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FROM THE DEATH TO REBIRTH OF RELIGION:  
EVOLUTION OF LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI'S THOUGHT  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE QUESTION: "WHO IS MAN?"

INTRODUCTION

When taking up the topic of evolution of Leszek Kołakowski's thought in the context of the key question of "who is man?," I would like to not only highlight the diversity of both philosophical and religious paradigms within which Kołakowski's thought took shape, but also show that despite this diversity, the problem of man remained a constant point of reference throughout the Polish philosopher's studies. Leszek Kołakowski's reflections on this topic are essentially similar, though over time the philosopher adopted a slightly different vantage point, and subsequently veered toward a fundamentally disparate perspective (KRÓL 2010, 31).

Reconstructing the evolution of Leszek Kołakowski's thought has been the subject of much research throughout the years. In this context, a study by Jan Andrzej Kłoczkowski is particularly worthy of mention. The author, by his own admission, focuses on exploring the evolution of a range of themes found in Kołakowski's studies before 1988 (KŁOCZOWSKI 1994, 12–13). In this paper, I aim to provide a synthetic account of the entire period of the Polish philosopher's studies. I also seek to address some of the comments that appeared after his death. In addition, I want to show that Kołakowski's insights can be considered as a voice in the debate he waged with the intellectual currents that emerged in philosophy towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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century within the broadly understood formula of post-modernism. In this discussion, Kołakowski presents himself as a strong advocate of the tenet of classical philosophy which is expressed, *inter alia*, in Kant's lectures on logic, stating that all important philosophical inquiries can be essentially reduced—deeply embedded in the culture of the Western world for centuries—Kołakowski highlights the need to search for some point of reference that would enable an interpretation of the human condition. In the philosopher's opinion, the primary point of reference is religion. It is in religion that one should seek a framework for addressing the status of man as man.

The starting point for tracking the evolution of Kołakowski's thought is Marxist philosophy. Kołakowski attempted to rejuvenate the classic approach to Marxism by proposing new interpretations and adapting them to his contemporary conditions (MENTZEL 2007, 105). Marxism was meant to be a philosophy of intervention. Its aim was to change the catastrophic global situation after World War II. In his works published before 1956, Kołakowski argues that Marxism offers a rational vision of history which gives man a chance for spiritual renewal, and carries a promise of a purely humanistic—i.e. anthropocentric—philosophy. Marxism was meant to free people from the mental and social oppression which, for centuries, had been imposed by religion—or more specifically the Catholic faith (KOŁAKOWSKI 1955).

Between 1956 and 1966, Kołakowski still remained under the influence of Marxist philosophy, but grew increasingly critical of the doctrine. He argued that, in the course of its evolution, Marxism had ceased to be a homogeneous system. Instead, it had become a source generating multiple discordant and incompatible positions. Strongly opposed to the possibility of maintaining a dogmatically orthodox interpretation of the Marxist doctrine, Kołakowski focused on the analysis of Marx's *Manuscripts*, where he saw an opportunity to bring into focus the problem of man's "authenticity". He was interested primarily in the attempts undertaken by "early" Marx to characterise man as a being who explores the world in the categories of practical actions: things have value in so far as they can contribute to the achievement of practical goals. Everything must "serve a purpose" (KOŁAKOWSKI 1959, 43–46).

If the vision of the world outlined in Marx's *Manuscripts*, where practical actions are the foundation of human cognitive abilities, is considered from the standpoint of historical tradition, it approximates—Kołakowski states—certain ideas embedded in Spinoza's doctrine. In both cases, man is the

creator of values. However, while in Marx's system the values are material, in Spinoza's writings they are of the spiritual type. A profound analysis of the Dutch philosopher's body of work (KOŁAKOWSKI 1958), combined with equally exhaustive studies into the non-denominational Christianity of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (KOŁAKOWSKI 1965), became a turning point in the evolution of Kołakowski's thought. His fascination with the philosophy propounded by "early" Marx was gone, replaced initially by reflection on myth and then by increasingly intensive explorations into the philosophy of religion. A thorough analysis of the history of Marxism and its main trends was presented by Kołakowski in his three-volume study published between 1976 and 1978 (KOŁAKOWSKI 1976–1978).

Myth, or more specifically mythopoeic production, fell into the sphere of Kołakowski's interests, mainly due to the structural properties of human consciousness. Crucially, mythopoeic production is inextricably linked to the fundamental human need to seek the meaning and continuity of the world, as well as the desire to give permanence to human values. Despite the fact that this need remains completely indifferent to the technological-analytical area of human activity, as it has no use in the process of practical taming of the physical world, it belongs directly to the essence of humanity. Kołakowski argues that the pursuit to satisfy this need can only be realised in the mythical sphere as a source of metaphysical inquiry. Reflecting critically on scientism (KOŁAKOWSKI 1966), the Polish philosopher views metaphysical inquiry as a possible defence against the phenomenon of the world's indifference. To Kołakowski, continuous attempts to overcome this phenomenon are, in fact, what fosters a sense of shared purpose in the entirety of human effort (KOŁAKOWSKI 1972).

In his subsequent works (KOŁAKOWSKI 1982), Kołakowski presents religious faith as the best defence against the indifference of the world. Clearly distinguishing this type of faith from rational thought, he underlines the importance of pitting the sacred against the profane. The author of *Religion. If there is not God...* is sharply critical of attempts to rationalize religious faith through intellectual accomplishments of knowledge derived from the domain of exact or empirical sciences. He outright rejects the possibility of presenting proof for the existence of God in the strict sense of the term "proof". On the other hand, he emphasizes very strongly that the sacred is an indelible component of human culture. It is exclusively the domain of the sacred that makes man aware of the existence of the transcendent world which does not exhaust itself, and it is linked to the belief in the possibility

of reaching beyond the limits of human cognition of the Absolute. The sacred, says Kołakowski, allows us to defend ourselves against cognitive and axiological nihilism, particularly the moral type. Religion, which focuses on establishing the relationship between the earthly world and the sphere of the sacred, gives meaning to human actions, obliging people to act in a morally responsible way.

Just as Kołakowski binds religious faith to the search for unconditional ideas pertaining to the eternal reality, he also combines rational knowledge with activity oriented towards the cognition and imposition of order on the earthly world. From this viewpoint, rationality can be defined in terms of instrumental rationality, i.e. a specific type of calculation aimed at achieving an increasingly precise control of the object of study, as well as growing effectiveness in the accomplishment of set objectives. Kołakowski devotes a lot of attention to determining the effects of thus interpreted rationality on the development of features defining the culture of the Western world. When exploring these effects, he identifies liberal thought as a particularly important influence on the condition of contemporary man. While appreciating liberalism in multiple facets, he also presents a warning about risks that are linked to liberal thought. He criticizes liberalism for not attaching any importance to tradition, which leads to social atomization and deprives people of spiritual support, condemning them to axiological relativism.

Kołakowski's extensive body of work has been discussed in a number of in-depth studies.<sup>1</sup> Considering the contribution of these studies to the process of assimilation and interpretation of Kołakowski's thought, I will focus on the evolution of the philosopher's thinking from the perspective of the question: "who is man?". I believe that this question pervades Kołakowski's body of thought from the beginning until the end of his philosophical inquiries. He attempts to find an answer to the question from the standpoint of different philosophical stances, focusing his interest on the Marxist, mythical-religious and liberal positions. However, he does not shy away from offering critical accounts of these paradigms, which testifies to the profound complexity and difficulty inherent in every attempt to understand who man is and why he is here. Regardless of the concept adopted for interpreting man, the interpretation is always elusive and out of reach. In fact, such analyses often yield competing interpretive versions, which implies the presence of ongoing tension in the process of shaping both

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, special attention should be given to the following studies: PIWOWARCZYK 1991; KŁOCZOWSKI 1994; HEIDRICH 1995; MORDKA 1997; KRÓL 2010; TOKARSKI 2016.

individuals and large social groups. Achieving a synthesis within such a process would be, Kołakowski admits, tantamount to the death of human culture, just like renouncing the pursuit of such a synthesis. A prerequisite for the creative persistence of human activities is their fragility<sup>2</sup>.

### 1. MAN AS A HISTORICAL COMMUNITY

The first half of the 1950s was a period when many Polish intellectuals were closely involved in the process of the interpretation and development of the Marxist doctrine. An important role in this process should be attributed to Leszek Kołakowski, who saw Marxism as an opportunity to change the socio-political order in post-war Poland and neighbouring countries. In the early period of his philosophical studies, Kołakowski deeply believed that Marxism offered a rational vision of history that gave man hope for spiritual renewal and which promised a purely humanistic project of building the future.

Kołakowski's criticism was targeted mainly at the Catholic religion as a form of culture exerting a major shaping influence on social consciousness. In his early works, notably in *Szkice o filozofii katolickiej* [*Sketches in Catholic Philosophy*] and *Światopogląd i życie codzienne* [*Ideology and Everyday Live*], Kołakowski speaks very sharply against religious attempts to defend the external world that was allegedly created by God and bestowed on man. Such a world would receive its final shape even before the creation of man, and the cognition of the world would involve discovering, out of God's grace, something that was previously established through divine will. Kołakowski radically challenges the view on the subordination of man to divine will. The philosopher puts an emphasis on the power of the human mind and its cognitive faculties. He criticizes religious doctrines, primarily for the fact that they view God—instead of man—as the source of moral judgement and orders: “the object of moral conduct is not man but God, and it is a sin to do anything with respect to man as an end in himself” (KOŁAKOWSKI 1957, 145). Kołakowski argues that the Catholic doctrine presents a biased view of the concept of authority.

<sup>2</sup> Expanding Kołakowski's thesis, one may point not so much towards the fragility of human actions, but instead to their opposing nature. An example which, in my view, aptly illustrates the way in which the modern culture of the Western world has been formed as a result of tension between contradictory ideas is the concept claiming the existence of the following four pairs: 1. individualism/collectivism; 2. rationalism/irrationalism; 3. intentionalism/contingentism, and 4. depthism/spectaclism. See BUKSIŃSKI 1996.

Religious authority depraves and degrades the human mind not because it represents an authority, but because it demands belief in non-verifiable and uncontrollable truths, and because it excludes a priori the possibility of applying any methods that could potentially prove the authority wrong. [...] However, the debasement of the mind is even deeper. The Catholic doctrine assumes that there are elements in divine revelation which people are obliged to recognize as truths despite it being essentially impossible to grasp their sense. Catholicism thus demands embracing certain beliefs whose meaning is inaccessible to mortals. (KOŁAKOWSKI 1957, 153–154)

The author of *Catholicism and Humanism* points to ample evidence that clearly demonstrates the degradation of the mind within the Catholic doctrine. Referring to works by Thomas Aquinas, he writes that

the aim of Thomistic philosophy is to create metaphysical justifications for the postulate of absolute obedience to the Church and, through it, to the regime sanctified by the Church. Thomism seeks to establish the role and the value of people in the world in a manner that makes them subordinate to the Church: the Church is like a cashier through whose agency human beings pay off their debts owed to the Almighty. (KOŁAKOWSKI 1955, 73 and 117)

Thomism extracts man from the process of history seen as human history, and embeds him into holy history. The latter, however, is independent of human effort, while an individual human being no longer has the status of subject in it.

In his criticism of religion, Kołakowski assumes the possibility of a reform of social life in which a point of reference is man entangled in history. The conscious subject of human history is the socially shaped human being. Contrary to Pascal's wager, the meaning of a person's life is only referred to the finite world. The finite world abounds in situations which render people powerless. They are inevitable. Furthermore, they are not amenable to alteration and, therefore, they must be accepted. For example, people cannot choose to live at a different time in history than the one in which they are born—or make the dead come back to life. However “the meaning of life is greater when fewer situations are considered inevitable and, at the same time, when unquestionable inevitabilities are more resolutely affirmed” (KOŁAKOWSKI 1957, 186).

This concept of man—as a socially shaped individual who, while aware of being finite, is also aware of his possibilities of active participation in history, is derived by Kołakowski from Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

Marx's thought is anti-naturalist in the sense that it essentially accepts the distinctiveness of human — and hence social — life from biological processes and ascribes human communities with a certain 'proper motion' which is not determined by the morphological traits of the species. [...] Nothing seems to impede the adoption of a rule within the boundaries of Marxist anthropology, which states that every human individual is a unique and inimitable being — a distinct set of properties shaped by an unrepeatable confluence of external influences consisting of both inherited qualities and the full spectrum of environmental determinants. The human individual thus conceived will always define him- or herself through certain contacts with the world, tangible from the outside, but may not be constructed by any *cogito*, through an act of self-knowledge. (KOŁAKOWSKI 1967, 26–27)

The life of the individual, despite being finite and subject to certain inevitabilities, has a certain degree of "malleability" which renders possible the humanization of the world. Consequently, the world becomes the world of humans, and exists as a product shaped and moulded by man caught up in history.

If the basic tenet of *Manuscripts* is active dialogue between man and nature, then it follows, Kołakowski argues, that the notion of nature refers to the idea of *humanized nature*<sup>3</sup>. Man, a part and product of nature, at the same time makes himself out of it. Nature provides the fabric for his activity and represents an extension of his body. A question that needs to be answered in this context, Kołakowski points out, concerns the sense in which nature, the product of which is the human being, can in itself be conceived of as an alienation of man or an alienated man? An attempt at exploring this problem is the Marxist theory of cognition, which is placed by the Polish philosopher in marked opposition both to the theory of cognition as a reflection of the world, and the pragmatic theory of cognition as a form of biological reaction aimed to ensure the best possible adaptation of the body to environmental stimuli (KOŁAKOWSKI 1969, 58–86; see also RUBEN 1979, 86–92).

The starting point for Marx's epistemological reflection is, Kołakowski claims, the proposition that the relationship between the human being and his or her natural environment is analogous in character to the relationship between the species and the objects of its needs. Man as a cognizing being is merely a part of complete man, i.e. a being that realizes itself throughout history as a species. Marx defines cognition in a functional manner, as a derivative of the process in which man gradually internalizes the outside

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<sup>3</sup> *Humanized nature* is not, Kołakowski writes, a metaphor. For man, everything around is social. All the natural functions, behaviours and traits of the human being have lost nearly all links to their animal origins. See KOŁAKOWSKI 2005, vol.1, 349.

world, i.e. organizes the raw material of nature for the purpose of satisfying his needs. People do not explore the outside world on the basis of the disinterested data of their consciousness. No contemplative consciousness is ever possible. This is because consciousness arises out of practical needs. Cognition represents a potential means to the fulfilment of these practical needs. It only becomes possible when nature is approached as something that puts up resistance and hinders the satisfaction of human drives. A prerequisite for cognition is the “realization of convergence between the conscious man and the external resistance which he encounters. This relationship is the only object which can be intellectually mastered by the human being, with the stipulation that it is fundamentally futile to expect that man, through making himself independent of both components of this relationship, will be able to cognize pure self, i.e. himself as an autonomous consciousness; or pure externality, i.e. existence within itself, which is not given to anyone, but precisely given and reflected in the imaginary contemplative consciousness (KOŁAKOWSKI 1969, 64–65).

Hence, human consciousness comes into existence when man—while seeking to fulfil his practical needs—meets with resistance from nature. The opposition then becomes a problem requiring resolution. Kołakowski states outright that

human consciousness—the practical mind [...]—produces existence that is composed of individuals divided into species and genera. From the moment man [...] begins to dominate the world of things [...] he finds that the world is already constructed and differentiated, not according to some alleged natural classification, but according to a classification imposed by the practical need for orientation. The categories into which this world is divided [...] are created by a spontaneous effort [...] to subdue the chaos of reality [...]. The cleavages of the world into species, and into individuals endowed with particular traits of being perceived separately, are the product of the practical mind. (KOŁAKOWSKI 1969, 66)

In the Marxist system, practical reason is inseparable from theoretical reason. Perpetuating the distinction between the two types of reason makes no sense.

Kołakowski claims that the concept of man’s practical actions as a foundation for human cognitive faculties, which was proposed by Marx in his early studies, is in a certain sense akin to the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. One of the main tenets of Spinozism is the opposition between the world held to consist of one substance and the world composed of parts. In actual reality, only the former is a concrete entity in the proper sense. In contrast, elements



of the latter world represent abstract fictions that are construed in order to meet the needs of daily life. The very idea of nature comprising multiple individual elements which are artificially abstracted from the whole for the purpose of satisfying man's practical needs and enabling man to master nature is, Kołakowski stipulates, a fundamental thesis of Marx's epistemology. The author of *Manuscripts* interprets human cognition as a function of continuous dialogue existing between human needs and the objects of nature that fulfil these needs. The dialogue, referred to as labour, creates both humankind and the external world, hence the apt statement that "in all the universe man cannot find a well so deep that, when leaning over it, he does not discover at the bottom his own face." (KOŁAKOWSKI 1969, 88). The anthropological, or rather anthropocentric, perspective thus becomes an integral constituent of every attempt to interpret all objects existing in the world.

## 2. MAN AS *HOMO RELIGIOSUS*

Leszek Kołakowski clearly demarcates the boundaries of analogy between Marxism and Spinozism. He asserts that the fundamental thought underlying the Dutch philosopher's doctrine is manifested in the statement that aside from practical determinants of intellectual labour there also exists knowledge which, in Kantian terms, renders it possible to penetrate into reality itself. Spinoza assumes the existence of a metaphysical world. For Marx, on the other hand, recognizing the existence of such a world is an inherently contradictory thought. Just like Spinoza is a metaphysical realist, Marx is a metaphysical anti-realist.

After an in-depth analysis of the body of work contributed by both philosophers, Kołakowski progressively departs from metaphysical anti-realism towards metaphysical realism. An important factor in this decision is the interpretation of the thesis, shared by both philosophers, on the freedom of man as an understood necessity (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 216). Marx explores the topic of man's freedom from the viewpoint of practical needs, while Spinoza focuses his attention on the needs of a spiritual nature. According to Marx, the evolution of human history is determined by necessary social and historical laws. The laws determine the transformation from one social system to another. To the author of *Manuscripts*, human knowledge—just like drives, values, perceptions, i.e. all the content of consciousness—represents

a product of man's social and historical existence. In other words, people are unable to liberate themselves from situations in which they are the object of their practical actions. Referring to Hegel, Marx identifies the sense of history with the history's final state in which man achieves full freedom, e.g. reconciliation of being with existence, with the abolition of all randomness of human existence. In his historiosophical position, however, Marx believes that Hegel should be 'turned upside down,' because while viewing humanity as a manifestation of the development of Absolute Spirit, he proved incapable of reconstructing either a complete man or a man who is vested with actual unity.

Marx thus equates man's freedom with the possibility of society gaining control over the natural and social conditions of his own existence, i.e. with the possibility of building a classless communist society which, through the abolition of ownership, will eradicate the alienation of labour. Kołakowski, however, dismisses such postulates as entirely utopian. He is critical about the Marxist concept of the freedom of man, and gradually begins to lean toward the conception found in Spinoza's *Ethics*. Just like Marx restricts the problem of freedom to the finite empirical world, Spinoza goes radically beyond that world. His conception of freedom is an expression of

nostalgia for man's total integration into nature and his experiencing of the world of ostensible concretes as the world of abstractions, as a product of alienation demanding abolition. [...] Spinozism is arguably the only doctrine [...] that gives voice to the experience of the enduring conflict between the finite character of individual existence and the infinite eternal nature, which, at the same time, appears to the individual existence as its own unrealized being. However, owing to the fact that the thought of transcendence is alien to Spinoza, he is able to show a way out of the conflict which has remained Pascal's unresolved drama — unresolved [...] on account of excluding the possibility of man transforming himself into the infinite. (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 423–424)

The resolution of the conflict between the finiteness of individual existence and the infinite eternal nature is possible within Spinoza's philosophical framework, Kołakowski argues, through intellectual effort in which

death is not man's descent into the kingdom of the past, but rather the continuation of what man has already achieved in life: a symbiosis with a form of being free from temporal transformations, and hence free from constancy, and thus also free from the alienation of individual being. The intellectual effort is called love, and no love, with the exception of intellectual love, is eternal. (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 424)

Kołakowski considers Spinoza's ideas predominantly as a moral doctrine and adopts this viewpoint for the interpretation of classical philosophical problems. The Polish philosopher translates metaphysical, anthropological and epistemological issues into questions expressed in the language of human moral problems, his aim being to uncover its concealed humanistic content. He presents

the problem of God as a problem of man, the problem of heaven and earth as a problem of human freedom, the problem of nature as a problem of man's attitude to the world, the problem of the soul as a problem of the value of human life, and the problem of human nature as a problem of interhuman relationships (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 7)

The work on Spinoza is an attempt to present philosophy as the "science of man".<sup>4</sup>

The doctrine elaborated by Spinoza in *Ethics* describes man's quest for happiness through the cognition of the absolute. The pursuit begins with an analysis of possibilities for acquiring knowledge of the world. Rather than improving the technical faculties of natural sciences, the pursued knowledge is expected to 'cure reason,' i.e. it represents the knowledge about the unity between the soul and all of nature. Although Spinoza enumerates four ways of 'curing reason,' he mainly concentrates his attention on intuitive cognition, regarding it as the supreme form of cognition. Intuition comprises both the analytical cognition of things through their definitions, and a "comprehensive perception of nature through a certain *modus* constituted by the cognizing man" (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 152). Intuition leads people to knowledge about the unity connecting the soul with all of nature. The character of the unity, however, is not that the soul is a specific part of nature, but instead that it is ontologically identical with nature. The identity constitutes the "primary and proper manner of human existence obscured by the conditions of human daily life" (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 153). Human emancipation is a process that seeks to expose these conditions.

The process of emancipation is linked to the question of the relationship between the whole and the parts, that is the relationship of man with the world and that of man with man. Seeking an answer to the question exposes

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<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Walicki believes that the way in which the author of *Individual and Infinity* addresses Spinoza's philosophy as the "science of man" is an example of the method of practising philosophy, which Kołakowski sought to elaborate together with other representatives of the Warsaw school of the history of ideas. See WALICKI 2012, 14.

four antinomies of freedom. The first of them focuses on the tension between the soul and the body, the second points to the conflict between reason and passions, the third brings into view the antagonism of man's objective and subjective goals, while the fourth is concerned with the contradiction in the principle of political and mental freedom. Kołakowski claims that the antinomies cannot be overcome within the framework of Spinoza's philosophical system — mainly because of the assumption that as soon as man becomes liberated from the supernatural world, he is also liberated from history and hence is unable to realize any idea of progress. Yet the ahistoricism of Spinoza's doctrine does not rule out the possibility of self-improvement of the human being. A self-improving individual

is searching — in the various domains of that individual's thinking and life — for the absolute which is known to exist, to be given, or to have been attained by others, the ultimate goal being to achieve it for oneself. [...] Humans are beings that, on a par with all other beings, are guided by the pursuit to achieve their own benefit and self-preservation, the specifically human feature being the fact that the main real benefit — either realized or unrealized — lies in the good of the soul, i.e. in knowing and managing one's affects. Genuine emancipation is thus transposed into the sphere of thinking. (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 394–395)

A thinker who has bound his life to reason and mastered the art of intuition has access to infinite reason. Nature is cognized directly, not through imagination (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 379).

Presenting the main tenets of Spinoza's philosophy, Kołakowski places special focus on its entanglement in internal conflicts, from which it is unable to extricate itself. The problem particularly applies to the principal part of the doctrine developed by the Dutch thinker, namely the theory of moral life. The theory is derived from Spinoza's metaphysics based upon the thesis on permanent tension in the world which is considered either from the viewpoint of substances or *modi*. The former case involves a worldview that is based on indivisible infinity, while the latter sees the world as an infinite set of individual things.

A moral effect of this dichotomy is the continuous contradiction between the morality of self-preservation and the morality of self-destruction; between the call to strive for absolute unity with the universe as a whole [...] and the principle of affirmation of innate egoism; between the concept of the individual having the misfortune of being an individual and the concept of the individual ordered by nature to affirm its distinctness via all available means and to consolidate its own existence. (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 342)

Kołakowski points out that inherent contradictions are in fact present in all other great philosophical systems. Each of them, examined in isolation, may be taken to testify to the failure of reason. On the other hand, Kołakowski adds,

no products of mental labour are final, and what appears to be tied up by an unresolvable internal contradiction turns out to be at the same time a starting point for further historical development, capable of sustaining the power of dynamic inspiration in creating new trials in which contradictions embedded in old viewpoints are overcome by new perspectives, simultaneously breeding new contradictions. (KOŁAKOWSKI 2012, 398)

The inspiration—derived from Spinoza's philosophy—to consider the problem of human nature from the vantage point of the permanent conflict between the finiteness of individual existence and finite eternal nature became a leitmotif recurring throughout a number of Kołakowski's studies. The conflict is very clearly described in the book entitled *The Presence of Myth*. The myth is recognised by Kołakowski as a domain of metaphysical inquiries. These inquiries inevitably involve a basic human need, which presents itself essentially as three complementary needs. One of the constituent needs is the need to “make the empirical realities understandable”. Another one is “the need for faith in the permanence of human values”, while the final need is “the desire to see the world as continuous” (KOŁAKOWSKI 2001, 2–4). Kołakowski believes that the possibility of satisfying these three needs lies exclusively in the domain of metaphysical inquiry. It is there that man seeks hope for the defence against one of the most fundamental human experiences, which is the phenomenon of the world's indifference. To Kołakowski, attempts to overcome this phenomenon on a continuous basis are, in fact, what fosters a sense of shared purpose in the entirety of human effort (KOŁAKOWSKI 2001, 129).

In his subsequent works, Kołakowski considers religious myth to be the best defence against the indifference of the world. In his book *Religion. If There is No God...* he highlights the distinct difference between religious faith and rational knowledge. An analysis of both domains shows both their mutual relationships and the fact that neither of them is a product of the other, even though both convey the need for creating a design of an orderly world, i.e. a world ruled by explainable laws. Kołakowski states that attempts to give an ambiguous response to the question: “is the phantom of God disturbing our vision of things, or, quite the opposite, is the world obscuring Him from our vision?” lead to the error of *petitio principii* because each of these two perceptions of the world—religious and rationalistic—having its

own rules of legitimacy, refuses to accept the criteria of the other (KOŁAKOWSKI 1982, 199). Rationalists' rules lead to the cognitive results for which they were designed in the first place. However, the interpretation of the world by referring to the order created by God is, in Kołakowski's view, equally coherent, and it provides believers with a certain type of understanding that is simply unacceptable to rationalists. Arguments present in religious faith most certainly cannot be expressed in the language of the rationalist's conceptual apparatus, but can be expressed in the language of the sacred. The category of truth that one is familiar with in the area of rational analysis is, undeniably, different from the category of truth which is valid in the realm of the sacred order. Kołakowski argues that since religion is not a set of propositions, but instead a path of life wherein understanding, faith and commitment to obligations merge into a single act, while people embark on that path via initiation into a collective cult, religious truth is protected and passed on in the form of its own specific continuous collective experience. Hence whenever one hears the expression "remain in the truth" in the religious register, there are no problems with interpretation. It is perfectly clear that it refers to stepping onto the path of salvation rather than becoming familiar with a theological statement of any kind. The conflict between religious faith (*the sacred*) and rational knowledge (*the profane*) should not, according to the author of *Individual and Infinity*, be considered in the categories of logical misunderstanding, confusion of notions, or misinterpretation of the boundary separating faith from knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The nature of the conflict is not so much logical as it is cultural, and its roots should be sought in forces which, remaining in mutual tension, are persistently embedded in human nature. Crucially, there is no way of analyzing these forces using measurable vectors so that they could be explained and predicted. They depend on a broad spectrum of historical and civilizational conditions. Analyzing various religious traditions, Kołakowski concludes that the discord between *the sacred* and *the profane* bears the traits of the fundamental conflict which, though it may occasionally remain hidden, is essentially ineradicable from human nature. The reason is that the conflict arises from the inevitable evolution in the mental and moral dispositions of human beings who, since time immemorial, have been asking variants of the same questions: "who am I?" and "what do I live for?" (KOŁAKOWSKI 1982, 208–210).

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<sup>5</sup> A critical analysis of Kołakowski's argument about the difference between scientific and theological truth was put forth by Helena Eilstein (1991, 15 and subsequent pages).

Arguing that there is no possibility for any “scientific outlook”, Kołakowski believes that something can be rescued from the “impersonal dance of atoms”. That *something*, he writes, should be “human dignity, a mere ability to realize—without a sense of dread—one’s freedom and ability to create sense by a pure act of will, with a full consciousness that it represents creation rather than the discovery of sense in nature or in history” (KOŁAKOWSKI 1982, 200).<sup>6</sup> Understanding that dignity becomes possible when man is aware that there is a higher being than himself: the Absolute. In contrast, when man attributes the superior dignity to himself, he gives testimony to the lack of respect for himself. Kołakowski states plainly that the absence of God “turns man into ruin in that it obliterates the sense of everything that is habitually thought to represent the essence of humanity: the pursuit of truth, the distinction between good and evil, the claim to dignity and the belief that we are creating something that will withstand the indifferent damage inflicted by time” (KOŁAKOWSKI 1982, 204)<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. MAN AS AN INDIVIDUAL EXTRACTED FROM TRADITION

Kołakowski asserts that recognizing the distinction between *the sacred* and *the profane* entails negating the full autonomy of the secular order and accepting the thesis on its limitations. If culture is deprived of the sacral sense, it is also stripped of the sense *tout court*. The atrophy of the sacred, which demarcates boundaries for the growth of the profane, consequently promotes one of the most dangerous illusions of our contemporary civilization, namely the misguided belief that transformations of human life are unrestricted by any barriers and that, essentially, human life is perfectly malleable. Those who disagree with this view challenge the possibility of total autonomy of the human being—and hence negate the human being as such. The illusion, Kołakowski claims, leads directly to the conviction that humans, considered as individuals, may liberate themselves completely from all sense rooted in tradition, and acquire the belief that all sense can be decreed or abolished at any time by force of whim or arbitrary will. Kołakowski warns that in the imaginary situation where everything is equally

<sup>6</sup> See also OLCZYK 2016, 236–241.

<sup>7</sup> A more in-depth analysis of the problem of religious faith in Kołakowski’s philosophy can be found in Jan A. Kłoczowski’s book (1994).

good, by the same token everything is equally neutral. “To believe that I am an omnipotent lawmaker of all possible sense is to believe that there are no rationales to create or issue any laws at all” (KOŁAKOWSKI 1984a, 173).

According to Kołakowski, the primary function of the sacred is to endow all fundamental forms of human activity with an additional sense which cannot be validated through any empirical means. For example, such sense is given to birth and death, marriage and gender differences, the lapse of generations and ages, labour and art, war and peace, crime and punishment, and professions and vocations. The sphere of the sacred provides a system of signs which are not only meant to identify different cultural phenomena, but also to ascribe to each of them a distinct and unique value, so that each can be incorporated into a different order that cannot be perceived through ordinary perception. The sacred is tied to the conservative position encapsulated in the terse statement that: “this is how things are, they cannot be otherwise.” The sacred order reaffirms and stabilizes the structure of society — its forms and its systems of divisions, and also its injustices, its privileges and its institutionalized instruments of oppression (KOŁAKOWSKI 1984a, 170).

Religion is man’s way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat. That it is not an inevitable defeat is a claim that cannot be defended in good faith. One can, of course, disperse one’s life over the contingencies of every day, but even then it is only a ceaseless and desperate desire to live, and finally a regret that one has not lived. One can accept life, and accept it, at the same time, as a defeat only if one accepts that there is a sense beyond that which is inherent in human history — if, in other words, one accepts the order of the sacred. (KOŁAKOWSKI 1984a, 173)

Thinking in the categories of the sacred is not identified by Kołakowski with manifestations of any concrete religious doctrine. What the philosopher means is rather a cult, manifested in the form of religious faith, which — while being oriented toward the absolute — will never renounce its inclinations to degrade the secular values of life, or to regard them as relative and derivative (if not outright hostile to the true human vocation). The vocation is to be understood primarily as the ability to tell good from evil, the claim to dignity, and the conviction that we create something that will be able to withstand the destruction of time.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jan A. Kłoczowski (1994) describes Kołakowski as a representative of “non-denominational Catholic Christianity.” Elaborating on this term, Jerzy Szacki argues that Kołakowski believed not so much in God as in the inevitable evil of a world without God. As Szacki concludes: “Perhaps he would have happily received ‘the grace of fairly,’ but he seemingly remained an unrepentant unbeliever” (SZACKI 2012, 121).



In Kołakowski's framework, religious faith is tied in with the search for unconditional ideas referring to the infinite and to the eternal. On the other hand, rational knowledge is associated with instrumental activity oriented primarily towards cognizing and commanding the material world. In this context, rationalism is defined in the categories of a calculation, which is meant to steadily increase the efficiency of actions and ensure the more effective achievement of goals. A measure of rationalism is thus interpreted as its verifiable usability. It can be widely applied thanks to the function performed by money. Human civilization, Kołakowski claims, would not have reached the level where it stands today without the use of money. In addition to its salient role in the process of stimulating technical progress, money has also significantly contributed to a flurry of intellectual initiatives which have improved people's thinking and acting, making them more efficient (KOŁAKOWSKI 1982, 213–214).

Kołakowski extensively explored problems relating to the effect of instrumental rationality on the shaping of the character of culture in Western societies. The issues were addressed chiefly in the context of the development of liberal thought, which was seen by the philosopher as pivotal for the condition of the contemporary man. In his studies from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, he recognized the contribution of liberalism to the struggle against totalitarian systems, however he also warned against inherent dangers embedded in the liberal doctrine. Commenting on Karl R. Popper's book *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Kołakowski brought into focus the risk of self-poisoning in the open society. He challenged Popper's characterization of the open society as a set of values, the most prominent of which are tolerance, rationality and independence from tradition. What is more, Kołakowski described as naive everyone who believed the value system to be perfectly non-contradictory, i.e. those claiming that the system's values "support, or at least do not collide, with one another" (KOŁAKOWSKI 1984b, 207).

The philosopher raised three types of objections towards this optimistic vision of building and developing the open society (KOŁAKOWSKI 1984b, 207–208). Firstly, the group of values constituting the open society comprises certain values which, on account of empirical (though not necessarily logical) reasons, are in conflict with one another. Consequently, they can only be realized through mutual restrictions. One example is the opposition between freedom and security. Secondly, consistent attempts to reaffirm and reinforce conflicting values pose a threat to the existence of the open society as such. Thirdly, no society, and hence no open society, is able to function

without trust in tradition. After all, a set of attitudes approved by liberalism constitutes its own specific tradition. If one campaigns for liberal education, which places an emphasis on tolerance, criticism, open discussion, selflessness or general human solidarity,<sup>9</sup> then one advocates the need to cultivate a certain set of attitudes which are nothing else than manifestations of liberal traditions. Such attitudes are not derivable from nature. Nor are they inborn or self-evident (KOŁAKOWSKI 1984b, 209).

The elimination of tradition from the sociopolitical sphere, Kołakowski points out, causes the disappearance, right before our eyes, of all signs and words that used to build our conceptual network, and also provides us with a system of rudimentary distinctions.

There is no longer any clear distinction, in political life, between war and peace, sovereignty and servitude, invasion and liberation, or equality and despotism. Nor is there a clear-cut dividing line between executioner and victim, between man and woman, between the generations, between crime and heroism, law and arbitrary violence, victory and defeat, right and left, reason and madness, doctor and patient, teacher and pupil, art and buffoonery, or knowledge and ignorance. (KOŁAKOWSKI 1984b, 171)

The process of blurring the differences and boundaries between the distinctions is referred to by Kołakowski as the preference for amorphousness. The philosopher links it to the illusion concerning the unlimited self-improvement capabilities of human societies, and to the instrumental attitude toward individual life.

Kołakowski puts the blame for the destruction of the pillars of the contemporary civilization—the collapse of the traditional world order and the rejection of history as a binding and stabilizing force of the contemporary culture—on the Lenin-Stalin communism and, to a lesser extent, on liberalism. He states bluntly that

our liberal culture is destroying these supports even more consistently than communism. Popular relativism is, clearly, a very convenient position, as it absolves people of the ideas of responsibility and duty. It appears that this is the main meaning ascribed today to the word *liberation*. Communism is not to blame for the situation. Actually, the liberal civilization is poisoning itself by turning

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<sup>9</sup> While addressing the values of liberalism, due attention must be given to the fundamental distinction between sociopolitical and economic liberalism. The idea of solidarity illustrates this difference very sharply.

comfort into epistemology and, to this end, producing appropriate philosophical fashions and a great diversity of concepts. (KOŁAKOWSKI 1999, 385–386)

Kołakowski argues that there are certain philosophical “fashions,” chiefly postmodernism and poststructuralism, which contribute to the self-poisoning of liberalism. He does not accept the need to analyze the phenomena and processes which are in the sphere of interest of both these trends. The philosopher sharply criticises the concept of liquid modernity for its failure to incorporate any absolute or permanent points of reference. However, he underlines the importance of spiritual security, which can be seen to be closely associated with trust in life. The trust comprises religious faith—inaccessible anywhere except tradition—in the meaningful order of the world and the belief that there exists “actual history which encompasses us; a living continuity which binds and restricts us; a whole within which past and present generations co-exist and communicate with one another” (KOŁAKOWSKI 1999, 384–385).

#### CONCLUSIONS

Kołakowski's struggles with the most fundamental problem of man show how great the disparity can be between answers given to this question. In his early works, containing references to Marx's writings, the Polish philosopher defines man through his contact with nature. The aim of the contact is the gathering of knowledge about nature. The knowledge thus achieved always has a practical quality. It is meant to enable human beings to transform nature in such a manner as to utilize its resources for practical needs. Just like the knowledge of nature is shaped through the prism of human practical needs, all forms of human consciousness are moulded in the same manner. None of them are autonomous, hence it is not possible for man to look at himself from a viewpoint that would be free from the condition of being a material interest of practical human life. The interests thus perceived are a product of the social and historical existence of man.

After authoring *Individual and Infinity*, Kołakowski gradually departs from the world of material interests, veering towards the world of ideas, standards and spiritual values. He becomes inclined to embrace the thought that the latter world plays a much more prominent role in both the evolution of individuals and whole societies. Fundamental reference points of our culture (truth, dignity, morality, freedom) should not, Kołakowski empha-

sizes, be explored with a focus on the possibilities of meeting only practical human needs. In order not to lose such points of reference, people need religious faith deeply rooted in their tradition.<sup>10</sup> Owing to faith, “there is a long-standing and real—rather than invented provisionally to satisfy current needs—differentiation between good and evil, and between truth and falsehood” (KOŁAKOWSKI 1999, 384).

The sphere of the sacred is viewed by Kołakowski as a safe haven of traditional values without which man loses his footing in the world and descends into the depths of self-destruction, thinking that he himself gives shape to the eternal world order and establishes rules governing its evolution. The main culprit, charged with the responsibility for actions that drive man to self-destruction, is liberalism. Attitudes postulated by the doctrine, including open-mindedness and a tolerance towards various value systems, and emancipation of the individual from the established tradition, contribute to destabilizing the structure of Western societies that has been moulded over the centuries. Even though Kołakowski accepts the thesis that the most fundamental trait of human existence is the inevitable tension between desiring a stable structure and seeking changes, he rejects the direction of changes which is set by liberal values. The philosopher blames liberalism for creating a structural void. He is much more committed to conservative values, seeing them as a way of upholding the family, nation and religious communities, i.e. such forms of human life which, by perpetuating tradition, ensure that the structure of individual and collective existence remains stable and uncontested.

To conclude the discussion of Leszek Kołakowski’s views in the philosophy of religion which—it needs to be underscored—forms the major part of his extensive oeuvre, it is worth asking the question of whether the philosopher’s position remains topical today. This aspect is important because after Kołakowski’s death some scholars, despite not challenging the philosopher’s seminal contribution to the subject field, claimed that it was alienated from the contemporary context.<sup>11</sup> One of them was Jan Tokarski, by asking outright:

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<sup>10</sup> In this way Kołakowski takes a stand in the dispute over the role of religion in shaping the public sphere. Although this dispute has a long tradition, it still remains valid. See TAYLOR 2007; TAYLOR and MACIURE 2011; NUSSBAUM 2008.

<sup>11</sup> After Kołakowski’s death, eight of his books were published in Poland, with the majority devoted to problems within the field of the philosophy of religion. Over a period of ten years, the total number of books sold significantly exceeded 150,000 (MENTZWEL 2020, 398–399).

Doesn't it seem to us today that the past has no significant effect on how we live? Totalitarianism, the tension between secular ideology and religious tradition—aren't these issues outdated, obsolete? Isn't our globalised world something unprecedented in history, so that the treasures of old wisdom turn out to be just a pile of useless junk? (TOKARSKI 2016, 11)

Indeed, Tokarski's claim that our attention today is focused on what is "here and now", which should be the main object of inquiry, is in sharp contrast to Kołakowski's way of practising philosophy. However, I do not believe that the claim is defensible. It is hard to contest Kołakowski's position when, as a representative of the Warsaw historical school, he argues that the interpretation of current issues is inextricably entangled in the historical context, i.e. in the rich tradition of Western thought (including religious thinking). Globalisation—the phenomenon evoked by Tokarski—is a very evocative example here. No credible conclusions can be drawn about globalisation without a thorough analysis of complex modernisation processes which had been set in motion a very long time ago (KIZWALTER 2020). Even leaving aside such an analysis, the problem requires a multi-dimensional interpretation of the social effects of economic globalisation with respect to religious issues. One such consequence is the secularisation of Western societies. However, the problem of the place and role of religion in today's globalised world today does not end there. It is important to note that various religions are thriving in many parts of the globe outside the Western world, and penetrate the West along with the influx of immigrants. This distinctive "import" of religion evokes various responses in the West: from the mobilisation of followers of Christianity, through attempts to secularise immigrants or waging a war with religious fundamentalists, to efforts towards achieving a peaceful coexistence (BUKSIŃSKI 2011). Given these circumstances, questions about religion—or more specifically the relations between religion and secular ideology, as Tokarski notes—cannot be ignored. The incorporation of such questions is, among others, what Kołakowski insists on in his philosophy. The philosopher underlines that in the culture of the Western world—at least in the form that we have seen for centuries—some fundamental problems, one of which is religion, have become not only irresolvable but also deeply puzzling. The mysteries of religion create the need to recognise good, truth, and meaning as values that remain relatively independent of our particular interests and choices.

In my view, it is precisely because of Kołakowski's multiple attempts to heighten our awareness of this need, that Charles Taylor noted: "[...] we are

all — Poles, Europeans, everyone — deeply in his debt” (TAYLOR 2010). Even though not all reviewers of Kołakowski’s works may feel indebted to the philosopher, his contribution is definitely acknowledged by those believing that one of the main premises underlying the culture of the Western world is the unyielding tension between the postulate of striving for the absolute on the one hand, and persistent doubts as to whether this postulate can be achieved, on the other.

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FROM THE DEATH TO REBIRTH OF RELIGION:  
EVOLUTION OF LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI'S THOUGHT  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE QUESTION: "WHO IS MAN?"

S u m m a r y

In his numerous books and articles, Leszek Kołakowski brought up a number of topics in the fields of the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy. His work offers valuable insights into problems revolving around Karl Marx's philosophy, social philosophy, and the philosophy of religion, to mention but a few. In all these areas of thought, the Polish philosopher centres his focus on the fundamental question of man. The present paper is aimed at discussing Leszek Kołakowski's contribution to the philosophical debate on this topic. The evolution of Kołakowski's views is traced from the Marxist concept of man which, after a certain period, is discarded by the philosopher in favour of a religious concept, to be confronted again with a liberal theory. Kołakowski is not uncritical about any of the conceptions, which testifies to the profound complexity of every attempt to gain insights into the very essence of the human being which, irrespective of the doctrine or perspective taken for interpretation, escapes clear-cut definition. However, despite the lack of unambiguous definitions Kołakowski recognises that the sole point of reference in any attempts to gain an understanding of the human condition in culture is religion.

**Keywords:** Leszek Kołakowski; man; philosophy of religion; *homo religiosus*; tradition, liberalism; material interests; values.

OD ŚMIERCII DO PONOWNYCH NARODZIN RELIGII.  
EWOLUCJA MYŚLI LESZKA KOŁAKOWSKIEGO  
W KONTEKŚCIE PYTANIA: „KIM JEST CZŁOWIEK?”

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Leszek Kołakowski w swoich licznych książkach i artykułach podejmował wiele zagadnień z zakresu zarówno historii filozofii, jak i filozofii współczesnej. Prowadził badania związane m.in. z problematyką filozofii Karola Marksa, filozofii społecznej czy filozofii religii. We wszystkich tych obszarach głównym przedmiotem zainteresowania polskiego filozofa pozostaje pytanie



o człowieka. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przybliżenie wybranych rozważań Kołakowskiego związanych z tym pytaniem. W sposób syntetyczny zostają pokazane dzieje jego myśli. Punktem wyjścia tych dziejów jest marksistowska koncepcja człowieka, która po pewnym okresie zostaje skonfrontowana z koncepcją religijną, by tę z kolei skonfrontować z koncepcją liberalną. Wobec żadnej z tych koncepcji Kołakowski nie pozostaje bezkrytyczny, co pokazuje ogromną złożoność każdej próby zrozumienia tego, kim jest człowiek — niezależnie od stanowiska, z perspektywy którego próbuje się go interpretować, wymyka się on jednoznacznym odpowiedziom. Mimo braku tych jednoznacznych odpowiedzi, Kołakowski przyjmuje jednak, że jedynym w zasadzie punktem odniesienia w stosunku do wszelkich prób zgłębienia sytuacji człowieka w kulturze jest religia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Leszek Kołakowski; człowiek; filozofia religii; *homo religiosus*; tradycja; interesy materialne; wartości.

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