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Utopia as a Parody of Hope? Some Remarks on the Temporality of Politics

Abstract: The text addresses the following question: to what extent is the rhetorical figure of modern political utopia a secular parody of religious hope, and to what extent can religious hope also be seen as a kind of restitution or restoration? The solution to this problem is twofold. On a theoretical level, by referring to the Christian concept of time, the text attempts to present the structure of thinking about social life from the perspective of religious hope against the background of the rhetorical figure of utopia. On a more empirical level (case study), the text refers to the process of reconciliation between Poland and Germany after 1965 and poses the question: to what extent can this process be described in terms of hope and to what extent in terms of utopia? In conclusion, the text proposes to distinguish between the rhetorical figure of utopia in its positive (active) sense and its passive (negative) sense, namely a self-limiting utopia.

Keywords: political utopia, hope, reconciliation in politics, religion and politics.

"Hope is with you when you believe
The earth is not a dream but living flesh,
That sight, touch, and hearing do not lie,
That all things you have ever seen here
Are like a garden looked at from a gate.
You cannot enter. But you're sure it's there. (…)"
Czesław Miłosz, "Hope" [Miłosz 2001: 49]

I. Introduction

Today, if we return to the vital questions about the hopes of religious faith and the hopes of secular politics that Pope Benedict included in his encyclical *Spe salvi*, or if we recall the warnings about a *New and Better World* that were formulated in a similar context by Huxley, Orwell or Zamyatin, we will, somewhat inevitably, also touch on a question that is very well established in political thought: the

question of the phenomenon of utopia. A question of a political rhetorical figure, or sometimes even of an ideology, that still fascinates us today, even if the experience of history and the brilliant works of the aforementioned anti-utopians should have cured us of our utopian illusions.

Much has been said and written by both literary and political scholars about the famous 'golden book' by St Thomas More published in Louvain in 1516 under this very title – *Utopia* [Baczko 1994: 72]. Even more attention has been paid by scholars to the followers, or perhaps imitators, of the fascinating message originally put forth by the author of *Utopia*, who – perhaps independently of the original's real intentions – sketched out different visions of social perfection [Dahrendorf 1958; Szacki 1980; Manheim 1992; Baczko 1994; Sargisson 2012; Segal 2012].

From the perspective that interests us here – the tension between religion and politics in the reading of the signs of the future – it is, however, worth pointing out at the outset an intriguing paradox related to the contemporary perception of the author of Utopia. For the Catholic Church, which proclaimed him a saint in 1935, celebrating the virtue of his faith and his courageous witness to his very end, and even setting him up as a model for politicians and civil servants, does not really address the question of his most famous work in its social teaching, even though the work is invoked, for example, in the anti-clerical left-wing tradition [Baczko 1994: 144–149; Kautsky 1949]. One can mention in this context, for example, Pope John Paul II's 2000 "Apostolic Letter Proclaiming Saint Thomas More Patron of Statesmen and Politicians". Recalling Thomas's example of conscientious service as a public servant and celebrating the virtue of his heroic faith, the Pope emphasized More's honesty and fairness, his service especially to the poor and the weak, his commitment to the education of the young, his profound detachment from the world of political ambition, the accuracy of his judgments about human nature, and even his humorous disposition, but he made no direct reference to *Utopia* itself – which, after all, has captured so much of the modern political imagination [John Paul II 2000].

This issue does, of course, raise a more fundamental question: what did St. Thomas, who was, after all, an experienced public servant and at the same time a deeply devout Christian who kept his distance from the realm of politics, actually mean by his tale of human happiness and the shared idyll, to which an exemplary governing authority, devoid of human vices, would lead? Should it be seen as an expression of More's real political convictions, or rather as a kind of literary doubletalk, a pun and a message full of hidden signs from the 'initiated' to the

'initiated', addressed by the eminent intellectual of the Renaissance addressed to his friends, including Erasmus of Rotterdam? [Baczko 1994: 85–86] Was it a manifesto of the author's political idealism or even revolutionism, as the leftist tradition would have it? Or perhaps the opposite, given the peculiar name of the Happy Island,[1] was it a rather bitter, and ultimately deeply Christian, observation that in the realm of human authority, paradise on earth, or Plato's ideal 'Republic', is it simply impossible? And did the Catholic Church therefore declare Thomas More a saint, as it were, despite his famous work?

Leaving these questions open, we can nevertheless conclude at least two points as more obvious. *The first* is that More's *Utopia* – along with Machiavelli's *The Prince*, written around the same time, and Bodin's *Six Books on the Republic* written a little later – is one of the keys that opened an era of modern politics that proclaimed itself secular and sovereign, and that sawn the state as a political state established by human hands (state, *Staat*, or *l'état*) rather than a God-granted *dominium* [Stawrowski 2007: 14]. For just as Machiavelli, in his reflections on the drama of politics, parentheses the classical notion of virtue and replaces it with the question of fortune and efficiency, and just as Bodin replaces the category of the divine origin of authority with the attribute of its sovereignty, so More, whether intentionally or not, places modern political thought, and in particular thinking about the political future, outside the framework of real time and space, opening up its new secular horizons. Whatever his intentions, the author of *Utopia* creates a specific stylistic figure which, as we know, has been used with seriousness (and perhaps less caution) by many of his followers.[2] And although – as J. Szacki, among others, insightfully demonstrates in his *Encounters with Utopia* [*Spotkania z utopią*]– this figure can take very different forms,[3] it seems that with the development of

[1] As B. Baczko notes, in the peculiar name *Utopia* one can read both the suggestion that it means "*Ou*-topia, a land that is 'nowhere', that does not exist" and "*Eu*-topia" [Baczko 1994: 87].

[2] The works of Francis Bacon, Thomas Campanella, Voltaire, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Charles Fourier, Étienne Cabet or Herbert George Wells are usually cited as classics of this genre. In the broadest sense, some seek utopian images of social happiness in the political thought of Plato, the pages of the New Testament, or contemporary cinema and literature.

[3] Within this political and literary genre, Jerzy Szacki distinguishes two fundamentally different general types: 'escapist' utopias, which focus on the mere dream of a better world, and 'heroic' utopias, which explicitly call for concrete action. In the first group, he distinguishes utopias of 'place', 'time' and 'eternal order', while in the latter he speaks of 'monastic', 'convent' utopias and utopias 'of politics'. The utopias of convent are, in this distinction, are meant to be a call for fundamental change within a defined and closed group or environment. The utopias of politics, on the other hand, are a general call to improve the social world as a whole, as such, through politics. [Szacki 1980: 48–56].

geography, which limits space to utopias of place, one of its leading forms becomes utopias of time, including utopias of the future.

Without delving here into a detailed analysis of the various forms of utopia, we can also note, *secondly*, in the most general terms, that many of them are characterized not only by the tinge of a dream, but also by the expressed or unexpressed conviction of the need to free politics from the shackles of its historicity.

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And here we return to the question posed at the beginning, the problem to which we wish to devote our reflections. Should the secular figure of the political utopia, which has accompanied modern political thought since its origins in the sixteenth century, be regarded merely as a form of parody or caricature of religiously derived hope? Or is it also a political substitute for, or even a secular modification of, hope? Out of necessity, we leave aside the otherwise important question of the feasibility and legitimacy of a strictly religious utopia, especially a Christian utopia.

Among the various avenues along which an answer to the question posed in this way might be sought, we shall, in our brief reflections, choose one that is relatively seldom chosen in political science: one that directs attention to the question of political temporality in the broadest sense. For changes in the perception of time and history leave their mark on political thought in much the same way as analogous changes in the perception of the state, authority or natural law.

Thus, in our reflections we will refer both to classical and more contemporary research on the figure of utopia [Dahrendorf 1958; Szacki 1980; Manheim 1992; Baczko1994; Sargisson 2012; Segal 2012; Maj 2014], as well as to classical reflections in the field of the anthropology of time [Eliade 1974; Tarkowska 1987; Benedict XVI 2007]. However, the main theoretical perspective of this reflection is provided by the framework of research in the anthropology of politics, based on contemporary Polish literature, which has been excellently outlined and systematized by, among others, Michał Gierycz [Gierycz 2017].

II. The Christian understanding of time and the perspective of hope

In seeking an answer to our question, therefore, we will *first* try to sketch briefly the framework – largely underpinned by Christianity – of classical European temporality and the category of hope that emerges from it. *Second*, we will attempt to consider our problem through an example of contemporary politics. *Third*, and

finally, we will attempt to outline the relationship between the category of secular utopia and that of religious hope.

Time as the word of God

The great question of the meaning of history and the passage of time has accompanied Christianity from its very beginning.[4] Therefore, in searching for a way to synthetically present the Christian perspective in this area, we must limit ourselves to just a few images.

In the shortest of terms, one can say that, in the Christian understanding, time is "the word of God" (Zięba) that resounds above the scene of the human drama.[5]

Extending this view a little, however, we can also note, following Jaroslav Pelikan, that the theological tradition – of both the Christian East and West – derived its understanding of time, as well as virtually every 'social programme', from the religious image of the Holy Trinity. As this historian of the Church wrote, in this Trinitarian view: "The mystery of the Divine Being and of the eternal relations *ad intra* between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity belongs to the realm of *theologia*, which transcends time and to which a negative and "apophatic" language is particularly suited; whereas the *ad extra* actions of the Father as Creator, the Son as Redeemer and the Holy Spirit as Giver of life take place in the context of the divine *oikonomia* and therefore in history – and therefore in time" [Pelikan 1999: 14].

At least two things seem significant in this image. *First*, it clearly shows the irreducible tension between God's mystery of the extra-temporal, eternal, 'always' and 'now' and the secular and time-bound perspective of temporal human history into which the One who is beyond time enters. Time thus becomes both the 'vessel of creation' [Pelikan 1999: 13] of the human world and the space of God's intervention in it: of incarnation and redemption, the fulfilment of which will be the *Parousia* in the future. Thus, *secondly*, Christianity clearly rejects the theory of time as recurring cycles, familiar from primitive religions, and history, in its perspective,

4 It is worth remembering: St John begins his Gospel by stating What was (Who was) in the beginning.

5 Presenting this phenomenological perspective, Rev. Prof. Józef Tischner wrote in the conclusion of his *Philosophy of Drama* [*Filozofia dramatu*]: "At the outset of a drama, the question arises: who are you? At the end, two mutually contradictory possibilities emerge: the accursed or the blessed" [Tischner 1990: 257].

not only acquires its beginning, but also its direction and its meaning. As Pelikan writes, recalling the thought of St Augustine that "the history of humanity is not a series of repetitive events, but leads – surely, though not necessarily in a straight line – to an ultimate goal" [Pelikan 1999:17].

The tension we have noted here between the *sacrum* of eternity and the *profanum* of temporality obviously has its roots in Greek philosophy, in which, as Krzysztof Michalski put it – referring to Plotinus: "Time can only be understood from the perspective of eternity, the transient form of the world can only be understood from the point of view of that which is unchanging, constant, timeless" [Michalski 1999: 6].

Furthermore, this relationship may also be related to the basic Greek temporal distinction between time as the continuation of human history – *chronos* – and *kairos* – that special, unique moment that must not be missed. Today we can understand *kairos* both in a phenomenological, secular sense, as a moment, an instant of revelation of the – usually hidden – depth and essence of our reality, and in a religious sense, as special moments of divine intervention [Bielecki 1995], such as the Visitation, the Incarnation, or the Redemption.

But this tension can also take on an altogether political and even ludic form. Citing eminent scholars of European culture, Charles Taylor sees its manifestations, for example, in a kind of ritual chaos – or a specific dialogue between social "structure" and "anti-structure" and between solemnity and laughter – such as festivals or carnivals in traditional societies [Taylor 1999: 22–65; Taylor 2007: 47–54].

More importantly, Christianity does not seem to accept the cyclical understanding of time that was present in the primitive religions. The rejection of this concept of time, brilliantly described, for example, by Mircea Eliade [Eliade 1974] as a religious longing and ritual return to a sacred cosmogony; and of the sacrum as a myth telling of this paradisiacal primordial beginning, opens up an interest in change and development in the Christian world. For while Christianity emphasizes not only the creation of the world, but also its redemption and the anticipated Parousia and final judgement, its essential value, in both religious and secular terms, lies in the future. And history, both personal and collective, begins to be seen as a journey. It is probably for this reason that, as early as the Christian Middle Ages, despite the fact that linear time was commonly measured in its natural and theological way, institutions, and procedures oriented towards the

future, development, and modernization were born and developed: the university, the urban community, law, commerce, and crafts.

However, as Charles Taylor points out, the dynamics as well as the direction of time understood and lived in such a linear way, in the Christian tradition was characterized by a clear relationship between temporal time and a higher, sacred time. As he explains: "tracts of secular time were not homogeneous, mutually interchangeable. They were coloured by their placing in relation to higher times" [Taylor 2007: 58; Taylor 1999: 40]. From this perspective, then, secular time, which runs linearly from the various (even dramatic) experiences of the past towards the unknown future, can reorient itself and, in a certain sense, regenerate itself in the nodal, festive moments of encounter with the higher and eternal time. With that extra-temporal divine "now" in which – dispersed on earth – past and future persist in perfect unity [Taylor 2007: 56; Taylor 1999: 39].

The point, however, is that, as the same author points out, such a dialogical perception of time begins to change in the Christian world as the forces of nature begin to be replaced by mechanics, and the "eternity of mathematics is not beyond change, but constantly rules change. It is equidistant from all times. It is not in this sense a 'higher' time" [Taylor 2007: 59; Taylor 1999: 42]. From this point, roughly from the seventeenth century onwards, the polyphonic and symphonic logic of time begins to be replaced by a logic of order, discipline, pace, and resources. A logic that, according to Taylor, leads to the Weberian "«*stahlhartes Gehause*» (iron cage)" of the 20th century modernity [Taylor 2007: 59; Taylor 1999: 43]. And we can also add: to the monetization motto, "Remember that time is money", from the *credo* of modern capitalism that became Benjamin Franklin's 1748 letter "Advice to a Young Tradesman" [Weber 1994: 32].

Hope. Change in structure or perspective?

In this – merely laconic – view of the Christian tradition of experiencing time, the peculiar tension between *secular* and *sacred* time seems particularly important from the point of view of our interest here. For it is here that the deeper and crucial Christian awareness of the structural flaw of the human world is expressed, inseparable from the religious and moral call to strive to change and improve this world. Without succumbing to hubris and without falling into despair.

It is also worth noting that the Christian core of European civilisation, which is so crucial to it, has been and continues to be recognized by those who look at it from

a certain, if only philosophical, perspective. Perhaps the most outstanding Polish philosopher of the twentieth century wrote in this regard in 1980: "Christianity said, «The philosopher's stone, the elixir of immortality, these are superstitions of alchemists; nor is there a recipe for a society without evil, without sin or conflict; such ideals are the aberrations of a mind convinced of its omnipotence, they are the fruits of pride». But to admit all this is not to give way to despair" [Kołakowski 1990b: 30–31; Kołakowski 1990a: 36]. And he stressed: "The degeneration into despair is common among those who once believed in a perfect and ultimate solution and later lost that certainty. But it is the tradition of Christian teaching to shield us from both these perils: from the wild certainty of our infinite capacity for perfection on the one hand and from suicide on the other" [Kołakowski 1990b: 30; Kołakowski 1990a: 35].

And it is here that the place and fundamental importance of Christian hope – also for social and political life – is revealed in all its clarity. Hope as a remedy both for pride and for despair or discouragement. In an encyclical dedicated specifically to this question, on the threshold of the 21st century – the century of uncertainty – Pope Benedict reminded us that hope, in its deepest sense, is born of man's encounter with the love of a personal God. As he put it, in this particular religious experience "it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love–a Person. And if we know this Person and he knows us, then truly the inexorable power of material elements no longer has the last word; we are not slaves of the universe and of its laws, we are free. In ancient times, honest enquiring minds were aware of this. Heaven is not empty. Life is not a simple product of laws and the randomness of matter, but within everything and at the same time above everything, there is a personal will, there is a Spirit who in Jesus has revealed himself as Love" [Benedict XVI 2007: par. 5; Benedykt XVI: par. 5].

In this religious perspective, then, hope is not a certainty about the future, nor a ready-made plan for the repair of the temporal world, nor even a mere premonition of the world's imminent fundamental improvement, much less a promise that all sin and evil will be removed from it. In an immanently flawed human world, hope merely reveals some glimmers of human freedom, dignity, subjectivity, agency and moral responsibility in relation to the work of creation. It is therefore an invitation to a change of perspective rather than a story of imminent change in reality or structure.

In this sense, then, hope is the proposal of a perspective which, without drawing any particular pictures of the future, without taking the laws of history in hand,

and without even believing in the redemptive power of hope, at the same time restores to history its essential human and moral meaning. In describing the contribution of Christianity to the shaping of European civilization, Pope John Paul II, speaking at the headquarters of the EEC in 1985, noted that this meaning can be seen especially in "a certain conception of man. He is convinced that the human person has a unique value at the centre of the world, that history has meaning, that progress is possible in all areas, that there is still hope for the construction of a world founded upon justice and solidarity in respect for rights, that it is possible not to let oneself be submerged by evil" [John Paul II 1985: par. 2].

III. Hope or utopia? The case of the post-World War II Polish-German reconciliation

To return to the main theme of our reflections, we should once again ask whether religious hope, understood in this way, can only find its parody in the secular figure of political utopia? Or can the relationship between the two be subtler?

Before attempting to answer these questions, let us briefly consider the whole matter using a more contemporary example of the search for ways of political reconciliation and forgiveness between Poland and Germany after the Second World War. This important issue has already received considerable attention in various deliberations.[6] For us, this example is instructive for two reasons. *First*, it can be seen as an attempt to free contemporary politics from the burden of history and from an irreversibly bygone time of suffering and evil. And *secondly*, as in any such case, the question may arise: is this an action inspired by religious hope, or do we also see in it some elements of a modern utopia?

Signs of hope

Without going here into the whole process of post-war German-Polish reconciliation,[7] which began on a wider scale in 1965 with the Letter of

[6] In Poland, this issue is addressed by, among others: [Kerski, Kycia, Żurek 2006; Pękala, Dingel (eds) 2020; Sowiński 2023].

[7] After the memorable Message of the Polish bishops, the subsequent stages of this religious--political process were marked, *inter alia*, by Chancellor Willy Brandt's kneeling homage (*kniefall*) in front of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and the signing of the border treaty between the People's Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany in December 1970; the young German Christians' expiatory action "Signs of Repentance" initiated in the early 1960s; German support for Polish society during martial law; the "Mass of Reconciliation" in Krzyżowa in November 1989; and the treaties between Poland and reunited Germany in 1990 and 1991.

Reconciliation from the Polish bishops to the German bishops, with its message – we grant forgiveness and we ask for your forgiveness,[8] one can quite clearly read in it the various motives of religious hope mentioned above.

First of all, therefore, it is worth noting that the Polish Bishops, in taking this landmark step in November 1965, a step that was to some extent risky – and certainly not understood by everyone at the time – were motivated by the impulse of the uniqueness of the historical moment, the particular religious *kairos* that marked the end of the Second Vatican Council, as well as the approaching *millennium* of the Baptism of Poland in 966. Secondly, furthermore, one can read in this initiative both an attempt at a courageous confrontation with the tragic history of both nations, marked in the twentieth century by German crimes, and a sense of responsibility for their common future. As one of the signatories of this *Letter* explained years later, forgiveness (which is also a condition for reconciliation between communities) does not mean ignoring or forgetting the wrongs or offences, but "it means re-examining them with a new attitude and learning precisely from the experience of suffering that only love can build up, whereas hatred produces devastation and ruin" [John Paul II 1996: par. 3]. In this sense, we can see in this step an attempt to reread the dramatic past in favour of a future that would not be determined by it, an attempt made because of the impetus of the present moment. Thirdly, we can also see here an attempt to extend the space of freedom, regardless of the rather brutal political reality of the time. Both the religious freedom of the Church and the freedom of future generations of Poles and Germans to work together; a freedom that does not relativize historical guilt, but is not paralysed by it either.[9]

In this process, at least in its origins, one can therefore see an invitation to shape above all a new attitude towards a shared past and future – not necessarily a proposal for a new, ready-made political structure that would permanently liberate the future and the past from the burden of conflict, suffering, sin or evil.[10]

[8] This was expressed in the *Letter of Reconciliation* in the following words: "In this all-Christian and at the same time quite human spirit we extend our hands to you across the benches of the Council that is drawing to an end; we grant forgiveness and we ask your forgiveness" [Polish Bishops 1966: 18].

[9] In his *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace on 1 January 2002*, Pope John Paul II wrote: "All human beings cherish the hope of being able to start all over again, and not remain for ever shut up in their own mistakes and guilt. They all want to raise their eyes to the future and to discover new possibilities of trust and commitment" [John Paul II 2002: par. 8].

[10] It is worth noting that this perception of the Polish-German reconciliation process is still present in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church today. For example, in September

A religious utopia?

Having said that, however, one can also ask whether the very announcement of an offer of reconciliation and forgiveness on behalf of the entire nation, only twenty years after the atrocities of the war, might not have been perceived as naïve, too dreamy and perhaps even utopian? And, more generally, does not any attempt at collective forgiveness and reconciliation that somehow touches on individual consciences and seeks to free politics from the burdens of history bear the hallmarks of a contemporary utopia?

With regard to the process referred to here, this question can be asked at least in relation to two moments in this process. First, at the very beginning of the reconciliation process, could not only the initiative itself, but also the content of the Polish bishops' *Letter* be considered unrealistic, too naïve, or utopian? After all, in 1965 – just three years after the Cuban Missile Crisis – the Cold War was still "in full swing" and the hardline anti-clerical and anti-German political line of Władysław Gomułka (then 1st Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party PZPR) *et consorts* had not abated. And, more importantly, there was no general willingness on the part of the German state, society, and the Catholic Church – with a few exceptions – to reconcile with Poland or to legally recognize the post-1945 political *status quo*. Suffice it to say that it was not until 1972, after Chancellor Brandt had fought hard to have the 1970 border treaty ratified by the *Bundestag*, that Poland's western borders were formally recognized in Germany [Żurek 2020]. And it was only then that the Holy See and the German Catholic Church recognized the new Polish dioceses in the territories recovered from Germany after the war. Moreover, the issue of fair and just post-war reparations is still not fully resolved.

In this situation, to offer as it were *in blanco*, reconciliation, forgiveness and own repentance in the *Letter*, or even the words contained in it: "let us try to forget! No polemics, no more Cold War, but rather the beginning of a dialogue, such as that which the Council and Pope Paul VI today are seeking to foster everywhere" [Polish Bishops 1966: 16–17] – all this, somehow understandable

2022, the President of the Polish Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, against the background of the report on the losses suffered by Poland as a result of the German aggression and occupation in 1939–1945, prepared by the Polish government of the time, wrote in his statement that "the issues raised in this report should be considered in the context of the long-standing process of Polish-German reconciliation", while recognizing the legitimate right of politicians to be prudent and to seek justice [Gądecki 2022].

from a religious perspective, could sound like a dream, or – precisely – a utopia in a political sense.

Secondly, especially from today's perspective, the great political, but also spiritual, expectations expressed about the fruits of the Polish-German reconciliation process at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries can be seen as somewhat utopian. Let us recall that politicians of both countries, who rightly emphasized the success and importance of this process, not only saw in it the key to close cooperation between Poland and Germany, but also created expectations of a common "safe and happy future" in a united Europe [Kohl 1995], or dreams of a united Europe in which "from the Judeo-Christian and humanist tradition of our civilization we draw the anthropocentric conviction that the human person is the foundation of the social order" [Geremek 1998]. The clergy of the Catholic Church in Poland and Germany as well, solemnly commemorating the 40th anniversary of the memorable *Letter* of 1965, expressed their conviction of the need to shape together, in the Christian spirit, the spirit of Europe [Joint Statement 2005].

IV. Conclusions

Does this initiative, therefore, which carries within clear motifs of Christian hope, not somehow border on the figure of political utopia? And therefore, to turn this perspective around, can we not say that, under certain circumstances and conditions, the rhetorical figure of a political utopia can somehow accompany religiously motivated hope? Or even, in a secularized society, could it pave the way for hope?

Utopia in the face of hope. Parody or restitution?

To answer this question, it is worth pointing out once again that the utopian figure of thinking about the future is, in its very structure, always a sharp, fundamental polemic in which – in one way or another – the representation of the political ideal is pitted against the experience of political reality. As an eminent sociologist of ideas has put it, "Utopia is a protest against the absolutization of current political divisions; it is an attempt to restart the dispute about the shape of society. It seeks to replace the choice between two versions of reality with a choice between reality and the ideal" [Szacki 1980: 137].

This seemingly laconic approach makes it clear that there are two dimensions to utopian thinking: a *negative* one, which questions the absolutization, idealization, or even premature legitimization of the existing political reality, and a

positive one, which promotes a kind of shared 'journey', understood in one way or another, from a screeching political reality to the realm of political happiness. Although the terms *negative* and *positive* dimension of utopia could still be described here as its *passive* and *active* sides, or – by analogy with the language of Isaiah Berlin in his "Two Concepts of Liberty" – as a form of utopia *from* and utopia *to* a political order. One could also refer here to the already signalled distinction between 'escapist' utopias, which refer mainly to dreams, and 'heroic' utopias, which call for action.

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Having made this distinction, and to return to our main topic, we cannot help but notice that political utopia in its *positive* dimension, e.g. as a political programme, has little in common with the religiously understood phenomenon of hope. On the contrary, in this dimension, in the various forms of utopian thinking, from utopias of place and time to utopias of the ideal state to various forms of utopias of politics, we can quite easily recognize a parody of religious hope. For by encouraging a political leap into an earthly "kingdom of happiness", utopia can easily become a caricature of religious hope.

To elaborate briefly on this rather obvious observation, the *first* point to note is that every utopia that is treated *positively* (and doctrinally), by pointing to the shape of the social world in which history will finally free itself (or is already freeing itself) from the unbearable tension between what is complete and unchanging (manifested in the moment of *kairos*) and what is flawed and transitory (along with *chronos*), thus *de facto* proclaims a nearer or further end to history itself. The end of history, and with it the end of hope for change, reconstruction, or development of the temporal realm created by man. For, as Ralf Dahrendorf so aptly observed, "utopias have but a nebulous past and no future" [Dahrendorf 1958: 116; Szacki 1980: 165]. *Second*, in proclaiming this or that political programme or social order to be ideal and finite, utopias generally sin not only with hubris, audacity or naivety, but also with the idolatry of politics. It does not take much insight to imagine – especially after the experience of the 20th century – what this can lead to. *Thirdly*, and perhaps most importantly, a *positively* conceived utopia parodies religious hope in the sense that it closes rather than opens the space of human freedom. For if in the political "kingdom of perfection" the good, the true and the beautiful are to become, as it were, an official necessity, then human freedom must become, within it, a pernicious phantasmagoria and, consequently, a runaway from it.

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However, recalling these – essentially – obvious facts, it should be noted that the whole matter may look somewhat different if, when reading utopian stories, we stop only at their *negative* or *passive* dimension, leaving aside their claims to strictly programmatic or systemic recommendations, or treating them as a kind of metaphor or intellectual provocation. In fact, such a limited presentation brings out in the structure of almost every utopian story above all those elements that deal with a change of perspective on the social view of the world, and less with the manner of its reconstruction.

For in saying this, it is worth noting, *first* of all, that in this negative sense, utopia is not just another radical critique of the political *status quo*, or a critical voice in the debate about it, but rather a way of urging that the present disputes and political quests be closed as they stand, abandoned as fruitless; it is "an attempt to restart the dispute about the shape of society". Importantly, this utopian aspiration is in this sense not only "a protest against the absolutization of current political divisions", but also – and perhaps above all – an encouragement to look for new foci, new language and new solutions in the old dispute about what is politically possible, necessary and needed here and now. It is precisely an encouragement – as in the case of the logic of religious hope – to precede the discussion of changing structures with a change of perspective. And perhaps this is how the 'golden book' of St Thomas More can be interpreted.

In utopia, read in its *negative* sense, one can also find – secondly – an encouragement to seek in thinking about politics some distance from the realm of power and politics, or at least some distance from its current form. A distance that helps to see political challenges with a new depth and breadth of vision. By the same token, it is conceivable that utopia in this *negative* variant, like religious hope, might bring a kind of invigorating restlessness and tension to the debate about politics. The kind of restlessness, ferment, and tension that the *Letter* from the Polish bishops brought about, and which at the same time opened up changes in political and ecclesiastical attitudes, also on the German side.

Thirdly and finally, utopia understood in this way – like the virtue of hope – can open up political thinking to an attitude of political far-sightedness; a moral responsibility for the future which, while posing bold questions and drawing up various scenarios, does not prejudge anything. For example, the far-sightedness

of the "founding fathers" of the first European communities, whose plans, formulated only a few years after the war, could have also seemed like utopias.

Utopias as imaginary numbers?

The answer to the question that we have posed about the relationship between the political figure of utopia and religious hope thus seems complex. For when utopia takes on the austere form of a self-confident political doctrine or ideology which, "taking the iron laws of history in hand", proclaims the imminent end of the drama of human history, it must become a verdict on human freedom and thus a negation, a farce, or a parody of religious hope. It is different when this or that utopia, while remaining a mere rhetorical figure, sparkling with finesse or imagination, becomes at the same time an intellectual and moral provocation to rethink the pressing challenges of the present, to look at them from an entirely different angle than before. Not necessarily in order to immediately rebuild the world around us according to a ready-made model, but in order to better understand the social causes of its shortcomings and to see new possibilities for changing it. Then, in the figure of utopia, one can cautiously look for traces or motifs of hope and see in it a kind of reminiscence or perhaps even restitution.

Looking for an analogy for this perspective in the world of mathematical sciences, we can also cautiously say that, under certain conditions, utopias can fulfil the same cognitive function in relation to political life as imaginary numbers (which can also be more elegantly described as representations) do in the understanding of nature or physics. For, as we know, even the latter, while retaining their distinctly theoretical character, at the same time free our cognitive apparatus from certain limitations of everyday life (such as the fact that the square of numbers cannot have a negative value), thus making it possible to understand the empirical (in electrical engineering, for example) much better.

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In our treatment of utopia, then, the question seems to be whether we can defend that crucial demarcation between its *negative* and *positive* forms, its *passive* and *active* sides, between utopia "from" the political order and utopia "to" that order. The line beyond which intellectual freshness, moral courage, political far-sightedness and freedom of hope end, and beyond which doctrinaire, moralizing and idolatrous politics begin.

In short, then, the problem seems to be whether the rhetorical figure of utopia is capable of keeping its distance from itself, and whether it is capable of self-limitation, as some contemporary peaceful revolutions have been capable of self-limitation [Staniszkis 2010]. Here, however, is a much more fundamental question, and one that is likely to be raised more than once in these pages: whether contemporary secular politics as such is capable of self-limitation. And, in a secularizing world, is politics, on its own and without the support of religion, capable of freeing itself from the temptation of idolatry? [Kołakowski 1990a: 237–264; Kołakowski 1990b: 146–161].

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