianism has been positively evaluated in the Polish educational system for years as a historical driving force and a source of inspiration for Polish bards of the Romantic era, contributing significantly to the creation of aesthetically valuable, monumental (translated into many languages) literary works of this period. On the other hand, Polish Messianism is appreciated for the above-mentioned capacity to preserve the collective will of revival, i.e. regaining national sovereignty and maintaining uninterrupted ideological transmission of this will across successive generations of Poles living for many years in the objective conditions of political enslavement. From yet another perspective, in line with the narrative characteristic of the period following the nineteenth-century January Uprising in Poland, the Romantic Messianist ideology is also considered within the strict limits of the phenomenon of compensation in its widespread present-day interpretation as an isolated collective consciousness pathologically detached from any contact with the objective world, together with the ideologically subordinate individual self-knowledge which, from this angle of interpretation, create a peculiar “ulcer on the healthy body” of progressive political thought. The ulcer, it was claimed, should be excised both for the good of Europe and Poland itself.

This entirely “realistic” concept of the nineteenth-century tradition of fighting for independence, and its ideological core in the form of Polish Romantic Messianism, materialized in full force after World War II. During the early period of the Polish People’s Republic, a fully “modern” and “progressive” programme of social education and upbringing was proposed through the effort of prominent originators of a new model of collective consciousness (so-called “socialist consciousness”). One of its main tenets was the systematic “healing” of the Polish society of the historical “madness” of Messianist ecstasies. The programme was implemented, among others, by Stefan Żółkiewski, one of the main originators of the cultural policy adopted in the socialist Polish state. From 1947, Żółkiewski headed the department of education and culture of the Central Committee of the communist Polish Workers’

Party, and later managed the culture and science departments of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. He was also the editor-in-chief of the sociocultural weekly *Kuźnica* and the first director of the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (it is difficult to list all the official functions held over the years by this prominent official of the post-war socialist regime). In line with the initial ideological orientation of *Kuźnica*, the postulated programme of education and social upbringing combines the characteristics of an objective method of describing social reality in the spirit close to the realist tendencies in the literary prose (mainly French) of the nineteenth century with the general elements of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment rationalism. In effect, the idealistic paradigm of national culture, embedded and rooted in the political romanticism¹ of the nineteenth-century thought of the Polish inter-insurrection period (1831–1863) is replaced by a new – realistic – paradigm. In line with the latter concept, the Polish thought is expected to regain the objective foundation of political realism which was lost in the wake of traumatic historical experiences of the past two centuries. The process of recovery is meant to proceed initially in an ideologically distorted form (steeped in the phraseology of propagandistic optimism embraced by the post-war builders of socialism in Poland) of the interpretation of the so-called Socialist realism which was transplanted from the ready-made matrices of Soviet propaganda of the 1930s, with their initial definition of culture and art understood as “realistic in form” and “socialist in content,” and afterwards (in an altered political climate after October 1956) in a new interpretation of culture which, in its ideological message, represented on the one hand a kind of “negative” of social-realist ideology and on the other – a pessimistically tinged equivalent of the latter. The earlier propaganda-motivated repression of the primary tradition of Poland's independence and its Romantic-Messianist cultural supra-structure is replaced by a cultural programme that is still anti-romantic and realistic, but already focused on the open criticism of the “heroistic” insurgent ideology, including the futile and groundless, as it is claimed, “martyrdom” and radical negation of the “national megalomania” allegedly characterizing the Polish people.

1 The concept of “political Romanticism” is introduced by Roman Dmowski in his critique of the Polish political thought of the nineteenth century, R. Dmowski, *Niemcy, Rosja i kwestia polska*, Lwów 1908, p. 212.

Andrzej Wajda, an influential advocate of this current – and the most-distinguished representative of the Polish Film School movement both in Poland and worldwide – still embraces the social-realist aesthetics in his feature film début (1954) *Pokolenie* [A Generation]. However, in his next critically acclaimed work released in 1958 (based on the autobiographical prose by Jerzy Stawiński, a former Home Army soldier and commander of a military unit during the Warsaw Uprising), the director presents a deeply innovative revised view of the reality of national liberation heroism, expressing in a synthetic and extremely concise manner the Polish insurgent tradition with the titular keyword: *Kanał* [Sewer] which is very telling in the historical context presented in Wajda's piece. A suggestive complement to this critical image of Romantic Messianism is the symbolic vision of a desperate and doomed charge of Polish cavalry on German tanks during the September 1939 campaign shown in one of Wajda's next films – *Lotna* (1959), though it needs to be noted that the cavalry attack as it is presented in the film has no historical basis and essentially replicates the World War II Nazi propaganda.

The philosophical equivalent of this programmatic revisionism of the Messianist foundations of the Polish national ideology in the nineteenth-century inter-insurrection period is the body of historical and philosophical research contributed by Tadeusz Kroński, a leading representative of post-war Hegelian Marxism in Poland.² Kroński's studies on the nineteenth-century Polish Messianism which were published in the 1950s³ reveal a clear tendency to reduce the ideological message of Romanticism to the level of class-conditioned feudal "reaction"⁴ to the dynamics of objective social progress in Europe which is linked by Kroński, initially in an integral manner (and in full compatibility with the spirit and letter of the Marxist ideology of the Stalinist era⁵), to the spread of Communism and later (after the theoretical cor-

2 See A. Wawrzynowicz, *Polska myśl mesjanistyczna w analizach Tadeusza Krońskiego*, "Folia Philosophica" 38 (2017), p. 115–125.

3 See particularly T. Kroński, *Reakcja mesjanistyczna i katolicka w Polsce połowy XIX wieku*, "Myśl Filozoficzna" 3 (1954), p. 120–149.

4 T. Kroński, *Reakcja mesjanistyczna i katolicka w Polsce połowy XIX wieku*, op. cit., p. 120.

5 See T. Kroński, *Reakcja mesjanistyczna i katolicka w Polsce połowy XIX wieku*, op. cit., passim.

rection triggered by the political thaw of October 1956)⁶ reduced to the level of unenlightened “irrationalism”⁷ integrating, in Kroński’s view, the intellectual achievements of modern Western European thought. However, at the antipodes of the wide current of Messianist revisionism during the discussed period, the thought of the future Pope Karol Wojtyła developed, still deeply anchored in the spirit of the pre-war Polish neo-Messianism.⁸

What are the specific features of this anchoring and spiritual connection with the discussed tradition? Polish Messianism in the final shape given to this ideology by the culture of the Romantic era (mainly created by émigré Poles) represents, according to Polish neo-Messianists of the turn of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a kind of “Polish national worldview” (Wicenty Lutosławski)⁹ or simply a synonym of the “Polish idea,” i.e. the sovereign political thought of the Poles (Stanisław Szczepanowski).¹⁰ After losing its real state-based existence in the process of historical upheaval, the Polish political thought was incorporated into the Messianist ideology.¹¹ It is this ideological framework, and not anything else, that allows the

6 See the second (revised) edition of the text: T. Kroński, *Reakcja mesjanistyczna i katolicka w Polsce połowy XIX wieku*, in: *Z dziejów polskiej myśli filozoficznej i społecznej*, red. B. Baczek, N. Assorodobraj, t. 3: *Wiek XIX*, Warszawa 1957, p. 271–304. See also T. Kroński, *Koncepcje filozoficzne mesjanistów polskich w połowie XIX wieku*, “Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej” 2 (1957), p. 81–123; T. Kroński, *Filozofia mesjanistyczna i katolicka w Polsce połowy XIX wieku*, in: *Rozważania wokół Hegla*, Warszawa 1960, p. 157–227.

7 T. Kroński, *Koncepcje filozoficzne mesjanistów polskich w połowie XIX wieku*, op. cit., p. 94.

8 See particularly K. Wojtyła, *Listy do Mieczysława Kotlarczyka z okresu wojny i okupacji*, in: Jan Paweł II / K. Wojtyła, *Dzieła literackie i teatralne*, red. J. Popiel, t. 1: *Juwenilia (1938–1946)*, Kraków 2019, p. 343–365.

9 W. Lutosławski, *Mesjanizm jako polski światopogląd narodowy*, in: *Spór o mesjanizm*, red. A. Wawrzynowicz, t. 1: *Rozwój idei*, Warszawa 2015, p. 381–390.

10 See S. Szczepanowski, *Idea polska wobec prądów kosmopolitycznych*, in: S. Szczepanowski, *Idea polska. Wybór pism*, wybór i przedmowa S. Borzym, Warszawa 1988, p. 259.

11 See S. Szczepanowski, *Idea polska wobec prądów kosmopolitycznych*, op. cit., p. 326f. See also A. Wawrzynowicz, *Stosunek idei do rzeczywistości w perspektywie filozofii politycznej Stanisława Szczepanowskiego*, in: *Idea i światopogląd. Z badań nad historią*

Polish idea to survive in the extremely difficult circumstances of political slavery persisting for many years. From this viewpoint, the history of the Polish Messianist ideology in the past two centuries turns out to serve as a material for the evolution of the modern collective consciousness of the Polish people. A mature stage in the evolution of this ideology thus takes on the significance of the dynamic progress of self-knowledge of the Polish idea. The progress, starting out from its pre-Romantic self-definition, and entering its fully-fledged phase in the thought of the Polish inter-insurrection period of the nineteenth century, finally reaches its complete realization in the views of the Polish neo-Messianists of the first decades of the twentieth century, to stand at the threshold of self-fulfilment.¹² The time when this final neo-Messianist phase of the modern interpretation of the Messianist ideology ended in Poland coincided with the moment when the continuity of the entire Polish national thought was interrupted after the outbreak of World War II following the German-Russian invasion of Poland in September 1939.¹³

What is the possible outcome of the end of the Messianist ideology thus defined, i.e. interpreted essentially as the opening of the perspective of “life after death” of the Polish national thought¹⁴? From the point of view of the neo-Messianist interpretation of the idea of Polish Messianism, it could certainly mark the onset of a higher form of its “realization,” and thus the dawn of a new stage, a “new life” of this idea.¹⁵ It could be the beginning of a full and objective rebirth of the Polish idea. It is interesting to note that this seems to be effectively – in the light of the historical evolution of the modern national consciousness of the Polish people in the next half-century – the proper sense of the intellectual heritage, life and pontificate of John Paul II. Hence,

filozofii polskiej i jej okolicami. Tom dedykowany Profesorowi Stanisławowi Pierogowi, red. T. Herbich, W. Rymkiewicz, A. Wawrzynowicz, Warszawa 2018, p. 151–168.

¹² See A. Wawrzynowicz, *Spór o polski mesjanizm. Geneza i rozwój idei*, in: *Spór o mesjanizm*, t. 1: *Rozwój idei*, op. cit., p. V–XX.

¹³ See A. Wawrzynowicz, *Spór o polski mesjanizm*, op. cit., passim.

¹⁴ The situation would be somewhat analogous to that which Maurycy Mochnacki characterized several dozen years earlier as “life after political death,” see M. Mochnacki, *Powstanie narodu polskiego w roku 1830 i 1831*, t. 1, Warszawa 1984, p. 51.

¹⁵ See A. Wawrzynowicz, *Spór o polski mesjanizm. Geneza i rozwój idei*, op. cit., p. XV.

a question arises as to whether the history of the development of the modern Messianist ideology in Poland can ultimately (in line with the neo-Messianist optics) be defined in a condensed manner (though admittedly with a certain degree of oversimplification) as the evolution of the sovereign Polish idea from Jan Paweł Woronicz to John Paul II. What is the possible outcome of this definition for the contemporary political thought in Poland?

These questions are legitimate because this interpretation of John Paul II's thought has its beginning (at least potentially) by a historical review of Messianist positions addressed in the first volume of the above-mentioned anthology (published in 2015–2017).¹⁶ It is worth emphasizing that the study is not an anthology of “Polish Messianism” but rather, as the book's title clearly indicates, an anthology of “The Dispute over Polish Messianism.” This is not only because the second volume of the publication contains a number of texts which negate the titular problem or at least are critical of the Messianist ideology in general. Another reason, perhaps even more significant, is that even the first volume, despite covering concepts which are – one way or another – positively involved in the controversy does not present positions representing a single cohesive line of thought, a compact and coherent ideological programme of Polish Messianism. The last aspect, in principle, can only be recognized *post factum*, i.e. from the perspective of the entire evolution and critical reception of this project. Before that (from the perspective of chronology), it was a programme marked – as if chronically – by an irreducible trait of *in statu nascendi*. In any case, such a conclusion arises after reading both parts of the anthology. And if so, there are doubts as to whether the Messianist project can still be successfully applied today – as an expression of living national ideology – to Poland's present and future. Perhaps it is merely a form of reconciling the Polish thought with its own past and history. This reconciliation is necessary, though ultimately quite hermetically complementary within itself, i.e. in its own logic, and it ultimately disappears “without issue” along with the final closure of this internal logic.

¹⁶ See *Spór o mesjanizm*, t. 1: *Rozwój idei*, op. cit.; *Spór o mesjanizm*, red. A. Wawrzynowicz, t. 2: *Recepcja krytyczna*, cz. 1–2, Warszawa 2017.

CALL FOR REVIVAL OF MESSIANIST IDEOLOGY

The sceptical conclusion thus expressed, arising from historical and philosophical studies into the evolution of the ideological framework of Polish Messianism, is challenged by attempts to revive the ideology in the spirit of contemporary times which have been undertaken in Poland for at least a dozen or so years.¹⁷ One of the more coherent and consistent theoretical proposals in this field is presented in the monograph *Liturgia dziejów. Jan Paweł II i polski mesjanizm* [Liturgy of History. John Paul II and Polish Messianism] authored by Paweł Rojek.¹⁸ Drawing on a rich body of comparative material including literary critical and philosophical sources on the one hand, and theological works on the other, the book presents arguments supporting the thesis about the existence of deep and vital ideological relationships linking the thought of John Paul II with the intellectual tradition of Polish Messianism. The author undertakes an effort to take a revised look at the Pope's spiritual heritage from the perspective of "integral Messianism" shaped on the basis of the Polish culture of past centuries.¹⁹ The history of the pontificate and teaching of John Paul II, together with the genealogically preceding key elements of the intellectual biography of Karol Wojtyła are woven here into the broad context of national history and the general horizon of the development of the Polish culture, indicating distinct elements linking these factors and reflecting their mutual conditioning.

Integral messianism assumes the complementarity of three conceptual components forming the basis of the central message of the Messianist ideology: missionism, millenarianism and passionism. The notion of missionism (introduced into the literature on the topic by Nikolai Berdyaev) defines essentially the general belief about the historical mission of certain communities, including nations. The belief may (but does not necessarily have to) entail the assumption that this is a special soteriological mission, i.e. a task inscribed in the dynamics

17 See the special issues of journals "Teologia Polityczna" 4 (2006/2007), "44/ Czerdzieści i Cztery" 1 (2008) and "Pressje" 24 (2011) and 28 (2012).

18 P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów. Jan Paweł II i polski mesjanizm*, Kraków 2016; see P. Rojek, *John Paul II and the Polish Messianism. Introduction to the Liturgy of History*, transl. by K. Popowicz, "Theological Research" 7 (2019), p. 9–27.

19 See P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów*, op. cit., p. 28f.

of the eschatological fulfilment of the humanity's destiny and closely related to the millenarist vision of the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. Some scholars studying Messianist problems scientifically, however, identify missionism with Messianism in a narrower sense (for example Józef Ujejski, a literary scholar and historian of ideas, and a leading pre-war Polish specialist in the field²⁰). Others (particularly Andrzej Walicki²¹ and also Jan Garewicz²²) clearly argue against such a broad approach. In any case, missionism, historically a fairly widespread doctrinal component of various national ideologies of modern times²³, generally permits the existence of multiple collective subjects of the historical mission. Hence, the fact of a nation embracing such a mission does not exclude, within the confines of this concept, the possibility of missions of another nations or multiple national communities that would be entitled to such historical vocation.²⁴ A prominent element of the interpretation of integral messianism proposed here is the doctrine of passionism defined as the belief about the vital shaping role of suffering in the dynamics of the Messianist process.²⁵ This ideological component seems to play a special role in the characterization of John Paul II's Messianist approach presented by Paweł Rojek, and more specifically in the Polish version of Messianism in general. The doctrine of passionism, however, fulfils this role not directly but indirectly. In other words, it is mediated here by the historically shaped and religiously inspired idea of national "work." The idea was conceptualized, among others, in the late Romantic literary vision proposed

20 See J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu do powstania listopadowego włącznie*, Lwów 1931, p. 1f.

21 See particularly A. Walicki, *Mesjanizm Adama Mickiewicza w perspektywie porównawczej*, Warszawa 2006, p. 15–16.

22 See J. Garewicz, *Misja narodu w ujęciu polskim i niemieckim*, in: J. Garewicz, *Wokół filozofii niemieckiej. Wybór pism*, Warszawa 2003, p. 227–228.

23 See J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu do powstania listopadowego włącznie*, op. cit., p. 20–25.

24 The position of missionism which does not entail messianist consequences is also, in its essence, represented in the Polish thought in the concept of the nation proposed by Artur Górski (unlike, for example, the similar concept of neo-Messianist formulated by Antoni Chołoniewski), see A. Górski, *Ku czemu Polska szła*, Warszawa 2007, p. 371–376; and A. Górski, *Kultura narodu*, Warszawa 2009, p. 48–94.

25 See P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów*, op. cit., p. 166–198.

by Cyprian Norwid which is clearly referenced in the papal thought. It is therefore no coincidence that the last – fifth – chapter of the book is entitled *Mesjanizm pracy* [Messianism of Work].²⁶

The work becomes a concrete material for the present and future implementation of the Messianist programme, and the foundation for translating it into the language of contemporary politics. The romantic postulate of Christianization of collective life is not just an empty idealistic phrase. In fact, it translates perfectly into the present-day political, social and cultural reality. However, a crucial prerequisite here is in-depth reflection on the intellectual legacy and spiritual testament of John Paul II. The Pope's religious thought – based on the Gospel, the social doctrine of the Church and the literary and philosophical heritage of Polish Messianism – and widely (and enthusiastically) embraced by the Polish society at the beginning of John Paul II's pontificate turned out to be an important factor contributing to the (external) historical breakthrough in the late 1980s, i.e. an objective basis for profound political, legal and economic changes in the history of Europe and the world. According to Rojek, this emancipatory potential is still partially ingrained in it (sealed as a “fragment of an unread last will and testament”) and calls for re-launch and re-implementation, followed by further exploration, though this time on the inner, social and moral-ethical foundation of collective life.

Paweł Rojek presents in his book the main historical links between the John Paul II's Messianist views and the Polish literature and philosophy, however without confining himself to the scope of genealogy itself. He attempts to incorporate these views into the living context of the present reality, and characterize them in a relatively close connection with similar positions in the Polish thought, representing the post-war axis of preserving the Messianist tradition up to the present day. Other important aspects integrated with the discussed context include an analysis of the evolution of Józef Tischner's views²⁷ and a discussion of the latest attempts to make references to the main line of evolution of the Polish Messianist thought undertaken already in the twenty-first century.²⁸

26 See P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów*, op. cit., p. 199–279.

27 See P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów*, op. cit., p. 271–279.

28 See P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów*, op. cit., p. 280–294.

Posing the final general question about the present-day validity of the Messianist ideology in Poland, the author confronts two contemporary interpretations of this ideology: one championed by the intellectual circles of the journal “44/Czterdzieści i Cztery” [“44/Forty and Four”] in the spirit of neo-Messianist apocalypticism (whose main proponents, according to this approach, would include leading intellectuals associated with the magazine since its launching in 2008: sociologist Michał Łuczewski, columnist Marek Horodniczy and philosopher Rafał Tichy) and the concept of integral messianism proposed in the book.²⁹ The supporters of both interpretations, Rojek claims, share the belief about the original ideological validation of John Paul II’s teaching in the thought of Polish Messianism, while they disagree on the final direction of the Pope’s teaching. Contemporary neo-Messianist apocalypticism revises the millenaristic component of the traditional perspective of Polish Messianism in that it challenges the tenet of active transformation of the world (i.e. establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth), and claims that the approach is consistent with the final (apocalyptic) turn in the papal teaching that ultimately departed from the foundations of millenarian Polish Messianism and shifted towards the pure paradigm of eschatological waiting for the transcendent destiny of humanity to fulfil itself. This assessment is not shared by integral Messianism, in which the teaching of John Paul II is inseparably linked to the programme of conscious work towards the realization of human goals both in the eschatological and this-worldly historical dimensions. The extreme polarization between the competitive views described here is best illustrated in one of the final passages of the book in which the author offers in-depth characterization of attitudes taken by both sides of this opposition:

The former claim that Christians should not take root in earthly existence, but instead should be driven by the apocalyptic hope for a change in everything except time. The latter believe that they are to pursue a mission in earthly existence: to change reality, make it more divine and more human, even if this mission is to be realized after the end of time.³⁰

29 See P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów*, op. cit., p. 286–292.

30 P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów*, op. cit., p. 293–294.

Rojek in his *Liturgia dziejów* [Liturgy of History] unambiguously links the pope's Messianist position with the other approach. In line with this view, John Paul II would be both the theoretical advocate and the practical and moral essence of integral messianism understood as a still thriving programme of Christianization of collective life drawing its power from the Christian roots of Polish Messianist thought. The programme underpinned the ideological foundations of the socio-political movement Solidarity in the early 1980s, which was conceptualized theoretically, *inter alia*, in the ethics of Józef Tischner, but later erroneously abandoned by the Polish political thought.³¹ The core of this programme would be a specific form of translation of the Christian theology of love and solidarity into the modern philosophy of national work, grounded in the foundation of the social science of the Church and supported by the tenet of ethical maximalism:

The task of the Church was to transform the world in history, but in the perspective of its ultimate completion beyond history. This way of thinking still seems to pervade in many Polish Catholic circles, although it is usually not associated with Polish Messianism. The ultimate abandonment of millenarism by Christian intellectuals would be a truly epochal event [...] If contemporary Christianity abandons all earthly and collective hopes, while retaining solely its eschatological and individual character, it will offer no alternative to the modern world. The apocalyptic renouncement of impact on the society, economy and politics means – in its essence – the consent to the disappearance of visible Christianity. However, if religion is not everything, it is nothing. True Messianism is a great call for the theoretical and practical desecularization of the world. It is also the only way to overcome post-modern nostalgia. After all, we do not live in the ruins of the universe, but on the cosmic construction site.³²

³¹ See P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów*, op. cit., p. 276–279.

³² P. Rojek, *Liturgia dziejów*, op. cit., p. 294.

FROM CRITICAL REVISION OF THE IDEA OF POLISH MESSIANISM TO “RE-VISION”³³

Even in line with the definition given above, the programme of national Messianism does not override the fundamental (philosophical) problem of a gap between a political idea and reality – in this case between the concept of Messianism (even the most theoretically sophisticated and perfect) and its practical realization.³⁴

Significant difficulties which always emerge at the interface between the sphere of knowledge founded on the idea of national freedom and the domain of the real will of national existence are addressed by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz in his well-known and widely discussed book *Reytan. Upadek Polski* [Reytan: The Fall of Poland].³⁵ Exploring the historical causes of the partitions of Poland and the final eclipse of Poland’s independent existence in 1795, Rymkiewicz moves back in time more than two decades, highlighting the motif of Reytan, a classic symbol of the powerlessness of knowledge and will of an individual in collision with the inertia of the collective will. The historical picture outlined by Rymkiewicz gives rise to fairly pessimistic conclusions concerning the national character of Poles and the specific nature of the Polish national idea as such. The original political project of fully sovereign Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ends with a symbolic act of protest by Tadeusz Rejtan, a representative of the Navahrudak Province of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Partition Sejm held in Warsaw in 1773–1775, against the Polish Parliament’s decision legalizing the First Partition of Poland. Hence the project ends in the same way as, historically, nearly all collective political programmes initiated by the Polish people end, namely with “a good idea” and “noble intentions.” What general conclusions could be drawn from this historical picture? According to Rymkiewicz, they do not necessarily correspond to the ideas championed one hundred years later by the famous Cracow historical school.³⁶ There are many indications that the Polish na-

33 See A. Wawrzynowicz, *Recepcja krytyczna idei mesjanizmu polskiego*, in: *Spór o mesjanizm*, t. 2: *Recepcja krytyczna*, cz. I, Warszawa 2017, p. V–XIV.

34 See A. Wawrzynowicz, “Ojciec nasz” jako projekt praktycznej realizacji idei historyzofii Cieszkowskiego, “Kronos” 1–2 (2009), p. 323–326.

35 See J. M. Rymkiewicz, *Reytan. Upadek Polski*, Warszawa 2013.

36 See J. M. Rymkiewicz, *Reytan*, op. cit., p. 79–83.

tional traits do not, in fact, include contentiousness or a propensity for anarchy. Also, perhaps these vices are not the primary characteristics of Poles, but they are in fact secondary to something even more primeval found in the Polish national character, namely the irreducible feature of “short-lived zeal” (on a collective scale), i.e. the lack of consistent determination to act resulting simply from chronic weak will.³⁷ History shows that the strong individual will has traditionally been a scarce commodity in Poland. Even though the modern history of Poland, similarly to other European nations, has featured individuals possessing this quality,³⁸ the involvement of these individuals in Polish collective life always turns out to be too insignificant in relation to the size of the population – in other words proportionally insufficient to inspire the entire community to stand up. The endeavours of these inadequately numerous representatives of the nation who are endowed with a strong will, are thus ultimately reduced to the level of Sisyphian efforts.³⁹

A slight generalization of Rymkiewicz’s interesting historical observations might suggest that perhaps it is no coincidence that blue, which traditionally represents freedom in the symbolism of national colours, is ultimately absent from the Polish state flag as it appears today. This is because freedom is accommodated within the domain of the Polish thought as if in the sphere of irreducible “transcendence.” Essentially, it turns out to be something chronically transcending the Polish national community – or something achieved by the latter only within the framework of supranational (but not extranational) political programmes such as the contemporary project of united Europe. This would mean that the Polish people eventually find their collective identity outside the activities pursued within the strict confines of their own political community. They identify it ultimately in the life structure of such political organisms which are capable of removing this directly unrealized Polish “deficit of the colour blue.” The process of searching for and finding the general identity always inevitably takes place in the dimension of individual action, with a concrete human subject realizing the above-mentioned deficit as an individual need for freedom, followed by its concrete individual realization.

37 See J. M. Rymkiewicz, *Reytan*, op. cit., p. 235–237.

38 See J. M. Rymkiewicz, *Samuel Zborowski*, Warszawa 2010, p. 287.

39 See J. M. Rymkiewicz, *Reytan*, op. cit., p. 262.

One would, therefore, be faced with a double paradox in the historical dimension, considering the fact that the Polish people have always been, first and foremost, fervent advocates of the idea of national liberty which they have found in the Gospel message ever since the adoption of Christianity in 966, and which, furthermore, they have sought to pursue as part of the unity of the free European world from the very beginning (that is, from the coronation of Bolesław I the Brave as the Polish king in 1025). Initially, the unity was understood as the Roman Catholic community of Christian nations, then as the general community of Christian Europe, and ultimately as a fully conscious universal community of nations living in the civilized Western world and growing out (like branches) from a single European trunk. Contrary to appearances, the Polish people have not experienced a shortage of support from providence – in its religious Christian interpretation – throughout the ages. What they have failed to show, however, is an effective ability to translate this religious image and its accompanying direct community will into the (philosophical) language of mature sovereign political thought – fully liberated from its initial dogmatic form – and its subordinate, completely internally determined will to realize this thought.⁴⁰ In other words, what the Polish people lacked was essentially a strong enough will to be a nation, i.e. a sovereign political community, and to maintain that status despite external adversity and internal weaknesses.⁴¹ The lack of this ability has been returning repeatedly throughout the Polish history like a boomerang.

Looking at this problem from the perspective of social psychology, this incompletely realized national liberty is reflected in the religious (or quasi-religious) image of the Christian Mother of God as the symbolic Queen of Poland.⁴² Mother of God (Mary's traditional colour being dark blue) is worshipped in Poland in particular places and in specific historical circumstances: in Marian sanctuaries, such as Częstochowa or Licheń, and in the course of extraordinary revelations occurring in various periods throughout history. Mary's worship as the Queen of Poland, is, however, widely prevalent in the Polish society, and has reached nationwide proportions. In the Polish collective consciousness,

40 See J. M. Rymkiewicz, *Reytan*, op. cit., p. 235–237, 262.

41 See J. M. Rymkiewicz, *Reytan*, op. cit., passim.

42 See M. Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury*, Warszawa 2006, p. 267–273.

it occupies the rank of the supreme symbol of national unity. An important contribution to perpetuating this symbol is the history of the Jasna Góra monastery. Mother of God has symbolized, at least since the Swedish Deluge (1655–1660), the political identity of Poland. As such, she embodies the sanctity of the country, patriotic feelings and values. At the same time, within the structure of community-shared ideas she herself constitutes a steady foundation of this sacralization, i.e. elevating love for one's homeland to the religious level of the sacred.

The effective historical separation of the spheres of politics and religion in the Polish collective consciousness does not take place until the rebirth of free Poland, i.e. the restoration of sovereignty in 1918 after 123 years of submission to the foreign rule. The subsequent loss of political independence in 1939 – followed by the disappearance of hope for the rapid recovery of the free and fully independent Polish state after 1945 – again revives the Marian cult in Poland and expands it (with a peak in the 1980s) on an unprecedented scale in Europe. The intensity of Virgin Mary's worship and the emotional sphere accompanying it is so strong that it could be directly channelled even by the rebirth of politically sovereign Poland in the wake of the events which are referred to collectively as the "Autumn of Nations" in Central and Eastern Europe. This fact, immediately following the defeat during the first post-1989 presidential election of the candidate nominated by the post-Solidarity political and cultural salon, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, by the legendary electrician Lech Wałęsa, a simple trade union leader and candidate of unenlightened masses, always sporting an image of the Mother of God in the lapel of his jacket) marks the birth of a new wave of the programme of national enlightenment in Poland on the threshold of the twentieth century. (As such, this wave represents another historical incarnation of the "ideology of modernization" originating in the historical trauma caused by the fall of the January Uprising of 1863, which was last dramatic nationwide attempt of the Poles to regain independence). It projects the approaching "twilight of the romantic paradigm" in Poland,⁴³ calling for the removal of its "Tyrtae-

43 See M. Janion, *Zmierzch paradygmatu*, in: *Czy będziesz wiedział, co przeżyłeś*, Warszawa 1996, p. 5–23.

martyrological-Messianist”⁴⁴ heritage and for overcoming the national mythology in the name of true opening towards Europe.⁴⁵

The cult of Virgin Mary, traditionally referred to as “the patron saint of the Polish nation,”⁴⁶ is, however, in keeping with the logic of this narrative, too strong. It permanently determines and supports the main components of the Polish national mythology, including the Messianist idea of Poland as the “Christ of nations,”⁴⁷ ultimately destroying the entire programme of cultural enlightenment (and Europeanization) of the Polish nation, as demonstrated in the deeply pessimistic anti-Messianist manifesto presented by Maria Janion during the inauguration of the Culture Congress in Warsaw on 7 October 2016.⁴⁸ This fact might profoundly undermine the very foundation for the critical diagnosis of the worship of Virgin Mary in Poland proposed by Maria Janion in her studies, and thus encourage their negation and rejection. However, one may also evaluate this fact in the opposite manner, in line with the author’s philosophical intentions, and further develop this theoretical proposal. In this line of interpretation, the nationwide pro-European and pro-EU enthusiasm, which ultimately led to Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004 (following the Treaty of Accession signed in Athens in 2003) can thus be interpreted, quite paradoxically, which may not be entirely consistent with the expectations of advocates of this diagnosis, as an indirect form of the persistence of Marian worship in the Polish political consciousness after 1989.

Why would the veneration of the European Union in Poland be an indirect form of persistence or underlying extension of the national Marian worship? The suggestion itself is not as absurd as it might seem at a first glance. It is no secret, after all, that the main supporters of the idea of united Europe among the leading post-war Western politicians – the French politicians Robert Schuman and Jacques Delors, or the Italian politician Alcide De Gasperi – were Christian Democrats, and privately believing Catholics. Their religious worldview essentially determined a very specific vision of the economic and political unity

44 M. Janion, *Zmierzch paradygmatu*, op. cit., p. 7.

45 See M. Janion, *Zmierzch paradygmatu*, op. cit., p. 19–23.

46 M. Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*, op. cit., p. 273.

47 See M. Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna*, op. cit., p. 267–276.

48 See M. Janion, *List do Kongresu Kultury*, in: *Spór o mesjanizm*, t. 2: *Recepcja krytyczna*, cz. 2, Warszawa 2017, p. 210–212.

of the European continent based on the cultural and religious foundations of historically Christian Europe. It is also a widely known fact that the author of the design for the European Union flag,⁴⁹ the French artist and ardent Catholic Arsène Heitz, confessed before his death that the official EU flag approved on 8 December 1955 (incidentally, on the day of the Catholic Feast of the Immaculate Conception) and presenting a circle of twelve gold stars upon a blue (azure) background was directly inspired by the Woman of the Apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation: "A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Revelation 12:1). Heitz kept this inspiration a secret for nearly 34 years.⁵⁰

In this context, a completely legitimate question arises as to whether the current anti-EU mood in Poland is, in fact, a testimony to profound changes in the Polish political consciousness and the gravitation of the latter towards fully-fledged euroscepticism, or perhaps a manifestation of something completely different, namely a historically justified process of striving for full emancipation of the Polish idea, i.e. gaining sovereign and rightful subjectivity in the structure of the European Union as a whole on the one hand, and no less justified concerns over the current direction of development of the European Community, or fears about the actual political, social and cultural decline of this community on the other?

Regardless of the above, however, another important issue requires resolution here. It is the general question whether Polish political thought today is capable of effectively tearing out its current interpretation of national freedom from the limitations of its alienated historical form arising from the foundations of providentialism, an abstract idealization of the general will requiring constant providential and transcendent support in all political activities which has little in common with the concrete (and fully meaningful) functioning in the global structure of collective political entities of modern-day world, and with the contemporary architectonics of international relations.

49 See W. Serwatowski, *Flaga Europy – historia i symbole*, <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/flaga-europy-historia-i-symbole> (accessed on: 11.12.2018).

50 See W. Serwatowski, *Flaga Europy – historia i symbole*, op. cit.

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