

# LIBERALISM AS CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: The Case of Józef Tischner

*Michał Luczweski*

After its confrontation with communism Christianity awaits  
a new confrontation with liberalism.

Józef Tischner

## I. INTRODUCTION

**K**arol Wojtyła, in a conversation with Vittorio Possenti, described Catholic Social Teaching (hereafter ‘CST’) as a ‘revolution of the Spirit’ that will make the world more humane.<sup>1</sup> In CST ethics comes before politics and economics—justice before effectiveness. The foundation for engaging in this-worldly matters is reliable conscience and a readiness to witness to the truth, that is, a readiness to sacrifice. Wojtyła saw the strength and

---

<sup>1</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *La dottrina sociale della Chiesa. Intervista di Vittorio Possenti* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2003).

originality of CST in its joining of Gospel hope with the realism expressed by the teaching of original sin.

For Wojtyła the most important test of Catholic theory is Catholic practice; bringing forth good fruit. According to Possenti, practice is precisely where the teaching of the Church is ailing most. Wojtyła did not agree with such criticism and invoked his own experience as a worker during the German occupation and his experience of cooperation with workers in communist Poland. Three months after this conversation Wojtyła unexpectedly became the head of the universal Church. A year later he made his first pilgrimage to Poland and launched a flood of enthusiasm that made *Solidarity* burst upon the scene.<sup>2</sup> Here was the proof Possenti wanted: a ten-million movement of workers that became a national movement; a national movement that changed the face of Europe. *Solidarity* provided the best test for the theory in this way. If there is any place where the reign of CST was realized on earth then it was in Poland in 1980.

*Solidarity* eventually won in 1989, despite its suppression in 1981 by Martial Law imposed by the communist regime, which feared the movement's growing power. In 1989 one of *Solidarity*'s main advisers, a longtime editor-in-chief of the Catholic monthly *Więź* [The Bond], Tadeusz Mazowiecki, became the first non-communist prime minister in the Eastern Bloc. The charismatic Jacek Kuroń, who represented the secular left wing of *Solidarity*, became the minister of labour and social policy. Adam Michnik, who came from the same left wing of *Solidarity*, took over the position of editor-in-chief of the largest independent Polish daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

The paradox is that the people whom *Solidarity* brought to power almost immediately threw off its heritage. Mazowiecki, Michnik, and Kuroń concentrated upon, as Kuroń put it, 'endorsing' the Neo-Liberal reforms of

---

<sup>2</sup> See George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Leszek Balcerowicz. While the abandonment of the ideals of socialism by those on the left has been well-documented,<sup>3</sup> the abandonment of CST by the Catholics still awaits in-depth analysis. However, in both instances the final effect was the same. In 1989 the previous worldviews were jettisoned and replaced by a new faith: liberalism.

Just as the victory of *Solidarity* speaks about the power of CST so does CST's crisis after 1989 point toward the dangers that stand before the Church. The rapid transition from CST to liberalism transformed Poland into a battleground of these two visions of reality. Therefore, the conflict between the two can be best studied there.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. JÓZEF TISCHNER AND *SOLIDARITY*

I was actually in Rome during August of 1980. The pope and I were eating dinner when Italian television showed footage from Gdańsk: the gate of the striking shipyard, the crowd of people, flowers stuck into the shipyard fences. The camera panned onto the gate and between these flowers there was a portrait of John Paul II. And he was sitting right next to me. He cringed. He did not say a word. We also went silent. Everyone was convinced that he was behind this. On the other hand, everyone also hoped that since his portrait, the portrait of the pope, was there people would not go around killing each other.<sup>5</sup>

This is how Fr. Józef Tischner (1931 - 2000) recalled the beginnings of *Solidarity*. Wojtyła's conversation partner was his former student and later one of his closest intellectual colleagues and partners. Tischner was at the center of the

---

<sup>3</sup> See Ost, D., *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> G. Beyer, 'Freedom as a Challenge to an Ethic of Solidarity in a Neoliberal Capitalist World: Lessons from Post-1989 Poland.' *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 6, No. 1 (2009): 133-167.

<sup>5</sup> A. Michnik, J. Tischner, and J. Żakowski. *Między panem a plebanem* (Kraków: Znak, 1998), 289.

most important Polish controversies for decades. A student of Roman Ingarden, fascinated by phenomenology (Husserl), axiology (Scheler), hermeneutics (Heidegger), the philosophy of dialogue (Levinas), the philosophy of history (Hegel), mysticism (Eckhart) and Polish Romantic thought (Norwid), Tischner was above all one of the most prominent contributors to CST. He always responded enthusiastically to each successive encyclical of John Paul II.<sup>6</sup> In their spirit he developed his own original Christian philosophy of labour.

In front of the TV in Castel Gandolfo sat the two people whose fates became inextricably intertwined with the fate of *Solidarity*. After his return to Poland Józef Tischner became one of the spiritual leaders of *Solidarity*.<sup>7</sup> He accompanied the movement through its most important moments as its chaplain. Tischner said Mass at the Wawel in Kraków, the castle of the Polish kings and the most hallowed place in Polish history. All the leaders of the burgeoning movement took part in this Mass. The text of the homily, 'The Solidarity of Conscience', had a momentous impact on them and became the starting point for a cycle of articles that later made up the now classic book *The Spirit of Solidarity* widely distributed in many different underground editions and translated into many languages.

The sermon Tischner gave during the First Solidarity Congress entitled 'The Independence of Work', was declared an official document of the congress a mere two hours after it was given. This is because no other statement better reflected what the delegates were aiming for.<sup>8</sup> The author of *The Spirit of Solidarity* participated in hundreds of masses, heard confessions, blessed banners,

---

<sup>6</sup> J. Tischner, *Idąc przez puste Błonia* (Kraków: Znak, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> See Zbigniew Brzezinski in J. Tischner, and B. Fiore, *The Spirit of Solidarity* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1984.), vii.

<sup>8</sup> See Jarosław Legięć, *Człowiek w filozofii pracy: Józefa Tischnera* (Wydawnictwo Księży Sercanów, 2012), 158.

and after the implementation of Martial Law he continued to serve *Solidarity* as a priest and thinker.

However, in 1989 Tischner abandoned the path he had followed until that point. He went from being one of the most active promoters of CST to one of the most active promoters of liberalism. Therefore, the history of his personal struggles is also the history of the struggles between CST and liberalism.

### 3. THE EXPERIENCE OF EVIL

Tischner's philosophy of the time grew out of the experience of evil. He gave this expression in the following memorable words:<sup>9</sup>

Before doing any philosophizing, especially in Poland, one must make a substantial choice: one must choose between that about which one *can think* and that about which one *must think*. But what we *must think* about does not come to us from the pages of books, but from the face of a person who is disturbed by his fate. In former times philosophy was born from wonder about the world that surrounds us (Aristotle). Then it came from doubt (Descartes). But now, here in our world, it comes from pain. The quality of a philosophy is decided by the *quality of the human pain* that a philosophy wants to express and remedy. Whoever does not see this is close to betrayal.<sup>10</sup>

Twentieth century societies came to share in deep human pain. They were marked by violence, atrocity, betrayal, injustice, and exploitation of labour.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> The frames of my analysis come from the theories that define modernity as a) "desubstantialization of evil" (Ricoeur) and "rendering evil no more evil" (Marquard) b) the displacement of apocalyptic thinking with a vision of the end of history and/or progress (Koselleck) c) the emergence of exclusive humanism (Taylor) and "immanentization of the eschaton" (Voegelin).

<sup>10</sup> See Bobko, *Myślenie wobec zła*; Gadacz, *Filozofia Boga w XX wieku*, 175-188; Marszałek, *Józef Tischner i filozoficzne koncepcje zła*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Legięć, 271-272; Tischner, J., *Etyka solidarności oraz Homo sovieticus* (Krakow: Znak, 1992), 207.

According to Tischner, CST is the most profound response to evil and it was expressed in a special way by the spirit of *Solidarity*. CST is supposed to express a person's experience of pain and to address it. Tischner utilized imagery culled from the New Testament in order to render the relationship between them. He depended upon the words of St. Paul to 'overcome evil with good',<sup>12</sup> which became a guiding thread of one of his spiritual heroes, Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, the chaplain of *Solidarity* in Warsaw. Fr. Popiełuszko witnessed to these words with his life and death when he was murdered by the communist secret service. His funeral became an impulse for the renewal of a weakened *Solidarity*. The blood of the martyr became a seed for the movement.

Tischner frequently appealed to the parable of the Good Samaritan, which his readers could transpose onto their own experiences:

The Good Samaritan's deed is an answer to a *concrete cry* of a concrete man. This is simple—*someone cries for help*. . . The solidarity born at the sight of such suffering is particularly deep. For whom is our solidarity then? It is, first of all, for those who have been hurt by other people and whose suffering could have been avoided for it was contingent and superfluous.<sup>13</sup>

In the homily he gave at the Wawel, the Polish chaplain used yet another Pauline image, which forever remained etched in the minds of his listeners:

'Bear ye one another's burdens: and so you shall fulfill the law of God' (paraphrase of Gal. 6:2). What does it mean to be in solidarity? *It means to carry another's burden*.<sup>14</sup>

What does it mean to carry a burden? In the final analysis, it is giving witness to the truth, therefore a readiness to give up your life for your neighbor. The witnesses of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, and earlier Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, were

---

<sup>12</sup> Tischner, *Nieszczęsny dar wolności* (Krakow: Znak, 1993), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Tischner, *Ethics of Solidarity*, 40-41, my emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 37-38.

heroic. They carried a whole nation along with them.<sup>15</sup> For Józef Tischner the political theology proper to Christianity can be boiled down to the *political theology of martyrdom*. In this way he was close to the vision of political theology held by Erik Peterson who rejected the political theology of the state developed by Carl Schmitt.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. ANNUS MIRABILIS: 1989

The year 1989 is an immense historical caesura for the Eastern Bloc. The future of CST depended upon the proper interpretation of that date. One thing was certain: this date played a role in the plans of Providence—thanks to Solidarity and the engagement of the Church the evil of totalitarianism receded into the past. In *Centesimus Annus* (22-29) John Paul II interprets the year 1989 as yet another step in the revolution of the Spirit, which did not end with the moment of liberal democracy's coming. In the same encyclical he says very clearly that it is a delusion to think that democratic liberalism overcame totalitarianism, because "a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism" (46).

Tischner took a different path. In interpreting 1989 he did what Eric Voegelin once described as immanentizing the eschaton. For him salvation history became world history. The year 1989 fulfilled his dreams about independence, dialogue, and of a non-violent revolution that would use persuasion instead of violence. In some ways the coming of liberal democracy brought about the end of history for him. This is because it was the political system closest to the

---

<sup>15</sup> Tischner, *Nieszczęsny*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> G. Geréby, 'Political Theology versus Theological Politics: Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt.' *New German Critique* 35, No. 3 105 (2008): 7-33.

Gospel.<sup>17</sup> If we resort to the tools of historical semantics, we can say then that Józef Tischner saw 1989 as a 'modern revolution'.<sup>18</sup>

Firstly, a modern revolution brings with it 'new things' in that it is complete, and it accomplishes a total transformation of the social world: economics, politics, and culture. This is the reason why it is connected with deep reforms. In 1989 this aspect of it was well-captured by a neologism coined by Timothy Garton-Ash, 'refolution', that is, the indivisible linking of reform and revolution. Tischner shared this vision completely by noting the total character of the transformations and the necessity of deep intellectual, social, and economic reforms.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, a modern revolution results in a separation of the present from the past.<sup>20</sup> On Polish soil this was expressed with the concept of the 'thick line' [*gruba linia*] that was used by Tadeusz Mazowiecki to stress that his government would not take responsibility for the communist past. With time the thick line came to refer to a radical break with the communist heritage: the heritage of political, economical, and moral enslavement.<sup>21</sup> Józef Tischner fundamentally agreed with such a vision of history.<sup>22</sup>

Thirdly, a modern revolution opens up to the future.<sup>23</sup> It is accompanied by a feeling of dynamism and an acceleration of time. In accordance with this pattern, 1989 introduced a caesura that not only separated itself from the past and deprived it of any meaning, but also rendered what is to come the most

---

<sup>17</sup> J. Tischner, Z. Dorota, and J. Gowin, *Przekonać Pana Boga* (Krakow: Zank, 2002), 49.

<sup>18</sup> R. Koselleck, 'Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time', *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (2004): 43-57.

<sup>19</sup> Michnik et al., 558.

<sup>20</sup> Koselleck, 249.

<sup>21</sup> P. Śpiewak, *Pamięć po komunizmie* (Krakow: Słowo/obraz terytoria).

<sup>22</sup> Michnik et al., 559.

<sup>23</sup> Koselleck, 249.

appropriate point of reference. Tischner experienced this when he straightforwardly spoke of a 'sharp acceleration of history',<sup>24</sup> an opening up of time,<sup>25</sup> and of progress.<sup>26</sup> All the richness of these meanings is contained in the concept of liberalism, as it began to function in Poland and supplied the interpretive frames for events. Its contents were not specified by previous experience (such as the experience of *Solidarity*), but by expectations for the future. As a consequence liberalism marked out a far-reaching goal of revolution and gave it an irreversible direction. The revolution can be slowed down or speeded up, but it cannot be reversed.<sup>27</sup> The revolution has no alternatives. There is no place in it for experiments and searching for a third way.<sup>28</sup>

Fourthly, in order to achieve its goals the modern revolution demands engagement. It is connected to activism. This was also part and parcel of the Polish concept of liberalism. Much like other modern -isms, liberalism became a concept that mobilizes, ideologizes, and politicizes.<sup>29</sup> In agreement with this model Tischner saw the new times as a space of unconstrained creativity. Only now could humanity become the creator of its fate: 'For the first time it was possible to think that 'as you make your bed, so you must lie in it. It marked the appearance of a consciousness of self-reliance'.<sup>30</sup> For these reasons he called upon the Church to engage in the building of the new political and economic order. He condemned Polish Catholics for their lack of trust in democracy and freedom.<sup>31</sup> He aligned himself with the camp of Tadeusz Mazowiecki and in

---

<sup>24</sup> C. Miłosz and J. Tischner, *Dziedzictwo diabła* (Krakow: Znak, 1993), 129.

<sup>25</sup> Michnik, et al., 704.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 559.

<sup>27</sup> Koselleck, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Michnik, et al., 561.

<sup>29</sup> Koselleck, 273.

<sup>30</sup> Michnik, et al., 558.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

1993 he also supported (to great and widespread disbelief) the electoral campaign of the Liberal-Democratic Congress, which was the most radical representative of the neo-liberal ideology in Poland.<sup>32</sup>

If 1989 was to be interpreted as a modern revolution demanding deep changes and political engagement, all the while cutting itself off from the past and opening up only to the future, then the Church was faced with some very serious challenges. Above all, a modern revolution does not need the Church to define itself and legitimate itself, because it defines and legitimizes itself, creating its own reflexive philosophies of history. How does this happen? First, it questions the Christian understanding of the new times. Christ no longer 'makes everything new', but man does so instead. Second, the break with the past questions the role of the Church, which is by definition a part of the past. Third, by opening up the horizon toward the future the revolution creates empty time, which can only take shape with the end of history or progress. This contradicts the Christian vision, because its vision for the future is filled with expectation for the *parousia*, the second coming. In other words, the liberal revolution takes away from the Church its authority over time and renders it useless.

## 5. CHRISTIAN LIBERALISM

As he remained faithful to the Church, Tischner could not derive such radical conclusions from his own interpretations of liberalism. He wanted to reconcile modernity with the Church and liberalism with Christianity.<sup>33</sup> His answer was supposed to be *Christian liberalism*. The project of baptizing liberalism did not

---

<sup>32</sup> W. Bereś and A. Więcek, *Tischner: Życie w opowieściach* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2008), 261-262.

<sup>33</sup> Here he stood before the same dilemmas as the Council Fathers who wrote *Gaudium et Spes* and earlier August Cieszkowski (1814-1894), a precursor of CST and the most outstanding Polish philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

resolve the difficulties, but hid them instead. This is because Christian freedom differs from liberal freedom. Tischner papered-over the tension between the two with a certain equivocation maintaining that they both talk about the same freedom. For example, when he proclaimed that 'freedom already is',<sup>34</sup> that 'in the world around us freedom has occurred',<sup>35</sup> then such statements hid the fact that one concept covered two meanings: Christian and liberal. On the one hand, in accordance with CST Tischner interpreted freedom as positive freedom, as a 'freedom to'.

Freedom can never be an absolute value. It derives its appearance of absoluteness from being the necessary condition for the realization of other, absolute values, among them humanity. From this develops a fundamental question of modernity: what is the value which justifies a voluntary loss of freedom? In the name of what value should human freedom transform itself into sacrifice?<sup>36</sup>

Here freedom is not an absolute value, but rather the process of an endless liberation from sin and the gradual preparation to take up sacrifice for the sake of one's neighbor. It finds its fulfillment in martyrdom. Freedom that does not serve the realization of absolute values degenerates into consumption.<sup>37</sup> Tischner considered 1989 as the opening up of a space for the realization of positive freedom understood in this way. On the other hand, however, and this went against his earlier thinking, he identified freedom with political and economic reforms: 'Balcerowicz's plan was the most important answer to my expectations', he said. 'Yes, obviously, freedom, but the freedom to complete the economic reforms, freedom in the face of a concrete project. First, and above all, freedom for Leszek Balcerowicz!'<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Zańko, Gowin, 49.

<sup>35</sup> Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni*, 291.

<sup>36</sup> Tischner, *Świat ludzkiej nadziei*, 147-148.

<sup>37</sup> Tischner, *W krainie*, 86.

<sup>38</sup> Michnik, et al., 559.

Tischner attempted to reconcile these two visions of freedom: ‘freedom for Leszek Balcerowicz’ and ‘freedom to sacrifice’. On the one hand, he called for the deepening of liberalism with a dimension of fidelity.<sup>39</sup> He called for the completion of the liberal revolution through overcoming the one-sidedness of negative freedom.<sup>40</sup> ‘We understand liberalism in an over-simplified way’, he lamented, ‘if we judge that it opens the way for relativism and ethical subjectivism. The principle of liberalism essentially contains within itself a demand that possesses all the qualities of an absolute choice’.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, Tischner strove to move from Christianity to liberalism by showing that freedom is the highest gift of God, ‘the grace of all graces’.<sup>42</sup> Yet, he felt all the while that his solutions were far from perfection, ‘[I]t is difficult to be a liberal during times when we do not know what freedom is’.<sup>43</sup>

After proving that liberalism is tied to (or can be tied to) Christianity, Tischner attempted to rebuild historical continuity by tying the reforms of 1989 with the activities of the Church and the spirit of *Solidarity*. Since *Solidarity* and the Round Table Talks had Christian inspirations the revolution did not present itself anymore as a break but as a continuation. Tischner demonstrated that at bottom Lech Wałęsa, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Leszek Balcerowicz realized the ideals of CST and the Christian philosophy of work:

Lech Wałęsa was the leader of the revolution which came about without blood spilling—the place of class strife was taken by the spirit of solidarity. Tadeusz Mazowiecki built institutions of the democratic state of law and at the same time connected the Solidarity movement with Christian personalism, whose beginnings are in the writings of Emmanuel Mounier, Jacques Maritain and its continuation is found in the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second

---

<sup>39</sup> Zańko, Gowin, 49.

<sup>40</sup> Tischner, *W krainie*, 86.

<sup>41</sup> Tischner, *Spór o istnienie człowieka*, 157.

<sup>42</sup> Tischner, *W krainie*, 294; Tischner, *Etyka solidarności*, 214; Tischner, *Spór*, 194.

<sup>43</sup> Tischner, *Etyka solidarności*, 181.

Vatican Council. Leszek Balcerowicz connected the solidarity utopia with Anglo-Saxon political economics.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, Tischner attempted to baptize the future. According to him, progress only seemingly liberates itself from Christianity. Even though in the new situation the Church finds itself in crisis, or even dies off, its mission is still further realized, 'I do not see the results of secularization negatively. This civilization, which appears non-Christian, has, below the surface, maintained its Christian character'.<sup>45</sup> Here Tischner was mainly thinking about the rights of man, democracy, and civil society: 'Christian truth and values tear themselves away from the Catholic trunk, live beyond it, and bring fruit outside of Christianity'.<sup>46</sup> The world is becoming more human now beyond the Church. What then ought the Church do? It should search for the actions of God in the world, '[d]oubtless, the humanization of modern societies is being accomplished by God himself. The works remains even while the author hides'.<sup>47</sup>

## 6. THE NEUTRALIZATION AND TEMPORALIZATION OF EVIL

What were the results of these efforts? Tischner aimed to inscribe liberalism into Christianity, but in reality he inscribed Christianity into liberalism. The attempt at Christianizing modernity led him to modernize Christianity and to transform the deepest structures of CST. He rejected the originary experience of evil. It seems that when he was philosophizing during the early 90's he went against his credo of 'thinking in values' and stopped gazing 'into the face of a person who is disturbed by his fate', stopped expressing their pain and counseling them, and

---

<sup>44</sup> Tischner, 'The Ethics of Solidarity Years Later', 61.

<sup>45</sup> Zańko, Gowin, 44-45.

<sup>46</sup> Tischner, *W krainie*, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Michnik, et al., 554.

instead he started expressing ‘wonder at the surrounding world’. Was this, in accordance with the standards of his earlier thinking, an act of betrayal?<sup>48</sup>

The Polish philosopher clearly acknowledged that after 1989 the ‘quality of the pain’ lessened. In accordance with the model described by Odo Marquard, Tischner ‘rendered evil no more evil’.<sup>49</sup> He had no doubts that after the revolution ‘yesterday’s experience of evil—evil present within the system, but also rooted in the people, in what is worst in people—has disappeared and humanity again shows itself to us in a glow of a kind of *innocence*, as a creature that is imperfect, which is more a victim rather than the root cause of woe. Today we have the hope that we ourselves can somehow deal with the evil that besieges us’.<sup>50</sup>

Tischner draws a thick line between the experiences of totalitarian evil and the experiences of the new times. Even if under communism there was violence, injustice, murder, and exploitation they have no consequences for the present political and economic order. The evil of totalitarianism has forever receded into the past. The faults of the communists were forgiven: ‘Is it possible to pass into quotidian order over possibly the biggest cemetery in the history of the world? Is it possible to close one’s eyes to the destruction of the economies of entire nations? After Hitler we had Nuremberg, will we have the *round table* after Communism?’<sup>51</sup> Tischner thought that the guilt of the communists was taken away when they sat down at the Round Table Talks, beside the fact that they were not at bottom communists but pragmatists. Therefore they cannot bear the evil of the whole system. For Hegel the tribunal of history was history itself—there was no place for him for any extra-worldly judgment of history. Tischner goes a step further. He believes that there can be no judgment in history at all.

---

<sup>48</sup> Tischner, *Myślenie*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Marquard, *Glück im Unglück*, 44-58.

<sup>50</sup> Tischner, *Nieszczęsny*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> Tischner, *Spowiedź rewolucjonisty*, 221.

The neutralization of evil that is expressed in Tischner's political philosophy does not make good bedfellows with his philosophical thinking, which constantly circles around the topic of evil.<sup>52</sup> His magnum opus titled *The Philosophy of Drama* was mainly dedicated to evil and all of its masks.<sup>53</sup> In social life evil is an axiom of our experience and comes to us through the ordinary experience of an evil person.<sup>54</sup> According to Tischner, human life is marked by an ethical horizon which has a metaphysical character cannot be reduced to being (the good) or non-being (evil). Here Tischner does not hesitate to use the figure of the demon. Man and society are not neutral, they do not exist near or beyond good and evil, on the contrary, they are stretched between good and evil, ascent and fall, victory and defeat, salvation and damnation.<sup>55</sup> This tension is perfectly rendered by the metaphor of drama.

Tischner's considerations point to the universal character of evil. There are people who are evil. Evil cannot be rooted out, because it is inscribed into human life. In this sense it cannot be neutralized. These inconsistencies are worked out by the philosopher in *The Controversy Over the Existence of Man*, which was the second part of *The Philosophy of Drama*, and in some ways became the summation of his philosophical way. In that book evil transforms itself from a universal element of the human world into a *temporalized* element. Tischner had a very strong awareness of the evils of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, symbolized for him by Auschwitz and Kolyma. They revealed the tragic nature of the human fate and along with it metaphysical evil, endowed with intelligence, aiming to eliminate the good because it is the good.<sup>56</sup> The totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Bobko, *Myslenie wobec zla*; Gadacz, *Filozofia Boga w XX wieku*, 175-188; Marszałek, *Józef Tischner i filozoficzne koncepcje zla*.

<sup>53</sup> See Pyra, „Man's Destiny” and special issues of *Thinking in Values* (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>) devoted to Tischner's philosophy of drama, agathology and dialogue.

<sup>54</sup> Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu*, 139-140.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, 53.

<sup>56</sup> Tischner, *Spór*, 44-46.

century promised that they would liberate us from the hell of capitalism, but they led us into an even greater evil. Evil conceals itself, convincing us that in the name of the highest values we ought to sacrifice the values that are closest to us.<sup>57</sup> Following Nabert he writes, '[t]he Enlightenment did not overcome the evils of history; it replaced *superstitious atrocities* with *enlightened atrocities*'.<sup>58</sup> It seems that Tischner so enlarges the experiences of evil in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, identifying them with the concentration camps, that at the moment when 1989 finally locks them in the past, he seems to think that evil itself has been locked in the past. After 1989, he says, 'something of Christianity realizes itself in life; not only in the Church but also around it... [b]etween social life and the principles of the Gospels there is a relative harmony'.<sup>59</sup>

## 7. THE NEUTRALIZATION OF TRANSCENDENCE

The deconstruction of evil has far reaching consequences for Tischner. If there is no exploitation and injustice, if pain and suffering disappear, then there is no place for the ethic of *Solidarity* and Catholic Social Teaching, which are supposed to remedy these very problems. However, the consequences are even more serious. Tischner understood well that the experience of evil is a source of religion. Religion becomes possible when at the bottom of hell we encounter the good. When betrayal, deceit, and cruelty appear then witnesses to the Good News also appear.<sup>60</sup> The neutralization of evil leads to the neutralization of transcendence and the dying off of the Church.<sup>61</sup> But if the world is already

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, 56-57.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, 41.

<sup>59</sup> Michnik, et al., 553.

<sup>60</sup> Tischner, *Nieszcześnie*, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

imbued with the Gospel then Christianity can no longer be a sign of contradiction, it cannot fight against the 'mighty of this world'.<sup>62</sup>

The neutralization of evil is also accompanied by the transformation of the fundamental picture of God. God is no longer a Just Judge who rewards the good and punishes the evil; he is instead a democrat and liberal who shines on the good and bad. Tischner asks, 'What can better justify liberal democracy than God's love for imperfect humans and imperfect humanity?'<sup>63</sup> But when God can no longer indicate what is good or evil then the conscience can no longer be a fundamental category. Thus, the conscience, after being considered a key concept that shaped the architecture of CST goes from being the source of the ethics of Solidarity and moves to the margins of Tischner's thought. By relying upon Hegel he also moves away from the vision of Kant and demonstrates that the conscience is something arbitrary: '[h]ere the conscience is the direct expression of myself. And since I am unrepeatable the conscience is not subject to generalities. It absolves itself of all responsibilities to the community and wants to pass for the law'.<sup>64</sup> Tischner decidedly criticized the 'moral worldview' that 'today boundlessly trusts ethics'<sup>65</sup> and 'diminishes importance of law and state'.<sup>66</sup> During communist times the conscience was the main source of solidarity, during liberal times it leads to unacceptable civil disobedience. How does such a reconfiguration affect CST? When Christian theory is rejected then practice falls apart.

---

<sup>62</sup> Tischner, *W krainie*, 293.

<sup>63</sup> Michnik, et al., 653.

<sup>64</sup> Tischner, *Spowiedź*, 229.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-224.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

## 8. PROSPERITY GOSPEL

After 1989 Tischner *de facto* criticizes and rejects his own earlier philosophy of labour. He goes even further by proclaiming its opposite and then he curiously presents the opposite as a continuation. He stops looking at labour from the point of view of ethics and the issue of whether it contributes to building up people and communities. Instead he begins to look at ethics from the point of view of economic demands.<sup>67</sup> The pathology of labour becomes a lack of capital, and not, as it was until then, exploitation that has a moral aspect. What's more, exploitation—in certain conditions, that is, the conditions of transitioning into capitalism—becomes something acceptable, even desirable:

It is enough to look at the lines that line up daily in front of the embassies of capitalist countries. Those people have a choice: either to leave for a certain amount of time and let themselves be exploited, or stay and let their lives go to waste. Human nature is strange because it prefers to be exploited rather than wasted. 'Socialism', or whatever it is that you want to call what we used to have, led to an unheard of waste of human and natural wealth. That is the reason why for those who have tasted the bitterness of waste *exploitation is a great relief*.<sup>68</sup>

But Tischner goes even further than this. He rejects the fundamental conviction of *laborem Exercens* about the primacy of labour over capital and begins to proclaim the primacy of capital over work:

The key for understanding this matter seems obvious: the key is labour and our concepts of it. Previous times not only imposed upon society a specific structure of work, but also a specific conception: it created an immense amount of illusory work and forced people to acknowledge the illusion as authentic work. In effect people were toiling, but they were not working. In our contemporary world of normal work something that does not give birth to and multiply capital is not considered to be work; *the growth of capital is*

---

<sup>67</sup> Charles Taylor describes Tischner's ethics of Solidarity as a variety of 'moral economy' incompatible with liberalism.

<sup>68</sup> Tischner, *Etyka*, 183 (my emphasis).

*the criterion of work.* If some activity takes up time, requires effort, or even dedication, but in no way contributes to the growth of capital, or consumes capital—it is not technically, in the strict sense of the word, considered to be work.<sup>69</sup>

Much as Tischner rejects the primacy of ethics, the conscience, and labour over the economy, he also rejects their primacy over politics. Even though his vision of the state remained deeply pessimistic since he saw the state, along with Weber, as 'legalized rape' and therefore the domain of devils rather than angels, he saw no sense in giving witness against the authorities. He writes straightforwardly that in the new times there is no need for heroism.<sup>70</sup> He even begins to treat the question of martyrdom with a big dose of irony: 'The virtue of witness! One must give witness! We have come out of communism as witnesses to the faith... We were one immense collective witness... The situation is different today'. Those who cannot understand this and continue to witness today seem farcical, '[i]t is such a witness that includes in its witnessing an apocalyptic offense at the world. It is the witness of the offended. The have been offended and... they witness to it. They suffer. Things are difficult for them, even very difficult. And I understand it. That is why I say: this is a dead end'.<sup>71</sup>

Accordingly, his political theology of martyrdom—and he did have reservations about it even before 1989—is replaced with the theology of 'building liberalism and democracy'. With this he moves from Peterson's position to Schimtt's position; from anti-political thinking toward political thinking, from the theology of the eschaton to the theology of the katechon. As a consequence the martyrs of old are replaced by able contemporary politicians: Wałęsa, Mazowiecki, Balcerowicz, and Michnik. Here we have another interesting shift: Christianity no longer demands heroism, but liberalism has started to ask for a

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 183 (my emphasis).

<sup>70</sup> Tischner, *Nieszczęsny*, 52.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 184-185.

kind of heroism. 'We know well today', wrote Tischner, 'that the systemic transformations we are participating in do not depend upon a change of external structures, instead they demand a profound change of consciousness'.<sup>72</sup> Therefore it is not enough to accept liberalism, we must transform ourselves subjectively—we must convert. 'It was known that the difficult period of systemic transformation would require many sacrifices. But this time, unlike before, these sacrifices would not be senseless'.<sup>73</sup>

Even though martyrdom loses its religious role it becomes the key to understanding liberalism. Unlike the senseless sacrifices before 1989 the sacrifices for liberalism will reveal a profound meaning.<sup>74</sup> What does this liberal sacrifice rely upon? It relies upon the agreement to bear the pain of the economic transformations, consent to unemployment and marginalization. Tischner demanded that the Church and Solidarity should point out, 'the specific task of a labour union is caring about rebuilding the entrepreneurial sphere—the sphere upon which the development of labour depends. The price to pay for this is immense. The price is a kind of agreement to unemployment. But will not such a concern for the whole lead to the betrayal of the interests of working people? Will it not reveal itself as suicide for the union as a union?'<sup>75</sup>

The most important ethical debate in Poland after 1989 was the question of holding the communists to account. Tischner saw decommunization as something un-Christian and wanted to counter it with evangelization of the former communists. He voiced the primacy of *mercy* over *justice*.<sup>76</sup> Social stability became the main issue for him; it could be disturbed by demands for justice, because they could quickly transform themselves into contempt for one's

---

<sup>72</sup> Tischner, *W krainie*, 85.

<sup>73</sup> Tischner, 'The Ethics of Solidarity Years Later', 61.

<sup>74</sup> Michnik, et al., 561.

<sup>75</sup> Tischner, *Etyka*, 183.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

opponents.<sup>77</sup> He agreed to what his friend Adam Michnik called a 'just injustice'. In the name of unity and mercy he called people to accept human errors, that is, errors of the communists.<sup>78</sup> He went on to criticize 'some of these 'politicians of justice', who lean upon the teaching of John Paul II. They suggest that according to his teachings the principle of justice is the highest principle of social life, whereas the principle of forgiveness is important exclusively in the domain of direct human relations. Tischner argued that mercy should in fact be a public virtue. He supported his argument by leaning on the encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*: 'It is difficult not to notice that very frequently programs, which start from the idea of justice, which are supposed to serve its realization in communal life, in groups and societies, in practice fall into perversions'. However, the encyclical itself clearly stated that justice and mercy complement each other. Mercy without justice becomes indulgence. Justice without mercy becomes revenge. In John Paul II's vision there is no justification for opposing justice and mercy.<sup>79</sup> Józef Tischner took advantage of CST in order to affirm the liberal order. In hiding the incompatibility between the two he was forced to revise *labourem Exercens* and *Dives in Misericordia*. This allowed him to identify political liberalism with the philosophy of labour, and political liberalism with teachings about mercy.

## 9. CONCLUSION: POST-LIBERALISM

How did it come to this? How could a thinker who was faithful to CST abandon it for liberalism without noticing it? In his confrontation with liberalism the Polish philosopher jettisoned his philosophical tools. He directed the blade of

---

<sup>77</sup> Tischner, *Spowiedź*, 226-227.

<sup>78</sup> Michnik, et al., 561.

<sup>79</sup> Stawrowski, *Solidarność znaczy więź*, 64-86.

CST against communism, but abandoned a critique of liberalism saying it was 'less interesting for us'.<sup>80</sup> However much his guides *How to Live?*, *Help in an Examination of Conscience*, stressed the need for cleansing oneself from sin, he did not see a need for the same in politics. When conducting an analysis upon communism he compared it to a pagan political religion, but excluded the possibility that liberalism might become just such a religion.<sup>81</sup> Even though he studied anti-liberal thinkers such as Hegel or Heidegger he did not take advantage of their critiques of liberalism.<sup>82</sup>

What's more, the tools that could have served Tischner in a critique of liberalism were rejected by him. He instead applied them against the critics of liberalism whom he identified as anti-evangelizers, pagans, neo-totalitarians, and followers of political reason. Tischner also did not develop new tools to deal with the new situation. When 'freedom arrived' he did not reach for the classics of liberal thought. As a consequence it seems as if liberalism was for him and existential choice rather than a theoretical one.<sup>83</sup>

Tischner's thinking had to break down in such a situation. Even if like Hegel he strove to unite the world in his thinking this was not possible. There was no way his Christian philosophy, love for the arts, the ministry, and folk religion could be combined with political liberalism. It seems that in his attempt Tischner interposed liberalism's fundamental divisions and contradictions upon his own thinking.

But Tischner's infatuation with liberalism was only momentary. His comrades also began to leave liberalism behind. This was most deeply felt by Jacek Kuroń who found himself guilty for the abuses of capitalism. He compared it to his guilt

---

<sup>80</sup> Tischner, *Polska jest Ojczyzną*, 22.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 76; Tischner, *Etyka*, 181.

<sup>82</sup> Legutko, 'Czy Tischner był liberałem?'

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

for communism. Tischner's own path was different and did not lead through guilt, but through suffering. Suffering gave unity to his final philosophical attempts. In 1988 Tischner was diagnosed with cancer of the larynx. The Polish thinker once again encountered pain, once again saw the face of 'the person who is disturbed by his fate'. It was his own pain and his own face. His philosophy began to reconnect with life. The guide through this final path was St. Faustyna. The path led to God through mercy. Tischner dedicated to her his very moving last texts, written during breaks between intravenous drips. Divine Mercy, as the Polish thinker saw it, was supposed to liberate Poles from a religiosity that is politicized and based upon resentment. Mercy does not strive to punish one's opponent, but to save him; it does not want to debase anyone, but seeks his goodness. 'The faith of St. Faustyna', he explained, 'is a calling for the contemporary person. [...] People today are so consumed by the will to power. Their idea of life is ruling over the world and other people. Faustyna's *Diary* has another message. More than anything else a person needs mercy. Might, which does not serve mercy, leads a person astray'.<sup>84</sup> With this Tischner came back to the center of the faith and the center of the Church. He came back from being led astray and into error.<sup>85</sup>

On this final path Tischner met with John Paul II who not long thereafter proclaimed Faustyna a saint. Even though he did not live long enough to see John Paul II's final pilgrimage to Poland, which was conducted under the sign of Divine Mercy, he certainly heard the words which his teacher and friend of old uttered during that visit:

[t]oday, with all my strength, I beseech the sons and daughters of the Church, and all people of good will: never, ever separate "the cause of man" from the love of God. Help

---

<sup>84</sup> Tischner, *Miłość nas rozumie*, 172.

<sup>85</sup> Stawrowski, 83-86.

modern men and women to experience God's merciful love!  
This love, in its splendour and warmth, will save humanity!

However, John Paul II was aware that mercy understood in this way goes beyond every political philosophy and goes against what liberalism ultimately became. The freedom of the nation must be connected to *social charity* (ie. solidarity):

This is necessary today also, when different forces—often under the guidance of a false ideology of freedom—try to take over this land. When the noisy propaganda of liberalism, of freedom without truth or responsibility, grows stronger in our country too, the Shepherds of the Church cannot fail to proclaim the one fail-proof philosophy of freedom, which is the truth of the Cross of Christ.

Translated by Artur Rosman