

ZOFIA KĘPIŃSKA-WALCZAK

THREATS TO FAITH: FR. JÓZEF TISCHNER'S REFLECTIONS

In the modern world there are numerous threats to faith widely discussed in the Church such as atheism, agnosticism or laicization. Yet, Fr. Tischner did not consider them as real dangers to faith. He saw the problem in other dimensions, and differentiated two kinds of threats: internal threats, i.e. threats coming from the human soul, which are born in the human heart and pose a threat to human faith, as well as external threats, i.e. those which are rooted in the surrounding world.

Discussing threats to faith, Tischner remains within the realm of contemporary Poland. He carefully observes the state of faith in Poland, yet he is not a passive observer but an active participant in the discussion of the Polish Church and the state of religion in our country. What worries him most is the use of religion and faith to achieve political goals. Tischner considers it as one of the threats to faith, along with sect religiosity, tendency to manifest and glorify suffering; lastly, he speaks about faith in the faith and the surrogates of religion. This article discusses and characterizes these dangers to faith as well as attempts to find some solutions as to how to combat them.

1. Politicizing faith and striving to gain power

According to Tischner, a serious problem in the contemporary Polish reality is the exploitation of religion for political ends, an attempt to create a state subordinate to the Church. He considers efforts to build political communities based on religious ties a serious and very risky

mistake, which involves equating religious power with state power¹. In such a case, one's religious declaration would determine one's political affiliation. Political divisions and disputes have penetrated deep into religion². „Someone who has the keys to the kingdom of heaven has also the keys to the kingdom of Earth. Decrees of emperors can increase or decrease the number of the saved”³. “This is how «political Catholicism» is born – the kind of Catholicism whose meaning is more closely defined by the dialectics of aspirations for power”⁴. Tischner warned against such abuse of religion as it impoverishes, distorts and loses the meaning of religion. The temptation of power destroys any dialogue. “Someone who wants power, labels the other person instead of trying to bring them round: Are you with me or are you against me? Are you in this or that group? It does not matter whether two plus two is four. What matters is the position from which you say this, to whom you say it”⁵.

The inability to liberate oneself from the model of power and subordination in thinking about faith is characteristic of integrism⁶. Tischner writes that “for an integrist there is nothing more scandalous than a free man – one who has authority over every power and who breaks the yoke of reasoning enslaved by fear”⁷.

Tischner considered the manipulation of transcendent election for political purposes as the greatest threat to the Church in Poland⁸. He strongly opposed the idea of a “Catholic state”. He believed that

¹ Cf. *Przekonać Pana Boga. Z ks. Józefem Tischnerem rozmawiają Dorota Zańko i Jarosław Gowin*, Kraków 1999, p. 55.

² Cf. J. Tischner, *Ksiądz na manowcach*, Kraków 1999, pp. 23–24.

³ Cf. *Przekonać...*, op. cit., p. 55.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. Tischner, *Miłość niemiłowana*, Kraków 1993, p. 119.

⁶ Integryzm to tradycjonalistyczny nurt w Kościele, obecnie reprezentowany przede wszystkim przez Bractwo św. Piusa X, skupione wokół osoby abpa Marcela Lefebvre'a i nieuznające Soboru Watykańskiego II (Por. M. Karas, *Integryzm bractwa kapłańskiego św. Piusa X*, Kraków 2010).

⁷ J. Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni*, Kraków 1997, p. 188.

⁸ Cf. J. Tischner, *Ksiądz na manowcach*, op. cit., pp. 25–26.

“anyone who practices religion in order to increase power, even the power of God over the world, makes a mistake”⁹. God alone could do it, if He wanted to. God does not need anyone to gain this power for Him. “God is generous and requires generosity. We say that we do something for the glory of God, but the glory must be understood as absolute selflessness: toward the truth, beauty, and good. A serious disease of modern religiosity is that man wants to increase the power of God over the world. It’s a misunderstanding! First, we are not able to do so; Second, we do not fully understand the essence of God’s dominion over the world. How can we expand that power if we do not understand it?! Hence, «do not be self-seeking», because behind seeking one’s own self-interest there hides great temptation of power and a trap of pride with which the angels sinned”¹⁰.

Tischner says that due to the politicization of Catholicism “religious inspiration in politics turned into a political inspiration in religion, and what was to be a goal has become a means to an end, and what was to be the means has become the goal”¹¹. A re-evaluation has taken place, a conversion of something that is below with something that is above, a conversion that is dangerous to faith. The truth about the crucified Lord, so important in Christianity, has been lost, even though it constitutes the very center of the Eucharist. Thus, it can be concluded that whenever people escaped from the truth about the essence of reign, they also escaped from the Eucharist. Such is the claim of Tischner, who also adds that a return to the truth must go hand in hand with a return to the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a great summary of the doctrine of faith¹². Summing up this part of the article, it is worth pointing out after Tischner that a true faith distracts man from the temptation of power¹³.

⁹ J. Tischner, *Miłość nas rozumie. Rok liturgiczny z księdzem Tischnerem*, Kraków 2001, p. 72.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ J. Tischner, *Ksiądz na manowcach*, op. cit., pp. 150–151.

¹² Cf. *Przekonać...*, op. cit., p. 55.

¹³ Cf. *Wokół Biblii. Z ks. Józefem Tischnerem rozmawia Ewelina Puczek*, Kraków 2005, p. 8.

2. Sect religiosity

Another threat to which Tischner devoted much attention in his reflection is the so-called sect religiosity. The word religiosity is not put here in quotation marks, because Tischner himself did not do this when he wrote about the phenomenon of sect religiosity. For him, religiosity did not have to be something definitely positive. Tischner sometimes puts this word in quotation marks to emphasize a certain distortion of faith, its misrepresentation and falsification. This might seem inconsistent, but Tischner describes in detail how he understands the very concept of religiosity. It is not a synonym for an authentic faith. Wrongly experienced religiosity, which is still considered religiosity in the semantic sense, can even distance man from faith or destroy it. The philosopher explains it in the following way: “It is clear that there are certain ways of experiencing religion – types of religiosity – which alienate man from God rather than bring him closer to God. (...) And recall that, in the end, Christ was condemned to death by religious people, even deeply religious people, not by some atheists, skeptics and relativists. Isn’t it the sign that religiosity can work against itself and distance man from something to which it should bring him closer to?”¹⁴. This is what happens in case of sect religiosity.

Every sect has its leader, who undeniably is charismatic, but this kind of charisma leads the faithful down the wrong path and turns the community of the Church into “a gathering around a shrine”. In this “shrine” it is not God that is worshiped, but the leader of the sect, who is treated as the sole interpreter of God’s will. An emotional relation with the “father” of the sect is considered a properly experienced religious bond. Followers focus on emotions they experience during their meetings with the leader, when they listen to him and can share this experience with other believers¹⁵. This beloved leader “puts the followers in a «pious mood», «he» lifts them up, «he» comforts them, «he» brings them back to life (...). Hence emerges the principle

¹⁴ J. Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni*, op. cit., pp. 244–245.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Tischner, *Ksiądz na manowcach*, op. cit., p. 114.

of obedience to the «father». The «believer» listens to whoever «he» listens to, and only to what «he» listens to”¹⁶.

Sect religiosity drives the believer into a state of dangerous confidence. Members of the sect already know and feel that they will be saved, which is guaranteed by their mere belonging to the sect and obedience to the leader. What is more, it is highly likely that they are also able to indicate those who will not attain salvation, just because they are not affiliated with their religious “elite”. This certainty distances man away from Revelation. “The key to sect consciousness is the following statement: salvation without revelation”¹⁷. After all, a sect member already knows who is who, he has already gained knowledge, he has already passed on the good side and does not need to search anymore. Sect religiosity puts feelings above reason. A person characterized by sect religiosity does not need to explore, because they already know everything. They do not tolerate any criticism, because, if they identify the experience of faith with the experience of salvation, the mere thought of subjecting their faith to internal criticism is considered a blasphemy.

A member of the sect sees the neighbour mostly, or only, in other members of the sect, members of the same “family”, participants of the same experiences, emotions, moods associated with the leader and the “truth” he proclaims. A member of the sect considers other people “enemies of the faith”. He hates, despises and is aggressive towards them. He believes that other people harm him, and not only him, but also the leader of the sect, and if the leader, then God too. The attitude man has towards the neighbour is an indicator whether he is immersed in sect religiosity. If faith breeds hostility, or even hatred, if religiosity causes disputes, conflicts, and is the source of contempt, then it is not a genuine faith, but sect religiosity. Also, obedience or lack of obedience may help us recognize whether we are dealing with a sect. The religiosity of a sect with its own authority, on which all of members’ attention, emotions and efforts focus, reluctantly opens

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 115.

to listen to the Church's authority. Sometimes, a sect is no longer able to listen, which is a real tragedy. It is the confidence discussed earlier in the article that makes members of a sect unable to listen to others – do the redeemed have any reason to listen to those who are so far away from redemption? “Does a person able to hear have to listen to a deaf person? Should a man able to see allow himself to be led by a blind person? Do those able to speak have to wait until a dumb person says something to them?”¹⁸.

It is characteristic of sect religiosity, as well as of a miserable faith described further in the article, to look for someone to blame and to always find the guilty outside the sect. A member of the sect is convinced that it is others that are to blame for his defeat. Others, i.e. enemies, people conspiring against him, accidental misfortunes, violence of those thinking differently, all this evil world that oppresses and persecutes him. Never he himself¹⁹. But those guilty people will be punished one day, enemies will be condemned. This conviction reassures him, an “innocent” underdog doomed to continuous defeat. He sends up prayers full of complaints and denunciations of other people and the whole creation²⁰.

A sect preaches service to the truth while being the cradle of a great lie, and thus showing its demonic nature. This is a striking paradox, because a sect thinks it is its primary duty to track and show the demon in the reality surrounding the worshipers – the reality so close, and yet so “hostile” as it exists outside the “father’s” territory. Chasing a demon, a sect itself starts to ride him and let him choose the way²¹.

3. Pharisaism

The phenomenon of pharisaism has never died and has not remained only within the realm of historic Judaism. In its trans-historical character, pharisaism has entered Christianity. What is most

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁹ Cf. J. Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni*, op. cit., p. 276.

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 5f.

²¹ Cf. J. Tischner, *Ksiądz na manowcach*, op. cit., pp. 114–116.

characteristic of pharisaism is hypocrisy. A Pharisee considers it his duty to give people a good example, to be a testimony of worship of the ideal. However, these efforts are limited to what is visible on the outside only. Nothing he preaches is part of his soul, or his way of living. Tischner describes the Pharisee's logic in the following way: "If we are sinners anyway, then at least let us not give a bad example and drag one to the bottom which we have reached. Let's hide our sin and praise virtue loudly. (...) Let the loudly paid tribute to virtue become the virtue of people who are doomed to sin anyway. Virtue builds, even if it is fake"²². The Pharisee will always find someone who can serve as background for him to shine. A tax collector at whom the Pharisee will be able to point his finger. A sinful woman from whom he could turn away his face and say, "Look, while I am upholding virtue, she plunges into filthy sin". The concept of guilt helps the Pharisee create pharisaical virtues. The idea that guilt is a kind of "stain" is trans-historical just as the whole phenomenon of pharisaism²³. "Today, this idea does not allow a «better Catholic» to greet with a «worse» Catholic, to pray with a Protestant (...) The Pharisee climbs upward, pushing his «tax collectors» down"²⁴. In pharisaism, content is lost for the benefit of form. The Pharisees believe in the power of a good example, even a false one, and they speak of their respect for absolute values to give such an example. However, if this respect is to influence others and attract attention, "it must be tangible, easily perceptible, visible. (...) It is «important» (...) not to come into contact with the infidels, it is «important» to severely punish the sinful woman ... and it is «important» that everyone sees it. At some point, however, what is «important» gets out of control, and begins to devour Mr. «Important» (...) A priest hurries to a temple and indifferently passes the wounded attacked by the robbers"²⁵. The Pharisee is closed to the world, and thus does not understand it.

²² Ibid., pp. 175–176.

²³ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

“Holy indignation”, “scandal” – these are the most common reactions of the Pharisee to the surrounding reality. Simultaneously, he gains another opportunity to present his own virtue. Why does the Pharisee act in such a way in the first place? Is it about silencing one’s voice of conscience, or lying to oneself? Tischner goes on and says that the Pharisee seeks power, “he finds his own absolute, so that he can use it reach absolute power”²⁶. But the Pharisee suffers. The source of this suffering is hypocrisy, which makes him cling to small truths while pulling him away from the great truth. The Pharisee lives in the belief that he fights for the truth. “What is the outcome of this fight? With the accumulation of hundreds of small truths there grows a great lie in him – the lie about man, world, God. Therefore, he is never able to “know the time of his visitation”. (...) The awareness of this untruth underlies the pharisaical hypocrisy and, once and again, resurfaces, causing even bigger alienation, suspicion and self-torment”²⁷.

Pharisaism means integralism and fundamentalism. It holds the belief in absolute values; however, the problem is that in the pharisaical thinking the concepts of the Absolute are stretched beyond the Absolute, to what is not absolute²⁸. When matters that do not belong to the sphere of the Absolute are considered absolute, when the sacred becomes confused with the secular, there is a risk that faith will go down the wrong path, “and will eventually become a false faith. Such a faith will tell the believer to kneel before a fire, but will not stop him from hating his neighbour. It will tell him to go to the Mass, but will not encourage him to help the one in need”²⁹. This pharisaic religiosity creates an illusion of the sacred, it distracts man from the deepest sense of faith, changes it into small things, makes man focus on meaningless trifles instead of directing him toward the essence – toward the living God. The Pharisee focuses on these small things and does not see the great matter. He sees a number of violations of

²⁶ Ibid., p. 177.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 177–178.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁹ Ibid., p. 181.

irrelevant principles; he rebukes, teaches others, but a truly dangerous sin, consuming his soul – his own sin of hypocrisy and hatred – that he cannot see³⁰.

There is one way to distinguish something that is authentically sacred from the appearances of the sacred. We find it in the Gospel, which “purifies” religiosity and puts it back to the realm of «religion»³¹. This is about the principle of love of neighbour. “Every sacrum that was aimed directly against the neighbour, had to be rejected”³². In fact, such a kind of sacrum is merely its appearance. It is this kind of sacrum that Christ fought with, and, for this reason, he was so much hated by the Pharisees.

4. Miserable faith

There are people who look at the world through the prism of their own misfortune. It does not matter whether this misfortune is a real situation or just a subjective feeling. The idea is that a person who feels unhappy is looking for people who are guilty of their misfortune. It is others that have caused it. “Wretched is a man who thinks: if I am unhappy, then there must be someone to blame. (...) A miserable man takes revenge for his misery on every happy person, or rather on anyone who appears happy to him. Hence, disinterested envy is born”³³. A suffering man hates the view of happy people. “Others should also suffer. And if they temporarily have no reason to suffer, they should suffer only because he – the martyr – suffers while they don’t”³⁴.

Misfortune also shapes the human relationship with God. A miserable man either blames God for his fate and turns away from Him,

³⁰ Cf. J. Tischner, *Miłość nas rozumie...*, op. cit., pp. 92–93: „Religijność, która jest znieczuleniem, narzuca człowiekowi mnóstwo małych bólów (...). A wszystko po to, żeby nie widzieć tego, co naprawdę groźne, np. grzechu antysemityzmu, niechęci do obcych, swojej nienawiści do świata, a w gruncie rzeczy także nienawiści do samego siebie”.

³¹ J. Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni*, op. cit., p. 246.

³² Ibid.

³³ J. Tischner, *Miłość niemiłowana*, op. cit., p. 68.

³⁴ J. Tischner, *Książka na manowcach*, op. cit., p. 119.

or makes his misfortune a key element of his religiosity. And this is not about the Christian perception of the meaning of suffering, but about taking delight in suffering. Tischner puts it in this way: “If God is full of mercy, and I’m miserable, there is a chance for me in my misery – through my misfortune I will find a way to God. (...) Then there is only one thing I can do: become attached to my misery, find my way to faith as well as my dignity in suffering”³⁵. Such a man wants to draw the attention of God with his misfortune. This is how a “miserable religiosity” is born. “You can awake masochistic instinct in man and throw him into a state of peculiar «love» of suffering. You can make suffering part of the axiological I – part of you. Then who am I? A wound, enormous pain, an unhealed scar. I hang on the cross and my cross is my pride”³⁶. Man’s attachment to his misery can go so far that his misery will become his religion. After a series of atrocities that life and other people brought to a man, he becomes cruel to himself. He ceases to have mercy on himself, and as a result he is less and less merciful to others. “Religion then becomes the second hell for man – he himself also becomes a hell for people close to him”³⁷.

Miserable religiosity in someone can be recognized by their inability to act. Interestingly, on the one hand, a person with such a kind of faith is capable of doing many “works”, but they should, in fact, be called “merciless”. They do not trigger any “action”. A miserable faith, which is the faith of merciless deeds, brings no harvest, because it sows nothing³⁸. “This kind of faith gives rise only to deeds that say “no” – to everything that is a joy, a smile, or the slightest drop of happiness. A man with such a faith is unable to say “yes” to any person he meets, to life just as it is, to the times in which he lives”³⁹. The only thing he can do is talk about his pain. He wants to seduce God and the world with his pain. This is not just any pain, not one of

³⁵ J. Tischner, *Miłość niemiłowana*, op. cit., p. 68.

³⁶ J. Tischner, *Ksiądz na manowcach*, op. cit., p. 19.

³⁷ J. Tischner, *Miłość niemiłowana*, op. cit., p. 70.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

those usually encountered in the world. This pain is unique, as it is messianic pain. Tischner writes that this is the Polish pain. "Who is it, in fact, that suffers in me? Poland suffers in me"⁴⁰. Suffering comes from all sides and everything is an obstacle to salvation. "But this is precisely why salvation has become so great and so valuable. It's not about being redeemed when everything helps you on the way. It is a great challenge to be redeemed when everything interferes with your salvation. This is why only a few will be redeemed. For sure, those will not be saved who are indifferent to the «Poland of sufferers»"⁴¹.

It is this kind of pain and miserable faith that are most noticeable in the Polish Catholicism according to Tischner. The Polish faith despairs, laments, is raucous. It wants to gain the full attention of God through suffering and have Him exclusively. But apart from this raucous faith, there is also another kind of faith, one that is less loud, less dazzling, one that does not sob – a true faith, a faith of great deeds. This faith sows greatly⁴². To express his faith in deeds, man needs to feel a little bit of happiness deep in his soul. Then he can act. An unhappy person will remain a slave of their misery, a prisoner of their inability to act and a prisoner of themselves⁴³. "You can love the cross so much that you will refuse to descent from it on the day of the resurrection"⁴⁴.

5. Faith in the faith

Another internal threat to an authentic faith is the so-called faith in the faith. Tischner writes that it poses even greater danger than disbelief in God itself. We speak of "faith in the faith" when one makes the belief that they truly have faith. But God becomes lost somewhere. This is not a genuine faith in God, but only a raucous faith in one's own faith, loving one's own faith and believing that one can teach

⁴⁰ J. Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni*, op. cit., p. 8.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴² Zob. *Miłość niemiłowana*, op. cit., p. 71.

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁴ J. Tischner, *Ksiądz na manowcach*, op. cit., p. 19.

others and reproach them that they do not believe. After all, one is allowed to do all this because he has such a deep faith⁴⁵.

Conclusion

Looking at the threats faith encounters today, it can be noticed that they share one thing – a departure from the Gospel. Somewhere in each of these threats, whether in sect religiosity or miserable faith, there is present some distrust, suspicion, anxiety and inability to feel true joy. We can overcome these dangers, if our faith will be continuously “filtered” by the truth contained in the Gospel. If faith is close to its source, i.e. the Gospel, it will remain authentic.

Summary

In his reflection Fr. Józef Tischner devoted much attention to the issue of faith – one of the theological virtues, which are the foundation of the Christian life. Tischner not only described what faith is and what its characteristics are, but also looked into what threatens faith. This article describes the threats to faith according to Fr. Tischner. The paper also makes an attempt to find some solutions as to how to combat these dangers. To overcome them, man needs to root his faith in its source, i.e. the Gospel, and make sure not to move away from it.

Streszczenie

W swej refleksji ks. Józef Tischner wiele uwagi poświęcał zagadnieniu wiary – jednej z cnót teologicznych, będących fundamentem chrześcijańskiego życia. Tischner nie tylko opisywał czym jest wiara, jakie są jej charakterystyczne cechy, ale też dociekał, co zagraża wierze. W tym artykule zostały wymienione i scharakteryzowane zagrożenia na jakie według ks. Tischnera natrafia wiara. Została także podjęta próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, jak te zagrożenia przezwyciężać. Tym, co pozwala pokonać zagrożenia, jest zakorzenienie w swej wiary w jej źródle, którym jest Ewangelia i czuwanie, by nie oddalać się od tego źródła.

⁴⁵ Cf. J. Tischner, *Zrozumieć...*, op. cit., pp. 48–49.

Key words: Józef Tischner, faith, threats to faith, politicizing faith, sect religiosity, pharisaism, miserable faith, theological virtues

Bibliografia

Przekonać Pana Boga. Z ks. Józefem Tischnerem rozmawiają Dorota Zańko i Jarosław Gowin, Kraków 1999.

Tischner J., *Ksiądz na manowcach*, Kraków 1999.

Tischner J., *Miłość niemiłowana*, Kraków 1993.

Karas M., *Integryzm bractwa kapłańskiego św. Piusa X*, Kraków 2010.

Tischner J., *W krainie schorowanej wyobraźni*, Kraków 1997.

Tischner J., *Miłość nas rozumie. Rok liturgiczny z księdzem Tischnerem*, Kraków 2001.

Wokół Biblii. Z ks. Józefem Tischnerem rozmawia Ewelina Puczek, Kraków 2005.

Zofia Kępińska-Walczak – mgr teologii, doktorantka teologii pastoralnej na UKSW, absolwentka Instytutu Wiedzy o Kulturze (obecnie: Instytut Dialogu Kultury i Religii) na UKSW w Warszawie, wolontariuszka w Stowarzyszeniu Rodzin i Opiekunów Osób z Zespołem Downa „Bardziej Kochani”, zainteresowania naukowe: duszpasterstwo nadzwyczajne, personalizm chrześcijański, religijność ludowa.