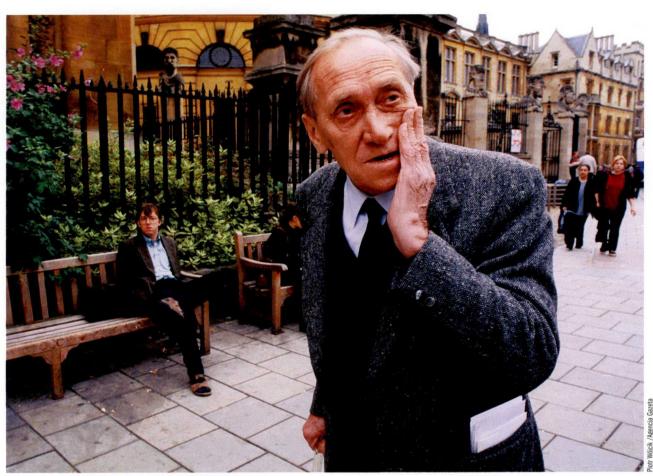Interview with Professor Leszek Kołakowski

Europe: the Presence of Culture

Professor Leszek Kołakowski, the world-renowed Polish philosopher, now resides in Oxford. Professor Kołakowski is a full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences and an emeritus fellow of All Souls College

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Academia: Professor Kołakowski, how do you view the European Union – as a cultural community, a civilization-based community, or a community dictated by economic needs?

Professor Leszek Kołakowski: I would prefer for the basis of the EU to be a cultural community. But I believe that this is not the case – that various economic and political considerations constitute its basis. I voted in favor of the EU in the referendum, but I voted for practical, pragmatic reasons, out of common sense. Not because I was an enthusiast. Europe is supposed to become a single state; where Poland or Hungary once were, there will be administrative districts or provinces. The idea of sovereignty is therefore on its way out. Perhaps there are reasons why the ideas of sovereignty should be relinquished, but no one is talking about this. The enthusiasts don't address this issue, but it is no trifling matter. Living in England, we know what kind of objections people have – both politicians who generally do want Great Britain to be in the EU, as well as those who would prefer to leave it altogether. The same goes for intellectuals. They don't want to have a tax system imposed upon them, they don't want to have a tax rate imposed upon them, they don't want to have any defense policy or foreign policy imposed upon them. I do not blame them for this. They are adhering to the principle of independence, although most of them do want Britain to be in the EU. Many people call what is being created a super-state, and this is indeed supposed to become a single state. Will it work? We don't know. Because there are also various cultural considerations here; cultural differences could get in the way, as could the immediate interests of individual nations.

I am in favor of Poland being in the EU, but I am not bursting with enthusiasm.

Since we are speaking about modern Europe's cultural heritage, what is the place of the Christian tradition, and that of the Enlightenment tradition?

Both Christianity and the Enlightenment represent part of our common spiritual past. It is silly to demand that there should be no mention of this in the European Constitution – although I'm not really certain what we need the latter for. Christianity is a phenomenon that arose at a specific moment, while our traditions stretch back earlier, into pre--Christian times. Nonetheless, one can't deny that Christianity as a whole was for centuries the spiritual expanse in which this culture developed. Of course, the Enlightenment was to a great extent anti-Christian or anti-religious, albeit not completely so. Here I have in mind the philosophers of the Enlightenment, especially the French ones, but not only them. The German Enlightenment was a bit different, the English one too. But even those who treated Christianity with animosity or hostility were bred in this tradition, and continued to be marked by it even amidst their animosity. If we are going to have a Constitution – although I repeat that I don't know what for – I would be very much like to see these things reflected in the document's preamble. Of course, the European Constitution cannot have an Invocatio Dei in the sense that it confirms the existence of God. We cannot have the Constitution accept the Christianity as essentially religious beliefs, but rather as historical tradition of Europe, the historical substance of its culture – it is even silly to argue over this. I can cite what I have myself written on such topics: Christian culture and the Christian attitude toward the world was such that Christianity managed to avoid two ideological traps. On the one hand – the Gnostic or Manichean trap, in which there was disdain for the physical world, for the body, for worldly life. On the other hand – the pantheistic trap, in which the presence of evil was almost

completely imperceptible. Christianity avoided these traps and was able to relate to the physical world neither as an enemy that should be shunned, nor as something that should be fully accepted. Rather, it was understood to be an opponent that we can master or tame. And this was the Christian attitude of world conquest via this culture. I think very highly of this. No one denies that European culture has absorbed various other influences – Greek philosophy, Roman law, certain elements of medieval Arab culture. Europe's yearning to come to know other civilizations was very strong, and we learned various things. We tried to absorb them, assimilate them, so that our culture should not be damaged as a result.

What I greatly esteem in European culture, and what is related to its Christian tradition, is this culture's capacity to step outside itself and view itself from the outside. This is what the Enlightenment taught us. In the Enlightenment there were various works in which authors tried to view our culture from outside; like Swift's horses, like Voltaire's Sirius, like Montesquieu's Uzbek. This is very important and it made it possible for anthropology to develop.

In 1945 T. S. Eliot wrote: the culture of Europe will not survive if Christian faith vanishes completely. Can European culture exist without Christian faith?

not North America, South America, or Asia. This is a Western European phenomenon, and it is not by any means clear what future lies in store for this process. Of course, when anything transpires for a long time, especially for several decades, it seems to us that things will keep moving in the same direction without bound. It seems to us to be a law of nature, but this is not the case. There are various processes that last a long time, and then end, or change into something different. And so current trends should not be extrapolated. Besides, I believe religion to be a cultural invariant – and I have repeatedly had the opportunity to comment on this. This does not mean that every individual person is religious, but it does mean that religion is the germ of cultural creation in every culture.

In the past, Europe defined itself via its relation to Russia on the one hand, and to the British Isles on the other. What is your vision of Europe in the geographic dimension?

This is not so important. Of course, here in this country, Great Britain, Europe essentially meant France, Germany, and Spain. The history of Europe was until recently the history of the West. No one was interested in such strange tribes as the Poles or Hungarians. Here, one could say "I'm going to Europe," which meant that one was traveling to Germany or France. Just like in Russia

I advocate the European Union, but I do not advocate a super-state. I advocate cultural exchange, but I am not an advocate or enthusiast of cultural amalgamation that would blur national differences

I do not think so. If the Christian tradition were to vanish, then we really would be living in a different cultural world. I don't know what it would be like, but I do know it would be different. Better or worse, I don't know, but I suspect that it would be worse. I do not believe that the Christian tradition will vanish, despite the progress that has been made by secularization. Please note that secularization on such a large scale is something characteristic of Western Europe,

one could say "yedu v Yevropu." For them, this was also something separate from Russia. Geography is poorly defined – it is not defined by nature, but rather by culture. Russia is part of Europe's cultural history. This is a country that has been Christian since the 9th or 10th century. This is a country whose cultural awareness, especially in literature or music, has become part of European heritage. There is no European culture without Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky.

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Russia has historically belonged to Europe, even if they do have their "oddities", such as when they cross themselves from right to left. Not to mention their "heretical" belief that the Holy Ghost originates from the Father, rather than from the Father and the Son. Nevertheless, the history of Christianity is also the history of heresy, reformation, and Orthodoxy.

And so does Europe have a culture that is strong enough to expand to the east and south, to Ukraine or Belarus, without losing fundamental elements of its identity?

There is no reason to believe otherwise. Of course, there is cultural resistance in all of these countries against Europeanization. These are long-term processes, and no ultimate results can be predicted. But I imagine that this culture of ours is resilient enough to have the potential to expand to other areas. Although it is hard for me to imagine the Europeanization of China, and I find the Europeanization of Muslim countries highly unlikely. And let it be so – cultural plurality is the world's treasure.

What is Poland's place among the countries joining the EU? Can we feel that we have some sort of special place as a result of our history, or is our place special because we are a large agricultural country whose civilization is backward in many regards?

Every nation has its own peculiarities. What contributions can it make to the community is not defined a priori.

So, it is not clear whether Poland, by the very fact of its joining the EU, will be able to open the way for its own cultural expansion. Poland is a relatively backward country – mainly due to the fact that such a large proportion of the population works in agriculture. And there are some sort of ideologies that extol this circumstance, which elsewhere would be considered a symptom of civilization immaturity. I do not know how things are, but we can surmise that Poland will change in this regard. And it has already changed in this regard in the post-war decades. The same process will take place as did in Western Europe, where the rural population shrank greatly. Poland has various cultural resources that could be interesting for others. But I don't know what Poland's specific role will be within the EU.

How should Poles joining Europe feel, especially Polish scholars? We know that you hold meetings with young Polish scholars in Oxford. Can any important differences be felt?

I have contact with Polish students; we meet each year for a term and chat about various things. I realize that those who come here do not constitute a representative sample of Polish university students. Of course not. These are people who have somehow been chosen on the basis of their various talents. But I like them. Besides, from time to time I also teach some classes with students in Poland. I did so at Warsaw University

last year, as well as in previous years. So I do have some contact. I am reassured by such contacts. I feel that Polish students have nothing to be ashamed of. Just as Polish people of science have nothing to be ashamed of. Of course I know very little about other Polish universities outside of Warsaw; I have been here and there, but I cannot comment in any consistent way. Based on what I know, hear, and read, I think that Polish humanists are no worse than others in an intellectual sense. Polish historians, and we have got excellent ones, Polish philologists, Polish sociology – together they constitute a good segment of European culture. Here, in England, not much is known about this. Few Polish books are translated into English or other languages. There are some translations, but not many, and I would like to see Poland make a greater effort in this direction as well. So that Poland is known here as a center of culture. There are some people who are well-known here: composers or writers. There are not very many of them. And so I would like to see Poland make an effort to promote not just tourism, but also the achievements of Polish culture. And I believe that this is possible because, as I keep saying, we have nothing to be ashamed of, and there are centers of "high culture" in which we are bona-fide participants.

Interviewed by
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