

Maria Szymborska

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0001-9054-9782

Desired and unwanted brotherhood

Book review edited by Joanna Kulcska and Anna M. Solarz

***Fraternity as an Overlooked Element in Global Politics*, Routledge 2025**

Abstract: The article is a review of *Fraternity as an Overlooked Element in Global Politics*, a publication edited by Joanna Kulcska and Anna M. Solarz and published by Routledge in 2025. An international group of scientists analyse the meaning and inclination of fraternity as an element of political thought.

Keywords: Africa, brotherhood, Christianity, Francis, fraternity, friendship, Iran, Islam, Latvia, Poland, Saudi Arabia, security, solidarity, ubuntu

A sentimental utopia or a meaningful concept that genuinely contributes to expanding areas of peace in the world? Alongside liberty and equality, the flagship idea of the French Revolution is treated with reserve by political scientists. The imbalance in the number of publications devoted to each element of the famous triad is clear evidence of this. For Joanna Kulcska and Anna M. Solarz, this was a pretext for reflecting on the notion of fraternity, which has recently returned in public discourse. The initiators brought together an international group of experienced scholars from various branches of the social sciences. The result is a highly engaging mosaic of perspectives presented in the volume *Fraternity as an Overlooked Element in Global Politics*.

In my view, this diversity, and sometimes even total dissimilarity, of the opinions and conclusions reached by the authors is the book's greatest strength. The arguments of those scholars who advocate for the revival of the idea of fraternity are far from naïve, and yet they clash with the legitimate concerns of those who see it as a threat. This tension reveals both the concept's inexhaustible potential and the need for precise, critical reflection on an idea that can lead to war no less than to peace. According to Kulcska and Solarz, it is precisely in this ambiguity that

fraternity may serve as a bridge between distant systems of meaning, disciplines of knowledge or regions of the world. The authors make full use of this wealth of possibilities.

The variety of concepts and positions has been organised in a four-part structure that lends coherence and clarity to the entire volume. The first six articles aim to define the concept of fraternity and situate it within the current context. Kamil Minkner, analyses the dominant contemporary perspectives on fraternity. He distinguishes between 'conservative', 'progressive' and 'transformative' approaches and identifies, in his opinion, the intellectually most interesting one. Joanna Radwańska-Wiliams explains the differences in the perception of fraternity and the first two elements of the French slogan basing on the concept of an individualist-collectivist continuum differentiating cultures. The dominant national responses of public authorities to the COVID-19 pandemic serve as a backdrop for her insightful observations and conclusions. In the third chapter, Rafał Prostak examines the role of fraternity and solidarity in contemporary liberal thought, using the works of Richard Rorty and John Rawls as key reference points. A different perspective is introduced in the following article, where Michael Roseneck presents religion as a potentially positive source of epistemologically and socially inclusive frameworks. He also discusses the contradictions inherent in excluding religious arguments from democratic deliberation. This intuition is further supported by practical examples in the next chapter, in which Tamás Nyirkos takes a closer look at the thought of St Thomas Aquinas, shifting the reader's focus from fraternity to friendship. The section concludes with Michał Gierycz's article, which, drawing on an analysis of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, presents a distinct interpretation of conservatively understood fraternity. His approach contrasts with that of Minkner. Gierycz also raises concerns about the papal document, suggesting that it departs from earlier traditions of the monotheistic religions.

The second part of the publication marks a shift from theory to practice presented through three, hopeful case studies. In the first article, Joanna Kulska complements the earlier reflection of Minkner, Roseneck and Gierycz by situating the activities of Pope Francis within a broader historical context. She also underscores their significance for the 'rediscovery' of fraternity in public discourse. One likely source of inspiration for the Jesuit Bishop of Rome was the interreligious meeting and time of prayer organised by John Paul II in Assisi in 1986. The tangible outcomes of the "Spirit of Assisi" are the focus of chapter eight, authored by Massimiliano Signifredi. Part two concludes with an analysis by Anna M.

Solarz of the Polish Solidarity movement and its religious foundations. The second editor of the presented volume, not only investigate the depths of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union that changed the course of European and global history but also reflects on what remains of its ideals in contemporary Poland.

The third section, entitled *Between Idea and Reality*, highlights the problem of the instrumentalisation of the concept under study. The most striking and poignant example is presented by Marcin Składanowski, who analyses how fraternity has been used to justify Russian aggression against Ukraine. Earlier, in chapter ten, Monika Gabriela Bartoszewicz and Piotr Gil present the limits of the title concept, explicitly pointing to the Masonic roots of contemporary universalist and shallow visions of fraternity. A particularly valuable aspect of their contribution is the question they raise concerning the very foundations of the proposed bond, as well as their effort to raise awareness of the multiple meanings and influences that the idea of a “brotherhood of blood” can carry. Highlighting the opposite of the declared effects of “fraternity-building”, especially at the international level, makes a strong introduction to Składanowski’s article. The consequences of the political entanglement of the notion of brotherhood are also familiar to Latvians, marked by years of Soviet propaganda on the one hand, and by the effects of the European multicultural policy on the other. The question of the appropriate political level at which decisions about the need for solidarity should be made emerges as a powerful theme in the last article of this section, authored by Māra Kiope, Solveig Krūmiņa-Koņkova and Inese Runce.

The final three chapters mark a notable shift in perspective. While the opening of the volume introduces concepts of brotherhood developed in Latin America, it is in the concluding section that the European gaze is set aside entirely in order to explore ideas emerging from the Middle East and Africa. Abdessamad Belhaj outlines the changes in Saudi Arabia’s external narrative, which is evolving from an historically exclusive posture toward one that now publicly promotes a discourse of universal brotherhood¹. In contrast, Hessam Habibi Doroh discusses the activities of the *Tablighi Jamaat*, an Islamic missionary movement operating in Iran. The juxtaposition of these two contributions offers a nuanced view of the diversity of interpretations and expressions within the Islamic tradition. The volume closes with Benson Ohihon Igboin’s presentation of *ubuntu*, a concept of community

¹ Saudi Arabia was one of the initiators of the establishment by the United Nations in 2020 of International Day of Human Brotherhood; resolution 75/200.

deeply embedded in African cultures. It is through relationship that one becomes truly human; something that, as author pointedly observes, Europeans often seem to forget.

Exploring non-Occidental ways of thinking, as well as drawing attention to the distinction between Western and Middle-Eastern Europe, constitutes the second major strength of the presented volume². Particularly as one of the key contexts framing the reflections is the weakening hegemony of the West and the increasingly assertive voice of the Global South.

A comprehensive analysis of all the contributions included in this volume lies beyond the scope of the present text; each article represents an intellectually rich and self-contained study that merits independent scholarly attention. For this reason, I shall limit myself to a few loosely related reflections and observations, in the hope that they may inspire subsequent volumes and encourage future readers to engage with this important work.

In Europe and the United States, anxiety over the global shift in the balance of power is being compounded by a growing sense of internal crisis. Some of its symptoms (and at the same time, underlying causes) include alarming statistic on declining rates of marriage, birth and even sexual activity in the developed world, alongside rising waves of depression and suicide [Piekutowski 2021]. Patrick J. Deneen characterises the modern human condition in the following way: „...we are more lonely and distant from each other. [...] Paradoxically – but not coincidentally – the means of an elaborate state apparatus, which include technology, the education system, science and technology, make us increasingly isolated, autonomous, relationshipless individuals, endowed with myriad rights and defined by a sense of freedom, but ultimately insecure, powerless, fearful and – well – lonely”³ [Deneen 2021]. An interest in fraternity may be seen as a natural response to this pervasive alienation, although the concept finds little place within dominant liberal thought in the West. As Rafal Prostak observes, for liberals, bonds of solidarity are something of a republican chimeras, ghosts of the past. The volume might have benefited from further engagement with thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, who have argued that liberalism, as an outgrowth of the Enlightenment project,

² The publication did not include concepts from the Far East, but the editors declare themselves open to further research directions.

³ All quotations from Patrick J. Deneen cited in translation are the author's own translations from Polish.

is itself one of the driving forces behind the erosion of relationships and the more or less subtle dominance of utilitarian logic [Czarniecki 2025]. In this context, MacIntyre's concept of virtue would also have been highly relevant.

The challenge facing political reflection on the fraternity lies in the difficulty of its institutionalisation. Within the revolutionary triad, it seems to be a voice from a different register, one that resists straightforward codification. Although the French revolutionaries overlooked the fact that democracy requires values it cannot generate on its own; content, not merely slogans⁴. Nonetheless, the French experience continues to be regarded as the foundation of modern politics. Yet, as Dariusz Gawin [2008] points out, the French Revolution "did not build anything lasting – instead of solidly rooted institutions, it left behind great unrest". In this context, I still find the reference to the American Revolution in subsequent volumes particularly inspiring. Unlike the French rebels, the Founding Fathers acknowledged the communities of faith that had preceded the founding of the republic.

As Tomasz Merta [2011: 207-208] wrote, in order to „separate religion from politics (...) they placed between them not so much a high wall as a gaping fence. (...) Alexis de Tocqueville, the most perceptive scholar of the American system, regarded religion as its first political institution. (...) Thus, if even the deinstitutionalisation of religion had indeed taken place, surely the belief of 'a nation subject to God' remained widespread...". The American Founders were distrustful of human nature, which they knew was far from angelic innocence [ibid.: 204]. They understood that it was impossible to construct „a universal ethical model on purely rational grounds" [Kobyliński 2025]. While legitimacy (or lack thereof) does not determine the personal morality, public ethics does require an external foundation. As Leszek Kołakowski [1955: 155] famously put it, „if there is no God everything is permitted"⁵. For this reason, I am personally drawn to a synthesis of the horizontal French values with the Polish motto *God, Honor, Fatherland*, a slogan with a more vertical, spiritually grounded character. Only together do they form a cross, meaning plenitude. But that, of course, is another story.

⁴ Following Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, Michael Roseneck reminds us of this.

⁵ Kołakowski emphasizes, however, that there is no logical transition from belief in a Supreme Being to the belief that He is God the Father in the Christian sense. He also clarifies that „... in questioning attempts to establish morality independent of religious faith, I am concerned solely with the issue of legitimacy. This reasoning provides no basis for claiming that in moral matters, nonbelievers cannot, by nature, act as well as believers, or even better..."

I refer to this concept because, by adopting a post-secular perspective, the authors of this volume cross the traditional religion-politics barrier. In this context, I find Michał Gierycz's reflections and his reference to limited anthropology especially valuable [Gierycz, Mazurkiewicz 2014/2015: 16-34]. Even from a strictly secular standpoint, thinkers such as Maks Horkheimer [2007: 17] have acknowledged the enduring relevance of theological ideas. Horkheimer, for instance, argued that „the doctrine of original sin is one of the most important theories in religion, reminding us of the limits of the striving to establish happiness and justice for all”. Nevertheless, the world's ideal, still solemnly sung on occasions like the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, remains *Imagine* and its vision of a “brotherhood of man”. Casting doubt on the supposed neutrality of John Lennon is not without risk⁶. Another informal anthem of all-human brotherhood *The wind of change* has changed its lyrics after thirty years. In the new version of this symbolic song of the Autumn of Nations, the *Scorpions* voice their protest against Russia's aggression toward Ukraine⁷. Still, in-depth reflection, “connecting the dots” is not the domain of pop culture. In a publication aimed at an international audience for whom familiarity with Christian traditions is not obvious, I missed only a brief explanation of why Christ „demands baptism” (although He does offer it), and why His disciples believe it to be necessary. In a cultural context shaped by “emotivism and prescriptivism” and marked by a “pseudo-virtue” of authenticity, such theological and anthropological foundations require clarification [Czarniecki 2025]. Especially since the awareness of the culpable evil that each of us adds to the world (alongside the unimaginable good) is not self-evident, even among Christ's followers. According to Christian teaching, it is only the task of the Holy Spirit to „convince the world of sin” [John 16,8].

In efforts to secure universal peace, it is of critical importance how we locate the adversary of peace. Can the mere elimination of specific individuals truly address the sources of conflict? As Dariusz Gawin [2008] notes: “Terror is not a degeneration of the essence of the revolution, arising through the fault of external

⁶ A journalist commenting on the opening of the Paris Olympics on Polish Television was suspended after referring to the communist inclinations of a John Lennon song.

⁷ After Russia's aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the band *The Scorpions* changed the lyrics of their famous song *The wind of change*. Instead of „I follow the Moskva Down to Gorky Park Listening to the wind of change” at concerts they sing „Now listen to my heart, it says Ukraine waiting for the wind to change” see [Polskie Radio 2022].

circumstances, but belongs to the very essence of the revolutionary project". The inhabitants of the Vendée, like the revolution's own guillotined children, had no place in the vision of the new citizen. Contemporary developments reveal similar patterns, though often in different forms. Patrick J. Deneen observes that: „Advances in the manipulation of nature inevitably facilitate the remodelling of humanity, with humanity 2.0 sometimes being played out against those unwilling or unable to afford to give up version 1.0" [Deneen 2021]. The human community, much like the sons of Jacob/Israel in the biblical narrative, continues to expel those who are deemed inconvenient. The appearance of unity is frequently constructed through the mechanism of scapegoating [Girard 1987; Maciejewski 2025]. This raises a critical question: Is „turning an enemy into an opponent" enough to break out of the vicious circle? After all, as Gawin [2008] reminds: „everything has inevitably become debatable, and discussion is no longer a dialogue to reach the truth, but a struggle in which ideology provides rhetorical tricks to defeat the opponent". Merely recognising difference and contradiction among people does not mean we possess the strength or the willingness to accept them.

Programmatic individualism may offer a sense of comfort, at least until the experience of loneliness and the indifference of others begins to take its toll. For the globalisation of indifference, Pope Francis proposed a form of "fraternity therapy" [Kuliska, Solarz 2025]. In this recurring theme throughout the publication, the coexistence of social fragmentation and the call for peaceful coexistence with the Islamic world is particularly evident. Indeed, the concept described in the *Fratelli Tutti* encyclical, according to Pope himself, was inspired by his earlier meeting with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb. In 2019, the head of the Catholic Church and the highly authoritative Sunni theologian had signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Coexistence*. An important element of the declaration was the unequivocal condemnation of all acts of violence carried out in the name of religion. A difficulty not explained in the publication is that Allah cannot be attributed the characteristics of the Christian God⁸. Leaving aside the doctrinally crucial issue of the Trinity, it is important to note that in Islam, Allah is not understood as a father figure, let alone as *Abba* [Brague 2014: 159]. Nor does Islamic theology include the idea of „two brothers,"

⁸ I deliberately omit from the text the aspect raised by some of the text's inconsistency with the Catholic Church's teaching on religious indifference, although one could rightly ask whether, if the text had been edited in accordance with the Pope's later remark on God's 'allowing' of different religions, rather than His will in this regard, it would have been signed by the Imam, cf. [Joint Declaration 2019].

a notion that Michał Gierycz recalls as fundamental to the Christian vision of human fraternity. At the same time, Islam does not have a central magisterial authority analogous to the Catholic Church. As a result, diverse currents and interpretations coexist within the tradition. Abdessamad Belhaj, for example, seems to suggest that Saudi Arabia's changing narrative is part of a wider political puzzle. The country's association with the financing of international terrorism appears increasingly to yield more political costs than advantages.

Despite various doubts and assumptions regarding the transcendent sources of true peace, the *Document on Human Fraternity*, understood as an expression of free human will, holds significant importance⁹. Pope Francis has been criticised for being too universalistic. At the same time, this broad invitation is verified by the attitude to the suffering person whom, like the man beaten at Jericho, we pass on our way. Christian's hope does not exclude a terrible judgment: „I do not know you” [Matt 25,12], for those who will not feed the hungry.

Leszek Kołakowski [1999: 160-161] argues that what determines the acceptance of given moral principles is the experience of guilt when one breaks them. As he writes it is: “not an intellectual act, but an act in which one questions one's own status in the cosmic order (...) it is not a fear of retaliation, but a sense of horror in the face of one's own act that has disturbed the harmony of the world, an anxiety that flows from the violation not of a law, but of a taboo”. The notion of „taboo”, which can be likened to Roger Scruton's „ethical vision”, is both the basis of any moral system and a component of religious life. For Kołakowski, *taboo*, inseparable from the sacred, forms the essential bridge between religion and culture. „In a word, culture is a set of taboos or, in other words, culture without taboos is a square circle” [ibid.: 163]. In developing a more anthropologically grounded reflection on fraternity, one might also draw on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, particularly his emphasis on the face of the Other as the starting point for ethical responsibility and moral conversion.

Readers who take a deeper interest in the history of Solidarity will possibly reach the reflections of Zbigniew Stawrowski [2021], who cites a testimony concerning the choice of a name for the union formed at the Gdańsk Shipyard. It appears that the specific term itself was of secondary importance, chosen somewhat

⁹ It is worth quoting here the positive opinion on the document of Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, who has been repeatedly described in the media as a critic of Pope Francis [eKai 2020].

incidentally. The upheaval initiated by the strikers, even though they used a term which was originally intended to replace the Christian concept of mercy (caritas), was above all a revolution of consciences. Once again, the fundamental question arises: do we truly desire this?

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The conceptual range opened by the authors in this volume is remarkably rich, and the reflection it invites could certainly be extended further. As I noted in the introduction, the diversity of conclusions drawn throughout the book testifies to the significant potential inherent in the notion of fraternity. The multiplicity of perspectives contained in the publication means that further questions arise in the juxtaposition of the reflections contained in the individual articles. This creates space for further inquiry, including within other disciplinary or thematic contexts.

I consider it highly valuable that, through publication with Routledge, such an opportunity is now accessible to an international community of scholars. *Fraternity as an Overlooked Element in Global Politics*, edited by Joanna Kulcska and Anna M. Solarz, provides a fresh and thought-provoking epistemological framework for rethinking the role of fraternity in global affairs. If the reader is left with a certain sense of incompleteness, it is a fruitful and deeply inspiring one.

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