The Evolution of Leszek Kołakowski's Religious Thought

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Abstract

This thesis examines the entire work of the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009), and argues that religious questions were at the heart of his thought from the very beginning of his intellectual career. Furthermore, it maintains that Kołakowski's youthful engagement with Communism in Stalinist Poland, along with his later historical inquiries into various strands of modern philosophy were, in fact, phases in his development as a *religious* philosopher.

The thesis, which relies on a textual analysis of Kołakowski's published and unpublished works, argues that the investigation of consecutive texts from the late 1940s to the late 1980s shows a gradual 'evolution' in Kołakowski's attitude to religion – developing from a militant Stalinist to a conservative apologist for Christianity. To this effect, the thesis is structured chronologically. The methodology employed is that of 'qualified contextualism', which recognises the fundamental importance of historical context in investigating philosophical questions, yet acknowledges that traditional contextualism does not suffice in explaining the ideas from the past.

The entire intellectual trajectory of Kołakowski can be summarised as the quest for the most satisfactory formula for an Absolute being that not only serves as the source of ethical normativity but also endows human lives with a sense of meaningfulness. In his studies of secular philosophical systems, Kołakowski asserts that people cannot establish moral values for themselves and need a transcendent metaphysical reality. Although he was a sympathiser, Kołakowski never officially committed to any institutional form of religion. The apparent Christian synthesis between the concepts of a loving Person and an eternal Absolute seemed irreconcilable for him. It is on these grounds that this thesis concludes the mature Kołakowski can be called a *religious* thinker, but not a *Christian* thinker. 'Kołakowski's God' is a being that is closer to the Neoplatonic Absolute, one that overcomes contingency of human life and makes it meaningful.

Extended Abstract

Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009) was a Polish philosopher who rose to global intellectual prominence in the late 1970s thanks to his seminal study *Main Currents of Marxism*. This thesis attempts to look at the entire work of Kołakowski with a view to arguing that religious questions were at the heart of his thought from the very beginning of his intellectual career. Furthermore, it argues that Kołakowski's youthful engagement with Communism in Stalinist Poland, along with his later historical inquiries into the philosophies of positivism, phenomenology, and Marxism (and, to a lesser extent, some other strands of modern thought) were, in fact, phases in his development as a *religious* philosopher. Historical investigations helped him to reconcile with religious ideas as the answer to the most fundamental philosophical questions. The central problem he engaged with was the question of the Absolute. The entire intellectual trajectory of Kołakowski can be summarised as the quest for the most satisfactory formula for an Absolute being that not only serves as the source of ethical normativity but also endows human lives with a sense of meaningfulness.

The thesis is based on a textual analysis of Kołakowski's published texts, unpublished notes, and drafts from his private papers and state archives. I argue that the investigation of consecutive texts from the late 1940s to the late 1980s shows a clear, gradual 'evolution' in Kołakowski's attitude to religion – he develops from a militant Stalinist to a conservative apologist for Christianity. The philosophical position he reached in the 1980s was later reaffirmed in the writings from the 1990s and 2000s. To this effect, the thesis is structured chronologically. Each chapter covers roughly a decade of Kołakowski's work and presents his major texts from the given period in a broader intellectual context. As this thesis belongs to the field of intellectual history, the selected methodology is that of 'qualified contextualism', developed especially in the works of the contemporary American historian Peter E. Gordon. The value of this methodology lies in that it recognises the fundamental importance of historical context in investigating philosophical questions, but also acknowledges that traditional contextualism (as practised by the 'Cambridge School' and its followers) is not exhaustive in explaining the meaning of ideas from the past. Until now, Kołakowski's philosophy has been largely neglected in scholarship, irrespective of the language in which it is written. This thesis therefore poses an exciting endeavour to provide a comprehensive analysis of his complete *oeuvre*.

The introductory chapter aims to present the most important historical and philosophical themes of Kołakowski's thought, which, at the same time, constitute the crucial intellectual issues that this thesis attempts to examine. The evolution of his religious philosophy was a gradual process of disillusionment with the concept of materialistic metaphysics – a non-religious, all-embracing system that tries to explain human life. The later sections of the introduction discuss the thesis' methodology, summarise the present state of historiography, and provide an outline of the subsequent chapters.

The first chapter analyses the philosopher's earliest works – those up to 1955. The biographical dimension plays an important role in this phase: Kołakowski, born into a family of leftist activists, was not baptised and was raised in a secular environment. After the Second World War left him a well-read teenage orphan, he eagerly engaged in establishing a new Marxist regime in Poland. Nevertheless, his university professors were pre-war analytical philosophers. Such an education gave him intellectual rigor and offered a much broader perspective than that of Marxism-Leninism alone. Most of the texts from this period are short essays and articles that Christianity as another form of human alienation and the Catholic Church as a mere tool of imperialism. Kołakowski's own intellectual interests start to clarify at this point – he is primarily a historian of the seventeenth century, a period he sees as fundamental in the secularization of philosophical thinking. The most important work analysed in this chapter is Kołakowski's doctoral dissertation on Spinoza (1953).

The second chapter focuses on the crucial 'transitional' phase between 1955 and 1965, which resulted in a major breakthrough in Kołakowski's thinking as regards religion. It starts with 'revisionist' essays from 1955–1959 (published mostly in the collection *The Worldview and Everyday Life* from 1957), in which he sought to find a new formula for Marxism. He tried to develop a socialist ideology that would not be a mere doctrine, but rather a 'moral force' that dealt with everyday problems. The most important element of it was the attempt to establish a satisfactory system of secular ethics that did not refer to any non-empirical authority as its foundation. Kołakowski commented on contemporary events, such as the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council and the rapprochement between Catholic and Marxist intellectuals in the 1960s Poland. He did not refrain from more popular literary forms, including his own retelling of famous Old Testament's fables and an imaginary press

conference given by the devil himself. Historical writings from this period, especially on early modern religious thinkers, such as Erasmus and Pascal, contributed to the breakthrough in his original philosophy. Kołakowski focuses on the individuals who looked for a purified, authentic version of Christianity and their conflicts with a corrupted institution of the Church. Lucien Goldmann and his work *The Hidden God* (1956), which presented a novel interpretation of Pascal, placing him in broader contexts of the seventeenth-century French society, had a significant influence on Kołakowski's understanding of the history of religious thought. A major historiographical work included a book based on his thesis on Spinoza – *Individual and Infinity* (1958). The much-revised version of the text presents a lucid and impressive historical analysis rather than a text permeated with orthodox Marxist arguments, as was the case with the original dissertation. His crowning achievement as an intellectual historian is *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* (1965), in which he studies seventeenth-century non-denominational Protestant groups and Catholic mystics. Importantly, he emphasises two contradictory visions of God in Christianity: Jesus as the teacher of morality from the Sermon on the Mount, a person who establishes close relationships with people; and Christ – the Absolute, the ultimate source of truth and morality.

The third chapter of the thesis discusses Kołakowski's early attempts to present his own original philosophy of religion in *The Presence of the Myth* (1966, published 1972). These philosophical conclusions are deeply influenced by his historical investigations from the previous decade. His new, much more sympathetic understanding of religion is also fundamentally influenced by the works of Mircea Eliade. The most important part of the chapter is the analysis of what I refer to as Kołakowski's 'disenchantment trilogy' – a short book on positivism (*The Alienation of Reason. A History of Positivist Thought* – 1966), on phenomenology (*Husserl and the Search for Certitude* – 1975), and three volumes of *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976–78). These all-embracing eschatologies attempt to find a secular Absolute, but, in Kołakowski's analysis, all fail in this endeavour. Based on these examples, he concludes that a materialist metaphysics is not possible and that any system of beliefs that seeks to provide a meaningful texture to the everyday human experience must be necessarily founded on a non-human, transcendental reality. As he summarises in his 'tour de force' of the history of Marxism: 'The self-deification of mankind, to which Marxism gave philosophical expression, has ended in the same way as all such

attempts, whether individual or collective: it has revealed itself as the farcical aspect of human bondage.'

The fourth chapter analyses Kołakowski's mature philosophy of religion – which developed from the late 1970s and is presented mainly in *Religion: If there is no God* (1982) and *Metaphysical Horror* (1988) – along with a book on Jansenism and Pascal (*God Owes Us Nothing*, 1995). Based on historical studies of the most important themes in the philosophy of religion, Kołakowski develops his original views on the topic. The crucial issue he consistently tried to tackle was the question of undisputed foundations for ethics. His disillusionment with orthodox Marxism and other non-religious systems resulted in the conclusion that such foundations cannot have a human character. In other words, a human person cannot be the creator of moral values. For this reason, Kołakowski presents his concept of an Absolute. This being has an unconditional, invariable, and atemporal existence. In this way, it is the only satisfactory formula for a fully independent and infallible source of ethical normativity. The life and thought of Blaise Pascal is a specific historical example that illustrates most of the issues analysed in Kołakowski's religious writings. *God Owes Us Nothing* serves as a historical summary for the decade-long evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought. The chapter also outlines his last writings – those from the 1990s and 2000s – which have a more popular character and criticise contemporary postmodern culture from a conservative position, emphasising the importance of traditional moral values.

Chapter Five has a comparative character in that it briefly presents the most important ideas from the philosophies of Karl Jaspers and Alasdair MacIntyre. Both of these thinkers help to present Kołakowski in the broader context of the twentieth-century Western philosophy. Jaspers' sophisticated philosophical system presents ideas similar to Kołakowski's mature religious thought. However, it is depends less on historical analysis, and is presented more explicitly through philosophical analysis. For this reason, some of Jaspers' concepts, especially 'philosophical faith', are very useful in understanding Kołakowski's thought. Alasdair MacIntyre is a contemporary point of comparison with an intellectual trajectory close to that of Kołakowski. MacIntyre's commitment to Marxism in the late 1940s and the 1950s resulted in a gradual disenchantment with the doctrine in the 1960s, a transitory period in the 1970s, and finally to the development of original religious thought in the 1980s,

although this was inspired by the Aristotelian tradition to a much greater extent than in the case of Kołakowski.

The conclusion recapitulates the most important themes in the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought and explicitly presents the mature form of his philosophy. The most important problem is the foundation of moral values. Ethical reflection is the foundation for accepting metaphysical beliefs, not the other way round. The 'Disenchantment Trilogy' and other analyses of secular philosophical systems prove, according to Kołakowski, that people cannot establish moral values for themselves. He therefore, argues that a belief in a transcendent metaphysical reality is necessary for meaningful sense of everyday life. This section of the thesis also locates Kołakowski's position in relation to Christianity. Even though he talks about 'religion' in general terms throughout most of his writings, he almost always identified the concept with the Western tradition of Christianity, both in Catholic and Protestant forms. He was a self-conscious and committed Eurocentric thinker who did not consider it necessary to take into account non-Western religious traditions in his research. Nonetheless, in the works from his 'mature' phase, Kołakowski returns to the fundamental tension between God – the Person, and God – the Absolute. Kołakowski's Jesus is not a Christ – the divine saviour of humankind; instead he is more of an ethical role model, a 'godly man', in lieu of the Absolute incarnate. This is not a God that is recognisable in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although he was a friendly sympathiser, Kołakowski never officially committed to any institutional form of religion. The apparent Christian synthesis between the concepts of a loving Person and an eternal Absolute was irreconcilable for the Polish philosopher. It is on these grounds that this thesis concludes the mature Kołakowski can be called a *religious* thinker, but not a *Christian* thinker. 'Kołakowski's God' is a being that is closer to the Neoplatonic Absolute, one that overcomes contingency of human life and makes it meaningful. However, Kołakowski's Absolute has one crucial qualification that distinguishes it from the ideas of Plotinus: since ethical behaviour is essential for a meaningful texture of human experience, the Absolute is not immutable; it is affected by human behaviour, by our everyday decisions to choose between good and evil.

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If there is no God,
Not everything is permitted to man.
He is still his brother's keeper
And he is not permitted to sadden his brother,
By saying there is no God.[1]

Czesław Miłosz

[1] C. Miłosz, 'If There Is No God', trans.: C. Miłosz, R. Haas, *New Yorker,* 30 Aug 2004, p. 94.

Introduction

Questions

Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009) did not create an all-embracing philosophical system. Neither did he train a generation of followers who developed different currents of his thought. Yet it is difficult to find a similar figure in modern intellectual history who is lesser known and more remarkable. The vast richness of Kołakowski's intellectual interests and depth of analysis make his work an extraordinary reflection of almost the entirety of twentieth-century Western thought. He has addressed analytical positivism, Marxism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology and Christianity – always with the most sophisticated, rigorous philosophical apparatus and always on the highest level of intellectual honesty. The exact path of the specific phases in his trajectory, as well as the conclusions he reached, cannot be considered as definite, since there are no final answers in philosophy. Nonetheless, the theoretical foundations examined in this thesis can serve as an inspiration for practical engagement and, moreover, teach us about modern European history. Kołakowski's dreams and disillusionments, along with his meticulous examinations and verdicts, can no longer be neglected. They deserve the considered scholarly analysis that this thesis attempts to provide.

Having left his native Poland in 1968, Kołakowski settled in Oxford, working as a Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College. He rose to global intellectual prominence in the late 1970s thanks to his seminal study *Main Currents of Marxism*, a comprehensive analysis of origins, development, and gradual decline of Marxist thought. This thesis, however, attempts to look at the entire work of Kołakowski with a view to arguing that religious questions were at the heart of his thought from the very beginning of his intellectual career. I argue that his youthful engagement with Communism in Stalinist Poland, along with his later philosophical inquiries into various strands of modern philosophy were, in fact, phases in Kołakowski's development as a *religious* philosopher. Furthermore, historical investigations helped him to reconcile with religious ideas as the answer to the most fundamental metaphysical questions. By virtue of the philosopher's interests, 'religion' is almost exclusively understood here in the sense of Western Christianity, either as Catholicism or as various Protestant traditions.

My research is primarily based on a textual analysis of Kołakowski's published works as well as of unpublished notes and drafts from archives. In addition to primary literature, the thesis relies on the interviews I conducted with his associates. I argue that the investigation of consecutive texts from the late 1940s to the late 1980s shows a clear, gradual evolution in Kołakowski's attitude towards religion – developing from a militant atheist into a conservative apologist for Christianity.

The entire evolution of Kołakowski's understanding of religion can be summarised by engaging with the concept of a materialistic metaphysics. I understand 'materialistic metaphysics' as an all-embracing philosophical system that is characterised by three fundamental features. Firstly, it provides an intellectual framework for the organisation of human experience into a meaningful structure, for the sake of giving the individual's everyday life a sense of purpose. Secondly, it provides at least general directions about what is morally right and wrong, which its followers can use as an ethical compass in making quotidian decisions. The third and final characteristics, posing its materialistic aspect, lies in that it does not refer to any extra-human, extra-temporal, or extra-mundane reality to legitimise its claims, but depends solely on projects created by human reason. Until the early 1960s, Kołakowski sought to develop certain aspects of such a system, relying, to a great extent, upon various currents of the Marxist tradition. After the mid-1960s – and the 1966 book *The Presence of Myth* may be considered a symbolic watershed in this process – Kołakowski's philosophical efforts were devoted to proving the impossibility of materialistic metaphysics and showing that any system that harbours the ambition of presenting the human life as a meaningful whole must depend on a religious justification.

Ethical reflections always came first in the subsequent stages of this evolution. For the purpose of this thesis, the terms 'ethics' and 'morality' will be used interchangeably. Kołakowski's major concern was to establish an unshakeable foundation for ethical decisions, to find an unchallengeable answer to the question of how to justify the distinction between good and evil. On an individual level, this could be phrased in the question 'how to ensure that my moral decisions matter?' If they do not matter, i.e. if they do not have any impact on the world, then it does not make any difference whether one does right or wrong. Kołakowski's constant redefinition of moral stances led to a gradual transformation of his metaphysical views. 'Who

decides on what is right and what is wrong?' I cannot decide for myself, as my decisions are always determined by a contingent context, and the same caveat applies to all other human beings. For this reason, an ethical concern is followed by an epistemological conclusion: people must know the difference between right and wrong from an outside, non-human source. Furthermore, the epistemological conclusion is supported by an ontological one: such a source must necessarily have a non-contingent existence. The existence of such a being is the only way to firmly establish morality. This is the Absolute: an atemporal, perfectly invariable being that unifies all beings and their deeds. The fundamental change in Kołakowski's thinking over the years was the process of accepting the idea that in practice a workable concept of an Absolute requires a religious character. In other words, the crucial question Kołakowski attempted to address throughout his entire intellectual life was: 'can human beings be creators of moral values?' The evolution of his religious thought was a gradual development from answering this question with a 'yes' to answering it with a 'no'.

Methodology

This thesis is a work of intellectual history. Of all the subfields of historical inquiry, intellectual history remains one of the most complex and challenging. It is often treated as a vast space, covering issues as diverse as political treatises, theological disputations, personal memoirs, popular pamphlets, and the broader cultural dissemination of ideas. From the methodological perspective, it remains a fundamentally interdisciplinary inquiry, mingling with philosophy, sociology, political thought or cultural history; it may be called the 'eclectic discipline par excellence'.[2]

I will analyse consecutive texts of Kołakowski through the prism of his whole intellectual career, concentrating on the most important works and most illustrative examples from his rich bibliography.[3] I argue that Kołakowski's mature philosophy of religion from the 1980s and 1990s emerged as the result of a very long evolution and, for this reason, my thesis is structured chronologically rather than thematically. The

[2] W. Breckman, 'Intellectual History and the Interdisciplinary Ideal' in in: *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, eds.: D.M. McMahon, S. Moyn, (Oxford, 2014), p. 290.
[3] See: *Leszek Kołakowski. Bibliografia*, ed. S. Gromadzki (Warszawa, 2017).

focus of my analysis in this work falls on philosophical texts. Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches to the thinkers of the past: either we read their philosophies as past attempts to address the same problems we are facing today, i.e. we argue for the transcendental character of philosophical questions in history. Or, alternatively, we try to analyse them entirely on their own terms, restoring their distinctive historical circumstances, up to the point where 'they cannot emerge into the present except as a set of museum pieces'.[4] In this case, we argue for a radically contextualist understanding of intellectual dilemmas. Neither of these methods in its pure form seems to be fully appropriate for the analysis of Kołakowski's religious thought.

The 'contextualist' approach is the theoretical framework developed by the 'Cambridge School', which includes scholars such as Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, and J.G.A. Pocock. The main presuppositions of the school were developed by Skinner (born 1940) in his groundbreaking article *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas* (1969) as well as in his later theoretical works.[5] Attacking the traditional understanding of the 'history of ideas', as exemplified in Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), Skinner repudiated the concept that thinkers of the past addressed the same questions and issues as we do today. There are no 'perennial philosophical problems', Skinner argued; ideas must be understood as concrete arguments used in concrete debates and determined by concrete historical situations. Drawing on the twentieth-century philosophy of language – especially J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein – Skinner claimed that words change their meaning over time, and it makes no sense to write, for instance, a 'history of liberty', as the word 'liberty' meant different things in different historical periods. Context, therefore, is everything. By extension, understanding the intellectual and linguistic context of a time is the only way to properly understand what a thinker from the past meant in their works.

While the Cambridge approach has many strengths, its classic formulation does not seem to be the most appropriate method of investigation for this thesis. Most importantly, Skinnerian historiography concentrates almost exclusively on the linguistic features of a historical context and emphasises the political dimension of

[4] A. MacIntyre, 'The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past', in *Philosophy in history: essays on the historiography of philosophy*, eds.: R. Rorty, J.B. Schneewind (Cambridge, 2004), p. 31.
[5] Collected in: Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics. Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002).

philosophical texts to the extent that it overshadows any other intellectual agenda.[6] Such an approach may be useful for certain purposes: if political thought is inevitably entangled with the practice of political life in a given historical period, as well as with its institutional frameworks and socio-economic dimensions, then radical contextualisation of a philosophical text is probably the most adequate approach.

The history of religious thought has a different character. At some points in history, for instance during the early Christian councils or the Reformation, theological arguments were forged in more dynamic debates between multiple writers, in a process similar to the development of political philosophy as analysed by the Cambridge School. Sometimes, however, deliberations on religious questions were spread over great periods of time, with the same philosophical arguments revived after many centuries in a different historical setting. In fact, Kołakowski's historical writings provide us with excellent examples of both instances. *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* (analysed in Chapter II) is a meticulous investigation of theological debates between various Protestant sects during the so-called 'Second Reformation' in the second half of the seventeenth century. *God Owes Us Nothing* (analysed in Chapter IV), in contrast, explains how the theological arguments of St Augustine (354–430) were rejuvenated in the thought of Blaise Pascal (1623–62) and the Jansenists.

Religious thinkers choose to address the questions they believe to have a transcendental character; what is more, they frequently see themselves as participants in centuries-long debates. It is often the intention of an individual thinker to speak *beyond* their own times in the attempt to reach out to a broader audience, which sometimes even encompasses those living in the remote future.[7] For this purpose, a historical investigation of religious philosophy requires a somewhat different approach to an investigation of political philosophy. Even if philosophical arguments are made in a specific historical context, their audiences are not necessarily contemporaries of the thinker under study; they may include philosophers from the past. The autonomy of philosophical and theological questions at the centre of Kołakowski's religious thought cannot be sustained in a purely contextualist

[6] P.E. Gordon, *What is Intellectual History? A frankly partisan introduction to a frequently misunderstood field*, pp. 7–8; from: http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/history/files/what_is_intell_history_pgordon_mar2012.pdf, retrieved 3/05/2017

[7] P.E. Gordon, 'Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas', in: *Rethinking Modern …,* p. 42.

perspective in which all ideas are reduced to a political context, as the standard version of the Cambridge School's methodology suggests.[8]

The fundamental difference between philosophical analysis and historical inquiry is contained in the fact that intellectual historian is focused on 'understanding' philosophical arguments rather than on their critical assessment.[9] The task 'is not to judge whether certain ideas are right or wrong, but instead to comprehend what counts as right or wrong in a particular historical and social setting.'[10] For this purpose, I will follow Peter E. Gordon's concept of 'qualified contextualism', where historical context and philosophical ideas merge in 'the dialectical entanglement by which immanence and transcendence cannot confront one another merely in a stance of abstract negation'.[11] In this way, historical context protects the intellectual historian from presentism, i.e. projecting our own intellectual interests onto the author from the past,[12] while transcendentalism is 'the best talisman against the wholesale dissolution of philosophy into history'.[13] In Gordon's idea, the fundamental methodological issue is our comprehension of the nature of historical change over time, understood as a fruitful tension between two ideals: the ideal of containment and the ideal of movement.[14] The former, which can be understood as a radical form of contextualism, attempts to achieve a perfectly isolated, stabilised historical moment; the latter strives to break up the restrains of temporal contexts and analyse different issues as if they were traveling through time without being affected by the journey itself. The key in the practice of intellectual history is to 'serve two masters':

> We obey the ideal of containment when we situate ideas in contexts, insofar as we subscribe to the principle that a context serves as the larger horizon of meaning within whose bounds an idea can be understood. We obey the ideal of movement because it alone awakens us to a sense of contingency and impermanence of *any* particular horizon of meaning; it reminds us, instead, to attend to the patterns of endless transformation and reformation by which an idea travels through time.[15]

[8] P.E. Gordon, 'Continental Divide: Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger at Davos, 1929 – An Allegory of Intellectual History', *Modern Intellectual History* 1, 2 (2004), p. 245.
[9] Gordon, *What is Intellectual History?*, p. 3.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
[11] Gordon, 'Contextualism and Criticism… p. 50.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[13] Gordon, 'Continental Divide…, p. 248.
[14] Gordon, 'Contextualism and Criticism… pp. 32-35.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Thus, the crucial issue in analysing the idea of Leszek Kołakowski's religious thought is to understand the *body* of the philosophical idea and at the same time its *embeddedness* in historical contexts. But what is meant by a 'historical context'? Especially when analysing complex texts, there is never only *one* context. Dominick Lacapra identified six major, yet overlapping, layers of contextual analysis in the examination of philosophical texts: I) the relation between the author's intentions and the text; II) the relation between the author's life and the text; III) the relation between the text and the broader society; IV) the relation between the text and other areas of cultural activity; V) the relation of the text to the corpus of a writer; VI) the relation between the text and modes of discourse.[16]

For the purpose of this thesis, contexts in the meanings of II (biography), III and IV (impact on the society-at-large and culture) will be presented only in a very limited form. This work does not aspire to be a comprehensive study of Leszek Kołakowski's life and thought in general, but focuses on his religious thought. This is not a biography and I am not interested in the *personal* perspective of Kołakowski's religious development – the question whether he actually believed in a god is not investigated in this thesis. My primary interest is the evolution of ideas, not their dissemination or the way in which they influenced broader social and political life. Such perspectives would require separate studies in the social history of ideas, another form of intellectual history, most famously practised by Robert Darnton.[17] In the same way, the questions of 'Kołakowski's Marxism' or 'Kołakowski's Politics' pose promising research avenues, but would require different investigations.

Therefore, political, social, and purely biographical contexts of his intellectual trajectory are discussed only in cases when they significantly affect his philosophical evolution, or when they are needed to provide readers with a general historical background and points of temporal orientation. This decision requires more justification, especially in the case of Kołakowski's engagement and gradual disillusionment with Marxism – one could not simply escape being political in the Stalinist Poland of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The new regime was established as a result of the Red Army's military presence, and the fate of Poland as a part of the

[16] D. Lacapra, 'Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts', *History and Theory*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 254-72.
[17] R. Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York, 1989); see also: S. Moyn, 'Imaginary Intellectual History' in *Rethinking Modern…*, pp. 112-30.

Soviet-dominated block was sealed after the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945.[18] However, for many Poles whose views were rooted in the Enlightenment progressive tradition, especially for the youth of Kołakowski's generation, Marxism appeared as an opportunity for a major social transformation, which would end injustices and backwardness of the pre-war Poland (the issue discussed in more detail in Chapter I). 'To be a Marxist meant to be settled in the Polish reality of that time' – Bronisław Baczko told me in an interview.[19] Nonetheless, Kołakowski's political involvement in the Communist system always had a theoretical rather than practical character. He did not serve in any party or state function other than a university lecturer. From a purely intellectual perspective, Marxism provided Kołakowski with a philosophical framework and a very general point of reference, instead of being his prime area of interest. He was never interested in economy or sociology. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, he worked on seventeenth-century thinkers, reviewing books written by Catholic priests and commenting on papal encyclicals. The only early text that refers to Marxist classics was his 1949 article about the Polish edition of *Anti-Dühring*.[20] The spectre that haunts his texts resembles much more the image of Voltaire than of Lenin. Kołakowski's 'revisionist' texts from the mid-1950s (analysed in Chapter II) were more universal deliberations on the nature of a modern democratic society and its ethical underpinnings inspired by the Marxist tradition, rather than strictly Marxist texts with a focus on the economic base and determinist character of historical processes. Comprehensive commentaries on Marx and other Marxist thinkers come only with *Main Currents of Marxism* in the 1970s. The success of his analysis there is based exactly on the theoretical, not practical approach, the issue that I address in Chapter III. This thesis is focused on Kołakowski's religious thought and Marxism is analysed only to the extent that Kołakowski's engagement and disillusionment with Marxism served as important stages in his rapprochement with religious philosophy. Kołakowski was settled in the reality of his times, but political events and social situation had very little influence on his intellectual interests – his mental homeland was amongst seventeenth-century mystics, not twentieth-century revolutionaries. There was never a passionate intellectual affair between Kołakowski and Marx. Historical context determined the tone, but not the content of Kołakowski's

[18] See: K. Kersten, *The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland, 1943-1948*, trans. J.C. Micgiel (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991).
[19] Interview with Bronisław Baczko, 17 December 2015.
[20] L. Kołakowski, 'Rewolucja zdrowego rozsądku', *Kuźnica* 17/1949, pp. 4-5.

thought and for this reason the analysis of the non-philosophical context is restricted in this thesis.

Kołakowski's trajectory is, to a great extent, similar to other Polish Marxist intellectuals of his generation (born in the interwar period), but very different from the experience of the older generation of Polish Communists (born around the turn of the century). The latter were true believers, involved in the clandestine activities of the Polish pre-war Communist Party. They were often the victims of the Great Purge and prisoners of the Gulag, and at the same time, to a great extent, were responsible for the establishment of the Marxist regime after 1945. This generation was much more persistent in its faith in Communism, even when its members suffered persecutions personally. Their disillusionment with Marxism was much more prolonged and often inconclusive. The most famous testimony of such remains Aleksander Wat's *My Century*.[21] History of that generation of Polish Communist intellectuals has been well researched, with works by Jaff Schatz and Marci Shore as standard positions.[22] Paradoxically, despite atrocious personal experiences, their bond with Communism was much stronger than that of the Western fellow travellers of the same generation, whose disillusionment was most famously presented in the 1949 collection of essays *The God That Failed*,[23] but also more intimate than that of the Western thinkers and activists who remained faithful to the Marxist cause for a long time after 1945, especially in France.[24] However, the history of Kołakowski's generation was different. Their faith in the Marxist order, first forged in the horror of the war, was greatly shaken by the failed liberalisation of the regime in October 1956 and the following Soviet invasion of Hungary. The remains of any commitment were cut following the anti-intellectual purge in March 1968, which also resulted in Kołakowski's emigration from Poland. The Marxist experience of that generation, which still requires serious historiographical research, has been presented in a more popular form in the series of sketches (mostly of writers and artists) by Anna Bikont and Joanna Szczęsna,[25] where Kołakowski is featured as one of the minor protagonists. It should be noted at this point that, in contrast to other Eastern-bloc

[21] A. Wat, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, trans. R. Lourie (New York, 1988).
[22] J. Schatz, *The Generation: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland* (Berkeley, 1991); M. Shore, *Caviar and Ashes. A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968* (New Haven, 2006).
[23] R.H. Crossman (ed.), *The God That Failed* (New York, 2001).
[24] See: T. Judt, *Past Imperfect. French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (New York, 2011).
[25] A. Bikont, J. Szczęsna, *Lawina i kamienie. Pisarze wobec komunizmu* (Warszawa, 2006).

countries such as Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia, post-war Poland never had any significant philosophers of Marxist theory; even thinkers with philosophical background, like Kołakowski, have quickly moved to historical studies as their main area of research. As the famous anecdote goes, Stalin was supposed to say that introducing socialism in Poland would be as difficult as putting a saddle onto a cow. Perhaps the same applies to the realm of the spirit.

The question of author's intentions (context number I in Lacapra's systematisation) is more problematic in the case of Kołakowski's intellectual evolution. It is vital to stress that he was not a systematic philosopher, but rather a writer who dwelt in the tradition of European thought and reformulated some common themes and conclusions already present in this tradition. For this reason, the thesis at hand may also be considered an exercise in the intellectual history of intellectual history. Apart from a few essays and two books (*The Presence of the Myth*, analysed in Chapter III, and *Metaphysical Horror*, analysed in Chapter IV), Kołakowski's output consists primarily of works in the history of ideas. In this sense, he was a thinker in the Hegelian tradition:[26] Kołakowski presented his own philosophy through writings in the history of philosophy. Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) is a good point of comparison. His historical investigations into the Enlightenment, Counter-Enlightenment, and Romanticism reinforced his own philosophical views and provided crucial arguments in the development of his pluralistic ethics and political liberalism.[27] In a similar way, Kołakowski's work on early modern theology and modern secular philosophical systems, such as Marxism or Husserlian phenomenology, were essential in the evolution of his own religious thought. In other words, Kołakowski, like Berlin,[28] perpetually advanced a philosophical agenda as a historian of ideas; the transformation of this agenda is what I wish to analyse in this thesis.

However, this qualification presents new difficulties. Kołakowski started to develop his original philosophy of religion only in the late 1970s. Therefore, the task of this thesis is not simply to analyse what Kołakowski wrote about religion in the 1950s, but what he wrote about religion when he was writing about Spinoza in the

[26] C. Taylor, 'Philosophy and its history', in: *Philosophy in history*..., p. 17.
[27] See: J. Gray, *Isaiah Berlin. An Interpretation of His Thought* (Woodstock, 2013), pp. 156–202.
[28] J. Cracraft, 'A Berlin for Historians', *History and Theory* 41,3 (2002), p. 298.

1950s, how his understanding of religion changed when he wrote about religious thinkers in the 1960s, what influence on his ideas about religion had his engagement with positivism or Marxism. Importantly, he was an intellectual historian whose main areas of interest were specific thinkers rather than particular ideas or philosophical problems. For this reason, it makes little sense to think about Kołakowski from the methodological perspective of the conceptual history, as developed by Reinhart Koselleck.[29] Nevertheless, as I argue throughout this thesis, whenever Kołakowski wrote about other thinkers or philosophical issues, religious issues remained either the crucial problem that he analysed or the most important point of reference for his investigations – in this way, the intention of Kołakowski's writings is to a great extent formulated retrospectively.[30] This became a somehow controversial problem in the analysis of Kołakowski's writings, especially after the Stalinist period. Andrzej Walicki argued that the reluctance to engage in contemporary debates after 1956[31] was one of the reasons why Polish Marxists, including Kołakowski, retreated to the safer field of history of ideas, and I address this issue in Chapter II. However, much later, unthreatened by any oppressive regime, Kołakowski identified his motives for choosing the historical questions that interested him as purely intellectual, and not political.[32] Even if his historical works inspired many social activists to engage in political life, works of intellectual history should not be seen as a cover for contemporary criticism. Suggesting motives and intentions other than those explicitly and consistently expressed by the author might result in another form of presentism. It should be stressed again that this thesis is interested in the development of Kołakowski's religious ideas, not in their dissemination or broader influences.

The context in the sixth meaning of Lacapra's classification – the relation between the author's text and modes of discourse – also has a limited role in this thesis. Kołakowski was a rather idiosyncratic thinker. Apart from the *Main Currents of Marxism*, his works did not have a significant influence on the most important debates of the academic mainstream, especially not in the Anglophone world of analytical philosophy. Wittily, he once described himself as an intellectual 'quadruple

[29] R. Koselleck, *Future Pasts. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. K. Tribe (New York, 2004); see also: J-W. Müller, 'On Conceptual History' in *Rethinking Modern…*, pp. 74-93.
[30] Lacapra, *Rethinking…*, p. 255.
[31] A. Walicki, 'On writing intellectual history: Leszek Kołakowski and the Warsaw school of the history of ideas', in *Leszek Kołakowski in Memoriam*, ed. Jacek Migasiński (Frankfurt am Main, 2012), pp. 12–13.
[32] L. Kołakowski, Z. Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy, czas niespokojny,* tom I (Kraków, 2007), p. 189.

island' – Britain being the first island, Oxford an island within Britain, All Souls College an island in Oxford, and Kołakowski himself as the lone isle in All Souls.[33] Even though for most of his life he was a thinker involved in contemporary political debates, the centre of his actual intellectual interests was always elsewhere. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, these interventions should be seen primarily as phases in the long-term development of Kołakowski's religious philosophy, rather than as his original political thought. Tellingly, in December 1991 when the Soviet Union was collapsing and the entire world order was re-established, Kołakowski's answer to *The Times Literary Supplement's* questionnaire about the book of the year was the third volume of Pascal's complete works.[34]

For these reasons, I will not attempt any exhaustive examination of Kołakowski's debates with his contemporaries. They will be investigated in more detail only when they have an effect on the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought. Other twentieth-century thinkers are discussed only peripherally – when their thought is crucial for Kołakowski's own philosophical development. The most important ones are Lucien Goldmann (analysed in Chapter II) and Mircea Eliade (Chapter III). For similar reasons, I also do not aspire to present Kołakowski as an equal 'interlocutor' of Spinoza, Pascal, or Marx. Such a project would require a scope, an in-depth knowledge and an understanding of these thinkers that I cannot claim to possess. I am not presenting a rigorous interpretation of these thinkers against Kołakowski's analyses; rather, I am examining how these historical investigations shaped his own views on religion.

Finally, for this thesis, the most important form of historical context is the issue of the relation between a text and the entire corpus of a writer. I argue in this dissertation that religious issues were at the heart of Kołakowski's interests from the very beginning, even when the primary topic of his texts were other thinkers or more theoretical problems in ethics. In this way, I am reading his consecutive texts in a teleological narrative, where the entire corpus of his writings from the 1950s-1970s reaches the climax in his original religious thought from the 1980s. One of the most serious weaknesses of the 'traditional' historiography of ideas, debunked by the

[33] 'On Exile, Philosophy & Tottering Insecurely on the Edge of an Unknown Abyss – dialogue between Leszek Kolakowski and Danny Postel', *Daedalus* (Summer 2005), p. 82.
[34] *The Times Literary Supplement*, no 4628 (13 December 1991), p. 13.

Cambridge School's contextualism, is what Quentin Skinner labelled the 'mythology of coherence',[35] i.e. that some thinkers presented a coherent set of beliefs throughout their whole intellectual career. My thesis argues that Leszek Kołakowski's ideas about religion *evolved* as a result of his gradual disillusionment with Marxism and other secular systems of thought on the one hand, and of the conclusions he had drawn from his own historical investigations into early modern and modern religious philosophy, on the other. Kołakowski's religious thought in the 1950s was fundamentally different from Kołakowski's views in the 1970s and even more different to his philosophy of religion in the 1990s. Lacapra argues that the unity of the corpus of a writer might be understood from three perspectives: continuity among texts, discontinuity among texts, or a dialectical synthesis of the ideas presented at various stages.[36] In this sense, Kołakowski's religious thought evolved in a dialectical process – his early understanding of religion, influenced by crude Marxist orthodoxy, was negated by his historical investigations and analysis of modern secular philosophies, which raised his religious thought to a higher level of original insight.

I would like to underline again that I am following neither the radical contextualism of the Cambridge School, nor the transcendental approach formulated in Lovejoy's traditional history of ideas. I will adopt Peter Gordon's qualified contextualism, which recognises the fundamental importance of historical context in investigating philosophical questions, but also acknowledges that contextualism is not exhaustive in explaining the meaning of ideas from the past.[37] Different forms of historical context were important in formulating consecutive phases in the development of Kołakowski's ideas, but in this thesis, the most fundamental emphasis is laid on the development of the ideas within the corpus of his writings. In this way, the thesis presents the evolution of Leszek Kołakowski's religious thought in a historical perspective, while careful to reflect on the transcendental dimension of the questions and arguments that constituted this thought.

[35] Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', *History and Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1969), p. 16.
[36] Lacapra, *Rethinking*..., p. 268.
[37] Gordon, 'Contextualism and Criticism…', pp. 50–2.

Historiography

Scholarly analysis of Leszek Kołakowski's thought is almost non-existent in English and still very limited in other languages, including Polish. Even though his political philosophy was the subject of academic study as early as in 1971,[38] his writings on religion remained unexamined for many years. Almost all can be found in the bibliography and I will refer to specific arguments from some of these works throughout the thesis. Three of them – the ones that attempt to present Kołakowski's religious philosophy in a more systematic way – deserve a brief discussion at this point.

The most pertinent point of reference remains Fr Jan Andrzej Kłoczowski OP's *More than a Myth*.[39] His main argument is that Kołakowski's gradual rapprochement with religion was not a result of his disillusionment with Marxism, but with the Enlightenment more broadly and its optimistic view of the capacities of human nature.[40] Kłoczowski also emphasises similarities between the Marxist and Christian versions of eschatologies[41] and tries to summarise Kołakowski's thought in the symbolic figures of a sceptic and a mystic, who form an alliance against a nihilist in order to save the absolute character of moral values.[42] Christian Heidrich presents a very similar approach in his monograph in German[43], although he places greater emphasis on Kołakowski's Marxist writings from the 1950s. The major weakness of these books lies in the fact that they were published in the mid-1990s, so fifteen years before Kołakowski's death, and therefore do not analyse his later works.

In *From a God of History to a Historical God*[44] Cezary Mordka analyses Kołakowski's religious thought from the perspective of analytical philosophy and presents it as an evolutionary process from an empirical to a transcendentalist positions.[45] However, he misunderstands Kołakowski's conclusions from the crucial works written from the late 1980s onwards. The fact that Kołakowski tried to prove that metaphysical speculations may not present us with definite answers about the

[38] G. Schwan, *Leszek Kołakowski. Eine politische Philosophie der Freiheit nach Marx* (Stuttgart, 1971).
[39] J.A. Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit. Leszka Kołakowskiego spory o religię* (Kraków, 1994).
[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11, 79, 115.
[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 75.
[42] *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 236–7, 324–30.
[43] C. Heidrich, *Leszek Kołakowski: Zwischen Skepsis und Mystik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995).
[44] C. Mordka, *Od Boga historii do historycznego Boga. Wprowadzenie do filozofii Leszka Kołakowskiego* (Lublin, 1997).
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

nature of the Absolute does not mean that Kołakowski 'chose the concept of a God as a Person', as Mordka suggests.[46] In part, such conclusions may be explained by the fact that Mordka's monograph comes from the mid-1990s, thereby preceding Kołakowski's late works, where he was much more explicit about his views on the relation between concepts of 'God – the Absolute' and 'God – the Person'.

Jan Tokarski's *The Presence of Evil*,[47] published after Kołakowski's death, could have included all the texts. The book, however, has a much more popular character and fails to examine unpublished archival writing. In addition, it suffers from a number of factual mistakes. Tokarski argues that the main theme of Kołakowski's thought was the irremovable presence of evil in human experience and his intellectual engagements with Marxism and Christianity were ways of taming evil in the world. In this interpretation, it is the evil that is the constitutive element of a meaningful structure for human life and an unconditional characteristic of human nature.[48] The problem of evil was very important for Kołakowski and will be analysed in Chapter IV, but it seems that Tokarski misrepresents his religious thought by placing this issue at the very centre of Kołakowski's entire philosophy. Evil is a part of the problem of the Absolute, not the other way round.

Considering the scarcity of literature on the topic, this thesis hopes to fill an important gap in the existing scholarship by presenting Kołakowski's religious thought in a systematic and comprehensive way – taking into account all the available sources, both published and unpublished.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter I analyses the philosopher's earliest works up to the year 1955. The biographical dimension plays an important role in this phase: Kołakowski, born into a family of leftist activists, was not baptised and was raised in a secular environment. After the Second World War left him a well-read teenage orphan, he eagerly engaged into establishing a new Marxist regime in Poland. Nevertheless, his university professors were pre-war analytical philosophers. Such education gave him intellectual rigor and offered a much broader perspective than that of Marxism-Leninism alone.

[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 157, 185.
[47] J. Tokarski, *Obecność zła. O filozofii Leszka Kołakowskiego* (Kraków, 2016).
[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 323, 325.

Most of the texts from this period are short essays and articles presenting Christianity as another form of human alienation and the Catholic Church as a mere tool of imperialism. Kołakowski's own intellectual interests begin to clarify – he is primarily a historian of the seventeenth century, a period he sees as crucial in the secularisation of philosophical thinking. The most important work analysed in this chapter is Kołakowski's doctoral dissertation on Spinoza (1953).

Chapter II focuses on the crucial 'transitional' phase between 1955 and 1965, which resulted in a major breakthrough in Kołakowski's thinking on religion. It starts with 'revisionist' essays from the latter half of the 1950s, when he attempted to find a new formula for Marxism that was not a mere doctrine, but rather a 'moral force' dealing with everyday problems. Historical writings from this period, especially on early modern religious thinkers, such as Erasmus and Pascal, contributed to the breakthrough in his original philosophy. Kołakowski focused on individuals who looked for a purified, authentic version of Christianity, and their conflicts with a corrupt institution of the Church. His crowning achievement as an intellectual historian was *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* (1965), in which he studies seventeenth-century non-denominational Protestant groups and Catholic mystics. Importantly, it was here that he identified for the first time two contradictory visions of God in Christianity: Jesus as the teacher of morality from the Sermon on the Mount, a person who establishes close relationships with people; and Christ – the Absolute, the ultimate source of truth and moral rules.

Chapter III analyses Kołakowski's early attempts to present his own original philosophy of religion in *The Presence of the Myth* (1966). These philosophical conclusions are deeply influenced by his historical investigations from the previous decade. The most important part of the chapter, however, is the analysis of what I call Kołakowski's 'disenchantment trilogy' – two short books on positivism (1966), Husserlian phenomenology (1975), and three volumes of *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976–78). Although these all-embracing eschatologies attempt to find a secular Absolute, in Kołakowski's analysis, they all fail in this endeavour.

Chapter IV analyses Kołakowski's mature philosophy of religion – which was developed from the late 1970s onwards and presented mainly in *Religion: If there is no God* (1982) and *Metaphysical Horror* (1988) – and his historical study of Jansenism and Pascal (*God Owes Us Nothing*, 1995). In these books, he returns to the fundamental tension between God – the Person, on the one hand, and God – the

Absolute, on the other. For him, Jesus Christ was more of an ethical role model, a 'godly man', than the Absolute incarnated. 'Kołakowski's God' is a being closer to a Neoplatonic Absolute, which overcomes the contingency of people's lives and makes them meaningful. Notably, this is not a God recognisable in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The apparent Christian synthesis between the concepts of a loving Person and an eternal Absolute was irreconcilable for Kołakowski. This is the basis for my argument that the mature Kołakowski can be called a *religious* thinker, but not a *Christian* thinker.

Chapter V has a more comparative character with a presentation of Karl Jaspers (as a philosopher who resembled Kołakowski's mature religious thought most closely) and Alasdair MacIntyre (a parallel transformation from a Marxist into a Christian ethicist). This places Kołakowski in a broader context of the twentieth-century intellectual history.

Finally, the conclusion summarises the arguments of the previous chapters and make explicit formulations about the final phase of Leszek Kołakowski's religious thought.

Chapter I: Living Flowers

> Criticism [of religion] has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains not so that man may bear chains without any imagination or comfort, but that he may throw away the chains and pluck living flowers.[49]
>
> Karl Marx

Kołakowski's early life and first intellectual influences

Leszek Kołakowski came from a rather extraordinary background. He was born in 1927 in a small Polish town of Radom, into the family of leftist intellectual and housing cooperative reformer Jerzy Kołakowski (1894–1943). Significantly, and somewhat unusually, he was not baptised as an infant, and remained a non-confessional person for the rest of his life. His mother died of cancer at the age of twenty-nine, when Leszek was just three years old. He was raised in a milieu of secular, yet patriotic socialists, actively engaged in the life of their communities, first in Radom, and then in a larger industrial city, Łódź. Secular socialism was a particularly important stream in Poland of the 1930s – a country with a nationalistic authoritarian government and a predominant cultural position for the Catholic Church. The influence of Kołakowski's father and his colleagues, intellectuals eagerly committed to the cause of building a modern, secular Poland, based on the ideas of social justice and equality, could be considered one of the first formative experiences in Kołakowski's life. [50]

After the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, most of the Polish civilian population not only went through the dangers and pauperisation characteristic of all wartime experiences; they also experienced rigorous and systematic terror on an unprecedented scale organised by the Nazi occupiers. This applies especially to those actively involved in underground resistance groups, as was the case with Kołakowski's father, who was eventually killed by the Gestapo in 1943. [51] Kołakowski spent some part of the war in Warsaw, where he had contacts with

[49] K. Marx, 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction', in *Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan, 2nd edition (Oxford, 2000), p. 72; This sentence was one of Leszek Kołakowski's favourite quotations from Marx - interview with Krzysztof Pomian, 22 February 2016.
[50] For more biographical information from the period covered in this chapter, see: Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…* tom I, pp. 5–141; W. Chudoba, *Leszek Kołakowski. Kronika życia i dzieła* (Warszawa, 2014), pp. 11–114.
[51] Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 27.

clandestine Communist organisations and even read Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* in a public library. However, for most of the wartime (including the 1944 Uprising), he lived with distant family in a rural region near Radom, working for a short period in a local toy factory. A Communist guerrilla unit refused to admit him as a fighter, recognising that he was of poor health and that this experience could risk his potential future as a Communist intellectual. Consequently, he never actively participated in the fighting against the Germans.[52] Instead, he used this time for self-study in various private libraries, mostly learning languages and deepening his interests in the humanities. Notably, one of his tutors at the time was Tadeusz Kordyasz – a former priest and Catholic writer – who introduced the young Kołakowski to Latin and the basics of theology and philosophy of religion.[53]

The crucial breakthrough, however, came in 1945 with the defeat of Nazi Germany and the introduction of a new political system in Poland. After the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, the fate of Central Europe in the new global order had been determined, with Poland firmly in the USSR's sphere of influence. The horrendous atrocities of the Second World War, in which about six million Polish citizens (some three million of them Jewish) perished either in the conflict or the Holocaust, provoked a popular need for a fundamental re-establishment of the entire social and political order. This was particularly true for the younger generation, which came of age during wartime. Ryszard Herczyński, one of Kołakowski's closest friends, recalled the following after many years:

> For our wartime generation, the fascism that we had experienced was the personification of absurdity and cruelty, leaving no doubt that there is no price too high to pay in order to create a world where the creation of new fascisms would be impossible. (…) An effective counterbalance, as we thought (and as many Western European intellectuals thought), could only be an ideology similarly simple and popular, but with completely reversed theses.[54]

Even though slightly older than Kołakowski and Herczyński, the famous literary critic Jan Kott (1914–2001) emphasised the sense of certitude and confidence that came from accepting Marxism as one's ideology and its assurance that one is 'on the right

[52] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…* tom I, pp. 57; 77-78.
[53] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…* tom I, pp. 48–50; Chudoba, *Kronika…*, pp. 29–30.
[54] R. Herczyński, 'Notatki o inteligencji', in *Obecność. Leszkowki Kołakowskiemu w 60. rocznicę urodzin* (Londyn, 1987), pp. 225–226; all translations from foreign languages are mine, unless stated otherwise.

side of history': 'Marxism taught me the laws of history, it allowed me to have trust in it.'[55] With its promise of a just society, based on equality and brotherhood among people, Marxism seemed an effective counterbalance craved by that generation. Yet, this longing for a new, encompassing philosophical system that would make sense of the unprecedented horror, and provide the hope of a better future, was prevalent not only among the youth, but also among many writers, thinkers, and activists of older generations.

The issue of intellectuals' involvement in the Communist movement in the first decade following the Second World War, both in the Soviet-controlled Central-Eastern Europe and in the Western part of the continent, has been the subject of many historical studies and contemporary accounts.[56] The specific Polish case, or broadly speaking, the case of Central European intellectuals who found themselves under the Soviet regime and decided to rally behind the new system, was most famously analysed by Czesław Miłosz in the *Captive Mind*. Before moving to an in-depth analysis of four well-known Polish writers who eagerly joined the new regime (although they appeared under pseudonyms, they were easily recognisable to the public), the author attempts to provide a more general and universal deliberation: why did educated people, well-trained in critical thinking, many of whom saw their creative liberty as the most precious value, become so easily deluded by the regime that established dictatorship and subjugated the individual.

An 'alienated' intellectual, who feels more at home with books than people, actually craves direct contact with other people, wants to be a part of a greater community, 'to belong to the masses is his great longing'.[57] Miłosz explicitly calls Communism (or simply 'diamat' for dialectical materialism) the 'New Faith', and compares its spread to the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire.[58] What made this possible was the overnight transformation of life, through the atrocities of war and the terror of occupation, into an everyday world where moral values are suspended, and one's understanding of 'normal' is completely distorted. The only alternative to the 'diamat' – American capitalism, with its focus on consumerism and very pragmatic

[55] Bikont, Szczęsna, *Lawina i kamienie…*, p. 45.
[56] See for example: R. Aron, *L'Opium des intellectuels* (Paris, 1955); Judt, *Past Imperfect…* ; Shore, *Caviar and Ashes….*
[57] C. Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. J. Zielonko (London, 1953), p. 8.
[58] *Ibid.,* p. XI.

approach to life – seemed superficial and unattractive.[59] At the same time, Miłosz argues that such honest commitment might only be temporary, and that at some point, an intellectual would have to cheat themselves and others into believing they still professed the 'New Faith'. The author introduces the concept of *ketman*, which derives from the Islamist tradition and refers to people who choose to remain silent about their true convictions for the sake of their safety, pretending to follow the popular view, even if they are deeply convinced of its erroneous character. At some point though, even ketman would not suffice. Anticipating the intellectual trajectory of many fellow travellers, Miłosz warns that if 'these obstacles were suddenly to be removed, he [an intellectual – HC] would find himself in a void which might perhaps prove much more painful'.[60]

Nevertheless, this was still not the case for the eighteen-year old Kołakowski, who joined the Polish Workers' Party (Polish: Polska Partia Robotnicza [PPR]) in late 1945[61] and zealously supported the new regime. In much later interviews, he explained his engagement at the time as seeing Communism as 'the conqueror of Nazism, a myth of a Better World'.[62] Marxism was tempting not only by virtue of its anthropocentric philosophy, but also because many Poles saw it at the time as a continuation of a more progressive and enlightened culture. It could be something against the narrow-minded bigotry and chauvinism of the traditionalistic right.[63] In other words, young Kołakowski saw Communism as a platform where he could realise the heritage left by his father and his friends.

Kołakowski enrolled at the University of Łódź in central Poland in autumn 1945. The University was established only earlier that year, as one of the first institutions of higher education after the war. As some of the traditional academic centres (e.g. Wilno, Lwów) were no longer in Poland but in the USSR, and Warsaw was completely demolished after the 1944 Uprising, Łódź, which was relatively untouched by the wartime destruction, became one of the centres of a restored Polish cultural life. Kołakowski joined a Communist youth organisation 'Życie' (*Life*),

[59] *Ibid.,* pp. 26–29, 33, 42.
[60] *Ibid.,* pp. 57–90, 80.
[61] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…,* tom I, p. 77.
[62] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[63] Leszek Kołakowski, *Wśród znajomych*, ed. Z. Mentzel (Kraków, 2004), pp. 98–99.

envisaged in the spirit of Soviet student societies.[64] In the wake of the war, members of the association were true idealists, often with significant military record, interested in building the Brave New World, rather than career-driven opportunists.[65] They were not interested in the national, 'patriotic' aspect of the Party's programme, but truly committed to internationalist Marxist principles, with sectarian mentality and mistrust for the less-enthusiastic or non-engaged colleagues.[66] Kołakowski gave speeches on modern Catholic doctrine to 'Życie' members as part of the organisation's antireligious campaigns.[67]

Copying the Soviet models in social institutions and 'ideologization of everyday life' was characteristic of Poland in the late 1940s and early 1950s.[68] The generation from the 1920s (Kołakowski was born in 1927) was often particularly committed to the establishment of a new regime. They were old enough to have experienced the war consciously and often actively participated in its atrocities, but too young to have had an experience of a society based on different principles. They came of age during the horror and the 'bug of the ideology', which promised a much better world, bit much stronger in their case.[69] To some extent, as Hanna Świda Ziemba argues, it was a 'lost generation', highly polarised between fully committed enthusiasts of the new order, on the one hand, and passive majority, who did not have a chance to start their adult life in ordinary circumstances, on the other.[70]

Years later, Kołakowski tended to diminish the importance of his youthful engagement with Marxism and tried to emphasise the importance of his formal university studies for his later intellectual development. As he recalled in an interview with Zbigniew Mentzel: 'Our minds were not really occupied with Marxism, but rather with a rationalistic doctrine, taught by our positivist professors.'[71]

University of Łódź's Faculty of Philosophy was dominated by the philosophers of the so-called Lvov–Warsaw School,[72] a genuine Polish philosophical school in the analytic tradition, similar in its views and methods to the Vienna Circle

[64] A. Leśniewski, *Łódzka Organizacja Akademickiego Związku Walki Młodych „Życie" 1945–1948* (Łódź, 1963), p. 118.
[65] *Ibid.,* p. 49.
[66] *Ibid.,* p. 131.
[67] *Ibid.,* pp. 147-8.
[68] H. Świda Ziemba, *Stalinizm i społeczeństwo polskie* (Warszawa, 1991), p. 3.
[69] *Ibid.,* p. 61.
[70] *Ibid.,* pp. 60-61.
[71] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…*, tom I, p. 93.
[72] The English name 'Lvov-Warsaw School' is more commonly used in modern historiography than 'Lwów-Warszawa'.

of neopositivists. Tadeusz Kotarbiński (1886–1981), one of the most important representatives of the school, and a 'leading freethinker of the interwar Poland'[73] was the rector (the academic principal) at the University of Łódź, and Kołakowski began working as his assistant in 1947.[74] It is crucial at this stage to look more closely at the philosophical views of that intellectual tradition, which had a fundamental formative influence on Kołakowski during his first serious encounters with philosophy.

The Lvov–Warsaw School of Philosophy could be traced back to 1895, when Kazimierz Twardowski (1866–1938) was elected the chair in philosophy at the University of Lvov and began to popularise his ideas among students.[75] After the First World War, many of his students moved to the University of Warsaw, and developed their views, focusing primarily on logic. Twardowski held a purely scientific view of philosophy, arguing that there is a set of metaphysical problems (mainly concerned with God's existence), which cannot be settled philosophically, and therefore should not be a matter of concern for philosophers at all.[76] Nonetheless, this is not the case with most intellectual issues. If we follow clear, strict rules of logical analysis and rational thinking, achieving an *absolute truth* on a given question is possible. Twardowski was explicit that relative truths do not exist.[77] These rules apply to ethics as well, seen by the Lvov–Warsaw School as a science. The correct moral choices can be made after an in-depth logical analysis of a given situation. Later, Tatarkiewicz and Czeżowski argued that if people can distinguish between different moral choices, and argue rationally to choose one, and not the other, they should realise in practice the rational path of ethical argumentation. It also means that *life has a meaning*, and that this meaning is intellectually comprehensible.[78] The Lvov–Warsaw School's strong emphasis on the question of absolute truth, and their strict rational way of attaining it, was one of the most fundamental lessons Kołakowski learnt as a student.[79]

The most influential students of Twardowski were the aforementioned Tadeusz Kotarbiński and Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz (1890–1963). Ajdukiewicz was more interested in the philosophy of science, and Kołakowski's critique of his

[73] Interview with Bronisław Baczko, 17 December 2015.
[74] Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 61.
[75] J. Woleński, *Filozoficzna Szkoła Lwowsko-Warszawska* (Warszawa, 1985), p. 10.
[76] *Ibid.,* p. 39.
[77] *Ibid.,* pp. 44–46.
[78] *Ibid.,* p. 291.
[79] Interview with Krzysztof Pomian, 22 February 2016.

philosophical views (the so-called 'radical conventionalism') is discussed below (pp. 34–35). Kotarbiński developed his original philosophical system, which was called 'reism' (from Latin *res* – a thing). It was a radical form of materialism, in complete contradiction to any idealistic views. According to Kotarbiński, only 'things' really exist and any object is a thing. Although it is naturally different to Marxist materialism, which emphasises the development of materialism through a dialectical process embedded in history, Kotarbiński's reism should still be regarded as an important contribution to the long historical tradition of philosophical nominalism.[80] As there are no metaphysical universals, people do not have any undisputed rules of behaviour in a given situation – Kotarbiński's ethics is a situational ethics, without any closed code of conduct, and independent from any external system of morality, including religion. Kotarbiński emphasised the moral autonomy of the individual, and the need to make moral choices anew in every situation. In Chapter II, we shall see how Kołakowski developed these ideas in his own quest for a rational ethics.

A university with a faculty composed almost exclusively of the pre-war universities and the traditional intelligentsia was a relative exception not only for Poland but for the entire Soviet bloc. Although they were decimated during the war, intellectual elites emerged as moral leaders of the entire society after 1945. This was due to their uncompromising stance and organisation of a widespread clandestine teaching system during the occupation. In sharp contrast not only to the Soviet Union, but also to other countries dominated by Communists after the end of the war the Polish academic elite was still a non-Marxist stronghold.[81] There was a need to educate and train a new intellectual elite that would follow Marxism, and spread its teachings among the higher echelons of society. In 1950, a special institution was founded with the aim of fulfilling this task – the Institute for the Education of Academic Cadres (Polish: Instytut Kształcenia Kadr Naukowych [IKKN]).[82] Its members had privileged access to foreign, 'bourgeois' press and books. The whole learning process at the institute was founded on the premise that all kinds of social action, including academic studies, have a political character.[83] Its purpose was to

[80] Woleński, *Szkoła Lwowsko-Warszawska,* pp. 210–225.
[81] See: J. Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).
[82] Renamed in 1954 as Institute of Social Sciences (Instytut Nauk Społecznych [INS]).
[83] B. Bińko, 'Skąd przychodzili, dokąd zmierzali… aspiranci pierwszego rocznika Instytutu Kształcenia Kadr Naukowych przy KC PZPR', in *Komunizm. Ideologia, System, Ludzie*, ed. T. Szarota (Warszawa, 2001), pp. 174–187.

serve as the 'ideological front' in the establishment of the new order in Poland. The main goal set before the IKKN, however, was not to conduct research on Marxist theory, but rather to re-interpret existing knowledge from the humanities and social sciences in the spirit of Marxism.[84]

But what do we actually mean by 'Marxism' in Poland in the first decade following the Second World War? It is important to remember that the ideological system imposed on the Central European countries after 1945 did not follow the original thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels exactly; it was a Russian-Bolshevik interpretation thereof. When Kołakowski graduated from Łódź, he joined the IKKN for his *aspirantura* (the equivalent of a doctoral programme). At the time, the main textbook of Marxist thought was prepared by Adam Schaff (1913–2006), a Moscow-educated Polish philosopher, Director of the IKKN, and the leading ideologue of the regime in its first decade.

Schaff argued that as a philosophical system of Marx and Engels, Marxism (a term used interchangeably with 'dialectical materialism' in his work) had been 'developed and deepened' by Lenin and Stalin,[85] and wrote that 'today, when we talk about Marxism, we are in fact talking about *Marxism–Leninism*'. [86] In his interpretation, the appearance of dialectical materialism was the most important breakthrough in the history of philosophy,[87] and served as the 'ideological tool of a revolutionary transformation of reality'.[88] Philosophy, in the Marxist perspective, is an all-embracing understanding of the world, a 'science of the most universal laws of progress for reality as a whole: nature, society, and thought'.[89] In Schaff's exposition of Marxism, the history of philosophy must be seen as a struggle between idealistic and materialistic ideas, with materialism serving as the ideology of social progress, and idealism as a tool of backwardness.[90] Friedrich Engels first presented this idea in his 1886 essay *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. Materialism and idealism had different forms in different historical eras, therefore, all

[84] B. Bińko, 'Instytut Kształcenia Kadr Naukowych przy KC PZPR– narzędzie ofensywy ideologicznej w nauce i szkolnictwie wyższym', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, t. XL, 2 (1996), pp. 200–203.
[85] A. Schaff, *Wstęp do teorii marksizmu. Zarys materializmu dialektycznego i historycznego*, 5th edition, (Warszawa, 1950), p. 1.
[86] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[87] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
[88] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[90] *Ibid.*, pp. 30; 13.

truths are relative historically and determined by conditions of a specific period.[91] For this reason, 'progressiveness' is also historically relative.[92] Following Marx's concept of base and superstructure, the economic base of society is naturally the foundation of all intellectual concepts, and specific philosophical systems are only ideological expressions of economic interests of the particular social classes in a given historical period.[93] Schaff argues that the essence of Marxism lies in overcoming capitalism through the ultimate triumph of the proletariat – the working class,[94] and the final abolition of class struggle in a Communist society.[95] Dialectical materialism (and its application in the interpretation of history – historical materialism) is a *science*, and as such, its predictions about the future development of society are assured, because they are proven with the scientific method. [96] Like other countries in the newly established socialist camp, Poland was in the process of transition between capitalism and communism, and this was 'the period when masses are being educated in the new spirit'.[97]

If the academic cadre of the IKKN was the ideological stronghold of the Communist regime, then educating the masses and fighting the ideological enemy were their main tasks. And, as Adam Schaff recognised himself, of all bourgeois philosophies, Catholic philosophy was the most dangerous enemy.[98] It is important to remember that such a statement would not have been made by a Marxist ideologue in any other country of the Soviet bloc. Catholic Church played a particularly important role in the formation of the modern Polish national identity. During the period of partition (1795–1918), when Poles lived without an independent state under the rule of Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary, the Church became one of the key vessels for forming a modern sense of national identity and preserving a distinct national culture. The figure of a 'Catholic Pole' was contrasted with a 'Protestant German' and an 'Orthodox Russian'. To this effect, Catholicism became a much more fundamental part of the national identity than is the case with most European countries. For these reasons, fighting Catholic philosophy was a crucial task if Marxism was to win Polish

[91] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[92] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
[93] *Ibid.*, pp. 182; 183.
[94] *Ibid.*, p. 227.
[95] *Ibid.*, pp. 311–4.
[96] *Ibid.*, pp. 194–5.
[97] *Ibid.*, p. 266.
[98] A. Schaff, 'Dziesięć lat walki o zwycięstwo filozofii marksistowskiej w Polsce Ludowej', *Myśl Filozoficzna* 3(13), 1954, pp. 7–8.

hearts and minds. Jakub Berman, who was in charge of both security apparatus and cultural policy during the Stalinist period in Poland, wrote in an official note from 1947:

> The Church is a great obstacle to us because in it are concentrated the philosophical bases of ideological reaction, which it ceaselessly relays to the masses. In the popular consciousness – above all amongst the humanist intelligentsia – it is the bulwark of Polish traditions and culture, the most complete expression of "Polishness". This traditional understanding of patriotism is the greatest strength of the Church, even stronger and more widespread than the magic of ritual. The Church is a natural source of opposition, both ideological and philosophical.[99]

Antireligious policies were implemented in all areas of social life. When one of the students in a local school prepared a bulletin board with a headline 'Christmas is coming', the headmaster accused her class teacher of 'not sufficient vigilance, when fideism is smuggled to the youth's consciousness.'[100]

Therefore, fighting religion was absolutely crucial for the new regime and the young Kołakowski was one of the most important Marxist soldiers delegated to this section of the ideological battlefront. He was among the first students of IKKN, and his exceptional talent was recognised from the very beginning. A 1949 note from the Cadres' Office reads as follows:

> [Kołakowski] is outstandingly talented, with a very receptive and creative mind, and great academic potential. During his stay in Łódź he remained under the strong influence of Prof. Kotarbiński, which led to some ideological deviations. However, thanks to effective self-criticism, a deep emotional commitment to the movement, and a disciplined organizational attitude (…) he can overcome his mistakes. (…) It seems that, in any kind of job, but especially in academic tasks, he could bring many benefits to the Party.[101]

Clearly, despite his young age, and some 'ideological deviations', his supervisors saw him as one of the most promising ideologues of Marxism. But before we proceed with analysing Kołakowski's texts from the period, one more issue needs to be addressed –

[99] K. Kersten, 'The Terror, 1949-1954' in *Stalinism in Poland, 1944-1956*, ed. A. Kemp-Welch (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 84.
[100] Świda Ziemba, *Stalinizm…*, p. 14.
[101] AAN ANS 35/31, p. 25.

what kind of arguments were actually used in the Marxist–Leninist doctrine to fight religion?

In Karl Marx's work, religion receives little attention. To a great extent, his views on religion are, in fact, a repetition of ideas formulated by Ludwig Feuerbach,[102] who famously criticised religion in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), and presented God as a mere projection of humankind's fantasies about itself. For Marx, however, the issue of religion must be addressed in social rather than naturalistic terms. What is important for Marx, is not whether God exists or not, but which specific social conditions made it possible that such a concept of God emerged in a particular historical period. Fundamentally, religion is a secondary problem deriving from the contradictions inherent in the economic base; it is just a part of the superstructure.[103] Following this argumentation, any transcendent reality does not exist at all.[104] The *Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach* proclaimed the following:

> All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.[105]

Nonetheless, there is one famous text from the early period of Karl Marx's career, where he writes explicitly about religion – *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction* from 1844. Leszek Kołakowski prepared the first Polish translation of this text in 1949.[106] A longer excerpt from this article is worth quoting, as it presents the Marxist approach to religion in a nutshell:

> The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-awareness of man, who either has not yet attained to himself or has already lost himself again. (…) It is the *imaginary realization* of the human essence, because the *human essence* possesses no true reality. Thus, the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle *against the world*, whose spiritual *aroma* is religion.

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[102] D. McLellan, *Marxism and Religion. A Description and Assessment of the Marxist Critique of Christianity* (London, 1987)*,* p. 3.
[103] P. Thompson, 'Marxism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, eds. S. Bullivant, M. Ruse (Oxford, 2013), p. 293.
[104] D. Turner, 'Religion: Illusions and liberation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx,* ed. T. Carver (Cambridge 1991, online 2006), p. 322.
[105] Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in *Selected Writings*, p. 173.
[106] K. Marks, F. Engels, *Wybrane pisma filozoficzne 1844–1846* (Warszawa, 1949), pp. 13–32.

> *Religious* suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.
>
> The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness.[107]

We can clearly see that for Marx religion is first and foremost, a moral agency, the voice of the unheard, a substitute for dealing with the injustices of the world.[108] However, in his interpretation, this is only an illusion, a false answer to real problems, and these problems need to be addressed in a completely different – socio-economic, not spiritual – way.

Yet, as we remember from Schaff's textbook, if we talk about Marxism in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, 'we are in fact talking about *Marxism–Leninism*'[109]. Lenin was less concerned with intellectually sophisticated deliberations on the nature of real happiness, and more troubled with the practicalities of real politics. With faith playing a significant social and political role, his writings fundamentally depict religion as an ideological tool of bourgeois oppression. In Lenin's view, religion and institutional churches are supposed to draw people's attention away from their lives here and now on Earth in order to prevent them from rebelling against oppression and exploitation, and make them focus on an illusionary happiness in heaven. This is important to emphasise, for such view was not explicitly put forward in Marx's work, but played a crucial role in the Marxist critique of historical and contemporary philosophy present in Kołakowski's texts. Lenin saw religion as follows:

> (…) one of the forms of spiritual oppression (…) Those who toil and live in want all their lives, are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward.[110]

For this reason, he believed it is absolutely crucial that Communists fight with religion as an ideological superstition, and as an instrument of social oppression: 'We

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[107] Marx, 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: *Introduction'*, in *Selected Writings*, pp. 71–2.
[108] J. Raines, 'Introduction', in *Marx on Religion,* ed. J. Raines (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 5–8.
[109] Schaff, *Wstęp do teorii marksizmu*, p. 27.
[110] V.I. Lenin, *On Religion* (Moscow, 1969), no translator given, p. 7.

must combat religion – that is the ABC of all naturalism, and consequently of Marxism.'[111]

A Marxist critic of contemporary thought

The young Kołakowski used his intellectual potential to attack contemporary bourgeois thought with a view to winning the hearts and minds of people for the new system. In his early critiques of contemporary thinkers, the reader is exposed for the first time to his consistently logical, substantive, yet ruthless and often even mean style of polemic. We could go as far as to suggest that much of his literary style comes from his extensive early reading of Marx and Engels, especially works such as *The Holy Family* or *Anti-Dühring*. Ironically, Kołakowski used the same kind of superb skills to criticise Marxist writers in the 1970s (Chapter III, pp. 153–54).

In 1951, Adam Schaff identified the Lvov–Warsaw School – the most intellectually sophisticated domestic non-Marxist school of thought – as the major enemy.[112] Various students from the IKKN were supposed to concentrate on the critique of different Lvov–Warsaw philosophers. Kołakowski's 'assignment' was Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz and his idea of radical conventionalism.[113] Ajdukiewicz argues that our perception of reality is based purely on the conventions we use to describe reality and that furthermore, these conventions are contingent upon the linguistic conventions used to describe them in return. To a great extent, this approach is similar to the philosophy of Wittgenstein, and in particular to his ideas about closed language systems and the limits of the language being the limits of our world.[114] Kołakowski criticised Ajdukiewicz and his theories as early as 1950.[115] In his master's thesis, Kołakowski, who was twenty-three at the time, focuses on the argument that radical conventionalism, with its cognitive relativism, rejects the notion of scientific objectivity, and of objective truth in general[116] – and as Kołakowski

[111] *Ibid.*, p. 21; original emphasis.
[112] R. Jadczak, 'Z dziejów spotkania szkoły lwowsko-warszawskiej z marksizmem', *Edukacja Filozoficzna* 11(1991), pp. 102–3.
[113] L. Kołakowski, 'Filozofia nieinterwencji. Głos w dyskusji nad radykalnym konwencjonalizmem', *Myśl Filozoficzna* 2/1953, pp. 335–373; other articles in the series included: A. Schaff, 'Poglądy filozoficzne Kazimierza Ajdukiewicza', *Myśl Filozoficzna* 1/1952; B. Baczko, 'O poglądach filozoficznych i społeczno-politycznych T. Kotarbińskiego', *Myśl Filozoficzna* 1/1952; H. Holland, 'Legenda o Kazimierzu Twardowskim', *Myśl Filozoficzna* 3/1952.
[114] Woleński, *Szkoła Lwowsko-Warszawska,* pp. 193–8.
[115] AUŁ 284/H, L. Kołakowski, *Naczelne dążności konwencjonalizmu w filozofii* (Łódź, 1950).
[116] *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

believed at the time, Marxism was a science of the most universal laws of reality as a whole. Kołakowski's main weapon in this critique of the Lvov–Warsaw School was the identification of Marxism with science – i.e. a truthful, materialistic and inevitable description of reality – as opposed to idealistic doctrines. In his reasoning, what underpins idealism is religion, insofar as negating the objectivity of science (Marxism) assists ecclesiastical obscurantism.[117] He believed that such an approach serves only the bourgeoisie and its interests, as 'the more the bourgeoisie falls into decline, the more science becomes its enemy'.[118] The main attack on Ajdukiewicz was intended to reach a broader audience in an article published in the leading intellectual journal *Myśl Filozoficzna*. Kołakowski's argument is, however, very simplistic, presenting an idealistic interpretation of conventionalism and stressing that undermining scientific objectivity only serves to promote religious superstition. Kołakowski in fact states that 'the main task of this philosophy [conventionalism] is to make religion indifferent to scientific critique'.[119]

Nevertheless, neopositivist philosophy was not the main ideology representing religious thought. For Schaff and other Marxist ideologues, contemporary Catholicism was the main foe, and most of Kołakowski's texts from the period analysed in this chapter were aimed at this target. In the late 1940s, he published few short essays criticising Catholic social thought as a road to fascism, and contrasting it with the real justice and equality of Communism.[120] Contemporary Catholic thought meant, in the first place, the twentieth-century version of Neo-Thomism, represented mainly by French thinkers such as Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) and Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), to name but a few. Inspired by the mediaeval philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, many secular and clerical thinkers tried to revive Catholicism so that it could face the challenges of the modern world. This intellectual ferment eventually led to the Second Vatican Council (1962–65; discussed in Chapter II, pp. 71–74). Kołakowski's critique of Catholic thought had two forms at the time. Firstly, he presented a series of papers and lectures at the IKKN, carefully analysing the concepts of Thomist thought and emphasising the historical continuity between its mediaeval

[117] *Ibid.*, pp. 116–9.
[118] ALK III.13228, L. Kołakowski, *Krytyka konwencjonalizmu. Materiały do minimum kandydackiego* (1952), p. 23.
[119] L. Kołakowski, 'Filozofia nieinterwencji…', p. 354.
[120] See for instance: L. Kołakowski, 'Recydywa obłędu, czyli o pewnych katolickich koncepcjach społecznych', *Po prostu* 3/1948, pp. 4–5; 'Księża mówią…', *Nowe Drogi* 5/1949, pp. 141–5.

and contemporary versions. This was his contribution to the 'ideological front' of Marxism: lecturing other students and academics on the perils posed by the Catholic enemy. Secondly, he wrote a few articles in the press, academically less sophisticated, using more colloquial and populist language, hoping to convince a broader audience that Catholicism was the greatest threat to the newly established freedom. Some of these texts were collected in Kołakowski's first published book, *Sketches on the Catholic Philosophy*.[121]

In a paper presented to the IKKN in December 1951, Kołakowski convinced his colleagues that the struggle against Thomist philosophy had 'been neglected so far'.[122] He labelled this neglect a grave mistake, as he believed the enemy to be neither as primitive nor as insignificant as the IKKN thought.[123] Kołakowski believed crude atheism to be in no way a sufficient solution. His presentation ended with a strong call for getting to know the enemy, so as to be able to present criticism from a professional, philosophical position:

> I think that our total indifference towards thomism, our light-heartedness and easy-going approach, the conviction that we can deal with thomism by simply saying that we do not believe in the bible, needs to be fundamentally revised. We should study thomist doctrine, discuss it, analyse it and attack it. Our slogan should be 'A return to Saint Thomas!' [original capitalisation – HC][124]

It should be noted that the critique of religion was predominantly from one of two sources: either from German Marxists, who were focused on the experiences of Lutheran Protestantism, or from Russian Marxists, who were struggling against Russian Orthodoxy. Few Marxist writers had yet considered the Thomist foundations of Catholicism. Even if other Marxist philosophers at the IKKN did not take Kołakowski's urge for an active engagement with Thomism seriously, Kołakowski himself lectured on Catholic philosophy on several occasions. All of these texts rest on two main arguments: firstly, that the Catholic Church is fundamentally a political, rather than spiritual organisation, and that it serves as an 'ideological tool' of the ruling classes (feudal or bourgeois, depending on the historical period) to keep the

[121] L. Kołakowski, *Szkice o filozofii katolickiej* (Warszawa, 1955).
[122] AAN ANS 97/114, L. Kołakowski, *Zagadnienie roli państwa w kształtowaniu świadomości socjalistycznej* (13–14 December 1951), p. 9.
[123] *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.
[124] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

oppressed masses under control; secondly, that the religious explanation of the world, based on the concept of the world's dependence on its Creator, is the main constraint upon the development of science. He argues that science is good, because it explains nature objectively, makes people's lives easier, and so forth. The latter also implies that human reason is incapable of complete perception of reality on its own, and requires some external (divine) support to understand the world. Kołakowski later presented very similar arguments in his analysis of the history of philosophy, which is outlined in the ensuing sections of this chapter (pp. 39–46).

In Kołakowski's understanding, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century revival of Thomism was merely a reaction to the emerging working class movement, the development of modern science and irrational currents within the Church.[125] He believed Evangelisation and the cultivation of people's faith to be not an end in itself, but a means to achieving political control by presenting the Church as a divine institution.[126] Kołakowski quickly moves between criticising capitalism and identifying it with fascism, quoting Mussolini's line about the need to implant an appropriate spirit into the people.[127] In this interpretation, the key point of religious philosophy is to prove human incompleteness, insufficiency and weakness.[128] For this reason, it shows the need for a hierarchical structure of the whole of creation, and of the earthly society.[129] The whole spiritual costume of religion and religious institution is just a fraud to delude the oppressed people. Kołakowski concluded one of his lectures as follows:

> Thomism's task is to organise masses politically in relation to the Church as a mystical body of Jesus Christ, only in order to organise them around the Church as the agent of imperialism, whose task is to hold up the ramshackle capitalist system.[130]

In his essays that aimed at a broader audience, he used the same kind of arguments conveyed in less sophisticated terms. A brief summary of his general argument in such texts reads as follows: the Church is merely a tool in the hands of bourgeoisie in

[125] AAN ANS 5/115, L. Kołakowski, *Krytyka neotomizmu. Materiały do minimum kandydackiego* (December 1952), pp. 3–4(155–6).
[126] *Ibid.*, p. 9(161).
[127] *Ibid.*, p. 19(171).
[128] AAN ANS 6/32, L. Kołakowski, *Krytyka neotomizmu* (lecture at the IKKN, 4 January 1954), p. 10.
[129] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[130] AAN ANS 6/32, L. Kołakowski, *Filozofia tomistyczna* (lecture at the IKKN, 11 January 1954), p. 22(50).

its fight against the proletariat;[131] the point of Catholic philosophy is to spread the conviction about the misery of human knowledge;[132] Catholicism is used in the propaganda against the Soviet Union;[133] it protects the 'sacred right of private property';[134] its purpose is to make the human being an alienated individual, deprived of any social, communal dimension.[135]

Towards the end of the period analysed in this chapter, Kołakowski prepared another rather interesting document, *Theses on the Atheistic Propaganda*, which he presented at the meeting of the Chair of History of Philosophy on 29 March 1955 (concurrent with his *Sketches on the Catholic Philosophy*). He derided his colleagues at the IKKN, identifying their actions up to that point as having constituted mere political propaganda rather than a serious critique of religion. In Kołakowski's opinion, their battle with religion – the Leninist ABC of Marxism – was based on a critique of the Vatican's policies, not on a substantive (*merytoryczny*) engagement with religious dogmas. Such approach could only be convincing to those already persuaded.[136] Kołakowski argues that books promoting atheism are simply too rude and primitive, and any ordinary behaviour in atheistic propaganda must be avoided at all costs.[137] One of the greatest perils lies in trying to reconcile Catholic thought with Marxist ideology, or, worse, in showing that Communism has some roots in the Christian tradition.[138] According to him, what is to be done, is to consistently approach people in individual discussions, point to the incompatibility of religion with modern science, debunk the alleged humanism of Catholic ethics, and publish popular works from the history of philosophy that would prove the falsity of religious dogmas.[139]

Nevertheless, neither Kołakowski nor his Marxist colleagues ever realised such a broad, academic, substantive propaganda of atheism. Soon after these theses were presented, crucial intellectual and political developments caused Kołakowski to move away from hard-line, orthodox Marxism, and his attitude towards religious

[131] Kołakowski, *Szkice…*, p. 10.
[132] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[133] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
[134] *Ibid.*, pp. 38–40.
[135] *Ibid.*, p. 171.
[136] AAN ANS 5/109, L. Kołakowski, *Tezy dyskusyjne do referatu na konferencję w sprawie propagandy ateistycznej* (29 March 1953), p. 116.
[137] *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 119.
[138] *Ibid.*, p. 118.
[139] *Ibid.*, pp. 117–121.

issues also changed. This will be investigated in Chapter II. However, during the early 1950s, the young Kołakowski did, to some extent, succeed in reaching a broader audience with a more substantive critique of religion – not as a radical journalist, but as a Marxist historian of philosophy and an academic lecturer.

A Marxist historian of philosophy

Fighting the enemy meant not only engaging in contemporary debates with Catholic thinkers. The main goal set before the young academic cadres at the IKKN was to re-interpret the existing state of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences from the Marxist perspective. In this section, Kołakowski's articles and lectures on history of philosophy will be analysed. According to the principles of dialectical materialism, the history of ideas must be seen in a framework of a struggle between materialism and idealism, as introduced by Engels in the essay on Feuerbach. In the introduction to his lectures on mediaeval philosophy from the academic year 1954/55, Kołakowski explained the role of Marxist historians explicitly:

> The Marxist historiography of philosophy (…) [must] show that theories treating all of European philosophy from the feudal period as one stream of orthodoxy are wrong. It must point to the germs of materialism and rationalism that were being born in this thought, to the processes that helped to liberate science from the pressure of theology and religion, to reveal progressive, anti-feudal and anti-ecclesiastical currents in the Mediaeval period (…).[140]

In this section, Kołakowski's early critique of religion will be reconstructed based on his works on the history of philosophy. Specific texts – whether devoted to a single thinker, or more comprehensive lectures – are almost always set within the template of materialism vs. idealism struggle, and Kołakowski's main concern throughout all of these writings is the role of religion, and thinkers' attitudes towards religious issues.

'Reinterpretation' often meant appropriating several past thinkers from the religious-idealist camp to the materialist cause. This was the topic of one of Kołakowski's first published texts: *Thomas More – Greatness in the Hands of Charlatans*.[141] Although Thomas More (1478–1535) died as a martyr for his Catholic

[140] L. Kołakowski, *Wykłady o filozofii średniowiecznej* (Warszawa, 1956), p. 6.
[141] L. Kołakowski, 'Tomasz Morus – wielkość w rękach szalbierzy', *Nowe Drogi* 4/1949.

faith, Kołakowski emphasises that society in *Utopia* was based on the abolition of private property. He ridicules the other side in the conflict for the philosophical heritage and presents them as swindlers with an illegitimate claim to More's thoughts as 'theirs': 'It is funny to observe clumsy attempts of Catholic writers to hide the embarrassing side of their martyr – his revolutionary social thought.' [142] To Kołakowski, as a Marxist historian of philosophy, the fact that More gave his own life to defend the principles of Catholicism is irrelevant: 'Religious slogans were a cover for all ideologies that mobilised the oppressed classes to fight papal-ducal despotism.'[143]

Thinkers from a different cultural circle were also understood according to the same template, and as a part of the story of emancipation from the influence of religion. Avicenna (c. 980–1037), a mediaeval Muslim interpreter of Aristotle and a practicing physician, fought in, as Kołakowski ironically puts it, the 'perennial (but perhaps not eternal) struggle between science and religious superstition', and 'helped philosophical thought to form an alliance with science, and to liberate itself from the oppression of religion'.[144] For Kołakowski, it does not matter that Avicenna believed in God; again, according to the principles of historical materialism, progress is historically relative. The point is that Avicenna cleared the way for materialism with his philosophy.[145] Furthermore, like the case of the Catholic Church in the European context, the Muslim thinker saw religion as serving fundamentally a political function, simply another set of tools to keep the ruled population under control.[146] Interestingly, Kołakowski contrasts Avicenna with St. Thomas Aquinas as an interpreter of Aristotle: Kołakowski suggests that while the Arab philosopher rightly focused on naturalistic and scientific aspects of the ancient Greek thinker, Aquinas used Aristotle to defend the hierarchical system of the feudal society.[147]

In cases where the thinker under consideration was a theologian, and it was difficult to focus on any non-religious aspect of his thought, the task of a Marxist historian was to present such a person as a critic of the institutional Church and the existing feudal social order. This was the case with Gregory Paul of Brzeziny (1525–

[142] *Ibid.*, p. 119.
[143] *Ibid.*, pp. 126–7.
[144] L. Kołakowski, 'Awicenna – lekarz dusz i ciał', *Myśl Filozoficzna* 3/1952, pp. 38–39.
[145] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
[146] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[147] L. Kołakowski, 'Awicenna jako filozof', in *Awicenna. Abu Ali Ibn Sina*, ed. A. Zajączkowski (Warszawa, 1953), pp. 163–6.

91), a sixteenth-century Socinian thinker who led a radical wing of the Polish Brethren, a Protestant order. According to Kołakowski, Gregory Paul was a leader of a radical people's left that fought a political battle against the elitist Roman Church.[148] As a theologian, Gregory Paul argued against the dogma of the immortality of soul with the aim of proving that all other dogmas are simply used by the Church to steal money from the deluded poor.[149] The Polish Brethren concentrated on the moral rather than redemptive aspect of Christ's mission, which for Kołakowski is an argument against the legitimacy of Church's earthly power.[150] Importantly, the article analysed in this paragraph was published in 1955, which is towards the end of the period covered by this chapter. By this time, Kołakowski had begun to make an additional, different kind of argument – that the rejection of ecclesiastical dogma means not only fighting against the Church as a political institution, but also taking a *moral stance*. He started to support the argument that we should not expect to be rewarded for our virtues, and the argument that the belief of immortality in paradise as a reward for our good deeds is simply immoral.

Apart from individual articles on specific thinkers, Kołakowski gave lectures on the history of philosophy at the re-opened University of Warsaw from May 1952.[151] The aforementioned lectures on the mediaeval period from the academic year 1954/55 were published as a book in 1956 and provide an interesting example of how Marxist interpreters analysed a longer period in the history of philosophy, along with intellectual developments within this period. Following orthodox Marxist principles, Kołakowski began each of the series of lectures (each of which correspond to chapters in the book) with a brief introduction to the social and economic context of the period. The ideological superstructure serves only as a derivative of the economic base. His narrative starts with an explicit statement that the entirety of mediaeval philosophy is based on religious premises and therefore represents a regression in comparison to ancient pagan times. To this effect, he sees Christianity simply as 'an organised form of intellectual barbarisation'.[152] Similarly, he believes the Church should be seen merely as an ideological institution of the ruling classes, and its primary function is to

[148] L. Kołakowski, 'Refleksje niefachowe nad Grzegorzem Pawłem i nieśmiertelnością duszy', *Twórczość* 9/1955, pp. 137–8.
[149] *Ibid.*, p. 146.
[150] *Ibid.*
[151] Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 92.
[152] Kołakowski, *Wykłady…*, pp. 8–10.

impose obedience upon people, presenting the existing social order as divinely ordained.[153] The first major Christian thinker to provide a sophisticated philosophical underpinning to this structure was St Augustine of Hippo (354–430). He proclaimed an unconditional dependence of the world on God, and, henceforth, on the earthly Church. In Augustine's doctrine, every human being is weak and powerless – from one's own initiative one can only do evil, and any good comes necessarily from God's grace.[154] The question of Augustine's views on grace is the subject of one of Kołakowski's last books and is discussed in detail in Chapter IV (pp. 185–90). However, in the early 1950s, Kołakowski still saw Augustinian morality as one of the major sources of human misery and injustice:

> To despise man, to despise oneself, to despise life and earthly aspirations of man, to despise earthly liberation (…) – this is the programme that Christian morality took after Augustine and keeps until this day, an inhuman morality of contempt, fear, humiliation and subjugation.[155]

Naturally, Kołakowski regards St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) as the other major villain in the history of mediaeval philosophy. Kołakowski notes in his lectures that Aquinas 'took up a papal commission' to reinterpret Aristotle in a Christian spirit, as the Church had difficulties fighting against the rightful, naturalistic interpretations of Aristotle proposed by Muslim thinkers Avicenna and Averroes.[156] Commenting on Aquinas' deliberations on the nature of angelic choirs, the structure of all creation, the hierarchy of species, and so forth, he concludes that the Aquinas was 'obsessed with hierarchy' and used his scholarship to legitimise the existing feudal order in his contemporary society.[157] Discussing Aquinas' famous 'five ways', or five proofs of God's existence, Kołakowski points out that each of these proofs is based on a single premise, very similar to the argument presented by Augustine – that the world itself is insufficient, that it needs some other point of reference for its own existence, thereby implying the world's total dependence upon God. Kołakowski's point is that the 'five

[153] *Ibid.*, pp. 12–14.
[154] *Ibid.*, pp. 27–31.
[155] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[156] *Ibid.*, pp. 81–2.
[157] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

ways' are actually concerned with nature, not with God[158] (compare with Chapter IV, p. 172).

Even though mediaeval thought was dominated by religion, Marxist historians were able to find some light at the end of the tunnel of those dark ages. This applies especially to thinkers who called for a rational inquiry into nature and natural phenomena, arguing for the autonomy of human reason from revelation. Many of those philosophers were associated with the high mediaeval current of 'nominalism'. In their dispute with 'realists', nominalists rejected the existence of 'universals', arguing that only specific things exist. It is easy to see that the 'materialism/idealism' template could be easily applied to the mediaeval conflict between nominalism and realism. Kołakowski argues that nominalists 'crushed many ecclesiastical issues as simply imaginary', and that they 'expressed materialist tendencies in the strongest way'.[159] Of all the nominalist thinkers, Peter Abelard (1079–1142) deserves special recognition for his brave struggles against the Church's official doctrine (represented by the sinister St. Bernard of Clairvaux), and for advocating independence of human reason from any religious restrictions.[160] Popular religious movements and some currents of mysticism provided another – more positive – aspect of mediaeval thought. Although these were profoundly religious phenomena, their existence challenged the ecclesiastical establishment and feudal order, emphasising a more personal, direct relation with God, devoid of mediation via the oppressive clergy.[161]

In his final conclusions on mediaeval philosophy, Kołakowski was quite unequivocal:

> The whole history of mediaeval philosophy provides considerable evidence that the roman church was hostile to culture and hostile to man, that for almost its entire existence it was an obstacle to rational progress, a nursery for bigotry and ignorance, for intellectual and moral barbarisation (…). All intellectual progress in the Middle Ages has been made against the church and against its fierce resistance. [original capitalisation – HC][162]

Kołakowski's lectures and papers presented at the IKKN, supposedly in front of the *crème de la crème* of Marxist ideologues, demonstrate an even more zealous

[158] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[159] *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 129.
[160] *Ibid.*, pp. 57–63.
[161] *Ibid.*, pp. 101–3.
[162] *Ibid.*, pp. 131–2.

engagement and politicised view of the past. He firmly argues that the Marxists should regain philosophical scholarship from the hands of the reactionary Neo-Scholastic Catholic thinkers.[163] For Kołakowski, modern-day Neo-Scholastics are the same enemy as the mediaeval Thomists, and re-emergence of Thomism in contemporary philosophy must be seen merely as a reaction to the threat posed by Marxism to the powers of obscurantism.[164] Faithful to the Marxist theory of base and superstructure, he even quotes Stalin extensively to explain feudal relations of production, and argues that contemporary Neo-Thomism is a tool of propaganda against the Soviet Union, fuelled by American dollars.[165]

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that Kołakowski's historical writings from that period do not necessarily have such a strong political and ideological flavour. Doctoral candidates at the IKKN had to prepare abridged versions of textbooks (*skrypty*) to be used by younger classes at the institute and the university. In 1953, Kołakowski wrote a 150 page summary of seventeenth-century Western philosophy,[166] which, with the exception of few quotations from Marxists classics and occasional reminders about the class character of philosophy, is perfectly readable and interesting even today, discussing both main, 'great' philosophers of the period, and many minor currents of early modern thought. Again, every chapter opens with a brief summary of the social and economic context of a particular country, but the language used is not as cumbersome as in other texts from the same period. Kołakowski started with the main thesis, that – as in the mediaeval period – almost all philosophical doctrines are concerned with religious issues: reformulating the relation between God and the human person, disputes between Catholicism and various Protestant churches, and, most importantly, the gradual emancipation of human cognition from the restraints of revelation.[167] When discussing the thought of René Descartes (1596–1650), Kołakowski stresses that his concept of *Cogito* was contrasted with the divine revelation professed by the Church. For this reason, the Church and scholastic

[163] AAN ANS 6/32, L. Kołakowski, *Walka materializmu z idealizmem w filozofii średniowiecznej* (lecture, 24 III 1954), p. 1(279).
[164] *Ibid.*, p. 29(307).
[165] AAN ANS 6/33, L. Kołakowski, *Rozwój postępowej myśli w okresie feudalizmu* (lecture from 1954), pp. 1(26), 6(31).
[166] AAN ANS 5/116, L. Kołakowski, *Filozofia zachodnio-europejska XVII w. (na kontynencie)*.
[167] *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5(270–71).

thinkers persecuted the French philosopher.[168] Analysis of Spinoza will be presented in more detail in the next section of this chapter, but at this point it is crucial to underline that Kołakowski situates all thinkers within a political and social context, which always has a double economic-religious character: class conflicts (rising capitalist bourgeois and declining feudal aristocracy) intersect with doctrinal disputes (Catholicism and various strands of Protestantism).[169] In his commentary on Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), Kołakowski refrains from irony or malice when describing the notion of occasionalism, which argues that God must be the ultimate cause of every single action in the world.[170] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) is criticised here for his reactionary thought and life – his system of monads is for Kołakowski simply another reflection of feudal social structure, and Leibniz's famous *Theodicy* (1710), which justifies the existence of evil in the world, has a very reactionary character. His career as a diplomat and servant of feudal princes does not evoke much sympathy from a Marxist historian either.[171]

Yet Kołakowski saw some religious authors in a more nuanced way. In *Seventeenth-Century West-European Philosophy*, he discusses extensively for the first time one of his favourite philosophical protagonists – Blaise Pascal, who will be analysed in more detail in Chapters II (pp. 83–85) and IV (pp. 184–98). One of the greatest apologists for the Christian faith, and at the same time, one of the greatest scientists of the early modern period, Pascal posed a serious challenge to Marxist historians. A crude critic of Catholic inconsistencies and hypocrisy, Kołakowski must have felt a great sympathy for Pascal's ruthless ridicule of Jesuits in the *Provincial Letters* (1656–7) and could have been easily charmed by the poetic arguments of the *Pensées* (1670). As early as 1953, Kołakowski states that Pascal is 'a very complex character, and requires a detailed historical and philosophical interpretation'.[172] He goes so far as to argue that *Pensées* were in fact 'a progress in atheistic thought (*sic*)' as they showed that proving ecclesiastical dogma on rational grounds is meaningless, and that one must resort to irrationalism in order to defend religion.[173] It is clear that Kołakowski admired Pascal as a thinker, but he was still reluctant to admit that openly in a textbook prepared in 1953.

[168] *Ibid.*, pp. 22–33(288–99).
[169] *Ibid.*, pp. 58–9(324–5).
[170] *Ibid.*, p. 100(366).
[171] *Ibid.*, pp. 142–149(408–415).
[172] *Ibid.*, p. 120(386).
[173] *Ibid.*, p. 123(389).

Other Marxists at the IKKN, however, did not greet *Seventeenth-Century West-European Philosophy* with too much enthusiasm. The text was discussed at a Chair of History of Philosophy meeting on 26 March 1953, and was criticised for 'significant ideological and methodological shortcomings'.[174] The perspective presented by the author was too objectivist, too historical, and did not sufficiently take the party's (*partyjny*) viewpoint into consideration.[175] Kołakowski did not satisfactorily emphasise the struggle between materialism and idealism, and, according to Bronisław Baczko, another outstanding student at the IKKN, 'suffers from religious obsession'.[176] The author had to express some self-criticism and accept that his textbook was not political and too historical, trying to defend himself by saying that he 'tried to avoid stating the obvious'.[177] A classified profile of Kołakowski, prepared by the party organs on 16 June 1953, describes him as a member deeply committed to the party, extraordinarily talented, but at the same time as a student:

> (…) with a strong ballast of bourgeois philosophy, especially of neopositivist philosophy (…) he experienced a serious inner conflict and was often criticised. (…) he was criticised mainly for objectivism in approaching intellectual questions, and not appreciating their political edge, inconsistency in realising the principle of party-affiliation (*partyjność*) of philosophy. (…) his ideological and political progress remains far behind his academic level.[178]

This points towards the conclusion that the orthodox templates of Marxist doctrine became too stiff for a mind as ambitious and talented as that of Kołakowski. However, before proceeding to the period when he openly stood against the official doctrine, we must first discuss his crowning achievement as a Marxist historian of philosophy.

[174] AAN ANS 5/107, pp. 85–6.
[175] *Ibid.*, p. 86.
[176] *Ibid.*
[177] *Ibid.,* p. 87.
[178] AAN ANS 97/114, p. 9.

Spinoza and His God – the first attempt

Kołakowski changed the topic of his candidate dissertation (doctorate) at the IKKN several times – initially it was supposed to deal with seventeenth-century Polish thought;[179] in early 1952 the topic was changed to 'The Reactionary Face of Thomist Philosophy';[180] eventually, in December 1953, Kołakowski defended his dissertation on 'Spinoza's Science on the Liberation of Man'.[181] In an interview with Zbigniew Mentzel, he recalled that it was Tadeusz Kotarbiński who suggested Spinoza to him as the topic of his doctorate. At the time, Kołakowski felt an intuitive interest in the Dutch philosopher:

> I had a feeling that this thinker, unknown at first, has some kind of weird mystery in him, something that is worth uncovering, and needs to be revealed. (…) Even if I didn't reveal the secret of that mind, I did touch it after all, and I have learnt a lot from that touch.[182]

The 1953 dissertation was not Kołakowski's last word on Spinoza: a significantly re-edited version of this text was published as a book in 1958 and will be discussed in Chapter II (pp. 74–79). In his doctoral dissertation, Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza (1632–77) is presented as the champion of rational, humanistic philosophy, a proto-materialist thinker whose main merit was to further 'disenchant' people's thinking about the world. Even the structure of the thesis revolves around this main argument. The bulk of the text is devoted to the presentation of Spinoza's epistemology and ontology; the relevant chapters are entitled 'Emancipation from Revelation' and 'Emancipation from God'. Kołakowski notes that Spinoza is often presented as an idealist and even a scholastic, but that this is a fundamentally false interpretation, a mere 'caricature', and that Spinoza's heritage, like that of many other past thinkers, needs to be 'won-over' for the materialist cause.[183]

It should be noted at this point that the topic of 'Spinoza's God' is one of the most ambiguous, complex, and challenging themes in the history of religious thought

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[179] Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 81.
[180] *Ibid.,* p. 89.
[181] *Ibid.,* p. 102.; Kołakowski's files in the Archiwum Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego state that the title of the dissertation was 'Spinoza's Science on the Liberation of Man' (*Nauka Spinozy o wyzwoleniu człowieka)* – AUW K1271, AUW IFZ-531-1; however, the only known copy of the dissertation, deposited in the Biblioteka Instytutu Filozofii, has the title 'Spinoza as a Historical Phenomenon of His Period' (*Spinoza jako zjawisko historyczne swojej epoki*) – BWFiS UW 17101/D3.
[182] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…*, tom I, p. 137.
[183] BWFiS UW 17101/D3, L. Kołakowski, *Spinoza jako zjawisko historyczne swojej epoki* (Warszawa, 1953), pp. 50–7.

in general.[184] It is not the ambition of this dissertation to analyse this question, but only to present Kołakowski's particular understanding of it at a particular moment of his intellectual development.

Kołakowski's dissertation starts with a scheme similar to his other historical works from the period. For the first fifty pages, the author opens with a rather long introduction on the socio-economic context of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. From the Marxist perspective, this is primarily a story of a rising capitalist bourgeoisie and the declining role of the traditional aristocracy. With its principles of tolerance, which were unique in Europe at the time, the Netherlands presented a truly heterogeneous society in terms of religion. Crucially, Kołakowski notes, religious dogma served the role of political axioms, and theological disputes intertwined with political struggles. Each social group searched for the ideological and religious platform that would best serve its interests. Furthermore, what derives from this in Kołakowski's interpretation, is the implication that any radical political doctrine was also religious heresy.[185] In all these disputes, we can naturally find the traditional Marxist template of the struggle between materialism and idealism.[186] Kołakowski repeats familiar arguments that the theological deliberations on the hierarchy of heavenly beings was supposed to legitimise rigid social hierarchy on earth, and that radical, mystical religious movements were, in fact, a voice of the oppressed peasantry.[187] In this interpretation, the rising bourgeois needed intellectual tools to fight the ideology of the old aristocracy and confirm its leading social and political position. For this reason, it had to fight the Calvinist version of Christianity, with its dogma of predestination and human powerlessness.[188] Following Kołakowski's argumentation, the new bourgeois was an active person, who shaped their own fate, and with the help of modern science could use nature for their own means. Spinoza was exactly the philosophical expression of these aspirations.[189]

Kołakowski argued that the foundation of Spinoza's philosophy was to develop 'such a cognition that could derive all knowledge from one, single, primary

[184] For a comprehensive introduction see: M. Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (Abingdon, 2008), esp. the second chapter.
[185] Kołakowski, *Spinoza jako zjawisko…,* pp. 13–16.
[186] *Ibid.,* pp. 21–4.
[187] *Ibid.,* pp. 41–4.
[188] *Ibid.,* p. 28.
[189] *Ibid.,* p. 77.

idea, which would correspond to the being, the ultimate source of all things'.[190] And the foundation for such an epistemology is rationalism, understood as a total rejection of any proofs and arguments that cannot be expressed in an understandable way, and comprehended by other people; in other words, it is a rejection of any form of mysticism.[191] For Kołakowski, such rationalism is a lethal weapon in the hands of science in its struggle with 'religious obscurantism'.[192] Thus, the main achievement of Spinoza's methodology was to develop a concept of human reason totally independent from any revelation and any God.[193]

The starting point of Spinoza's ontology was the negation of the world's creation, an unequivocal affirmation of its eternal existence. Therefore, Kołakowski labels him as an 'atheist' and a 'materialist'.[194] Kołakowski's interpretation is this: Spinoza declares God's existence, but it is not a God in any recognisable form of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It is an all-embracing substance, the immanent source of all things,[195] which, however – and this is very important – does not exist outside human reason.[196] If this is the case, and if God is immanent, and not transcendent to the world, it also means that such a God 'confirms human cognition, rather than limits it'.[197] Following this line of argumentation, Kołakowski defends Spinoza from the traditional accusation of pantheism, emphasising the materialistic aspect of his thought[198] and, crucially for the Marxist perspective, argues that abolition of a transcendent God destroys the traditional argument of the divine source of the feudal social order and the Church's earthly power.[199] Even though Spinoza calls for a universal religion that it is possible for anyone to profess, he sees it as a tool of social control rather than a genuine spiritual movement.[200] In analysing Spinoza's religious thought, Kołakowski only touches upon another major issue, on which he deliberates more deeply in his commentary on Karl Jaspers (Chapter V, p. 216): the difference between religion for enlightened people, and the kind of religion required by the

[190] *Ibid.,* p. 109.
[191] *Ibid.,* pp. 129–30.
[192] *Ibid.,* p. 136.
[193] *Ibid.,* p. 160.
[194] *Ibid.,* p. 167.
[195] *Ibid.,* pp. 171–212.
[196] *Ibid.,* p. 221.
[197] *Ibid.,* p. 140.
[198] *Ibid.,* p. 239–44.
[199] *Ibid.,* p. 273–6.
[200] *Ibid.,* pp. 366–8.

uneducated, simple masses.[201] Kołakowski summarises his thesis by concluding that even if Spinoza was a bourgeois thinker of his time, in the perspective of historical materialism, his philosophy was an important link in the chain of emancipatory thought, of which Marxism is the last and final link.[202] It is for this reason, Kołakowski argues, that 'dialectical materialism is the only legitimate heir of Spinoza's philosophical heritage (…)'.[203]

Kołakowski's dissertation on Spinoza may be seen as an exemplary piece of reinterpreting history of philosophy in the spirit of orthodox Marxism–Leninism. The author places his protagonist in the perennial struggle between materialism and idealism, explaining in detail how ideological superstructure derives from the economic base of the society, and how the rational approach of independent human reason can reject religious superstition step by step. Most of Kołakowski's theses are supported with relevant quotations from Marx, Engels, Lenin, and even Stalin.[204] The thesis presented Spinoza's philosophy from a certain perspective, but a large portion of his writing outlines and interprets Spinoza's thought in an unbiased way. It is clear that Kołakowski put a lot of effort into understanding Spinoza and comprehended his thought to a great extent. Interestingly, most of Kołakowski's substantive arguments were presented in a lucid, concise academic paper as early as in April 1951 (almost three years before his final *viva voce*).[205] This text did not include much of the Marxist narrative and language, as he was trying to present Spinoza as objectively as possible. However, such reception was met with huge criticism from Kołakowski's supervisors and colleagues. Although impressed with Kołakowski's work and erudition, they condemned him for not emphasising the issues of materialism, and the historical role of the Marxist breakthrough in the history of philosophy.[206] Baczko succinctly summarised the contemporary approach in a single sentence: 'Starting from the Marxist point of view, we will not be led astray.'[207]

[201] *Ibid.,* p. 371.
[202] *Ibid.,* pp. 399–411.
[203] *Ibid.,* p. 409.
[204] For example: *Ibid.,* pp. 356, 399, 402–403.
[205] AAN ANS 97/114, L. Kołakowski, *Przezwyciężenie dualizmu przez materialistyczną filozofię Spinozy*, pp. 21–65.
[206] AAN ANS 5/112, pp. 19–23
[207] *Ibid.,* p. 21.

What did this mean? First of all, it seems that Kołakowski saw himself first and foremost as a *historian* of philosophy, and only in the second instance as a *Marxist* historian. This applies to all of the cases analysed in this chapter. Whether Kołakowski worked on Polish neopositivists, contemporary Thomists, mediaeval or early modern thinkers, he first had to carefully read and thoroughly understand the analysed material, and only then saturate it with the Marxist framework of materialism, class struggle, etc. Second of all, as we will see in the following chapter, this approach was becoming less and less satisfactory. Kołakowski and many of his colleagues started to see the intellectual barrenness of orthodox Marxism. As one of the students at the IKKN confessed to her tutor: 'When I'm reading the classics of Marxism, I'm only studying. But when I'm reading bourgeois philosophers, I start to think.'[208]

The year 1955 was a watershed one: it was when Kołakowski's approach towards Marxism started to change significantly, and, as a result, his religious thought also evolved in a different direction. In a discussion about the state of contemporary Polish philosophy, Kołakowski, together with Baczko (the same person who had criticised him so harshly just few years before) presented the opinion that they had 'educated people in a one-sided way, too dogmatically' and that they had 'tried to "catechize" Marxism'.[209] Testimonies of the Gulag from old Polish Communists became common knowledge, while books by Orwell, Koestler and other leftist yet anti-Stalinist writers also started circulating among friends.[210] As Kołakowski recalled years later in the interview with Mentzel: 'In 1955 we already knew that this ideology was a road to nowhere.'[211]

[208] AAN ANS 5/106, p. 3.
[209] 'Dyskusja na temat działalności frontu filozoficznego w Polsce', *Myśl Filozoficzna* 1/1955, p. 283.
[210] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…*, tom I, pp. 131–41.
[211] *Ibid.,* p. 143.

Chapter II: A Rational Jester

> What we have just demonstrated is also confirmed by daily experience with so many convincing examples as to give rise to the common saying: 'Man is a God to man.'[212]
>
> Baruch Spinoza

The period between 1955 and 1957 was crucial in the development of Communist regimes not only in Poland but also in the entire Eastern Bloc. After Stalin's death on 5 March 1953, the centre of power shifted towards factions that rejected the totalitarian character of government and opted for a moderate liberalisation of the political system. This eventually led to the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, when the new party's leader, Nikita Khrushchev, presented his famous 'Secret Speech', denouncing the cult of personality and the dictatorial methods of the Stalinist period. Political earthquakes in other countries ensued. Polish Communist leader Bolesław Bierut died soon after the Congress, in March 1956. He was replaced by Edward Ochab (in office March–October 1956), and eventually, after factional struggles and workers' strikes throughout the country, by Władysław Gomułka, a wartime PPR leader. In the late 1940s he had been denounced as a traitor for his persistent opposition to the collectivisation of Polish agriculture, and spent a few years in prison.[213] His rise to power was met with great enthusiasm among the population, and consolidated during a rally in Warsaw on 24 October, when even 500,000 people gathered to hear his speech.[214] However, hopes for a more democratic and pluralistic political system were soon dispelled. Even though the oppressive policies and intense propaganda of the Stalinist period dissipated, political and cultural life remained under the firm grip of the Party and its censors. Disillusioned with the official socialist state, Marxist intellectuals had to look for new inspiration and new formulas for their philosophy.

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[212] B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, 35, Sch., in *Complete Works*, ed. M.L. Morgan, trans. S. Shirley (Indianapolis, 2002), p. 338.
[213] For the political history of Poland in this period, see: A. Paczkowski, *Pół wieku dziejów Polski* (Warszawa, 2007), pp. 194–233.
[214] *Ibid.*, p. 204.

This chapter will analyse Leszek Kołakowski's philosophical inquiries into the heart of socialist ideas as well as his gradual disillusion with all forms of Marxism. This part is necessary for this thesis, as it shows how Kołakowski tried to develop an original, secular form of ethics inspired by the Marxist tradition. The realisation that such a form of ethics is impossible was the defining turn in the evolution of his religious thought. This chapter will also present how Kołakowski's works in the history of ideas – like the process during the Stalinist period described in Chapter I – influenced his gradual rapprochement with religion and paved the way for the development of his own philosophy of religion from the mid-1960s onwards. As well as numerous essays and articles, two longer monographs were crucial in this process: *Individual and Infinity* (1958)[215], a revised version of his doctorate investigated in Chapter I (pp. 47–51), and *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* (1965)[216], a monumental study of various forms of seventeenth-century religiosity.

Kołakowski and His Marx – the first attempt

It is noteworthy that the events of 1956 were the end, rather than beginning of the 'Thaw' after Stalin's death.[217] The term itself comes from a title of a 1954 novel by a Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg. Marxist thinkers faced a completely new challenge, as the corset of official doctrine was not only very tight; it distorted the socialist ideal in its basic principles. Like many leftist intellectuals from the past, who had opposed the mainstream of Marxism's developments, they were soon dubbed 'revisionists', as they attempted to revive the original thought of Karl Marx. They wanted to distance themselves from later additions to the doctrine, especially from Lenin's interpretations, and from the petrified doctrine imposed by the Soviet Union. They were influenced by some of the more recent Marxist thought, notably by *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) by the Hungarian thinker György Lukács (1885–1971), which gave rise to 'Western Marxism'.

However, the most important foundation for revisionist thought was the so-called 'young Marx', i.e. his early writings from the 1840s, and the *Economic and*

[215] L. Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność. Wolność i antynomie wolności w filozofii Spinozy* (Warszawa, 2012), first edition: Warszawa, 1958.
[216] L. Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna. Studia nad chrześcijaństwem bezwyznaniowym XVII wieku* (Warszawa, 1997), first edition: Warszawa, 1965.
[217] Interview with Bronisław Baczko, 17 December 2015.

Philosophic Manuscripts (1844) in particular. In this work, Karl Marx was not yet interested in details of the capitalist economy or concerned with political action towards a world revolution of the proletariat. Instead, he was attempting to build a novel anthropology based on the principle that modern social and political systems alienate people from their true nature and that this becomes the main source of their ills. Kołakowski regarded the answer to this as the original definition of Communism:

> (…) the positive abolition of *private property* and thus of *human self-estrangement* and therefore the real *reappropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man; (…) It is the *genuine* solution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man. It is the true solution of the struggle between existence and essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution to the riddle of history and knows itself to be this solution.[218]

For the young Marx, Communism was not a question of society and its economic system; it was a question about the individual and the potential of fully realising one's nature. Even though the *Manuscripts* were only published for the first time in 1932, a more anthropological and humanist interpretation of Marxism had already been presented by Lukács, and in the writings of the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). After 1953, these ideas were taken up by many philosophers in Western Europe, including Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), and by the German thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School. In the Eastern Bloc, the most influential revisionists included the Czechs Karel Kosik (1926–2003) and Ivan Svitak (1925–1994), the GDR's Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) and the Yugoslavian milieu grouped around the *Praxis* magazine (although it was more active during the 1960s and 1970s).

In Poland, the leading platform of the 'Thaw', was the weekly magazine *Po Prostu* (*Simply*), which was engaged in day-to-day political debate. Leszek Kołakowski was undoubtedly the most prominent intellectual leader of Polish revisionism.[219] At the height of political tension in early November 1956, he wrote the short pamphlet *What is Socialism?*, which censors deemed inappropriate for publication. There he lists dozens of descriptions of a socialist state:

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[218] K. Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', in *Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan, p. 97.
[219] D. Gawin, *Wielki Zwrot. Ewolucja lewicy i odrodzenie idei społeczeństwa obywatelskiego 1956–1976* (Kraków, 2013), p. 65; For other important revisionist texts from the period, see for instance: B. Baczko, 'O stylu filozofowania', *Myśl Filozoficzna* 4/1956, pp. 3–28.

> a society in which some people are unhappy because they say what they think and others are unhappy because they do not; a state that produces superb jet planes and lousy shoes; a state whose government always knows the will of the people before it asks them; a state that believes it alone can save mankind; (…)[220]

A long list of the socialist state's faults ends in rather hopeless confession: 'Here is what socialism is: Socialism is a system that… But what's the point of going into all these details? It's very simple: socialism is just a really wonderful thing.'[221]

Working on the question of 'what is socialism?', and arriving at the conclusion that socialism is definitely nothing close to the official Marxist doctrine, but rather a *moral* stance in everyday life was the most important philosophical issue that drove Kołakowski in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, and was a crucial stage in the evolution of his religious thought. An analysis of this process will constitute the first part of this chapter.

Kołakowski's most important essays from that fervent period of moderate liberalisation, prior to the disillusionment with Gomułka and the Soviet intervention in Hungary in late October 1956, were collected in the book *The Worldview and Everyday Life*.[222] These texts have a few common themes.

The first of these themes was that Marxists must be ready to accept that Marxism is not a piece of marble carved once and forever, but a living thought in continuous development. In order to develop, Kołakowski argues, it must be self-critical, aware of its own weaknesses and constantly improving.[223] He challenges the dogmatic desire to believe that the classic Marxist authors have already provided potential answers to all possible philosophical questions.[224] Only by revising its own mistakes and finding new answers to new problems that arise throughout history, says Kołakowski, can Marxism successfully compete with other ideologies. Otherwise, he predicts, there can be only 'a struggle with an imaginary foe with imaginary victories'.[225] In Kołakowski's view, this realistic criticism was to apply not only to

[220] L. Kołakowski, 'What is Socialism?' in *Is God Happy? Selected Essays*, trans. A. Kołakowska (London, 2012), pp. 20–24; the text was commissioned by *Po Prostu*, but was withheld by the censorship, while unofficial copies circulated among intellectuals, see: Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 128.
[221] Kołakowski, *Is God Happy?*, p. 24.
[222] L. Kołakowski, *Światopogląd i życie codzienne* (Warszawa, 1957).
[223] L. Kołakowski, 'Światopogląd i krytyka', in *Światopogląd…*, p. 60.
[224] *Ibid.,* pp. 61–62.
[225] *Ibid.,* p. 68.

theoretical investigations, but also to everyday practice of social and political life. He explains that although the role of theory is to find intellectual tools to shape everyday practice in the correct form, what people actually experience is a situation in which Marxist theory is subordinated to the short-term needs of political life.[226]

Second, and like the texts from the early 1950s explored in Chapter I, religion, and Catholicism in particular, remain the negative point of reference for Kołakowski. In his view, when Marxist parties resist any form of critique they behave just like the Catholic Church, as infallibility constitutes its fundamental nature, even if some specific priests or popes are sometimes mistaken.[227] He sees an ossified doctrine, which resists any adjustments, transformed into the following:

> a mythology, an object of worship, surrounded by a ritualistic cult and immune to criticism. In this situation theoretical progress becomes impossible; and new dogmas that appear are monopolized and served up, with no reasons given, as articles of faith.[228]

In this way Marxism becomes a religion, and 'Religion is the death of science' for Kołakowski.[229] We can hear a familiar tone presenting the Church as the oppressor of the people, and Catholic thought as the intellectual tool of this oppression. In Kołakowski's view freedom in Catholicism must mean subjugation to God, which in practical terms means subjugation to ecclesiastical institutions.[230] He sees the 'authentic interpretation' of Catholic morality not in the Gospels, but rather in Catholic history, which is despicable.[231] He also sees Catholicism as 'a system of magical tricks to calm down consciences and absolve from moral responsibility'.[232]

The question of morality and responsibility for our moral decisions is crucial for Kołakowski and his re-interpretation of socialism. Building on the young Marx's premise that 'for man the root is man himself',[233] so that all morality can be assessed only in purely human, not divine, terms, Kołakowski elaborated on the role of philosophy and intellectual endeavours in public life in general. He believed

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[226] L. Kołakowski, 'Platonizm, empiryzm i opinia publiczna', in *Światopogląd…*, p. 137.
[227] *Ibid.,* pp. 133–4.
[228] L. Kołakowski, 'Intellectuals and the Communist Movement', in *Toward a Marxist Humanism. Essays on the Left Today*, trans. J. Zielonko Peel (New York, 1969), p. 165; first published: 'Intelektualiści a ruch komunistyczny', *Nowe Drogi* nr 9/1956.
[229] *Ibid.,* p. 163.
[230] L. Kołakowski, 'Istota i istnienie w pojęciu wolności', in *Światopogląd…*, pp. 109–112.
[231] L. Kołakowski, 'Katolicyzm i humanizm', in *Światopogląd…*, p. 151.
[232] *Ibid.,* p. 158.
[233] K. Marx, 'Toward…', in *Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan, p. 77.

philosophers should be guides who help people to live their lives correctly with regard to both private and social aspects. He argued that philosophy must build a 'complete vision of the world' and 'lead to moral progress in the broadest meaning'. However, because of this, he also felt that political life needed to be assessed in moral terms.[234] He saw teaching Marxism as a *moral force* as the fundamental task before Marxist philosophers. Kołakowski strongly believed that 'Communist morality is the greatest strength of Communism',[235] that Communism is 'a wind of great hope'.[236] He argued that this morality, a basic set of principles, must be confronted with authentic questions and the life situations of every single person – that Marxism means something slightly different for every Marxist.[237] He did not see such a worldview as an ossified doctrine, enclosed in libraries, but as a living moral force, one that requires practice in everyday life for it to have any value at all.[238] This is the last important point Kołakowski makes in *The Worldview and Everyday Life*. Kołakowski felt that practising a given worldview in everyday life leads inevitably to the question of the *meaning of life*, a question he sees as the 'hidden nerve of philosophy'.[239] Again, following the young Marx's anthropological principles, Kołakowski argues that no one is born with a meaning of life given to him, that it must be chosen.[240] He asks why Communism provides the best philosophy for a satisfactory meaning of life, answering that it endows history with a rational meaning and provides human beings with an intellectual way to 'affirm life just as it is',[241] to live life 'in solidarity with the rhythm of realisation of human history'.[242]

Kołakowski's programme for a revival of Marxism in 1955–56 was based on the aim of making Marxism something that would provide people with a meaning of life and be practised in everyday life. In order to be able achieve this and become anything other than a mere religion, the argument went, Marxist philosophy would have to avoid becoming an ossified doctrine; instead, it should be a constantly developing theory that would face new questions and challenges throughout history.

[234] L. Kołakowski, 'Z czego żyją filozofowie?', in *Światopogląd…*, pp. 14–17.
[235] *Ibid.,* p. 51.
[236] *Ibid.,* p. 52.
[237] *Ibid.,* pp. 43–45.
[238] *Ibid.,* p. 34.
[239] L. Kołakowski, 'Światopogląd i życie codzienne', in *Światopogląd…*, p. 174.
[240] *Ibid.,* p. 180.
[241] *Ibid.,* p. 194.
[242] *Ibid.,* p. 205.

In order to achieve this, the argument continued, Marxism would have to be open to criticism and constant revision. However, after the tragic events of the Soviet intervention in Hungary, and the authoritarian turn of Gomulka's government after October 1956, the situation changed dramatically; there was not much hope left for serious reform of Marxism from within the system. At the time, Kołakowski was 'completely devastated', commenting that it was necessary to start from scratch and that 'Communism was broken globally'.[243]

The Death of the Gods, another important text from late 1956 was also denied publication.[244] This powerful text was a very bitter settlement of accounts with Kołakowski's engagement with Communism up to that time. A few longer fragments from this text are worth quoting here, so we may fully realise how important the 1956 breakthrough was in the philosopher's intellectual development:

> When, at the ripe age of eighteen, we become communists, equipped with an unshakeable confidence in our own wisdom and a handful of experiences, (…) acquired in the Great Hell of war, we devote very little thought to the fact that we need communism in order to harmonize relation of production with the forces of production. (…) In short, we are not good Marxists. For us, socialism, however we go about arguing for it in theoretical debates, is everything but the result of the operation of the law of value. (…) it is really just a myth of a Better World, a vague nostalgia for human life, a rejection of the crimes and humiliations of which we have witnessed too many, a kingdom of equality and freedom, a message of great renewal, a reason for existence.[245]

The reality of socialist state brought disillusionment, but this disillusionment was repressed for a long time:

> We were not blind; thousands of facts evoked the horror of laughter. But both the horror and the laughter were platonic: harmless and defanged.
>
> So let us not delude ourselves that it was only when faced with new knowledge and new facts that we found ourselves in a land of silence, abandoned by the gods.
>
> It was not a lack of knowledge that fostered our illusions. They were fostered by the way in which, morally and intellectually, we dealt with the knowledge we had: by a system in which

[243] J.J. Lipski, *Dzienniki 1954–1957* (Warszawa, 2010), p. 104.
[244] 'Śmierć bogów', commissioned by *Nowa Kultura* magazine (Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 128); unofficial copies circulated among intellectuals, published for the first time in *Pochwała niekonsekwencji* (Londyn, 1989).
[245] L. Kołakowski, 'The Death of the Gods', in *Is God Happy?*, p. 5.

> every inconvenient fact was given a simple explanation within a set of ideological myths, with which we deliberately blinded ourselves to the reality.[246]

But when one is ready to face the reality, Kołakowski continues his argument, and rejects these ideological myths that were blinding us, the result is the death of the gods – a complete falling apart of the precious worldview that was to make our lives meaningful. In his view, it is the destruction of an ideology that was supposed to be a *moral force*, but turned out to be a mere mythology. And when only one brick is pulled out from the construction, the whole project shatters into pieces:

> The first step is the hardest; the rest comes easily. (…) This is why – priests, take note – a mythology, if it is to be effective, must be all-encompassing. The death of the gods is a chain reaction; each drags another down into the abyss. (…) The logic of mythology is familiar to every priest; it is there in his mind when he says: today you will miss Mass, tomorrow you will curse God, and the day after that you will become a Bolshevik. This is why only Stalinism, because it was all-encompassing, was a viable mythology.[247]

For Kołakowski, this is something relieving; once we realise that the gods are dead and we do not delude ourselves with ideological myths, we can work towards developing a new socialism, which would be the true moral force we need:

> The death of the gods is the liberation of man – always partial and imperfect, and, like childbirth, often painful, violent and brutal, and yet always to be welcomed.
>
> We are back where we started. Back at the point where the political and theoretical work of reviving a worker's movement that is viable and capable of evolving must begin anew.[248]

The greatest problem was that 'Marxism' ceased to be an intellectual movement and started to be an institutional set of rules, which is, as Kołakowski points out, something that always happens in churches. The Party, which was a personification of the whole political system during the Stalinist period, did not accept any form of critique, seeing its monopoly on government as an aim in itself, and behaving more like a sect, splitting the world into those who are saved (subjugated to

[246] *Ibid.,* p. 8.
[247] *Ibid.,* pp. 12–13.
[248] *Ibid.,* p. 19.

the Party), and those who are condemned (everyone else).[249] In this way, the Stalinist Party is just like the Catholic Church – it cannot have allies, it will not retreat an inch from its doctrinal principles. It accepts only an unconditional surrender.[250] For Kołakowski, Stalinism did great harm to the socialist idea, took it hostage and presented it to the world as a 'historical necessity'. This is not real socialism; real socialism is a moral obligation in relations with other people. Alas, when something is seen as a necessity, the ends justify the means, and morality is suspended.[251] According to this interpretation of Stalinism, moral criteria are replaced with practical criteria, and when morality is a tool of history, what we get in fact is history being made a 'pretext for villainy (*łajdactwo*)'.[252] And this, fundamentally, is not what Communism is about:

> We are not communists because we recognized communism to be a historical necessity. We are communists because we stand on the side of the oppressed against the oppressors, on the side of wretches against their masters, on the side of the persecuted against the persecutors. (…) Practical choice is a choice of values, that is, a moral act, and that means an act for which everyone bears his own, personal responsibility.[253]

Over the next few years, Kołakowski further developed his understanding of socialism. Nevertheless, the tone of these essays and the kind of arguments he makes differ significantly from the texts from 1955–1957. Terms like 'Marxism' or 'Communism' rarely appear. Instead, he tries to build the coherent socialist 'worldview' he called for in his earlier essays, which would provide people with substantial intellectual guidance for their everyday moral choices. As George Gömöri expresses it, Kołakowski became 'a pioneer of a post-Marxist socialist ethic'.[254]

Kołakowski spent 1958 on sabbatical in the Netherlands and France, working towards a project that eventually became the book entitled *Religious Consciousness*

[249] L. Kołakowski, 'Responsibility and History', in *Toward…*, pp. 97–100; first published in fragments: 'Odpowiedzialność i historia', *Nowa Kultura* 35–38/1957.
[250] *Ibid.,* p. 103.
[251] *Ibid.,* pp. 116–22.
[252] *Ibid.,* pp. 138–9.
[253] *Ibid.,* p. 142.
[254] G. Gömöri, 'Foreword', to C. Newman (ed.), *A Leszek Kolakowski Reader. TriQuaterly,* No. 22 (Fall 1971), p. 10.

and the Ecclesiastical Bond, which is analysed later in this chapter (pp. 90–108).[255] Upon his return to Poland in 1959, Kołakowski published three essays that mark a significant 'leap' in the evolutionary process of the development of his religious thought, and formed a kind of a summary of his intellectual journey so far.

The first of these essays, *Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth*,[256] was the last from this period to deal directly with the issues of Marxist theory. It was perhaps also the most classic 'revisionist' text, in the sense that it contrasted the 'young Marx' with the 'old Marx', or rather, with the interpretation of Marxism developed by Engels and Lenin. One of the most important philosophical novelties introduced by the Leninist interpretation of Marxism was the so-called 'reflection theory' – the idea that human knowledge simply reflects the natural world, and that people have no real influence on the state of nature. In this way, a much more naturalistic, 'scientific' version of Marxism prevailed over the anthropological, 'humanistic' variant present in the writings of the young Marx. Kołakowski contrasts this idea with the epistemological concepts presented in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, where Marx's main concern was the relationship between human beings and nature, presenting the human person as a fundamental part of nature, but at the same time, seeing nature as being shaped by people, who through labour transform nature to fit human needs.[257] To this effect, Kołakowski claims, using Marx's arguments, that our perception of reality is a form of human *creation* and not *imitation*, as the reflection theory would suggest.[258] Individuals create the world in order to fulfil their needs – this means that a person is fully responsible for shaping nature, independently of any 'necessity':

> There is no epistemological absolute: neither reality in itself 'reflected' in consciousness, nor sense impressions, nor a *cogito*, nor innate categories of the mind, nor pure, non-mental phenomena. The only accessible world is the endless interplay between human needs (our needs as social beings) and the natural environment as the possible means of satisfying them.[259]

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[255] Chudoba, *Kronika…*, pp. 148–61.
[256] in: L. Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza & Other Essays on Philosophers*, trans. A. Kołakowska and others, ed. Z. Janowski (South Bend, Indiana, 2004); first delivered as a lecture at the University of Tübingen in December 1958 (see: Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 160); first published in Polish: 'Karol Marks i klasyczna definicja prawdy', *Studia Filozoficzne* 2/1959.
[257] *Ibid.,* pp. 176–7.
[258] *Ibid.,* pp. 180–1.
[259] *Ibid.,* p. 186.

He makes one more crucial argument: that such an epistemological stand has significant ethical consequences. Again, the main point is the question of the practical decisions we make. If 'the things our world is composed of are things that have been chosen, since they have been created', then it is a matter of choosing a practical point of view in your life, not a theoretical argument.[260] The text ends with one of the most poetic and powerful sentences in the entire works of Leszek Kołakowski: 'One might say that, in all the universe, man cannot find a well so deep that, leaning over it, he does not discover, at the bottom, his own face.'[261]

The second of Kołakowski's important essays from 1959 was *Irrationalities of Rationalism.*[262] This is perhaps his most philosophically sophisticated text from this period, clearly drawing inspiration from the French existentialist thinkers, especially Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Disillusioned with official Marxism, Kołakowski looked for a new formula for his own ethical philosophy, which he had been developing since 1955. The new term he starts to use in this text is 'radical rationalism', which is supposed to be both a methodological demand in the humanities and a specific moral worldview. He builds up a meticulous picture of how the term 'rationalism' acquired different meanings throughout history, and how various philosophical currents use it in the present.[263] According to Kołakowski, the conclusion we may deduce from historical inquiries is that a rational stand in life is always a necessary condition for slow, but real and substantial improvements in social life.[264] When explaining what 'radical rationalism' is, Kołakowski refers directly to one of the most famous definitions in the history of philosophy – like Kant's Enlightenment, it is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity:[265]

> The human species is not protected by anyone (…). Whatever it is, and whatever it becomes, it owes it only to itself. A rationalist stand is self-awareness of this situation, and of all its consequences; it is an awareness that man cannot count on anyone's protection, apart from

[260] *Ibid.,* p. 192.
[261] *Ibid.,* p. 195.
[262] L. Kołakowski, 'Nieracjonalności racjonalizmu', in *Pochwała niekonsekwencji. Pisma rozproszone sprzed roku 1968*, tom II (Londyn, 2002); fragments published in *Argumenty* 19–20/1959; the text was ready to print in a collection of essays *Fetysze racjonalizmu* (Warszawa, 1963), but the book's depository was destroyed by the authorities; full text first published in *Pochwała niekonsekwencji* (Londyn, 1989).
[263] *Ibid.,* pp. 189–204.
[264] *Ibid.,* p. 206.
[265] *Ibid.,* p. 238.

> another man, and that no one can take control over him; that at the same time, he has a right to everything that exists outside him, and that nothing obliges him to anything, apart from himself.[266]

According to Kołakowski at this stage of the evolution of his religious thought, the greatest threat to 'radical rationalism' is religion and its concept of Divine Providence, which controls human lives, and in fact absolves them from responsibility for their moral decisions. Religious faith is a form of 'disability', Kantian immaturity:

> (…) we do not think that God takes away from man what is the best in him; we think that he takes away what is the most unbearable in him: a situation of an unconditional responsibility for himself.[267]

For this reason, Kołakowski argues, rationalism is more of a moral stand than any specific thesis; it completely rejects any idea of the sacred, any form of axiological or epistemological absolute; 'it is a philosophy of chronic incompleteness of the world, a situation of permanent imperfection of man'.[268] Refining arguments he had already put forward in *The Worldview and Everyday Life* and those inspired by the young Marx's anthropological standpoint, Kołakowski describes rationalism as a chance to face the future as a 'flexible opportunity', a space where one can always find a room for improvement, and overcome reification of human existence.[269] Finally, he gives an explicit and very powerful statement of his own worldview at the time:

> We propose an attitude of openness without any hope that it will lead us at some point to an ultimate standpoint, better than any other; we propose the attitude of openness without any eschatological perspective, the attitude in concord with the totality of experience that the history of worldviews leaves us with. We do not believe in a perspective of a complete worldview.[270]

Just as *Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth* was a summary of Kołakowski's revisionism and his deliberations on Marxism, so *Irrationalities of Rationalism* clearly presents a new form of thinking that is inspired by Marxist

[266] *Ibid.,* p. 237.
[267] *Ibid.,* p. 239.
[268] *Ibid.,* pp. 241–2.
[269] *Ibid.,* p. 243.
[270] *Ibid.,* p. 246.

tradition but breaks with the dogmatic paradigm, thereby providing a new quality of answering philosophical questions.

The last of the three essential essays from 1959 is *The Priest and the Jester*.[271] This text expresses more openly a direct link between Kołakowski's socialist ethics and religion. Furthermore, it contains a few exceptionally apt and lucid expressions, which will be helpful in better understanding this phase in Kołakowski's intellectual evolution. Interestingly, the lecture on which this essay is based was first presented at a seminar held at the 'Crooked Wheel Club' (Polish: Klub Krzywego Koła), an intellectual society that served as a platform for the dialogue between the socialist and Catholic intelligentsia.

Kołakowski starts his argument with an acknowledgement that philosophy is indebted to theology; he states that questions of the latter are simply 'clumsy formulations of those eternal enigmas that confound us still',[272] but that 'theology is 'never more than a projection of anthropology onto the domain of the non-human'.[273] This brings to mind Ludwig Feuerbach's famous sentence from *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) that 'theology is anthropology'[274]. Although Kołakowski does not refer to Feuerbach directly, this thought underpins most of his writings from this period. Kołakowski discusses various religious concepts that have a secular counterpart, such as the problem of theodicy or the issue of nature and grace. The most important question that philosophy inherits from theology, however, is that of a possibility of eschatology at all, the question as to whether human essence can be reconciled with one's existence.[275] According to Kołakowski, theology likewise provides a crucial intellectual concept that allows for this reconciliation – the idea of revelation.

> Revelation is the constant hope of philosophy. (…) Philosophy is a constant effort of questioning: a questioning of everything that seems obvious, and thus also of existing revelations.[276]

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[271] L. Kołakowski, 'The Priest and the Jester. Reflections on the Theological Heritage of Contemporary Thought', in Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes*…; first delivered as a lecture on 25 June 1959 (Chudoba, *Kronika*..., p. 165); first published in Polish: 'Kapłan i błazen (Rozważania o teologicznym dziedzictwie współczesnego myślenia)', *Twórczość* 10/1959.
[272] *Ibid.,* p. 239.
[273] *Ibid.,* p. 240.
[274] L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans: M. Evans (London, 1881), pp. xi–xii.
[275] Kołakowski, 'The Priest and the Jester', p. 239.
[276] *Ibid.,* p. 248.

Therefore, he argues, we can clearly understand that theology supplies philosophy with questions, but not with answers; it diagnoses the correct problems, but provides incorrect solutions. After contemplating a few other issues that originate in theological thinking, Kołakowski concludes all of them revolve around the same scheme:

> (…) for or against eschatology – i.e. for or against ordering the events of our daily lives with reference to an absolute which will in time be realized; (…) for or against attributing to the absolute the responsibility for our actions; for or against revelation – i.e. for or against seeking an ultimate, unquestionable cognitive principle as an infallible foundation of knowledge; (…) for or against a view of the world where everything acquires meaning by reference to the absolute, of which it is a manifestation, a part or an instance. In short, for or against the hope that there is a cognitive or metaphysical absolute; for or against seeking absolute foundations.[277]

This is a decisive moment in the intellectual evolution that this thesis attempts to analyse. This is the first time that Kołakowski explicitly names the antimony – 'for or against the absolute' – the concept that, in his view, organises all philosophical thinking. I argue this is also the central theme of his philosophy and I try to explain his shifting from the camp of philosophers who are 'against' to those who are 'for'.

In 1959, Kołakowski clearly rejects any worldview that calls for absolutes; he stands for a rational attitude in life, 'man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity'. At the end of *The Priest and the Jester*, he finally presents the title metaphor, which vividly presents two different attitudes in life – priests are the ones *for*, and jesters are the ones *against*. His choice is still unambiguous:

> This author declares himself in favour of the jester's philosophy: the attitude of scepticism and suspicion towards absolutes of any kind. (…) To adopt this attitude is to adopt a view of the world which holds out a hopeful but difficult prospect: that of a gradual and laborious process of working out, in our interactions, how to reconcile those elements of human thought and behaviour which are hardest to reconcile: how to achieve goodness without universal indulgence, courage without fanaticism, intelligence without disenchantment and hope without blindness. All other fruits of philosophical thinking are of little worth.[278]

[277] *Ibid.,* p. 255.
[278] *Ibid.,* p. 262.

We might say that the basic elements of Kołakowski's 'post-Marxist socialist ethics' were already formulated in his essays from 1959. Although these rather abstract and meta-philosophical concepts could have been used for a more general programme of intellectual activity, they still lacked a good 'guidebook' for applying 'rationalism' in everyday situations. Kołakowski's 'philosophy of life' was powerfully presented in a 1962 essay entitled *Ethics Without a Moral Code.*[279] Just as *Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth* was a summary of his revisionism, so *Ethics Without a Moral Code* may be seen as a conclusion of his secular ethics.[280]

The text opens with a challenge to nihilism and conservatism: two ethical positions, seemingly contradictory, that result in the same unwanted conclusion – giving up responsibility for moral actions. Kołakowski argues that on the one hand, nihilism is a silent declaration that the world is fundamentally and irrevocably evil; therefore, it allows questioning the effectiveness of any moral activity. Conservatism, on the other hand, declares that any kind of change in the world would be a change for worse, therefore, what we need is an unchangeable and absolute hierarchy of values – a moral code.[281] In this interpretation, codes mean a *de facto* end of morality:

> But the desire for a complete code comes from a need for 'moral security' or moral certainty and is irreconcilable with those forms of consciousness which must be preserved if moral and social degradation is to be avoided.[282]

The desire to conscientiously follow a code is, Kołakowski continues his reasoning, a flight from making ethical choices, which results in a 'ready-made life', a world completely predictable, where nothing really depends on our free decision.[283] It is worth recalling at this point Kołakowski's arguments about the idea of the meaning of life from the 1956 essay *The Worldview and Everyday Life* – we have a sense that our life has meaning when we are open to changes, when we have a sense that our actions matter and have influence over the world around us; a predictable future, a future that

[279] L. Kołakowski, 'Ethics without a moral code', in C. Newman (ed.), *A Leszek Kolakowski Reader*…; first delivered as a lecture on 30 April 1962 (Chudoba, *Kronika*..., p. 179); first published in Polish: 'Etyka bez kodeksu', *Twórczość* 7/1962.
[280] The term 'secular' ethics is used on purpose, as it will be striking to present a fundamental change in Kołakowski's understanding of ethics, when we compare the 1962 essay with the *Little Ethics* (1977) analysed in Chapter IV (pp. 157–8).
[281] Kołakowski, 'Ethics…', pp. 156–61.
[282] *Ibid.,* p. 165.
[283] *Ibid.,* pp. 167–8.

is completely independent from our actions is a form of death.[284] He argues again that there must not be any outer system that has absolute control over our lives; otherwise, our very existence as individual subjects is put into question:

> The desire for a code comes from the urge to identify one's own moral life with a transcendent order of things. It comes from a fear of choice and, ultimately, from a fear of one's own separate individual existence.[285]

It is important to point out that the mature socialist ethics presented by Kołakowski in the early 1960s is very similar to the views of Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Kołakowski's former positivist professor. The most striking similarity is with regard to Kotarbiński's emphasis on the situational character of moral decisions and the importance of an individual's autonomy in making such decisions (see Chapter I, p. 67). Ideas presented in these ethical essays can also be compared to the idea of 'value pluralism' presented in the same period by the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997).[286]

Leszek Kołakowski's socialism went through two major phases in the period from 1955 to 1965, even if in both of these phases, his main task was to revive the 'moral force' of Marxist tradition. Firstly, there are numerous 'revisionist' texts in which he attempts to find a formula for the most appropriate form of socialism *within* the official system. He continued his attempts to hone the doctrine rather than to look for a new intellectual home. However, these attempts ended abruptly in the autumn of 1956. The best proof of this is the bitter disappointment presented in *What is Socialism?* and *The Death of the Gods*. This phase was given a somewhat belated postscript in *Karl Marx and the Classic Definition of Truth*. Years later, commenting on this period of his career, Kołakowski proclaimed revisionism to be internally inconsistent, and the hopes he and his friends cherished at the time to have been futile.

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[284] Kołakowski, *Światopogląd*..., pp. 188–91.
[285] Kołakowski, 'Ethics…', p. 180.
[286] See for instance: I. Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, ed. H. Hardy, R. Hausheer (New York, 2000); on the comparison between Kołakowski's and Berlin's ethics see: Tokarski, *Obecność zła*, pp. 227–59.

Nonetheless, all of them decided to remain members of the Party, as this was the only form of political activity that had any importance whatsoever. [287]

The second phase in the Kołakowski's evolution as a socialist thinker was developing an ethical system that was fundamentally inspired by the leftist intellectual tradition. His idea of 'radical rationalism' emphasised the individual's moral responsibility and the grave danger that comes with subjugating one's ethical decisions to some absolute set of rules, whether religious or secular. He believed that although there was no place for a moral force in an ossified dogma, the socialist tradition was still the best platform for developing the right ethical position:

> (…) socialism is the sum total of social values whose implementation is incumbent on the individual as a moral duty. It is a body of imperatives regarding human relations that an individual or a group sets itself.[288]

Kołakowski's socialism is not the art of understanding history, nor the art of reforming the society; it is the art of human relations. It is realised not in transcendent history, but in troublesome everydayness. Yet, further development of his thought in the decade to follow will show that such an attitude is inaccurate and unsatisfactory, and that Marxism cannot be an inspiration for an appropriate ethical attitude.

A literary writer and a contemporary commentator

The period between 1955 and 1965 was undoubtedly the most prolific in the entire intellectual career of Leszek Kołakowski. He published political essays, numerous works in history of ideas, and several literary and non-academic texts that shed light on his evolving philosophical views. This section of the chapter will concentrate on these writings, which are directly related to theological issues and the role of the Catholic Church in the contemporary world.

Kołakowski masterfully presented his theological erudition, but also his critical, and, at times, satirical attitude towards religion in *The Key to Heaven*.[289] It is

[287] L. Kołakowski, 'Posłowie' in Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji. Pisma rozproszone sprzed roku 1968*, tom III (Londyn, 2002), pp. 312–4.
[288] Kołakowski, 'Responsibility and History' in *Toward…*, p. 116.
[289] L. Kołakowski, *The Devil and Scripture* (London, 1973): 'The Key to Heaven', trans. N. Bethell, 'Talk of the Devil', trans. C. Wieniewska; some of the stories from *The Key to Heaven* were first

a collection of very short (2–3 pages) witty commentaries on famous fables from the Old Testament. God is always presented as a rather dull, grumpy, and selfish figure, while people are usually innocent victims of his whims, or the worst type of careerists, slavishly serving their master. Kołakowski focuses on the paradoxical nature of biblical stories and, as in the case of the socialist state, he points to the bitter differences between a marvellous theory and expectations, as well as their often tragic consequences. Each story, like a good fairy tale, ends with few morals, which serve as universal lessons to the readership.

Even though the world 'bears a certain stamp of greatness', God created it mainly to feed his vanity and a need for glory.[290] God elected Israel to be his Chosen People, not because Israel was the most powerful of all nations, but simply because he felt love for Israel. And then he allowed for centuries of persecution and the Holocaust. The moral? 'We should not rely on feelings that are disinterested. We should count on reciprocity, not charity.'[291] Noah was an 'appalling boot-licker and toady'. He abandoned his friends and most of the family in order to submit to a cruel and unjust verdict. Naturally, these were very special circumstances: 'it is occasionally permitted to surrender to the powerful and betray one's own friends, but only when one knows for certain and without a shadow of doubt that this is the only way of saving the whole of humanity. Up to the present day, Noah has been the only man to face such dilemma.'[292] Patriarch Abraham was an 'unmitigated coward', who feared facing his wife after sleeping with a slave, and had a corporal's mentality, as he did not hesitate for a second to kill his son, just to fulfil the order of his commander.[293] The ironist Kołakowski is probably at his best in crafting an imaginary dialogue between King Solomon and an angel, who delivers the message that the future generations of Israel will be punished for the king's sins:

> 'In other words,' said Solomon slowly and haltingly, 'the friendship between my people and God, which has been compromised by my own fault, will be restored without me being punished but by murdering a part of my people. Do you regard this solution a reasonable one?'

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published in *Nowa Kultura*, no. 5–6, 8, 9, 12, 14, 16, 17/1957; first edition as a book: *Klucz niebieski albo Opowieści budujące z historii świętej zebrane ku pouczeniu i przestrodze* (Warszawa, 1964).
[290] *Ibid.,* p. 4.
[291] *Ibid.,* p. 7.
[292] *Ibid.,* pp. 10–13.
[293] *Ibid.,* pp. 14–21.

> 'The justice of God is past all understanding,' replied the cherub, raising his eyes to the heavens.
>
> 'Ah, ha,' said Solomon, 'that is another matter. In that case everything is quite clear.'[294]

Nevertheless, as we may suspect, there is one Old Testament tale with great philosophical significance that it is not possible to ridicule so easily: the story of Job. In his commentary, Kołakowski does not focus on Job's suffering, but imagines a scene in a pub in which Satan and a slow-witted Jehovah talk about people over a drink. Satan manages to trick God into a bet over Job and makes a fool of his foe with logical reasoning; 'I'm not very well up on theology, and to tell the truth I don't quite understand theological discussions and arguments,' Jehovah admits at some point.[295]

Kołakowski ends his interpretation of Job's story with a moral: 'it is very easy to lose a theoretical discussion with Satan, since he has many rational arguments on his side. But it is possible to simply ignore him.'[296] This is the first time that the figure of a cunning, fully rational and very intelligent Satan appears in Kołakowski's writings. The question of the nature of evil later became a crucial element of his religious thought. In one of the essays, he describes the devil as 'probably the most important contribution of Central-Asian civilization to the world's culture'.[297] In the 1950s and 1960s, these deliberations continued to take a more light-weight form of literary works, as if it was still difficult for a 'radical rationalist' to talk about the devil without a pinch of salt. *Father Bernard's Great Sermon*[298] is a speech by a passionate, overdramatic priest, who in the course of his sermon reveals his true identity as a demon, calling to reverse St Paul's teaching, and to overcome evil by committing more evil.[299] However, the most powerful argument for the importance of evil was presented in another witty text entitled *Shorthand Transcript of a Metaphysical Press Conference given by the Demon in Warsaw on 20 December 1963*.[300] The Demon starts his speech with a simple statement: 'you have ceased to believe in me'. Much like in *The Death of the Gods*, he reminds us that giving up faith is a chain reaction:

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[294] *Ibid.,* pp. 74–5.
[295] *Ibid.,* p. 44.
[296] *Ibid.,* p. 46.
[297] L. Kołakowski, 'O pożytkach z diabła', in Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji…*, tom III (Londyn, 2002), p. 7.
[298] First published in Polish: 'Wielkie kazanie księdza Bernarda', *Twórczość* 10/1961.
[299] Kołakowski, *The Devil…,* p. 95.
[300] First published in Polish: L. Kołakowski, *Rozmowy z diabłem* (Warszawa, 1965).

'Yet disbelief seems to begin with me. It seems to be easier to discard the devil.' [301] The most important argument the demon makes during his conference is to refute the idea of the contingency of evil. It is not an accident, Kołakowski says through the demon's character, but an indelible part of our lives:

> Evil is not a reality, you say, evil is a misfortune, an accident in the world, something that happens of course, but merely happens (…) But this is not true, gentlemen. The word 'evil' does not contain anything that is emphatic, no terror or sublimity. It is matter of fact and dry. (…) Evil is a thing, like any other thing.[302]

This conclusion also has significant theological consequences. If evil is not contingent, but absolute, and cannot be dismissed in the world, it means that evil's existence is independent from divine will. An indirect answer to this question can be found in the *Transcript of a Metaphysical Press Conference*:

> God did not save the demon because He was not in a position to do so. (…) Is one to assume therefore that the fundamental structure of Being is not the result of God's free decision, but that God Himself is entangled in a system independent of His will?
> I'll answer: Yes, this is what one must assume.[303]

To this effect, we may clearly see that Kołakowski's understanding of God in the mid-1960s is fundamentally different to the omniscient figure of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Furthermore, he understands evil not simply as result of human ill will, or the Augustinian absence of good; rather, as a part of the 'fundamental structure of Being'.

Before we proceed with his historical works, however, it is necessary to analyse another set of contemporary writings. Between 1960–61 Kołakowski wrote a few short texts on contemporary Catholic thought and rather unusual intellectual ferment in the Church at the time, which eventually led to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). [304] Most of these texts were published in *Argumenty*, an official magazine of The Society of Atheists and Freethinkers. There is a striking difference if

[301] Kołakowski, *The Devil…,* pp. 124–5.
[302] *Ibid.,* p. 128.
[303] *Ibid.,* p. 134.
[304] On the history and intellectual background of the Council, see: J.W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

we compare the level of objectivity and rational argumentation as regard religious issues of these essays with Kołakowski's anticlerical writings from the late 1940s and early 1950s (analysed in Chapter I). In the works published in *Argumenty*, Kołakowski still considers Catholicism as an opponent, but as an opponent that must be respected, taken seriously, and won over with arguments rather than be crushed. He sees Catholicism as a serious ideological project rather than a mere a tool of capitalist imperialism. The 1960s also signified the beginning of a gradual rapprochement between leftist intellectuals, disillusioned with official Marxism, and the Catholic intelligentsia. [305] The process became much more intensive and politically important in the 1970s, when Kołakowski was already in Britain, but this development had already begun in the early 1960s with a more friendly exchange of ideas, as his articles from *Argumenty* provided.

Most of these short commentaries on contemporary religion were published together in the collection *Notes on the Contemporary Counter-Reformation*.[306] The introduction to the book defines the crucial process in contemporary Catholicism:

> Counter-Reformation is not only an effort to return to the pre-Reformation reality, but an attempt at internal transformation, which would help the Church to assimilate values created outside of it, and against it, to make them parts of its own body and to neutralize them in this way. Counter-Reformation, if it is to be effective, is a practical self-criticism.[307]

This reflects Kołakowski's belief that the Church finally had begun to come to terms with modernity and all of its intellectual and social challenges. He analyses the historical importance of Thomism and presents it as a form of mediaeval Counter-Reformation.[308] For Kołakowski, the modern incarnation of Thomist philosophy, found especially in the work of the French thinker Jacques Maritain, is the newest philosophical Counter-Reformation. Even if this present-day Thomism still rejects serious dialogue with secular philosophy and the values it represents, this doctrine seriously engages with the real social and political questions of the contemporary world that arose from the development of capitalism, decolonisation, etc. [309] Kołakowski argues that in the case of Poland, this Counter-Reformation spirit was to

[305] Interview with Krzysztof Pomian, 22 February 2016; see: Gawin, *Wielki Zwrot…*, pp. 192–206.
[306] L. Kołakowski, *Notatki o współczesnej kontrreformacji* (Warszawa, 1962).
[307] *Ibid.,* p. 5.
[308] L. Kołakowski, 'Chrześcijańska Filozofia Historii', in *Notatki…*, pp. 27–8.
[309] *Ibid.,* pp. 43–4.

be found in the 'open Catholicism' groups, that is, the more liberal-minded faithful associated with intellectual magazines such as *Tygodnik Powszechny* or *Więź*. These societies were also more open to a dialogue with the socialist tradition of thought.[310] In all the essays, Kołakowski's tone is very sympathetic to the Catholic cause, and even if though he remains an ironic jester, observing everything from a distance, it is clear his attitude have changed dramatically since the anti-clerical pamphlets of the early 1950s. In Kołakowski's opinion, both believers and non-believers are members of the same community, and come from the same culture and tradition; 'they are even built physically in the same way. It is a circumstance worth consideration'.[311] In April 1961, editors of *Argumenty* met with the editors of *Tygodnik Powszechny* for a debate on Christian universalism.[312] During the discussion, Kołakowski said openly: 'I would like to treat Catholicism as a friendly adversary.'[313]

Importantly, in the early 1960s it became much easier for secular thinkers to express sympathy towards Christianity and the Catholic Church. The pontificate of John XXIII (1881–1963; in office 1958–1963) brought a revival of more liberal theological thought and institutional openness (*aggiornamento*) towards the modern world, which finally concluded in the reforms of Vaticanum II. Kołakowski reviewed the papal encyclical *Mater et Magistra* ('Mother and Teacher', 1961). While this encyclical did not revolutionise the Church's social teaching, it significantly shifted emphasis in regard to few crucial aspects, paving the way for the Council's official opening in October 1962. Nevertheless, Kołakowski was clearly disappointed. In its attempt to appease both liberals and traditionalists, the encyclical is not progressive enough; its main characteristic is a 'complete absence of content'. This, however, is not something to cheer about – the Catholic Church is an important part of the world and we should all hope that it would develop in a progressive direction.[314]

Even if the proposed programme for Church's reform in 1961 seemed to be too cautious for Kołakowski, his assessment of John XXIII's pontificate left no doubts about its utmost importance. It is easy to argue, he comments, that the last period was not a revolution, but merely 'a change of accents', adding that he clearly felt 'such explanations to be insufficient'. The Pope attempted to establish a

[310] L. Kołakowski, 'Małe tezy de sacro et profano', in *Notatki…*, pp. 53–6.
[311] *Ibid.,* p. 62.
[312] Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 173.
[313] L. Kołakowski, 'Głos w dyskusji o uniwerslizmie chrześcijańskim', in *Notatki…*, p. 91.
[314] L. Kołakowski, 'Tricesimo Anno. Nieskromny komentarz do skromnej encykliki', in *Notatki…*, pp. 67–8.

completely new point of view for the Church – one from which what is right and what is wrong does not depend on the interest of the Roman Church as an institution. In this way, he writes, 'something irrevocable happened, something that bears a seed of the possible, fundamental transformations in the Church of the future'.[315]

Spinoza and His God – the second attempt

Leszek Kołakowski's gradual disillusionment with official Marxism and the development of this own ethical thought were crucial in the development of his religious thought between 1955 and 1965. Nonetheless, it seems the intellectual process that had the most significant influence on the emergence of his original thinking on religion was his work in the history of ideas. Like the writings from the Stalinist period, it appears that historical investigations helped Kołakowski to find inspiration and clarify his own views on religious issues.

The monograph on Baruch Spinoza – a significantly revised version of the doctoral dissertation commented on in Chapter I (pp. 47–51) – is the first of this kind written by Kołakowski. *Individual and Infinity* was published in September 1958, but its typescript had already been sent to the publisher in August 1957.[316] This means Kołakowski worked on the revised version of his doctorate during same period in which he wrote his crucial revisionist essays on Marxism. It is possible to detect many similarities between the two systems, which are from very different periods – an anthropological version of Marxism based on the early works of Karl Marx, and the early modern thought of Spinoza in Kołakowski's interpretation.

The kind of philosophical arguments the author makes in the second version of the text, along with the general level of intellectual sophistication of his narrative, is beyond comparison with the original Stalinist text from 1953. *Individual and Infinity* does not feature the lengthy introduction of socio-economic historical context so typical of Marxist historical works produced in the early 1950s. Instead, the author presents his work as an ambitious philosophical project, the main task of which he describes as follows:

[315] L. Kołakowski, 'Jan XXIII – granice Rzymu i granice chrześcijaństwa', in *Pochwała niekonsekwencji…*, tom III (Londyn, 2002), pp. 111–4; first published: *Argumenty* 23/1963.
[316] Chudoba, *Kronika…*, pp. 139, 157.

> (…) it is about interpreting classical problems of philosophy as problems of a moral nature, (…) to present the problem of God as the problem of man, the problem of earth and heaven as the problem of human freedom, the problem of nature as the problem of man's relation to the world, the problem of soul as the problem of value of life, the problem of human nature as the problem of relations between people. (…) This work is an attempt to present philosophy as a study of man.[317]

This is a very important quotation, and we will get back to it further in this chapter, when we will present other historical works from this period. For now, it may be worth pointing out how this statement resembles the young Marx's remarks from *Towards a Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*:

> The first task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, once the holy form of human self-alienation has been discovered, is to discover self-alienation in its unholy forms. The criticism of heaven is thus transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.[318]

In Kołakowski's interpretation, the most important philosopher to pave the way for Spinoza's sophisticated system was undoubtedly Rene Descartes, who triggered the rational turn in modern philosophy.[319] Spinoza is the heir to Descartes' programme of rebuilding trust for an autonomous human reason, to see the human person as a thinking being able to comprehend reality without the help of an external revelation. Human reason must not have any humility before authorities of any kind: 'The rationalism of Spinoza is a programme of man's intellectual de-alienation, restoration of loyalty to his own reason.'[320], Kołakowski argued. Here we can clearly see the influence of the young Marx's theory of alienation from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, as well as the early stages of Kołakowski's theory of 'radical rationalism', which was developed in essays subsequent to *Individual and Infinity*. Kołakowski argues that for Spinoza, intellectual attitude in life is a part of human moral standpoint[321] – almost exactly the same idea presented in the revisionist and ethical essays from the latter half of the 1950s.

In Kołakowski's reading, this rational attitude to the world is the basis for Spinoza's ethics. The Dutch philosopher took up the most important intellectual

[317] Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność,* p. 7.
[318] K. Marx, 'Toward…' in *Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan, p. 72.
[319] Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność,* pp. 22–6.
[320] *Ibid.,* pp. 73–5.
[321] *Ibid.,* pp. 79–80.

challenge of his era – to liberate thinking from religious dogma, to fight for the human person's emancipation from any mystified extra-terrestrial forces. Finding a purely humanistic foundation for ethical behaviour is a vital part of this task:

> It is not god wearing the costume of a priest, it is the priest wearing the costume of god; one needs to expose god as a man, as a priest, that is, to disclose his orders, warrants and moral models as human models. But emancipation from god is at the same time the emancipation from a man, that legitimizes himself by god's authorization. Humanization of morality means freedom from the Church. [original capitalisation– HC][322]

Like for the young Marx, for Spinoza humanity is the only creator of ethical values, and there can be no transcendent source of morality at all.[323] This means that the quest for rules of behaviour in this world can be found only in this world: 'Spinozism is an affirmation of life, because of the life itself'[324] – an argument very similar to Kołakowski's description of the role of Communism in the essay *The Worldview and Everyday Life* (above, p. 57). Another crucial analogy made between Spinoza and the young Marx concerns their view on the relationship between the human person and nature: 'Spinozism is man's reintegration into the conditions of natural existence', writes Kołakowski, who sees it as a coexistence of the human individual with humanised nature.[325] This perception of individual as a fundamental part of nature results in a specific concept of human freedom. Freedom is not a feature of human nature, but rather a *situation* of a human being as a part of nature, determined by objective materialist conditions. It is a 'cognitive attitude to the world'.[326] A free person is someone following inner reason, and if the reason is a manifestation of the natural world, then to be free means to *understand necessities* determined by the natural world.

The relationship between the human nature and nature brings us to Kołakowski's interpretation of the idea of God in Spinoza's philosophy. It is important to stress, once again, that explaining the concept of divinity in *Ethics* remains one of the most complex and challenging questions in the history of religious thought. As such, it is not the purpose of this thesis, which only hopes to present how

[322] *Ibid.,* p. 301.
[323] *Ibid.,* p. 310.
[324] *Ibid.,* p. 323.
[325] *Ibid.,* pp. 168–70.
[326] *Ibid.,* p. 207.

Kołakowski's reading of Spinoza affected his own religious thought. The issue of what or who God actually is was central to the emergence of a new anthropocentric vision of the world:

> The problem of the relation between the world and man to God remained a central philosophical question also in Spinoza's times, and was in fact a question about the value of human life and about the possibility of man's impact on his own fate. The dispute over the existence of an extra-terrestrial creator and over his role in the creation and conservation of the world was a dispute over man's relation to his own life, or, using Marx's words, whether 'for man the root is man himself.'[327]

Kołakowski rejects the traditional interpretation, which labels Spinoza a pantheist.[328] The substance of the world was not created and, therefore, there is no transcendent divinity, but God is to be identified with nature.[329] At the same time, however, he is something more than the natural world. He is identical with the material world metaphysically, but not phenomenologically.[330] In Spinoza's thought, God is a *causa sui* – a substance that can have no other cause than itself, something that is infinite and un-creatable, its existence being constituted by its very essence.[331] In other words, it can be said that Spinoza's God is an illustration of an idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

This rather sophisticated concept has significant results. If God is neither a transcendent absolute, nor an anthropomorphised figure,[332] it means that individual is the only possible point of reference for oneself, 'the root for himself'. The individual is also a part of nature, but a part that is fundamentally different from all other things in that a person is a rational being, and for this reason, a person can get to know and understand the structure of the world through an intellectual effort.[333]The individual *per se* is the 'self-knowledge of the nature', nothing or no one else, and because of this, Kołakowski concludes, Spinoza's crucial message is succinctly presented in the aphorism from the *Ethics* that 'man is a God to man'.[334]

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[327] *Ibid.,* p. 99.
[328] *Ibid.,* pp. 179–80, 224.
[329] *Ibid.,* p. 108.
[330] *Ibid.,* p. 156.
[331] *Ibid.,* pp. 105–6.
[332] *Ibid.,* p. 137.
[333] *Ibid.,* p. 268.
[334] *Ibid.,* p. 174; see the motto of this chapter.

What is more, such a vision of God has not only ethical but also political consequences. Kołakowski comments on Spinoza's idea of religion's different forms in much greater detail than in his Stalinist doctoral dissertation. There are separate forms for the educated, 'enlightened' elite, and for the common people.[335] Spinoza argues the real nature of God is too sophisticated and too challenging for the vast majority of people. They need their churches, priests, miracles, Sunday masses, and commandments. To this effect, religion in a perfect state would foremost have a political and social, not spiritual significance. It would be completely separated from philosophy, a tool of social engineering to maintain peace and order, a matter of practical, not theoretical reason.[336] Anna Borowicz argues[337] that the vision of an enlightened elite leading the masses in Spinoza's writings resembles the idea of Marxist intellectuals set out in the essay *Intellectuals and the Communist Movement*, which dates from the same period. However, it must be emphasised that Spinoza is more radical and cynical in formulating this postulate – it seems like the Dutch philosopher cares little about social progress or the good of the common people.

A similar attitude applies to reading the Bible. The unenlightened, unable to comprehend God and nature intellectually, need fables and miracles as guidance in everyday life and as a source of morality.[338] Interestingly, in the *Theological-Political Treatise,* the only major work published during his lifetime, Spinoza became one of the first thinkers to carry out a radical criticism of the historical authenticity of the biblical tradition. Equipped with the lethal weapon of Cartesian rationalism, Spinoza argues that the Scriptures are not a revealed sacred text, but simply a human book that teaches benevolence and morality. The prophets were not 'enlightened', but rather simple people with a vivid imagination who could talk about God in the way comprehensible by the common people.[339]

The last important point raised by Kołakowski in *Individual and Infinity* is the question of Spinoza's philosophical heritage. There is no doubt that Spinoza's project of an all-embracing nature and the idea of determined human freedom were crucial sources of inspiration for the development of Hegelian and Marxist philosophies.[340]

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[335] *Ibid.,* pp. 21–23; 63–64; 365–6.
[336] *Ibid.,* pp. 373–4.
[337] A. Borowicz, *Rozwój filozofii kultury Leszka Kołakowskiego na tle filozofii polskiej w latach 1955–1966* (Gdańsk, 1997), p. 54.
[338] Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność,* pp. 382–5.
[339] *Ibid.,* pp. 59–61.
[340] *Ibid.,* p. 216.

However, Kołakowski is not particularly eager to describe Spinoza as a 'materialist' without any reservations. Kołakowski regards Spinozism as too complex and sophisticated for such easy labels, regarding it instead as 'a striking example against the view, according to which the division between materialist and idealist doctrines, in the understanding of Engels, is an exhaustive division'.[341] This stands in sharp contrast with his original judgement presented in the dissertation (Chapter I, p. 50). Kołakowski makes one more important argument as a historian of ideas – the story of *reception* of a philosopher's thought is as important as the original thought itself and should be carefully studied by historians. Even if the further development of a philosopher's doctrine is sometimes fallible, it always has some substantial premises, and it is a good practice to 'know the tree by its fruits'.[342] The whole point of studying the history of philosophy is not to perform an idle intellectual exercise, but to look into the past for inspiration that could answer questions raised by our own present time.[343] This will be particularly important in Kołakowski's history of Marxism, which is presented in the next chapter (pp. 145–54).

In the mid-1950s, when dynamic political events dramatically changed the face of Marxism and the position of Marxist intellectuals, Kołakowski attempted to develop a new rationalist philosophy to face the challenges of the time. He had also found a historical ally in the Dutch thinker who had put the human person at the centre of the universe three centuries earlier:

> Spinozian metaphysics is a quest for a man's place in the world, which needs to be found, in order to live without despair, regret and false hopes. Spinozian epistemology is an affirmation of man as a thinking subject. Anthropology – is looking for the life's value in the life itself and in possibilities of coexistence with nature.[344]

A post-Marxist historian of philosophy

The monograph on the philosophy of Spinoza was only one of Kołakowski's works as a historian of ideas between 1955 and 1965. He specialised in the seventeenth century, and most of his historical texts concern this period. The structure of these essays, and the kinds of arguments made are very different from

[341] *Ibid.,* p. 422.
[342] *Ibid.,* p. 396.
[343] *Ibid.,* p. 418.
[344] *Ibid.,* p. 396.

Kołakowski's Stalinist historical writings. The texts are devoid of ideological propaganda, the omnipresent materialist/idealist scheme, or any aggressive language. They are scholarly, substantial, sensitive to the inconsistencies of a philosopher's thought, and very often written in a vivid and witty language. Kołakowski's attitude to philosophy has changed significantly not only in his understanding of Marxism and its role in the contemporary world, but also in his analysis of the past. Despite these changes, one characteristic remains the same: his main concern is still religious thought. He looks at thinkers torn between the emergence of a new, rational, scientific understanding of the world, and their deep spirituality, which steadfastly refused to give way to reason. He is interested in paradoxes, contradictions, and people seeking their own way, often against official doctrines and institutions. Although he remains a rational jester, 'sceptical and suspicious towards absolutes of any kind', he continues to contemplate only the absolute – yet through an ironic lens.

Before delving into Kołakowski's historical texts, it is worth presenting one work that seems to have a very important influence on the way in which leftist intellectuals understood the history of philosophy. Lucien Goldmann's *The Hidden God*[345] from 1955 had a significant impact not only on Kołakowski and his writings, but on the whole group of Polish intellectual historians who, disillusioned with official Marxism after 1956, later formed the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas.[346] Goldmann was undoubtedly one of the most important and influential Marxist thinkers of the time. Inspired by Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness,* Goldmann is one of the first thinkers to have developed a more sophisticated Marxist historical methodology. He focuses on contradictions, arguing for the idea that a dialectical synthesis of a philosopher's thought might be paradoxical and logically incoherent. Nevertheless, even if these antinomies are unsolvable, this very fact constitutes the crucial lesson – some differences cannot be overcome and must be accepted as an ambiguous conclusion. Goldmann's works on Pascal were especially influential, and his thought is sometimes called 'Pascalian Marxism'. His original idea was to compare Pascal's famous wager[347] (Chapter IV, pp. 193–95), which bets on the

[345] L. Goldmann, *The Hidden God. A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. P. Thody (London, 2016); French edition: Paris, 1955.
[346] Interview with Bronisław Baczko, 17/12/2015; Interview with Andrzej Walicki, 14/11/2015.
[347] B. Pascal, *Pensées,* fr. 233; all quotations from *Pensées* are based on the Brunschvicg's edition, in W.F. Trotter's translation.

existence of God, with the 'Marxist wager', which bets on the future of humankind and, as Goldman believes, will develop as predicted by dialectical materialism.[348] Goldmann's perspective, like that of the young Marx, is fundamentally anthropological. In the introduction to *The Hidden God,* the author makes a statement that sounds very similar to the task set by Kołakowski in the introduction to *Individual and Infinity* – to 'present philosophy as a study of man':

> The main concern of any philosophical investigation is man, his behaviour and his knowledge of himself. In the final analysis, every philosophy implies an anthropology, a complete view of the nature of man.[349]

The most important methodological concept that Goldmann introduces in his work is the idea of a 'world vision', originally used by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911):

> What is a *world vision*? It is not an immediate, empirical fact, but a conceptual working hypothesis indispensable to an understanding of the way in which individuals actually express their ideas.[350]

In short, it is a general set of outlooks on the most important issues in life and about the world. As a Marxist, Goldmann argues that social classes create world visions, i.e. they are the ideological expression of a specific class consciousness in a particular moment in history.[351] What interests him is the tragic world vision of the mid-seventeenth–century French *noblesse de robe* – the group of nobility whose rank came not from inherited land, but from certain bureaucratic posts.[352] From time to time, a social class produces an exceptional individual, who conceptually expresses the world vision of his class.[353] In Goldmann's interpretation, this was the case with Pascal's *Pensées* as well as with Jean Racine's (1639–99) plays:

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[348] M. Löwy, 'Foreword' to Goldmann, *The Hidden God…*, pp. xii–xxii.
[349] Goldmann, *The Hidden God…*, p. 7.
[350] *Ibid.,* p. 15; The French term 'vision du monde' (English 'world vision') tends to be translated into Polish as 'światopogląd' (English: 'worldview', like the German 'Weltanschauung'), rather than 'wizja świata'. Henceforth, I will use the term 'worldview' in this sense.
[351] L. Goldmann, *Human Sciences and Philosophy*, trans. H.V. White, R. Anchor (London, 1969), pp. 102–3; French edition: Paris, 1966.
[352] *Ibid.,* pp. 64–5.
[353] Goldmann, *The Hidden God…*, pp. 17–19.

> For Pascal himself, there is really only one position which he regards as valid: that of the tragic dialectic which replies both 'Yes' and 'No' to all the fundamental problems created by man's life and by his relationship with the universe and his fellows.[354]

When introducing the concept of the 'Marxist wager', Goldmann is firm that Marx's wager, unlike that of Pascal, rejects any transcendence, and that standing on naturalistic, immanent grounds, 're-establishes the unity of man with the world'.[355] He describes the 'tragic world vision' as a situation in which a human person is not satisfied with possibilities offered by the world, and yet refuses to abandon the world, accepting the inescapable incompleteness of his existence. This way of experiencing life is profoundly dialectical, as it aims to achieve a synthesis of contradictory positions:

> This is why tragic man, torn between 'Yes' or 'No', will always scorn those who choose an intermediary position, and will remain instead on the only level whose value he recognizes to be adequate: that of saying both 'Yes' and 'No', of attempting to realize a synthesis.[356]

This also relates to a tragic vision of God, who is both present in the world and hidden from the human person, both absent and present at the same time:

> It is only the man who is supremely conscious both of the demand for absolute values and of the impossibility of ever satisfying this demand in the real world who sees the paradoxical nature of the tragic God.[357]

This is exactly one of the main themes in the evolution of Leszek Kołakowski's religious thought: 'the demand for absolute values and […] the impossibility of ever satisfying this demand'. The realisation of this paradox was to a great extent inspired by Goldmann's work on Pascal from the mid-1950s. But how could he come to terms with this antinomy if he stood on the position of 'radical rationalism'? He did not. It is not a matter of reason. This is the moment when Goldmann applies to Pascal the Kantian distinction between theoretical and practical reason. A human person, he writes, can only know God's nature practically, not theoretically; certainty about this

[354] *Ibid.,* p. 11.
[355] *Ibid.,* p. 48.
[356] *Ibid.,* p. 57.
[357] *Ibid.,* p. 62.

issue cannot be achieved by human reason.[358] But, in Pascal's poetic phrase, this might be a 'reason of the heart'.[359] As one of the founders of modern physics and a leading figure in the early modern scientific revolution, but also a polemist associated with the Jansenist group and their demanding religiosity, Pascal was tormented by this conflict himself: 'in theory, he recognized the absolute primacy of religion; but in practice, he continued to live in the world'.[360] Goldmann suggests that Pascal's solution was Christianity, as the only religion to ask for belief in a contradictory and a paradoxical God, both a human person, and the Absolute at the same time.[361]

There can be no doubt that Lucien Goldmann's *The Hidden God* had a crucial influence on the development of Kołakowski's thought. He had read it at some point in the late 1956 or early 1957,[362] so exactly at the time when he rejected the official interpretation of Marxism. Goldmann's interpretation of Pascal and his specific sensitivity to the insolvable conflicts deeply embedded in the very nature of things helped Kołakowski to formulate his own philosophy. He wrote a review of Goldmann's book,[363] the first of two important texts on Pascal from the period analysed in this chapter. Kołakowski's lifelong preoccupation with Pascal bore fruit in a separate book, which is closely investigated in Chapter IV (pp. 184–98). However, we should now look at a few intellectual history essays published between 1957 and 1965, which will incisively present a great transformation of Kołakowski as a historian of ideas. He is no longer the youthful propagandist of the Stalinist period who sees in history a mere tool for short-term political agitation. He becomes a thinker who treats the past as a source of inspiration for answering the question of the present.

The review opens with the discussion of Goldmann's concept of a 'worldview' as a 'significant global structure'. Kołakowski argues that while the 'worldview' cannot be simply identified with philosophy, it can find its expression in philosophical discourse, as well as in religious thought, political ideas, literature, or fine arts. Notably, and Kołakowski admits sharing this attitude, Goldmann sees

[358] *Ibid.,* p. 67.
[359] Pascal, *Pensées,* fr. 277: 'The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.'
[360] Goldmann, *The Hidden God*…, p. 181.
[361] *Ibid.,* pp. 306–7.
[362] Chudoba, *Kronika*…, p. 129.
[363] L. Kołakowski, 'Pascal i epistemologia historyczna Goldmanna', in Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji*…, tom I (Londyn, 2002); first published: *Studia Filozoficzne* 3/1957.

'worldviews' as the best units for a historical study.[364] However, the idea that Marxist social classes determine worldviews is an oversimplification.[365] Kołakowski emphasises that the 'tragic vision' of the *noblesse de robe* was principally a reaction to the seventeenth-century rationalism and sceptical empiricism that emerged with Descartes. This worldview accepted the major notion of this new philosophy – a rational, independent individual – but refused to accept rationalism as the most important characteristic of a human being. A follower of this worldview rejects the world, but decides to remain within the world; it declares a radical uncertainty about the transcendence, but hopes for its existence. In short, it unifies contradictions. A monologue with the hidden, silent God, just like in the *Pensées*, is the only acceptable literary form to express this tragic vision.[366] Kołakowski concludes his text with an important methodological statement. Since Lucien Goldmann was universally considered an important Marxist thinker, *The Hidden God* served as an excellent example to show again that the traditional dichotomy between materialism and idealism is not a good historiographical tool, but that dialectical materialism can inspire a different and successful type of intellectual history.[367]

The second important text on Pascal from this period is a short essay entitled *Pascal's Banality*, which was prepared as an afterword to the Polish edition of *Provincial Letters*,[368] and was written five years after the review of *The Hidden God*. Kołakowski again starts by emphasising the paradoxical nature of the Pascal's thought, but this time he paints a broader panorama of the theological and political conflict between the Jansenists and Jesuits in mid-seventeenth-century France.[369] For the first time, Kołakowski formulates a clear respect for the 'genius of Jesuitism', i.e. the ability of the Catholic Church to find an inclusive formula for a religion with a benevolent God, a divinity that is not hidden and demanding, but easily accessible to everyone.[370] This is the successful Counter-Reformation he had in mind (above, p. 72). The Jansenists fought against this vision of Christianity, and the ruthless pen of Pascal served as their weapon in this polemic. However, as Kołakowski notes, the

[364] *Ibid.,* pp. 222–24.
[365] *Ibid.,* pp. 225–6.
[366] *Ibid.,* pp. 229–31.
[367] *Ibid.,* p. 239.
[368] L. Kołakowski, 'Banał Pascala' in Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji…*, tom I (Londyn, 2002); first published: *Zeszyty Argumentów* 4/1962; an afterword to B. Pascal, *Prowincjałki*, tłum.: T. Boy– Żeleński (Warszawa, 1963).
[369] *Ibid.,* pp. 213–15.
[370] *Ibid.,* p. 217.

Pascal of the *Provincial Letters* is very different to the Pascal of the *Pensées*. He did not defend Christianity from irrational positions, but attacked Jesuits and their theology from a rationalist, 'common sense' stand, pointing out their inconsistencies, hypocrisy and lukewarm attitude towards moral rules.[371] However, in Kołakowski's interpretation, the *Pensées* will not be a rejection of this apparent rationalism; they will be its development: 'The last proceeding of reason is to recognize that there is an infinity of things which are beyond it.'[372] This is exactly the paradoxical message Pascal delivered:

> Man's greatness is determined through reason, but reason establishes its own greatness, when it proclaims and accepts its own humbleness; (…) In other words: awareness of our own limits and unreasonable desire of overcoming them – both constitute a man, who realizes through himself all that a man can realize. Every single limit is possible to overcome, but it is impossible to overcome the fact that there is always a limit.[373]

The text entitled *The Worldview of the Seventeenth Century*[374] is a prime example of how Kołakowski's interpretation of specific historical period evolved over the course of the 1950s. Written as an introduction to a collection of primary texts from early modern philosophy, the essay gives a panoramic view of the period, and is especially interesting if compared with *Seventeenth-Century West-European Philosophy*, which was prepared as a textbook for IKKN students (analysed in Chapter I, pp. 44–46). The new text omits the extended socio-economic introduction typical of the Marxists texts. Instead, Kołakowski stresses the fact that the seventeenth century was a transitional period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, a period when the rapid emergence of the scientific revolution exerted constant pressure on philosophical thinking.[375] Kołakowski addresses the same issue discussed in *Seventeenth-Century West-European Philosophy*, but from a very different point of view. The Stalinist text emphasises that the new science 'liberated philosophy' from religion, while in the new interpretation, the tone is much more balanced and nuanced, suggesting that Cartesian rationalism changed the way people viewed the world and

[371] *Ibid.,* pp. 215–16.
[372] *Ibid.,* p. 219; Pascal, *Pensées,* fr. 267.
[373] Kołakowski, 'Banał Pascala', p. 220.
[374] L. Kołakowski, 'Światopogląd XVII stulecia', in *Filozofia XVII wieku. Francja, Holandia, Niemcy*, ed. L. Kołakowski (Warszawa, 1959).
[375] *Ibid.,* pp. 7–13.

the way they understood their religion, without passing strong judgements.[376] We can spot the influence of Kołakowski's long study of the young Marx and Spinoza in the prioritisation of the problem of unity between a human person and nature in all early modern doctrines.[377] Once again, we read an argument that the rationalist turn triggered by Descartes and his philosophy had a significant result in creating a naturalistic vision of humankind – thanks to the *cogito*, a human person is understood primarily in intellectual categories, not as a soteriological object, as in the mediaeval scholasticism of St Thomas Aquinas.[378] Rational thinking resulted in the questioning of the authority of religious revelation, but eventually also led to the secularisation of thinking and the questioning of authorities in political life.[379] Finally, Kołakowski concludes that the seventeenth century is a period of striking contradictions, with no single prevailing *Zeitgeist*. We can argue, he suggests, that these antinomies are:

> (…) perhaps, not only a result of a natural pluralism of ideas, characteristic to almost every time period, but that they come from the emerging consciousness of antinomies existing in the very nature of things.[380]

Before we proceed to the most important historical work from the period analysed in this chapter – *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* – it is worth looking at two more texts from the first half of 1960s. Kołakowski wrote profiles of two early modern thinkers, which were seen by many contemporaries as self-portraits of a leftist intellectual who rejects the official interpretation of the doctrine, and looks for independent ways of thinking. The first of these essays presents the seventeenth-century French priest Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655).[381] Even though a member of the clergy (just as Kołakowski was still a member of the Party in the early 1960s, one could say), Gassendi was a sceptical erudite who distanced himself from all the dogmatic disputes of his times, was reluctant to make any absolute statements, was critical of natural theology and dissociated himself from the obscurantism of the Church. He spent most of his time with the like-minded

[376] *Ibid.,* pp. 15–20.
[377] *Ibid.,* p. 11.
[378] *Ibid.,* p. 30.
[379] *Ibid.,* pp. 36–38.
[380] *Ibid.,* pp. 42–43.
[381] L. Kołakowski, 'Pierre Gassendi: Christian, Materialist, Skeptic', in Kołakowski, *The Two Eyes…*; first published: 'Piotr Gassendi – chrześcijanin, materialista, sceptyk', an introduction to P. Gassendi, *Logika*, trans. L. Chmaj (Warszawa, 1964).

intellectuals referred to by historians 'French libertines'.[382] Like the 'radical rationalism' presented by Kołakowski in the *Irrationalities of Rationalism*, libertinism is an attitude, an ethical standpoint in life rather than any systematic doctrine. It is 'a kind of calm sceptical detachment towards the age in which one lives, often ironic and tinged with a certain melancholy. But the irony is not combative, the scepticism is not militant or doctrinal, and the melancholy is not despair'.[383] Such an attitude has naturally political consequence – religion in public life should be a simple ritual, a tool to achieve social cohesion, reduced to its most important beliefs, just like in Spinoza's system.[384] Participating in religious ceremonies should be like paying taxes.[385] In his writings, Gassendi attacks the popular form of 'religiosity', beliefs in superstitions, quacks and phantoms. However, many of his contemporaries read these descriptions between the lines as a thinly veiled critique of Catholicism:

> But to readers the analogy was plain: their criticism of pagan priests, seers and soothsayers, oracles, prophecies and miracles relied rather too heavily on examples which bore striking resemblance to popularly known Christian legends.[386]

But what about the Polish readership of the 1960s? Did they read Kołakowski's historical work as a sophisticated critique of a system that claimed to be socialist, but was in reality a perverted version of the doctrine? The author distanced himself from such interpretations,[387] even if his thought after the revisionist period was a kind of 'socialist libertinism' to many contemporaries.[388] Paradoxically, in the text about Pierre Gassendi, Kołakowski once again made a very important historical claim: in the history of ideas, the afterlife of a thinker is as important as the original thought. It is not about what you originally wanted to say, Kołakowski believed, but rather about whom and what you influence: 'In other words, might, in this domain, is right', he emphasised.[389] As we have already seen, it was true for Baruch Spinoza, it was true for Pierre Gassendi, but also obviously, as we will see in Chapter III, it was also true in the case of Karl Marx.

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[382] *Ibid.,* pp. 105–6.
[383] *Ibid.,* p. 111.
[384] *Ibid.,* p. 113.
[385] *Ibid.,* p. 141.
[386] *Ibid.,* p. 114.
[387] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…*, tom I, pp. 205–6.
[388] M. Król, *Czego nas uczy Leszek Kołakowski* (Warszawa, 2010), p. 45.
[389] Kołakowski, 'Pierre Gassendi…', p. 138.

The thought of the Gassendi had one more important aspect that links him to the protagonist of the second 'self-depiction' from the early 1960s. Gassendi opted for an optimistic vision of human nature, seeing the human person as fundamentally good, rather than corrupted by original sin.[390] The great Renaissance humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) had promoted these views more than a hundred years earlier, on the eve of the Protestant Reformation. The essay *Erasmus and his God*,[391] which was published in 1965, may be seen as a summary of the long intellectual journey that Kołakowski – a historian of religious ideas – travelled between 1955 and 1965. He neither attacks nor criticises; he investigates an author who is obviously close to him, someone he could identify with.

Erasmus understood Christianity as a religion of Grace, the greatest chance to cultivate what is best in human beings:

> For Erasmus, Christianity was not a violation of human nature; it was an ennobling of that nature, a growth stimulus for at least some of its innate tendencies. (…) Grace does not kill human nature; it purifies and elevates it. Christianity is the continuation of the good aspects of man's nature, not the triumphant conquest of nature by super-nature.[392]

Kołakowski argues that Erasmus' genius can be contributed to the fact that he does not contradict human nature and divine Grace, but looks for a formula that reconciles both: 'For it tells Christians to behave as if everything dependent on their own efforts while at the same time telling them that nothing does.'[393] This is naturally a paradoxical position, which once again reminds us of the 'tragic world vision' found in Pascal, and in the seventeenth-century conflict between Jesuits and Jansenists. We may again see the concept of an ideology that is not based on an established doctrine and codes of rules, but is fundamentally a *moral stand*, an open-ended attitude in life, for which the perspective of relationship with other people is always the crucial point of view. A rather lengthy fragment is worth quoting, as it clearly presents Kołakowski's vision of Christianity in 1965, which is strikingly different from the way he saw religion as a tool of oppression and alienation in the early 1950s:

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[390] *Ibid.,* p. 132.
[391] L. Kołakowski, 'Erasmus and his God', in *Is God Happy?*; first published: 'Erazm i jego Bóg', an introduction to Erazm z Rotterdamu, *Podręcznik żołnierza Chrystusowego nauk zbawiennych pełny*, trans. and ed. J. Domański (Warszawa, 1965).
[392] *Ibid.,* p. 176.
[393] *Ibid.,* p. 179.

> Christianity as Erasmus understood it was defined above all through its opposition to the religion of the Old Testament – a religion of Law, where the relation between God and the faithful is a sort of business contract. (…) The relation with God is one of love, involving no calculation; the Covenant with God is not a system of mutual claims and obligations but a free and unconstrained personal relationship – and thus essentially an irrational one, involving no justifications or claims. (…)
>
> In Erasmus's writings all roads led towards the same goal: the restitution of Christianity as the effective readiness to fulfil the dictates of morality (…) These dictates are simple and can be understood by everyone; they do not require superhuman heroism or extraordinary talents; they are cut to fit human beings and are addressed to all. The rest is of no importance.[394]

Both Erasmus in the early sixteenth century and Kołakowski in the mid-twentieth saw the importance of ideas one believes in not as lying in any specific commandments of the doctrine or subjugation to an authority that guards this doctrine. They saw it as consisting in the way one behaves towards other people and the rest as being of no real significance.

But if the rest is of no importance, then what is the point of theological debates and confessional exclusivity? Why do we need an organised institution that decides on the legitimacy of our beliefs, and may condemn us on some theoretical grounds, even if we prove with our practical actions that the ideals of the doctrine have been truly realised in our lives? Erasmus always declared himself a faithful son of the Church and believed in an evangelical reform programme from within the institution.[395] Kołakowski used his case to demonstrate the institutional flexibility of the Catholic Church, which had managed to assimilate and neutralise his non-confessional ideas to its own purposes during the Counter-Reformation.[396] Nevertheless, Erasmus is responsible for sowing seeds of doubt as to whether ecclesiastical structures are needed for salvation:

> For Erasmus the Church was not a goal in itself, to which all other values must be subordinated; on the contrary, it was an instrument, useful only in so far as it was able to transmit the pure and undistorted values of the Gospels to the faithful. (…) There was no escaping the fact that his ideas, if followed to their logical conclusion, ultimately compelled a choice: either Christianity or the Church; either the Gospels or organized religion.[397]

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[394] *Ibid.,* pp. 174–5.
[395] *Ibid.,* p. 181.
[396] L. Kołakowski, 'O upadkach religijnych reformatorów', in *Notatki*..., pp. 115–18.
[397] Kołakowski, *Is God Happy?*, p. 181.

This is one of the most important and recurring antinomies we can find in Kołakowski's thought, both in his original philosophical essays, and historical scholarship: the conflict between a living *idea* and an established *doctrine*, between an independent *individual* and a controlling *institution*. Some commentators, such as Adam Michnik, ask the question: 'Did Kołakowski want to be an Erasmus of the Marxist Church?'[398] Was there a place for an ideological dissident who could remain a member of the organisation and change the system from within? To some extent, this issue was answered in the work that is widely considered Kołakowski's crowning achievement as a post-Marxist historian of philosophy. This work was neither a short essay nor the introduction to a different text, but the result of seven years of research, a six hundred page study of seventeenth-century religiosity, which we will examine now.

Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond

Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond is in fact a collection of case studies, divided into two clear parts. The first part concerns the so-called 'Second Reformation' in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, when numerous Protestant groups resisted the growth of established Calvinist churches and pursued their quests for a 'real', 'pure' form of Christianity. The second part analyses a few cases of early modern mysticism in Catholic France. Naturally, the main question revolves around what these two different forms of religiosity – non-denominational churches, on the one hand, and a critically individualistic, transcendental relationship with God, on the other – can tell us about religion in the early modern period. However, Kołakowski also asks whether they reveal other universal phenomena that transcend any specific historical era. Before we proceed with the text itself, it is worth looking more closely at an important contextual aspect of this book – Kołakowski's intellectual milieu in the first half of 1960s.

The Warsaw School of the History of Ideas was the name given to an interesting, if short-lived, group of academics working at the University of Warsaw and Polish Academy of Sciences in that period. The pivotal moment of the School

[398] A. Michnik, 'Książę i żebrak', in *Polskie pytania* (Warszawa, 2009), p. 214.

came in years 1964–1965, when, in addition to *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*, three other major studies were published: the monograph *Rousseau: Solitude and Community* by Bronisław Baczko (1924–2016), *Counterrevolutionary Paradoxes*, a study of conservative thought after the French Revolution, by Jerzy Szacki (1929–2016), and *The Slavophil Controversy*, a study of nineteenth-century Russian conservatism by Andrzej Walicki (born 1930). From the titles alone, we can see that all of these books deal with 'paradoxes', 'controversies', historical contradictions that cannot be solved, 'antinomies existing in the very nature of things'. All of these authors shared experiences of war, Stalinism, and the Thaw of 1955–1957. Apart from Walicki, they were all members of the Party.[399] For many years, they not only collaborated in academic and political circles, but also formed close social relations.[400] They spent their formative years at the IKKN, which was designed to train the new generation of orthodox Marxist scholars. Thanks to the relative freedom of research, however, the IKKN turned out to be a nest of revisionists.[401] The Warsaw School of the History of Ideas can be seen as a direct result of the political transformation that began in October 1956.[402] Other leftist thinkers asked themselves the question Kołakowski had posed in his essays from 1955–1957: 'what is to be done with Marxism?'[403] Starting in the late 1950s, numerous Polish intellectuals found refuge in historical studies in lieu of continuing theoretical debates on the development of Marxism. Such an approach – historical studies rather than philosophical discussions – was specific to Poland and did not occur in other socialist countries.[404] Debates on the nature and future of Marxism were especially vivid in Yugoslavia and in Czechoslovakia, where philosophical development paved the way for the Prague Spring in 1968. However, Kołakowski and his peers looked to the past to find new formulas for a better version of socialist philosophy. Andrzej Walicki argues this was the result of a much deeper and faster disillusionment with the official orthodoxy. The intellectual leaders of the group – Kołakowski and Baczko – developed a sophisticated scepticism, which in the late

[399] A. Walicki, 'On writing…', p. 10.
[400] R. Sitek, *Warszawska Szkoła Historii Idei* (Warszawa, 2000), p. 17.
[401] *Ibid.,* pp. 57–9.
[402] M. Szpakowska, 'Dyskusja: Warszawska szkoła historii idei – powstanie, przekształcenia, kontynuacje' in *Wokół dorobku Warszawskiej Szkoły Historii Idei,* ed. A. Kołakowski (Warszawa, 2013), p. 27.
[403] J. Szacki, 'Marksizm po bardzo wielu latach', in *Warszawska Szkoła Historii Idei. Tożsamość, Tradycja, Obecność,* ed. Paweł Grad (Warszawa, 2014), pp. 21–23.
[404] Walicki, 'On writing…', pp. 12–13.

1950s helped them to abandon a naïve belief in the possibility of reforming the system from within. Walicki describes Polish post-Stalinist socialists not as Don Quixotes, knights-errant of a lost cause, but rather as Hamlets, dwelling on their reflections and insolvable paradoxes.[405]

What were the main assumptions of the Warsaw School's methodology? Without doubt, the most important influences were Lukács' concept of 'class consciousness' and Goldmann's idea of 'world vision' (or 'worldview').[406] 'Worldview', the main research unit, was useful in building a broader intellectual perspective of a historical period by looking at different authors, their socio-economic contexts, and wider cultural backgrounds.[407] Importantly, Goldmann's method in his historiography of ideas suggested that historical inquiries are not intellectual exercises for their own sake, but rather tools in understanding our situation today:

> If knowledge of history has any practical importance for us, it is because we learn from it, about men who, in *different* circumstances and with *different* means, for the most part inapplicable in our own time, fought for values and ideals which were similar, identical, or opposed to those of today; and this makes us conscious of belonging to a totality which transcends us, which we support in the present and which men who come after us will continue to support in the future.[408]

Other important methodological inspirations for the Warsaw School included Claude Levi-Strauss' (1908–2009) structuralism and Karl Mannheim's (1893–1947) sociology of knowledge.[409] In short, with its focus on broader socio-intellectual contexts, attention to lesser-known thinkers (which is especially true for *Religious Consciousness*), the Warsaw School did not practice a classical history of ideas, as represented in Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (1936);[410] instead its approach was closer to what would later be established as the Cambridge School.

Walicki argues that Kołakowski's introduction to *Individual and Infinity* is the first 'manifesto' of the School's methodology.[411] Although this fragment has already been quoted earlier in this chapter, it is worth repeating it again:

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[405] *Ibid.,* p. 13.
[406] Sitek, *Warszawska Szkoła…*, pp. 81–2.
[407] *Ibid.,* pp. 165–70.
[408] Goldmann, *Human Sciences and Philosophy*, pp. 28–9.
[409] Sitek, *Warszawska Szkoła…*, pp. 123–5.
[410] *Ibid.,* p. 133.
[411] Walicki, 'On writing…', p. 14.

> (…) it is about interpreting classical problems of philosophy as problems of moral nature, (…) to present the problem of god as the problem of man, the problem of earth and heaven as the problem of human freedom, (…) the problem of human nature as the problem of relations between people. (…) This work is an attempt to present philosophy as a study of man.[412]

Philosophy, and history of philosophy, is a study of individuals, their nature and questions that concern them, not of class struggle, or progress, or historical necessity of any kind. Bronisław Baczko presented a more comprehensive proposition in the 1958 article *Crypto-Problems and Historicism*.[413] He argued that historical investigations result in finding a number of crypto-problems, which mask the actual, substantial philosophical issues, which must be revealed by a historian of ideas. The subject of philosophy cannot be determined beforehand, in an *a priori* form, it is forged in the process of philosophising.[414] All-embracing perspectives of the world, such as Marxism, often impose such pre-determined questions. But accepting Marxism as a worldview does not have to mean accepting that all of these questions have to be found in different branches of knowledge.[415] According to Baczko, the key issue of historiography from a Marxist perspective is to associate historical perspective with people's emancipation from alienation.[416] In 1964, at the time when his monograph on Rousseau was published, Baczko summarised the methodological evolution of intellectual historians, who emerged from Stalinist propagandists in the early 1950s, as follows:

> The issue here is a philosophical historiography that is oriented anthropologically, analysing philosophy not only from the perspective of its cognitive functions, but from the perspective of its expressive functions toward human attitudes, conflicts and antinomies, both historical-social and existential.[417]

Finally, Kołakowski also presented methodological remarks in the *Religious Consciousness*. He did not prepare any systematic introduction though, choosing instead to scatter methodological statements throughout the text. Drawing on concepts

[412] Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność,* p. 7.
[413] B. Baczko, 'Kryptoproblemy i historyzm' in Baczko, *Człowiek i światopoglądy* (Warszawa, 1965).
[414] *Ibid.,* pp. 373–6.
[415] *Ibid.,* p. 391.
[416] *Ibid.,* p. 411.
[417] B. Baczko, 'Filozofia polska w dwudziestoleciu. Historia filozofii nowożytnej', in *Studia Filozoficzne* 3/1964, p. 22.

of ‘worldviews’ and ‘significant global structures’, he proposed a notion of ‘expressionist historiography’ that ‘organises empirical elements of the historical world and subjugates them to a central idea. This central idea gives meaning to each element, and manifests itself in a system of ideal constructions’.[418] The historian must look for a *human* sense in a work, which seems meaningless from a purely scholarly or even logical perspective. Kołakowski argues that in order to achieve this, one must fulfil two contradictory requirements. First, historians must identify with people from the past to such an extent that would enable seeing their times from their own point of view, that is seeing their times as an open perspective; but secondly, one must understand a historical period in a broader panorama from a different temporal viewpoint, i.e. to see one’s own era as a closed perspective. Both of these conditions are necessary, but cannot be realised in the same cognitive act.[419]

Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond starts with a study of the seventeenth-century Second Reformation in the Netherlands. At that time, various Protestant societies refused to accept the establishment of state-sponsored churches that wanted to codify the religious doctrine. Kołakowski is interested in the ‘non-confessional’ Christians, i.e. thinkers and groups that reject the idea of an organised religious institution altogether. In his view, this is especially interesting for two reasons. Firstly, by virtue of rejecting institutional constraints, they represent the phenomenon of religiousness in its possibly purest form. Secondly, they are heretics, not because they believe or not in a specific dogma, but because they *have to be* heretics as a result of their rejection of the very fundamental idea of a church that defines all dogmas.[420] In wake of the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the Catholic Church established a rule of *ex opere operato*, which meant that all liturgical acts were valid only by virtue of the legitimacy of a priest’s consecrations, whatever his moral qualities. Protestant theologians rejected this rule and stood by the principles of justification by faith, predestination and efficacious grace. However, in the practice of religious life, these rules had exactly the same effect as the Catholic *ex opere operato*. How do I prove that I truly believe in God and that I am thus saved? How do I know I have been predestined to be saved? This is possible only by participating in an

[418] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna…*, p. 253.
[419] *Ibid.,* p. 554.
[420] *Ibid.,* pp. 5–7.

organised religious community and following its commandments. What Kołakowski is interested in here are the groups that reject both the Catholic and Protestant position.[421] The rise of such communities naturally adds an important socio-political dimension. The early modern Netherlands was the most tolerant country in Europe: it was where dissidents from all over the continent found refuge. It was also a country with a booming economy thanks to the rise of international commerce. In Kołakowski's historical interpretation, the newly enriched merchant class needed a religion that was not as strict and demanding as the first wave of Protestantism, but which would provide clear set of moral rules. They were worried about their businesses, so they did not want to worry about constantly having to make ethical decisions anew. In short, they needed a moral code. Established Calvinism provided a formula for such religion, being a convenient belief for everyday life, for 'normal people', average people with average families and regular jobs, it 'sanctified the mediocrity of bourgeois life'.[422] Kołakowski's protagonists did not want to fit into this scheme. They wanted a religion that was able to fulfil their life in its totality but that also left space for individual choices and focused on everyday issues rather than dogmatic speculation. As we have seen before, an important inspiration for such religiosity was Erasmus, who believed that such a religion should not be a ritual or a dogmatic code, but a practice of everyday life that is realised in relationships with other people.[423]

The first thinker analysed in the book is Dirk Camphuysen (1586–1627), 'the most symptomatic example of the incurable antagonism between religion and church'.[424] Camphuysen's Christianity is an entirely individual's affair. It states that good deeds or participation in sacraments are irrelevant if they are not the product of sincere inner convictions and that these convictions must be realised in everyday life. Camphuysen believes both of these conditions to be necessary.[425] He summarises the programme of religion reduced to ethical relations with other people in a laconic statement: 'Our religion is to do God's Will. To do God's Will is to do good.'[426] Like Erasmus, Camphuysen argues this is not a very difficult commandment and that every

[421] *Ibid.,* pp. 16–18.
[422] *Ibid.,* pp. 41–43; a similar argument was later made by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).
[423] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna…*, pp. 61–62.
[424] *Ibid.,* p. 65.
[425] *Ibid.,* p. 73.
[426] *Ibid.,* p. 69.

single person has a natural capacity to achieve the goodness necessary for salvation.[427] This naturally has a fundamental political and theological consequence – we do not need a separate priestly caste. For Camphuysen, the Church is not about religion, but about political power, and nothing else.[428] Kołakowski sums up Camphuysen's philosophy as 'a thought of Erasmus after a century of disappointments'.[429]

Galenus (1622–1706) proposed a less radical stance. He believed that the Church as such is not necessarily bad, but that the only 'real' church is that of Christ and the Apostles. Ever since that time, his argument continues, churches have been simple human institutions, communities helping us to become better Christians, and not a divine worldly instrument with any religious authority over people.[430]

According to Kołakowski, the greatest challenge the Second Reformation faced was the revolution brought by Cartesian philosophy. If human beings are defined as fundamentally thinking subjects who perceive reality through reason, then from the Christian perspective, it is crucial to ask whether the reason is a part of our humanity that was made 'in God's image', the divine channel through which God speaks to us, or, if it is a part of our fallen nature, which only deceives us and leads us into temptation. If one were to follow the non-denominational ideas of Camphuysen, that person would be sceptical of using reason in religion. Rationalising dogmas results in the creation of theology as a separate branch, which requires professional theologians, and a caste of priests that interpret the doctrine for the people. This is what the papist Rome does with its scholasticism, and what authoritarian Protestants do.[431] If we try to apply rationalism to religious beliefs, the only result is their irrationalisation, Kołakowski argued.

The story of Johannes Bredenburg (1643–1691) is a perfect illustration of such a process.[432] His theology is a programme of Cartesian religion that is based entirely on reason, deprived of any Revelation, but justifying evangelical morality with rational arguments.[433] It is also a non-denominational project, as the interpretation of

[427] *Ibid.,* p. 79.
[428] *Ibid.,* pp. 94–95.
[429] *Ibid.,* p. 98.
[430] *Ibid.,* pp. 131–45.
[431] *Ibid.,* pp. 172–5.
[432] For a more recent discussion of Bredenburg's ideas, see: J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: philosophy and the making of modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 342–58.
[433] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna…*, p. 180.

dogmas or of the Scriptures is not agreed upon with any community, but derived from rational reasoning. However, Kołakowski meticulously describes how other theologians forced Bredenburg into polemics and how Bredenburg eventually capitulated from his earlier positions and admitted defeat, accepting that rational religion makes no sense, and that religious faith cannot be justified on rational grounds:

> Therefore, if we want to save religion, we have to accept that its world is governed by rules that are contradictory to those rules governing nature and human reason, it means we must accept the total irrationality of religious faith.[434]

Orthodoxy, be it Marxist or Christian, is always a monolith. As we have already learnt from the essay *The Death of the Gods* (above, pp. 58–59), it must be all-encompassing. When someone puts into doubt only one aspect of it, it results in a collapse of the whole structure.[435] Therefore, one could not simply 'purify' the doctrine of irrational elements and re-establish it on rational grounds. However, Kołakowski argues, early modern Christian apologists were caught in a catch 22 situation: with progress in the natural sciences on the verge of the Enlightenment, the defence of religion from irrational positions meant the collection of arguments against religion as such.[436]

Issues of confessionality and rationality were brought together in a late seventeenth-century dispute between the factions of Voetians and Cocceians (from the names of their respective leaders – Gisbertus Voetius and Johannes Cocceius). Kołakowski again deliberates on the nature of Counter-Reformation as a movement *within* an institution that takes up some arguments of the critical reformists and attempts to alter them by absorbing some elements into orthodoxy. However, it seems there is no limit to the budding of theological divisions. In a classic dialectical process, this Counter-Reformation facilitates the emergence of another reformatory movement as a response to institutional reaction.[437] Kołakowski argues that in the Second Reformation, this was the case with Voetianism and Cocceianism respectively. Voetians called for a strict moral renewal, but by remaining within the

[434] *Ibid.,* p. 183–98.
[435] *Ibid.,* p. 99.
[436] *Ibid.,* pp. 200–201.
[437] *Ibid.,* pp. 209–10.

institutional structure of the Calvinist church.[438] Followers of Cocceius presented the non-denominational views we have already encountered: the Christian community should be based on moral standards, and not on an organisation, people need no intermediaries in interpreting the Scriptures, whereas rituals and sacraments do not really matter.[439] At the same time, however, they called for the secularisation and rationalisation of everyday thinking, especially in the development of natural sciences.[440] Another incarnation of non-confessionalism would not be as interesting, had Cocceianism not evolved further in the thought of Frederik van Leenhof (1647–1713).[441] Influenced by Cartesian rationalism, as well as by Spinozian naturalism, he proposed in *Heaven on Earth* (1703) not only full secularisation of thinking, but also shifting religious interests towards the temporal matters, with total affirmation of joyful life and worldly delights.[442] This was too much for the moral standards of the early eighteenth century; van Leenhof was forced to repudiate his theses and his followers dispersed.[443] Kołakowski argues that the cases of Bredenburg and of Cocceius provide us with the important conclusion that rationalism is irreconcilable with religion and that any attempts to synthesise the Cartesian *cogito* with Christian dogmas are nothing but illusory solutions that eventually resulted in conflict. Kołakowski summarises by saying that '"Heaven on Earth" proved to be impossible' and that 'heaven is against earth, as long as heaven and earth exist.'[444]

The second part of *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* analyses a few cases of early modern Catholic mysticism. Mysticism, and the phenomenology of religious experience in general, is one of the most challenging questions in intellectual history. Analysis of these issues was first presented in the works of Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), especially in the concept of 'numinous', or in the writings by Max Scheler (1874–1928). In the mid-twentieth century, important developments were presented by Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), whose thought will be discussed in more detail in Chapter III (pp. 115–19). Mystical experiences are common to virtually every religious tradition, but a variety of these experiences

[438] *Ibid.,* p. 212.
[439] *Ibid.,* pp. 220–21.
[440] *Ibid.,* p. 213.
[441] See also: Israel, *Radical Enlightenment…*, pp. 406–35.
[442] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna…*, p. 227.
[443] *Ibid.,* pp. 242–5.
[444] *Ibid.,* p. 247.

requires a slightly different approach for each case.[445] All mystical experiences are deeply rooted not only in their particular religious tradition, but also in a specific historical context, and they do not fully 'transcend' their historical time. The experience must be mediated by a mystic, who is also a historical being who belongs to a certain time.[446]

The notion of achieving ontological unity between the human and the divine is one of the most constitutive elements of Christian mysticism, and distinguishes it from Judaist and Islamic traditions. The starting point is the experience of finitude and contingency of human existence, and the desire to overcome them by unification with an infinite Absolute. This is a clear influence of the absorption into Christianity of the late-Antique philosophy of Neo-Platonism[447], and especially the thought of Plotinus (c. 204/5–270). Mystical experiences developed from the early Christian notion of *corpus mysticum* (mystical body) – as Christianity was fundamentally based on the *loss of a body* (resurrected Christ), it was crucial to formulate a theological concept that would replace that body – i.e. a community of the Church that both performs transcendental sacraments, and is a *historical* institution entangled in a specific time. Mysticism overcomes this division and joins these two perspectives of a Christian body.[448] When the Catholic Church became a truly pan-European, centralised and clericalised structure under the papal authority in the late eleventh century, this process was challenged by the proliferation of private experiences and individualisation of religious practices. '"The Mystical" came to designate what had become separate from the institution.'[449] The ecclesiastical institution had fully taken over the role of the 'Christ body' from the faithful. This development was paralleled in the secular structures by the rise of centralised absolutist state – '*L'Etat, c'est moi*' echoes the Eucharistic formula 'this is my body'.[450] Mysticism became a refuge for all those who wanted an independent, personal contact with divinity.

Kołakowski faced the issue of scholarly analysis of mysticism in an article from 1959, i.e. directly after his return from sabbatical in the Netherlands and France,

[445] S.T. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism', in *Mysticism and philosophical analysis*, ed. S.T. Katz (New York, 1978), pp. 22–25.
[446] *Ibid.,* pp. 56–59.
[447] *Ibid.,* p. 41.
[448] M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Volume One, trans. M.B. Smith (Chicago/London 1992), French edition: Paris, 1982, pp. 79–83.
[449] *Ibid.,* p. 86.
[450] *Ibid.,* p. 87.

where he conducted most of the research for the *Religious Consciousness* project.[451] He clearly states that the objects of his research are mystical texts, rather than mystical experiences as such. He is not interested in mystics' psychology[452] and rejects the notion that mysticism is incommunicable. Kołakowski argues that we think with words, and if mystics had presented their experiences in a textual form, it means they found words to describe their thoughts, i.e. they found a medium for intersubjective communication.[453] Importantly, he admits that the traditional Marxist historiography, which analysed any intellectual phenomena using the template of materialism/idealism, proved to be 'clearly ineffective', and is useless in investigating mysticism.[454] Nonetheless, he is clear that religious needs in a given historical period are shaped and defined by other social and economic factors, and that it is only possible for these issues to form a structure that can be an object of humanistic analysis if they are brought together.[455] All of the cases presented by Kołakowski have the common theme of a conflict between the individual consciousness of a mystic, and the rigid institutional structure of the Church.[456] This point is repeated in the introduction to *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*. Even though most Catholic mystics made a deliberate effort not to cross the borders of orthodoxy, their rejection of external forms of devotion, in practice, has the same result as the dissident Protestants' notion of Christianity purely based on morality – it ends in denouncing the idea of institutional church as such. In fact, mysticism, pushed to its logical consequences, is the most radical form of religious subjectivism. In the end, its fundamental principle is the premise that a human being can communicate with God directly, without mediation of other people or institutions.[457] Kołakowski discusses different definitions of mysticism in order to formulate one that seems to be most satisfactory:

[451] L. Kołakowski, 'Mistyka i konflikt społeczny. O możliwości interpretacji mistycyzmu metodami materialistycznego pojmowania dziejów', in *Studia Filozoficzne* 3/1959.
[452] *Ibid.,* p. 4.
[453] *Ibid.,* p. 9.
[454] *Ibid.,* pp. 5–6.
[455] *Ibid.,* p. 13.
[456] *Ibid.,* p. 8.
[457] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna…*, pp. 18–22.

> (…) a doctrine, according to which it is possible, under some circumstances, that the human soul, a reality different from human body, can communicate through experience (…) with the spiritual reality that is primary (in time, in creation or in conditionality) to any other reality.[458]

He discusses opinions suggesting that a portion of mystical experiences might be a result of mental illness or repressed sexuality.[459] Eventually, he follows the argument of phenomenology of religion suggesting that religious needs are irreducible and cannot simply be described as a function of socio-political circumstances. Nonetheless, he comments, the task of a historian of ideas is to explain these phenomena genetically, to investigate how their specific character and developments are determined by their context. Only a context so broad as to take into account both separate religious issues and other cultural aspects of the period can form an autonomous structure for humanistic studies.[460]

Kołakowski starts the second part of his study with a brief outline of probably the most famous and most symptomatic of all Catholic mystics – Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591). If the most important assumption of Catholic mysticism is the fundamental contradiction between an infinite God and finite human nature, then the programme of such mysticism is based on the hope to annihilate the nature and crave for the union with the divine.[461] Kołakowski argues that this type of mystical experience is essentially theocentric, seeing the Absolute not as the most important, but as the only possible value. This mysticism assumes resignation from individual's needs, including the hope for one's salvation, and, eventually, gradual annihilation of human individuality.[462] 'That love is fulfilled in death – this is the ultimate knowledge of mystical experience.'[463]

The first important case of mysticism addressed in *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* – the story of Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629) – is the most 'orthodox' of all the examples discussed. In Kołakowski's commentary, Bérulle's thought was an attempt to institutionalise the desire to achieve unity with the divine through orthodox Catholic concepts, especially the sacrament of Eucharist. Receiving Holy Communion creates the personal bond between a human being and

[458] *Ibid.,* p. 25.
[459] *Ibid.,* p. 31.
[460] *Ibid.,* pp. 35–37.
[461] *Ibid.,* p. 263.
[462] *Ibid.,* p. 270.
[463] *Ibid.,* p. 272.

God.[464] This movement towards the identification of an individual with the divine does not imply doubting in official dogmas. According to this doctrine, the original authenticity in the Christian faith is achieved through spiritual channels within the Church, not through a rejection of the ecclesiastical community as in the cases of Protestant non-denominationalists.[465] In Kołakowski's analysis, Pierre de Bérulle was an example of how the Counter-Reformation's Church successfully absorbed non-orthodox, problematic forms of religiosity and managed to find a place for them within its structure.

Jean-Joseph Surin (1600–1665) and the story of the Loudon possessions in the 1630s is probably the most famous and popularised instance of early modern mysticism.[466] Described by Kołakowski as 'a literary genius and a madman',[467] Surin was a Jesuit priest who fought with the demons in Loudon Ursuline convent. Surin is a very illustrious example of total rejection of the mundane nature and human physicality. Fear of carnal desires made him restless and afraid of any physical contact, even with his own body. His weekly change of shirt on Sunday terrified him as early as Thursday.[468] Surin's mysticism was based on a theocentric negation of the created world and its values, practiced passive contemplation inspired by selfless love.[469] Everything that is not an Absolute is worthless; God is not the most important value, He is the only value, and independent human will is the only evil.[470] Any rational effort in religious matters is harmful for the main goal – annihilation of an independent human existence that would be different from the Absolute.[471]

Surin's ideas were very similar to the principles of quietism, an important current of mysticism in the second half of the seventeenth century: annihilation as the end, passivity as the means, indifference towards personal salvation, gnostic hatred of physical world, etc.[472] The main theories of quietism were developed by the Spanish priest Miguel de Molinos (1628–1696), but its most famous representative was French Madame Guyon (1648–1717). Pope Innocent XI condemned quietist theses in 1687.

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[464] *Ibid.,* p. 287.
[465] *Ibid.,* p. 297.
[466] *Ibid.,* pp. 316–25; see also for instance: A. Huxley, *The Devils of Loudon* (London, 1952).
[467] M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, vol. II, ed. L. Giard, trans. M.B. Smith (Chicago/London 2015), French edition: Paris, 2013, pp. 144–5.
[468] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna…*, p. 323.
[469] *Ibid.,* p. 323.
[470] *Ibid.,* p. 329–31.
[471] *Ibid.,* p. 334.
[472] *Ibid.,* p. 335.

The human soul should put trust in God completely, but the way to do that is 'holy idleness', a never-ending passive contemplation of divinity, which eventually leads to unity with the Absolute.[473] Kołakowski argues that the novelty lies in the quietist argument of that such contemplation perfectly separates soul from the body, therefore, carnal sins cannot defile human spirit.[474] On this occasion, Kołakowski makes a more universal and ironic claim about the history of philosophy: 'one cannot find a philosophical or theological doctrine, from which, with some good will, it would be impossible to derive practical consequences that justify sexual freedom'.[475] Total passivity in contemplation leads to total transformation (annihilation of individual subjectivity), which results in a union with the divine.[476] In Kołakowski's analysis, the cases of Bérulle, Surin, and quietism are indicative of a gradual radicalisation of early modern mysticism. If Bérulle's ideas were fully absorbed by mainstream orthodoxy, and Surin's visions pushed him to the edge, but were still acknowledged by the ecclesiastical authorities, Guyon's concepts could not possibly be accepted.

Angelus Silesius (real name Johann Scheffler, 1624–1677) is an exceptional case in this connection. His poetic treatise *The Cherubinic Wanderer* (1657) focuses on all major mystical currents outlined so far, but in a much more sophisticated manner. Kołakowski notes this is the most important of all thinkers analysed in *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*.[477] Silesius' verses continue the long tradition of German pantheistic mysticism, which started with the mediaeval preacher Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328). The human soul may apprehend and realise its original identity with divine being by discarding one's own will and dissolve it in the divine nothingness.[478] The question of ontological unity between a human being and God, the hope to overcome human finitude and participate in the eternal infinity is present in Silesius' mysticism in the most refined way:

> Ich selbst bin Ewigkeit, wenn ich die Zeit verlasse
> Und mich in Gott und Gott in mich zusammenfasse[479]

[473] *Ibid.,* p. 356.
[474] *Ibid.,* p. 353.
[475] *Ibid.*
[476] *Ibid.,* pp. 378–79.
[477] *Ibid.,* p. 396.
[478] *Ibid.,* pp. 398–400.
[479] A. Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, I, 13.

This is, Kołakowski argues, a hope for a life that knows no transience, where everything is immediate and co-existing at the same time.[480] The German mystical tradition introduced one more crucial concept about the relation between the human person and the Absolute, later developed in a more systematic way in Hegel's philosophy, i.e. the idea that achieving the ontological union is a reciprocal process[481] – the human person is realised in God, but also God realises himself in the human person:

> Ich weiss, dass ohne mich Gott nicht ein Nu kann leben,
> Werd ich zu nicht, er muss von Not den Geist aufgeben[482]

Naturally, these lines would be blasphemous from the orthodox point of view, and the fact that Silesius' theses were not condemned derives from the fact that Silesius was a convert from Lutheranism, and his book was prepared at a specific time when Catholicism struggled with Protestantism in that part of Europe.[483] The poet's mystical lines thoroughly explore the crucial mystical phenomenon – that of love. In mysticism, Kołakowski says, 'love is a form of hunger, and like any hunger, it craves for fulfilment, therefore, it realizes itself in extinguishment'.[484] Mystics do not lose something *for God*, they are lost *in God*, their love has a masochistic character, as it moves towards the full annihilation of the self and full identification with the Absolute.[485]

The last two examples analysed in *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* are the cases of Antoinette Bourignon (1616–1680) and Jean de Labadie (1610–1674). Kołakowski comments that they were both illustrations of more light-weight early modern spiritualism: charismatic sectarian leaders rather than mystics. Their activities did not aim at achieving unity with the Absolute, but at forming a worldly community of followers. Madame Bourignon, who had no theological education whatsoever, but based her views entirely on some common knowledge clichés, is a notable example of a 'pure prophetic consciousness' and

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[480] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna…*, p. 409.
[481] *Ibid.,* p. 413; Kołakowski uses a quotation from Meister Eckhart as a motto for the whole book: 'He [God] needs you thousand times more than you need Him.'
[482] Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, I, 8.
[483] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna…*, pp. 400–407.
[484] *Ibid.,* p. 424.
[485] *Ibid.,* pp. 424–26.

'egocentric mysticism'.[486] Rejected by her family, she experienced a conversion in her early youth and gathered for some time a group of supporters in Lille, presenting a highly narcissistic attitude and demanding complete obedience from her followers.[487] It is worth mentioning one of the episodes from her early career as told by Kołakowski, as it is a good illustration of her religiosity. When given the New Testament for the first time

> (…) she has immediately realised that the content of the book is fully in line with her own thoughts, dictated to her by God, and that if she wrote down her thoughts, exactly the same book would be produced; she was convinced then that she does not have to read, as God teaches her everything directly.[488]

Labadie, however, is a slightly more sophisticated case. A Jesuit at first, he then converted to Calvinism, ending up as a leader of a non-denominational group. Kołakowski calls him 'a role-model of the perfect sectarian'[489] and explains how Labadie, under the influence of the theology of the Jansenists (see Chapter IV, pp. 185–91) and the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, developed a theory of a Church as a community of the elect, a refuge in the corrupt world.[490]

This is another theme that reappears throughout the entire history of religious thought, and which we could have already found in other thinkers: Christianity constantly navigates between the concepts of nature as a God's revelation and of a nature as a God's negation. Kołakowski suggests that one of the most important intellectual tools to deal with this troublesome antinomy is the story of original sin, which allows us to blame the specific act of ill will for this paradox; however, it does not answer the question whether the divine character of the created world had been fully withered away, or not.[491] From this issue follow two different visions of the Church and of its role in the world. It can either be an asylum for saints that protects them from the evils of the world; or an army of apostles, a divine tool to fight the evils of the world. But it can never be both at the same time.[492] A similar conclusion will be presented in Kołakowski's analysis of St Augustine (Chapter IV, pp. 189–90).

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[486] *Ibid.,* pp. 449, 467.
[487] *Ibid.,* pp. 450–67.
[488] *Ibid.,* p. 462.
[489] *Ibid.,* p. 501.
[490] *Ibid.,* pp. 546–7.
[491] *Ibid.,* pp. 548–9.
[492] *Ibid.,* pp. 549–50.

As we have seen, all of these specific historical examples of mysticism provide Kołakowski with a pretext for more general conclusions. This poses a very important moment in his intellectual evolution. I argue that Kołakowski's historical inquiry into seventeenth-century religiosity was the crucial 'leap' in the evolution of his religious thought. Lessons he drew from Camphuysen and Angelus made a crucial impact on the breakthrough in his intellectual transformation from a neopositivist-educated, Marxist-rooted rational jester, ridiculing any form of metaphysics, to a genuine philosopher of religion, whose mature thought will be presented in Chapter IV. Naturally, before the final development, Kołakowski had to settle more accounts. These will be analysed in Chapter III. I, however, claim that his investigations in *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* deepened his sensitivity to some fundamental issues that became central to his thought in the decades following the 1960s. Although he had not yet provided 'religious' answers to these questions in the mid-1960s, he had explicitly articulated them for the first time. In a way, he reverses the process described a few years earlier in *The Priest and the Jester*. If for Kołakowski theology was merely a set of 'clumsy formulations of those eternal enigmas that confound us still', it turns out that history of religious ideas provides us with very good examples of 'eternal enigmas', and that they are not formulated clumsy, but often in a more powerful and intelligible way. Zygmunt Bauman summarised Kołakowski's study in an editors' discussion at *Argumenty*: '*Religious Consciousness* is a book about jesters and about priests' defence against jesters, and about the inevitable process of jesters becoming priests.'[493]

What are those 'eternal enigmas'? First, we encounter a theme presented in the post-Marxist ethical essays analysed earlier in this chapter – the question of human incompleteness, of unfulfilled desire to define oneself. The tool through which people aspire to overcome that incompleteness is human freedom. The fundamental differences between visions of Christianity in the Erasmian non-denominational communities and in its mystical form provide us with different answers to this question. On the one hand, we can understand human freedom as the *divine aspect* of human nature, overcoming the worldly perspective of our existence. Human uniqueness is defined by the *possibility* to define oneself anew at any time, but also by

[493] *Argumenty*, 20 March 1966, p. 7.

the *impossibility* to define oneself in an ultimate way. On the other hand, we may understand human freedom as the *fallen aspect* of human nature. In this sense, true freedom is not a possibility open before human being, but a *fait accompli*, accomplished not by the human person, but by God.[494] This contradiction is constitutes the 'human phenomenon':

> (…) a hesitation between the need of absolute dependency, absolute integration and absolute certainty, and the need of equally absolute affirmation of oneself, defined by a fundamental impossibility to be defined.[495]

We must either take responsibility for every single ethical decision, or live according to a moral code. This relates us to the antinomy of grace and law. Our religiosity might be based either on the irrational, personalised grace in a direct relation with the divinity. Or, it can be organised in a more rational way, with systematised doctrine and institutionalised ritual. Church may be an administrator of grace only if it includes grace in the order of the law, that is, when it denies the authenticity of grace. In conclusion, the tension between the individual and the institution is an unsolvable paradox of Christianity.[496]

Finally, in *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*, Kołakowski confronts for the first time the most challenging of the theological questions to recur in his religious writings from this point onwards. I argue that these eventually became the main reason he turned into a religious but not a Christian thinker. Kołakowski shows that on the one hand, we have Christ as the teacher of morality, an immanent person, an ethical role model, the God of Erasmus; on the other, we have Christ as the Absolute, the Logos, the transcendent source of being, the God of mystics; *Sermon on the Mount* versus the *Song of the Songs*.[497] These two visions are irreconcilable. This issue will be summarised in the conclusion.

Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond (1965) marks a watershed in Kołakowski's intellectual trajectory. It is the crowning achievement of his historical texts from this decade, which compiled many themes and issues addressed in preceding works. As in the case of *Erasmus and his God*, the book was

[494] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna…*, pp. 555–57.
[495] *Ibid.,* p. 478.
[496] *Ibid.,* pp. 387–8, 553.
[497] *Ibid.,* pp. 288–89.

often read as a hidden commentary on contemporary politics. Analogies between the non-denominational Christians and Marxist revisionists were obvious to many:

> It is not difficult to read between the lines of his [Kołakowski's] historical study of seventeenth-century non-denominational Christianity a parallel to twentieth-century 'non-denominational' – i.e. revisionist and 'intellectual' rather than 'institutional' – Marxism.[498]

Similar hints can be found in reviews of the book.[499] Kołakowski unambiguously rejected such interpretations at the time,[500] and reaffirmed such position many years later in an interview with Zbigniew Mentzel.[501]

Turning points

Before we proceed to the next chapter, we ought to look at two 'transitional' texts, which succinctly and tellingly present the fundamental change that occurred in his thought between 1955 and 1965.

The first of these essays, *Religious Symbols and Humanistic Culture*,[502] was written during the completion of *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*. Kołakowski deliberates the question of religious myth as a special case of a symbol. He argues that such myths are not simply a re-enactment of some historical situation, they do not provide knowledge about an event, but enable to participate in the same event, which happens again and again in a non-historical time.[503] These views were greatly influenced by the thought of Mircea Eliade, which will be presented in the next chapter. Kołakowski is referring to the most important phenomenologists of religion (Otto, Scheler), who insisted on the irreducibility of religious phenomena, especially 'the holy'. Naturally, this is in sharp contrast to dialectical materialism and other rationalist doctrines, which saw religion as a false, substitutive interpretation of the human person and nature. These doctrines shaped Kołakowski as a thinker and he followed them up to this point. In the modern world,

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[498] G.L. Kline, 'Beyond revisionism: Leszek Kolakowski's recent philosophical development', in Newman (ed.), *A Leszek Kolakowski Reader,* p. 29.
[499] *Argumenty*, 20 March 1966, p. 10.
[500] *Ibid.,* p. 11.
[501] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…*, tom I, p. 189.
[502] L. Kołakowski, 'Symbole religijne i kultura humanistyczna' in L. Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze* (Warszawa, 2009, first edition 1967); first delivered as a lecture in Warsaw on 24th April 1963 (see: Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 188); first published in Polish in *Argumenty* 13/1964.
[503] *Ibid.,* pp. 222–23.

he argues, religious faith has not withered away, despite the progress of scientific knowledge and education.[504] He goes on to present the view that religious symbols have genuine value and represent some elemental human need; they are not instrumental substitutes for some other values. 'In other words', he says, religion exists for real.'[505]

This is a truly revolutionary statement in Kołakowski's philosophy of religion. After almost a decade of historical inquiries into theological disputes, and after gradual disillusionment with contemporary Marxism and its attitudes, he recognises the authenticity and irreducibility of religion. He still speaks from the position that religion is not the best answer to 'those eternal enigmas that confound us', but acknowledges it as an authentic and independent answer. Kołakowski continues to hold the Marxist view that people are alienated from nature and the world[506], but he sees religion not as a form of this alienation, rather as one of the solutions to it:

> Nature does not fulfil integrative needs, thus, it does not allow for man to consider himself as an *object* through reference to nature. Religion brings him back the status of an *object* through the reference to the Absolute, i.e., it places his life, suffering and death in the framework of a rationally planned order in which they turn out to be values. Acknowledging this situation, where man is his only keeper, and all the values – his own historical products, have turned out to be extremely difficult so far.[507]

A human being is still an object and not a subject. Nonetheless, it is religion that provides a rational framework, which makes one's life meaningful. Accepting that man is his own keeper – or in Marx's formula that 'for man the root is man himself', or in Spinoza's terms that 'Man is a God to man' – turned out to be extremely difficult. Kołakowski argued in 1959 that radical rationalism should be defined as a Kantian 'emergence from self-imposed immaturity'. Already in 1963, he admits a partial failure of this concept. He also identifies modern philosophical currents – existentialism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and positivism as disseminating 'humanistic interpretation of values, which delegitimized religious symbols'.[508] Kołakowski's challenge to that delegitimisation will be the topic of the next chapter. But at this

[504] *Ibid.,* pp. 227–28.
[505] *Ibid.,* pp. 230–31.
[506] *Ibid.,* pp. 233–34.
[507] *Ibid.,* p, 234.
[508] *Ibid.,* p, 238.

point, towards the end of his historical work on *Religious Consciousness*, he realises that *religious* consciousness prevails over what he describes as follows:

> (…) a consciousness that man really has no other point of reference than himself, and that any form of integration into the Absolute is a mystification. This consciousness is not easy to accept; it is, therefore hard to imagine a world where it would become dominant.[509]

The final text I want to discuss in this chapter is *Jesus Christ – Prophet and Reformer*, [510] which gathers all the philosophical and historical conclusions Kołakowski developed in the last decade. The text was prepared as a popular lecture for a broader audience about a year after the completion of *Religious Consciousness*. Kołakowski starts by declaring he is interested in a philosophical analysis of Jesus for the following reason:

> (…) the layman who professes no particular Christian faith, embraces no dogma and belongs to no church community, but who does feel himself to belong to the larger tradition of which Christianity is an essential part – the tradition of which Buddha, Socrates, Kant and Marx are also a part.[511]

He continues by briefly outlining how various thinkers envisaged Jesus. However, his main point is to present Jesus' main prophecy: an imminent end of the world, which results in an entirely different perspective on our lives. If the Apocalypse is just around the corner, all worldly concerns disappear in the face of it.[512] Kołakowski argues that in order to prepare for this prophecy, Jesus introduced a radical reform:

> (…) Jesus does not, in fact, so much replace some laws by others, complete them or amend them, as teach that laws are not needed at all, for love entails the command, and thus makes it superfluous; it is, so to speak, spontaneously bound up with it. And only love is important.[513]

He continues further: 'In the view of the approaching catastrophe, only a blind man would take comfort from his temporal achievements. (…) The mission of Jesus Christ

[509] *Ibid.*
[510] L. Kołakowski, 'Jesus Christ – Prophet and Refomer' in *Is God Happy?*; first delivered as a lecture in Warsaw on 22nd October 1965 (see: Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 205); first published in Polish in *Argumenty* 51–52/1965.
[511] *Ibid.,* p. 144.
[512] *Ibid.,* p. 148.
[513] *Ibid.,* p. 150.

is to reveal the wretchedness of the temporal world.'[514] Kołakowski argues that the message of the founder of Christianity is in the 'rules' that Jesus left as his legacy. Kołakowski explains that these rules define Jesus' fundamental importance in human history and that they include the hope of eliminating violence from human relations, the stipulation that man shall not live by bread alone (that we must recognise some essential values that are irreducible to physical needs) and the abolition of the idea of a chosen people ('that fundamental human values are the common property of all, and that humanity is one people'). [515] These are the rules, Kołakowski argues, that constitute the message of Jesus himself and his teachings from the Gospels. They are not the message of the Christian religion established by Paul and the other disciples or the message of the Christian churches that was developed in later centuries. In a way, these conclusions are similar to Kołakowski's mature idea of socialism, as presented in his essays *Irrationalities of Rationalism* and *Responsibility and History*. It is also close to the vision of Christianity presented in *Erasmus and his God,* an essay published earlier the same year. Abolishing law in favour of love is based on the belief that '*human* relations which are based on trust cancel or preclude contractual relations'.[516] The point is not about focusing on institutions or establishing dogmas, it is about other people, not about law, but about love.

Finally, Kołakowski makes a statement inconceivable for someone who had been a young anti-clerical philosopher just ten years earlier:

> (…) any attempt to 'invalidate Jesus,' to eliminate him from our culture on the pretext that we do not believe in the God in whom he believed, is absurd and fruitless. Such attempts are made only by those primitive enough to imagine that crude atheism not only suffices as a view of the world, but can also justify trimming the cultural tradition as one sees fit, according to one's own doctrinal fancies (…).[517]

This is not a confession of faith, but there is no sign of the rational, sceptical jester here either. It is an acknowledgement of the philosophical and historical significance of the essence of Christianity. A militant atheist from the 1950s could not possibly imagine producing such statement. Ten years later, Kołakowski, a sophisticated theoretician of socialist ethics and historian of early modern religious thought,

[514] *Ibid.,* p. 151.
[515] *Ibid.,* pp. 153–58.
[516] *Ibid.,* p. 153.
[517] *Ibid.,* p. 159.

deepened his understanding of religion. Loyal to his own reason, his thought evolved precisely in this direction.

Chapter III: Need of Myth, Fear of Myth

I've set my heart upon nothing, you see[518]
J.W. Goethe

The political situation in Poland became tense in the second half of the 1960s, resulting in probably the single most important event in Leszek Kołakowski's intellectual and private life – his forced emigration from Poland in late 1968.[519] After delivering a lecture on the tenth anniversary of the 1956 events, he was expelled from the Party on 27 October 1966 and began to have serious difficulties publishing new works. Many other writers and intellectuals left the Party in protest to Kołakowski's expulsion, including Tadeusz Konwicki, Wiktor Woroszylski, Jacek Bocheński, and Kazimierz Brandys.[520] Although Kołakowski was not directly involved in the student protests of March 1968, he became a victim of a broader anti-intellectual purge pursued by the Party and was eventually forced to leave Poland in November 1968. He assumed a teaching position at McGill University in Montreal, then at Berkeley, and finally accepted a Senior Research Fellowship at All Souls College in Oxford in 1970, where he remained until his retirement in the 1990s.

Leaving communist Poland had two major implications for Kołakowski's philosophical development: on the one hand, he had to leave his original academic milieu and network, people who had been his important intellectual interlocutors. On the other hand, released from a censorship regime, he could approach some philosophical issues with greater honesty and boldness. In the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought, the decade 1966–1976, which is analysed in this chapter, forms a crucial 'transitional' phase, connecting his firm anti-religious stance of the 1950s with his religious philosophy of the late 1970s and onward.

While it is not the main area of interest of this thesis, it is important to mention that Kołakowski's political engagement in the 1970s became a significant part of his intellectual activity. As a political *émigré*, he was still banned from publishing in Poland. He did, however, prepare essays for independent political journals published

[518] *Vanitas! Vanitatum Vanitas!*, trans.: J.S. Dwight; original: 'Ich hab' mein Sach auf Nichts gestellt'
[519] For more biographical details from the period, see: Chudoba, *Kronika…*, pp. 209–335; L. Kołakowski, Z. Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy, czas niespokojny*, vol. II (Kraków, 2008), pp. 5–112.
[520] Bikont, Szczęsna, *Lawina i kamienie…*, pp. 343–7.

abroad, especially for the Paris-based *Kultura* and the London-based *Aneks*. After the tragic events of December 1970, when workers' strikes were met with brutal suppression by the militia and military, Kołakowski wrote a very influential essay entitled *Theses on Hope and Hopelessness*, in which he argued for a gradual, evolutionary attempt to fight for more democratic liberties within the existing system. In June 1976, when more strikes caused a major political crisis, he became instrumental in supporting the Workers' Defence Committee (Polish: Komitet Obrony Robotników [KOR]) and popularising the cause of democratic opposition in Poland on the international stage. These actions had a limited impact on the development of his religious thought, but they almost certainly influenced the way in which Kołakowski formulated his final conclusions on Marxism and his critical assessment of non-democratic political life.

After the major 'evolutionary leap' constituted by his research and conclusions drawn from *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*, Kołakowski's understanding of religion and religious questions became more sophisticated and profound than in his crude texts from the Stalinist period. The result of the historical investigations into early modern Protestant theology was *The Presence of Myth* (1966),[521] which gathered, for the first time, Kołakowski's original thoughts on religion (and not simply his commentaries on the margins of historical studies) in a more structured way. *The Presence of Myth* was influenced by his own historical writings but also by the works of his contemporary Mircea Eliade. For this reason, Eliade's religious thought, together with Kołakowski's concept of myth, which is presented both in *The Presence of Myth* and a few other essays from the same period, will form the first major section of this chapter.

The rest of the chapter will return to the analysis of Kołakowski as a historian of ideas. This time, however, his historical interests focus not on religious thought directly, but on various currents of modern philosophy. It is as if, before fully embarking on the study of religion in the late 1970s, he had to meticulously investigate all of the crucial modern secular projects of all-embracing philosophies that attempt to explain the world in its entirety. Three books on such philosophical

[521] L. Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, trans.: A. Czerniawski (Chicago, 2001); the book was written in 1966, but published for the first time in Polish in 1972 (*ibid.*, p. vii): *Obecność mitu* (Paris, 1972).

systems: positivism,[522] Husserlian phenomenology,[523] and Marxism[524], form what I call 'the disenchantment trilogy'. Kołakowski had to 'disenchant' these non-religious eschatologies, and prove them to be unsatisfactory in the task they had set themselves. Only then could he proceed with work on the system that appeared to be the least unsatisfactory of all answers – religion.

A major influence: Mircea Eliade's philosophy of myth

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) was a Romanian historian of religion. Although he spent most of his career in France and the USA, he wrote his most important books in French. His role in establishing religious studies as a separate branch of the humanities has been widely acknowledged. He has often even been described as the world's most influential interpreter of religious symbolism and myths.[525] His main area of expertise was not the established monotheistic religions of Abrahamic tradition or the Asian polytheistic systems of Buddhism and Hinduism, but rather beliefs of prehistoric peoples, from which he attempted to formulate more general theories of religious phenomena. Fundamentally, myth for Eliade is a religious myth and religion provides us with the only foundation to understand myths.[526] He defined myth in the following terms:

> Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled of the 'beginnings.' In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality (…) Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation'; it relates how something was produced, began to *be* (…) In short, myths reveal that the World, man, and life has a supernatural origin and history, and that this history is significant, precious and exemplary.[527]

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[522] L. Kołakowski, *The Alienation of Reason. A History of Positivist Thought*, trans.: N. Guterman (New York, 1968); first published in Polish: *Filozofia pozytywistyczna (Od Hume'a do Koła Wiedeńskiego)*, (Warszawa, 1966).
[523] L. Kołakowski, *Husserl and the Search for Certitude* (New Haven and London, 1975); this was the first book Kołakowski wrote in English.
[524] L. Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism. The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown* (one-volume edition), trans.: P.S. Falla (New York, 2008); first published in Polish in three volumes: *Główne nurty marksizmu. Powstanie, rozwój, rozkład* (Paris, 1976); first English edition in three volumes: Oxford, 1978.
[525] D. Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (London, 2002), p. xi.
[526] *Ibid.,* pp. 65–66.
[527] M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans.: W.R. Trusk (New York, 1963), pp. 5–6; 19.

The two most important functions of myth in Mircea Eliade's religious thought are therefore firstly that it tells the story of the beginning, answering Leibniz's question 'why is there something, rather than nothing?', and secondly that it provides role-models of behaviour for human moral choices. Eliade explains that myths 'identify the womb of Being',[528] explain 'how it should be like', how to conduct our lives and daily experiences to make them meaningful. He also comments that 'the main function of myth is to determine the exemplar models of all ritual, and of all significant human acts'.[529] Eliade emphasises that those rituals organised by mythical narrative do not simply commemorate or comment on the sacred history. They re-enact it, myth is a living story, and through participation in it, people become actually immanent and present with the supernatural.[530] This active, engaging dimension of mythical narrative is highly significant. According to Eliade, myth is the domain of the practical, not the theoretical, and is deeply rooted in actual everyday-life experiences: 'myth expresses in action and drama, what metaphysics and theology define dialectically'.[531] Interestingly, even though he specialised in animalistic religions of prehistoric societies and rarely provides examples from the most established modern religions, Eliade devoted some time to discussing the idea that Marxism simply tells a secular version of the main Judeo-Christian myth: that the suffering of the Just Man (or a communal 'man' in the form of the proletariat) will save the world and fundamentally change its ontological status. Marx borrowed the eschatological hope for the absolute end of history, which Eliade understands as Marx's hope of solving all conflict and eliminating evil once and for all.[532] As we shall see later in this chapter, Kołakowski's understanding of Marxism in the 1970s had a very similar character.

Another crucial idea in Eliade's religious thought is the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane.[533] These are the two opposite modes of being in the world.[534] He understands those concepts in spatial terms – for Eliade, finding the

[528] *Ibid.,* p. 111.
[529] M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans.: R. Sheed (New York, 1958), p. 410.
[530] Allen, *Myth…*, p. 192.
[531] Eliade, *Patterns…*, p. 418.
[532] Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, pp. 183–4.
[533] Allen, *Myth…*, p. 66.
[534] M. Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane. The Nature of Religion*, trans.: William R. Trask (New York, 1959), pp. 10, 14.

sacred space, or rather, delimiting the sacred from the profane, means finding the place 'where it all began', identifying the special, qualitatively different and privileged place that is described by the mythical narrative. He sees recognition and acceptance of the sacred as crucial for the sense of meaning in human life, claiming that '*if the world is to be lived in*, it must be *founded* – and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space.'[535] Importantly, Eliade was a historian of religion and always emphasised that the sacred and human experience of religion is always manifested in a specific historical context.[536] However, and this is one of the most controversial parts of Eliade's theory of religion, he says that the meaning of the 'sacred' and of any religious experience has a transhistorical and atemporal character.[537] This notion again reinforces the idea that mythical rituals do not simply observe some anniversary, but allow for the participants to move beyond the *profane* time they live in, and engage in the absolute, *sacred* meaning of the ritual, which is universal throughout time.

Eliade's concepts of myth and of the sacred/profane dichotomy are the foundations upon which he developed a more general theory of religion. He argues that religion is something that arises from human existential crises and it is the sacred, explained through mythical narrative, that helps us to overcome these crises, thereby providing the human person with something meaningful, real, and true. Paradigmatic modes of behaviour in myths save people from chaos and bring sense of order to their lives. Furthermore, religion necessarily involves a transcendent dimension and elevates human experience beyond the immanent everydayness.[538] For Eliade, the human person is fundamentally a *homo religious* – a being who experiences an irreducible sacred dimension of its existence as the ultimate reality.[539] The notion of the irreducibility of religious experience is a very important one. According to Eliade, religion is a *sui generis* phenomenon, and cannot be understood as a simple function of some other – economic, social, or political – needs.[540] This stands in sharp contrast to the orthodox Marxist view of religion (discussed in Chapter I, pp. 32–33), where it is explained as another form of alienation: the 'imaginary flowers' and 'opiate of the people' that comforted the working class before it developed class consciousness.

[535] *Ibid.,* p. 22; original italics.
[536] Allen, *Myth…*, p. 243.
[537] *Ibid.,* p. 254.
[538] Allen, *Myth…*, pp. 67–9.
[539] *Ibid.,* p. 72.
[540] *Ibid.,* pp. 3; 12–14.

Eliade continued to stress that every single act of religious worship has a total character and transfers the human person to the transcended domain of the sacred.[541] He also emphasises that human beings can never be fully rid of the need for experiencing religious phenomena.[542] As long as there are people, there will be religion.

It is hard not to see the echo of these ideas in the conclusion of Kołakowski's 1963 essay *Religious Symbols and Humanistic Culture*, which I discussed at the end of the previous chapter: 'In other words – religion exists for real (…) Religion brings him [a human being] back the status of an *object* through the reference to the Absolute, i.e., it places his life, suffering and death in the framework of a rationally planned order, in which they turn out to be values.'[543] Kołakowski even devoted an essay-long study to Mircea Eliade's thought. It was published in 1966,[544] right after he had finished *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* and during the time when he was worked on *The Presence of Myth*. Interestingly, as if he was still trying to convince himself it is absolutely possible to delve into religious questions without committing oneself to some specific faith, Kołakowski describes Eliade's scholarship as 'religious, but non-confessional at the same time', saying that it is possible to 'achieve a significant level of independence from biographical pressures'.[545] In his analysis, Kołakowski focuses on the idea of religious phenomena as a 'paralysis of time', the idea that sacred experience re-enacts the original situation and allows participating in a transcendent reality. He states that the most important tool to achieve this is myth:

> Myth is always a challenge thrown down to transience, it is a standstill of time, it is a peculiar 'happening' which suspends the real succession of events and allows to be re-enacted in the always original version each time anew.[546]

[541] Eliade, *Patterns…*, pp. 156–59.
[542] *Ibid.,* pp. 464–5.
[543] Kołakowski, 'Symbole religijne i kultura humanistyczna' in Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze*, pp. 230–234.
[544] L. Kołakowski, 'Mircea Eliade – religia jako paraliż czasu' in Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji…*, tom III; first published as an introduction to the Polish edition of *Patterns in Comparative Religion*: M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, trans.: J. Wierusz-Kowalski (Warszawa, 1966).
[545] *Ibid.,* p. 38.
[546] *Ibid.,* p. 39.

Still, Kołakowski makes the observation that Eliade's work contains philosophical assumptions and is simply not research-based historiography.[547] In other words, Kołakowski believes that Eliade had his own agenda, that he was attempting to pursue it through his historical scholarship, and that his ideas must be read in this perspective. The difference between a historian of religion and a philosopher of religion is not blurred, but rather flexible. In the case of Eliade, we may clearly see how historical research leads to developing original philosophy. The same process applies to Kołakowski and we will look at his first attempt to clarify his own ideas about religion in the following section of this chapter.

Kołakowski's philosophy of myth

Leszek Kołakowski articulated his own religious thought for the first time in the mid-1960s. He presented it in several essays and most importantly in the book *The Presence of Myth*. Two crucial processes led to this articulation, both of which have been discussed in Chapter II. The first of these was his gradual disillusionment and disappointment with Marxist philosophy, initially with its orthodox form and then with the 'revisioned' version. The second was his historical investigations into early modern religious thought, which provided the foundation for *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* and other texts from the ten years between 1955–1965.

The two processes were parallel and reinforced one another. The young Kołakowski defined the task of philosophy as 'building a complete vision of the world' and 'providing a guide for moral progress in the broadest meaning' (Chapter II, p. 57). If Marxism failed in those tasks, as Stalinism and unsuccessful revisionism proved, then perhaps religion could succeed, as early modern mystics suggested to Kołakowski? However, for someone who had been born into a secular family and had professed militant atheism in his youth, it was not easy to make a Kierkegaardian *salto de fe* and fully commit to a religious cause. Using a more evangelical metaphor, we could say that the seeds were sown in around 1965, but that the harvest time had yet to come for Kołakowski's religious thought. I will now discuss several of his texts from the mid-1960s and the early 1970s. These were early attempts to formulate this thought, and owed a great debt to Eliade's concepts of 'myth' and 'sacred'. However,

[547] *Ibid.,* p. 42.

before Kołakowski's mature philosophy of religion developed in the late 1970s and 1980s, he had to 'clear the field' of more unsatisfactory secular attempts to 'build a complete vision of the world'. This will be covered in the remainder of this chapter.

Truth and History

Kołakowski's first attempts to use Eliade's conceptual tools to analyse broader philosophical issues, albeit without structuring them in a fully religious framework, came in two essays from 1965–66[548]. In *Truth and Truthfulness as Cultural Values*, he carefully examines the philosophical category of the 'truth'. In the section entitled 'Truth as a Myth', Kołakowski provides the powerful declaration of an intellectual who is no longer committed to any ideological project, but remains faithful to Reason and sees philosophy as a vocation by which to understand the world:

> We desire the truth only because it is the truth and we do not think – or, strictly speaking, philosophers do not think – that this desire requires a justification in any other values than the self-recognition as 'the owner of the truth.'[549]

Although he is very careful with his choice of words and attempts to avoid embracing religious language, he argues that 'the spiritual structure that gives birth to the desire of truth', is 'homologous to the structure of myth'. Kołakowski says that myth is crucial, because it relativizes contingent human experience to an unconditional reality and *in this way* makes it meaningful. Philosophy takes up this 'need of the truth', which comes from a mythical source, and quests for the best way of relating the empirical world to an unconditional reality. If modern philosophy declares such a quest as nonsensical and invalid, Kołakowski argues, and this is a hint pointing to his other works discussed in this chapter, then philosophy turns against itself. However, he continues, this quest can never be fully successful, the object and the subject can never be fully united, because their opposition is exactly what defines them. Therefore, philosophy debunks the utopian character of mythical narrative, even though it recognises its fundamental importance. Eventually, philosophy leads to a

[548] L. Kołakowski, 'Prawda i prawdomówność jako wartości kultury' in Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze*; first published: *Studia Filozoficzne* 2/1966; L. Kołakowski, 'Historical understanding and the intelligibility of history', in Newman (ed.), *A Leszek Kolakowski Reader*…; first delivered as a conference paper in French in August 1965 and published as 'La Compréhension historique et l'intelligibilité de l'histoire' in *Praxis* 1–2/1966 (see: Chudoba, *Kronika*..., p. 203).
[549] Kołakowski, 'Prawda i prawdomówność…', p. 191.

collision between the myth and the truth, and this collision is the source of human culture.[550]

The tone of this 1965 text is rather ambiguous. It is often difficult to distinguish the instances where Kołakowski simply refers to the views of others from the places where he presents his own ideas. For this reason, *Truth and Truthfulness as Cultural Values* is an excellent illustration of the 'transitional phase' in the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought discussed in this chapter. He presents new ideas with great reluctance, as if unready to express his new views explicitly, which would happen in the texts from the 1980s, which are analysed in Chapter IV. His changing views on the role of philosophy and its relation to religion can be found in *Historical understanding and the intelligibility of history*, the only text in which Kołakowski modestly attempts to present his own historiosophy. The influence of Eliade can be seen very clearly here. Kołakowski's main argument is rather simple, but again expressed with great reluctance and in ambiguous sentences: if history has any meaning, this meaning cannot be derived from history itself, but needs to have an external, non-empirical source. He again criticises secular versions of historical eschatologies, specifically identifying Hegel, Marx and Husserl and deeming their projects futile. The answer, Kołakowski declares, lies elsewhere:

> It is necessary to surpass history by an act of philosophical or religious faith if one wants to accord it a meaning. It is necessary to posit a pre-empirical (transcendental or transcendent) world of the possible to which empirical history gives body and which it transforms into reality. (…) Since the Enlightenment, philosophers have elevated their faith almost to a science. It is time to place the alleged science at the level of faith. I do not say 'degrade.' I do not say 'elevate.' I say: place at the level of faith. This faith is always charged with a practical significance. It is our projection that gives our past a meaning.[551]

It is difficult to imagine a philosophical statement that could be further away from the concept of 'radical rationalism' that Kołakowski pursued in his essays only six years earlier. The formula of 'philosophical faith' would have been inconceivable for the rational jester of the late 1950s and this only proves how fundamental the first half of 1960s was in the evolution of his attitude to religion. The concept itself comes from

[550] *Ibid.,* pp. 192–4.
[551] Kołakowski, 'Historical understanding…', pp. 115–6; translation slightly altered to follow the French original more faithfully.

the German thinker Karl Jaspers, whose thought will be the main point of comparison for Kołakowski's mature philosophy of religion in Chapter V (pp. 204–18).

There are crucial conclusions we have to draw from Kołakowski's argument quoted above: first, philosophy is a faith, which means it includes irrational elements that cannot be supported by arguments, but are a matter of axiological choice; secondly, this choice has a series of practical consequences. He formulates an alternative, one that recurs in *The Presence of Myth*: either we face the fact that there is no sense to human history (and, by implication, individual lives as well) whatsoever, or we *make* history intelligible through a conscious project. The rational jester of revisionist Marxism would have certainly decided on the former. At this stage, however, Kołakowski opts for the latter, albeit reluctantly and indirectly. He suggests that this 'project', just like the 'sacred', must be based on some 'pre-historical *eidos*' of humanity, the essence that is realised through history.[552] Although Kołakowski does not use the word 'myth' here, it is appears likely that that what he means by 'a project that makes history intelligible and meaningful' is the Eliadean myth. All these themes were developed in Kołakowski's first original philosophical book, which I will analyse now.

Although I have repeatedly stressed that the chronology of texts is crucial for the argumentation of this thesis, in this specific case I will slightly alter the order of my analysis. After completing *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* (published in April 1965), Kołakowski worked on a history of positivist thought (published in January 1966), and only then embraced the project on the philosophy of myth.[553] Nonetheless, I would like to investigate *The Presence of Myth* first, with a view to emphasising its relation to Mircea Eliade's religious thought and the fact that the issues of myths and the importance of non-empirical narratives became central to Kołakowski's interests, mainly due to his experience of working on early modern religion in the first half of 1960s. Only once we finish discussing this first attempt at formulating original religious thought – the result of previous historical investigations rather than an opening for new ones – should we proceed with the analysis of his debunking of secular philosophies.

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[552] *Ibid.,* pp. 116–7.

[553] Chudoba, *Kronika…*, pp. 199, 209, 220; *The Presence of Myth* was the first of Kołakowski's major publications to be blocked by communist censorship after his expulsion from the Party in October 1966; it was only published in Polish by an emigre publishing house in 1972, but a Hebrew edition came out in 1971 (*ibid.*).

The Presence of Myth

There can be no doubt that *The Presence of Myth* marks a watershed in Leszek Kołakowski's intellectual development. It was a peculiar summary of his hitherto Marxist-sceptical works, and a transition to the new phase, when his attitude to religion developed a much more sympathetic character.[554] Even though there are very few direct references to Mircea Eliade's scholarship in the book, the influence of Eliade's methodological categories is obvious.[555] Kołakowski also uses the conclusions drawn by Eliade as his main assumptions: religious phenomena are not functions of any other socio-political aspect and do not alienate the human person from any 'real problems'. Instead, they exist as irreducible needs that cannot be satisfied by nonreligious activities – even though it is impossible to undeniably confirm that those needs can ever be fully satisfied.[556]

Given the main arguments Kołakowski presents in the book, perhaps a better title would be 'The Need for Myth'. 'Myth', which he does not define at any point in the text, is required as a reference to 'non-empirical unconditioned reality' and to answer the 'questions that are ultimate and metaphysical – that is, incapable of conversion into scientific questions'.[557] Kołakowski acknowledged that this is a very bold task, and describes his work as 'footnotes to the most classical texts of our culture: Book Seven of Plato's *Republic*, the third chapter of Genesis and the second dialogue of the Bhagavad Gita'. He tellingly takes as a motto a quote from William Blake's *There Is No Natural Religion*: 'Less than All cannot satisfy Man.'[558] In short, it is a book about the meaning of life.

But we should ask: why do people ask these ultimate questions in the first place? Although Kołakowski provides three main reasons, they are underpinned by a problem of the utmost importance: the contingency of the world. The problems listed here will constitute the most important categories, those according to which he organised his thinking on religion in the decades to follow. In Kołakowski's opinion, these are the problems that are at the heart of what it means to be human, and to

[554] Król, *Czego nas uczy…*, pp. 106–7.
[555] Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit…,* pp. 93–95.
[556] *Ibid.,* p. 112.
[557] Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, p. 2.
[558] *Ibid.,* pp. xi–xii; a similar attempt is described in the preface to *Religion. If There Is No God…*, which is analysed in Chapter IV; in book seven of *Republic*, Socrates tells the story of a cave; in chapter three of *Genesis*, the serpent tempts man into the Fall; in the second dialogue of *Gita*, Krishna teaches Arjuna about the immortal soul, which is free of the ego and mundane concerns.

which all non-religious systems of thought have provided unsatisfactory solutions. These reasons are as follows:

> (…) a need to grasp the world of experience as intelligible by relating it to the unconditioned reality which binds phenomena teleologically.
> (…) the need for faith in the permanence of human values.
> (…) the need to see the world as continuous.
> (…) Thus, even a most cursory glance shows us that in all instances we are concerned with the same problem: to avoid acceptance of a contingent world (…) which is what it is now and bears no reference to anything else.[559]

I suggested that the title 'The Need of Myth' would be more appropriate for Kołakowski's main argument, which is that people need a mythical narrative (in Eliade's sense) to fulfil the needs listed above, a fulfilment that would make human life meaningful. Perhaps the 'presence' from the actual title is in a way one of the last instances of a rational jester's hat jingling. In 1966, Kołakowski was still trying to place himself at a distance to the investigated issues: he was not personally engaging in the mythical cause as he had engaged in the Marxist and rationalist causes described in Chapter II. He simply acknowledged, following Eliade, that myth must be 'present', i.e. that religion exists for real and that religious needs cannot be reduced to any other needs.

Where myth is most needed is in the realm of values. Here Kołakowski touches upon one of the main issues in his philosophy – namely the question of whether human beings can be the creators or source of moral values. If we look at his early writings, especially the doctoral dissertation on Spinoza (Chapter I, pp. 47–51), and even at later writings from the end of 1950s and the beginning of 1960s, such as *Irrationalities of Rationalism* and *Ethics Without a Moral Code* (Chapter II, pp. 62–67), his position is clear: yes, people can and must be the source of moral values, moral life must mean taking full responsibility for ethical decisions and implies that people must not rely on any external source of morality. Let us recall the quote from *Irrationalities* (1959) that was presented in Chapter II:

[559] *Ibid.,* pp. 2–4.

> (…) we do not think that God takes away from man what is the best in him; we think that he takes away what is the most unbearable in him: a situation of an unconditional responsibility for himself.[560]

The contrast with *The Presence of Myth* is striking – human self-constitution is futile:

> My acts of bestowing meanings on things and events, acts of the so-called establishment of values, would arise from each successive unconditioned spontaneity and would on each occasion raise me to the position of Creator who calls his universe to renewed life from nothingness (…)
> Whoever believes that he has issued this decree does not create good and evil, but rather refuses to admit the difference between good and evil.[561]

In short, values are mythical, transcendent and not empirical,[562] i.e. a human being cannot be the source of values. Kołakowski explicitly states that it is impossible for humankind to have self-knowledge as a value;[563] in other words, that man cannot be the Marxian root for himself or the Spinozian God to himself. He argues that all events and all human actions require 'a mythical court of appeal which antedates all historicity'.[564] Kołakowski hesitates to name that 'mythical court of appeal' as 'God', but he starts using the word 'absolute' more often. Such an 'absolute' is a being that exists unconditionally and eternally, does not become anything else, 'is removed from time and change'.[565]

For the same reasons, philosophical systems that reject the mythical narrative are not capable of fulfilling the need of bestowing meaning on human life. Some comments from *The Presence of Myth* anticipate his critique of secular eschatologies, which will be analysed in the next section of this chapter. Kołakowski comments that purely philosophical means to overcome the contingency of human life were illusory, as they sought to establish achievements of discursive reason, which is itself dependent on human cognitive powers. Thus, the efforts of Plato, Leibniz, Husserl, Sartre, or Hume[566] to make sense of the world were futile in the absence of a mythical narrative. Myth is inevitable.

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[560] Kołakowski, 'Nieracjonalności racjonalizmu', in *Pochwała niekonsekwencji…* vol. II, p. 239.
[561] Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, pp. 20–21.
[562] *Ibid.,* p. 26
[563] *Ibid.,* p. 57.
[564] *Ibid.,* p. 30.
[565] *Ibid.,* p. 53.
[566] *Ibid.,* pp. 13–4; 28–8; 6, 132.

In fact, *The Presence of Myth* could end here as a longer essay that summarises Kołakowski's new philosophical position in the mid-1960s. However, he dwells on the importance of the mythical structure of narrative in two more important aspects. First, in probably the most personal pieces he ever wrote, Kołakowski deliberates on the question of 'the phenomenon of the world's indifference', which was very important in the final shattering of the rational worldview he had held in the late 1950s and which anticipated pessimistic conclusions from the last phase of his intellectual evolution. Second, *The Presence of Myth* is the first instance of a critique of modern, materialistic civilisation from a conservative point of view, which again anticipates Kołakowski's mature texts of the 1990s and the 2000s (Chapter IV, pp. 198–202).

The mythical project is needed not only as the ultimate point of reference for ethical values, but also as a remedy for the experience of the world's indifference to our existence. Attempts to overcome this indifference, 'constitute the crucial meaning of human struggle with fate, both in its everyday and its extreme form'.[567] This section of *The Presence of Myth* is written in a very personal, even intimate style, and constitutes one of a very few instances in which Kołakowski seems to really expose himself to the reader. In an earlier chapter, he investigates why mythical narrative is needed to make sense of the world on a macro, cosmic level. Here, he touches upon the need of myths for personal lives of people. We comprehend our existence only in the form of belonging to the world, Kołakowski argues, and for this reason we are not really afraid of 'non-existence' in the sense of nothingness, because we do not have any other intuition of nothingness other than being absent from the world. He claims that what we are really horrified at is a world that does not care about our presence in it, a world ruthlessly indifferent to our existence. This horror reveals itself especially when we have to anticipate our death, as the border experience when the world's indifference finally embraces our existence.[568] Kołakowski says that there are different partial, not fully satisfactory ways of dealing with this indifference: technology's taming of natural forces, the possession of material objects, finally, relations with other people, the most extreme case of which is an erotic encounter with another person. An emotional sexual union is the most powerful moment, when

[567] *Ibid.,* p. 70.
[568] *Ibid.,* p. 72–4; unacknowledged influence of the Heideggerian concept of being-toward-death is clear here.

something in the world shows that it cares for our existence. Yet, all of these means of overcoming the world's indifference sooner or later turn out to be deceptive, because of their partiality and temporality. In Kołakowski's opinion, there are two more ways to escape the indifference: commit suicide, or take a position that would definitely be defended with much more vigour by the rational jester of earlier years. This would be

> a decision to accept the indifference of the world in a complete understanding and to entrench those situations of human coexistence that are accessible to us, rejecting the temptations of perfect solutions and seeking partial satisfaction.[569]

Nonetheless, after the experience of studying early modern mystics and following his disillusionment with the secular eschatology of Marxism, Kołakowski deemed this project 'unrealisable'. He argues that this would also be a partial solution, as the phenomenon of the world's indifference might be overcome only by an 'all-or-nothing' attitude, all other ways are either consents to despair or mere mystifications. There is only one satisfactory means to overcome the indifference:

> for it is myth, be it religious or philosophical, that has the power of removing the world's indifference, in contradistinction to all the attempts we have described (…) [myths] bring it about that empirical Being loses its own weight and begins to appear as a derivative reality, a carrier of a code transmitted by a non-empirical, unconditioned mythical world.[570]

The problem with the modern world is that it prefers illusionary, partial mystifications to mythical narrative. This part of *The Presence of Myth* anticipates Kołakowski's critical texts from the final phase of his career. Even in the mid-1960s, however, he complained about the state of culture and societies in modern developed countries. The problem is that we have rejected the mythical narrative, i.e. we do not accept the world as a pre-given, determined by the processes and traditions that are out of human control, and we started to see the world as our own product instead. To this effect, people delude themselves with illusionary, partial mystifications, which only disorganise our moral compasses, something Kołakowski calls the 'culture of analgesics'. He argues that there are two fateful results stemming from this: first, we give up personal responsibility for ourselves and for others, assuming that rationally

[569] *Ibid.,* p. 81.
[570] *Ibid.,* pp. 81–2.

organised communities will solve all the ethical dilemmas; second, we cease to believe in suffering as a source of values, an intuition that had been built into most of the primordial cultures.[571] Kołakowski presents this as a tragic situation:

> The obsessive fear of suffering, of failure, of the weakening of our social status (…) all these are symptoms of the same phenomenon: the loss of our ability to face life: the loss of instruments, with whose aid an individual can (drawing on his own spiritual resources) restore his own balance in the face of disasters and sufferings (…).[572]

It is worth noticing at this point that his very subjective and personal account of fundamental moral issues could use more arguments or examples. When Kołakowski makes the normative statement that 'the more we are incapable of enduring our own suffering, the more easily we endure that of others. The harder it is for us to tolerate loneliness, the more of it we create'[573] it does not seem to be much more than pessimistic conclusions from personal experience.

Nevertheless, his main argument is that people become egoists and conformists, concerned only with themselves because they have rejected the mythical consciousness that originally awoke a sense of obligation, an 'indebtedness toward Being' that in everyday life resulted in practical reciprocal bonds of assistance and cooperation between people.[574] Kołakowski says that this is lost in the modern world. Crucially, institutional 'checks and balances', that were supposed to protect the presence of myth, failed.

This is the first time that Kołakowski criticises the Catholic Church for *not being conservative enough*, a radical change if we compare it to the militant anti-clerical articles analysed in the first chapter, and even if we compare it to the perceptive critic of the early 1960s from the second chapter. However, this critique again anticipates Kołakowski's much more conservative stance of the 1990s and 2000s. Although the Catholic Church did not introduce any revolutionary changes to its moral doctrine at the Second Vatican Council, the general message that came from the Vatican somehow was in tune with the liberal mood of the 1960s. John O'Malley described the Church after the Council as 'more inclined to reconciliation with human culture than to alienation from it, more inclined to see goodness than sin, more

[571] *Ibid.,* pp. 83–8.
[572] *Ibid.,* p. 91.
[573] *Ibid.,* p. 93.
[574] *Ibid.,* pp. 91–5.

inclined to speaking words of friendship and encouragement than of indictment'.[575] We can imagine that Kołakowski might have welcomed such an 'Erasmian' turn in Rome with great hope, but he seems much more sceptical and doubtful. He argues that it is not the right direction for the Church to retreat from those areas of spiritual life that help people to develop 'spiritual instruments to face life', i.e. teaching about original sin and the real presence of evil in the world. The modern Church, too accommodating with the modern world's lax morality

> abandons the supremely Christian idea of permanent conflict between what is transient and what is infinite, and drawing a paradoxical view of the world, which in its very temporality will attain the value of an Absolute.[576]

An Absolute, as we remember from Eliade, cannot be temporal, it must necessarily have an atemporal and non-empirical character. Such a situation results from Christianity's surrender to the Enlightenment. Although *The Presence of Myth* was the first instance in which Kołakowski criticised the ethical aspect of the Enlightenment, this criticism became a recurrent theme in his later writings. The main charge against this endeavour was that it pursued an ideal of a fully rationalised community in which all bonds between people are regulated by legal procedures and subjugated to the utilitarian concept of the commonwealth's good. Kołakowski criticises the Enlightenment project as being based on the naïve concept that human needs, if 'properly' understood, are not in real conflict and that all disagreements derive from insufficient rational planning. The conclusion he draws is that such an enlightened community would be organised only on a calculation of profits and losses, and would not need any mythical justification for its professed values. Kołakowski ridicules this vision, pointing out that it would mean a perfectly stagnant society, and that if all needs were to be fulfilled, it would mean the end of the human world.[577] In one paragraph of *The Presence of Myth*, he deems the Enlightenment's project a mirage:

> Conflicts and competition are therefore inevitable in every civilization capable of life. That is precisely why it is frivolous to hope that communal life may function efficiently with an

[575] O'Malley, *What Happened…*, p. 311.
[576] Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, p. 89.
[577] *Ibid.,* pp. 98–102.

> organization based on a model of self-regulating structures, with a complete absence of those non-replicating and non-utilitarian solidarity bonds which bear fruit only on a mythical tree.[578]

Here, he once again confirms that myth is simply indispensable.

However, mythological narratives also have a darker side. Kołakowski did not simply reject all the experience and lessons he learnt in the Stalinist and rationalist phases of his intellectual trajectory. Myths may be dangerous, as they have all-embracing character and may even 'grow like a tumour', taking over and subjugating all areas of culture and science, using terror and despotism to establish itself as the dominant doctrine. This is exactly the formula used by the ossified Marxist doctrine and the Catholic Church throughout history: to be an authority that comforts people by providing all the possible answers and solutions to any of their problems. It is very important to emphasise here that this is one of the most significant arguments made in *The Presence of Myth*, and that it recurs in all of Kołakowski's philosophy henceforth: the tension between the need of myth and the fear of myth is the bedrock on which human culture is built. The crucial challenge human beings are posed with is to live in this constant tension:

> (…) is it possible simultaneously to avoid a life anaesthetized by daily events, insensitive to the attraction of the mythical abyss, and at the same time to avoid a life numbed by the deadly certainty of myth slumbering in its benign barrenness?[579]

Mythology is therefore under constant suspicion. But who are the myths' watchmen? Kołakowski makes an indirect reference to his famous essay *The Priest and the Jester* (Chapter II, pp. 64–65), stating the need for both the guardians of the myth and its critics.[580] Nonetheless, if the 1959 Kołakowski declared himself unambiguously to be in favour of the jester's (a myth-critic's) philosophy, the 1966 Kołakowski hesitated to commit to either of the positions.

This leads us to formulating some final conclusions from *The Presence of Myth*, the crucial transitional step in the evolution of Leszek Kołakowski's religious thought. I would like to repeat my main argument here: through historical

[578] *Ibid.,* pp. 103–4.
[579] *Ibid.,* p. 104.
[580] *Ibid.,* p. 105.

investigations into the history of religious thought, especially those that were parts of the *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* project, Kołakowski's understanding of religious questions and of religion's role in explaining human life changed fundamentally, particularly if we compare it to the firmly atheistic position he held in the 1950s. I do not, however, imply that he 'converted' or accepted a theistic philosophical worldview. Basing on his conclusions from these historical studies and using conceptual tools developed by Mircea Eliade, Kołakowski attempted to understand the importance of religion and analyse its inevitable role in human life. At this stage of the evolution of his religious thought, his deliberations adopted the more general term of 'myth' to describe religious phenomena. Summarising his views, we may say that myths are indispensable, in the sense of narratives that make people's lives meaningful. This role cannot be fulfilled by natural sciences or by any philosophical system that attempts to be scientific. People alone cannot accomplish this task either: since we are not omnipotent (which means – we are not gods) in the natural world, we cannot declare ourselves omnipotent in the world of values. In short, human beings cannot be the creators of values.[581] For these reasons, one cannot be 'convinced' to follow myths, as a mythical narrative does not have any rational arguments; it has to be accepted at face value and in its totality.[582] Like his rationalist socialism from the turn of 1950s and 1960s, Kołakowski's philosophy of myth is first and foremost an exercise in the practice of everyday life, not a theoretical construct to be accepted after careful rational consideration.

Nonetheless – and this is the most important 'nonetheless' in this section – bearing in mind all the motifs for the necessity of myth, so that it makes our lives meaningful, because otherwise we are left with unsatisfactory mystifications or fall into despair, a rational thinker is faced with the final dilemma: if we know the myth is needed to fulfil our craving for a meaning in life, does it lose its powers then? Can we *know* it is invented and at the same time *believe* it is true? In 1966, at least, Kołakowski's answer is negative:

> And if myth is a secondary projection of our practical intention, whose role is to secure and justify that intention, then, nevertheless, were we to be certain that it is such a projection, we would be unable to accept it. The moment we know it, or think that we know it, our right to

[581] *Ibid.,* pp. 116–8.
[582] *Ibid.,* pp. 7, 56.

> have a voice and our right to impose meaning upon events are taken away from us. That is why factual history requires myth, and hence we have no right to regard ourselves as fully the creators of myth, but rather as its discoverers.[583]

At the end of his deliberations, he asks succinctly: 'Is a consciousness possible which acknowledges this genealogy of myth and at the same time is capable of participating in myth?'[584] The answer he gives at this stage of his religious thought's evolution seems quite superficial. Or, perhaps, it is an easy subterfuge to refrain from a clear commitment; according to Kołakowski, such a situation is psychologically possible and acceptable as long as we clearly distinguish between mythical and empirical realms, i.e. as long as myths do not attempt to find rational and empirical legitimisations.[585] Alasdair MacIntyre gave a different answer to the same question (Chapter V, p. 222). The conclusion is, Kołakowski argues, that the need of myth and a refusal to accept it are both necessary and irreconcilable, and that it is the painful tension between the two that is the source of human culture.[586]

The Revenge of the Sacred

As I have outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the years from 1966 to 1970 were crucial in Kołakowski's biography. This period is marked by his expulsion from the Party and forced migration from Poland, his moving between universities and settling in Britain in 1970, the need to confirm his position in the Western academic system, and finally his indirect involvement in Polish politics. All of these events had a significant influence on his intellectual projects and the development of his original philosophy. Considered from this perspective, *The Presence of Myth* was more of a conclusion from the fundamental transformations of the early 1960s than an introduction of a new chapter in the development of his thought. The ten years between 1966–1976 were significantly marked by what I call the 'disenchantment trilogy': his book-length critiques of positivism and Husserlian phenomenology as well as his final settlement of accounts with Marxism. However, before we proceed to the analysis of these secular systems of thought, Kołakowski's 'middle-phase' philosophy of myth had one more important episode in a 1973 essay *The Revenge of*

[583] *Ibid.,* p. 32.
[584] *Ibid.,* p. 118.
[585] *Ibid.,* pp. 119–20.
[586] *Ibid.,* p. 135.

the Sacred in Secular Culture[587], in which he drew a conclusion that he had not been explicitly stated before.

Next to the 'myth', the 'sacred' is the other crucial methodological concept developed by Mircea Eliade in his study of religion (above, pp. 116–17) and used by Kołakowski in his writings. For Eliade, the sacred space provides an absolute space for the non-contingent foundation of the world, in contrast to the relative profane area. In his essay, Kołakowski is concerned that the modern world witnesses a process of secularisation, which he understands primarily as blurring the difference between the sacred and the profane. He sees the universalisation of the idea of the sacred as the destruction of it.[588] He argues, again following Eliade, that the importance of the sacred is to bestow a special, non-empirical significance on special events in human life, such as birth, marriage, death, etc.[589] Destroying the difference between the sacred and the profane, he says, has a similar, mystifying result as abandoning mythical narrative in explaining the world: we develop an illusion that our lives and societies are perfectly flexible and can be infinitely transformed in accordance to our will. Kołakowski argues that when there is no absolute authority on what is acceptable and possible, and what is unacceptable and impossible, the human person is left in darkness 'where everything is indifferent'.[590] Again, this is a complete reversal of the 'rational jester's' standpoint that is presented in Chapter II. In *The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture*, we see Kołakowski's powerfully formulated conclusion (drawn from the historical investigations of the early 1960s and developed for the first time in *The Presence of Myth*) that man is not root for himself, that he is not God to himself and that he has to find his keeper. For Kołakowski, religion is the best option available:

> The utopia of man's perfect autonomy and the hope of unlimited perfection may be the most efficient instruments of suicide ever to have been invented by human culture. To reject the sacred is to reject our own limits. (…) If it is true that in order to make society more tolerable, we must believe that it can be improved, it is also true that there always must be people who think of the price paid for every step of what we call progress. (…) Religion is man's way of

[587] L. Kołakowski, 'The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture' in Kołakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, trans.: various (Chicago and London, 1990); first delivered as a conference paper in French in September 1973 and published in French: 'La revanche du sacré dans la culture profane' in *Le besoin religieux* (Neuchâtel, 1973) ; (see : Chudoba, *Kronika…*, p. 275).
[588] *Ibid.,* p. 68.
[589] *Ibid.,* p. 69.
[590] *Ibid.,* pp. 72–3.

> accepting life as an inevitable defeat. That it is not an inevitable defeat is a claim that cannot be defended in good faith.[591]

The rather pessimistic conclusion that 'religion is man's way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat' became one of the most paradigmatic arguments in the development of Kołakowski's mature philosophy of religion, which we will look at in Chapter IV. Nonetheless, this pessimistic conclusion anticipates his hesitance to fully commit to the religious cause. Kłoczowski suggested that this conclusion was the final breach with the Enlightenment tradition in Kołakowski's thought. In Kłoczowski's view, Kołakowski believes that secular ideologies – those that attempt to replace the mythical narrative, try to transplant the transcendent sacred into the realm of human profane, and create fake myths that result in despotism and the failure of humanity – are the kind of myth we should fear.[592]

Marcin Król argues that for many commentators, Kołakowski's philosophy of myth was an intellectual way of escaping the monistic, totalitarian vision of the world professed by Marxism-Leninism. If the human world and consciousness are narrated with myths, the argument goes, then there is no single truth; instead, there are various mythologies and their various truths. However, Król analyses, this interpretation is mistaken. The concept of the 'truth' was as important to Kołakowski's religious thought in this middle phase as the concepts of 'myth' and 'the sacred'. I have already outlined this crucial idea from the essay *Truth and Truthfulness as Cultural Values* (above, p. 120). Kołakowski did not abandon the notion of the 'truth' in his philosophy of myth. Rather, mythical narrative seemed the most appropriate way of pursuing that notion; and, for Kołakowski, pursuing the notion of the truth remains pursuing the notion of one truth, even if we know (or we are not sure about it) that only one 'truth' does not exist. [593] But before these ideas were ready to harvest, he had to 'clear the field' from unsuccessful philosophical systems that had attempted to replace religion in explaining the world in its entirety and in providing the unconditional foundation for the 'truth'.

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[591] *Ibid.,* p. 73.
[592] Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit…,* pp. 116–8.
[593] Król, *Czego nas uczy…*, pp. 115–7.

The Disenchantment Trilogy

This section will necessarily have a more limited scope than the fragment on Kołakowski's philosophy of myth. It is far beyond the ambition of this dissertation to present an in-depth investigation of the history of these philosophical systems. For our purposes, Kołakowski's critique of them and the kind of arguments he used in his critique are important as subsequent stages in the evolution of his religious thought. A slightly more elaborate analysis, dealing with Kołakowski's final examination of Marxism, will be presented in the last section of this chapter. This is caused by the fact that Marxist philosophy constituted the crucial point of reference in the first stages of his intellectual trajectory and the definite rejection of Marxism marked the most important struggle in the development of his mature religious thought. The 'disenchantment trilogy' consists of longer studies published as books. It should be mentioned, however, that in the same period Kołakowski wrote a much shorter essay on psychoanalysis[594], which criticised Freud's doctrine from very similar positions as in his examinations of positivism, phenomenology, and Marxism.

Positivism

The American edition of Kołakowski's history of positivist thought is published under the title 'The Alienation of Reason', which does not appear in the original Polish version. This emphasised Kołakowski's main argument in the book, which is that the entire positivist enterprise to find an absolute point for self-legitimisation of human Reason is idle. This thesis was supported by a profound historical investigation of positivist thought, traced backed to the mediaeval nominalism of Roger Bacon and William Ockham.

Kołakowski defines positivism as 'a certain philosophical attitude concerning human knowledge'. He believed that this limits the scope of what is acceptable as knowledge (or science) to the conclusions that result from the empirical inquiries of the modern natural sciences.[595] The point of positivism is to distinguish between what is absolutely reliable and what is not, to establish the infallible, ultimate cognition. Only such knowledge, he says, is reliable in the positivist worldview.[596] Kołakowski regards it as important that positivist philosophy in its various historical incarnations

[594] L. Kołakowski, 'The psychoanalytic theory of culture', in Newman (ed.), *A Leszek Kolakowski Reader*…, pp. 68–102; written in Polish in 1968, but published first in English translation.
[595] Kołakowski, *The Alienation of Reason*…, pp. 2, 9.
[596] *Ibid.,* p. 15.

strongly rejects any form of metaphysical reflexion, which by its nature cannot be supported by empirical evidence.[597] An empirical description of the world tells us how the world *actually is*, but that it will never tell us whether it *could be different*, or how it *should* be. Thus, he concludes, positivism exposes the contingency of all the nature.[598]

The empirical worldview was pushed to its limits in the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment thinker David Hume (1711–1776), who, in Kołakowski's opinion, should be considered the true father of positivist philosophy. Many of his writings are devoted to the critique of religion and argue that there cannot be any rational foundations for religious belief.[599] Kołakowski, however, argued that Hume's importance lies elsewhere, namely in the fact that the conclusions he drew were drastically contradictory to what he had hoped to prove in the first place. For Kołakowski, consistent application of Hume's radical critique of causality in nature results in the observation that the frequency of a phenomenon does not imply its occurrence in the future. Using a comparison to the demythologised world of ethical values, Kołakowski explains that in such an application, each natural event must be interpreted independently, without analogies or references to other occurrences of similar observations. His conclusion is that this had a devastating influence on the concept of knowledge itself:

> Hume lessened the cognitive value of all knowledge other than descriptions of individually given observable qualities. (…) The meaning of knowledge thus becomes purely pragmatic, knowledge turns out to be a collection of guidelines, useful and indispensable in practice, but devoid of cognitive value.[600]

Kołakowski deems Hume's philosophy the 'helplessness of the Enlightenment'.[601] However, the question that could spring from his thought was taken up by positivist philosophy as its greatest challenge:

> Is there anything absolutely certain in our knowledge, and if so what? (…) What is inductively acquired knowledge? Is it a socially conditioned reflex merely, which bids us accept a certain

[597] *Ibid.,* p. 9.
[598] *Ibid.,* pp. 22–3.
[599] *Ibid.,* p. 31; 36–8.
[600] *Ibid.,* pp. 39–40.
[601] *Ibid.,* p. 43.

> state of affairs as permanently present (…) Or is it a valid method for establishing certain truths about the world, truths relative in the sense that they are subject to revision, but not in the sense that something true at one time could be false at another time? How we answer this question is crucial for all our convictions concerning the meaning of science and philosophy, for all our statements about reality.[602]

In Kołakowski's interpretation, all subsequent developments of the positivist philosophy struggle towards the goal of finding a certain foundation of all knowledge about the world, of establishing a unified, scientific worldview that embraces all human cognition.[603] Once again, the fundamental problem of the 'truth' lies at the core of Kołakowski's concerns. Anticipating his own analysis of Husserlian phenomenology, he emphasises Husserl's critique of positivism from the modernist era (so-called 'empirio-criticism'). Empirio-critics, especially Richard Avenarius (1843–1896) and Ernst Mach (1838–1916) proposed a reductionist concept of human cognition that could be explained simply as fulfilling biological needs and could, therefore, abandon most metaphysical questions. Husserl's view (one to which Kołakowski appears to be very sympathetic) is that renunciation of the 'truth' in the classical sense, and reducing it to a peculiar instance of biological reaction, would be disastrous to European culture, as it delegitimises all the values upon which culture is founded. Furthermore, Husserl's argument continues, such a scientifically oriented worldview implies that the world is fundamentally a result of human labour. This is a view that was praised by the rational jester of the late 1950s, but not by Kołakowski after his 'religious consciousness' breakthrough.[604]

Conventionalism had an even more calamitous effect on the concept of the 'truth' than empirio-criticism. It is worth remembering that conventionalist philosophy was the topic of Kołakowski's master's thesis from 1950, and that some of his more important articles from the early 1950s were critiques of Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, the leading Polish proponent of this philosophy (Chapter I, pp. 34–35). This early-twentieth-century current of positivist thought argues that even empirical experience acquired by scientific experiments is not a true description of the world, but rather an artificial creature accepted because of its usefulness and convenience in

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[602] *Ibid.,* pp. 41–2.
[603] *Ibid.,* p. 107.
[604] *Ibid.,* pp. 114–33; it is useful to remind again that *A History of Positivist Thought* was written right after *Religious Consciousness* and probably overlapped with Kołakowski's early work on *The Presence of Myth* in 1965.

everyday life. In this way, conventionalists renounce the ideas of 'pure facts' and epistemological absolute in general.[605] In Kołakowski's words: 'In science, "truth," if the term may be used at all, is not conformity with the real, but at best conformity with experience.'[606] By discrediting the very idea of knowledge based on empirical experience, Kołakowski argues that conventionalism expressed the 'self-destructive tendency' within positivist thought.[607]

He is also very critical of logical empiricism as the next incarnation of a purely 'scientific' philosophy, this time based on the logical analysis of language and meaning of linguistic concepts. Nonetheless, he does acknowledge a specific historical context in which logical empiricism emerged, which is that after the atrocities of the First World War, philosophers were seeking a new system that could prevent people from falling for new irrational, fanatical ideologies. However, in Kołakowski's view, this is again a futile enterprise:

> [Philosophy] was not to be just a science, but also to perform an educational task in the struggle against irrational beliefs that poison collective life and give rise to attempts to impose them by force. (…) [positivists] professed a kind of utopianism, based on the assumption that the attitude of the intellectual whose convictions are more or less determined by strict scientific thinking could become the socially dominant way of thinking, and that this attitude could serve as a model for society as a whole, once education had been imbued with this spirit.'[608]

In his characteristically sharp but implacable review, Kołakowski ironically pointed out that 'most representatives of this school are much stronger on logical studies than on historical studies', going on to suggest that knowledge does not accumulate in philosophy in the way it accumulates in natural sciences. In other words, he concludes, positivist attempts to erase most of the history of philosophy and eliminate the majority of metaphysical questions as 'pseudo-problems' and linguistic nonsenses, are illegitimate.[609]

This verdict might, however, provide some benefits. According to Kołakowski, philosophy developed self-awareness by virtue of the positivist critique

[605] *Ibid.,* pp. 134–47.
[606] *Ibid.,* p. 146.
[607] *Ibid.,* p. 150.
[608] *Ibid.,* p. 178.
[609] *Ibid.,* p. 187.

of metaphysics. The point, he claims, is not to claim any technologically applicable and empirically verifiable knowledge, but to aim at a 'more meaningful image of the world – in the humanistic, not the semantic sense of "meaningful."'[610] Kołakowski's conclusions revive at moments the ardent, humanist jester from the previous chapter, who embarked on a quest for philosophical foundations in order to give us strength to face everyday life in a responsible way. A radical version of positivist thinking, which deems natural sciences self-sufficient in explaining the entirety of human experience, follows below:

> (…) the escapist's design for living, a life voluntarily cut off from participation in anything that cannot be correctly formulated. The language it imposes exempts us from the duty of speaking up in life's most important conflicts, encases us in a kind of armour of indifference to the *ineffabilia mundi* (…)[611]

In this way, such philosophy fails to provide us with the intellectual tools for dealing with the phenomenon of the world's indifference, which is so vividly described in *The Presence of Myth*.

This critique of positivism led Kołakowski to the final lesson he drew from this historical investigation. The lesson is in fact quite similar to the conclusion of *The Presence of Myth* – namely, that the source of human culture is to be found in the insolvable conflict between the need for a mythical narrative and the refusal to accept it. In *A History of Positivist Thought* this lesson is still presented in a more analytical, discursive way, rather than in the metaphorical and poetic language we find in the later book. Kołakowski argues that the history of philosophy teaches us that the desire to find an epistemological absolute, or the 'metaphysical certitude' – or, in yet other words, to establish human 'reason' as an autonomous subject, independent from the biological perspective of our lives – is nonsensical from a purely pragmatist point of view. Nonetheless, this desire is an 'eternal temptation' of philosophy which can never be fully abandoned. At this stage, Kołakowski was not explicit about what the source of reason's autonomy should be – his philosophy of myth was developed immediately after these deliberations – but he had already stated the main alternative. Kołakowski sees one of the most important problems of philosophy in general is as follows: either attempts to constitute reason, and hence to explain human intellectual

[610] *Ibid.,* p. 198.
[611] *Ibid.,* p. 210.

life, are some kind of 'evolutionary decadence', or, and Kołakowski is even more hesitant to say this explicitly than in the later *The Presence of Myth*, the reason is 'an alien body, originating in another world'.[612] Whichever is true, Kołakowski continues, positivist thought has failed to provide us with philosophical certitude.

Kołakowski was strongly criticised for being too reluctant and ambiguous in his verdict on the futility of attempts to establish 'pure reason' by the famous science fiction writer Stanisław Lem (1921–2006). Lem argued that the sphere of modern philosophy's interests is constantly limited by the progress of natural sciences, which he believed will eventually provide almost all answers to our concerns.[613] The discussion was held at the time when Kołakowski had begun work on *The Presence of Myth*, and, interestingly, he used an example of the question about world's contingency[614] – a matter of concern in the philosophy of myth, but not directly in the history of positivism – to provide an example of purely philosophical issues that cannot be solved empirically and to defend the arguments he had presented in *A History of Positivist Thought*. This case serves to prove fundamental consistency and continuity in the evolution of his religious thought at this stage and as another illustration of how his work as a historian of ideas resulted in the development of his original thought.

Husserl's phenomenology

Kołakowski's assessment of phenomenology focuses almost entirely on the thought of its founding father, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). There is almost no mention of any further developments of phenomenological thought in Germany and France. Kołakowski presented his most developed critique of 'the greatest and the most serious attempt in our century to reach the ultimate sources of knowledge' (which he believed 'was bound to fail'[615]) in *Husserl and the Search for Certitude*, which was based on the Ernst Cassirer Lectures, delivered at Yale University in February 1974.[616] However, most of Kołakowski's arguments against the Husserlian phenomenology were already present in a 1965 essay entitled *Husserl*

[612] *Ibid.,* pp. 216–9.
[613] 'Dyskusja – "Filozofia pozytywistyczna. Od Hume'a do Koła Wiedeńskiego"', in *Studia Filozoficzne* 2/1967, pp. 73, 82.
[614] *Ibid.,* p. 93.
[615] Kołakowski, *Husserl…*, pp. 4–5.
[616] *Ibid.,* 'note', p. ii.

– *Philosophy of Intelligible Experience*,[617] another text written in the crucial period of completing *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* and working on *A History of Positivist Thought* and *The Presence of Myth*.

It is worth emphasising again it is far beyond the ambition of this dissertation to present any complex assessment of Husserl's phenomenology. My focus is entirely on Kołakowski's interpretation of Husserl and my aim is to present this interpretation as an important stage in Kołakowski's 'disenchantment' with secular philosophies and the gradual emergence of his mature philosophy of religion.

Having stressed this point, it is worth to briefly explain that the main idea of phenomenology is to construct a new philosophical system based on a completely new form of cognition, taking as the starting point of one of the most traditional philosophical questions on the relationship between the way things appear to be and the reality of those things. The idea is to completely purify the cognitive process, to delete all things, processes, objects from all of our previous experiences, assumptions, and prejudices. If we exercise a meticulous elucidation of what is happening when we are experiencing the world, we will get back to the 'things themselves', that is, to the absolute foundation of knowledge. In a way, Husserlian phenomenology was a project of the return to the situation of Locke's *tabula rasa*, to experience the world in its purest, unpolluted phenomena.

The concept of 'certitude' is, according to Kołakowski, the key to understanding Husserl's thought.[618] Husserl's aim is to find the absolute foundations of our cognition, and for this reason, he wanted his philosophy to be a 'strict science' (a term he actually used for the title of one of his papers), and not just a 'worldview', although, Kołakowski points out, the intention to construct such a new philosophical worldview is evident throughout Husserl's work.[619] Kołakowski argued that Husserl was correct in claiming that this 'search for certitude' is the constitutive element of European culture.[620] We may see that this is a new version of the 'need of myth' Kołakowski traced in various intellectual systems.

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[617] L. Kołakowski, 'Husserl – filozofia doświadczenia rozumiejącego', in B. Baczko (ed.), *Filozofia i socjologia XX wieku. Wydanie drugie. Część pierwsza* (Warszawa, 1965).
[618] Kołakowski, *Husserl…*, p. 5; Kołakowski uses the terms 'certitude' and 'certainty' interchangeably, the Polish does not distinguish between them and uses one word: 'pewność.'
[619] Kołakowski, 'Husserl – filozofia doświadczenia rozumiejącego', p. 277.
[620] Kołakowski, *Husserl…*, p. 7.

Once again, the problem of 'the truth' is at the centre of these investigations. In Kołakowski's reading, Husserl follows in the footsteps of Descartes in an attempt to find certain foundations of knowledge, and the latter thinker is crucial because of the consequences of his devastating epistemology:

> It turned out that once we gave up the idea of an apodictically certain (and not analytical) truth, we did not need, and we were not capable of building, any concept of truth at all; once we are unable to say how the world is bound to be, we are unable to say how it is, either.[621]

The result is a scientific worldview in which truth means 'accord with experience', rather than 'accord with the world as it really is'. These conclusions were acquired by the positivist tradition, but what was especially disastrous for Husserl was 'psychologism', understood as the empirical interpretation of the rules of logic.[622] Kołakowski argues that if our cognition has, first and foremost, a physiological character, that is, it is not bound by some autonomous rules, but is purely a derivative of biological reactions, then the concept of the 'truth' has no sense at all. The answer was to establish a certain foundation for the timeless laws of logic, to fight the Protagorean principle that man is the measure of all things. Kołakowski summarises as follows:

> If we want to save the trust in Reason, in the validity of knowledge, and to preserve the very meaning of the concept 'truth,' we must not base logic on psychological laws. We have to find the transcendental foundation of certitude.[623]

This foundation then must be transcendental, not empirical. He argues that Husserl's phenomenology is the strongest argument in modern philosophy for the thesis that from an empirical point of view, the 'truth' is useless. In this way, his argument continues, science is also useless as a means of searching the truth. At this point, he makes one of very few strong statements in the first person singular – his own views are stated explicitly and it is not necessary to derive them from a descriptive analysis of the ideas of others:

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[621] *Ibid.,* p. 14.
[622] *Ibid.,* p. 16.
[623] *Ibid.,* p. 23.

> I believe that whoever consistently rejects the transcendental idea is bound to reject not only the 'absolute truth' but the truth *tout court*, not only certitude as something already gained but certitude as hope as well.[624]

Kołakowski sees Husserl's phenomenology as the quest for a method to justify validity of knowledge independent of history, biology, or personal experience.[625] This was the meaning of phenomenology's slogan 'back to the things themselves'. This was the purpose of *epoché* or 'bracketing', the method of phenomenological reduction. The transcendental subject performs a reduction on an intentional object, and once the process is completed, the universal, irreducible *eidos* of a phenomenon is discovered from the experienced object, while the transcendental subject is reduced to a pure transcendental *ego*. [626]

However, and this was Kołakowski's main argument as to why Husserlian phenomenology failed in fulfilling its goals, bracketing turns out to be a one-way process. Once we reduce the intentional object to its *eidos*, and the transcendental subject to the *ego*, his argument goes, that is, once we get 'back to the things themselves', there is no way to 'get back to the world' and communicate the outcome of our reduction to others. Therefore, Kołakowski says, the notions of philosophy as a 'strict science' and 'getting back to the things themselves' are contradictory and exclude each other. Knowledge acquired through science must be communicable — it must be possible to exactly recreate the scientific process through which the knowledge was acquired. In Husserlian phenomenology, Kołakowski continues, we are left with the problem of the 'bridge' between the unpurified phenomena before the *epoché*, and the purified *eidos* after it. In this way, he explains, each phenomenological reduction becomes a single, unique process, rather than a universal justification for knowledge.[627] This judgement is similar to his assessment of Hume's thought (above, p. 136).

Phenomenological reduction does not provide us with epistemological certitude, since it does not solve the problem of a bridge between the *eidos* of a thing and the perception of a thing. So what can provide us with the certitude? Kołakowski gave a clear answer:

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[624] *Ibid.,* pp. 28–9.
[625] *Ibid.,* p. 35.
[626] Kołakowski, 'Husserl – filozofia doświadczenia rozumiejącego', pp. 278–86.
[627] *Ibid.,* pp. 287–93.

> This certitude can be gained where we do not need to worry about 'the bridge' from perceptions to things, where there is an *absolute immediacy*, where the act of cognition and its content are *not mediated* in any way (even if their distinction remains valid), where we simply *cannot ask how we know* that our acts reach the content as it *really is* – where the content is absolutely transparent to the subject or is immanent.[628]

The excerpt above quoted is another way of saying what Kołakowski had already said in *The Presence of Myth*: there is a need of an Absolute, a totally independent point of reference, whom we '*cannot simply ask how we know*', a subject that, like the Eliadean myth, does not require explanation, but instead explains everything. In Kołakowski's view, we need something that does not require a 'bridge' between its perception of things and the things themselves, because the perception of a thing and its essence is one. In this way, the conclusion Kołakowski reached from his studies of early modern mystics in *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* was eventually the same as those he developed from twentieth-century phenomenology.

The radical search for certitude attempted by Husserl, Kołakowski ended his examination of phenomenology, could be realised only in immanence, when object and subject come to identity. That is, it must be a position of gods, where the epistemological absolute is inconceivable without the ontological absolute. This and only this is the rock on which the certitude is built.[629] This search has nothing to do with science, but rather as follows, as Kołakowski concluded, echoing *The Presence of Myth*:

> Its background is religious rather than intellectual; it is, as Husserl was perfectly aware, a search for meaning. It is a desire to live in a world from which contingency is banned, where sense (and this means purpose) is given to everything.[630]

Once again, Kołakowski's analysis of a modern philosophical current leads him to the same conclusion, reformulated and reinforced with more historical arguments. He emphasises that Husserl's importance is contained exactly in the fact that the failure of his phenomenology had finally demystified any objective, 'scientific' attempts to establish the Absolute:

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[628] Kołakowski, *Husserl…*, pp. 67–8.
[629] *Ibid.,* pp. 81–3.
[630] *Ibid.,* p. 84.

> He better than anybody, compelled us to realize the painful dilemma of knowledge: either consistent empiricism, with is relativistic, sceptical results (a standpoint which many regard discouraging, inadmissible, and in fact ruinous for culture) *or* transcendentalist dogmatism, which cannot really justify itself and remains in the end an arbitrary decision. (…) it is the conflict of values, rather than their harmony, that keeps our culture alive.[631]

Kołakowski presented the final, most lapidary form of this dilemma in *Religion. If There Is No God*, which is analysed in the next chapter. However, before this mature form of his religious thought was developed, it was necessary to kill one more beast, to debunk one more secular myth.

Kołakowski and His Marx – the second attempt

The topic of the last section of this chapter is *Main Currents of Marxism* and Kołakowski's essays on Marxism from the early 1970s. This was the final 'disenchantment', the ultimate denial of the most powerful and most influential secular myth in modern history, the inevitable refusal before he could thrive as a philosopher of religion in the late 1970s and 1980s. For Kołakowski, Marxism is fundamentally a myth that failed, a pseudo-religion that did not refer to non-human transcendence, and, for this reason, could not fulfil its tasks as a metaphysical system.

This three-volume book is undoubtedly his most famous work and raised him to the prominence of a global public intellectual in the last decades of the twentieth century. It has been praised as 'the best critique of Marxism ever published',[632] but is essentially more of an encyclopaedia or a lexicon of various Marxist philosophers. It is organised chronologically as to form, in Tony Judt's words a sort of 'bildungsroman (…) of a once-mighty family of theory and theorists, related in sceptical, disabused old age by one if its last surviving children'.[633] The academic importance and scholarly outcome of the Kołakowski's Herculean achievement is unquestionable. Nonetheless, it is important to point out at this stage that the great international career of *Main Currents of Marxism* was at least partly a result of the political climate of the 1970s and 1980s. Kołakowski's critique of Marxism was much more credible because he was a 'convert', someone who had dedicated much of his

[631] *Ibid.,* pp. 84–5.
[632] T. Judt, T. Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (London, 2012), p. 197.
[633] T. Judt, 'Goodbye to All That? Leszek Kołakowski and the Marxist Legacy' in *Reappraisals. Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (London, 2009), p. 132.

early life to propagating and developing Marxism. Furthermore, it was not simply another 'disenchanting' volume that debunked *practice* of socialist systems, as was the case with the great works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Milovan Đilas, but an in-depth demolition of the Marxist *theory*. *Main Currents of Marxism* was an argument that the system was rotten at its very foundations. That the whole sophisticated intellectual structure, which held the empire together, was an illusion. That the real problem lay not with the communists, but with Communism itself.

As in *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* (chapter II, pp. 90–108), Kołakowski's own commentaries and intellectual conclusions are scattered throughout the chapters on other thinkers and not presented in one single place. Nonetheless, if his attitude towards the theologians and mystics in *Religious Consciousness* was that of admiration, curiosity, sometimes even sympathy, his attitude here resembles the cool vivisection of a surgeon.

For the purpose of this thesis, there is no need to refer to the text as meticulously as I have done in regard to *Religious Consciousness* and several other important works throughout the various stages of the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought. Instead, I would like to analyse his main arguments with regard to the core of Karl Marx's philosophy, i.e. how Kołakowski placed Marx in the bigger picture of the history of Western thought. I would also like to present a few particularly interesting assessments of other thinkers in which Kołakowski reveals his own ideas and unambiguous judgements. However, I would like to emphasise two important assumptions that he made in *Main Currents*, neither of which are a matter of consensus among scholars of Marxism.[634] Firstly, Kołakowski argues that there is a fundamental consistency within Karl Marx's thought, i.e. that the scientific 'old Marx' (the scientist) was not a break from the 'young Marx' (the humanist), but a development of the basic ideas that had been present in his philosophy from the very beginning. Secondly, Kołakowski believes there was a fundamental consistency between Marx and Marxists, i.e. that further evolution of Marxist doctrine, especially its Leninist incarnation in Russia, was not an aberration, but a logical consequence of the original thought of Marx. More importantly, Kołakowski's Marxism is a grand-scale project of 'mankind's self-deification'. This is the most important conclusion he

[634] For more recent assessments of Karl Marx's philosophy, see: J. Sperber, *Karl Marx: a nineteenth-century life* (New York, London, 2013); G. Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (London, 2016).

makes from the perspective of this thesis. *Main Currents of Marxism* is not the story of a *political* movement, but rather the history of an ideological project that attempted to become a mythical narrative, all-embracing, omniscient system that could explain everything, and make history, the world, and human life meaningful. We ought to examine how this narrative failed in its task, and how Kołakowski became 'disenchanted' with the last great secular eschatology.

One typical feature of Kołakowski's interpretation of Marxism is the very long intellectual genealogy he established for Marx. While most accounts of Marxism start with Hegel or with the Enlightenment and Rousseau's political philosophy, he draws a line back to the ancient Neoplatonic Plotinus and his deliberations about the nature of the One. Furthermore, the consecutive line of succession includes thinkers that definitely fall on the 'idealist', rather than the 'materialist' side of the history of philosophy. These were the thinkers who have assimilated Neoplatonic concepts into the Christian tradition and whom we would tend to expect in the story of mystics from *Religious Consciousness*, including Eriugena (c. 815–c. 877), Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328), and even Angelus Silesius (Chapter II, pp. 103–4). At an earlier point, Kołakowski still understood the 'meaning of life' as the 'hidden nerve of philosophy' (Chapter II, p. 57). Later, this statement was reinforced by experiences from his studies of early modern mysticism and the philosophy of myth with its focus on the issue of human incompleteness and the contingency of existence:

> If the aspiration of philosophy was and is to comprehend intellectually the whole of Being, its initial stimulus came from awareness of human imperfection. Both this awareness and the resolve to overcome man's imperfection by means of understanding the Whole were inherited by philosophy from the realm of myth. (…)
> In the Platonic tradition (…) the fact that man as a finite, temporal being was different from the essence of humanity, signified that 'man was other than himself', i.e. his empirical, temporal, factual existence was not identical with the ideal, perfect, extra-temporal Being of humanity as such.[635]

In a nutshell, this was Kołakowski's interpretation of Karl Marx's philosophy: if Husserlian phenomenology can be summarised in the slogan 'back to the things themselves', then Marxism is a project of 'back to the man himself'. Kołakowski's

[635] Kołakowski, *Main Currents…*, p. 12.

starting point is philosophical anthropology,[636] which he understands in terms of the Neoplatonic philosophy of the Absolute, filtered through Christianity, the Enlightenment, Hegel and the Hegelian Left with Ludwig Feuerbach in particular.[637] Only after those developments, continues his argument, did 'a new eschatology [come] into view', with humanity itself accepting its finitude, but becoming the new Absolute, without a reference to any antecedent, transcendent, non-human Absolute.[638]

As I have already emphasised, one of the most important arguments Kołakowski made in his history of Marxist thought was that there had been a fundamental consistency in Karl Marx's philosophy, that the old, 'scientific' Marx was a development rather than a break with the young, 'humanistic' Marx. He identifies the core of Marx's ideas from the very beginning of his intellectual trajectory, and even the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 are, in his view, 'the first draft of the book that Marx went on writing all his life, and of which *Capital* is the final version'.[639] In *Main Currents* Kołakowski managed to succinctly crystallise the essence of Marxism, 'the fundamental principles of Marx's theory, from which he never departed'. It is worth quoting at this point a longer excerpt, from which we can see a true summary of Kołakowski's take on Marxism, a result of almost thirty years of engagement and critical analysis:

> Marx's point of departure is the eschatological question derived from Hegel: how is man to be reconciled with himself and with the world? (…) Marx, following Feuerbach, places in the centre of his picture the 'earthly reality' of Man, as opposed to the Hegelian Spirit developing through empirical individuals or using them as its instrument. 'For man, the root is man himself' – the basic reality, self-derived and self-justified. (…)
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> Alienated labour is a consequence of the division of labour which in its turn is due to technological progress, and is therefore an inevitable feature of history. (…) Alienation means the subjugation of man by his own works, which have assumed the guise of independent things. (…) Alienation is thus not to be cured by thinking about it, but by removing its causes. Man is a practical being, and his thoughts are the conscious aspect of his practical life, although this fact is obscured by false consciousness. (…)
>
> The transcendence of alienation is another name for communism – a total transformation of human existence, the recovery by man of his species-essence. (…) It is the fulfilment of the

[636] *Ibid.,* p. 8.
[637] *Ibid.,* pp. 26–7; 59–66; 93–8.
[638] *Ibid.,* p. 67.
[639] *Ibid.,* p. 109.

> human calling, the reconciliation of essence and existence in human life. (…) It is the solution to the problem of history and is also the end of history as we have known it, in which individual and collective life are subject to contingency. (…)
>
> But the proletariat is more than the instrument of an impersonal historical process: it fulfils its destiny be being conscious of that destiny and of its own exceptional situation. (…) Here the opposition of freedom and necessity disappears, for what is in fact the inevitability of history takes the form of a free initiative in the proletariat consciousness. (…) While communism is the final transformation of all spheres of life and human consciousness, the motive force of the revolution that brings it about must be the class-interest of the exploited and destitute proletariat.[640]

The sentence 'It is the fulfilment of the human calling, the reconciliation of essence and existence in human life' clearly shows that Marxism, in Kołakowski's interpretation, is not simply a political philosophy or economic theory, but a *mythical narrative*, an eschatological project that endows human life with meaning.

Even when commenting on the economic aspects of Marx's critique of capitalism, Kołakowski continues to emphasise the centrality of anthropological and philosophical perspectives throughout the project as a whole. For Kołakowski's Marx, what is most outrageous in the capitalist mode of production is not the poverty it produces, but the loss of human subjectivity in the dehumanised process of commodification. [641] If historical materialism is to be taken seriously as a historiosophy, argues Kołakowski, with its main idea being that class struggle derives from economic differences within a society, and that this is the one and only characteristic which may explain all of political, social and cultural history, then such ideology is absurd. On the other hand, if historical materialism is considered in its limited form, as a theory of interdependence between technological process, culture and property relations, then it is a mere common sense banal. Nonetheless, Kołakowski continued to emphasise that the most fundamental, constitutive feature of Marxism is its 'communist prophecy': the eschatological perspective of the 'fulfilment of human calling'. Without that prophecy, Marxism ceases to be Marxism. In Kołakowski's view, the mythical character of this vision allows the conclusion that historical materialism is essentially a faith, an 'exhortation of a prophet', not a scientific theory.[642]

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[640] *Ibid.,* pp. 146–9.
[641] *Ibid.,* pp. 230–6.
[642] *Ibid.,* pp. 298–307.

Importantly, what was understood as 'Marxism' by subsequent generations was, to a great extent, distorted by Friedrich Engels' interpretation. As Marx's closest collaborator, executor of his last will, and editor of most posthumously published works, including the last two volumes of *Capital*, Engels had an undisputed authority among the early followers of Marxism. However, his own way of thinking was deeply influenced by positivist sciences and Darwinist naturalism, and he tried to present Marx's ideas in a similar perspective.[643] Kołakowski argues that this is a misinterpretation and that Marx's starting point was philosophical anthropology and the question of human self-reconciliation, rather than the vision of the human person as a particular application of some universal, dehumanised laws of nature. Although Kołakowski sees Engels as a 'philosophical amateur', he accepts it was the Engelsian version of Marxism that prevailed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This resulted in the development of a political ideology that had an opportunity to realise Marxist premises in practice: Leninism.[644]

The question of whether Leninism was a legitimate heir to Marxist philosophy is one of the most controversial and complex issues for all histories of Marxism and necessarily entangles such intellectual analysis with an active engagement in political discourse. It was here that Kołakowski makes a fundamental methodological statement, once again redefining the role of a historian of ideas. If we are asking 'where is the true heritage of Marx's philosophy?' – in the horror of Stalinist gulags, in the bureaucracy of Soviet apparatchiks, in the British welfare state, or in German philosophy – he says, we are simply asking the wrong question. In an open rejection of the Marxist orthodoxy to which he had at first been faithful and then tried to reform from within, Kołakowski argued that Marxism does not consist of any method that can provide us with the solutions to the problems unknown to Marx. Putting Marxism in a purely historical perspective, he argues that had Marx lived longer, he would have changed the way he thought about society and its challenges. In Kołakowski's view problem must be stated in different terms:

> The problem facing the historian of ideas, therefore, does not consist in comparing the 'essence' of a particular idea with its practical 'existence' in terms of social movements. The question is rather how, and as a result of what circumstances, the original idea came to serve

[643] *Ibid.,* pp. 212–4.
[644] *Ibid.,* pp. 327–35.

> as a rallying-point for so many different and mutually hostile forces; or what were the ambiguities and conflicting tendencies in the idea itself which led to its developing as it did? (…) In other words, the historian treats ideas seriously and does not regard them as completely subservient to events and possessing no life of their own (for in that case there would be no point in studying them), but he does not believe that they can endure from one generation to another without some change of meaning.[645]

For these reasons, Leninism, in Kołakowski's interpretation, was a possible interpretation of Marx's doctrine, but not the only possible one. Instead he interprets it as the result of numerous historical circumstances and coincidences, often, especially in its undemocratic character, contrary to Marx's original *intentions*. Nonetheless, in Kołakowski's view, it represents to a great extent the logic of the doctrine's development.[646]

There is an if not crucial, but noticeable difference in Kołakowski's analysis of the relationship between Marx's philosophy and Leninism in the first volume of *Main Currents*, and the second and third volumes. The first volume, which addresses Marxism's genealogy and Marx and Engels themselves, was drafted in Poland as early as 1967–68, directly after Kołakowski's work on *The Presence of Myth* and *A History of Positivism*, while the second and third volumes were written during Kołakowski's fellowship at Oxford in the first half of the 1970s. This occurred after his departure from Poland and subsequent bitter experiences with student protests and the New Left at Berkeley. While in the first volume he was much more willing to differentiate and present a more balanced view of the various 'currents' of Marxism and the reasons Leninism emerged as *the main current* of Marxism, in the second and third volumes the importance of the consistent development between Marxism–Leninism–Stalinism is much more unambiguous. Kołakowski's take on Lenin as a theorist is very clear: there is an absolute primacy of the political aspect over any intellectual problems. In Kołakowski's view, all the major innovations that Lenin introduced to Marxist doctrine – the central role of the party, the strategic alliance between workers and peasantry, self-determination of nations – had a purely pragmatic purpose and served the aim of consolidating all revolutionary forces in one camp:

[645] *Ibid.,* pp. 6–7.
[646] *Ibid.,* pp. 342–4.

> He was not in search of answers to any philosophical questions, for all the important ones had been solved by Marx and Engels (…) He believed firmly that the revolutionary movement must have a clear-cut, uniform *Weltanschauung*, and that any pluralism in this respect was a grave political danger.[647]

Furthermore, the Stalinist system of totalitarian state was in turn the legitimate heir of the Leninist interpretation of Marxism.[648] Kołakowski re-affirmed the critique of Stalinism that he had presented in his revisionist essays of the mid-1950s (Chapter II, pp. 53–68). Being Marxist did not mean following some particular set of ideas, but rather total conformity to the supreme authority that establishes orthodoxy. Given this basis, Kołakowski argues, the leap between the concept that the 'proletariat always possess the truth' and that 'Stalin is always right' is not a very long one:

> This, in fact, is not too grave a distortion of Marx's epistemology combined with Lenin's notion of the party as the advance guard of the workers' movement. The equation: truth=the proletarian world-view=Marxism=the party's world-view=the pronouncements of the party leadership=those of the supreme leader is wholly in accordance with Lenin's version of Marxism.'[649]

Kołakowski was even more unequivocal in a shorter 1975 essay entitled *Marxist Roots of Stalinism*, which was a political summary of *Main Currents*. He acknowledged that Soviet Communism must be understood in the specific context of Russian history and that Marx never wrote about the future kingdom of freedom as a system based on a despotic single-party domination.[650] Nonetheless, his main argument was again very categorical, stating that 'every attempt to implement all the basic values of Marxist socialism is likely to generate a political organisation that would bear the unmistakable marks of Stalinism'.[651] If Stalinism is truly a caricature of the original Marxist thought, Kołakowski argues, we can talk about a caricature only if it resembles the original.[652]

With a view to understanding the entire process of Kołakowski's rejection of Marxism as a secular metaphysics, it is worth briefly outlining some other 'currents'

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[647] *Ibid.,* p. 723.
[648] *Ibid.,* pp. 769–70.
[649] *Ibid.,* pp. 791–2.
[650] Kołakowski, *Is God Happy?*, p. 102; 93.
[651] *Ibid.,* p. 94.
[652] *Ibid.,* p. 111.

of Marxist thought, especially those he analysed in the third volume, which addresses the post-1917 developments in Marxist philosophy. The only serious philosophical alternative to the Leninist interpretation of Marxism was that of an Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), who died in a fascist prison. He rejected the main premises of Engels' materialism and placed the question of culture at the centre of his thought. His ideas have never had the opportunity to be implemented in political practice, as it was the case with Leninism in Soviet Russia.[653] Kołakowski briefly analyses the Eastern European revisionism, mentioning explicitly his involvement in the movement, and concluding bitterly that all the attempts to reform the system from within were doomed to fail as long as the ossified orthodoxy of the ruling party was the constitutive element of the regime.[654]

The most interesting part, however, is Kołakowski's assessment of his actual contemporaries, post-war Marxists, both the Western 'fellow-travellers', who enthusiastically supported Soviet Communism from a safe distance, and thinkers from the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain, often slightly older than Kołakowski, who did not share his fundamental disillusionment after the late 1950s. His judgement of such intellectuals is unambiguous:

> The psychological motives of this voluntary self-deception were various. Among them were a desperate need to believe that someone in the world embodied the age-old dreams of universal human brotherhood; the illusion of intellectuals concerning 'historical progress; (…) the longing for a master key to unlock all the secrets of the universe, including those of history and politics ; (…) Desiring, as they believed, to be on the same side of the barricade as the deprived and persecuted of this world, the Communist intellectuals became the prophets of the most oppressive political system then existing (…).[655]

Kołakowski is at times ruthless and exaggerates in ridicule, which echoes his vehement anti-Catholic tirades in the early 1950s (chapter I, pp. 34–39), especially when talking about his contemporaries. He describes the critical theory of the Frankfurt School 'not so much a continuation of Marxism in any direction, as an example of its dissolution and paralysis'. He sees Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) as an example of a naïve person from an affluent society, who is obsessed with sex; Ernst

[653] Kołakowski, *Main Currents…*, pp. 963–88.
[654] *Ibid.,* pp. 1153–67.
[655] *Ibid.,* pp. 932–3.

Bloch (1885–1977) as a 'preacher of intellectual irresponsibility',[656] and Louis Althusser (1918–1990) as ignorant and pretentious, and asks whether Marxism really existed in Karl Marx's thought, or whether Althusser was its true inventor.[657]

The most interesting case is Kołakowski's assessment of the Hungarian thinker György Lukács, whose idea of *Totalität* was instrumental in the development of Lucien Goldmann's concept of a 'worldview' (Chapter II, pp. 81–83). Kołakowski's position is more nuanced here; tellingly, the relevant chapter is entitled 'Reason in the Service of Dogma'. He clearly admired Lukács as the only real philosopher of Stalinist orthodoxy.[658] Kołakowski sees Lukács' most important achievement as re-introducing the Hegelian perspective to Marxism and emphasising that Marx's comprehension of the world and history has a profoundly dialectical character, i.e. that understanding and transformation of the world, are one and the same process, rather than a premise and a conclusion. Kołakowski regards Lukács as debunking the Engelsian, naturalistic vision of Marxism as a 'scientific worldview', claiming that 'his work had the effect of revealing the mythological, prophetic, and utopian sense of Marxism which had eluded Marx's more scientific followers'.[659] In Kołakowski's view, Lukács was finally the most tragic example of a great mind seduced by a secular pseudo-religion:

> In the Communist party he found what many intellectuals need: absolute certainty in defiance of facts, an opportunity of total commitment that supersedes criticism and stills every anxiety. (…) Lukács is perhaps the most striking example in the twentieth century of what may be called the betrayal of reason by those whose profession is to use and defend it.[660]

Kołakowski and His Marx – summary

Kołakowski famously summarised his understanding of Marxism in the 1970s as a correlation and interplay of three main motifs. The Romantic motif was a longing for a true unity between the individual and the community. It was a desire for a relationship that would not be mediated in any way that would reject the concept of negative liberty as an expression of egoistic self-interest, a relationship in which there

[656] *Ibid.,* pp. 1103; 1104–23; 1124; 1143.
[657] L. Kołakowski, 'Althusser's Marx', *The Socialist Register* 1971, pp. 117, 120; Kołakowski, *Main Currents…*, p. 1176.
[658] *Ibid.,* p. 989.
[659] *Ibid.,* p. 1024.
[660] *Ibid.,* pp. 1031–2.

would be no form of alienation whatsoever, in short, a relationship that would restore the authenticity of individual life. The second motif was the 'Faustian–Promethean' motif, which was a conviction that humanity, as a collective, is fully responsible for its own existence and must not depend on any outer authority; or, recalling again one of Marx's most famous quotes, a belief that 'for man the root is man himself'. This motif served as the main inspiration for Kołakowski's own 'revisionist current' of Marxism in the late 1950s. Finally, there is the rationalist, determinist motif of the Enlightenment, which may be seen as an extension of the previous Promethean motif. It is the acceptance that hitherto universal laws governed history, that freedom means understanding necessity, but at the same time that Communism will mean the beginning of the proper human history. From this perspective, since understanding the world and transforming it is a single process, the revolutionary proletariat is the first group in history to be the true subject, rather than the object, of historical process, and the determinism of pre-communist history will fade into the past.[661]

'Marxism has been the greatest fantasy of our century'[662] Kołakowski concludes his three-volume masterpiece. He acknowledges Marx's greatness as a philosopher, and argues that his main ideas, especially those on the centrality of economic production, and social and political consequences of it, irrevocably changed the way we think about society. Nonetheless, Kołakowski emphasises, and this is the main point of his critique, that without its claim to be the 'scientific knowledge' of the future, Marxism is not Marxism. He also argues that it has completely failed in providing such knowledge. A secular eschatology, he continues, is not simply a different version of a *sacred*, religious eschatology, a transcendent mythical narrative that endows human lives and the world with meaning. It is a fake myth, he maintains, a false religion:

> Marxism is a doctrine of blind confidence that a paradise of universal satisfaction is awaiting us just round the corner. Almost all the prophecies of Marx and his followers have already proved to be false (…) In this sense Marxism performs the function of a religion, and its efficacy is of a religious character. But it is a caricature and a bogus form of religion, since it presents its temporal eschatology as a scientific system, which religious mythologies do not purport to be.
>
> (…)

[661] *Ibid.,* pp. 335–41.
[662] *Ibid.,* p. 1206.

> The self-deification of mankind, to which Marxism gave philosophical expression, has ended in the same way as all such attempts, whether individual or collective: it has revealed itself as the farcical aspect of human bondage.[663]

The mythical character of Marxism, and Kołakowski's final break with the Marxist tradition, was expressed even more explicitly in a 1973 conference paper *The Myth of Human Self-Identity: Unity of Civil and Political Society in Socialist Thought* during a conference organised by Kołakowski under a very telling title 'Is There Anything Wrong with the Socialist Idea?'. Developing the Romantic motif of Marxism explained above, Kołakowski builds a direct bridge between the ambitions of the Communist ideology to restore a perfect unity between the individual and the community, and the totalitarian state in Soviet Russia, suggesting that such perfect unity can be realised only through coercion and human suffering on a massive scale.[664] This text triggered a polemic by the famous British historian E.P. Thompson, who accused Kołakowski of abandoning the cause of socialism. Thompson appealed to the shared experience of 1956 and the short-lived 'Thaw' as the foundation for the search for 'better Marxism', a peaceful way to build a truly just society.[665] Kołakowski's reply was ruthless: he referred to his personal experiences from living in Communist Poland and to testimonies of other atrocities committed in the Soviet Union, accusing Thompson of being childishly naïve and 'falling victim to verbal magic'. He made the crucial declaration that he was not 'interested at all in being "a Marxist" or in being called so'. Finally, depriving his opponent of any delusions, Kołakowski concluded with the words 'this skull will never smile again.'[666]

Still, it is worth asking if it ever will? Kołakowski's assessment of Marxism is rather unambiguous and highly critical: Marxism as a philosophy is dead. In a 1988 afterword to the collection of his early essays, he acknowledges Marx's importance in the intellectual history of Europe, but diminishes his contemporary significance with the rather peculiar and perhaps exaggerating suggestion that 'relying on his [Marx's] resources – no matter how refreshed – in investigations and critiques of modern societies is as useful, as reading the works of Descartes for a handbook of modern

[663] *Ibid.,* pp. 1208; 1212.
[664] L. Kołakowski, 'The Myth of Human Self-Identity: Unity of Civil and Political Society in Socialist Thought', in Kołakowski, Hampshire (eds.), *The Socialist idea: a reappraisal* (London, 1974), pp. 18–35.
[665] E.P. Thompson, 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kołakowski', *The Socialist Register* 1973, pp. 1–100.
[666] L. Kołakowski, 'My Correct Views on Everything', *The Socialist Register* 1974, pp. 1–20.

physics'.[667] The usefulness of such a critique during the Cold War was explained at the beginning of this section. Paradoxically, one of the weaknesses of *Main Currents of Marxism* is the fact that it focuses almost entirely on the *philosophical* history of Marxism, while neglecting its political and social dimensions. This objection was already raised in contemporary reviews,[668] even though the general assessment of the book was very positive. However, some leftist thinkers, including a leading theorist of British socialism, Ralph Miliband, presented a more fundamental critique, calling *Main Currents* 'a monument that rests on unsound foundations and is full of cracks'. Kołakowski's interpretation was also attacked for being misleading on crucial points of diminishing differences between the young Marx and the old Marx, and between Marx and later developments of the doctrine. Crucially, Miliband argued, Stalinism was not a logical consequence of Marx's premises, but an 'absolute contradiction' of his project. Finally, Kołakowski belittled the aspect that was crucial to his own writings from the late 1950s and constituted for decades the main attraction of the socialist cause, namely the vision of Marxism as a moral force, a call to banish evil from this world.[669]

Myths and Myths that Failed – Summary

This chapter has analysed Leszek Kołakowski's major writings from the decade 1966–1976. After the major 'evolutionary leap' in the development of his religious thought from the early 1960s, the next decade, marked by his forced emigration from Poland and final break with Marxism, was an important transitional phase. It was during this time Kołakowski's intellectual engagement focused on various areas of twentieth-century thought. All the systems he investigated claimed to provide definitive answers to the most troubling philosophical questions, specifically the sense of the contingency of human existence. Inspired by the conclusions he drew from *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* and the works of Mircea Eliade, Kołakowski used conceptual categories of 'myth' and 'sacred' to analyse

[667] Kołakowski, 'Posłowie', in *Pochwała niekonsekwencji…* vol. III, p. 314; a similar view was repeated in the new preface to the new edition of the *Main Currents* from 2004: Kołakowski, *Main Currents…*, pp. v-vii.
[668] S. Lukes, 'Low Marx', *The New York Review of Books* (May 20, 1980), online archive accessed 19/06/2017.
[669] R. Miliband, 'Kołakowski's Anti-Marx', *Political Studies*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1/1981, pp. 115–22.

positivism, Husserlian phenomenology and Marxism as the most important 'secular eschatologies' that attempted to give meaning to human life. The conclusion he drew from all of these examinations was that those projects failed, and that the most important reason was that they had attempted to structure their causes on human Reason and all its limitations. According to Kołakowski, this was the wrong strategy, as only an absolute, transcendent point of reference can provide us with certitude. For Kołakowski, the human Prometheus will never reach Olympus and become a god; Man cannot be the Marxian root for himself; the Spinozian cannot be God to himself; his heart cannot be set upon Nothingness, as in Goethe's poem. Kołakowski argued that the foundation must be a non-human Absolute and that what is needed for a successful mythical narrative that will truly endow life with meaning is a religious system. These investigations were necessary before Kołakowski made his final leap in the evolution of his philosophy of religion, which will be the topic of the next chapter. In another text he prepared towards the end of the examined period, Kołakowski used the concept of 'utopia' to make the same point – that all secular eschatologies turn out to be failed religions:

> Utopia is a desperate desire to attain absolute perfection; this desire is a degraded remnant of the religious legacy in nonreligious minds. By contrasting the sacred with the profane, mythological order enabled people to accept the inevitable imperfection of the finite world. Once the realm of the sacred collapses in people's minds, the desire for the absolute does not wither away and takes a self-contradictory ideological form; it becomes an idea of finite and corruptible reality, which embodies infinite and incorruptible values.[670]

[670] L. Kołakowski, 'Introduction: Need of Utopia, Fear of Utopia', in S. Bialer (ed.), *Radicalism in the Contemporary Age. Volume 2: Radical Visions of the Future* (Boulder, Colorado, 1977), p. 11.

Chapter IV: A priest cries 'The horror!'

> If the road I have pointed out as leading to this goal seems very difficult, yet it can be found. Indeed, what is so rarely discovered is bound to be hard. For if salvation were ready to hand and could be discovered without great toil, how could it be that it is almost universally neglected? All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.[671]
>
> Baruch Spinoza

The penultimate of the main chapters of this thesis will analyse Leszek Kołakowski's mature religious thought. After the two stages investigated in previous chapters, the crucial 'evolutionary leap' resulting from his study of early modern mysticism in the early 1960s and the examination of non-religious eschatological projects in the 'disenchantment trilogy' and other texts from the late 1960s and 1970s, Kołakowski's philosophy of religion reached a fully mature form in the second half of 1970s and was presented in his writings over the next three decades.

This transition was conducted under much calmer social and political circumstances than it was the case in the previous period.[672] As a senior research fellow at All Souls College, Oxford and a lecturer at the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, Kołakowski had comfortable conditions for his intellectual work, and he remained in England for the rest of his life. The international success of the *Main Currents of Marxism* made him a globally renowned thinker. He was recognised with numerous prestigious awards, including a MacArthur Fellowship and the John W. Kluge Prize. After Poland's political transformation in 1989, he became one of the most popular public intellectuals in his native country, even a household name, commenting on political and philosophical issues to a broader audience. Kołakowski's last writings, from the late 1990s and 2000s were more accessible, and aimed at a wider audience rather than the narrow circle of professional academia. He died after a short illness in 2009.

I will argue that Kołakowski's mature religious thought had a coherent and consistent form already in the late 1970s, and that only slight alteration were made to

[671] Spinoza, *Ethics*, V, 42, Sch., in *Complete Works*…, p. 404.
[672] For more biographical details from the period, see: Chudoba, *Kronika*..., pp. 337–452; Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…,* tom II.

the issues that were at centre of his interests in the later decades. This was a question of a shift in emphasis, not of the main arguments. In a way, we could say the evolutionary *process* has been completed. For this reason, this chapter will not, as the previous ones have, emphasise the chronology of Kołakowski's later texts. Rather, writings from different decades will be investigated together, focusing on the structure of their arguments. It should be noted, however, that his most important ethical texts – which stood in contrast with the ethics he developed in the late 1950s and 1960s – were written in the second half of the 1970s, immediately after he settled accounts with the 'secular eschatologies' in his 'disenchantment trilogy', but before he presented his original metaphysical thought. Once again, I argue that Kołakowski had to clarify his ethical positions first, before fully embarking on a direct investigation of religious issues.

For all these reasons, this chapter will be structured more analytically, with three main sections discussing the following: his ethical thought; metaphysical ideas; and finally views on the role of religion in modern societies. This examination will be based on numerous essays, shorter popular texts, and on the last three major books by Kołakowski: his study of the main themes in the philosophy of religion;[673] a historical study of Jansenism and Pascal;[674] and, most importantly, the crowning achievement of his religious thought, a short treatise *Metaphysical Horror*.[675]

One more issue should be pointed out at this stage. Throughout the various texts analysed in this chapter, Kołakowski often quotes the Bible to support his argument or to make a historical comparison. However, despite his great erudition and knowledge of many languages, he never mastered ancient Hebrew or Greek. Therefore, almost all his biblical references are taken neither from the original text, nor from any modern vernacular version, but from the *Vulgate*. It is not relevant for this thesis to elaborate on various issues emanating from different translated versions and editorial history of that text (which Kołakowski was naturally perfectly aware of), nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that 'Kołakowski's Bible' is not precisely the Holy Writ, but it is the Bible as a *cultural* and *civilisational* fact. The Latin Bible was the text used in the worlds of St Augustine, Aquinas, Erasmus, Spinoza, and Pascal – all major philosophical protagonists who influenced Kołakowski's own

[673] L. Kołakowski, *Religion. If there is no God* (London, 1993); first published in 1982.
[674] L. Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing. A Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism* (Chicago and London, 1995).
[675] L. Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror* (Chicago and London, 2001); first published in 1988.

thinking about Christianity. Finally, it was the official text used by the Catholic Church for more than a thousand years, which made it the authoritative version of the Scriptures for the members of the Church.

Kołakowski's Ethics

Kołakowski's mature ethical thought derived fundamentally from the process analysed in the previous chapter – his gradual disillusionment with most important non-religious philosophical systems that attempted to explain the world in its entirety. What Kołakowski did not try to refute in any specific text directly, was the Enlightenment's tradition of progressive humanism, which served as the foundation for his early ethics, presented particularly in *Irrationalities of Rationalism* and *Ethics without a Moral Code* (Chapter II, pp. 62–67). Nonetheless, it will become clear from this section that this worldview was eventually also rejected as unsatisfactory.

Kołakowski's main ethical thesis is this: we need a non-human, non-contingent, independent source of morality. Human beings cannot create values, for if they did, the whole moral system would inevitably be blurred and the difference between good and evil would effectively be abolished. Since none of the secular philosophical systems proved to be sufficient in this respect, such a source *must* have a transcendent, or rather – as Kołakowski argued following Eliade – a mythical character. The only mythology that could possibly be satisfactory is religion. It must to be stressed again at this stage that religion does not necessarily mean Christianity – Kołakowski never officially joined any church. However, since he was writing almost exclusively about the Western intellectual tradition and Western societies, 'religion' *de facto* meant Christianity in his thought, or, more specifically, the Catholic and Protestant traditions.

In was not an easy task, however, to convince his audience in the secularised societies of Western Europe and America in the late twentieth century – not to mention analytical philosophers at university faculties – that ethical systems should have religious sanction. Kołakowski's arguments concerning the failures of Husserl and Marx to provide moral certitude could be accepted. Traditional phenomenology never developed into a more popular system of thought and lived only in academic circles of continental Europe. Marxism as an ethical system was commonly held to be

bankrupt because of the totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union and atrocities of the Stalinist period. Kołakowski's *tour de force* in *Main Currents of Marxism* was one of the reasons to firmly establish this view. Yet the last part of the 'disenchantment trilogy' – that is, positivist thought – became the benchmark of a rational discourse in the modern, technological civilisation. Kołakowski rejected the scientific worldview as early as in the mid-1960s (Chapter III, pp. 135–140). By the late 1970s, the main theme of Kołakowski's major ethical writings was arguments against the positivist ethical foundation, and for a metaphysical ethical foundation – which meant arguing against the contemporary tradition of analytical philosophy, especially 'meta-ethics' and its rejection of metaphysical questions as altogether meaningless[676].

Arguments against positivist ethics were presented notably in two essays: *The Persistence of the Sein–Sollen Dilemma*[677] and *Little Ethics*.[678] In the positivist system, usefulness in scientific inquiries is the criterion to determine what we mean by a true 'empirical judgement'. Thus, empirical judgements have to be verifiable and must have predictive value. However, Kołakowski claims, it is only an arbitrary set of premises:

> If positivist definitions of meaning are based on certain decisions about values, it follows that we are free not to assent to them and, consequently, we have no convincing reasons to admit that value judgements are meaningless.[679]

Kołakowski says that positivism is useful for science, but not for morality. There is a fundamental difference in validating ethical and scientific statements, and in both cases specific judgements might be true or false.[680]

When we think about morality and the validity of its judgements, there is a structure where narrative and normative statements are in fact united – this is a worldview based on a mythical order. Kołakowski developed a crucial conceptual

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[676] See for instance: Hans-Johann Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (Cambridge, 2008), esp. pp. 182–8.
[677] L. Kołakowski, 'The Persistence of the Sein–Sollen Dilemma' in *Man and the World*, no 2, vol. 10 (1977); first delivered as a conference paper in 1976.
[678] L. Kołakowski, 'Mała etyka' in L. Kołakowski, *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony i 27 innych kazań* (Kraków, 2009); first published in Italian as an encyclopaedia entry in *Enciclopedia*, vol. V (Torino, 1978).
[679] Kołakowski, 'The Persistence…', p. 206.
[680] *Ibid.*

framework from his studies of religion and Eliade, which is that the truth of ethical statements gleaned from a myth is based on the same authority as the story conveyed in the myth:

> If God is the supreme source of wisdom, then the saying 'thou shalt not steal' is valid in exactly the same sense as the saying 'God created the human race on the sixth day'; both are established according to the same criteria of revelation and there is no other way their validity could be confirmed.[681]

This is the crucial moment in which Kołakowski abandoned the mainstream discourse of contemporary philosophy. He claims that our ability to determine whether a judgement is true or false *does not matter* to its actual truth or falsity.[682] Statements such as 'torture is wrong' cannot be assessed in the same way as the statement 'the Rhine is longer than the Thames'.[683] It is also inescapable that people will differ in their moral judgements and it is impossible to prove to others that they are 'wrong' in the same sense that we can prove they are wrong in their empirical statements. Furthermore, Kołakowski argues, various moral values will often be contradictory and in an inevitable collision; most of moral life consists in making irrevocable choices between contradictory values.[684] In other words, normative statements cannot be derived from descriptive statements. The 'Sein–Sollen Dilemma' (which Kołakowski takes from Kant, rather than from the Humean form of 'is–ought') is a necessary feature of our morality.[685]

The key question, then, is whether religious belief can provide the necessary validation for ethical codes. Kołakowski calls upon Dostoyevsky's famous sentence from *The Brothers Karamazov*, 'if there is no God, everything is permitted', to elucidate the issue,[686] thereby arguing that religious sanction is a very good principle. For Kołakowski, it is the principle on which ethics should be based, and in the context of Western civilisation this means Christianity. He writes that Christian morality 'in its original sense is probably the most noble creation of human history'.[687] It is also a

[681] *Ibid.*, pp. 202–3.
[682] *Ibid.*, p. 207.
[683] *Ibid.*, p. 209.
[684] *Ibid.*, pp. 197, 212; here again we can see significant similarities between Kołakowski's ethical positions and Isaiah Berlin's thought (Chapter II, p. 67).
[685] Kołakowski, 'Mała etyka', pp. 120–22.
[686] *Ibid.*, p. 156.
[687] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

solution to the Sein–Sollen dilemma, since in the act of religious faith – a form of a mythical narrative about life – the difference between descriptive and normative judgements fades away. It has a 'total' character of an all-embracing worldview, and the intellectual understanding is, in fact, identical with moral submission to divine commandments.[688] Kołakowski concludes as follows:

> We have therefore good reasons to claim that any statements about rightfulness of moral codes or value systems can be founded only in a religious perspective of the world. (…) In this sense, morality truly 'depends' on religion (depends also in a historical meaning).[689]

Mythical order is simply a much better framework for moral dilemmas than the positivist/scientific order. Kołakowski does not simply warn against the naturalist fallacy, but actively opts for the argument that ethics has a transcendental, rather than an empirical, character. This could not be any further from the conclusion he presented in the 1962 essay *Ethics without a Moral Code* (Chapter II, pp. 66–67). Over a period of fifteen years, after Kołakowski had completed his studies of early modern religiosity and disenchanted secular eschatologies, his religious thought evolved in a completely different direction. In his mature philosophy, the divine *fiat* has a fundamental importance in talking about the sources of good and evil; without it, this crucial distinction becomes immediately questionable and fragile.[690] In morality, we have to appeal to a standard of what it means to be human, but this standard has to precede humanity.[691]

Nonetheless, it must again be emphasised that Kołakowski did not unambiguously declare himself a believer, and argued that although *in the practice of our civilisation* such transcendent sanction has a Christian form, it does not necessarily have to take such form. The claim regarding the standard of humanity: that people 'found ready-made, independently of our conventions, customs, regulations' was reformulated in the text on natural law.[692] Kołakowski claims that natural law is an absolutely necessary premise of life, by denying it, we deny our

[688] *Ibid.*, p. 163.
[689] *Ibid.*, p. 166.
[690] L. Kołakowski, 'Normy-nakazy i normy-twierdzenia', in Kołakowski, *Moje słuszne poglądy na wszystko* (Kraków, 2011), p. 101; First delivered as a conference paper in 1987.
[691] *Ibid.*, p. 114.
[692] L. Kołakowski, 'On Natural Law' in Kołakowski, *Is God…*, p. 241; first delivered as a lecture to the Polish Constitutional Court on 3 May 2001.

humanity altogether.[693] He does however, introduce the following important caveat:

> While belief in natural law does not – I repeat – require belief in the existence of God as a necessary premise, it *does* require the belief in something that one might call the moral (in addition to the physical) constitution of Being – a constitution that converges with the rule of Reason in the universe.[694]

In short, we can summarise Kołakowski's position as follows: the world of values has to have a transcendent foundation, 'a constitution of Being'. He is reluctant to state explicitly that this foundation must have a religious character, but in fact we are left with no other option. Positivist premises are applicable in the empirical sciences, but not in ethical decisions. All other man-made ideologies are unsatisfactory in providing a firm cornerstone for meaningful human life. This also applies to the great current of thought that, in a way, encompasses all 'disenchanted philosophies' and founded the modern world – the Enlightenment tradition and the liberal, secular worldview that derived from it. Kołakowski's judgement of this tradition is dispersed throughout various texts,[695] but its criticism is crucial in understanding his final ethical position and the metaphysical thought that developed from it. For this reason, the last part of this section will analyse Kołakowski's critical remarks about the Enlightenment and its futile attempts to provide a non-religious framework to explain human life.

The defeat of the Enlightenment can be seen as early as the failure of philosophy of the true founder of the positivist tradition – David Hume (Chapter III, p. 136). His work proved 'the inadequacy of human Reason and poverty of our cognition'.[696] With characteristic wit, he summarised: 'Thus poor reason, hardly born, committed suicide. Sad, in one so young.'[697]

Kołakowski argues that the ideas of the Enlightenment are hollow, as they are artificial and not grounded in the reality of human experience. We might say that, in this interpretation, the Enlightenment's influences in the modern world deny the

[693] *Ibid.*, p. 248.
[694] *Ibid.*, p. 249 (original emphasis).
[695] See Preface to Kołakowski, *Moje słuszne…*, p. 6.
[696] L. Kołakowski,*Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing? 23 Questions from Great Philosophers*, trans.: A. Kołakowska, (London, 2007), pp. 144–53.
[697] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

importance of the 'Sein' end of the 'Sein–Sollen Dilemma', focusing exclusively on the wishful thinking of the 'Sollen' project. This is exactly the basis for his criticism of one of the most famous documents inspired by the Enlightenment tradition, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):

> What is, let's repeat, the list of human rights? It is an ideological constitution for all states of the world, past, present, and future, a project of a charitable system, where no one will suffer and no one will want, but everyone will live in a brotherhood. This project may be briefly summarized: the world should be just, but it isn't. (…) Such is the ideology. Reality is different.[698]

He claims that this is a floating project, unsupported by anything that can provide us with an unshakeable certitude. Most importantly, it is not supported by historical experience. Without a reference to de Maistre, Kołakowski unambiguously criticises the idea of an 'abstract human person' as 'made up by the ideologists of the Enlightenment, unsettled in history, (…) purified from belonging to any of the diversified cultures of the world'.[699]

The Enlightenment's failure to properly establish the relationship between humankind and its history can be seen as one of its greatest bankruptcies. It was Hegelian historicism that attempted to replace the divine Absolute with a relative Absolute embedded in a historical process. This was supposed to be 'a newly discovered infallible foundation on which meaning could be built, and the binding power that could reconstruct a meaningful whole (…)'.[700] The falsity of this worldview was revealed in the philosophical heir to Hegelian historicism, Marxism, and its consistent statement that History can be meaningful only from the perspective of the ultimate aim located in the *future*, i.e. beyond History. In this way history, 'the last rampart of the Enlightenment', collapsed under its own weight, failing to provide a framework for a meaningful life, Kołakowski argues.[701] Crucially, if we consistently follow the idea that values are historically determined, it means abolishing the traditional notion of the 'truth'.[702] The persistence of the concept of an absolute,

[698] L. Kołakowski, 'Po co nam prawa człowieka', in Kołakowski, *Czy Pan Bóg jest szczęśliwy i inne pytania* (Kraków, 2009), p. 232.; first delivered as a lecture on 2 October 2003.
[699] *Ibid.*, p. 235.
[700] L. Kołakowski, 'The Demise of Historical Man', in Kołakowski, *Is God…*, p. 269; first delivered as a lecture in German on 30 November 1989.
[701] *Ibid.*, p. 272.
[702] *Ibid.*, pp. 270–1.

objective 'truth' was indispensable to any meaningful system in Kołakowski's thought. And, at a more important level, 'truth' also means the undisputable difference between good and evil.

Here we have reached the bridge between Kołakowski's ethical thought and his mature metaphysics from the 1980s. The philosophical goal he wanted to achieve remained constant from at least the mid-1950s and the 'revisionist' essays collected in *The Worldview and Everyday Life*. This goal is to find the best foundation for a system of values that can explain our everyday experience and make our lives meaningful. In short, his ultimate goal is to find the best possible answer to the question of 'meaning of life', that 'hidden nerve of philosophy' (Chapter II, p. 57). For Kołakowski, this is the whole point of philosophy:

> All the most traditional worries of philosophers (…) all of them boil down to the quest for meaning; and they presuppose that in dissecting such questions we may employ the instruments of reason, even if the ultimate outcome is the dismissal of reason or its defeat. Philosophers neither sow nor harvest, they only move the soil. They do not discover truth; but they are needed to keep the energy of mind alive, to confront various possibilities for answering our questions.[703]

One ethical premise remains unchanged throughout the whole development of his thought: one must not submit unconditionally to any authority, be it a Marxist Party or an ecclesiastical institution. An individual must never refrain from responsibility for the undertaken actions. An order, or a commandment must not be used as an excuse under any circumstances. Yet, human incompleteness means that one is not able to develop the necessary tools to make moral decisions in specific situations; in other words, we cannot be creators of moral values. These values must come from an external lawgiver, and the crucial legislation in this matter is the clear difference between good and evil. We have to know good and evil in order to take responsibility for our life. Kołakowski's point connecting his ethics with metaphysics is this: to know good and evil means to experience evil in oneself, and to experience evil in oneself is possible only through a sense of guilt.[704]

[703] L. Kołakowski, 'The Death of Utopia Reconsidered', in Kołakowski, *Modernity…*, p. 135; first delivered as a lecture in English in 1982.
[704] L. Kołakowski, 'Odpowiedzialność', in Kołakowski, *Moje słuszne…*, pp. 178–81; first delivered as a lecture in French in 1994.

Kołakowski's Metaphysics

This part of the chapter will consist of three main subsections: first, we will discuss the importance of the problem of evil as a necessary part of human experience, resulting directly from one's ethical thought. Second, Kołakowski's mature ideas about the concept of the 'Absolute' will be presented. This constitutes the key part of the thesis as a whole. Finally, we will look at the last major historical enterprise in his intellectual career, namely a longer study of Pascal and Jansenism, which, in a concrete historical example, concentrates all the major themes from Kołakowski's philosophy of religion.

Evil

According to Kołakowski, modern thought helps people to deny their personal, moral responsibility – is a philosophy of purely innocent individuals.[705] The importance of the sense of guilt is crucial here. Feeling guilty means experiencing evil as a constituent part of our existence, an indispensable element of being human.[706] The question of evil in Christian thought was developed primarily by St Augustine of Hippo. This issue stands at the very centre of the whole philosophy of this great thinker, and is defined as pure negation, the absence of all that could possibly be at all, since all divine creation must be good by definition.[707] We will analyse Augustine's theology in more depth in the part concerning the study of Jansenism and Pascal.

In his compendium of the most important issues from the philosophy of religion, Kołakowski examines the most influential attempt in Western philosophy to reconcile the presence of evil in the world and the dogma of a benevolent God. In the famous argument presented in *Théodicée* (published 1710), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz claimed that the infinitely good and omniscient God must have created the best of all possible worlds. Kołakowski ridicules this approach by presenting a vision of God calculating an indefinite differential equation in order to find the most suitable solution for the world.[708] The point is, he argues, that this kind of an explanation for the presence of evil is incorrect. We should not look for motives to account for the

[705] L. Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony. Esej apologetyczny i sceptyczny*, trans.: D. Zańko (Kraków, 2014), p. 29.
[706] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
[707] Kołakowski, *Why Is There…*, pp. 54–6.
[708] Kołakowski, *Religion*, pp. 17–20.

reasons why a loving God allows evil, he argues; rather, we should rather focus on the problem of why people commit evil. When Kołakowski discussed different forms of religiosity in the early modern period, the most useful theological platform to compare those various attitudes and ideas was the story of original sin (Chapter II, p. 105). Once again, humanity's Fall and the Exile from Eden turns out to be the best metaphor to explain the most important metaphysical issues:

> The history of Exile (…) is not a 'historical explanation' of the facts of life. It is the acknowledgement of our own guilt: in the myth of Exile we admit that evil is within us (…) we admit, through the symbol of our Exile that we are cut of warped wood (to use Kant's metaphor) and that we do not deserve to lead a carefree, happy and idle life; an admission that does not strike one as absurd.[709]

We can clearly see here a continuation of the issues that were raised for the first time in *The Presence of Myth*. The misery of our experience is inescapable, and any attempt to root out suffering and evil from our lives is futile. What we need is a narrative that would make that suffering meaningful. He continues as follows:

> The symbol of Exile includes, at the same time, a dim hope of Return to the lost home and a confidence that human suffering will not turn out to be in vain, after all, that something important has been gained on the human way of the Cross, which could not otherwise have been reached. The concept of *felix culpa* is the oblique anticipation of a Return, which will bring something more than the restoration of pristine innocence (…).[710]

This brings us back to the crucial question of guilt. Adam and Eve became fully human only once they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And immediately after they had eaten from the Tree, they knew they had done something wrong, because they broke the Lord's commandment, i.e. they felt guilt. This, according to Kołakowski, was the true beginning of morality. Guilt is not an intellectual activity, but rather an 'existential act', questioning one's own place in the ontological structure of the cosmos. Furthermore, a new crucial concept is introduced, the missing link that binds morality and metaphysics: guilt arises not simply from breaking the law (since it eventually organises the human, immanent order), but from

[709] *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48; 'crooked timber' is a better known translation of the Kantian phrase, popularised by Isaiah Berlin.
[710] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

transgressing the transcendent order, i.e. guilt is the result of breaking a *taboo*:

> The presence of taboo is both the immovable pillar of *any* viable moral system (as distinct from a penal one) and an integral component of religious life; thus taboo is a necessary link binding the worship of eternal reality with the knowledge of good and evil. [711]

Kołakowski thus defines morality as participation in an order of taboos, a set of restrictions that provide the framework for our ethical life. This conclusion is derived from his thoughts on the nature of the sacred and profane from the late 1960s and early 1970s. These were inspired by the study of early modern religiosity and Mircea Eliade, and outlined for the first time in *The Presence of Myth* and *The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture*, where he declared for the first time that 'religion is man's way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat' (Chapter III, pp. 133–34). The sacred is the space where taboo resides. Apart from brute physical force, the concept of guilt is all that humankind has developed with a view to imposing some rule of conduct onto its members; 'in a word, culture *is* taboos', he summarises.[712]

At this point, we must note the fundamental discrepancy between theological theory and the moral practice of human life. When St Augustine defined evil as 'lack of good', he made the crucial assumption that good precedes evil ontologically (since 'good' must be identified with God's creation and God himself). However, Kołakowski claims, in human experience the reverse is true: evil comes before good. We know what is good only because we know what is evil, we know what is evil because we feel guilt, and we feel guilty because we broke a taboo. Here, he recapitulates the same thought: 'the Sacred is revealed to us in the experience of our failure. Religion is indeed the awareness of human insufficiency, it is lived in the admission of weakness.'[713]

Kołakowski's theory of evil focuses almost entirely on moral evil, and does not thoroughly investigate the issue of natural evil, which has troubled so many thinkers throughout the centuries. In fact, in his argumentation, natural evil has the same source as the evil deeds of people – moral separation from God. In this way, natural disasters, diseases, etc., are simply the additional results of original sin,

[711] *Ibid.*, p. 183.
[712] *Ibid.*, pp. 185–6.
[713] *Ibid.*, pp. 187–8.

Nature's punishment for the Fall.[714] It seems rather unsatisfactory that Kołakowski never elaborated on the question of involuntary suffering, for instance, the suffering of small children, but did discuss the question of animal suffering as contradictory to the idea of a benevolent God.[715] He quickly summarises the issue by commenting that in Christianity, the faithful are taught to simply 'trust God' when faced with great misfortunes.[716] In this matter, his ethical thought is rather disappointing and insufficient.

The Absolute

Here we reach the heart of Kołakowski's religious thought. We can say that the evolution of Leszek Kołakowski's religious thought is presented in its most developed and mature form in two major books from the 1980s: *Religion* and *Metaphysical Horror*. Kołakowski's concepts of religion and God will be again recapitulated in the conclusions, but all the most important arguments that result from the intellectual trajectory analysed in the preceding chapters find their ultimate formulations in these texts.

Kołakowski states, once again, that despite the predominance of analytical philosophy in Anglophone philosophy, sensibility to the most traditional metaphysical issues is still alive. The 'perennial' metaphysical questions about good and evil, the nature of being and the relation of myself to the universe, he argues, remain at the heart of the entire philosophical enterprise.[717] For Kołakowski, the question first formulated by Parmenides (c. 540–470 BCE) – the question of 'Everything', with a capital 'E', of what is real, is all that actually matters.[718] In Kołakowski's view, asking this question and analysing the possible answers have no practical implications whatsoever,[719] but he does not regard this state of affairs as important:

> It is possible to admit that the traditional metaphysical questions are insoluble without dismissing them as meaningless. Philosophy, after this manoeuvre, is still the love of wisdom, but it is a love that can never be consummated. Any consummation we think we have achieved is illusory, however certain we may be. What good, then, is such a futile search,

[714] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
[715] *Ibid.*, pp. 51–4.
[716] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[717] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, pp. 2–3, 8.
[718] Kołakowski,*Why Is There…*, p. 16.
[719] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 13.

> acknowledged from the start? The answer is that it is the search itself that matters; for such a search, however unsuccessful, radically changes our lives.[720]

In contrast to the empirical judgements about the world, metaphysical statements have no scientifically valid criteria of meaningfulness and are not falsifiable.[721] The only way to express them is using a sacred language rooted in a mythical framework.[722] The best example of such description, the 'core of the religious life', is the mystical experience that is so thoroughly examined in the *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*. Mystics are also important in this argument for another reason. Their idiosyncratic experiences provide them with direct *knowledge* of God, even though this knowledge is neither rational nor transferable. Mystics do not have to 'prove' God's existence, it would be like proving that water is wet.[723]

The question of 'proof' of God's existence has been one of the central issues of natural theology for centuries, and Kołakowski refers to the much-contested 'five ways' of St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).[724] He already criticised them from the Stalinist perspective in the 1950s (Chapter I, pp. 42–43). The most important and most philosophically challenging of these five ways is the 'argument from necessity', which can be summarised as follows: all finite things that we experience in our lives are contingent, their existence is not a necessary feature of the universe. For this reason, the entire contingent world, in order to be conceivable at all, must depend on a necessarily existing, non-contingent cause. We need an ontologically self-sufficient Absolute to support the non-sufficient world. The question of contingent and necessary existence is of fundamental importance in this matter and Kołakowski points to a crucial problem in Aquinas' argumentation: 'To know properly what it is to be contingent in a metaphysical sense we have to know what it is to be non-contingent, thus to know what God is.' Kołakowski analyses that this conclusion cannot be reconciled with human experience in any way, a critique best formulated by Hume – there is no logical way to bridge the finite world of our experience and infinity. [725]

A similar case was presented in St Anselm's (c. 1033–1109) ontological proof

[720] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[721] Kołakowski, *Religion*, pp. 152–4.
[722] *Ibid.*, p. 176.
[723] *Ibid.*, pp. 92–95.
[724] *Ibid.*, pp. 57–64.
[725] *Ibid.*, pp. 64–7.

for God's existence: God is the greatest conceivable being; and since to exist in reality is greater than merely to exist in mind, whoever accepts this definition of God (and everyone does) and claims that God does not exist in reality, contradicts oneself. Yet again, just as in the case of Aquinas' proof from necessity, Kołakowski argues that in Anselm's analysis, understanding the idea of a 'necessary' God *must precede* other reasoning: 'we cannot think of God as an imaginary entity once we know what it is to be God'. Quoting the contemporary philosopher and theologian Charles Hartshorne, he summarises the ontological proof in a hypothetical judgement, 'if God is possible, God is necessary'. [726]

The need for a 'necessary being' is therefore a consequence of a crucial human experience. This, the contingency and incompleteness of our own existence, was the theme of *The Presence of the Myth* (Chapter III, pp. 123–32). The whole of metaphysics, understood as 'a search for certainty and for an ultimate foundation', is simply an expression of human (and of the world's) fragility.[727] Kołakowski argues that we need a necessary Absolute, for the ultimate question, which cannot cease to amaze us is the one formulated most famously and succinctly by Leibniz: why is there something rather than nothing? We will now examine four major perspectives through which Kołakowski presented his idea of an 'Absolute': as Nothingness, as a Person, as the Truth, and, most importantly, as Time.

The first great philosopher to formulate sophisticated questions about the Absolute, the 'core of metaphysics' was Plotinus. [728] In *Metaphysical Horror*, Kołakowski analyses Neoplatonic thinkers (whom he read in Latin translations) who followed Plotinus' lead with regard to the nature of the Absolute. One of them, Damascius (c. 458–538) identifies the crucial problem of talking about the absolute One as something totally different from anything we know from human experience. It means that any description of the ultimate reality must necessarily have an apophatic character – we can only meaningfully express the Absolute through what it 'is not':

> There is no way of naming it. (…) It is so ineffable that it is wrong to call it ineffable. (…)

[726] *Ibid.*, pp. 86–7.
[727] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 17.
[728] L. Kołakowski, *O co nas pytają wielcy filozofowie. Trzy serie* (Kraków, 2008), p. 260; note that Plotinus was also the first thinker in Kołakowski's long philosophical genealogy of Marxism in the first volume of the *Main Currents of Marxism*.

> This *Eschaton,* neither cause nor principle, is nothing; indeed, Damascius calls it the Nothing or the No-thing – non-being. (…) The essential conclusion is that, of all the inappropriate words for the *Eschaton*, the least inappropriate is 'nothing.'[729]

Damascius used the word 'Eschaton', but in this context, it is just another name for the same 'absolute being' we are considering. Nonetheless, Kołakowski continues his argument, we can reach the same conclusion starting from a completely different point. The inexpressible Absolute is like nothing else we know, but as the necessary being, it can be identified with the harmony and peace of the world, a fullness of goodness, as in the writings of Proclus (412–485).[730] But if we follow this idea consistently, it again leads to rather confusing conclusions:

> (…) if good equals peace and harmony, perfect good equals perfect peace and harmony, which means a perfect absence of tension and thus, ultimately, absolute indifferentiation and immobility – i.e.. the One. The more unity, the more good: this is the fundamental axiom of Proclus and the Platonists. Consequently, when good reaches the point of completeness, it loses any recognizable quality of goodness; having achieved perfection, goodness vanishes. (…) Life, at least as we conceive of it, involves differentiation and tension; complete peace is achieved only through lifelessness.
>
> Thus the Absolute, the entity that was supposed to explain existence, is reduced, by its own perfection, to non-existence, and sinks into irrelevance. By being supremely real it is transformed into unreality.[731]

This is the crux of the matter: fullness can be only defined through a void. In real life, 'to be' means 'to be incomplete'. The Absolute is complete, which means it does not exist in the same way people can exist. In the history of philosophy, Hegel probably stated this idea in the most concise form when he wrote that '*pure being* and *pure nothing* are, therefore, the same.'[732] This remark is the first formulation of the 'horror', the terrifying, radical conclusion of metaphysical investigations that Kołakowski presents in his religious thought:

> Why horror? Because if nothing really exists except the Absolute, then the Absolute is

[729] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, pp. 49–50.
[730] *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.
[731] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[732] G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, Vol. One, Book One, Section One, trans.: A.V. Miller (Abingdon, 2002), p. 114.

> nothing; and if nothing really exists except myself, then I am nothing.[733]

The second part of this formula – the argument that people entertain the idea of their own being as nothingness – leads us to the second crucial perspective on the Absolute: the attempt to understand it as a person. In *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*, Kołakowski had already recognised the crucial junction of Christian theology: the indelible tension between the concepts of Jesus – the teacher of morality from the Sermon on the Mount; and Christ – the Eternal Logos of the Gospel of John. In order to be conceivable, however, God-Absolute requires personal traits like those we find in other human beings. Kołakowski once again uses a quotation from Angelus Silesius, a seventeenth-century mystic, and one of the main protagonists of *Religious Consciousness.* A most powerful and succinct formulation of the problem is presented in Silesius' verses:

> God is verily nothing, and insofar as He is something,
> He is such only in me, as He chose me for Himself[734]

This is the ultimate theological mystery and an insurmountable obstacle before human Reason in Christianity.

> The image of a tender and merciful Father implies properties, which were hardly in keeping with this metaphysical entity. How can the Absolute be subject to affections? (…) if philosophers wanted to remain faithful to the traditional teaching and to believe in a God who is simultaneously Plotinus's One, and the Old Testament's angry Leader and Jesus's loving Father, they were bound to confess their helplessness; no intellectual effort could pierce the ultimate mystery.[735]

In Kołakowski's interpretation, the personal perspective of the Absolute implies another crucial question, one that concerns his own freedom of action. If the Absolute is everything that he could possibly be, it makes no sense to say that he could possibly be inconclusive about something, that he had made a *choice*, followed one possible option rather than another. He is not free in the sense that people are free. A solution to this issue was proposed by Spinoza, whose thought, as we have already

[733] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 23.
[734] *Ibid.*, p. 54; *The Cherubinic Wanderer* I, 200.
[735] Kołakowski, *Religion*, pp. 115–6.

analysed, was the topic of Kołakowski's first major historical study (Chapter I, pp. 47–51; Chapter II, pp. 74–79). Spinoza proposed that God is free in the sense that he is not subject to extraneous influences. Nonetheless, this freedom means only that nothing other than himself is responsible for his acts, but he is still not free in the sense that he can bring alternative potentialities into reality. At the same time he is not constrained by external necessities, but he is necessary in the sense that nothing remains concealed in him. In other words, the Absolute is beyond the necessary/free distinction, which means that he is not a person in the same sense as human beings.[736]

This brings us back again to the cornerstone of metaphysical inquiry in general: why is there something rather than nothing? Or, as the Neoplatonists would put it: why had One begotten many?[737] The relation between Creator and Creation has been problematic for Christian philosophy from the very beginning – if God–Absolute is perfect, what did he need the world and human beings for? Some philosophical systems, such as that of Hegel, formulate a vision of the divine and human histories being intertwined, where God needs humanity to fully realise his potential.[738] Nonetheless, in the Christian context, love is the crucial issue. The phenomenon of love between God and human beings is central to the mystical experience. Kołakowski uses a quotation from the mediaeval mystic Meister Eckhart as a motto for *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*: 'He [God] needs you thousand times more than you need Him'. In other words, you need two for love, so God created the human person to have someone to love. But you cannot be perfect and love at the same time, Kołakowski says. Love necessarily implies incompleteness, craving for a fulfilment in the object of our love, and this is contradictory to the nature of the Absolute.[739] Yet, this is precisely what Christianity teaches, that God is both – the Person and the Absolute, love and completeness at the same time, despite our inability to understand this identity.[740]

The next key dimension through which we have to comprehend the Absolute is its role as the source of 'the Truth'. As we have already examined, this question was very important from the very beginning of the evolution of Kołakowski's

[736] *Ibid.*, pp. 25–6.
[737] *Ibid.*, p. 137.
[738] *Ibid.*, pp. 137–9.
[739] *Ibid.*, p. 140.
[740] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 59.

thought. Let us juxtapose two quotations from different periods. The first is from the 'transitional period', and is a sentence from the 1965 essay *Truth and Truthfulness as Cultural Values*, which is discussed in Chapter III (p. 120):

> We desire the truth only because it is the truth and we do not think – or, strictly speaking, philosophers do not think – that this desire requires a justification in any other values than the self-recognition as 'the owner of the truth.'[741]

The second is a statement from the 1982 text *The Death of Utopia Reconsidered*:

> My general attitude may be thus expressed: What philosophy is about is not Truth. Philosophy can never discover any universally admissible truths; (…) The cultural role of philosophy is not to deliver truth but to build the *spirit of truth* [emphasis in original], and this means never to let the inquisitive energy of mind go to sleep, never to stop questioning what appears to be obvious and definitive (…) and never to allow us to forget that there are questions that lie beyond the legitimate horizon of science and are nonetheless crucially important to the survival of humanity as we know it.[742]

The seeming contradiction between these two claims is only illusory and must be understood in a broader context of Kołakowski's position about the role of metaphysics and philosophical inquiry in general. All searches for certitude have failed, be it in Marxism, phenomenology, or scientific positivism. Modern Reason has failed to establish itself as the ultimate source of meaning and no one seriously hopes to find the epistemological Holy Grail anymore.[743] However, the fact that we cannot find it does not mean we should not seek it. This conclusion 'is compatible with the belief that metaphysical, non-pragmatic insight is possible as a result of our living within the realm of good and evil and experiencing good and evil as our own. But it does explain why philosophy, like Peter Pan, never matures.'[744] The desire for the truth, but the truth that is 'truly true', independent of our own perception and reasoning, is an invariable of human condition. And this desire can be satisfied by nothing less than the Absolute.[745] In Kołakowski's religious thought, this Absolute must have a divine character:

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[741] Kołakowski, 'Prawda i prawdomówność…', p. 191.
[742] Kołakowski, 'The Death of Utopia Reconsidered', p. 135.
[743] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 71.
[744] *Ibid.*, p. 106.
[745] *Ibid.*, pp. 34–5.

> I will try to argue for the following quasi-Cartesian assertion: Dostoyevski's famous dictum, 'If there is no God, everything is permissible,' is valid not only as a moral rule, but also as an epistemological principle. This means that the legitimate use of the concept 'truth' or the belief that 'truth' may even be justifiably predicated on our knowledge is possible only on the assumption of an absolute Mind.[746]

In order for anything to be true at all, an omniscient subject that cannot err, a depository of the all-encompassing truth must exist. Kołakowski claims that there must be an ultimate tribunal that has the final decision on good and evil. Because of its incompleteness, a human individual cannot take up this position. Human judgements on moral issues will always have a contingent, relative character. Only God can perform the role of the ultimate judge. Thus, God, strictly speaking *does not know* the truth, but *is the truth*.[747] For the same reason, the famous question from Plato's *Eutyphron* – is the holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods? – is incorrectly formulated as it contradicts the Absolute's perfect self-identity.[748] Eventually, Kołakowski summarises, we are faced with an unavoidable epistemological dilemma: 'either God or a cognitive nihilism, there is nothing in between'.[749]

Importantly, very similar ideas about the nature of God and the role of religion can be found in the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859–1941), the protagonist of a short historical study[750] that Kołakowski wrote in the mid-1980s, during the same period when he was working on *Metaphysical Horror*. He describes how a universal morality that embraces all of humankind rather than just one's closest kin develops only from religious inspiration.[751] In Kołakowski's interpretation of Bergson's thought, people seek 'truth wherever they hope to find it, apart from consensus and efficacy'.[752] Bergson's conclusions about the relation between the Absolute and Nothingness strike us as similar:

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[746] Kołakowski, *Religion*, p. 77.
[747] *Ibid.*, pp. 83–4.
[748] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[749] *Ibid.*, p. 84.
[750] L. Kołakowski, *Bergson* (Oxford, 1985).
[751] *Ibid.*, p. 76.
[752] *Ibid.*, p. 87; interestingly, in the Polish edition of the book, translated by Kołakowski himself, the quoted sentence ends with 'regardless of consensus and efficacy.'; Kołakowski, *Bergson* (Warszawa, 1997), p. 112.

> We have shown that the idea of 'nothing' is tantamount to the idea of a square circle, that it vanished under analysis, only leaving an empty word behind it, in fine that it is a pseudo-idea. May not the same apply to the idea of 'everything', if this name is given not only to the sum-total of the real, but also to the totality of the possible?[753]

Nothingness, Person, Truth – these are all crucial concepts that we use to understand the Absolute. Nonetheless, the relation between Time and the perfect Being is indisputably the most important one. According to Kołakowski, Time is the ultimate framework of all metaphysics, a lens that focuses all other perspectives and issues related to being. The entirety of his religious thought was succinctly summarised in a very short text published in 2004. It is worth quoting the entire text as a starting point for summary of Kołakowski's main philosophical views. *A Short and Complete Metaphysics. There Will Be No Other. There Will Be No Other*:

> There are four pillars of a house, where, pompously speaking, the human spirit lives. And these four are: Reason, God, Love, Death.
>
> And the vault of this house is Time, the most common reality in the world and most mysterious. From when we are born, time seems to be a reality that is most ordinary and most tamed. (Something was and ceased to be. Something happened yesterday, or a minute ago, and will never, never, be back). Therefore, time is the most ordinary reality, but most horrifying as well. The four aforementioned beings are our means to deal with that horror.
>
> Reason serves us to discover the eternal truths, resistant to time. God, or the absolute, is the being which does not know the past or the future, but contains everything in its 'eternal now.' Love, in an intensive experience, discards the past and the future, it is the present concentrated and excluded. Death is the end of that temporality in which we were immersed during our lifetimes, and perhaps, as we suspect, an entrance into a different temporality, about which we know nothing (almost nothing).
>
> All those cantilevers of our thought are tools with which we liberate ourselves from the horrifying reality of time, all seem to serve the purpose of truly taming time.[754]

[753] H. Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans.: R. Ashley Audra and C. Breretqn (London, 1935), p. 224.
[754] L. Kołakowski, 'Krótka i kompletna metafizyka. Innej nie będzie. Innej nie będzie', in Kołakowski, *Czy Pan Bóg*…, p. 297; first published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no 43/2004.

In this way, time is humanity's greatest enemy, but also the most profound reality of its being. Philosophical investigation of time, but also the insights of mystics, lead to the idea that whatever resides in the past or in the future does not really exist at all, except in memory or anticipation; while 'the present', when carefully examined, turns out to be a deceptive and elusive point that disappears when we try to experience it. Our deliberations on the nature of the Absolute return to the issue we have started with: whatever really exists, exists beyond time; but nothing in our experience exists beyond time; therefore, nothing really exists.[755] Kołakowski has recourse to one of the most famous lines in the history of European literature, which expresses this insight in a much better way than any rational discourse: Goethe's '*Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis*'.[756] What is needed is a being that is not transient, which conquers time, which exists beyond time. Here, we have his second formulation of the metaphysical horror:

> Necessary and timeless and One, it generously restores to being the fragile world of experience and miraculously makes everything real again. (…) The Absolute is supposed to redeem the world, to save it from this never-beginning and never-ending death. In its eternal present everything is preserved, everything is protected and made permanent; nothing ever perishes. The Absolute provides the ultimate support for the existence of anything; it is the final subjugation of time. (…) And since the Absolute, like Time, its defeated but living foe, cannot be conceptually reduced to anything else, its name, if there is one, is Nothing. So Nothing rescues another Nothing from its Nothingness.
> This is the *horror metaphysicus*.[757]

This Absolute – the conqueror of Time – is not everlasting or eternal, it is timeless. It is perfectly adamant and immutable, it cannot be affected by anything, including itself, it is everything it can be in its pure actuality.[758]

However, we are faced now with a similar challenge to the one that eventually proved to be insurmountable for Husserlian phenomenology (Chapter III, pp. 140–45) – how to make a connection between the ideal existence of a perfect Being and the reality of human experience. In other words: what kind of framework allows a human being to participate in the Absolute? How is it possible to find access to a reality

[755] Kołakowski, *Religion*, p. 114.
[756] J.W. Goethe, *Faustus*, II, v, 7635–6.
[757] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, pp. 57–8.
[758] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

where *my own personal* achievements and failures are not in vain, where everything I do is preserved?[759] The answer is religion. Through salvation and immortality, we gain access to that timeless Absolute. Humanity participates in the victory over Time. Thanks to religion, it is I, who conquer Time. This is the cornerstone of religion that is available to mystics even before death and immortality, thanks to their experiences. If *nothing really perishes*, nothing is lost or forgotten, then *everything really matters*. My life matters. I matter. And since Everything is One, then my participation in the One is not contingent, but necessary. Without me, the entire Universe has no sense. This is, Kołakowski says, 'the gift *par excellence* of religion – the world endowed with meaning'.[760]

Nonetheless, we are faced with one final obstacle – this conclusion seems to be simply incompatible with everyday human experience. The doubts Kołakowski raises in *The Presence of Myth* remain valid. Religion (or the mythical order, as he would have it) is useful as a 'homeostatic mechanism' that helps people to deal with sufferings and failures in their lives[761] to overcome 'the phenomenon of the world's indifference', it is 'man's way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat'. But such functional rationalisation is simply the wrong approach if we are talking about religious faith, Kołakowski argues. Religion is a realm where everything – knowledge, understanding, worship, and moral commitment – must come in a single act, must necessarily be accepted in one, indivisible package. It must be a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, religion cannot be understood from outside,[762] it is not a set of propositions, but a way of life.[763] We should ask at this point: 'but if Kołakowski has never declared himself a Christian and did not participate in the religious life of the Church, could he understand Christian religion?' I will return to this issue in the conclusions of the thesis.

A specific historical figure who brilliantly exemplifies all these strands of thinking about religion and of religious engagement, was Blaise Pascal. He is the protagonist of Kołakowski's last major historical study and will be analysed below. This is the thinker who ruthlessly exposed the alternative we are faced with: either a

[759] Kołakowski, *Religion*, p. 34.
[760] *Ibid.*, p. 150.
[761] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
[762] *Ibid.*, pp. 165–7.
[763] *Ibid.*, p. 207.

meaningful world guided by God, or an absurd world that ends in nothing and does not care about us.[764]

Let us recall a few short excerpts from two crucial essays from 1959: *Irrationalities of Rationalism* and *The Priest and the Jester.* These were analysed in Chapter II (pp. 62–65) and are the most explicit presentations of Kołakowski's metaphysical position before his 'religious turn' in the early 1960s. In the first of the essays, he declares:

> '(…) we do not think that God takes away from man what is the best in him; we think that he takes away what is the most unbearable in him: a situation of an unconditional responsibility for himself'.[765]

In *The Priest and the Jester*, he is even more categorical. All philosophy can be summarised in a dilemma:

> (…) for or against eschatology – i.e. for or against ordering the events of our daily lives with reference to an absolute which will in time be realized; (…) for or against attributing to the absolute the responsibility for our actions; for or against revelation – i.e. for or against seeking an ultimate, unquestionable cognitive principle as an infallible foundation of knowledge; (…) for or against a view of the world where everything acquires meaning by reference to the absolute, of which it is a manifestation, a part or an instance. In short, for or against the hope that there is a cognitive or metaphysical absolute; for or against seeking absolute foundations. (…)This author declares himself in favour of the jester's philosophy: the attitude of scepticism and suspicion towards absolutes of any kind (…) All other fruits of philosophical thinking are of little worth.[766]

In 1959, Kołakowski's understanding of the role of religion and its relation to philosophy and everyday human life can be outlined as follows: if we want to take responsibility for our lives, we must reject any form of the metaphysical Absolute. We must guide ourselves through life, and work out the right ethical attitude in our interactions with the world. People can be responsible for their lives only on their own, without any ultimate point of reference.

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[764] *Ibid.*, p. 193.
[765] Kołakowski, 'Nieracjonalności racjonalizmu', in *Pochwała niekonsekwencji…* tom II, p. 239.
[766] Kołakowski, 'The Priest and the Jester… in *The Two Eyes…*, pp. 255; 262.

Thirty years later, after his studies of Marx, Spinoza, Erasmus, Angelus Silesius, Husserl, and Pascal, Kołakowski's philosophical position was the complete opposite: people can be responsible for their lives only with an Absolute to refer to. Only in an order where every single action and decision constitutes a necessary part of a One Whole must we fully commit ourselves to make the right moral decisions because they affect everything else in the world and nothing can vanish. It should be noted, however, that in this perspective, the question of human freedom is unresolved. If all my deeds are part of a timeless, invariable One, they must also have been predetermined. This, however, is contrary to the idea that I am free in my actions, and I can take responsibility for them only if I decide on them freely.

And where is Kołakowski personally in all this? As I have signalled before, his own understanding of God and attitude towards religious traditions will be recapitulated in the final conclusion of this thesis. However, a juxtaposition of the last sentences of the two books investigated in this section only reaffirms Kołakowski's claim that the meaning of life is not a realm of rational investigation: 'What is real or unreal to us is a matter of practical, rather than philosophical commitment; the real is what people really crave for.'[767] And what does he crave? Only very reluctantly, he asks a complex yet rhetorical question:

> And is it not reasonable to suspect that if existence were pointless and the universe void of meaning, we would never have achieved not only the ability to imagine otherwise, but even the ability to entertain this very thought – to wit, that existence is pointless and the universe devoid of meaning?[768]

If the Absolute exists, it must be the Nothingness. But if it is the Nothingness, it leaves us in a hopeless despair. So it must be a Person as well. But under no rational criteria can the Absolute be a Person. It can only be a Person in a religious order of life. In other words: if we apply any standards of human experience (life) to religion, then religion is meaningless; but it is only religion that can make human experience (life) meaningful. This is the essence of Leszek Kołakowski's religious thought. This is Kołakowski's horror.

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[767] Kołakowski, *Religion*, p. 215.
[768] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 129.

Pascal and His God

Blaise Pascal was the object of Kołakowski's philosophical investigations as early as the 1950s. Lucien Goldmann's work *Hidden God*, and his methodological concept of a 'worldview' was crucial in the development of Kołakowski's own historical studies and the entire Warsaw School of the history of ideas (Chapter II, pp. 90–94). Pascal and the religious movement of Jansenism, with which he was associated, were the topic of Kołakowski's last book-length historical study, *God Owes Us Nothing* (1995). It is very telling that even though, by the late 1980s, Kołakowski had already studied religious thought for about four decades, he stated that only during this particular project did he fully comprehend some crucial theological issues.[769]

Pascal is a focal point in that he exemplifies all the major themes of Kołakowski's metaphysics. He was a brilliant physicist and inventor who subjected everything to rigorous rational examination, and accepted no excuses before the tribunal of modern Reason. However, at the same, he was a committed Christian and did not pretend that religion might be explained in rational terms. After all, Christianity might be wise and foolish at the same time, but it is only the Cross that makes people believe.[770] However, there is one more crucial perspective on Pascal, and it is very important in Kołakowski's interpretation: if Pascal was so convinced about the truthfulness of his belief and his religion, he should be full of evangelical joy and proclaim divine love in the world. Yet Pascal is profoundly sad, he always has a great sense of failure and is horrified by the world. He is the mirror in which the entirety of Kołakowski's religious thought looks at itself.

The seventeenth-century conflict between the order of Jesuits and Jansenism was a specific historical embodiment of one of the fundamental and never-ending debates in Christian theology: the confrontation of divine grace with human free will.[771] In the language of theological speculation, it was the expression of the central theme of Kołakowski's deliberations on the Absolute and its relation to an individual human being:

[769] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…,* tom II, p. 102.
[770] Pascal, *Pensées,* fr. 587.
[771] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, p. 3.

> Ultimately the whole problem boils down to the perplexing difficulty in reconciling two tenets of Christianity: God is omnipotent and it is impossible to imagine that his will might be foiled by men; men are responsible for their damnation or salvation.[772]

Kołakowski provides a detailed historical background to the conflict, which dates back to the fifth-century debates between St Augustine and Pelagius, but also includes complex socio-political issues of mid-seventeenth-century France. For the purpose of this thesis, we will summarise this background only very briefly.

Jansenism was a French religious movement that took its name from the Dutch theologian Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638, known by the Latinised name 'Jansenius'). In the times of the Counter-Reformation, and with the Catholic Church gradually adjusting to the emergence of modern societies, they called for a strict observance of the long-established Catholic teachings, especially in matters of rigorous, everyday morality and traditional theology concerning the nature of divine grace, human will, and original sin, as introduced by St Augustine in late Antiquity. The latter issue was especially problematic, as Calvinism adopted the Augustinian doctrines. By this association, the Jansenists were an easy target for more progressively minded groups within the Catholic Church. Their greatest foe proved to be the Jesuits, who advocated that Catholicism should take a much more lenient attitude towards the faithful and their sinfulness. In Kołakowski's view, this was a seventeenth-century instance of a classic struggle between conservative reaction and modernity.[773] The Jesuit anti-Jansenist campaign resulted in a papal bull *Cum Occasione* (1653), promulgated by Innocent X, which condemned Jansenius' most important theological statements. This, in turn, prompted the famously anti-Jesuit polemical *Provincial Letters* (1656–57) by Pascal. The main movement of Jansenists was eventually dissolved after Clement XI's *Unigenitus* (1713), although their teachings remained influential in the French church for many decades.

The Jansenist doctrine – and to a great extent Pascal's understanding of religion – was fundamentally based on the teachings of St Augustine. I must emphasise that, as with Spinoza (Chapter II, pp. 74–79) and Husserl (Chapter III, pp. 140–45), it is not the ambition of this thesis to present the religious thought of St

[772] *Ibid.,* p. 9.
[773] *Ibid.,* p. 3.

Augustine in detail,[774] but only to briefly outline the issues that were important in Kołakowski's intellectual trajectory.

In fact, Jansenius' main theological treatise was entitled *Augustinus* (published in 1640), and the whole movement saw itself as the true heir of Augustinian teaching, which was still the formal bulwark of Catholic theology. St Augustine's views were forged in his polemics with the British monk Pelagius (c. 360–418). Pelagianism taught that human will is crucial to the process of salvation. People accept divine grace, and then freely do good deeds, thanks to which they earn their salvation. St Augustine categorically opposed this view. In his theology, the central event of human history was the Fall and original sin, after which nothing could have been the same as before. Human nature is irrevocably faulty and incapable of doing good on its own. Whatever a human being does from own will is necessarily evil, only God can be the source of good. People can do good only thanks to the effects of divine grace, and grace is given freely by God, regardless of any human merits or efforts. Furthermore, divine grace is irresistible. When God endows his grace on someone, the person is not capable of refusing it. In this way, human salvation is entirely a matter of God's will, St Augustine taught. And since God does not act within the limits of human time, the question of our individual salvation is already predestined by God's will. Human deeds have nothing to do with salvation; they merely confirm the inevitable preordained verdict. Pelagius and his ideas were eventually declared heretical by the Council of Carthage (418), and the Church adopted Augustine's teachings on grace as its official doctrine. However, a more moderate version of Pelagianism, called 'Semipelagianism', accepted that divine grace is necessary in the process of salvation, but still insisted it is within human power to resist grace. Many progressive theologians throughout the centuries indirectly adopted Semipelagian views. In the early modern period, they became particularly popular among Jesuit theologians, who served as the Catholic *avant-garde* during the Counter-Reformation. Semipelagianists of the time were often called 'Molinists', after their most famous proponent Luis de Molina (1535–1600). The influence of Molinist theologians and the consequent loosening of morality was one of the main catalysts for the emergence of Jansenism.[775] It is worth emphasising that this conflict, to a great extent, resembles

[774] For classic, accessible introductions see: P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography* (London, 1967); H. Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986).
[775] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, pp. 13–21.

various visions of religiosity during the time of Erasmus in the previous century. These had been a topic of Kołakowski's earlier studies.

Augustine's doctrine of grace must be outlined in more detail, as it constitutes the heart of Jansenist and Pascalian religion. Kołakowski starts his presentation noting a crucial historical fact: St Augustine not only codified the Catholic doctrine of grace and original sin, but also to a considerable degree invented it. However, Augustine did not know Greek and in his biblical studies had to rely on Latin translations. The standard fourth century translation of the crucial excerpt from St Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* (Rom. 5:12), which concerns Adam's sin in Paradise, states: 'in quo omnes peccaverunt', which translates into English as 'in whom as all men sinned'. However, modern translations of the Greek original interpret this fragment rather as 'inasmuch as all men sinned',[776] which has less grave connotations. Kołakowski does not write this explicitly, but the entire doctrine of original sin in Western Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant, as Luther and Calvin saw themselves as the rightful heirs of Augustine) might be based on a mistranslation. The young Kołakowski of the early 1950s would have used this occasion to bully the Church without mercy for many pages. In 1995, he was lenient enough to spare it with two short witty comments: 'The history of ideas is no less an infinite collection of unpredictable accidents than is political history'; 'The early Greek fathers, unlike Augustine, did not need to cope with this problem and perhaps for this reason failed to elaborate a similar doctrine.'[777] He summarises Augustinianism in four main points:

> First, we are, all of us, so hopelessly corrupted that we are absolutely incapable of doing anything good by our own forces; (…) Second, divine grace is not only necessary to enable us to do good and to obey divine law, but, when it is given, it achieves its end infallibly. (…) Third – salutary grace is given gratuitously and distributed by God among human creatures according to his inscrutable will. After the Fall we contribute literally nothing to our salvation in terms of divine justice; we all deserve eternal damnation. If God wishes to save some of us, this is not because of our merits – nobody has any and nobody can deserve grace – but simply because he so wishes. Double predestination is just by definition, as whatever God does is just; there is no rule of justice other than his will. (…) Fourth – Jesus Christ could not possibly have died for all men (…).[778]

[776] New American Bible Revised Edition, first edition published in 1970.
[777] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, p. 31.
[778] *Ibid.,* p. 32.

In other words, the original sin is 'inherited' in Augustine's doctrine, and a human being cannot refuse this inheritance. As a result, the human soul is irrevocably corrupted, and this idea forms the foundation of the entire theological framework, which also includes concepts of double predestination and the crucial role of divine grace. The starting point for every human being is damnation and eternal death; it is only God's sovereign decision whether to change this status, and this decision is made separately in every single case. Questioning Augustine's doctrine would mean questioning the *absolute sovereignty* of God.[779]

Kołakowski argues the belief in double predestination ('double' meaning that some people are predestined for salvation and some are predestined for damnation) is not psychologically incompatible with the belief in freedom of human action. To believe in my own free will is a source of trust in life, even if we put this trust in the verdicts of divine Providence. This faith could hardly pass any rational scrutiny, but it works in everyday experience.[780] Referring to the issue raised in *Ethics Without a Moral Code* (Chapter II, pp. 66–67), and *Little Ethics* (above, pp. 163–64), Kołakowski emphasises the consistency of the Augustinian doctrine of predestination with a need for clear moral commandments in life. This system was

> (…) well adapted to the mentality of people who above all sought and valued moral security and whose main religious need was to be certain that they were possessed of truth and thus elected by God. Whatever the theological distinction involved, the practical effect of belief in double predestination was the certainty of being among God's children.[781]

Once again, we may notice that Kołakowski clearly distinguishes two orders, which are separate and governed by different rules: the empirical, which follows a rational, scientific method of inquiry, and the transcendent (mythical), which can be understood only from the inside, by a full commitment to a mythical narrative in a form of a religious belief. Rationally speaking, to believe in predestination and personal freedom at the same time makes no sense, but is perfectly sensible in religion. His comment on this issue illustrates how far he has wandered from the mainstream of modern philosophy:

[779] *Ibid.,* p. 34.
[780] *Ibid.,* p. 42.
[781] *Ibid.,* p. 45.

> Rationalists normally shrug off the idea of 'mystery' (as distinct from something not yet known) as a verbal cover for simple illogicality. However, when people think of ultimate realities, the experience of mystery, which often includes a logical helplessness, may be intellectually more fruitful than rationalist self-confidence that simply cancels metaphysical questions, relying on doctrinal dogmas.[782]

The question of predestination again raises the crucial issue of the vision of the role of the Church in the world. This doctrine is 'a theological sword in the hands of a militant Church whose soldiers may rightly feel that they belong to the *assembly of the elect*'.[783] This problem had already been analysed by Kołakowski in *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond*, especially in his investigation of Jean de Labadie (Chapter II, p. 105). Labadie, a contemporary of Pascal, is a very illustrative example of this story. He started his career as a Jesuit, but, influenced by the Jansenist theology of predestination and original sin, first converted to Calvinism (the Jesuits main accusation of Jansenists was that they were crypto-Calvinists) and then started his own small sect 'of the elected people'. If we see original sin as a cosmic tragedy that corrupted people forever, then the Church is the refuge of saints surrounded by an ocean of evil (and this was the Augustinian–Jansenist point). If we see original sin as an opportunity for human beings to fully develop and use freedom for good, then the Church should be opened to the world (as the Semipelagian Jesuits would like it to be), an army of the apostles, rather than a holy garrison in a fortress. In 1965, Kołakowski claimed that the Church cannot be both at the same time. In his religious thought from the 1990s, however, the issue is much more complex:

> This does not imply that the Church, as Augustine saw it, was supposed to be a tiny elite. It inherited the spirit of militant certainty from the time it had been an alien body among pagans, but in Augustine's day it was on its way to conquer the world. It was holy and spotless by its divine origin, not by the holiness of individuals. On the contrary, it was Pelagius who wanted the Church to be holy thanks to the Christian virtues of its members; it would be thus reduced, had Pelagianism won, to a spiritual aristocracy, incapable of fulfilling its mission. His condemnation was therefore well justified; he might have deprived the Church of its institutionally guaranteed innocence.[784]

[782] *Ibid.,* p. 43.
[783] *Ibid.,* p. 35 (original emphasis).
[784] *Ibid.,* p. 36.

The Augustinian Church then seems to be harmonious not only with a small sect of fanatical believers, but also with a Church that has theocratic claims. The doctrine of grace and predestination provides the ecclesiastical authorities with highly useful tools to discipline the faithful and exercise control over many aspects of their lives.[785]

This is, however, only a part of the story. The seventeenth-century Catholic Church was neither a small sect, as in the early centuries after Christ's death, nor the key organiser of social life, as in mediaeval Europe. The modern period saw the emergence of a new society, whose main foundation was not the alliance between the altar and the throne, but rather that between a stock exchange and a scientific laboratory. New intellectual instruments were needed to adapt Christianity to this situation, and Molinist theology was precisely the answer to it. The Jesuits taught that

> (…) human nature, God's work, while contaminate by original sin, could not be hopelessly rotten; that all natural impulses and desires could, if properly guided, conduce to good; and that a spiritual adviser or confessor, in order to mend a sinner's ways, should accompany him as far as feasible, show understanding for, and even solidarity with, his weaknesses and thereby direct him step by step towards virtue.[786]

In this sense, the Jesuits were heirs of the vision of Christianity presented by Erasmus, so sympathetically described by Kołakowski in 1965. We can argue that this also means focusing on everyday life and the simple ethical message of the Gospel, rather than meticulous theological speculation, which can never lead to results that would be satisfactory to both human Reason and ecclesiastical authority.[787]

For these reasons, the Church had to be Augustinian in order to maintain its institutional authority and provide clear, unambiguous moral guidelines for its lay members. And at the same time, it had to be Semipelagian in order to face the challenges of a new civilisation. The Catholic Church, as all successful political institutions in history, solved the problem by declaring one policy, while pursuing the other. The Council of Trent officially condemned Pelagian teachings and reaffirmed St Augustine's theology as its doctrine. Yet, in the pastoral practice of the following decades, the Molinist theology advocated by the Jesuits gained the upper hand.[788] Kołakowski's interpretation is unambiguous in this manner: Jansenists rightly

[785] *Ibid.,* p. 45.
[786] *Ibid.,* p. 46.
[787] *Ibid.,* pp. 45–8.
[788] *Ibid.,* pp. 56–7.

considered themselves faithful followers of Augustinian theology, and by condemning Jansen's writings in *Cum Occasione* (1653), Rome effectively condemned St Augustine, in theory one of its greatest theological authorities.[789]

When commenting on the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, Kołakowski described it as a 'contemporary Counter-Reformation', emphasising that any successful Counter-Reformation must take over some of the ideas and arguments of its adversaries in order to be successful (Chapter II, pp. 71–74). The same happened in the 'original' Counter-Reformation of the seventeenth century. The Church had to use Augustinian rhetoric in order to become less Augustinian in its practice, Kołakowski argues. A deadly serious 'either–or' mentality did not appeal to the people, who were generally more and more engaged in worldly businesses, but still wanted to believe and remain members of the religious community. This was unacceptable for the Jansenists. For them, one had to be Christian and nothing but Christian, living in constant horror of eternal damnation and rejecting the world and all its affairs. 'We should weep all the time and never laugh', as Saint-Cyran, one of their leaders supposedly said.[790] Pascal wrote in the Fourteenth Provincial Letter: 'You must be ranged either on the one side or on the other; for there is no medium here. "He that is not with Jesus Christ is against him." Into these two classes all mankind are divided.'[791] Kołakowski judges that the Jesuits won the struggle.[792] And although in the introduction to his last major historical study, he states that his 'sympathies and antipathies are divided', in a different text, commenting on the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, his views are expressed less reluctantly:

> In sum, one can say that on this particularly important point the *Catechism* represents a further step toward freeing the Church from Augustinianism and embracing a humanist-Jesuit-Pelagian theology. *Gaudeamus*. [793]

This long exposition of Jansenist theology was necessary for providing the crucial context in which Pascal's own struggles with Christianity were fought.

[789] *Ibid.,* pp. 5, 23.
[790] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[791] B. Pascal, *The Provincial Letters,* trans.: Th. M'Crie (New York, 1866), p. 369.
[792] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, pp. 108–9.
[793] L. Kołakowski, 'A Layman Pronounces Upon the *Catechism*', in L. Kołakowski, *My Correct Views on Everything*, ed. Z. Janowski, trans.: various (South Bend, Indiana, 2005), p. 149; first published in Polish 'Laik nad Katechizmem się wymądrza', *PULS*, 62, No 3 (Londyn, 1993).

Kołakowski, who used the entire *oeuvre* of the thinker in his analysis, makes an important distinction. Pascal was not a heretic, as he has never been officially declared personally such by the Church, but he did professed a heretical doctrine, as he was following Jansenist theology.[794]

Nonetheless, *Pensées*, a collection of Pascal's notes for a planned apology of Christianity constitutes the core of this examination. Pascal planned to write a text that would be convincing for people like himself: seventeenth-century French *hommes du monde*, educated, sophisticated representatives of the upper classes. However, if we follow the Augustinian–Jansenist theology and believe that human fate is predestined by a divine judgment, what is the point in trying to convince someone of the importance of religion? Is not a missionary Jansenist a squared circle? We do not know God's ways of getting through to the people, and we should simply follow the idea that, in whatever we do, we are only His humble tools. But how can one reach modern, rationally oriented people who know Descartes, and convince them that religion can be meaningful? This is the main point Pascal makes in *Pensées*. Religion is not about reason, it belongs to a different order, that of the heart[795]:

> The last proceeding of reason is to recognize that there is an infinity of things that are beyond it. It is but feeble if it does not see so far as to know this. ;
> The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. ;
> It is the heart, which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason. [796]

Christianity is therefore not contrary to reason, but rather above it. The aim is not to make it rationally plausible, but rather desirable, loveable.[797] It is a mythical order.

The main tenets of Pascal's theology come from Jansenist teachings. God is absolutely sovereign and human nature is irrevocably corrupted by original sin. God could, but simply did not wish to include all the people in his glory, he 'owes us nothing'.[798] These are the main causes of the greatest tragedy in human life – the fact that God is hidden from the human person[799]:

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[794] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, p. 113.
[795] *Ibid.*, pp. 118–25.
[796] Pascal, *Pensées*, fr. 267, 277, 278.
[797] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, pp. 159–60.
[798] *Ibid.*, p. 125.
[799] See Isaiah 45:15; Goldmann's book about Jansenism was entitled *Hidden God* (Chapter II, pp. 74–78).

> Our corruption explains why God is hidden, and his sovereignty explains why he is not absolutely hidden; it explains why our reason is helpless beyond certain limits and why it is nonetheless reliable within limits that are assigned to it: the Pascalian theme par excellence. Virtually everything in human life becomes understandable within the framework of these two 'facts.'[800]

But what is the God Pascal looks for? He is exactly the Absolute that Kołakowski looks for in his religious thought – the ultimate point of certitude, a being that is beyond time, and contains everything in its 'eternal now', as Kołakowski wrote in *The Short and Complete Metaphysics*. But such a point is unreachable, and such being inconceivable for the human mind:

> This is our natural condition, and yet most contrary to our inclination; we burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks, and the earth opens to abysses.
> Let us therefore not look for certainty and stability. Our reason is always deceived by fickle shadows; nothing can fix the finite between the two Infinities, which both enclose and fly from it.;
> The greatness of man is that he knows himself to be miserable.[801]

The answer to this dilemma is the Pascalian Wager about God's existence, probably the most famous part of the *Pensées.* The most important part of the wager states:

> Let us then examine this point, and say, 'God is, or He is not.' But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos, which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.
> (…) you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is. (…)

[800] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, p. 127.
[801] Pascal, *Pensées*, fr. 72, 397.

> …But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite.[802]

Kołakowski's assessment emphasises again the point about the irrational character of religious faith. The Wager is not an intellectual game of any kind, it is not a mathematical formula for the probability of God's existence or any attempt to present new rational or empirical 'proof' of it. It is supposed to appeal to the heart rather than the reason. Therefore, the addressee of the wager is not a committed sceptic, but rather someone confused at a crossroads, with at least a minimal 'will to believe'. It is not, to contrast what may seem a superficial reading of the text, an 'insurance policy'. It is again more of a call for a full, irrational commitment, a decision to believe, which must in fact *precede* the actual faith. If you do not experience divine grace in your life, Pascal suggests, observe the instructions of religion and the inner feeling will come: '"I would soon have renounced pleasures," say they, "had I faith." For my part I tell you, "You would soon have faith, if you renounced pleasure." Now, it is for you to begin.' (fr. 240). Pascal reaffirms Kołakowski's conclusions from *Religion* and *Metaphysical Horror*. Religion can be only understood from within, you have to participate in the myth in order to make sense of it at all:[803]

> Everything boils down to this: Pascal believes that human destiny and God's self-concealment are made intelligible by the history of the Fall. A rationalist will always reply that he sees no reason to believe the biblical story and that even Pascal does not explicitly accept this story as a credible hypothesis. And so we turn in a circle: once you are a believer, everything makes sense, but you cannot infer the content of faith from facts; it is rather the other way round: armed with your faith, you project meaning onto the facts.[804]

The whole of Christianity can be summarised in the insolvable tension between the 'I' and the Absolute, the human and the divine, the finite and the infinite.[805] As a true Augustinian, Pascal resolves this tension by absolute submission to the divine sovereignty:

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[802] *Ibid.,* fr. 233.
[803] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, pp. 161–67.
[804] *Ibid.,* p. 167.
[805] *Ibid.*, p. 182.

> True religion consists in annihilating self before that Universal Being, whom we have so often provoked, and who can justly destroy us at any time; in recognizing that we can do nothing without Him, and have deserved nothing from Him but His displeasure. It consists in knowing that there is an unconquerable opposition between us and God, and that without a mediator there can be no communion with Him.[806]

The 'mediator' Pascal has in mind is naturally Jesus Christ; the *Pensées* are an apology for Christian religion, not for religion as such.

Finally, this brings us to the question of Pascal's legacy and the relation of his message to Kołakowski's mature religious thought. One crucial point is that Pascal's apology of Christianity protected faith against the claims of reason, but also defended modern science from the controlling inclinations of religious authorities. He was neither a preacher calling for the supremacy of irrational belief, nor a simple early modern deist defending secular reason from the intrusions of ecclesiastical institutions. As both a brilliant scientist and a committed Christian, he protected each against the other. *Pensées* show that religion does not need fragile support from a limited human intellect, but also that it is not the business of the Holy Office to investigate physical theories and historical research.[807] The other important issue concerns not Pascal's theological arguments as such, since they were not particularly original, but rather the general sensibility and attitude with which he defends Christianity. His style is moving, he appeals to emotions rather than to rational arguments, and from this perspective, it might be very convincing.[808] But again, perhaps the most important message Pascal leaves us with comes directly from Augustinian–Jansenist theology – there is an inseparable abyss between human beings and God, and our willingness to overcome this abyss has no rational or empirical grounds whatsoever; only a decision to commit oneself to the will to overcome this gap makes human life meaningful:

> His last word appears to be: within the natural light nothing can be really proven. But this is only a part of his last word. Skepticism is a pillar on which confidence in the Bible can be built: the weakness of human reason reveals the truth of original sin. Epistemology, the quest for certainty, is not a self-contained problem; it makes sense only as a part of our attempt to

[806] Pascal, *Pensées*, fr. 470.
[807] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, p. 171.
[808] *Ibid.,* p. 182.

> discover the meaning of human life: who are we, where did we come form, whither are we going? This amounts to admitting that, strictly speaking, there is no epistemology at all. At the end of our search we are left only with the advice: 'Listen to God.'[809]

However, this is not *the* most important problem Kołakowski takes after Pascal. The most fundamental and most troubling issue is the fact that after reading *Pensées*, we are left with a sense of Pascal's sadness. Had he found God, had he been a member of the elected community, touched by the grace, he would have been basking in heavenly joy. Pascal should be happy, Kołakowski writes, but he is not.[810] In a slightly later text, Kołakowski returns to this problem and outlines it once again in a more literary form of an imagined dialogue between Pascal and a seventeenth-century humanist:

> *Humanist*: So there is no way of understanding faith if you are standing outside the door of this realm, and the door is closed?
> *Pascal:* No. There is no way. And yes, the door is closed.
> *Humanist*: But you want this door to open for me?
> *Pascal*: Yes, with all my heart. I want you to be saved.
> *Humanist:* But what can I do to make that happen? And what can you do?
> *Pascal:* I can try to convince you to stop resisting God's will.
> *Humanist*: But surely, according to you, it is impossible successfully to resist God's gratuitous Grace?
> *Pascal:* Yes, it is.
> *Humanist:* Well, then?
> *Pascal weeps.*

> Ultimately, all the stratagems elaborated by Pascal to make his apologetics clear and convincing came to nothing, smashed to pieces against the wall of his theology. He never explained this rent in his thought and never repaired it. (…) In the end, the only conclusion we can supply to Pascal's thought must be this: that nothing in life is of any importance save those things which are so deeply hidden that there is nothing we can do to find them. Nothing at all. [811]

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[809] *Ibid.,* p. 192.
[810] *Ibid.,* p. 138.
[811] L. Kołakowski, 'An Invitation from God to a Feast', in Kołakowski, *Is God Happy?*, pp. 199–200; first published in Polish in *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej* 2002, nr 47; The question of sadness will be crucial in Jaspers (Chapter V, pp. 204–18) and the summary of Kołakowski's religious thought (Conclusions, pp. 226–44).

Kołakowski concludes his entire study of Jansenism and Pascal by stating that 'it was a religion for unhappy people and it was designed to make them more unhappy'.[812] Why is this important for Kołakowski's understanding of religion and Christianity in particular? Because it proves the quest for the Absolute will not only fail in providing us with *intellectual* satisfaction – we will never fully grasp the whole Truth, we will never understand the Absolute's nature – but it also turns out it can be *emotionally* unsatisfactory. Making the Absolute a Person (as in Christian religion) was supposed to save us from the despair we face when reducing the Absolute to Nothingness. But what is the point in having a loving God if we do not feel this love? Why should we consistently commit our lives to a cause that makes us miserable and sad, never rewarding us? How can we bear the fact that the meaningful life we were promised can be only realised in the afterlife? Pascal does not give us a straight answer. Yet again, Time seems to be the greatest obstacle in achieving happiness. The inability of people to overcome time in their lives results from their inescapable incompleteness:

> Let each one examine his thoughts, and he will find them all occupied with the past and the future. We scarcely ever think of the present; and if we think of it, it is only to take light from it to arrange the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means; the future alone is our end. So we never live, but we hope to live; and, as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so.[813]

Only God can live in the 'eternal now'.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Kołakowski gave a series of lectures for Polish television. They were aimed at a popular audience and concerned the most important thinkers from the past. The lectures were later collected in a book entitled *What Do Great Philosophers Ask Us About?*[814] Each lecture ended with two or three 'unresolved questions' that can be deduced from a philosopher's thought. However, Kołakowski began his summary of Pascal with a powerful statement: 'Pascal asks us about everything'.[815] It is hard to imagine a more beautiful homage one intellectual can pay to another. In a way, then, *Pensées* could be considered a philosophical text *par excellence*: written by a master of rational thinking who keeps emphasising the limits of human reason and vanity of all intellectual efforts: 'to mock philosophy is to

[812] Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, p. 197.
[813] Pascal, *Pensées*, fr. 172.
[814] A selection in English published as: Kołakowski, *Why Is There…*.
[815] Kołakowski, *O co nas pytają…,* p. 144.

be a true philosopher'. (fr. 4). Pascal was a subtle thinker who expressed the entire metaphysics of Leszek Kołakowski in one sentence: 'It is incomprehensible that God should exist, and it is incomprehensible that He should not exist.' (fr. 230).

Religion and the Modern World

The last part of this chapter will examine Kołakowski's minor writings from the 1990s–2000s, which either took a form of commentaries on contemporary social and political issues, or were more general reflections about the current state and prospects of Western civilisation. Religious values and the role of ecclesiastical institutions are at the centre of these analyses. An important political event, and one that influenced his public viewpoint on the role of the Church, was the election of the Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła, to the Papacy as John Paul II in October 1978. Kołakowski established a warm personal relationship with the Polish Pope[816] and was a frequent participant in the seminars organised at the Papal Summer Residence in Castel Gandolfo between 1983 and 1998.[817] Kołakowski commented on John Paul II's two most important philosophical encyclicals: *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) and *Fides et Ratio* (1998) in the texts examined later in this section. Kołakowski also participated in the post-1989 debates on the role of religion and the Catholic Church under the new democratic system of government in Poland. It is important to note that sometimes, when Kołakowski writes about 'Christianity', he actually means Roman Catholicism and the Catholic Church, without dwelling on theological and social differences between different denominations in the Western world.

In a way, these texts recall Kołakowski's articles from the early 1950s. This time, however, he has a completely different functional view about the role of the Church. As a committed Marxist at the time, he criticised the role of religion and of the Catholic Church in particular as obscurantist and a major obstacle to social progress. Forty years later, he sees religion as the main foundation for the whole structure of civilisation and keeps warning that rejecting religious values, as has become common in the late twentieth-century West, will eventually result in grievous consequences. The main reason for this is the conclusion Kołakowski drew from his

[816] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…,* tom II, pp. 113–24.
[817] The seminars were organised by Prof Krzysztof Michalski from the Vienna Institute for Human Sciences.

ethics: that religion is the only source of morality, a compass of what is right and wrong. However, and this is the second important point he makes about the modern role of religion, it must not indulge in theocratic temptations. He writes:

> I am convinced that if our civilisation let its religious roots to dry up, it would die together with them; this heritage is necessary in order to clearly realise our faults and duties, but not in order to codify our religious pretentions, claims or retaliations.[818]

Kołakowski argues that Europe is 'Christian by birth' and Christianity is 'the seminary of the European spirit'.[819] The very consciousness of European identity is derived from 'the unity of faith'.[820] Christian values are also the inspiration for the most important modern 'secular' formula of ethics: human rights.[821]

Nonetheless, 'roots' and 'foundation' must not equal statutory law. According to Kołakowski, the principle of separation between the state and the church protects both civic rights and Christian values.[822] Therefore, these Christian 'values' must not serve as a legislative formula, since this would lead to secular regulation of the questions of right and wrong, and, in this way, they would be used for intolerance and oppression.[823] Thus, 'Christian values' in legal acts do not sanctify secular institutions; on the contrary, such legislation paganise Christianity, he claims.[824] Even though some periods in the Church's history might suggest the opposite, theocratic aspirations have no grounds in the Gospels: Jesus' message was about universal moral values, not particular political systems.[825] Provocatively, Kołakowski repeats Karl Jaspers' statement that if he were faced with a choice between a Catholic and a Soviet totalitarianism, he would opt for the former, as the Bible remains the foundation of all European culture, and that therefore the civilisation would have a much stronger sense

[818] L. Kołakowski, 'Czy ludzkość może jeszcze ocalić swoje człowieczeństwo?' in Kołakowski, *Niepewność epoki demokracji* (Kraków, 2014), p. 111; first published in German in 2002.
[819] L. Kołakowski, 'Looking for the Barbarians. The Illusions of Cultural Universalism', in Kołakowski, *Modernity…*, pp. 26–7; first published in French in 1980.
[820] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
[821] L. Kołakowski, 'Europa i co z tego wynika' in Kołakowski, *Niepewność…*, p. 238; first published in Polish in 1990.
[822] L. Kołakowski, 'Pomyślne proroctwa i pobożne życzenia laika na progu nowego pontyfikatu w wiecznej sprawie praw cesarskich i boskich', in Kołakowski, *Kościół w krainie wolności. O Janie Pawle II, Kościele i chrześcijaństwie*, ed. Z. Mentzel (Kraków, 2011), p. 11; first published in Polish in 1978.
[823] L. Kołakowski, 'Amatorskie kazanie o wartościach chrześcijańskich', in Kołakowski, *Moje słuszne…*, p. 49.; first published in Polish in 1996.
[824] *Ibid.*, p. 52.
[825] L. Kołakowski, 'Politics and the Devil', in Kołakowski, *Modernity…*, pp. 182–3; first delivered as a lecture in English in 1987.

of continuity.[826] The necessity of a reliable moral framework is so important because 'political goals have to be assessed in terms that are not political'.[827]

For these reasons, in a modern world threatened by despotic, ruthless totalitarianisms, the cause of defending Christianity and the cause of defending democratic institutions are positively correlated, Kołakowski suggests.[828] This however, means that the Church must not identify its cause with any specific political movement, and must not act as if it were a political party; instead it should concentrate on its universal and timeless evangelical message.[829] As Kołakowski argued, this was realised in a particularly successful form in 1980s Poland, when the Catholic Church and the secular intelligentsia joined forces in their opposition to the Communist regime.[830] In his review of the *New Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), he concluded that 'the Church is more than ever before reconciled with the liberal-democratic order'.[831]

What then does Kołakowski think the role of the Church in the modern world should be? Somewhat provocatively, he references the title of a famous mediaeval treatise by Pope Innocent III (pontificate 1198–1216) – *On the Wretchedness of the Human Condition*:

> This is a very traditional theme, and yet by some means forgotten by the contemporary Church. It seems that the Church has adapted to modern times and it suggests that it will be cheerful in the world.
>
> And I do not think that it will be cheerful and I even dare to argue that it is precisely the Church's role, to follow Innocent III and pronounce precisely this, even if it would result in a silly charge that the Church does not know life. Amen.[832]

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[826] L. Kołakowski, 'The Idolatry of Politics', in Kołakowski, *Modernity…*, p. 149; first delivered as a lecture in English in 1986; I could not track down the exact quotation from Jaspers stating this, but this is a conclusion one could draw from his later writings, especially *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949).
[827] *Ibid.*, p. 155.
[828] Kołakowski, 'Pomyślne proroctwa…', p. 19.
[829] L. Kołakowski, 'Słuchając dobrego człowieka', in Kołakowski, *Kościół w krainie…*, p. 50; first published in Polish in 1995.
[830] L. Kołakowski, 'Wiara dobra, niewiara dobra', in Kołakowski, *Czy Pan Bóg…*, p. 71; first published in Polish in 2002.
[831] Kołakowski, 'A Layman Pronounces…', p. 146.
[832] Kołakowski, 'Amatorskie kazanie…', p. 56.

And if the Church fails in delivering its message and keeping the faithful loyal to its cause, it is only the Church and the clergy that are to be blamed. They should not look for the support of secular institutions in preaching the Gospel.[833] Once again, in his more popular writings, Kołakowski reaffirms the most important conclusions from the evolution of his religion thought: 'religion is man's way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat'. He presents an unequivocal position: the role of the Church is to constantly remind people every time they do evil that they should feel guilty about it, because they break taboos of the meaningful mythical order they live in.[834]

The pontificate of John Paul II was a very important point of reference for Kołakowski's critique of modern civilisation. In his interpretation, the Pope's message can be summarised in the argument that the main source of the modern crisis of culture is the fact that people 'forgot about God', and live their lives without the ultimate source of moral values.[835] In addition, this special relationship can be clearly seen in Kołakowski's supportive reviews of papal encyclicals. The Pope defends 'faith in the truth', just as Kołakowski repeatedly stresses the importance of this idea in his writings from the early 1960s onward.[836] John Paul II argues that human conscience on its own might very easily degenerate into a tool of moral nihilism, which is harmonious with Kołakowski's ethical premises from *Religion*.[837] The one important issue though, where he departed from that of the Polish pontiff, was the question of the relationship between truth and human freedom. In the earlier encyclical (*Veritatis Splendor*), the Pope is not clear whether human freedom can be compatible with defying divine truth, i.e. with choosing evil. Kołakowski once again confirms his 'Semipelagian sympathies' and argues that freedom also realises itself in choosing evil, which is of course contrary to traditional Augustinian theology.[838] When in *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II is more explicit that freedom cannot be realised

[833] L. Kołakowski, 'Krótka rozprawa o teokracji', in Kołakowski, *Czy Pan Bóg…*, p. 250; first published in Polish in 1991.
[834] L. Kołakowski, 'Kościół w krainie wolności', in Kołakowski, *Kościół w krainie…*, pp. 28–30; first published in Polish in 1993.
[835] L. Kołakowski. 'Prorok odpowiedzialnej wolności', in Kołakowski, *Kościół w krainie…*, p. 97; first published in English in 2005.
[836] L. Kołakowski, '*Fides et Ratio*. Mała uwaga o wielkiej encyklice', in Kołakowski, *Kościół w krainie…*, p. 56; first published in Polish in 1998.
[837] L. Kołakowski, 'Prawda i wolność. Co pierwsze?' in Kołakowski, *Kościół w krainie…*, p. 32; first published in Polish in 1994.
[838] *Ibid.*, pp. 33–6.

in decisions against God, Kołakowski seems to be troubled by this theological retreat.[839]

Mature Religious Thought – Summary

This chapter has presented the mature version of Kołakowski's religious thought, the final stage of its evolution, resulting from the intellectual developments analysed in Chapters I, II, and III. Kołakowski's metaphysics – his understanding of the most important religious questions derived from his ethical positions – was expressed in the two most important books in the entire corpus of his work: *Religion* and the *Metaphysical Horror*. Pascal, who was an object of his historical interest since the 1950s, might be seen as a specific historical example that focuses all the most important issues and tensions in Kołakowski's thought. For this reason, his historical study of Jansenism and Pascal (*God Owes Us Nothing*) is in a way a summary of his career as a historian of ideas. We have reached the most important idea in Kołakowski's religious thought: God, understood as the Absolute, is needed as the source and the ultimate point of reference in moral life, and as the 'conqueror of Time', a being who helps people to overcome the contingent and transient character of their own existence.

Before we proceed with the final recapitulation of all the most important conclusions put forward in this thesis and present Leszek Kołakowski's idea of God explicitly, I wish to introduce a short chapter on thinkers who have reached similar conclusions, or have travelled a similar journey between different modern philosophical projects, only to reach the endpoint in religious thought.

[839] Kołakowski, '*Fides et Ratio*…', pp. 58–9

Chapter V: Fellow travellers

> The urge to learn from the source of this what is, what can be, and what may come to be, has one sole goal that can be phrased in many ways. We long to be sure of the source, to return to it, to be sheltered in it, to find contentment in its being.[840]
>
> Karl Jaspers

The philosophies of Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) and Alasdair MacIntyre (born 1929) serve as points of reference to Leszek Kołakowski's mature religious thought and his broader intellectual developments.

Jaspers is the more important thinker in this context. His sophisticated doctrine, which was developed between the 1930s and 1960s, is the closest modern philosophical system to Kołakowski's own conclusions, which are presented in Chapter IV. For this reason, I will first examine the most important concepts in Jaspers' thought: Existenz, Transcendence, ciphers, the Encompassing, and philosophical faith. Secondly, I will briefly outline Jaspers' famous debate with Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) on the topic of a 'demythologised Christianity'. Then, I will present Kołakowski's assessment of Jaspers' philosophy outlined in few of his texts. All these concepts will help us to form a better understanding of Kołakowski's views on religion, philosophy, and the Absolute.

MacIntyre's thought will be presented as an interesting point of comparison – his philosophical trajectory is more closely comparable to that of Kołakowski. MacIntyre's youthful engagement with Marxism in the late 1940s and the 1950s resulted in a gradual disillusionment with the doctrine in the 1960s, a transitory period in the 1970s, and the development of his own original philosophy – to a great extent inspired by the Christian tradition – in the 1980s. Despite all the crucial differences, MacIntyre demonstrates that the social and political contexts of a given thinker do not necessarily result in a fundamentally different intellectual trajectory to those of his peers in other countries.

It should again be emphasised that this thesis does not attempt to present a comprehensive analysis of either Jaspers' or MacIntyre's thought. Jaspers is

[840] K. Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, trans.: E.B. Ashton (London, 1967), p. 5.

particularly challenging to present in such an abridged form; not only because he was a sophisticated philosopher, but because his writings are often characterised by ambiguities, repetition, and inconsistent use of crucial terminology. These thinkers will be examined only to the extent that it helps us to understand the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought in a broader perspective of twentieth-century intellectual history.

Karl Jaspers

Karl Jaspers started his career as a practising psychiatrist, and turned to philosophy only in the late 1910s.[841] Influenced mainly by Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, and Immanuel Kant, he developed an original philosophical system and, together with Martin Heidegger, became one of the leading representatives of the German philosophy of existence. Jaspers was not involved with the Nazi regime in any capacity, but suffered some persecution due to his wife's Jewish origins. After the war, he was one of the most important thinkers behind the liberal-conservative consensus of the new Federal Republic[842] and one of the best-known public intellectuals commenting on the contemporary issues and transformations of modern society. In the 1920s, Jaspers began to develop his original philosophy of existence, with the first exposition of all major themes in a three-volume publication entitled *Philosophy* (1932). His mature philosophy of religion was presented in the 1962 book *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*.[843]

Basic concepts of Karl Jaspers' philosophy

The two most important, closely related ideas in Jaspers' thought are Existenz (existence) and Transcendence. Existenz is a mode of human being that is open to self-reflection on its unique possibilities, through which one may fulfil his or her nature. It may be contrasted with an empirical being (*Dasein*), which can be an object of sociological or psychological examination. In contrast, Existenz is explained as a

[841] For more biographical details, see: S. Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers: A Biography – Navigations in Truth* (New Haven, London, 2004); K. Jaspers, *Philosophische Autobiographie* (München, 1977).
[842] C. Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers. Politics and metaphysics* (Abingdon, 2002), p. 2.
[843] A. Cesana, 'Daring to Live out of Uncertainty. Karl Jaspers on Philosophical Faith, Transcendence and Ciphers', in K. Salamun, G.J. Walters (eds.), *Karl Jaspers' Philosophy. Expositions and Interpretations* (New York, 2008), loc. 2153 (ebook).

way of living life in conscious freedom, by which Jaspers means understanding oneself as something fundamentally different than the empirical, rational, objective world. Existenz is openness to various possibilities of life, which can enrich us and make it possible to realise ourselves. It is therefore not a given for a human being, but rather a possibility, a mode of existence that is worth living. 'Existenz' is a specific, conceptualised form of 'existence', which, as a noun, has a much more common sense and universal meaning in Jaspers' thought.

'Existenz' is inseparable from 'Transcendence', which is an even more elusive concept. Transcendence is a position in which a particular being situates itself beyond the empirical world. Both ideas are in a state of permanent relation – Transcendence is the horizon to which Existenz strives, and both are in a state of constant fluctuation and movement.[844] My life becomes an Existenz when I attempt to fulfil my potential as a human being, but this can be realised only in relation with Transcendence:

> Existenz is not a kind of being; it is potential being. That is to say, I am not Existenz but possible Existenz. I do not have myself; I come to myself. To be or not to be, that is the choice which Existenz keeps facing all the time. I am myself only if I will it. (…) There is no Existenz without Transcendence. This is the structure of Existenz, so to speak, however Transcendence may be conceived and imagined in the areas of the mind and consciousness at large.[845]

We can clearly see that these two concepts are far from the lucid integrity of modern analytical philosophy. However, as we will understand later in this chapter, such ideas might prove more useful in explaining a human being's position in the mythical order of the world, so they are important in Kołakowski's philosophy of religion. Jaspers himself also gives a rather vague explanation of what 'Existenz' and 'Transcendence' are specifically, what the exact relation between the two is, and what their role in the world is:

> Existenz cannot say of itself that it is finite, or infinite, or both. It is the infinite and therefore insurmountable discontent that is as one with the search for transcendence. Existenz is either in relation to transcendence or not at all. (…) Transcendence is located neither in this world

[844] Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers…*, pp. 16–17.
[845] Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, p. 66.

> nor in another. Its location is a boundary – but a boundary on which I face transcendence if I truly am.[846]

Existenz and Transcendence communicate with each other through 'ciphers' – 'the language of transcendence'.[847] We can find ciphers in literally everything: 'there is nothing that could not be a cipher'.[848] Ciphers are the immediate medium through which Transcendence corresponds with Existenz. They slip away from a discursive analysis: ciphers can be 'seen' but not interpreted, 'perceived' but not cognised.[849] In Jaspers' own words, ciphers take the forms of visions and interpretations. What is more, they cannot be verified as universally valid, but are unique to the relation of a specific Existenz with Transcendence. They are not signs: Existenz can be conveyed by signs, but ciphers are manifestations of Transcendence.[850] Crucially, no cipher is the ultimate cipher, the one and only.[851] Jaspers summarises as follows: 'Ciphers are the language of transcendent reality not Transcendence itself. They are not universally valid but can be interpreted in many ways. They do not speak to our intellect; we hear them only as possible Existenz.'[852]

What permeates all possible Existenz and Transcendence is the Encompassing (*das Umgreifende*, sometimes also translated as 'the Comprehensive'). Of all Jaspersian concepts, the Encompassing seems to be the most enigmatic. It is probably the closest we get in Jaspers' philosophy to an Absolute. In his own words: 'We call the being that is neither only subject nor only object, that is rather on both sides of the subject–object split, *das Umgreifende*, the Comprehensive (the Encompassing).'[853] If ciphers are the means of communication between the Existenz and Transcendence, then the Encompassing is the structure that binds them together, that 'encompasses' both in a single whole. Where Kołakowski refers to Goethe (Chapter IV, p. 180) to explain the need for an absolute being that 'encompasses' all existence and history,

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[846] K. Jaspers, *Philosophy. Volume 3*, trans.: E.B. Ashton (Chicago and London, 1971), pp. 7, 13.
[847] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
[848] *Ibid.*, p. 147.
[849] L.H. Ehrlich, *Karl Jaspers. Philosophy as Faith* (Amherst, 1975), p. 164.
[850] Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, pp. 92–95.
[851] *Ibid.*, p. 134.
[852] *Ibid.*, pp. 286–7.
[853] K. Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, trans.: R. Manheim (London, 1950), p. 14; it is worth pointing that the original title of this book is *Der Philosophische Glaube* ('Philosophical Faith').

Jaspers uses[854] Dante's vision of God and the angelic choirs to illustrate what the Encompassing is:

> Not otherwise the Triumph, which for ever
> Plays round about the point that vanquished me,
> Seeming enclosed by what itself encloses[855]

For the purpose of this thesis, however, the most important of all ideas in Jaspers' philosophy is 'philosophical faith'. Jaspers uses this concept to present his own original take on philosophy of religion. Philosophical faith is a belief in a fundamentally transcendental character of human life, rejecting the atheist claims of modern science. At the same time, however, it renounces any ossified theological dogmas of organised religion based on a belief in a divine revelation.[856] This means philosophical faith offers no sense of certitude at all, but only gives a vague method to navigate through spiritual experiences. Following Kierkegaard, Jaspers emphasises the perplexing, often contrarian character of metaphysics. Philosophical faith is a vehicle that enables one to accept the insolvable character of these antinomies; it is 'a fundamental, yet paradoxical belief in the transcendent purpose and value of existence, which upholds humanity precisely in the absence of certainty'.[857] Even though Kołakowski did not use the concept at the time, it is striking how similar Jaspers' idea is to the understanding of philosophy and culture Kołakowski presents in his essays from the 1960s and *The Presence of Myth* (Chapter III, pp. 123–32).

Jaspers and His God

This finally leads us to the question of Jaspers' understanding of the idea of the Absolute and of the relationship between philosophy and religion. Kołakowski once described:

> the philosophical dream of Germany: to discover a God without the God, to find a secular and transcendental foundation of the cognitive and moral certitude. (…) Karl Jaspers was one of

[854] Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, p. 72.
[855] Dante, *Divine Comedy. Volume III (Paradiso)*, Canto XXX, trans.: H.D. Longfellow.
[856] Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers…*, pp. 27–28.
[857] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

> those who managed to say clearly what was it all about: a philosophical faith, so not a faith based on a revelation, but a faith nonetheless.[858]

Let us, then, outline Jaspers' principles of philosophical faith:

> God is;
> There is an unconditional imperative;
> Man is finite and imperfectible;
> Man can live in God's guidance;
> The reality of the world subsists ephemerally between God and existence.[859]

The crucial difference between philosophical faith and the religious faith of any revealed religion, however, lies in the fact that these principles cannot be turned into rigid dogmas professed by institutional authority. They are only general points of orientation, with unique characteristics for each Existenz in its relationship with Transcendence.[860] Philosophical Faith provides no tangible, objective support to a human being in distress. According to Jaspers, it is only 'a gathering of spiritual sustenance through the actualisation of the Comprehensive (the Encompassing), to win oneself by being given to oneself'.[861] There is no consolation, no promise of an ultimate redemption or salvation. Only revealed religion offers liberation from the sense of despair and emptiness.[862] Jaspers himself states he has no ecclesiastical faith[863] and has never believed in the mere possibility of religious revelation.[864] Nonetheless – and this is a crucial point that Jaspers shares with Kołakowski – despite our personal religious convictions, all people of Western civilisation are actually Christians by virtue of the cultural environment and tradition they live in.[865] Like Kołakowski, when he talks about a 'revealed religion', Jaspers almost always has Western Christian denominations in mind, even if his historical works emphasised the importance of non-Western traditions in world philosophy.

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[858] L. Kołakowski, 'Reprodukcja kulturalna i zapominanie', in Kołakowski, *Czy diabeł...*, p. 112; first delivered as a lecture in German in 1980.
[859] K. Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom. An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans.: R. Manheim (New Haven and London, 2003), p. 85.
[860] Cesana, 'Daring to Live…', loc. 2241.
[861] Jaspers, *The Perennial...*, p. 25.
[862] K. Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit* (München, 1977), p. 923.
[863] Jaspers, *Philosophische Autobiographie*, p. 114.
[864] Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, p. 8.
[865] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

For Jaspers, religious revelation is an elusive idea that slips away from proper rational analysis: 'it is neither possible nor impossible'.[866] However, religion based on revelation necessarily has an ecclesiastical character.[867] If the relationship between Existenz and Transcendence has a unique, subjective character, then revealed religion is an attempt to universalise this experience: 'This is what religion is, the objectivity of the relation to transcendence in cult and traditional knowledge, tied to the institution and to the authority of a church.'[868] In Jaspers' view, this is another fundamental difference between philosophy and religion. The former is a matter of the individual, while the latter is inextricably intertwined with community, rites, and prayers.[869] For Jaspers, philosophy and religion are two sides of the same coin; 'philosophy must be *at odds with religion*', but at the same time 'in philosophy, religion will not let us rest, and we keep thinking in reference to religion'.[870] In short, 'philosophizing may thus be characterized as religion in reverse'.[871]

Once we have established the difference between philosophical faith and faiths of revealed religions, or rather between philosophy and religion as such, the question of what Jaspers actually understood by 'God' remains. He tends to use the term 'God' whenever he refers to or comments on the historical dimension of philosophy. However, whenever he presents an exposition of his own views, the more familiar and tangible idea of God is replaced by the inexplicable 'Encompassing'. Jaspers' God is not the personal God of the Bible, but an abstract Absolute that is closely linked to the basic concepts of Existenz and Transcendence. As we have seen above, the proposition 'God is' is the fundamental principle of the Jaspersian philosophical faith, but there can be no empirical or scientific knowledge of God.[872] 'A proved God is not God' – Jaspers says – and states that certainty of God's existence 'is a premise, not a result of philosophical activity'.[873] Like the Kantian postulate of practical reason, 'God' is a necessary feature that enables the human being to fully realise itself: 'God exists for me in the degree to which I in freedom authentically become myself. He

[866] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[867] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[868] K. Jaspers, *Philosophy. Volume 2*, trans.: E.B. Ashton (Chicago and London, 1970), p. 308.
[869] K. Jaspers, *Philosophy. Volume 1*, trans.: E.B. Ashton (Chicago and London, 1969), p. 20.
[870] *Ibid.*, p. 295; original emphasis.
[871] *Ibid.*, p. 298.
[872] Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, p. 82.
[873] Jaspers, *The Perennial…*, p. 36.

does not exist as a scientific content but only as openness to existence.'[874] Crucially, in Jaspers' thought, God is also 'the One', an Absolute that bring unity to all beings, and the 'quest for One' is one of the perennial questions of philosophy.[875] It is, actually, the crucial issue of philosophy and for our Existenz:

> The one thing known to Existenz as absolutely serious is the One, which can never be definitely stated. Existenz will not find its reality in this or that sphere; it will serve its one God, knowing him only in doing what it must do, not otherwise. His answers (…) come out of existence, only half-understood and always clad in mystery. (…) the final step is how it appears to us in the historicity of our Existenz: that the One, the only One, is imperfectible in time.
>
> Philosophy as the self-ascertainment of the One in existence becomes a stated thought structure and this subject to rationality. (…)
>
> Philosophy *cannot*, without declining, *serve as a means*, to any other end. [876]

Like Kołakowski, Jaspers stresses the inconceivable nature of the Absolute.[877] Like Pascal, he repeats after the Prophet Isaiah that God is hidden,[878] and that this fact, impossible to overcome, makes human life tragic:

> All I want is the eternal, yet I cannot draw it out of hiding. I can gain no solid foothold in the world, and yet there is no home to be found in another.[879]

'God's voice' is expressed only as the person's judgement of himself or herself, though it is always equivocal and never definite. This voice is audible only in moments of exaltation, but yet 'it is by such moments and for such moments that we live'.[880] Mysticism, so important for Kołakowski's studies of different forms of religiosity, is rather ignored by Jaspers, as it functions in a completely different sphere. In a mystical union, there is an immediate knowledge of God, so there is no need for faith at all.[881] In mysticism, 'Existenz and Transcendence, I and God, become one. To know God means to become God', and just like Kołakowski (Chapter

[874] Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, pp. 45–46.
[875] *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.
[876] Jaspers, *Philosophy. Volume 1*, p. 268; original emphases.
[877] Jaspers, *Philosophy. Volume 2*, p. 105.
[878] *Ibid.*, p. 273.
[879] *Ibid.*, pp. 278–9.
[880] Jaspers, *The Perennial…*, p. 74.
[881] Jaspers, *Philosophy. Volume 2*, p. 244.

II, pp. 103–4), he quotes Angelus Silesius[882] as an example of this idiosyncratic union.

Finally, as in the concluding remarks from Kołakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism* (Chapter III, pp. 155–56), Jaspers refutes any modern attempts to build a secular eschatology, which would result in the self-deification of humankind. This would be an insult to man's possible Existenz, depriving it of its potential for different developments:

> The deification of man dishonours man by making things easy for him. It gives him the tangible, whereas it is his situation in the world that he must do without this tangibility, and instead find only hieroglyphs and images along the road by which he can, and hence should, come to himself through God.[883]

This last point is a crucial summary: for Jaspers, God is not the end, but the means, the necessary way through which human beings fully develop their Existenz in communication with Transcendence. It is the way for the human person to fully become himself or herself. In the Jaspersian philosophical faith, God is a cipher.[884] For these reasons, and Jaspers is unusually unambiguous on this issue, a person must not profess both philosophical faith and revealed faith of an organised religion; the two are mutually exclusive.[885] This also implies that Jaspers' God is a temporally relative being. To believe that the fullness of truth was revealed only once in a specific historical situation (as in the cases of Moses, Jesus or Muhammad) is contrary to reason.[886] Jaspers' argument is this: if the truth realised in my own Existenz were universally valid for all other Existenz, then it would simply mean that I am God.[887] The true liberation of a human being results in a fundamental conclusion: 'I stop claiming that the cipher of the God I follow as mine must be God to all men.'[888]

Demythologisation debate

The last relevant part of the presentation of Karl Jaspers' original thought was his 1950s dispute with German theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) on the idea

[882] Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, p. 264.
[883] Jaspers, *The Perennial…*, p. 132.
[884] Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, p. 126.
[885] *Ibid.*, pp. 362–3.
[886] Ehrlich, *Karl Jaspers. Philosophy as Faith*, p. 124.
[887] *Ibid.*, p. 69.
[888] Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, p. 285.

of a 'demythologized Christianity', [889] which triggered Kołakowski's direct commentary. Bultmann, who was to a great extent influenced by the nineteenth-century tradition of Protestant liberal theology and by the early philosophy of Martin Heidegger from *Being and Time* (1927), argues that in order to reveal the authentic, 'kerygmatic' content of the Scriptures, it is crucial to differentiate the spiritual content from the 'mythical' forms in which it was disguised. The historical fact that Jesus of Nazareth was born a man in ancient Palestine, in a specific historical context is irrelevant from a theological perspective. The same applies to his deeds and miracles during public activity. They are not important for the true meaning of Christianity.[890] This is particularly important in the modern age, Bultmann argues, as with the progress of science, Christians should no longer believe, for instance, in the supernatural miracles Jesus performed, including the resurrection.[891] In Bultmann's view, such 'demythologisation' would make Christianity accessible to modern, enlightened people and in line with all the developments of technological civilisation.[892]

At first, it may seem that Bultmann's demythologisation concurs with Jaspers' critique of religion based on a historical revelation.[893] What the two thinkers argue about, however, is not the idea of a philosophical faith, but the meaning of Christianity itself. In exactly the same manner as Kołakowski, Jaspers argues that 'the myth is a carrier of meanings which can be expressed only in the language of myth'.[894] Following Jaspers' argument, we may say that there is the scientific order of meaningfulness, which is based on empirical experience, explains natural phenomena and is crucial for a modern mode of life. Nonetheless, the transcendental sphere of life can be understood only in a mythical order of meaningfulness:

> The real task, therefore, is not to demythologize, but to recover mythical thought in its original purity, and to appropriate, in this form of thinking, the marvellous mythical contents that deepen us morally, enlarge us as human beings, and indirectly bring us closer to the lofty,

[889] K. Jaspers, R. Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity. An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth*, no translator provided (New York, 2005).
[890] Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers…*, p. 151.
[891] R.J. Hoffman, 'Myth and Christianity: A New Introduction', introduction to Jaspers, Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity…*,p. 14.
[892] Cesana, 'Daring to Live…', loc. 2399–2416.
[893] Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers…*, p. 152.
[894] Jaspers, Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity…*,p. 31.

> imageless transcendence, the idea of God, which no myth can fully express for it surpasses them all.[895]

Jaspers argues that Bultmann misunderstands the meaning of modern science, claiming that it will not provide any definite answers about the meaning of life. The quest for *arche* has a philosophical character.[896] Even if revelation is a special kind of myth – one that requires uniqueness, exclusiveness, absoluteness of faith – it is still fundamentally a myth, and can be understood only as a mythical structure.[897] Jaspers restates his position that there is no one truth that can be valid for all people in all historical periods (as Christianity proposes),[898] but his main argument against Bultmann is very clear: a demythologised Christianity is no longer Christianity.

Kołakowski's assessment of Jaspers

It is difficult to establish a straightforward relationship between Jaspers' philosophy and the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought. In contrast to Goldmann (Chapter II, pp. 80–83) or Eliade (Chapter III, pp. 115–19), Kołakowski did not refer directly to Jaspers in his texts from the crucial transitory decade between 1955 and 1965. Nonetheless, if we read Kołakowski's key texts closely, Jaspers' influence from the early 1960s on is striking. Let us recall a key excerpt from *Historical understanding and the intelligibility of history*, which was quoted in Chapter III (p. 121), as an introduction to Kołakowski's philosophy of myth:

> It is necessary to surpass history by an act of philosophical or religious faith if one wants to accord it a meaning. (…) Since the Enlightenment, philosophers have elevated their faith almost to a science. It is time to place the alleged science at the level of faith. I do not say 'degrade.' I do not say 'elevate.' I say: place at the level of faith. This faith is always charged with a practical significance. It is our projection that gives our past a meaning.[899]

In his 1965 essay Kołakowski argues, like Jaspers, that philosophy is a *faith*, not a science, and only as such can build meaningful structures of human life. In the same year, Kołakowski published an edited collection of texts by various existential

[895] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
[896] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[897] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[898] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
[899] Kołakowski, 'Historical understanding…', pp. 115–6.

thinkers.[900] Just before the decade in which he wrote his 'disenchantment trilogy', he described existential philosophy as an 'attempt to reinstate the subject (…) after all the unsuccessful endeavours of empiricists, phenomenologists, psychoanalysts'.[901] Kołakowski argued that the existentialist enterprise, however, is eventually idle as well, as it negates any ultimate relations between beings, without giving any positive recipes for a meaningful life: '[Existential philosophy] does not provide an understanding of a man, nor of his transcendental counter-module, but only presents a silhouette of their irreducible opposition.'[902] It calls for a total engagement, but leaves the human being without any points of reference, remaining silent on the most pressing challenges of moral life.[903] This text (written in November 1963) is another example of how dynamic the intellectual evolution of Kołakowski's work was in the early 1960s, especially if we compare these statements with *Ethics Without a Moral Code*, which was published just a year earlier (Chapter II, pp. 66–67). Tellingly, Kołakowski choses an excerpt from the first volume of Jaspers' *Philosophy* that criticised positivism and idealism[904] as closed systems of thought that limited the potentiality of human Existenz. In a short foreword, Kołakowski describes Jaspers' thought as 'philosophizing that must move beyond any attempt of scientific rationalisation of the world, as it is (…) living in communion with realities that basically cannot be conceptualised. These realities are Existenz and Transcendence'.[905]

The most significant analysis of Jaspers in Kołakowski's texts comes only in the 1980s, during the period in which his mature religious thought was acquiring its final shape. In the 1985 essay *The Illusion of Demythologization*, he comments on the Bultmann–Jaspers dispute, unambiguously supporting Jaspers' position by stating that Christianity without a mythical narrative is no longer Christianity.[906] However, Kołakowski does not regard Jaspers as defending his own idea of a sophisticated philosophical faith, but rather something similar to the pragmatic religion of Spinoza

[900] L. Kołakowski, K. Pomian (eds.), *Filozofia egzystencjalna* (Warszawa, 1965).
[901] L. Kołakowski, 'Filozofia egzystencji i porażka egzystencji', introduction to Kołakowski, Pomian, *Filozofia egzystencjalna*, p. 12.
[902] *Ibid.*, p. 21.
[903] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
[904] Jaspers, *Philosophy. Volume 1*, pp. 226–42.
[905] Kołakowski, Pomian, *Filozofia egzystencjalna*, p. 142.
[906] L. Kołakowski, 'The Illusion of Demythologization', in Kołakowski, *Modernity…*, pp. 103–5; first delivered as a lecture in English in 1985.

(Chapter II, p. 78), in which the common people take biblical myths not as ciphers, but understand them literally.[907] In other words, we can see an explicit statement of a more generalised conclusion found at the end of *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*: Christianity must be mythologised in order to remain Christianity, but a mythologised Christianity is not a religion for philosophers. The answer to demythologising tendencies, Kołakowski repeatedly argues, is the return of the sacred. However, it is not the role of philosophers to actively participate in this restoration, Kołakowski says. Only faithful, fully committed priests can do this, while philosophical jesters must remain in their positions as distanced commentators.[908]

We can clearly see that in his description of Jaspers' positions, Kołakowski is actually smuggling the doubts and insolvable tensions present in his own thought. 'What we call Jaspers' philosophy is actually a description of a dramatic, incurably painful condition of a human being stretched between two indefinite realities',[909] was how Kołakowski – with the concepts of Existenz and Transcendence in mind – started his short summary of Jaspers.

When describing Jaspers' *oeuvre* as a historian of philosophy, Kołakowski again talks about himself to a great extent:

> His historical reflections were intentionally conceived as a never-ending dialogue with the great minds of the past rather than a pursuit of historical facts. His historical studies ought to be considered as expressions of his own philosophy, not as textbooks. He did not practice the history of ideas. Instead, he sought instances where the continuity of culture was broken by the unpredictable invasion of a great mind (…).[910]

It is perhaps worth stressing again at this point that Kołakowski *did* practice the history of ideas and was much more of a historian and much less of an original thinker than Karl Jaspers. Nevertheless, as we have already seen throughout this thesis, historical studies were one of the most important media through which Kołakowski presented his own philosophical reflections, often in a very similar fashion to Jaspers.

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[907] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
[908] *Ibid.*, p. 107.
[909] Kołakowski, *O co nas pytają…,* p. 243.
[910] L. Kołakowski, 'Philosophical Faith in the Face of Revelation', in Kołakowski, *Modernity…*, p. 109; first delivered as a lecture in German in 1983.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to present Karl Jaspers' works in detail and for this reason, we will not present his specific historical studies here. It is, however, very striking that both Kołakowski and Jaspers are interested in the same thinkers, especially those with great works in metaphysics, and that they came to very similar judgements about them.[911] Whether it was Plotinus, Nicholas of Cusa or Spinoza, they were crucial historical influences and the most significant 'great philosophers' of the past, philosophers who radically changes our understanding of the world for both thinkers. Nonetheless, in the concluding recapitulation of Kołakowski's religious thought we will get back to Jaspers' studies of two seminal figures who are critical to any formulation of philosophy of religion, namely Pascal and Jesus.

Kołakowski emphasises the non-discursive character of Jaspers' thought, which does not explain anything, but only 'elucidates the Existenz'. In this manner, it is very similar to mystical writings.[912] This philosophy is fundamentally non-conclusive and leaves us with no definite answers. The ciphers of Transcendence cannot be deciphered and philosophical faith 'was nothing else but the will to face the presence of ciphers and never to let our situation in the presence of the indecipherable fall into oblivion'.[913] This kind of philosophical and spiritual position is very challenging, both intellectually and psychologically. Therefore, Kołakowski repeats that philosophical faith is a project of a religion for the enlightened,[914] who will have rational tools to deal with the uncertainty of the ciphered Transcendence. Nonetheless, he points to the fundamental similarity between philosophical faith and revealed religion, explaining that they both 'meet in a fundamental human anxiety; namely in the awareness of the self-insufficiency of the world and of the human existence within it'.[915]

I would therefore like to argue that 'philosophical faith' is a concept that expresses Kołakowski's own religious thought, as it had been developing since the early 1960s. It is the expression of the 'need of myth and fear of myth' present together in their irreconcilable, painful relationship. Jaspers, as Kołakowski concluded his analysis, has perfectly revealed the crisis of both Christianity and the

[911] See especially: K. Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers. Volume II*, trans.: R. Manheim (London, 1966).
[912] Kołakowski, 'Philosophical Faith…', p. 110.
[913] *Ibid.*, p. 114.
[914] *Ibid.*, p. 115.
[915] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Enlightenment, which compete with one another for the soul of a modern human being, with neither of them able to present a convincing solution to his or her troubles.[916] In a way, Jaspers' philosophy summarises the entire critique of modern philosophy that Kołakowski presented in the 'disenchantment trilogy' and other writings:

> Against the Enlightenment he stressed the inexplicability and unintelligibility of the empirically accessible world from within itself. Against Christianity, he intended to show that this unintelligibility of the world can never be established as a common good of humanity, a universally valid achievement, or a field of communication. (…) While superbly expressing this ambiguity and paralysis, Jaspers offered no remedy for its elimination. But perhaps it is the call of philosophers to reveal crises instead of curing them.[917]

Here, we can again clearly see Kołakowski's reluctance to fully commit to a new mythical system that offers an explanation of the world. Instead, as outlined in the mature philosophy of religion presented in Chapter IV, he merely *suggests* – but suggests repeatedly – that religion is the best answer we have. However, as we have seen in the excerpt about Jaspers, Kołakowski constantly retreats to the safe position of an unbiased critic. It is as if, after having performed his role of a priest and preaching, he puts on the jester's hat again the moment he steps down from the pulpit.

We have already seen that in Kołakowski's mature thought, 'religion is man's way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat' (Chapter III, pp. 133-34). Mythical narratives give a sense of meaningfulness to human lives, but one has to really believe in the myth, fully commit to the system, and participate in it in order to understand it. Only then can one really reconcile oneself to defeat in this life, because religion brings a promise of a different order, of participation in an Absolute in which everything has its meaningful place. Nonetheless, from the point of view of someone who does not commit themselves, as Kołakowski never officially did, then such reconciliation is fake, a mere half-measure to delude oneself. It is for this reason that Kołakowski's final assessment of Jaspers thought is rather severe: he argues that if Existenz can never be completed, ciphers decoded, then Transcendence is always adamant and deaf, and that if there is no hope whatsoever for a final reconciliation,

[916] *Ibid.*, pp. 118–9.
[917] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

only a constant struggle, then life truly ends as an inevitable defeat.[918] 'This great philosopher leaves his readers with a sense of a sad emptiness',[919] adds Kołakowski. Remember that Kołakowski's final word on Pascal was that his philosophy 'was a religion for unhappy people and it was designed to make them more unhappy' (Chapter IV, p. 197). We will return to this issue of sadness in the final conclusion of this thesis. At this point is also worth repeating that the essays from *What Do Great Philosophers Ask Us About?* end with a few 'unresolved questions' from the philosopher in question. The question Kołakowski left at the end of his analysis of Jaspers would probably be very similar to the question one could leave at the end of 'what does Kołakowski ask us about?': 'Is it credible that people become better and they enrich their humanness if they are convinced that life ends in an inevitable failure, and that there is no consolation and no salvation?'[920]

Alasdair MacIntyre

Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophy – unlike that of Jaspers – bears no resemblance to Kołakowski's religious thought. Nonetheless, there are several reasons that make it worth briefly outlining his intellectual trajectory in this thesis. In addition to coming from the same generation (he is just two years younger than Kołakowski), he also had a long-lasting involvement with Marxism and developed a mature philosophy that was to a great extent based on Christianity around the similar period of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nonetheless, his British background meant that the crucial formative experience of the Second World War was completely different from that of a contemporary Pole. Like the young Kołakowski (Chapter I, pp. 26–28), he was first trained in analytical philosophy and was then fascinated by Marxism. Nonetheless, his engagement with the doctrine was nothing like the work of intellectuals under the regime of a Stalinist state. His process of disillusionment was much more prolonged and less conclusive. Finally, his mature philosophy drew more significantly from different sources, especially Aristotelianism, than was the case with Kołakowski. Considering all these similarities and differences, a succinct presentation of MacIntyre's most important ideas will not only provide us with an interesting point

[918] Kołakowski, *O co nas pytają…,* p. 248.
[919] *Ibid.*, p. 250.
[920] *Ibid.*, p. 251.

of comparison for the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought; it will help us to establish it in a broader context of twentieth-century intellectual history.

MacIntyre's Marxism

The 'Marxist period' in MacIntyre's thought lasted until 1971.[921] This was some time after the dramatic events of 1956 and 1968, which were turning points for many Communists in the West. This shows that his involvement in the Marxist cause had a very different character to that of Kołakowski's. His political activity did not affect his personal life to a similarly serious extent, and the gradual process of disillusionment had an almost entirely intellectual character. Furthermore, in the early 1950s, MacIntyre aspired to be genuinely both Marxist and Christian, belonging at the same time to the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Church of England.[922] This stood in sharp contrast to Kołakowski's activities during the same period, as he was becoming one of the most anti-clerical writers in Poland. Crucially, however, MacIntyre saw Marxism and positivism as the only serious rivals to Christianity in providing a coherent worldview for a modern human person from the very beginning.[923] The main theme of his philosophical development was to find a formula that would be a synthesis of Marxism and Christianity. He was therefore able to make the following observation on the relationship between the two:

> [Marxism has] many of the characteristics of a Christian heresy rather than of non-Christian unbelief. Marxism is, in consequence, a doctrine with the same metaphysical and moral scope as Christianity and it is the only secular post-Enlightenment doctrine to have such a scope.[924]

MacIntyre demonstrated such an understanding of Marxism as early as 1953 – something that first became obvious in the *Main Currents of Marxism* in the case of Kołakowski. 'The tragedy of Marxism', wrote MacIntyre, 'is that it wished to combine the scope of metaphysics with the certainty of natural sciences.'[925] In

[921] P. Blackledge, N. Davidson, 'Introduction: the Unknown Alasdair MacIntyre', in Blackledge, Davidson (eds.), *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism. Selected Writings 1953–1974* (Leiden and Boston, 2008), p. xx.
[922] A. MacIntyre, 'Epilogue. 1953, 1968, 1995: Three Perspectives', in Blackledge, Davidson (eds.), *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement…*, p. 416.
[923] P. McMylor, *Alasdair MacIntyre: Critic of Modernity* (London, 1993), p. 4.
[924] A. MacIntyre, 'Epilogue…', p. 412.
[925] A. MacIntyre, *Marxism. An Interpretation* (London, 1953), p. 71.

arguing for similarity between Marxism and Christianity, he went even further than Kołakowski at any stage of his career:

> For Communism inherits from Christianity the notion of a redemption, a reconciliation of all mankind. Then just as Christianity turned salvation for man into salvation for Christians, so Communism turned reconciliation for man into reconciliation for the proletarians.[926]

For MacIntyre, Marxism was to be the practical, political realisation of the revolutionary message of the Gospels. For this reason, 'the two most relevant books in the modern world are St Mark's Gospel and Marx's *National Economy and Philosophy*; but they must be read together'.[927] The young MacIntyre concluded that 'Marxism is in essence a complete realisation of Christian eschatology',[928] a statement obviously very controversial even for the most liberal of Anglican vicars.

But what kind of Marxism did he have in mind? MacIntyre has never been seduced by a totalitarian version of the doctrine, whether in its Stalinist or Maoist incarnations. From the early 1950s, his understanding of Marxism was a peculiar mixture of a focus on the young, humanistic Marx with an emphasis on the religious and collective dimension of the ideology. It was not, as it was for the revisionist Kołakowski from the second half of the 1950s, an opportunity to construct a new, humanistic ethics that would help an *individual* realise his or her potential as a human being. For MacIntyre, the *community* remained the crucial philosophical concept that organised his thinking. For this reason, he began to criticise Eastern European revisionism, and Kołakowski in particular in the mid-1950s. He argued that revisionists simply change the *content* of the ideology, replacing the Stalinist orthodoxy with liberal individualism, as depicted in Karl Popper's *Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), but that they retain the rigid, authoritarian structure of the system. He acknowledged the specific political situation of the countries of the Eastern bloc, and accepted that revisionism may be useful as a political strategy, but he did not accept that this was not the right way to reform Marxism:

> One cannot revive the moral content within Marxism by simply taking a Stalinist view of historical development and adding liberal morality to it. But however one may disagree with

[926] *Ibid.*, p. 102.
[927] *Ibid.*, p. 109.
[928] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

> Kolakowski's theoretical position, the kind of integrity involved in reasserting moral principles in the Polish situation is entirely admirable. (…) But to assert this position in the West is to flow with the stream. It is merely to conform.[929]

So in the definition of what the crucial issue is, 'Stalin and Popper shake hands': what is needed according to MacIntyre is a third position that is non-Stalinist and non-liberal at the same time.[930]

MacIntyre's Christianity and Ethics

According to MacIntyre, it is much more common in the modern world for Christians to become Marxists than the other way round.[931] Nonetheless, in the era of a widespread cynicism and disinterest in public issues, it is more important what kind of a Christian or a Marxist one is. MacIntyre consistently sees the two systems as the only modern proposals that take an all-embracing perspective on human life seriously. Like Kołakowski, he commented on Lucien Goldmann's *Hidden God* (Chapter II, pp. 80–83), but the intellectual influence definitely had a less significant impact in his case. His assessment of Goldmann's analysis of Pascal is similar to Kołakowski's, but he uses the text as an opportunity to once again stress that even if Christians and Marxists disagree about the existence of God, they both agree that God's existence is the crucial question.[932]

During the 1960s, while Kołakowski was going through the most important transitional stage in his philosophical development, MacIntyre directly addressed the crucial question. It is a question that has never been explicitly posed by Kołakowski, but it was a peculiar phantom that haunted his writing during that period, especially *The Presence of Myth* (Chapter III, pp. 131–32). Any intellectual trained in the strict, rational method of analytical philosophy, anyone with a serious episode of engagement with Marxism, and an interest in religious problems, should ask himself or herself the question: 'is understanding religion compatible with believing?'[933]

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[929] A. MacIntyre, 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness', in Blackledge, Davidson (eds.), *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement…*, p. 49.
[930] *Ibid.*, pp. 51–2.
[931] A. MacIntyre, 'Marxists and Christians', in Blackledge, Davidson (eds.), *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement…*, p. 186; first published in 1961.
[932] A. MacIntyre, 'Pascal and Marx: On Lucien Goldmann's *Hidden God*', in Blackledge, Davidson (eds.), *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement…*, p. 316; first published in 1964.
[933] A. MacIntyre, 'Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing', in J. Hich (ed.), *Faith and Philosophers* (New York, 1966).

MacIntyre's answer is that the standards of what can be understood, i.e. what is intelligible, is established by the intellectual culture of a given society.[934] In the world of modern science and its rigorous method, any attempt to explain religion in *rational* terms, i.e. to make religion intelligible, is an endeavour destined to fail. Like Kołakowski, MacIntyre acknowledges that religion cannot be assessed by any rational standards. However, in contrast to Kołakowski or Jaspers, he is not satisfied with this conclusion and a verdict that religion is simply organised by a different, 'mythical' order of meaning: 'Thus, the logical invulnerability of Christianity seems to me a position that can be maintained', he writes, 'But only at a cost. This cost is emptiness.'[935] His final answer to this crucial question of understanding and participating in religion at the same time is therefore negative and somehow bitter:

> If I am right, understanding Christianity is incompatible with believing in it, not because Christianity is vulnerable to sceptical objections, but because its peculiar invulnerability belongs to it as a form of belief which has lost the social context which once made it comprehensible. It is now too late to be mediaeval and it is too empty and too easy to be Kierkegaardian.[936]

MacIntyre's mature religious thought was a project to find a formula that would establish as rational a structure for religion in the modern world as possible. This was presented first in his influential *After Virtue* (1981).

The starting point was similar to Kołakowski's contention from the 'disenchantment trilogy' that both Marxism and positivism (analytical philosophy) had failed in providing an appropriate language for ethics in the modern world.[937] MacIntyre felt that the widening divergence between philosophy and religion was one of the maladies of modern world and the main cause of the grave moral disorder he found himself in:

> In a world of secular rationality religion could no longer provide such a shared background and foundation for moral discourse and action; and the failure of philosophy to provide what

[934] *Ibid.*, p. 126.
[935] *Ibid.*, p. 130.
[936] *Ibid.*, p. 132.
[937] A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London, 2007 – 3rd edition), pp. xvii, 2.

> religion could no longer furnish was an important cause of philosophy losing its central cultural role and becoming a marginal, narrowly academic subject.[938]

MacIntyre agrees with Kołakowski and Jaspers that the role of philosophy, like the role of religion in the past, is to provide a narrative about life that makes experiencing life meaningful. However, his answer to this problem is not, as it is for the other two thinkers, to establish philosophy as a faith. On the contrary, he believes that philosophy must be constructed as a tangible, rational structure. This does not mean subjugating to the concept of predictive social sciences that are supposed to explain everyday phenomena through law-like, scientific generalisations.[939] Here, the 'mature' MacIntyre is in agreement with the 'mature' Kołakowski. The crux of the matter is again the insolvable tension between irreconcilable values:

> It is necessary, if life is to be meaningful, for us to be able to engage in long-term projects, and this requires predictability; it is necessary, if life is to be meaningful, for us to be in possession of ourselves and not merely to be the creations of other people's projects, intentions and desires, and this requires unpredictability.[940]

The solution is to be found in the ancient philosophy of Aristotle. In a sophisticated historical analysis, MacIntyre presents a fundamental change in the ethical thought that came with Aristotle. In the previous period, when Greek morality was to a great extent based on Homeric poems and traditional religion, ethical values were seen as manifestations of specific social roles: different values were expected of warriors, than of farmers, etc. In contrast, Aristotle introduced an idea of a universal *telos* of human beings as a species, and only this *telos*, which precedes any moral actions, determines which human qualities are seen as values. The concept of a 'good life' is prior to the concept of a virtue, and living according to the virtues will help the human person to realise the potential, to fulfil the *telos* of a good life. Crucially, MacIntyre argues, the same logic of ethical values, albeit with different content, is present in the New Testament.[941] What was lost during the emergence of modernity is precisely the concept of 'wholeness of life',[942] thanks to which *all* of our actions are interdependent and build together a purposeful narrative, which gives a sense of a meaningful life. If

[938] *Ibid.*, p. 58.
[939] *Ibid.*, p. 103.
[940] *Ibid.*, p. 121.
[941] *Ibid.*, pp. 214–5.
[942] *Ibid.*, p. 236.

life lacks a *telos*, then the narrative of our experiences is unintelligible and life itself seems to be meaningless.[943] The central thesis of MacIntyre's ethical project is this:

> But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' (…) The is no way of *founding* my identity – or lack of it – on the psychological continuity of the self. The self inhabits a character whose unity is given as the unity of a character.[944]

In other words, MacIntyre fundamentally agrees with the 'mature' Kołakowski on the crucial issue: human beings cannot be the creators of moral values as moral values must precede our ethical actions. In *After Virtue* he does not explicitly declare that this ethical project should have a religiously inspired *telos*, although the figure presented as the illustrative role model for establishing ethical communities was St Benedict. [945] Nonetheless, in later works, especially *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (1990), the emphasis is placed on the importance of Christianity, but Christianity in the rationalist version of St Thomas Aquinas.[946]

Fellow travellers – Summary

It is important to emphasise that Kołakowski's mature religious thought can be compared to both Jaspers and MacIntyre. Even though 'philosophical faith' or 'the Comprehensive' are concepts that are much more similar to Kołakowski's own ideas about metaphysics, there is one crucial area where his philosophy is much closer to MacIntyre rather than Jaspers. The latter is still fundamentally an optimistic thinker in the tradition of the Enlightenment. It seems that every Existenz can develop and become able to communicate with Transcendence. 'Philosophical faith' requires a high level of intellectual and spiritual sophistication, but Jaspers does not argue that it would be *too difficult* for anyone to achieve that level. 'Philosophical faith' is a task open to every human being. Existenz discovers moral values through its complex

[943] *Ibid.*, p. 252.
[944] *Ibid.*, pp. 250–1.
[945] *Ibid.*, p. 305.
[946] T. D. D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality and Virtue. The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Burlington, 2008), p. 163.

relationship with Transcendence, but basically it does it on its own, without any external help from an objective authority.

On the other hand, Kołakowski and MacIntyre, disillusioned with Marxism, and more generally with the modern faith in unlimited human capacity for moral improvement, have lost that Enlightenment optimism. They both believe that people need an external source of morality, a *telos* that precedes them, but they also need some kind of a community to help them realise those rules in everyday lives. They need a church. The mythical narrative has to be constantly reminded by someone about the wretchedness of the human condition (Chapter IV, p. 200). Jaspers never experienced such fundamental change of heart, as he was never involved in an all-embracing philosophical system in the way Kołakowski and MacIntyre were engaged with Marxism. When examining the early modern theologians, Kołakowski described Dirk Camphuysen as 'Erasmus after a century of disappointments' (Chapter II, p. 96). Perhaps we could say, with slight exaggeration, that Kołakowski is Jaspers after the disappointment of Marxism.

This chapter has presented a very brief analysis of the philosophies of Karl Jaspers and Alasdair MacIntyre. Both authors serve in this thesis as interesting points of comparison to Leszek Kołakowski's religious thought: Jaspers in terms of the main ideas present in his mature religious philosophy, MacIntyre in a similar intellectual trajectory over the same time period. They prove that Kołakowski's religious thought is not particularly unique in the broader spectrum of the twentieth-century intellectual history, and that we may find thinkers working on similar questions in both Anglophone and continental philosophical traditions.

Jaspers is the more important of the two, and his historical interpretations of the figures of Jesus and Pascal, as well as his original concept of 'philosophical faith', will be used in the concluding chapter of this thesis, which will summarise the entire evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought.

Conclusions: Kołakowski and His God

> There are only three kinds of persons; those who serve God, having found Him; others who are occupied in seeking Him, not having found Him; while the remainder live without seeking Him, and without having found Him. The first are reasonable and happy, the last are foolish and unhappy; those between are unhappy and reasonable.[947]
>
> Blaise Pascal

The last part of this thesis will summarise Leszek Kołakowski's mature religious thought and recapitulate arguments presented in the previous chapters. The first section of this chapter will examine the crucial question of his relationship with Christianity. I have frequently emphasised that whenever Kołakowski writes about 'religion', he almost always means 'Christianity', but there are very few occasions on which he addressed this issue directly. The second part of this chapter will explicitly restate Kołakowski's main ideas about the concept of 'God' and present the final conclusions of the thesis.

Kołakowski and Christianity

The first part of this section will deal with Kołakowski's mature understanding of the crucial figure in Christianity's history and theology – Jesus of Nazareth. The famous essay *Jesus Christ – Prophet and Reformer* from 1965 marks the crucial breakthrough in the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought (Chapter II, pp. 110–12). In this text, the figure of Jesus is named an undismissable foundation of European culture that abolishes law in favour of love. This is a symbolic farewell to the militant atheist of the 1950s and an unequivocal sign that Kołakowski's attitude towards Christianity has fundamentally changed.

Five years after Kołakowski's death, an unknown manuscript from the 1980s resurfaced in his archives thanks to the work of Maria Kluźniak, and was published as a posthumous book entitled *Jesus Ridiculed*.[948] Written in the form of a long essay

[947] Pascal, *Pensées*, fr. 257.
[948] Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony*…; it is worth emphasising that the original French title *Jésus ridicule* should be translated as 'A ridiculous Jesus' (Polish: 'Śmieszny Jezus'), rather than 'Jesus ridiculed'.

rather than a monograph, much of this material was used as a draft for the essay on demythologisation (Chapter V, pp. 214–15). The remaining parts, however, present us with Kołakowski's direct commentary on the figure of Jesus in the crucial period – that is after the 'disenchantment trilogy', and around the time of the exposition of theological issues in *Religion* and his work on *Metaphysical Horror*.

Kołakowski starts his text by stating that he considers Jesus 'an element of the European civilization', and, using his most important conceptual tool in analysing religion, a 'myth'.[949] Crucial declarations follow: 'I am ignoring religious faith' and 'Was He a God? I have no idea. But if there has ever been any man of God on this Earth, it was Him.'[950] Kołakowski emphasises that the most important aspect of Jesus' teaching is the eschatological consciousness of an imminent end of the World, the Apocalypse. This idea, 'the consciousness of the Apocalypse', is the only way to rescue human beings from 'self-destruction'. Therefore, it has to be constantly repeated and internalised by people.[951] What exactly does Kołakowski mean by Jesus' Apocalypse?

> Jesus' message was that in the face of an inevitable End, all goods and mundane things are, if not worthless, then at least second-rate and relative (…) There is only one thing worth an unconditional desire: God and His Kingdom; there is only one thing which is an absolute evil: loss of the soul, its irrevocable depravity.
>
> Christianity loses all its historical, moral and religious sense at the moment when it forgets this most important idea: that all mundane things are only relative and second-rate.[952]

This message is in contradiction to all temporary interests and values people cherish in their everyday lives. For this reason, from the mundane perspective, Jesus is ridiculed (ridiculous).[953] Jesus' teaching is a challenge thrown in the face of the world, a revolutionary call to change the way people live, and the most important feature of this change is love.[954] Kołakowski actually uses the phrase 'the root of this transformation is love', and I think the striking similarity with the slogan coined by

[949] *Ibid.,* pp. 8–9.
[950] *Ibid.,* pp. 10, 12.
[951] *Ibid.,* p. 20.
[952] *Ibid.,* pp. 21–22.
[953] *Ibid.,* p. 23.
[954] *Ibid.,* pp. 105–106.

the young Marx – 'for man the root is man himself' – is far from coincidental (Chapter II, p. 56).

Once again, however, we face the question of Kołakowski's personal attitude to Christianity. If he keeps suggesting that Christianity provides the best intellectual and spiritual framework to endow human life with meaningful texture, then why did he not commit to Christianity publicly? In a 2008 interview with Zbigniew Mentzel, he stated the following:

> (Mentzel): Could you say about yourself that you are a Christian?
> (Kołakowski): In some very broad sense, which I am not able to specify, yes. I am committed to the Christian tradition, to the great power of the Gospels, of the New Testament. I think this is the foundation of our culture. But not only that. I have a feeling, that it is also important to me, personally. (…) But I value not only Christianity, I also value Buddhism very highly.[955]

This can hardly be considered a declaration of religious faith.

In *Jesus Ridiculed*, he wrote: 'Nonetheless, a "modern man" can still accept the Christian message, not in its "objective", but in its "existential" meaning (…).'[956] Not 'objective, but existential' suggests that, for Kołakowski, Christianity is not a set of dogmas and rituals, but a way of living, the most general directions of how to live a good life with a sense of purposefulness. In short, to use Jaspers' concepts, it would be a philosophical faith, not a revealed religion (Chapter V, p. 207). Yet in the same essay, Kołakowski also writes: 'His [Jesus'] teaching is worthless if one does not believe that Jesus was a Christ, that a mortal and suffering man has really possessed the Word.'[957] If we want to interpret that Kołakowski was consistent at least within this one text, then his understanding of the term 'Christ' must have been non-orthodox. In this case, Christ – the Messiah is not God, 'Son of God' does not mean a member of the godly Trinity, but simply 'a mortal man' with some unique understanding of the God–Absolute.

This is the crux of the matter, the greatest problem Kołakowski that had with Christianity. How can the Absolute be a Person? This issue was identified as fundamental as early as in *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* from

[955] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…*, tom II, p. 177.
[956] Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony…*, p. 81.
[957] *Ibid.,* p. 51.

the mid-1960s (Chapter II, pp. 90–108). The contradiction remained unresolved for Kołakowski even after forty years:

> But how could the God of the Old Testament and Plotinus's One be one and the same? How can we reconcile Plotinus's One – a timeless being we cannot fathom (for we do not understand what it means to be beyond time, or to be omnipotent, or to be omniscient without ever going outside oneself) – with the God of the Old Testament, God as a Person? How could the ineffable One of the Neoplatonists have made a covenant with Abraham, instructed Noah in ark-building and talked with Moses? This is something we cannot fathom. And this is what Christianity had grappled with. Whether it did so successfully I cannot say, but reconciling these two images of God borders on the impossible.[958]

Perhaps Karl Jaspers' religious philosophy could again be helpful in clarifying Kołakowski's positions. For Jaspers, Jesus was the last of the Hebrew prophets through whom God chose to spoke to people, rather than God incarnated. According to Jaspers, the concept of 'Jesus Christ' is understood as myth within the revealed Christian religion.[959] Jesus was a man, Christ is a cipher.[960] Jaspers' Jesus, however – and this is where Jaspers' interpretation is similar to that of Kołakowski – is a 'man of God', the greatest role-model for our everyday moral decisions. He is the beacon for all human beings, an example that living in accordance with the highest moral standards is possible, even if it means living against the established, mundane, contingent values:

> As a man, Jesus is a cipher of being human. It says that a man who lives and thinks as he did, a man who is true without any restriction, must die at the hands of men, because human reality is too untruthful to bear him. (…) We are to take our bearings from Jesus, moreover, to become truthful as we can, for our worldly reality exacts an inevitable price. Taking our bearing from Jesus makes us clearer about what we do and want. The cipher of his humanity shows us how to discover our fundamental limits and shortcomings.[961]

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[958] L. Kołakowski, 'On Reason (and Other Things)', in *Is God Happy?*, p. 305; first published in Polish in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 41/2003; the Polish original ends with words '(…) extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible.': in Kołakowski, *Czy Pan Bóg*…, p. 212.
[959] Jaspers, *The Perennial*…, pp. 103–4.
[960] Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, p. 319.
[961] *Ibid.,* pp. 338–9.

'With unlimited radicalism, Jesus breaks through all worldly orders';[962] this is exactly the apocalyptic consciousness, the radical revolt of everydayness that Kołakowski thought to be pivotal in Jesus' heritage. Crucially, this revolt does not refer to institutions of political life; it is not about the law, but about love and the inner life of every human being. The Kingdom is not of this world:

> The only true reality is the inner reality, which is called life, truth, light. The kingdom of God is a psychological state. It is not expected, but is present everywhere and nowhere. It is a state of beatitude which cannot be demonstrated by miracles or by scripture, which offers no promise or reward, but is its own proof, its own miracle and reward.[963]

The notion of the Kingdom as the psychological state of beatitude brings us to another fundamental issue in Kołakowski's relation to Christianity. In *Jesus Ridiculed*, he writes: 'According to Jesus' message, the Kingdom exists and this is the only reason why life is not necessarily a defeat.'[964] As we have seen in Chapter III, one of the most important conclusions Kołakowski drew from the evolution of his religious thought in the 1960s and 1970s was the idea that 'religion is man's way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat' (pp. 133–34). I have argued in Chapter IV that Pascal can be seen as a figure who brings together all the central themes of Kołakowski's religious philosophy. According to an apocryphal anecdote, Pascal always had a feeling that there was an abyss on his left side. Kołakowski summarised Pascal's religious thought as 'a religion for unhappy people' that was 'designed to make them more unhappy' (Chapter IV, p. 197). I would argue that Kołakowski's sense (not understanding) of religion was similar to that of Pascal, and, for this reason, the idea of 'the Kingdom as a state of beatitude' remains an unfulfilled ideal. His religious thought did not provide the certitude needed for 'the Kingdom of beatitude', which left him with a sense of unhappiness, the uncertainty of falling into an abyss.

Jaspers had a more nuanced view of Pascal. In his interpretation, Pascal's struggles with the Jesuits and his attempts to justify Christianity with reasons of heart turned against him: 'With bitterness he opposed the bitterness that he rejected in his

[962] K. Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers. The Foundations*, trans: R. Manheim (London, 1962), p. 103.
[963] *Ibid.,* p. 85
[964] Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony…*, p. 55.

opponents as well as in himself (a paradox he was unable to overcome).'[965] Pascal's apology for religion might seem moving and convincing, 'asking questions about everything', in Kołakowski's phrase, but in terms of human life, it is a trap. Pascal's message leaves us

> (…) in the guise of impossibility, which, while seductive, to be sure, is in fact destructive. (…) Whomever Pascal arouses from somnolence has to come to what he can be by himself. If he follows him to the letter, he will be lost.[966]

Kołakowski makes a rather disturbing confession in his interview with Mentzel: 'I do not have a feeling that there is something like the joy of existence (…) from the early childhood, I have a sense that the world is sad, that life is sad.'[967] In his 2006 essay, he tried to answer a rather provocative question: *Is God Happy?*[968] His answer is an unambiguous 'no'; God is either an immutable Absolute that cannot be affected by any emotions, or is a loving Father of the Judeo-Christian tradition who participates in human miseries. Either way, he cannot be happy. But there is more: according to Kołakowski, even human beings cannot be really happy:

> And if in addition to accepting something like this intellectually, in addition, that is, to simply believing that all must be right with the world because it is under the constant guidance of God, we also feel in our hearts that this is so, and experience the splendour, goodness and beauty of the Universe in our daily life, then can we not be said to be happy? The answer is: no, we cannot.
>
> Happiness is something we can imagine but not experience. (…) Such a condition can be imagined, but it has never been seen. It has never been seen.[969]

Therefore, even if one imagined participating in 'the Kingdom of beatitude', one would simply be fooling oneself. Once again, Kołakowski reinforces the idea that religion is the way to accept life as an inevitable defeat, but this time, towards the end of his life, he is emphasising the 'inevitability' perspective of that statement. This life, this mundane existence, must end in the fall into the abyss. The Absolute as a Person

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[965] K. Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers. The Disturbers. Philosophers in Other Realms*, trans: E. Ehrlich, L.H. Ehrlich (New York, 1995), p. 110.
[966] *Ibid.,* p. 120.
[967] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…*, tom II, pp. 85, 87.
[968] L. Kołakowski, 'Is God Happy?' in Kołakowski, *Is God Happy?*, p. 213
[969] *Ibid.,* pp. 213–4.

was supposed to save people from despair, but it seems that Kołakowski sees no rescue from despair in this life. Then, perhaps, the only hope we could cling to is the hope of another life?

A great thinker whom Kołakowski clearly did not like but still greatly admired is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Nietzsche was the only one, Kołakowski mentions a few times, who had the courage to push metaphysical conclusions resulting from the non-religious, non-mythical explanations of life to the limit: the world abandoned by God is an absurd world.[970] Nietzsche's reader 'can sense helpless flutterings of despair: the incurable despair of a mind wounded by the discovery of the meaninglessness of existence.'[971] Jaspers comes to exactly the same conclusion: 'Every human life, action, deed, eventually becomes a failure. (…) Because life, like any existence, is something finite (…).'[972] Marian Przełęcki, Kołakowski's long-term friend, gave the following testimony in one of his books:

> From many conversations I have had with him [Kołakowski], I got the impression that a world in which he would not exist anymore was intuitively inconceivable for him – something which could not be understood and could not be accepted. I think this is a justified speculation that an anticipation of an inevitable death is something which pushes the author to believe in some reality that is independent of time and eternal.[973]

Let me summarise the conclusions from this section by answering some questions. Was Kołakowski a Christian? If we apply his own standards of what it means, then the answer is no. He did not participate in the community or the rituals, he did not accept the official dogmas, and did not declare himself a Christian. I repeat that although philosophical faith may be a private affair, religious faith is not. Moreover, as he did not participate in religious life, he could not understand Christianity properly (Chapter IV, p. 181). Although Kołakowski undoubtedly regarded the figure of Jesus as one of the greatest role models of how to live a truly moral life it does not mean he accepted Jesus as God. [974]

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[970] Kołakowski, *Religion*, p. 200.
[971] Kołakowski,*Why Is There…*, p. 200.
[972] K. Jaspers, *Filozofia egzystencji* (Warszawa, 1990), p. 371.
[973] A. Brożek, J. Jadacki, M. Przełęcki, *W poszukiwaniu najwyższych wartości. Rozmowy międzypokoleniowe* (Warszawa, 2011), p. 285.
[974] It should be noted that Kołakowski's tombstone in Warsaw has an engraved cross.

Why was Kołakowski not a Christian? There are actually three different answers to this question: one non-religious answer, and two religious answers.

The non-religious answer is that Kołakowski may have studied Christianity from philosophical and historical perspectives, and valued the *practical* character of this religion as a mythical narrative that provides people with tools to escape despair in everyday life. Ultimately, however, this mythical narrative is false. The truth is that Nietzsche was correct: the world is absurd, and after death, there is only Nothingness, which does not include any form of my existence. If Kołakowski declared any sympathy for the Christian religion, it was for these practical reasons only, as it would be too devastating for most people to admit and proclaim that Nietzsche was right. Even though it seemed at times as if he were trying to delude himself that Christianity might *really* save him from non-existence – ultimately, what people really crave is what is real (Chapter IV, p. 183) – he was still too intellectually honest to become a Christian himself.

The first religious answer is a Christian answer. If we follow the doctrine and theological arguments, especially those of St Augustine and Pascal, then we know that religious faith is a matter of divine grace. The last word in this process belongs to God, not to a human being. 'You did not choose Me, but I chose you'[975] Jesus said. Sometimes God calls people, but they refuse to listen to Him. Sometimes there are people who try to hear God's words, but, for one reason or other, he does not call. Ultimately, he owes us nothing. Pascal wept because he could do nothing for his own salvation (Chapter IV, p. 196). Perhaps Kołakowski was not among the elect and wept with Pascal.

The other religious answer is that Christianity is in practice the best form of religion we have in the Western world (it is again worth emphasising that Kołakowski has little interest in non-Western intellectual traditions), but its dogmas do not express the truth about the nature of God. The truth is to be found elsewhere. The next section of this chapter will reiterate Kołakowski's final word on this issue.

[975] John. xv. 16; Modern English Version.

Kołakowski and the One

I argue that Leszek Kołakowski's mature idea of God was very close to the Neoplatonist concept of 'the One', albeit with some important qualifications to the ancient original and certain inconsistencies in Kołakowski's own presentation. In 2008, Kołakowski declared himself a follower of the Neoplatonic tradition of interpreting Christianity.[976]

The founder of Neoplatonism was the third-century thinker Plotinus. Kołakowski distorted the chronological order of his essays on great philosophers from the past to end his series with a text on Plotinus, whose questions are 'the core of European metaphysics'.[977] He was the initial element in the long-chain of Marx's intellectual genealogy in *Main Currents of Marxism* (Chapter III, p. 147), a crucial influence on St Augustine, early modern mystics (Chapter II, p. 99), and other Neoplatonist thinkers of late Antiquity, who served as the starting point for Kołakowski's deliberations in *Metaphysical Horror* (Chapter IV, p. 173). What is more, he was the topic of a study by Jaspers.[978] In other words, we could say Plotinus could be found at the bottom of all of Kołakowski's investigations. I will briefly present the most important aspects of Plotinus' 'One', concentrating on those aspects that had a direct influence on Kołakowski's understanding of the idea of God. It should be underlined that this thesis has no ambition to present a detailed analysis of this challenging and sophisticated doctrine, especially with regard to the One's relation to the Intellect and the Soul or the concept of emanation.[979]

Plotinus was a follower of Plato (c. 427–347 BCE), who offered new perspectives on some of Plato's ideas, especially from the dialogues *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*. The most original aspect of Neoplatonism is the doctrine of the 'One' – the first necessary principle of all being, which is in itself beyond the human comprehension of the concept of 'being'.[980] The One is the source of everything, which means that everything is dependent on it and contained in it, while the One is not dependent on anything.[981] In Plotinus' own words: 'Standing before all things, there must exist a Simplex, differing from all its sequel, self-gathered not interblended

[976] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…*, tom II, p. 189
[977] Kołakowski, *O co nas pytają…,* p. 260.
[978] Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers. Volume II*, pp. 38–92.
[979] For a comprehensive introduction, see: E.K. Emilsson, *Plotinus* (Abingdon, 2017).
[980] *Ibid.,* pp. 25–35.
[981] *Ibid.,* p. 63.

with the forms that rise from it, and yet able in some mode of its own to be present to those others (…).'[982] The constitutive characteristic of the One is unity, as all existing things strive for unity, and the One is the only thing that is perfect unity.[983] The One of Plotinus is also basically incomprehensible; we can talk about it only in the form of *via negativa*, what it is not. Crucially, Plotinus is the first thinker in Western tradition to consistently argue that there are limits to human thought and human understanding and yet that there are things beyond these limits that are of fundamental importance for human life.[984] It is precisely this assumption that is the cornerstone of Pascal's philosophy (Chapter II, p. 85), and one of the most important conclusions Kołakowski drew from his 'disenchantment trilogy'. Even the verb 'to be' is not appropriate to describe the One:

> Whence could such a Being arise or into what could it disappear? – the very word, strictly used, means that the thing is perdurable. Similarly white, the colour, cannot be now white and now not white (…);
> And yet this 'He is' does not truly apply: the Supreme has no need of Being: even 'He is good' does not apply since it indicates Being: the 'is' should not suggest something predicated of another thing; it is to state identity.[985]

The One has no mental or emotional life at all, it does not think, desire, or love.[986] It does not allow for any change. As Kołakowski would have put it: it can be neither happy, nor unhappy. Plotinus writes as follows:

> To an authentic All it is not enough that it be everything that exists: it must possess all-ness in the full sense that nothing whatever is absent from it. Then nothing is in store for it: if anything were to come, that thing must have been lacking to it, and it was, therefore, not All. (…) Since nothing can accrue to it, it cannot seek change or be changed or ever have made its way into Being.;
> Neither can it have will to anything; it is a Beyond-Good, not even to itself a good but to such beings only as may be of quality to have part with it.[987]

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[982] Plotinus, Ennead V.4.1 in Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans: S. MacKenna (electronic edition, Charlottesville, Va, 2016), p. 400.
[983] Emilsson, *Plotinus*, p. 73.
[984] *Ibid.,* pp. 80–81.
[985] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, IV.7.9, p. 353; VI.7.38, p. 591.
[986] Emilsson, *Plotinus*, p. 63.
[987] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, III.7.4, p. 225; VI.9.6, p. 620.

This concept of an Absolute Being stands in stark contrast to the Judeo-Christian tradition of God, who actively intervenes in human history.[988] I argue that Plotinus' the One is a subtle philosophical concept that is closest to the ideas about the Absolute that Kołakowski presents in his works from the 1980s, especially in *Metaphysical Horror*, albeit with an important qualification. The Neoplatonist One is perfectly adamant and invariable, which leaves no space for human agency. Kołakowski's understanding of the Absolute was altered by another fundamental characteristic of the One, which, I argue, was the most important for his religious thought.

The One is the Good. For Plotinus, unity is perfection and perfection is goodness.[989] The last part of *The Enneads* is called 'On the Good, or the One.' He is unambiguous that the One and the Good are the same thing:

> For the moment les us define the Nature of the Good as far as the immediate purpose demands.
> The Good is that on which all else depends, towards which all Existences aspire as to their source and their need, while Itself is without need, sufficient to Itself, aspiring to no other, the measure and Term of all (…);
> Just as the goodness of The Good is essential and not the outgrowth of some prior substance of the Unity of The One is its essential.
> Therefore:
> When we speak of The One and when we speak of The Good we must recognize an identical nature; we must affirm that they are the same (…).[990]

In his commentary on Plotinus, Kołakowski says the source of the world is to be found in '"the Good", the good without any pinch of evil, that is of the lack, the Good that is invincible. God is man's vocation.'[991] As a characteristic of the Absolute 'Goodness' did not play as important a role in Kołakowski's analysis in *Metaphysical Horror* as did the concepts of Nothingness, a Person, the Truth or Time (Chapter IV, pp. 171–83). Nonetheless, in the same period he wrote an encyclopaedia entry on 'the Good' in which he briefly summarised his views. He analyses 'the goodness of God or of existence as such', an apparently innocent statement, thereby proving

[988] Emilsson, *Plotinus*, p. 74.
[989] *Ibid.,* p. 63.
[990] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, I.8.2, p. 67; II.9.1 p. 132.
[991] Kołakowski, *O co nas pytają…,* p. 259.

Kołakowski's firm theistic position and his identification of 'existence as such' with God. In all monotheistic religions, God is 'totally good in an absolute and unqualified sense' and in Christian theology (which he implicitly identifies with Catholic philosophy) 'there are no rules of goodness different from his [God's] essence'.[992] God's goodness, or rather, the Absolute's goodness, and the at least partial trust in that particular feature of the Absolute, solves the question of evil in human experience (Chapter IV, pp. 168–71). Kołakowski's mature position is laconically summarised in a short essay from the series 'mini lectures on maxi issues' from 1999:

> Good does exist, and it would not if an evil demiurge ruled the world. That is why, if the presence of Good and Evil in this world were to determine our belief in the existence or non-existence of God, and in His goodness, the Good in the world would constitute a much stronger argument for His goodness than evil and suffering for His being evil: not because there is more Good than Evil but because, if He were evil, there would be no Good at all, only eternal fire in infernal gloom.[993]

It should be noted, however, that the same elucidation includes an earlier statement: 'And there is also the joy of existence.' Kołakowski's statement from the 2008 interview (above, p. 231) is its direct negation. He is not consistent, and this issue remains unresolved in his religious thought. As I have already argued, he clings to the hopes promised by revealed religions, but is too reluctant to fully accept them as his own: 'Perhaps, again, God is more like us: sometimes good and sometimes evil, yet never so evil as to consign sinners to eternal torments?'[994] Kołakowski argues for the Neoplatonic Absolute, the source of all being and moral values, but for the unconditional Absolute, which is somehow still dependent on people and their moral choices. If the One is the Good, then our choices of good and evil must have some influence upon it:

> It is an intuition of existence, grounded not in any previous acquaintance with the Absolute or the *Cogito* but in a movement which (we feel) makes Being grow or diminish as a result of the good or evil in our acts. Being becomes intelligible within the self-perception of good and evil.[995]

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[992] L. Kołakowski, 'The Good', in ed. M. Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion. Volume VI* (New York, 1987), pp. 75–6.
[993] L. Kołakowski, 'On God', in Kołakowski, *Freedom, Fame, Lying and Betrayal. Essays on Everyday Life*, trans: A. Kołakowska (London, 1999), pp. 120–1.
[994] *Ibid.*
[995] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 103.

Main Currents of Leszek Kołakowski's Religious Thought

We have started with ethics, and we end with ethics. From the very beginning, the most important problem in the evolution of Kołakowski's religious thought was establishing the ethical certitude, an incontestable and infallible source of morality. His historical investigations and Marxist essays from the 1950s and early 1960s were all attempts to prove that people are capable of establishing such certitude on their own. To demonstrate that a human being can be a creator of values. In the first half of the 1960s, however, his positions changed radically. The influences of Lucien Goldmann's and Mircea Eliade's ideas along with his historical work on *Religious Consciousness and the Ecclesiastical Bond* were crucial phases in this evolutionary process. What one human being establishes, another human being can change, and this is not incontestable and infallible certitude. Another fundamental stage in this process was Kołakowski's gradual disillusionment with modern philosophical systems that attempted to explain human life as a whole, without any transcendental foundation as a point of reference. Positivism, phenomenology, and Marxism all proved to be unsuccessful attempts to establish human life as necessary and self-sufficient. A materialist metaphysics is not possible.

> In other words, man does not possess a ground outside himself on which he could both stand and know that he is standing there.[996];
>
> But we must surely know something about good and evil; we must have some tool that allows us to assert with conviction that freedom is better than slavery or equality better than servitude. But where is this tool?[997]

This tool is to be found in the idea of the guilt that derives from breaking *taboos* – rules that necessarily have a transcendental character. Ethical rules, therefore, must have a religious character. At the same time, however, religion must not be reduced to its normative consequences. Religion necessarily involves participating in the order of the *sacred*, that is in the institutionalised rituals and communal experiences.[998] Since human beings are irrevocably prone to evil and this evil has a real existence and 'is in us', then we can never manage to create a community of sinless saints. To this effect,

[996] Kołakowski, *The Presence of the Myth*, p. 12.
[997] Kołakowski, 'On Reason…', p. 306.
[998] Kołakowski, *Religion*, pp. 163–4.

we need an authority to constantly remind us about our potential to commit evil, one that would use the concept of the 'guilt' as a tool to prevent evil; 'the main message of Christianity should not be "thou shall not sin", but rather "sin and feel guilty"'.[999] But, and here is the crucial point, a myth (religion) cannot be reached by persuasion.[1000] Following a religion, that is, following its moral rules, is an act of a moral commitment, an act of trust, not of an intellectual ascent.[1001] Kołakowski achieved these conclusions in the final stage of his religious thought's evolution in the 1980s with the books *Religion* and *Metaphysical Horror*.

In his mature philosophy, axiological choices precede rational discourse rather than follow from it. In this sense, Kołakowski is very anti-Enlightenment, even anti-Socratic. Such an attitude has enormous consequences. If trusting the Absolute is a matter of human choice, then Kołakowski does not abandon the problem of human responsibility for their moral actions. Morality does not have and cannot have any foundations in empirical experience, as the doctrines from the 'disenchantment trilogy' hoped to prove. One must choose a myth to follow and is responsible for this choice. For Kołakowski the practical repercussion of this means choosing a religion. His answers in this regard, however, appear inconsistent and unsatisfactory, as he himself did not choose a religion. Although Kołakowski is not unambiguous that one specific religion is the right choice, it seems that he allowed for religious relativism. This, by extension, means moral relativism.[1002] Ethical norms of different religious systems vary greatly: Jesus' 'revolution of love replacing the law' is just one example. Because of his reluctance to fully commit to Christianity, Kołakowski leaves room for relativism, an idea he sees as one of the greatest evils and something that must be fought and defeated.

This brings us to the second crucial theme in the transformation of his religious thought – the problem of the Truth. At different stages of his intellectual trajectory, Kołakowski stated that philosophy is concerned with 'the Truth' or 'the spirit of the Truth'. Despite the difference in emphasis, his argument was the same: we must not give up on the concept of an absolute Truth. The question of the Truth and the need for the Truth is an irreducible, permanent human need. People want to

[999] Kołakowski, 'Reprodukcja…', p. 110.
[1000] Kołakowski, *The Presence of the Myth*, p. 7.
[1001] Kołakowski, *Religion*, pp. 163–4.
[1002] Mordka, *Od Boga historii…*, p. 125.

know the certain Truth, 'to know the world as it really is'.[1003] Nonetheless, this cannot be just a Truth, a relative Truth; it must be the unconditional and incontestable Truth. For Kołakowski what matters is 'not just whether such-and-such an answer accords with the rules of coherence, or is good or bad in the pragmatist sense – i.e., useful or useless – or whether it can help us in making predictions, or come in handy in practical matters'.[1004] The desire for the Truth cannot be possibly eradicated from human experience.[1005] However, this desire can be maintained only if there is a subject that *knows* the Truth, that is infallible and all-knowing.

> This subject, in order to meet the requirement of omniscience and to be the repository of Truth in the unrestricted sense, must be everything it knows. It must also be perfectly self-transparent, as any distance between it and what it knows would abolish the certainty and the Wholeness [of the Truth- HC].[1006]

This subject is God; 'either God or a cognitive nihilism, there is nothing in between'.[1007] But reasoning ends at this point for Kołakowski. There are no more arguments to convince someone for such an understanding of the Truth. He claims there is no compelling reason to equate 'truthfulness' and 'meaningfulness' with empirical experience, stating that this is only one of the decisions people can make. [1008] Kołakowski calls for a different decision. For him, understanding philosophy is not a matter of some objective rational arguments and conclusions, but 'a spiritual conversion'. He supports this claim with a rather unlikely example. Wittgenstein opens his *Tractatus*, *the* text of modern philosophy based on empirical presumptions, with the statement: 'Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it – or at least similar thoughts.'[1009] The same applies to all of philosophy, Kołakowski says. This spiritual conversion has no universal, objective, irresistible force. Like religious faith, it is a matter of trust. But trust excludes certitude, leaving space for doubt and failure. As a consequence, we are left with an insolvable dilemma, the one already

[1003] L. Kołakowski, 'On Our Relative Relativism', in Kołakowski, *Is God Happy?*, p. 285; first published in Polish in 1996.
[1004] L. Kołakowski, 'Is There a Future for Truth?', in Kołakowski, *Is God Happy?*, pp. 295–96; first published in Polish in 2001.
[1005] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 34.
[1006] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[1007] Kołakowski, *Religion,* p. 84.
[1008] *Ibid.*, p. 154.
[1009] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 108.

acknowledged in *The Presence of Myth* from 1966: 'A real participation of myth assumes its approval in the so-called cognitive order, that is, assumes a kind of intellectual trust. A belief in a total genetic explicability of myth paralyzes that trust.'[1010] In a literary form, this issue was probably best expressed by Jesus: 'Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall not enter it.'[1011] Or, in simple terms, can one understand a myth (religion) and believe in it at the same time? MacIntyre claims this is not possible (Chapter V, p. 222). Kołakowski's formula suggests that once a person fully commits to a religion and 'trusts God' this problem becomes invalid. But Kołakowski never publicly committed. In the context of Western civilisation, Kołakowski sees Christianity as the best choice for a religion, but does it remain so in different civilizational contexts? How can one be consistent in following the dilemma formulated directly by Kołakowski's student, Marcin Król: 'Craving for truth remains craving for only one truth, even if we know that there is not only one truth.'[1012] Can one really follow this rule? Is it psychologically possible to consistently maintain such position? Kołakowski does not give us an answer.

From the early 1960s onward, Kołakowski is at least explicit and consistent about one thing – his argument that philosophical problems do not offer a definitive answer. He sees constantly returning to the most fundamental questions as being absolutely necessary, but knows that this endeavour will never end in complete success. The motto that Kołakowski choses for his first original book on religious philosophy is a line from William Blake: 'Less than All cannot satisfy Man'.[1013] At this point it is apt to repeat that philosophy is the love of wisdom, which can never be fulfilled, but which changes human life through the process itself.[1014] The source of that process, of 'our stubborn search for "reality"', for what *really is*, for the *real truth*, is the experience of our fragility, of contingency and relativity of our existence'.[1015] In other words, an ontological Absolute necessarily derives from the idea of an epistemological Absolute. Kołakowski verdicts the following: I cannot be the creator of moral values, I cannot establish things *for real*, necessarily, not

[1010] Kołakowski, *The Presence of the Myth*, p. 119.
[1011] Mark. x. 15; Modern English Version.
[1012] Król, *Czego nas uczy…*, p. 117.
[1013] Kołakowski, *The Presence of the Myth*, p. xii.
[1014] Kołakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, p. 9.
[1015] *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

contingently, because my own existence is contingent and not necessary.[1016] The most important characteristic of the Absolute is that it is the 'conqueror of Time', a timeless being that will never cease to exist (Chapter IV, pp. 179–80). No one can escape this issue, Kołakowski claims, even the most hardened atheists are, in fact, concerned with God: 'But the Absolute can never be forgotten. And the fact that we cannot forget about God means that He is present even in our rejection of Him.'[1017] Kołakowski believes that there is

> a place where everything we do and everything that occurs in the world is somehow eternally preserved; therefore our achievement and pains are not in vain, after all; through them reality grows and enriches itself, as it were; they are not engulfed and annihilated in the abyss of time but are captured in the never perishing abode of Being; and only in eternal (i.e., timeless, not everlasting) reality can Nothingness be defeated.[1018]

In this way, our lives and our moral decisions do matter. They enrich the Being itself. As in the Neoplatonic One, to *really be* means to be good. Dirk Camphuysen, to whom Kołakowski referred as 'Erasmus after a hundred years of disappointments', synthesised his own doctrine in the statement: 'Our religion is to do God's Will. To do God's Will is to do good.' (Chapter II, p. 95). This is exactly the cornerstone of the meaningful texture of the world provided by religion. In Kołakowski's religious thought, this is the point of the relationship between God and a human being: 'Faith and the meaning of the world are inseparable. It means that this meaning is not like a hidden treasure, ready to be taken and waiting for its discoverer; it is a treasure which is born and develops in the process of its discovery. The human sees God in God's birth.'[1019] This is Kołakowski's last word and testifies to the evolution of his religious thought.

As I have presented throughout this thesis, Kołakowski was persistently ambiguous about his own philosophical positions and it is often difficult to distinguish between his references to other thinkers, and his own original comments.

[1016] Kołakowski, *The Presence of the Myth*, p. 117.
[1017] L. Kołakowski, 'Anxiety About God in an Ostensibly Godless Age', in Kołakowski, *Is God Happy?*, p. 195; written in 1981, first published in English in 2003.
[1018] Kołakowski, *Religion*, p. 34.
[1019] L. Kołakowski, 'Krótka uwaga o tak zwanym dialogu między religiami i o wiecznym milczeniu języka wiary', in Kołakowski, *Czy Pan Bóg…*, p. 85; written in French in 2006, first published in French in 2008.

There are, however, two instances in which he explicitly confirms his belief in the Absolute. In a letter from 1986 written to Józef Czapski, a Polish painter and intellectual, Kołakowski states:

> In the infinite darkness, in which we live and to which we contribute, there is an illuminating thread which binds us, with a perhaps weak, but inextricable bond, with that, which is beyond darkness.[1020]

In his 2008 interview with Mentzel, Kołakowski is even more explicit:

> Mentzel: So it's not the case that nothing is eternal?
> Kołakowski: We don't know that really. We can believe that the entire world of our experience is not the ultimate reality.
> Mentzel: Do you believe in that?
> Kołakowski: Yes, I believe in that. And I would even like to say – I know it. Yet if I said so, someone could ask me to prove it.[1021]

Kołakowski's God is therefore not the God of Christianity, or of any other revealed religion. Kołakowski's ethics is crucial in formulating and reinforcing his metaphysical positions. To this effect, his God is the source of morality and of all being, in that order. It is close to the Neoplatonic concept of the One, with the fundamental qualification that Kołakowski's Absolute is not invariable. It is affected by our moral decisions, and we can either 'enrich' it or 'diminish' it through choosing good or evil, as both of these realities exist. Since the Absolute is timeless, it 'stores' all of our actions. In this way, we are responsible for our decisions – we are free to choose to do the right thing, but we are also free to commit evil. This is not the God of Spinoza, as Kołakowski's Absolute depends upon people. It is not the God of Pascal, as human choices are not predestined by the divine whim. Finally, it is not the God of Erasmus – as even if Christ's Gospel is the best formulation of moral examples we have, we can never have the certitude that Christ was God.

Leszek Kołakowski's philosophy can be described in simplified comparisons between his own concepts of the priest and jester (Chapter II, pp. 64–65), or between

[1020] Kołakowski to Czapski, a letter dated 7 August 1986 in 'Leszek Kołakowski. Mądrość prawdziwa', *Zeszyty Literackie,* numer specjalny 1/2012, ed. B. Toruńczyk, p. 198.
[1021] Kołakowski, Mentzel, *Czas ciekawy…*, tom. II, p. 184.

a mystic and a sceptic. Kłoczowski argued that Kołakowski's religious thought is an alliance between the positions of a mystic and a sceptic against the moral relativism of a nihilist.[1022] While I deem all these concepts useful, I believe they should be analysed in the dichotomies of priest/sceptic and jester/mystic.

Kołakowski was a priest, because he considered evil to be an irrevocable feature of human nature that can never be eradicated from human behaviour. For this reason, there must be some sort of an institution that constantly reminds people they are made of 'crooked timber' and uses tools to discourage them from committing evil. When religion is the source of morality, churches are the institutions that protect morality, and the idea of 'guilt' has proved to be the most efficient tool in preventing evil.

Kołakowski was a sceptic, because while human beings cannot be creators of moral values, the institutions that are supposed to protect these are human creations. For this reason, a sceptic must constantly watch the institution, point to its inconsistencies and hypocrisy, and question the legitimacy of normative rules, so that they can be defended and strengthened in the process.

Kołakowski was a jester, because he understood that moral values cannot be reconciled and are very often in conflict. He has no closed philosophical system. His intellectual programme is different: 'when things seem to be clear and apparently understandable, the point is to sow a healthy confusion and to cover those seeming clarities with a shade of uncertainty.'[1023] He argues that some moral dilemmas cannot be properly solved and that many situations in life will necessarily remain ambiguous. He does not see any final certitude in human life.

Kołakowski was a mystic, because eventually this final certitude, the unity and reconciliation of all dilemmas and all truths is the ultimate hope of religion and of philosophy. This certitude cannot be achieved through a rational discourse, but only through an act of faith. The search for this certitude, however, even if it is never fulfilled in this reality, is the only real challenge to human thought:

> Will a genius come along one day and *prove* (not just claim) that, seen from a higher standpoint, St Augustine, Spinoza, Hume, Kant and Hegel were all either saying the same thing or expressing perfectly compatible visions of reality – the same reality seen from different angles? Martin Buber quotes a tzaddik as saying that *all* the (mutually contradictory) statements of the various Jewish sages are true in heaven, since all truths are united. We shall see.[1024]

[1022] Kłoczowski, *Więcej niż mit…,* pp. 313–30.
[1023] L. Kołakowski, 'Słowo wstępne' in Kołakowski, *Moje słuszne…*, p. 6.
[1024] Kołakowski, *Methaphysical Horror*, p. 112.

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