



Adam Michnik

Confessions of a Converted Dissident

Essay for the Erasmus Prize 2001

For us, Europeans behind the Iron Curtain, the idea of Europe was simply a rejection of the Communist project, writes Adam Michnik: freedom instead of servitude, open borders and legality instead of the Berlin Wall and preventive censorship. This vision obviously contained an idealisation of both the practice of the European Union and of its theoretical foundations.

The wise man rightly reminds us to drink the water from our own well, so that we are not forced to search for it somewhere else but rather give it from our own source to others. Abandon then those collections of formulas and calculations, slovenly and muddy, and turn your own heart into the library of Christ: from it, like a provident master of a treasure chest, take as need arises things sometimes old, sometimes new.
(Erasmus, *Method of True Theology*)

1.

To receive the Erasmus Prize is a special honour. This prize has been awarded to some of the most outstanding people of the recent decades. I am aware that in my person the award is given to the people of Polish democracy, to those who for decades fought for freedom against coercion, built a philosophy of striving for freedom, and finally were able to sustain that freedom. If it were not for freedom – the freedom won in my country and all of Europe in 1989, I would not be standing in front of you now, moved and made shy by the majesty of these surroundings. In my life, I have been a rebellious dissident; I have been a political prisoner who from behind bars opposed dictatorship with written words; I have participated in strikes and demonstrations, written leaflets and political essays. For the last twelve years, I have been the editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the largest daily between Elbe and Vladivostok. Perhaps, then, now is a good moment to try to present my own balance of the twelve years of freedom.

2.

Soviet Communism seemed an invincible power. We did not believe anymore that the system could be reformed or humanised; we did not want a third world war that would abolish the system, nor a great bloody revolution, because we did not believe in its efficacy. We were first *dissidents* – this is what the newspapers of democratic Europe and of the United States called us, although

we did not like the term. A dissident is a rebel, a renegade, a rare bird, whereas we were revolting against a dictatorship that we understood as a rule of a group of criminals over the majority of society. We believed that it was we who represented the overwhelming majority of the nation. I think that we were right, but that at the same time we were mistaken. We were right because the edifice of totalitarian dictatorship collapsed like a house of cards when favourable external conditions appeared, especially the so-called perestroika of Michael Gorbachov in the Soviet Union. But we were mistaken in not appreciating enough the strength of the mechanism of *escape from freedom* (to use the felicitous definition of Erich Fromm), built in into our societies by the years of Communist dictatorship. The fear and apathy that accompanied these years were to turn after 1989 into the radicalism of revenge – an anti-Communism with a Bolshevik face on the one hand, and a nostalgic longing for a predictable world, governed by party apparatchiks on the other. The dissidents were a voice of conscience of the conquered nation, but a conscience is poorly fitted to wield power. At the beginning we inspired respect and admiration, then enthusiasm and jealousy, and at the end, dislike and diffidence that led to a series of electoral defeats.

But this happened later. First, there was a revolt flowing from the deepest levels of conscience: from Milovan Djilas, Poles such as Milosz and Kolakowski, Kuron and Modzelewski; Russians such as Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn, Amalrik and Boukovsky; Ukrainians such as Vasilij Stus and Viacheslav Chornovil; Czechs such as Václav Havel and Jan Patocka; Hungarians such as János Kis and György Konrád. And others, from other countries.

It was Polish singularity that the movement of dissidents assumed the institutional form of the Committee for the Defence of Workers (KOR), and later – after August 1980 – of the Independent Self-governing Labour Union Solidarity. We invented something like alternative society, which would fulfill a substantial part of its needs independently from a totalitarian state. In Russia, Samizdat was born, a great movement for free debate and culture liberated from censorship. In Czechoslovakia, an idea of independent Polis appeared around Charter 77, which was to constitute, according to the formula of Václav Havel, the power of the powerless. In Hungary, György Konrád wrote about anti-political politics. In Poland, the Committee for the Defence of Workers was created, then free trade unions; independent journals and publications were printed and distributed illegally. It was then that Jacek Kuron formulated his famous principle: instead of burning party committees, create your own!

It was Polish singularity that the powerful Catholic Church was a truly independent state within the state, a sovereign state within a non-sovereign state. It was a refuge for free people, the only place in which Polish speech was not defiled and reduced to the role of a carrier of the despicable meanings of totalitarian dictatorship.

The Polish specificity consisted also of the dimension of the democratic opposition. *Solidarity*, created in August of 1980, brought together millions of members and became a national legend. If the Gulag Archipelago became a symbol of totalitarian Communism, we were trying to create an archipelago of freedom and tolerance. Already, we encountered the first paradox: the people who were promoting tolerance had to be extremely non-tolerant towards the people of the dictatorship. Dialogue is the principle of tolerance, but the attitude of protest and rejection of dictatorship demanded the refusal of dialogue with the Communist dictatorship, because your interlocutor was

either an intellectual deceiver who was conducting black masses of logic, or simply an officer conducting prison interrogation. In the conditions of dictatorship, intransigence was a virtue and heroic attitudes frequently took on an exalted character, for which dissidents were often reproached.

David Hume wrote:

The fanatic consecrates himself, and bestows on his own person a sacred character, much superior to what forms and ceremonious institutions can confer on any other ... Enthusiasm being founded on strong spirits, and a presumptuous boldness of character, it naturally begets the most extreme resolutions; especially after it rises to that height as to inspire the deluded fanatic with the opinion of Divine illuminations, and with a contempt for the common rules of reason, morality, and prudence.

It is thus enthusiasm that produces the most cruel disorders in human society; but its fury is like that of thunder and tempest, which exhaust themselves in a little time, and leave the air more calm and serene than before. When the first fire of enthusiasm is spent, men naturally, in all fanatical sects, sink into the greatest remises and coolness in sacred matters; there being no body of men among them endowed with sufficient authority, whose interest is concerned to support the religious spirit; no rites, no ceremonies, no holy observances, which may enter into the common train of life, and preserve the sacred principles from oblivion. Superstition, on the contrary, steals in gradually and insensibly; renders men tame and submissive; is acceptable to the magistrate, and seems inoffensive to the people: till at last the priest, having firmly established his authority, becomes the tyrant and disturber of human society, by his endless contentions, persecutions, and religious wars. (*Essays*, X).

Unfortunately, in those times we read David Hume not too attentively. We thought that our revolution without utopia, revolution in the name of freedom and normalcy, will be not only velvet and bloodless but also free from the phenomenon that Hume calls superstition. If the essence of Communism consisted in making a person a property of the state, we thought that our velvet transformation would bring four emancipations.

We believed in national emancipation, in a state without ethnic discrimination, a state which will not be a victim of conquest but at the same time will not become an oppressor of another nation. We met with disillusionment. The collapse of Communism brought with it an explosion of ethnic chauvinisms; the disintegration of the Soviet Union did not create tolerant multinational countries but states in which the old Communist elites often transformed themselves into authoritarian ethnic dictatorships. The consequences of the dissolution of Communism in Yugoslavia were even more tragic. It brought many bloody wars, ethnic cleansing and hatred between the nations.

We believed in religious emancipation. We thought that the religion that was persecuted and discriminated against, while being at the same time a refuge for human dignity, will naturally become a priceless component of democratic order. We met with disappointment, as the churches bowed to political instrumentalisation and often became a basis for attitudes of extreme

intolerance.

We believed in the emancipation of the world of labour, of which the multi-million strong Solidarity Union was to be the seed. We met with disappointment, as the labour union Solidarity soon became a caricature of itself and tried to play in the factories and in the state the role that previously belonged to the Communist party. At the same time economic evolution pushed our countries towards privatisation and heartless market economy. In its wake came unemployment, a rat race, and money became the only measure of the value of a person and of life's success.

We believed in the emancipation of citizens, in freedom, which is not a chaos; in democracy, which permits avoidance of the *negative selection of cadres*, in the freedom of culture, which will blossom after the abolition of censorship. We met with disillusionment. A widespread corruption is our lot, endangering the quality of democratic order. Censorship that was silencing culture has been replaced by commercialism and cacophony, which make the voice of culture ever less audible.

This bitter balance is not at all a confession of a frustrated pessimist. Quite the opposite. I believe that a great change took place and that this change is undoubtedly positive. Often, when I wake up in the morning, I am afraid to open my eyes, so as not to find out that all of this is only a dream, that my country is still governed by a dreary gangrenous dictatorship of the Communist nomenklatura. I am happy that Poland is a free and independent country, that we are members of NATO, which gives us security, and that soon we will become members of the European Union – a fact that will include us for good in the institutional body of democratic Europe. But if at the same time I underline the dark aspects of democratic transformation, it is because, first of all, I believe it to be my duty as a citizen and intellectual, and second, because these questions torment many other people. Many among my friends are bitter; many believe that Poland is going in the wrong direction.

The interpretations of what is happening are presented in different ways. One very common interpretation says that it is all due to the fact that Poland did not go through a fundamental de-communisation. It was Communists that captured control of the world of banks and business, from which they could influence politics and gain material profit. It was Communists who, still in politics, were able to organise a strong political party and win in successive elections. It was Communists who blurred the line between good and evil, and that led to ethical disorientation, moral relativism and cynicism. These critics look for the sources of these afflictions in the velvet character of the revolution: it was too lenient towards the people of dictatorship.

Was it really so? Is it true that the velvet revolution, the change that came through negotiations, and then pluralism and tolerance are a result of moral degradation? I belonged to a school that felt a deeply encoded fear of revolutionary solutions. I was afraid of people who wanted to use Bolshevik methods and deprive the functionaries of the former regime of their citizens' rights. I was aware that every revolution, even a velvet one, has in its logic a built-in dilemma: justice or forgiveness, vengeance or resolution, re-conquista or re-conciliation. No doubt, I believed, the criminals should be judged and punished. But the people of the old regime, who gave up power through negotiations should be treated as rightful citizens. It was, I then believed and continue to believe, the only way to abolish the logic of the cold civil war. What is more, I suspect that a peaceful dismantling of dictatorship following

the Spanish model is perhaps the most precious contribution to the democracy of the last decades of the twentieth century.

The former dissidents, the former fighters for freedom, were, for the most part, forced to the margins of the political scene. Although Václav Havel is still President of the Czech Republic, Viktor Orbán Prime Minister of Hungary, and Gábor Demszky Mayor of Budapest, the political formation that grew out of the democratic opposition and that today refers to those traditions is on the margins and is losing elections. In this phenomenon there is a kind of logic of revolution, that rejects her creators, but at least does not devour her children. This is not nothing.

The wielding of power requires capacities different from those needed for anti-totalitarian opposition. It requires more professionalism than idealism, more brains than courage, more accomplishment than heroism. In the epoch of dictatorship, an intellectual was the one who spoke in the name of the gagged nation. Today the nation is not gagged anymore and therefore an intellectual is not longer its guide. Does this mean that intellectuals are not needed any more? Or to put it differently: what does remain from those years? I believe, that it is the heroic, stubborn effort to build hope that remains for us from those years. Today nothing is easier than pragmatism and cynicism, despair or melancholy. Nothing is easier than capitulation in the face of the gigantic process of globalisation, which is encompassing the entire world.

Thinking therefore about our place in the world and about the strategy of wrestling with the world, I am reminded of a man to whom I owe a lot, and whose memory I would like to invoke here. I am thinking about my father. His name was Ozjasz Szechter. He was a Jew and a Communist, and I am a Pole and an anti-Communist. He was a wise and honest person, and yet he made a bad choice in his life, because Communism was a bad choice. It was for Communism that he was imprisoned and tortured in pre-war Poland. He spent eight years in prison for Communism; I did six years of prison for anti-Communism. But I am wondering if those who imprisoned my father and tortured him made a good choice. The twentieth century was black and white. Many people adopted false and base ideas out of good and noble intentions. Communism promised a just world, but gave birth to a despotic and monstrously unjust regime. Entering the Communist party in 1919, my father made a non-conformist choice, and yet he took part in the creation of a system in which conformism was a totally enforced norm. This is why I treat with such diffidence all those who feel in possession of absolute truth and believe that they are able to build a perfect and sin-less world. With diffidence I also treat my own choices, because nobody is a good judge in his own case.

I think more and more often about the advice given me by my father. He came from Lvov, city of many nations, cultures and religions. He was in a way a product of that multi-cultural society, when he was saying: be with the weak ones, Ukrainians, Armenians, Jews, Poles, as long as they are weak. Keep your distance when they become strong enough to dictate their laws to others.

He was also saying: as long as the authorities mete out jail sentences, be with those who are marching in the front lines; when they start distributing government jobs, keep away. All power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely, he repeated after lord Acton. He also said: you should never believe that you possess the entire truth; always try to look at the world through the eyes of your adversary, sit behind his desk, look through his eyeglasses, put on his shoes.

And he also said: you should never feel innocent and just, always look for some part of guilt in yourself.

3. The Idea of Europe

I remember these words of advice from my father, a Jew and Pole, Galician and Communist, when I am thinking about today's debate of the future shape of the European Union.

The idea of the European Union came into being after the Second World War as a reply to Nazism and to the triumphant Communism of Stalin. It was a practical reply to the totalitarian madness of the twentieth century and to ethnic nationalism, which led to wars and dictatorships and a reply to the totalitarian practice of the Soviet empire which was born of the rhetoric of the universalistic utopia of classless society, social justice and planned economy. For us, Europeans from behind the Iron Curtain, the idea of Europe was simply a rejection of the Communist project. It symbolised freedom instead of servitude, creativity instead of obedience and fear, colourfulness and pluralism instead of greyness and uniformity, human rights instead of the principle that people are property of the state, open borders and legality instead of barbed wire, the Berlin Wall and preventive censorship.

This vision certainly contained in itself an idealisation of both the practice of the European Union, and of its theoretical foundations. This is why today, during difficult and not always understandable negotiations about the enlargement of the European Union, many among us are asking with unease:

Is the new, united Europe born from the spirit of philosophy or the spirit of economics? From Aristotle and Plato, or Schroeder (or better Kohl) and Van den Broek? If the new Europe is to be uniquely the product of economy and Brussels' bureaucracy, will its labyrinths created at the beginning of the new century put into practice Kafka's labyrinths from the beginnings of the last century?

If the new Europe arises as a response to America, does it mean that its ties will be forged – in addition to economics, the common space of free market – by the popular culture of the lowest common denominator?

Is the populism of pragmatic European politicians ready to give way to the voice of intellectual, creative elites?

Is the end of the century in Europe also an end of ideology, an end of great social and moral, eschatological plans about our earthly existence, an end of utopias? What is the balance of that century of hope that ended with gulags and prisons? Is it enough to know that this history should not be repeated? Are we ready, because of that history, to deprive ourselves of any utopia?

What should be done with the Europe of borderlands, we can ask together with the writer Drago Jancar, the Europe of small nations and cultures that grew from common spiritual roots? Should that Europe be integrated, should we allow it to be swallowed by centrifugal currents? Is the issue of the identity of small nations, of their languages and cultures only a question of *ecology* that sooner or later will inevitably disappear?

These questions are not new and therefore the reply will not be a revelation. None of us knows what this new Europe will be. It depends in great measure on ourselves, the citizens of the countries that are part of the European Union as well as on those who are knocking on its doors, on Poles and Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks, Slovenians and Estonians.

But let us say a few words about our desires. We do not want the future Europe to be organized on the model of centralized, absolutist states, whether Jacobin–Napoleonic or German–Mittel Europa. Europe, and I am here repeating the words of a great European, Denis de Rougemont, consists of that which needs to be united into a citizens' community.

Such a citizens' community, even in conditions, which do not seem to offer any way out, is built by desire. Desire, for example, to live in a certain town, to move about in that town freely and calmly, to exchange thoughts and merchandise, to participate in its governance; the desire to be a citizen leads to building of such a city, which, in turn, forms citizens' traditions and the need to improve them.

Such citizens' community will be built by Europeans, if they will desire it. Because the creation of the European Union was not and still is not inevitable, it will not happen spontaneously nor under the dictate of European powers.

It can only be a result of the choice and will; just as it happens in democracy, through a majority of inhabitants, who will inspire and lead the minority, not by coercion but by the force of persuasion.

The specificity of Europe is that this *small peninsula of the Asian continent* is a discoverer of the entire world that in truth has not yet been discovered. What are the specific reasons for which we love Europe? European culture, despite the many sins its conscience is burdened with, is a culture of pluralism, conformity, dialogue and resistance, irony, humour, and of the Christian foundation that makes people equal. Or, to put it more simply, the European culture is a culture of freedom:

the only freedom that counts for me, any true European will say, is the freedom of self–realisation; and it means the freedom of searching, finding and living in my own truth, not the truth of others, or the truth imposed by a state or a party, and given to me to be believed. If I would lose that fundamental freedom, my life would truly be devoid of meaning.

The European culture conceived in such a way is not threatened today by Nazism, or totalitarian Communism, which both, luckily, ended in the dustbin of history. Europe is threatened today by a new wave of fanatical ethnic chauvinisms, and, on the other hand, by a phenomenon that Denis de Rougemont calls *primitive materialism*. "With nationalism," he writes,

it is a bit like with the head cold, which for the immunity–deprived Papuans becomes a fatal illness. It is a passion, which for a century and a half causes Europe a fever and threatens it with catastrophe; we however do not want to see unfold its tragic dimension when it embraces Asia, the Arab world and Africa, and turns against us, in the name of our own principles, grievances that are mad and full of hatred. Nationalism, this collective form of pride, by its nature anti–Christian, was univocally condemned by the Pope and the heads of all Churches; besides, it is condemned by the very economic conditions, the technology and culture of the

twentieth century. It continues, however, to bring devastation to the minds of Europeans and of the newly created peoples: from inside it endangers our federalist union of states, which could become our peaceful weapon, from the outside, it multiplies the aggressive forces of those, who are turned by it into our enemies.

And the *primitive materialism* can become a cult of comfort or a cult of profit, but in the end it transforms itself into a "bestly indifference towards spiritual reality," which blocks all creativity, because creativity is decided by "a spiritual inquietude, passionate challenge to the fate and the refusal to accept the so-called natural turn of things."

This is how the problem of Europe was seen and defined by Denis de Rougemont thirty years ago. Fifteen years later, Claudio Magris, my eminent colleague, in his famous book *Danube*, spoke about the "other Europe", the one from behind the Iron Curtain. He believed that

Europe does not only mean Western Europe - France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and so on, but also the so called 'other Europe', Eastern and Central Europe, which was then forgotten and subjugated, was causing fear and dislike. Of course, the Soviet domination was the first reason for such a division, for this dislike, or at least for the feeling of distance from East-Central Europe, but a part of the responsibility is borne by Western prejudice, negating or ignoring this fundamental element of our European civilisation.

In Claudio Magris' book I see the completion of the vision of Denis de Rougemont, and a practical response to the questions of Drago Jancar about the fate of the *small nations* in the European Union. At the same time Magris analyses perspicaciously the second face of the phenomenon of *primitive materialism* - nihilism.

A nihilist deludes himself that he is seeing in front of him, on the scene of already-completed world history, the bazaar of creeds-for-sale, without noticing that he too is participating in this common parade. A parasite on the lack of fulfilment, he is retreating into the absolute negation, wading comfortably between the contradictions of existence and of culture, underlining ostentatiously their absurdity, instead of trying to understand even the most preposterous skirmish between good and bad, truth and falsity, brought with it by every single day.

"The absolute negation," wrote Magris, "is a convenient ruse to solve definitively every problem and shield oneself against any doubt. But the lack of values brings also the suffering of nothingness and death."

I want to stay longer with the book of Magris because of its unusual value, also for my own thinking. The book about the civilisation of Danube, about the crucible of nationalities, cultures, languages and religions, was inspired by his native Trieste, about which he wrote that it was not only a crucible, "but also an archipelago, the place of meeting of cultures and of their separation, as often happens on the border which is at the same time a bridge and a dam." Danube became a great metaphor for Trieste and the entire Central Europe. But isn't it as well a metaphor for the entire European continent? Magris wrote

about the *small nations* that their culture "is a fortress giving them a safe shelter, when we feel threatened by the world, attacked by life, and when we fear losing ourselves in the hostile reality. We then close ourselves at home, hide in official papers and protocols, in a library." But is it only in Central Europe that such small nations live? What about the Flemish in Belgium, Irish in Ulster, Basks, Corsicans? The complex of small nations consists in their "feeling, that they have to explain continuously an impression or cover it up, or, on the contrary, to boast about it as a sign of distinction."

But experience teaches that this effort of overcoming difficulty brings as fruit what is fundamental to European culture: Magris mentions Franz Kafka and Elias Canetti, Eugene Ionesco and Emil Cioran, I.B. Singer and Manes Sperber. And to such names many could be added, beginning with the great Czeslaw Milosz. And is not the *Ulysses* of James Joyce born out of the dramatic history of a small nation to become a metaphor of human fate? In the book of Magris there is still another thread that is extremely important: the topic of the left and Communism, or of the guilt the left bears for Communism. Looking at the formless complex of workers housing in Vienna, Magris reminds us that

it arose from a desire for reform, a faith in progress, the will to construct a new society open to new classes and destined to be led by the latter. It is easy today to smile at this uniform barracks-like grayness. But the courtyards and the flower-beds have a certain melancholy gaiety, if we are to trust the games of children who before these dwellings were built would have lived in hovels or in nameless rat holes, and also the pride of the families who in these houses, for the first time, had a chance to live with dignity, as human beings.

This monument of the Modern embodies many progressive illusions of the period between the wars - illusions that have collapsed. But it also bears witness to real and considerable progress, which only presumptuous ignorance could underrate. In 1934 these dwellings were the centre of the great workers' uprising in Vienna, which Dollfuss, the Austro-Fascist chancellor, put down with bloody violence. The right wing is patriotic, but it fires more often and more willingly on its own fellow-citizens than on the invaders of the country.

This sarcastic and bitter remark leads to the very centre of the contemporary European debate about Fascism and Communism. What did happen in the epoch of Hitlerism and Stalinism, asks Magris. It was then that the faith in Communism collapsed. Magris invokes the novel of Manes Sperber:

The deserter from the Party ... is orphaned by the whole: when the clandestine Communist militant, who has sworn fidelity to the Revolution and is operating in countries dominated by Fascist dictatorships, discovers Stalin's perversion of the Revolution, he finds himself in a no man's land, alien to all societies and exiled from life itself.

And as a commentary, Magris adds:

Those deserters from Stalinist Communism have taught us a great lesson, because they preserved the Marxist, unified, classic image of man, a faith in that universal-human which is

sometimes ingeniously expressed in the narrative forms of the past. They did not see the temporary setbacks to their own dreams as a license to indulge in irresponsible intellectual liberties, and their very humanity is utterly different from the coquettishness of today's orphans of Marxism, whose disappointment that it has not proven the 'Open Sesame' of history give way to strident mockery at the expense of that which only yesterday seemed to them sacred and infallible. The wistful though firm resolution of the exiles of yesterday can teach us to live correctly under today's conditions. To be orphaned by ideologies is natural, as it is natural to lose one's own parents. It is a grievous moment, but not one that induces us to profane our lost fathers, because it does not mean abandoning what has been taught us. Political militancy is not a mystic church in which everything stays put; it is a day-by-day effort which does not redeem the earth once and for all, but is exposed to errors and prepared to correct them. Marxism has also undergone this period of liberal secularisation, which has no time for idolatries or Vietnam orphans, but tends to form mature personalities capable of withstanding continual disappointments.

I wish to thank today Claudio Magris for these words. It required exceptional wisdom to be able to pronounce them fifteen years ago and to foresee the arrival of a generation of "sons without original sin", who would sing their own freedom, but their lack of memory and consciousness of moral conflict will make them similar to "the herd outside of the confines of good or bad, shapeless and colourless, devoid of sin and happiness, innocent and sterile." This wisdom, the wisdom of the people who erred and are marked by the original sin, is what we will bring into Europe.

There is still another inclination, which can among good deeds await even good people if they do not watch against it - and it is self-assurance. Christ cannot bear it in his disciples. And so the one who deems himself pious, is little pious. So Christ despises the Pharisee, who, close to him, speaks loudly about his good deeds, and expresses his appreciation to the publican, who stays apart unhappy with himself. (Erasmus, Method of True Theology)

Several years ago the Erasmus prize was received by my master, the prince of Polish humanists, Leszek Kolakowski. He never hid his liking for Erasmus of Rotterdam and his thought. He was fascinated by the influence of his thought, persecuted in bookstores and private libraries, forbidden on penalty of death and confiscation of property, branded as heretical, revolutionary, schism-inducing. He was fascinated by the humanism of Erasmus and his intuitions of non-denominational Christianity: "without rites, dogmas, priests", but with the belief, "that it is not flowery speech that reaches God, but the truthful desire of the heart." But this was not all: Erasmus was fascinating to Kolakowski as a certain project of being in the world and a model of functioning as an intellectual within the institution of the Church. He was fascinated by Erasmus' strategy of reforming orthodoxy. "All the work of Erasmus," he wrote in 1960,

although it did not contain a directly formulated idea of non-denominational religion, was an amassing of countless

suggestions, which led to it by different ways: all of them were bordering on heresy with the constant effort of stopping at the very limit; all of them met with violent accusations, at the same time always leaving a space for ambiguity which permitted the author to defend his own orthodoxy. Each of these suggestions separately gave a possibility of defence, and in the end, in spite of all the attacks and accusations, during his life Erasmus avoided final confrontations, and the successive placing of his works on different lists of forbidden books started later, when the subversive consequences of his divertive action became quite substantial.

What kind of advice would Erasmus of Rotterdam give us today in a world of globalization, ethnic wars, religious intolerance, but also in a world where hope struggles with despair and freedom with subjugation? Erasmus, Kolakowski wrote, was

a peace-loving fomenter, philologist and moralist, often indecisive, deeply engaged in the main conflicts of his times, yet at the same time cautious and retreating, not inclined towards extremes, one of the greatest promoters of the movement of reform of religious life, who, however, never joined the Reformation, a gentle warrior, savant and satirist.

Exactly. So what would Erasmus from Rotterdam have to say to us today?

Leszek Kolakowski said:

The tension between spiritual independence and total identification can be solved only by abandoning independence. It is almost impossible to avoid conflicts between the typical intellectual like Melancthon, and a great people's tribune like Luther. And when the intellectuals tried to become themselves peoples' leaders or professional politicians, the results were usually not too inviting. The market square of the word with all of its dangers is finally a more appropriate place for them than the king's court.

Let's therefore go to the market square, constituted today by the changing Europe. Not only to the governments and parliaments, but to the common people. In this advice there is something of the spirit of Sisyphus, pushing his boulder. But if we reject that boulder, we will retreat in a fight which, although it never ends with final victory, never brings – and we know it from Erasmus and from Leszek Kolakowski – a final defeat.

References

Erasmus, *Method of True Theology*

David Hume, *Essays* (1742), Oxford University Press, 1993

Denis de Rougemont, *Lettre ouverte aux Européens*, Paris, 1970

Claudio Magris, *Danubio*, Garzanti 1986; quotations after the American edition, *Danube. Journey through the Landscape, History and Culture of Central Europe*, New York, 1989

Leszek Kolakowski, *Notatki o współczesnej kontrreformacji*, Warszawa, 1962 and "Die Intellektuellen" in *Kann der Teufel erlöst werden?* (Polish edition, *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony*, London 2nd, 1984)

This is one of the two essays written for the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation on the occasion of the award of the Erasmus Prize to Adam Michnik and Claudio Magris, Amsterdam, November 2001.

The authors and the Praemium Erasmianum kindly gave their permission to the [Fund for Central and East European Book Projects](#) to make the essays available to Eurozine.

Published 2001-12-28

Original in Polish

Translation by Irena Grudzinska Gross

Contribution by CEEBP

© Adam Michnik and Praemium Erasmianum Foundation, 2001