

Obituaries

Leszek Kołakowski (1927-2009)

Leszek Kołakowski is born on 23 October 1927 in Radom. During the war years he is able to continue his schooling through private tuition and passes his school-leaving exams in Łódź in 1945. That same year he begins his studies in philosophy at the University of Łódź, and, starting in 1950, continues them in Warsaw. In 1953 he receives his “Candidate of Sciences”¹ degree, and begins to work as Reader at the Faculty of Philosophy of *University of Warsaw* the following year. In 1959 he takes the chair of History of Contemporary Philosophy (after the passing of Tadeusz Kroński in 1958). He is appointed *professor extraordinarius* in 1964. Kołakowski is an active member of the Communist Party from 1945 until his expulsion in 1966. His initial enthusiasm for the communist cause is eventually transformed into a critical stance regarding the real life application of Stalinist methods, making him one of the main proponents of the so-called “revisionism.” In March of 1968 he is removed from his university position, and as a consequence he leaves Poland in the autumn of that year. He goes to Canada, then to California, finally settling in Oxford, where he becomes a Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College in 1970. From 1981 on he divides his time between Oxford and Chicago, where he lectures at the Institute for Social Research. He dies 17 July 2009 at Oxford.

Kołakowski received a number of awards and distinctions over his lifetime, including the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels) in 1977 and the John W. Kluge Prize in the Human Sciences in 2003.

The focus of Kołakowski’s philosophical research was the history of ideas. He began with Marxism – first as an enthusiastic supporter, then as a revisionist, and finally as the author of a fundamental work critically analyzing the philosophical evolution of the Marxist doctrine, from Marx to Leninism and the Frankfurt School. In the opinion of many researchers Kołakowski’s study is both the most fundamental and the most expert critique of Marxist ideology.

His next field of study was the philosophical and religious thought of the

* The first post-graduate scientific degree, corresponding to a PhD., first introduced in the Soviet Union in 1934 and awarded in Poland between 1951-1958.

17th century. He wrote books on Spinoza and Pascal, as well as on those strands of Christianity to be found outside the church structure, thus surveying the relationship between religious consciousness and institutional bonds.

Gradually, his attention was drawn by more contemporary philosophical currents: he published volumes on positivism, Bergson, and Husserl. These were not only historical analyses, however. What Kołakowski was interested in was the search for different sources of certainty of knowledge. *The Presence of Myth* and *Metaphysical horror* are among his most important treatises. Kołakowski sees scientific cognition as an extension of the human effort to control the natural environment, to subdue it and make it livable. Yet this kind of cognition does not answer the fundamental existential questions people ask themselves, questions which are indeed justified. The answers are provided by myth – not myth as defined by specialists in religious studies, but rather myth understood as affirmation of values such as truth, goodness, and so on.

This is the type of discourse that organizes Kołakowski's thinking about religion. Proofs formulated in the language of rationality cannot lead to the acknowledgement of God, because at the end of that line of reasoning it is not the God believers pray to that will be revealed. Religious cognition follows different rules than those required by the language of rational or scientific deliberations, nonetheless it does have its own rules of authentication.

Yet Kołakowski does not join the chorus prophesying the end of religion; for him it still is the living tissue of culture, which, while changing, is still crucial to the survival of culture through the crises that continue to strike. Taking such views did not mean that Kołakowski became a participant in one of the religious traditions, although he did hold in high esteem both Christianity (that remaining closest to its evangelical roots) and Buddhism, especially that transmitted through the oldest texts of Gautama's teachings.

More important works

(1964). *Der Mensch ohne Alternative. Von der Möglichkeit und Ummöglichkeit Marxist zu sein*. München: Piper.

(1969). *Chrétens sans Eglise: La Conscience religieuse et le lien confessionnel au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Gallimard.

(1971). *Die Philosophie des Positivismus*. München: Piper. (1978). *Main currents of Marxism. It's rise, growth and dissolution*. New York: Oxford.

(1982). *Religion. If there is no God...*, New York: Oxford University Press.

(1988). *Metaphysical Horror*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

(1989). *The Presence of Myth*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.

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