

Stefan Swieżawski

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# Revolution in the Church

## Conversation with Prof. Stefan Swieżawski

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**Paweł Kaczorowski:** We would like to talk to you about the mutual relations between the state and the Church. The discussion that till now has taken place in Poland on this subject has been very fragmentary and overwhelmed by various political circumstances. Now we would like to focus our attention on the whole problem from a philosophical perspective. What – in your opinion – does the problem “the state and the Church” consist in? Is it a problem that appeared with Christianity or, as Max Weber said, is it to some extent universal?

**Stefan Swieżawski:** I think it is universal. I would only like to warn you that I have dealt with these matters only marginally, to the extent they have been linked with my interests in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The 7<sup>th</sup> volume of my work on the 15<sup>th</sup> century, that is, *Ethics*, and the 8<sup>th</sup> volume, *Ecclesiology*, dealt with these matters. I think though that understanding these issues without this historical background is very difficult. And even a philosophical discussion without a historical context is groundless.

**P.K.:** We share your conviction. “Civitas” is thus edited so as to present timeless problems within concrete circumstances and concretely expressed.

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**Stefan Swieżawski** (1907–2004): professor emeritus of the Catholic University of Lublin and the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Author of the monumental work, eight volumes entitled *Dzieje filozofii europejskiej XV wieku* [History of European Philosophy in the XV Century]. He was an auditor of the Second Vatican Council.

**S.S.:** So I think that a most important thing in this matter is basically to understand conciliarism. As Bishop Dembowski once rightly said, the Church now, after the last Council, exists in times of moderate conciliarism. I think it is the glory of Poland to have fought so strongly for conciliarism in the Jagiellonian era. This is, it seems, a very important matter, as it points to the close of a certain epoch, which gives way to another. I think that the last Council concludes the Constantine Epoch.

**Zbigniew Stawrowski:** But does this imply that this tension between the state and the Church comes, to a largest extent, from the inner and especially institutional self-awareness of the Church? For if the Church is understood as a hierarchical structure with a monarch as its head, then it immediately comes into conflict with the state.

**S.S.:** Until Vatican II there was the system of theocracy and monarchical absolutism in the Catholic Church. The representatives of the Church hierarchy speak about it reluctantly, but Vatican II fundamentally changed something. What is interesting here is the question of authority and the whole concept of the Church, which till then was to be the Church of success (both worldly and spiritual), whereas Vatican II changed the entire image of the Church in the world. Its objective was no longer success. It was a huge revolution.

**Agnieszka Nogal:** What did this revolution consist in?

**S.S.:** It had three fundamental dimensions: the Church was to be a community, to serve and to be open. The nature of the community above all means the declericalization of the Church. The Church should be neither clerical nor laic, which Protestantism does not understand, as it essentially negates the concept of the Church and sacrament. That is why the "East," the whole Orthodox Church, is closer to Catholicism than Protestantism.

Servitude means that the Church is not to be in any way imperious. I have repeated this many times: as an auditor at

the Council, I was fortunate enough to hear many statements by Paul VI, saying that the Church ought to renounce all signs of imperiousness, and at all levels. However, it is very difficult – from a parish priest to the primate – to say abruptly that the Church is to serve and not to be imperious.

Finally, the third point: being open, that is ecumenism. It consists in searching not for something about which the other is mistaken, but for something upon which we both agree. From a mason or an anarchist, to a Christian of another denomination. Switching one's mentality to this attitude is extremely difficult – hence all the resistance. People think that the decline of the model of clericalism, imperiousness and closedness spells disaster for the Church.

**P.K.:** Can we speak about the uniform structure of the Church that went throughout the Constantine Epoch – which you mentioned – and which ranges from the times of Constantine till the 1960s, despite differences in at least three periods: the early Middle Ages, Middle Ages, and modern times, and despite the fact that the Church was changing and evolving in these three periods?

**S.S.:** Yes, although conciliary tendencies have always clashed with theocratic tendencies in this structure. This was the issue that I was most interested in while dealing with the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Conciliary tendencies did not appear out of the blue in the 15<sup>th</sup> century; they had been suppressed by the Roman Curia, which strove to create a legal structure which would favor papal theocracy. Conciliarism and neoconciliarism consist in a rule that is not absolutist, but in agreement with episcopates of various areas. But if theocratic tendencies predominate in these episcopates, then this is very difficult to change.

**P.K.:** Do you think this means that, from the perspective of this change that took place in the 60s, the whole prior history of the Church was the history of a certain mistake?

**S.S.:** No, it seems to me that if Maritain says that the Holy Roman Empire was coming to a close, then he means a specific way of life that had to end at a certain moment. I also think that *christianitas*, a notion that has never been realized and was the medieval ideal, was like the UN of Christian countries, and it ended at one point. I think that the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the period of the struggle of our Cracow school in Constance, points to a moment in which *christianitas* becomes unrealistic. In a word: the connection between societies, between countries, had to change its character, and that is why the Republic of many nations was a historic event, as it was something that was growing, neither a nation state nor a religious one.

**Z.S.:** If I may refer to the Jagiellonian idea – do you think that we can find certain directions for today’s Europe in it?

**S.S.:** Absolutely. Because the point is not to create new powerful monarchies. It is a model for a future Europe and even for the whole world. This was the opinion of Zenon Kałuża – an excellent disciple of mine and a famous Parisian medievalist, considered one of the best. According to him, texts by Paulus Vladimiri must have circulated across all of Europe. Those were the times in which *scriptoria* served as today’s press office of the Council. It is almost certain that the “revisionist school” of Aristotelism in Salamanca drew from the achievements of the Cracow school. Bartholomew de Las Casas, the great apostle of American Indians, was also fed with these ideas. I do not want to be accused of national fanaticism, but I am truly convinced that the Cracow law school had some influence on European thinking, and beyond.

**Z.S.:** The main idea that then appeared in the Cracow school and attempted to fight its way at the Council in Constance – though it ended in failure, symbolized by the burning of Jan Hus – was somehow identified with the ideal of religious freedom, and respect for the rights of pagans and people of different denominations to their own land, their own state and property.

It is astonishing to me that this idea, which was then articulated and which is truly Christian, disappeared from the public sphere and was rejected by the Church. However, it won recognition in the secularized world. The modern state was built on the idea of religious freedom.

**S.S.:** But why? Because conciliarism was defeated. It lost because it was too extreme, and as such, could not be included in the Catholic orthodoxy. Conciliarism advanced the thesis that a council is higher than the pope, which the Catholic Church could never accept, though it did accept the continual cooperation between the pope and a council. Nowadays, it is visible to a greater extent than the medieval conciliarists wanted, for back then a council was to be established every five years, and now the Pope calls synods which create a permanent council. In this way the idea of conciliarism is realized.

Because this idea was not accepted, the University of Cracow did not want to accept papal obedience for many years and stuck to the Basilean obedience, i.e. extreme Basilean conciliarism. This left its mark on the whole modern epoch; it bore fruit in *Tridentium*, and continued bearing fruit until the defense of Vatican and *Vaticanum primum*, which happened in struggle. The decline of the Church state, which was considered the greatest of tragedies, in my opinion brought liberation to the Church. These are views which are difficult to accept.

**Z.S.:** They are very close to us.

**S.S.:** I meant the church hierarchy...

**A.N.:** But you see, problems appear when we start speaking about hierarchy, as conciliarism and the already existing structure overlapped...

**S.S.:** Yes, but conciliarism did not destroy hierarchy. The objective was to change its model.

**Z.S.:** A hierarchy can be a hierarchy of imperiousness, or a hierarchy of servitude.

**S.S.:** Naturally, it should be one of servitude, and not only in the title: *Servant of the Servants of God*.

**Z.S.:** We have been talking about the institutional aspect of the conflict between a modern state and the Church. The Church did not assimilate certain ideas, did not carry out an internal reform; therefore, tension ran strong between the modern state and the Catholic Church for many ages. But one may also argue that the Church resisted on philosophical grounds, from accepting a certain understanding of natural laws, an understanding also present in Thomism, which says that we should look at the state and political order from a teleological perspective. It is important that a state carries out good aims, that it molds its citizens, and morally mends its members. However, a modern state is built on another principle. Not on the principle of “mending its members” but on that of assuring peace and safety. Everyone is left to his/her freedom, the freedom to search for good.

**S.S.:** I think – if we at all agree to the order of the natural law and natural morality – that there are differing opinions about natural law and natural morality, arising from very profound philosophical premises. A “proper” modern democrat would never agree to the thesis – which sounds right to me – that inherent ethics, natural ethics, must be based on metaphysics, i.e. on a certain concept of man. To him everything is dependent on free decision. It seems to me that at bottom there is a controversy over the sources of the inherent or “natural” ethics accepted by certain currents of Christian thought, especially by St. Thomas. According to this position, inherent ethics are independent from any confession, but are dependent on metaphysics, on a certain concept of man.

**Z.S.:** Surely. But the problem that gave rise to tensions was not whether someone was guided by these ethics – regardless of whether they were natural or based on revelation – but whether the state, its institutions and political authority supported moral mending by means of violence. This is a classical concept

of a state which may be traced back to as early as Greece. Christianity adopted it, through St. Thomas. But there is another concept of state which was born in modern times, according to which the state is reduced to a minimum. It only has to ensure safety.

**S.S.:** I find this concept right, for we have to accept pluralism. This acceptance leads to the acceptance of the concept of a minimal state. Then we may have disputes, but they do not lead to the destruction of the state. I think that a true unity must be the unity in diversity. And if it is not a unity in diversity, it becomes uniformism, it leads to total or religious systems, or anti-religious ones; it is the road to fascism, to communism.

I think that one may discern such tendencies toward totalism in Christian thinkers when they tend toward accepting only one state model.

**Z.S.:** You are a great expert in the thought of St. Thomas. How could you respond to those who try to argue that the Church – based on the philosophy of St. Thomas (also on the doctrine of the natural law and his concept of a state) – was against the modern, pluralistic state.

**S.S.:** If I have done one thing useful in my life, then it was probably my attempt to show, by the example of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, to what extent the thought of St. Thomas was transformed into ideology. It was deformed in many fundamental ways. Also, when I say that I am an adherent of St. Thomas's philosophy, it does not mean that I agree with everything that is present there. Above all, I accept his metaphysics and his concept of man. The philosophy of nature, philosophy of culture and political philosophy were connected with a concrete space-time situation, which has changed fundamentally, while his philosophy of man and being, in my opinion, goes beyond these space-time transformations. His achievements in this field, whether in Greek, or in medieval or in modern philosophy, are timeless. This is one thing. The other thing is that Thomism was adopted over

the course of time by the Church as an ideology for the Church institutions. For the Church institution, as any other, needs an ideology. And that is why Tischner is right when he says that the epoch of Thomism is over, in the sense that it was the Vatican II that wanted to finish decisively with the ideologization of theology and philosophy.

**P.K.:** You have said that every institution needs philosophy. Does this mean that now the changing Church needs a different philosophy or – if it is still an institution – a new ideology?

**S.S.:** Philosophy cannot be imposed – it is something one chooses. That is why, in my opinion, the Church above all needs a good history of philosophy, so that every novice could pick from this abundance. The Church may just state that for reinforcing faith and theology of faith, a discussion on the most important matters is needed, i.e. the philosophy of being and the philosophy of man. What we need is a very solid historical study of philosophy understood as a history of problems.

**P.K.:** That would be preparatory work, but do you see any philosophy to which believers' minds should be inclined?

**S.S.:** I myself have already chosen, and not because the Church or history have made me choose in this way. I have chosen St. Thomas because I am a realist in philosophy and I see the importance of metaphysics. His philosophy is the only one which places the problem of existence in the center of metaphysics, and not essence. It searches for the answer to the question: Does it exist, and how does it exist? and not: What exists? Here I follow Maritain and Gilson, and though I do not agree with all the conclusions of these great masters, it seems to me that classical philosophy can give us a lot.

**P.K.:** Now a question on the Christian religion and its relation with the state. Do you think that the Christian religion is, as Father Józef Tischner often claimed, a religion of freedom?

**S.S.:** To my mind, it definitely is. This is quite obvious to me, and not only in a philosophical sense. St. Thomas clearly states



that if a seeker adopts Christianity without being convinced of its rightness, then he commits a cardinal sin.

**P.K.:** But I must ask the following question: unlike philosophy, which is created by man, religion is a revealed truth. Doesn't a tension appear between freedom as a condition of man's sensible acceptance of the meaning of revelation, and the very miracle of revelation, which is a **fact**. Together with this fact a revealed **truth** appears which is a **given**. Does this limit human freedom?

**S.S.:** I would put it this way: man's duty is to develop his cognitive and volitional skills to the maximum. When man is cut off from contemplation, he commits a sin. Otherwise, he is free. Just as man cannot not want happiness and has to search for it, he has to search for the truth. If he does not search for the truth, he violates the limits of truth.

**Z.S.:** A few years ago there was a huge debate in Poland on the relationship between the Church and the state, and then suddenly everything died down, as if this problem had been ultimately solved. Is this really so?

**S.S.:** I think that absolutely not. These are problems which are always present, which cannot be solved by political or legal decisions, because they concern consciousness. They demand *metanoi*, that is, a change in the way of thinking. The Jagiellonian model, still so seldom referred to, could be useful.

**A.N.:** You have said that the Orthodox Church is closer to the Catholic Church. Nowadays, however, Catholicism is politically closer to Protestantism: the idea of a common Europe involves the countries of Western Europe, and also Catholic countries, but it still has not reached the Orthodox areas.

**S.S.:** I think that approaching certain positive elements in Protestantism is indispensable. However, the Orthodox Church is closer to us as far as the Orthodox Liturgy is concerned. I think that it has retained its community and direct sacred contact. There is also the great Eastern theology. In general we believe in

the same, on the other hand, in Protestantism the very “backbone” has been shaken, as the concept of the church has become half-laic. There is no sacrament there, as the sacraments that have remained do not have their previous meaning, the form of priesthood has also changed, and the right priests were replaced with leaders and superiors.

**Z.S.:** I have another question: I have read in an interview you gave that you opposed inscribing the relationship between the state and the Church in Poland in the form of a concordat.

**S.S.:** As a historian I must tell you that the freedom of the Church has often been guaranteed by the lack of a concordat. For a concordat has not always been the most favorable solution for the Church. Sometimes only utilitarian issues have mattered.

**Z.S.:** We may recall here, for instance, the concordat in Germany in 1933.

**P.K.:** Then what could the areas of cooperation and the areas of conflict be between the state and the Church in contemporary Europe?

**S.S.:** I think there are areas of possible conflict; for example, the idea that John Paul II is fighting for, that is, the defense of life. The Church cannot agree to this problem being decided by a vote. For me it is an absolutely fundamental thesis of natural law, and as such, it is really unquestionable. The indissolubility of marriage is a similarly fundamental problem. The ease of divorce may be dangerous, though true tragedies do happen, and we must take such cases into account. However, this should not keep us from addressing the matter rigorously. After a long stay in the United States, professor Gilson once told me: Marriage is ceasing to be a social solution, marriage is ending. And for me marriage and family are still very important matters, which cannot be decided by a vote. I remember my great friend from Vilnius, Henryk Dembiński saying that, all in all, he prefers a political system in which the stock exchange is replaced with a metaphysical discussion.

**P.K.:** And what about areas of cooperation?

**S.S.:** They are enormous. Especially in the situation of a market economy, in which we observe the increase of social injustice. The Church may do a lot as far as the question of help and compensating for injustice are concerned.

**P.K.:** Thank you very much for this conversation.

*Translated by Paulina Chołda*

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