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Fr. Józef Tischner (1931-2000) : Chaplain of Solidarnosc and Philosopher of Hope

by Gerald J. Beyer

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This old but also very new word, solidarity, what does it mean? To what does it call us? What memories does it bring back? To explicate it more precisely, perhaps it is necessary to reach back into the Gospel and seek the origin of the word there. Christ explains its meaning: "Carry one another's burden and in this way fulfill God's law" (paraphrase of Paul in Gal. 6:2). What does it mean to be in solidarity? It means to carry the burden of another person. . . . Solidarity has still another facet; solidarity does not need to be imposed from the outside by force. . . . And one more thing - solidarity, the one that is borne from the pages and spirit of the [G]ospel, does not need an enemy or opponent to strengthen itself and grow. It turns towards all and not against anyone.¹

Fr. Józef Tischner originally preached these words in a now famous sermon on Poland's Wawel Hill in Kraków on October 19, 1980. The occasion was the Solidarity movement's first national convention. His homily during that convention, along with essays later published in a collection entitled *Etyka solidarnosci*, earned Tischner the title of "the philosopher of Solidarity" or the "theologian of Solidarity."² Twenty years later, on the twenty-eighth of June, Tischner died after an ordeal with cancer of the larynx. During those twenty years he touched the minds and hearts of millions of Poles and had an indelible impact on Polish society. Today, many Poles experience a deep void and wonder if anyone can provide the desperately needed intellectual and pastoral leadership as Tischner did in the struggle to achieve a just, democratic social order. Thus, the well-known activist and intellectual Adam Michnik³ recently opined: "For me personally, he [Tischner] was the conscience of Polish democracy. How will Polish democracy manage without Józef's conscience?"⁴

Despite Tischner's intellectual and historical achievements, he appears to be relatively unknown in the United States. In my judgment, Tischner represents one of the great Christian thinkers of this century and is worthy of attention on several counts. First, his publications from 1955 to 2000 number over six hundred.⁵ Varying greatly in nature, style and tone, they deal with topics as diverse as the inadequacy of Thomism,⁶ the possibility of dialogue between Christians and Marxists⁷, critiques of anti-liberalism and anti-democracy in the Roman Catholic church, the nature of good, evil and human freedom and interpretation of the new catechism. Second, Tischner's deep commitment to pastoral ministry and his social involvement at the grass roots level with the Solidarity movement make him an outstanding example of an engaged Christian philosopher who witnessed to the Gospel through rigorous academic work and actively promoting social

change. Third, I believe, as did Tischner, that “a new perspective opens new horizons . . . the two worlds mutually need one another.”⁸ Christianity from the “East” and the “West” have much to learn from one another. The “iron curtain” all but eviscerated this exchange for forty years. In addition, the study of Tischner’s work would aid in eradicating a prejudice in “the West” that makes it almost an oxymoron to say “Polish” and “intellectual” in the same breath.⁹ Anyone acquainted with the compelling and innovative writing of a figure such as Fr. Józef Tischner would not fall prey to such ignorance. Finally, Tischner’s philosophical reflections on the nature and praxis of solidarity, a term which is often used in a vague and vacuous manner in ethical discourse, continue to have currency. Tischner’s description of the “ethic of Solidarity” that helped overturn the Communist regime in Poland also provides insight into the moral foundations of democracy. As Charles Taylor has written in an essay concerning Tischner’s “ethic”, “we cannot abandon this theory [of solidarity] because it plays an essential role in the entire project of modern democracy.”¹⁰

The limitations of the present essay preclude a comprehensive examination of Tischner’s thought. I will focus primarily on his theological anthropology and its connection to some of his integral ideas concerning social change. Prior to a critical assessment of these areas, a short biographical sketch of Tischner is in order. To reiterate, the enduring significance of Józef Tischner resides both in his essays and treatises and in his intimate involvement with people and social movements.¹¹

Fr. Józef Tischner: 1931-2000¹²

Józef Stanislaw Tischner was born on March 12, 1931 in Stary Sacz, a region close to the Tatra mountains in Southern Poland. Although Tischner spent much of his adult life in Kraków, where he studied and taught, his close ties with the Highlanders, the Highlander culture (*kultura góralska*), its dialect and the mountains had a tremendous impact on his philosophy and its style. *Górale* (Highlanders) are considered “primitive” by many Poles from the intellectual and cultural centers of places such as Kraków, Warsaw and Poznan. Never renouncing his heritage, Tischner made a point of announcing himself as one of them. He often wrote in a style that made his work accessible to people from all walks of life and even published *Historia filozofii po góralsku* in 1997, a short book with a tape-recorded transcript in which he relates the history of philosophy in the Highlanders’ dialect. Of Tischner’s affinity for the land (particularly the Tatra mountains), Jan Andrzej Kloczowski OP wrote: “. . . because he felt the land, he believed his responsibility was to be vigilant towards the thinking of those who walked and lived on that land.”¹³

Tischner began studying in the department of theology at Jagiellonian University in Kraków in 1950. The Communist regime eliminated the theology department in 1954. In 1955, Tischner was ordained a Roman Catholic priest. In his later reflections on this decisive moment in his life, he stated that “the voice of a calling spoke within me, which said: Yes! you do not have to, but if you want to, you can...”¹⁴ The importance of a free decision “for God” would return again and again in his writing. For example, in *Ksiadz na manowcach* we read:

The freedom of God in relation to creation and the freedom of the human being towards God is the basic principle for understanding the history of salvation. In

this history nothing “must be.” It is rather the case that “everything can be.” Therefore, salvation is often called “liberation.”¹⁵

Tischner started his student days in theology but ended them with the successful defense of a doctoral dissertation on Husserl in 1963. The influence of Husserl provided a lasting impetus to the kind of work Tischner would undertake in the future. During the initial stages of his bout with cancer, Tischner wrote to his students of philosophy that “the thinking human being thinks not only for himself or herself, but to some degree, perhaps above all, for others. Husserl said that philosophers are the functionaries of all of humanity...In this is expressed their sense of responsibility for the fate of the human being as homo sapiens.”¹⁶

Tischner’s personal encounters with eminent philosophers from Europe and North America also shaped the contours of his mind. As co-founder (with Hans-Georg Gadamer in 1981) of the Institut für den Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna and as a participant in the papal gatherings of intellectuals in Castle Gandolfo, he was in continual dialogue with Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur and other esteemed thinkers. He sought to bridge the gap between the “East” and “West” by encouraging Polish readers of his own works to delve into the minds of such luminaries from the commonly perceived “relativist, morally bankrupt, liberal West.” Tischner engaged contemporary minds such as Emmanuel Levinas and Gabriel Marcel and “classics” such as Augustine, Hegel and Kierkegaard in order to “test his own thinking”¹⁷ and to forge his own, innovative philosophical concepts, such as the “axiological Self.”¹⁸

The year 1981 drew Tischner into the heart of the Solidarity movement. Oxford University historian Timothy Garton Ash describes Tischner’s role at the Solidarity convention as follows:

If few of the delegates troubled to read the Pope’s encyclical [Laborem Exercens, 1981], or even the account of it which appeared in the Solidarity Weekly, they certainly listened to the Pope’s close friend and intellectual associate, Father Józef Tischner. Although, like the Pope, steeped in phenomenology, Tischner yet retained an almost Lutheran pastoral directness and natural vividness of language. The world of Polish work, he preached on the first day of the Congress, was as broad and filthy as the River Vistula... ‘Let the water in the Polish Vistula become as clean...as the water in the five Polish lakes in the Tatra mountains.’¹⁹

Here on Wawel Hill, the former seat of Polish kings and location of St. Stanislaw’s Cathedral, Tischner was elected chaplain and articulated, in the words of John Paul II, the “spiritual bases of the ethics of Solidarity”.²⁰ Even before his official role in the movement was confirmed, he was a friend and advisor to many members of the movement during their times of trouble:

In 1980, he wanted to meet with the workers who had created free labor unions . . . he asked about the mood in the Lenin steelworks. Clearly, he was interested in the workers: their opinions, their behavior, habits. . . . He once pulled out a bottle of slivovitz and proposed that we should be on a first name basis. I was stunned: I, an ordinary worker, and the reverend, professor, and beyond that, philosopher.²¹

The speaker, Stefan Jurczak, one of the founders of Solidarnosc, goes on to say how much it meant to him that Tischner came to visit him while he was in jail for “crimes against the state” and helped his family while he was interred. It was also in this context

that Tischner met Adam Michnik, with whom he remained close friends and collaborated until his death.²² According to Michnik, not himself a member of the church, Tischner explained cogently why democracy needs the church and what kind of church it needs.²³ It is safe to say, as did Janina Ochojska, the founder of Polish Humanitarian Aid, that Tischner's *Etyka solidarnosci* shaped the political consciousness of an entire generation.²⁴

The rebirth of modern democracy in Poland was a turbulent era for Tischner. Ironically, he was compelled to write of "the unfortunate gift of freedom" (the title of his book published in 1993). Poles were not prepared for the civic responsibility that came with freedom. An intense fear of freedom arose, which "became greater than the fear of violence." With the winds of freedom from "the West" came abortion, pornography, a lack of respect for religious piety.²⁵ In addition, the transition from Communism to a democratic, free market society did not go smoothly: "Our crisis has a dual nature: we are still holding on to the sicknesses of socialism and simultaneously colliding with the sicknesses of capitalism."²⁶ To make matters worse, the Roman Catholic church lost a great deal of authority and became internally fragmented. During this phase of his life, Tischner tirelessly championed democracy (imbued with the "right values"), freedom ("properly understood") and Catholicism that witnessed to the "Good News." In this vein, he proclaimed: "Will the opponent, whom today we defile, accuse, corner with suspicions and humiliate, come to us tomorrow to be baptized by our hands? The style of polemics [prevalent today] clearly indicates that it is not about evangelization, but about power."²⁷ His dedication to the edification of civil society in Poland and to renewal in the church won him many accolades. For example, in 1999 he received the Presidential "White Eagle", the highest award given for service to Poland. However, he also made many enemies through his efforts. His detractors denounced him with such epithets as "liberal", "Jew" and "mason."²⁸ Hence, Tischner has been likened to the Israelite prophet Jeremiah, who "loved his nation so much, that he had to prophesize on more than one occasion against it" because he "uncannily clearly saw all of the threats that the nation created for itself."²⁹

Despite the vituperative attacks, Tischner remained a moral authority and spiritual leader until his death. His widespread appeal spanned several generations. For many years he and his "friend", Bartek the teddy bear, explained the rudiments of the Catholic faith to hundreds of eager young listeners at St. Mark's Church in Kraków. His Monday afternoon lectures at Jagiellonian University (which I had the privilege of attending) invariably packed the massive auditorium with spiritually and intellectually hungry college students. His televised ruminations on the Catechism of the Catholic Church elucidated for millions what otherwise would have remained abstruse. Never unaware of basic needs, Tischner even obtained farming equipment from Austria for Polish peasants.³⁰ Believers and non-believers alike sought him out during their final stages of life. In one of his last public lectures, Tischner spoke of his conversations with the Polish poet Halina Poswiatowska, whose struggle to lead a zestful life despite her deteriorating health ceased at age thirty-two. While peering into the eyes of death, she pleaded in one of her poems, "say you won't condone, that I die all alone, in this world so cold and dark."³¹ Tischner, who consoled Poswiatowska and numerous others during their final days, once mused: "To a certain degree, our Christian faith is tested in our attitude towards death."³² It would seem that for Tischner the key is the movement from "why

have you forsaken me” to “into your hands I commend my spirit.” Hope conquers death. This movement allows us to enter the “other side of life” as “children of hope.”³³

Afflicted by cancer during his final years, he continued to write from a hospital bed and function as the chair of the philosophy department at the Papal Academy of Theology in Kraków. When asked in an interview if he had ceased to believe in something as a result of his illness, he replied:

“Actually, I am starting to believe in more and more ‘impossible things.’ I am discovering that the world is richer, more colorful than I previously imagined...my illness has enriched the world for me. It has given me a sense of freedom.”³⁴

Even in his final moments, Fr. Józef Tischner provided inspiration and wisdom to those who would listen. He embodied, in word and deed, the kind of “incarnational humanism” that the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray espoused in his writing.³⁵ Succinctly stated, he was a “light for the world” (Mt. 5: 14-16).

Hope, the Human Person, and Social Change in Tischner’s Thought

One of the distinctive and pervasive characteristics of Tischner’s work is the attempt to articulate and provide ground for hope. Tischner acknowledges that this is a Herculean task after Auschwitz and Kolyma. He claims that the dimensions of the evil of the “totalitarian epoch” were so great that they surpassed all intellectual categories and intellectual possibilities of comprehending it.³⁶ Yet, in a speech given to German students of theology in 1993, he contended that “it is not true that at Auschwitz and Kolyma the human being lost. The truth is that the human being won. How was this possible? In order to answer the question, we need to rethink the whole of European thought - Christian and Greek.” This reinterpretation must be undertaken from another point of view - from the heart of Auschwitz and Kolyma.³⁷ In describing his own philosophy in the preface to an earlier work, Tischner explicitly discusses contemporary humanity’s crisis of hope. According to Tischner, early philosophy was borne of wonder for the world (e.g. Aristotle). Later, it arose from doubt (e.g. Descartes). Today it is borne of pain. Tischner prophetically states that “the quality of philosophy is determined by the quality of human pain that it seeks to express and assuage. Whoever does not see this is close to betrayal.”³⁸ Betrayal to whom? Betrayal to humanity. The task, therefore, of the philosopher, is to give testimony to our humanity. According to Tischner, not a single contemporary philosophy of the human being bequeathed such a witness to humanity as did Maximilian Kolbe. Kolbe symbolically represents the many who sacrificed themselves for the sake of others.³⁹ Tischner returns to the heroism of concentration camp prisoners again in his final systematic philosophical work, *Spór o istnienie o człowieka* [“The debate concerning the existence of the human being”]. Like the Viennese psychiatrist Victor Frankl, Tischner points to the freedom of those who gave their lives for others⁴⁰ (we will examine Tischner’s conception of human freedom in due course, as it is inextricably linked to his hope in humanity).

Tischner believed that one needed to “work on” human hope in preschoolers, students, and adults in myriad situations. “When I look back at my work as a priest and philosopher, I realize that for decades I mainly worked on human hope”, he once mused.⁴¹ One might easily be tempted to dismiss Tischner’s philosophical search for hope. Marx and Lenin made most of us cognizant of the “opium” that religion sometimes

provides for those who suffer. Feminist theologians rightfully admonish those who urge us to “offer up our sufferings” and “accept our crosses,” while paying no attention to the material circumstances which generate suffering. Tischner, well aware of Marx, Lenin and the real suffering that ensued from the instantiation of their ideas, refuses to root hope solely beyond this world: “We cannot talk about hope in this way! . . . a repository of hope exists: ‘carry one another’s burden’, ‘you are mutually each other’s trustees of hope and from this trusteeship of hope community is created.’”⁴² In other words, it is the responsibility of all members of a community (the Church, for example) to strive to eradicate obstacles to hope and to foster the hope of one another.

How are we to be repositories of hope for one another? Shall we deny or denigrate the suffering of others? Is this just another proposal to “suffer with dignity”? As we have already seen, the “post Auschwitz, post Kolyma” philosopher does not deny the magnitude of human suffering. “We must accept the fact that our thinking falls under the judgment of the suffering human being.”⁴³ However, Tischner makes this contention in order to critique philosophies that have failed to recognize it. He has not yet put forth any constructive proposals. Hence, the question remains, what verdict shall the high court of humanity render towards Tischner’s philosophy? The answer depends on how trenchantly he addresses the problem of suffering and whether he demonstrates that “in the very structure of humanity lies a seed of hope.”⁴⁴

In a provocative essay, Tischner censures a “new messianism” that exists in Poland with regard to the suffering that Poles have endured in the last several centuries: partitions, invasion and destruction by the Nazis and 40 years of Soviet domination. In his analysis of this phenomenon, he accuses some Poles of “concentrating the eyes of the world on themselves.” He acerbically states “Is there something worth looking at in the world other than my pain? Whoever doesn’t look at my pain is a sinner!” He goes on to say ironically

However, one needs to ask one’s self, what is the nature and meaning of the pain of the defeated such that it is worth universal consideration? There is, after all, much pain in the world. There are famines, poverty, diseases and wars. Why should we focus on one pain, on the pain of these particular people and not others who are defeated? Because this pain is the messianic pain. It is from this pain that the emancipation of the world will come. . . . Messianic pain is Polish pain.⁴⁵

While this message was delivered to Poles, it carries universal significance. Tischner asks us to swallow an unsavory dose of medicine. In an age when people often play the “my suffering is worse than your suffering” game, Tischner’s words are timely and necessary.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, this precautionary word against fixating on one’s own pain does not deny the need for true healing and restoration as a result of real human suffering. This admonition alone does not spawn desperately needed, life-giving hope. On the one hand, Tischner roots hope eschatologically in the future. Following Meister Eckhart, he claims that when God reveals God’s self to human beings, it is always in a partial, perhaps fleeting way. God promises to reveal God’s self to us fully only in the future.⁴⁷ However, neither this stance nor his rebuke of “messianic pain” overcomes the primary problem with which Tischner must grapple. He phrased the question as follows:

‘The human being died’ engrossed by that which it thought up itself. . . . Why did the human being destroy itself? Because it discovered that it cannot be good. . . . Can we reverse this process? Can we make a human being from a game-player?⁴⁸

In other words, without denying that human beings built Auschwitz and Kolyma, took satisfaction from these monstrosities and tried to wash their hands of guilt after the fact, how can we restore faith in the human person? Eschatological hope is ultimately important for Tischner. Yet, he will not abandon the human person. Adumbrating his philosophical project, he maintains it is possible to “make a human being from a game-player” (i.e. one who views all of reality as a game to be won). This can be accomplished by “showing that from the interior of the human being’s game we can extract [or call forth] a yearning for that which is truly good, a yearning that through freedom seeks a space for itself.”⁴⁹ It is at this moment that we must turn to Tischner’s theological anthropology in our quest for his locus of hope.⁵⁰

A thorough analysis of Tischner’s theological anthropology exceeds the scope of the present essay. However, it is necessary to present, at least in broad strokes, the interconnected notions of freedom, good and evil (or sin) and grace as they appear in Tischner’s writing.⁵¹ The aim is twofold: First, a brief examination of these loci will illuminate the underpinnings of Tischner’s philosophy of hope. Second, an understanding of Tischner’s anthropology and philosophy/theology of hope will shed light on what Tischner believed could be achieved in the social sphere. One interesting way to do this is to contrast elements of the respective anthropologies of Tischner and Reinhold Niebuhr, and to show how their variant concepts may have produced divergent conclusions regarding social change.⁵²

Our point of departure is the “axiomatic given” of a phenomenologist’s analysis of evil. It is the springboard from which we can move through Tischner’s anthropology: “Evil is a given. I do not ask if it is an illusion or not. I know - I have experienced in a clear enough manner that in the other exists some kind of embodied evil.”⁵³ Tischner’s understanding of sin underscores its various dimensions. In one place, Tischner speaks of the “slavery of evil”, which he describes as a loss of freedom. He also claims, in accord with the “Christian conception” of sin, that sin is a basic evil that is “overlaid” upon human nature. Following Hans Urs von Balthasar, he also portrays sin as the attempt of “finite freedom” to play or usurp the role of “Infinite Freedom.” This is made possible by the glimpse of “Infinite Freedom” that exists within “finite freedom.”⁵⁴

Reinhold Niebuhr’s intriguing account of sin in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* strikes many similar chords. For example, Niebuhr states that “. . . the self lacks the faith and trust to subject itself to God. It seeks to establish itself independently.”⁵⁵ He also speaks of the slavery of sin: “The ultimate proof of the freedom of the human spirit is its own recognition that its will is not free to choose between good and evil.”⁵⁶ While many of Niebuhr’s ideas echo what we have heard from Tischner, their “tones” begin to diverge even within the last of Niebuhr’s cited statements. It would seem that their paths split (perhaps not radically, but in important ways) in regard to human freedom and grace.

According to Tischner, the Christian concept of grace developed in contradistinction to the pagan, Greek concept of *fatum*. Among their differences, *fatum* ignores or denies the freedom of the human being while grace affords freedom’s achievement. Tischner points out that philosophers and theologians have debated throughout the ages over how this seemingly paradoxical statement can be true.⁵⁷ In his judgment, the problem of grace represents the crux of the matter; it encompasses the problem of the human being, sin, freedom and responsibility.⁵⁸ The Christian concept of

grace assumes two things about the human being: first, that human beings are in need of grace; second, that human beings are capable of receiving it.⁵⁹

If grace is that which creates the possibility of human freedom, what kind of freedom can it create? For Tischner, grace is the remedy for human evil. Grace is that which liberates human beings from the slavery of sin. According to Tischner, Christianity portrays the human being enslaved by sin from birth who can undergo a gradual liberation. Therefore, Christianity does not proclaim an absolute freedom, unlike the Enlightenment, which professes that all human beings are born totally free.⁶⁰ How does grace concretely operate in granting us freedom? Tischner claims that it “fastens wings” to the human being, in order that he or she may gaze “from above” at everything that limits or restrains.⁶¹ While Tischner does not elaborate on these ‘restraints’ in his philosophical treatises on grace, he proffers insight into their nature in his book entitled *Jak żyć?* [How to live?]. In a sense, the beatitudes free us from the “things of this world”; they allow us to see earthly affairs in the proper perspective. “The hope of the kingdom frees us from slavery in relation to the world”⁶² (It is interesting to note that Tischner reflected on the meaning of the Beatitudes for the “liberation” of Poland in 1982 in articles published during the martial law period)⁶³. The “human being” of the beatitudes is a pilgrim. The pilgrim, like Abraham, journeys towards a “fatherland.” In short, it would seem that for Tischner grace allows the pilgrim to hope in the future and thus to have the courage to travel the path of justice, righteousness and mercy towards union with God. This is a journey of progressive liberation from sin towards absolute freedom or “Infinite Freedom.” To be free, is to be free in relation to good and evil.⁶⁴ The following passage encapsulates Tischner’s understanding of the relationship between grace, freedom and human hope:

Freedom is the power that liberates hope. It also liberates joy and the feeling of dignity. But how is the passage from despair possible? How is it possible to defeat sadness with joy? How is it possible to conquer contempt and to free the sense of one’s dignity? If freedom is a kind of ‘ascent’, how is such an ‘ascent’ possible, raising one’s self from the state of despair? Can the human being accomplish this alone? If the human being could, the human would certainly not have fallen. And if he or she has fallen, he or she cannot get up themselves. Freedom means that a human being can accomplish this. On the other hand, however, freedom comes from the outside. In the incomprehensibility of this passage from despair to hope the experience of grace is anchored. Freedom is grace opening up towards grace.”⁶⁵

Paradoxically, “freedom comes from the outside.” Only the infusion of grace can enable the human being to begin the “ascent” that Tischner describes. Recall, however, that evil embodied in others is an “axiomatic given” for Tischner (perhaps all would readily agree to this). Therefore, either not all human beings are free or there is a possibility to reject grace. Tischner elucidates his position in *Spór o istnienie człowieka* and *Jak żyć?* In the former, he contends that the good cannot be good by force or necessity. “Goodness, in order to be good, must itself ‘want to be’ good.”⁶⁶ In the latter work he argues that in order for an act to be considered sinful it must be performed “with at least a dose of consciousness and a degree of freedom.”⁶⁷ Moreover, “the human being, placed at the foot of the signpost and pushed by grace in that direction, must decide to march. The will must decide.”⁶⁸ Hence, Tischner explicates why not all human beings

decide to “spread their wings and fly” at every given moment. Freedom, the “grace of all graces”⁶⁹, liberation from sin, is offered to all human beings. This freedom can be freely rejected or accepted. This position is consistent with what we have already heard in the historical sketch of Tischner’s life. In salvation history, nothing “must be.” Rather, everything “can be.”⁷⁰ It also resembles *Gaudium et Spes* concerning “the excellence of liberty.” The Council fathers argued that “only in freedom can man [sic] direct himself towards goodness.”⁷¹

Reinhold Niebuhr discusses a “reconstruction of the self” in similar terms. It is a consequence of “power” and “grace” from beyond the self. He maintains that the Christian experience is of a new self. “The new self is more truly a real self because the vicious circle of self-centeredness has been broken.”⁷² It would appear on this basis that he, like Tischner, believes in the possibility of some degree of liberation from the stranglehold of sin, at least theoretically. Elsewhere, as we have seen, Niebuhr contends that “man [sic] is most free in the discovery that he is not free.”⁷³ How are we to make sense of these apparently contradictory claims? In a segment entitled “grace is a power not our own,” Niebuhr provides a pithy nuance of his position on grace and freedom:

The real situation is that both affirmations - that only God in Christ can break and reconstruct the sinful self, and that the self must “open the door” and is capable of doing so - are equally true; and they are both unqualifiedly true, each on its own level. Yet either affirmation becomes false if it is made without reference to one another.⁷⁴

Hence we see that for Niebuhr, the human must “open the door” and for Tischner the human must “decide to march.” Niebuhr indicates that claiming that grace alone produces the reconstruction of the self is tantamount to a “divine determinism.” This would “imperil every sense of human responsibility.” On the one hand, Reformation theology has run that risk.⁷⁵ On the other, Catholic theology errs in trying to precisely delineate human versus divine activity and places them “on the same level.”⁷⁶

On the theoretical level, Tischner’s views on human nature, grace and freedom seem remarkably similar to Niebuhr’s. The former speaks of the “ascent” of the human (note the influence of Romanticism on Tischner). The latter envisions a “reconstruction of the self.” Both strive to maintain human freedom while acknowledging that ultimately humans are dependent on grace. The difference between the thinking of these two great minds arises in their consideration of the likelihood of the “ascent” or “reconstruction.” It is one thing to hold out the theoretical possibility of “liberation from sin.” Does this liberation actually take place? If so, how often? Niebuhr reminds us that “history is filled with endless possibilities of good and evil” and that “every new human potency may be an instrument of chaos as well as order . . .” He maintains that the Reformation most fully comprehended “this tragic aspect of history.” Its polemic against Catholic doctrines of sanctification, which exhibited a “too-simple confidence in historical possibilities, was well founded.⁷⁷ In short, the history of humanity’s “denial of the Gospel” militates against any false sense of progress and naive optimism about the human’s ability to “reconstruct the self.” As we have seen, Niebuhr has a doctrine of grace that theoretically grants this possibility. Yet, in his words, “. . . human pride is more powerful than any instruments of which it avails itself.”⁷⁸

While Niebuhr seems to focus on the dark side of human history, Tischner dares to speak of the “discovery of the good.” It is intriguing that a philosopher from Poland, a land that

has been historically battered by “evil”, holds out more hope in the human possibility for liberation from sin than Niebuhr.⁷⁹ In an essay entitled *Wiara w mrocznych czasach* [“Faith in Dark Times”], Tischner articulates the need to understand the horrors that Central and Eastern Europe experienced. Having pondered how people could have perpetrated such heinous crimes upon their fellow citizens, he states that the experience of evil “opened the door” for the experience of good. According to Tischner, people have struggled to define the good since Aristotle. He claims that it is perhaps indefinable. However, one can “‘see’ concrete ‘good’ in those who, jeopardizing their own lives, came to the aid of those who were doomed and often died for others.” Once again he names Fr. Maximilian Kolbe and Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko as paragons of embodied goodness. In the case of Kolbe, those prisoners who witnessed his act underwent a passage from despair to hope. A new attitude reigned among them.⁸⁰ Tischner considers what inspired Father Jerzy Popieluszko to risk his life in the name of truth.

Among what he calls “some aspects of the experience of the good”, he enumerates the willingness to be heroic and resignation from violence. The latter represents one of the linchpins of Tischner’s ethics of Solidarity and will be the focus of the remainder of this essay. For the moment, it will suffice to point out that Popieluszko acted according to the maxim he often repeated: “Conquer evil with goodness.”⁸¹ This phrase, rooted in Paul’s letter to the Romans⁸², was often repeated by the Polish Romantic poet Cyprian Norwid. John Paul II also appealed to it during his pilgrimages to Poland during the Communist era.

Tischner’s belief, shared by his compatriots, that good can conquer evil and that “evil is not free because it is dependent on hatred of the good” seems to distinguish him from Niebuhr. In his writing on grace, freedom and evil, he ultimately defends the human being’s ability to “ascend” or “transcend” those things that enslave him or her. Moreover, it is a real possibility. Whereas Niebuhr’s reading of history conveys a sense of resignation and pessimism about the possibilities for the embodiment of good, Tischner harkens to paradigmatic examples of “the experience of the good.” These exemplars indicate what is truly possible. This belief enables Tischner to hope unwaveringly in the human spirit. It is this hope that drives his insistence on the real possibility of social change brought about through non-violent means. Having seen the anthropological underpinnings of Tischner’s philosophy, we may now examine his proposals for the fostering of social change. Once again we will contrast his thinking with Niebuhr’s on this matter. It would seem that what has been already stated in regard to Niebuhr’s anthropology evinces why what he considers “really historically possible” looks meager in comparison to Tischner’s more optimistic proposals.⁸³

1 Józef Tischner, *The Spirit of Solidarity*, trans. Marek B. Zaleski and Benjamin Fiore, S.J. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 2-3. This is the English translation of Tischner’s *Etyka solidarnosci* (Kraków: Znak, 1981). It was republished in 1992 and 2000 by “Znak.”

2 It is debated as to whether Tischner’s work was that of a philosopher, Christian humanist, theologian or all three. Upon hearing of Tischner’s death, John Paul II spoke of “a theologian and philosopher, who was open to the human being, but never forgot about God.” See Jan Pawel II, *Tygodnik Powszechny Online*, <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/ludzie/tischner/jpii.html>, (8 Dec. 2000). Charles Taylor remarked that he sees Tischner as a Christian humanist. Cf. Charles Taylor, “Bedzie nam go brakowalo”, *Tygodnik Powszechny Online*, <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/ludzie/tischner/taylor/html>, (8 Dec. 2000).

3 Adam Michnik, a Jewish Polish historian, was one of the original founders of the *Komitet Obrony Robotników* (Committee for Workers’ Defense), which preceded and led up to the Solidarity movement.

He spent many years in prison at various points in his life and was banned from teaching at Polish universities. His most well known works in English are his *The Church and the Left* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). He currently serves as the chief editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's most widely read newspaper.

4This quotation is taken from one of the many recollections about Józef Tischner published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. They can be found at <http://www.gazeta.pl/ISO/Plus/Wspomnienia/Tischner>, (17 Nov. 2000). It is important to note that the loss of Tischner is felt by Poles from all walks of life, not only the intellectual elite. I have personally witnessed the deep sense of tragedy among Poles. Having noticed that I was reading reflections about Tischner, an elderly woman on a bus in Kraków this past summer turned to me and said "It is terrible that Fr. Tischner has died. I don't know if there is anyone else in Poland who can be the kind of leader he was to us."

5The Polish publishing house "Znak" has compiled a list of his publications between 1955-1994. See Teresa Szczerbinska and Beata Zalewska, *Bibliografia publikacji ks. Józefa Tischnera 1955-1994* (Kraków: Znak, 1995).

6According to the Dominican philosopher of religion Jan Andrzej Kloczowski, the ahistorical, atemporal nature of Thomism ultimately lies at the root of Tischner's strong critiques of this school. See Jarosław Makowski, "Filozofia z wnętrza metafory," *Tygodnik Powszechny* 19 Nov. 2000: 12. Tischner's most sustained criticism of Thomism can be found in his *Myslenie wedlug wartosci* (Kraków: Znak, 1982).

7Józef Tischner, *Marxism and Christianity*, trans. Marek B. Zaleski and Benjamin Fiore, S.J. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987)

8 Józef Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobrazni* (Kraków: Znak, 1997) 86.

9George Weigel mentions this prejudice as one of the barriers to understanding the mind of John Paul II. See George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Cliff Street Books/HarperCollins, 1999) 5-6. My own encounters of such ignorance confirm Weigel's contention.

10 Charles Taylor, "Kilka refleksji na temat solidarnosci", *Znak* 541 (2000) : 22-34. Given the limitations of the present essay, I will not thoroughly treat the elements of Tischner's "ethic of solidarity." For a nuanced discussion of it and its relevance today, see Taylor's essay and Wojciech Bonowicz, "Swiatla Etyki Solidarnosci", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 7 January, 2001: 1, 5.

11Tischner himself claimed that "thinking without experience is empty. Experience without reflection is blind." Józef Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobrazni* 86. It has been said that one cannot understand Tischner's philosophy without considering the fact that it was borne out of his nation's experience of Oswiecim (Auschwitz) and Kolyma. Cf. Makowski, "Filozofia z wnętrza metafory." Tischner wrote that the labor camp symbolically ". . . is the place in which the ultimate instantiations of the basic ideas of Communism were found, particularly the idea of the 'new human being.' Kolyma is not tied to one place geographically: the entire life of a human being under Communism contained something from a life at Kolyma." See Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobrazni*, 40.

12A biography of Tischner will appear in a few months. It will be published by "Znak." I am indebted to the author, Wojciech Bonowicz, for some of the following information. Wojciech Bonowicz, "Bonowicz-biographia ksiedza Tischnera, *Znak*, <http://www.znak.com.pl/tisbiogr.htm>, (21 Nov. 2001). I also rely on the calendar of Tischner's life, "Ks. Józef Tischner: Kalendarium", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, <http://www.gazeta.pl/ISO/Plus/Wspomnienia/Tischner3/010zyc.html>, (17 Nov. 11, 2000).

13Jan Andrzej Kloczowski, "Filozofia jest rozmowa", *Tygodnik Powszechny Online*, <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/ludzie/tischner/kloczowski.html>

14Bonowicz, <http://www.znak.com.pl/tisbiogr.htm>.

15Józef Tischner, *Ksiadz na manowcach* (Kraków: Znak, 1999) 74 -75.

16Cited in Kloczowski, "Filozofia jest rozmowa".

17Kloczowski, "Filozofia jest rozmowa."

18The understanding of one's self as values. According to Marek Drwiega, Tischner's reading of both Husserl's concept of the "transcendental Self" and Scheler's foundational work on axiology formed the basis for Tischner's concept of the "axiological Self." See Makowski, "Filozofia z wnętrza metafory": 13.

19 Timothy Garten Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983) 230-31.

20See Jan Pawel II, *Tygodnik Powszechny Online*, <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/ludzie/tischner/jpii.html>.

21 Stefan Kurczak, "Etyka solidarnosci" at www.tygodnik.com.pl/ludzie/tischner/jurczak.html

22 Their collaboration perhaps culminated in a 500 page book of their deliberations on myriad topics entitled *Miedzy panem a plebanem* (Kraków: Znak, 1995).

23 Adam Michnik, "Był darem", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, <http://www.gazeta.pl/ISO/Plus/Wspomnienia/Tischner3/252wsp.html> (17 Nov. 2000).

24 Janina Ochojska, "O ksiedzu Józefie Tischnerze", *Gazeta Wyborcza*, <http://www.gazeta.pl/ISO/Plus/Wspomnienia/Tischner3/294wsp.html>, (17 Nov. 2000).

25 Cf. Józef Tischner, *Nieszczesny dar wolności* (Kraków: Znak, 1996) 7.

26 Józef Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobrazni* 90.

27 Tischner, *Nieszczesny dar wolności* 19.

28 The epithet "Jew" can only be understood in the light of the complex problem of anti-Semitism in Poland. A helpful collection of essays on this issue is Władysław Bartoszewski, ed., *Under One Heaven: Poles and Jews* (Warszawa: Wiedza, 1999).

29 Grzegorz Rys, "Jeremiasz", *Tygodnik Powszechny Online*, <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/ludzie/tischner/rys.html>, (8 Dec. 2000).

30 Jerzy Turowicz, "Kim jest Józef Tischner," *Tygodnik Powszechny* 19 Nov. 2000: 10.

31 Halina Poswiatowska, "kiedy umre kochanie", *Własnie kocham . . . Indeed I love*, ed. and trans. Maya Peretz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997) 213.

32 Józef Tischner and Jacek Zakowski, *Tischner czyta Katechizm* (Kraków: Znak, 1996) 178.

33 Tischner and Zakowski, *Tischner czyta Katechizm* 184. His account of Husserl's death is intriguing. Apparently Husserl continued to analyze his experiences in writing up until the moment of his death. At one point, he asked his caregiver, Sr. Jegerschmitt for something to write with because he had seen a great light and wanted to describe it. When she returned, he was dead. The account is noted in the memoirs of Sr. Jegerschmitt.

34 Cited in "Ks. Józef Tischner: Kalendarium"

35 See John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960) 175-196, esp. 195.

36 Tischner, *Nieszczesny dar wolności* 66.

37 Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobrazni* 86.

38 Tischner, *Myslenie wedlug wartosci* 13.

39 Tischner, *Myslenie wedlug wartosci* 12. Tischner often speaks in this vein of his friend, Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko. Fr. Popiełuszko was brutally slain and dumped into the Vistula river on October 19, 1984 by "SB" (the Polish secret police during the Communist era) officers because of his association with striking trade unions of "Solidarity". He sealed his fate when he sternly criticized the "falsehood" of the Communist regime in a homily. Cf. George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 149.

40 Tischner refers here to Nazi camps and Soviet camps, such as Kolyma. Józef Tischner, *Spór o istnienie człowieka* (Kraków: Znak, 1999) 321. In my judgment, Victor Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz, wrote one of the most profound observations about human freedom in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1973) 104: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of all human freedoms - to choose one's own attitude in any circumstances, to choose one's own way. . . Every day, every hour offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom."

41 Tischner and Zakowski, *Tischner czyta Katechizm* 94.

42 Tischner and Zakowski, *Tischner czyta Katechizm* 94.

43 Tischner, *Myslenie wedlug wartosci* 324.

44 Makowski, "Filozofia z wnętrza metafory": 13. According to Kłoczowski, this was Tischner's goal as a philosopher.

45 Tischner, *W krainie schorowanej wyobrazni* 8.

46 I have in mind, for example, the fact that one hears attempts to quantitatively and/or qualitatively argue that the Holocaust was a more heinous crime against humanity than the institution of slavery or vice-versa. In my judgment, this is counterproductive and does not constitute a serious attempt at healing and reconciliation.

47 Tischner and Zakowski, *Tischner czyta Katechizm* 92.

48 Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 64.

49Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 65.

50Polish philosophers Marek Drwiega and Karol Tarnowski point out that Tischner ignored the post Enlightenment disjunction between philosophy and theology. Because he felt that theological categories were necessary to describe the human being, he used them without reservation, thus overcoming what Paul Ricoeur named “consciously controlled schizophrenia.” See Makowski, “Filozofia z wnętrza metafory”: 13.

51Tischner has returned to questions such as the nature of evil and human freedom again repeatedly in his writing. I recognize that this presentation runs the risk of grossly oversimplifying Tischner’s ideas. It should be treated as an initial attempt to outline the most salient points in Tischner’s writings on these matters.

52The choice of Reinhold Niebuhr is not arbitrary. His stature and impact in the United States makes him one of the few American theologians who have had the same kind of significance for his society as Tischner did for Poland. Like Tischner, he made his impact both through his prolific career and his link to social movements such as the pro-labor Union for Democratic Action. On the latter topic, see Richard Wightman Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr: A biography; with a new introduction (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 197

53Józef Tischner, Filozofia dramatu (Paris: Editions Du Dialogue, 1990) 141.

54Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 345.

55 Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. I. Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964) 252.

56Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. I, 258.

57Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 131.

58Tischner and Zakowski, Tischner czyta katechizm 129.

59Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 132.

60Tischner, Nieszczesny dar wolności 12.

61Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 297.

62Tischner, Jak zyc? 102.

63These articles were later published in book form as Książeczka Pielgrzymia (Warszawa: Libellus, 1996). This edition indicates the portions of the original texts that were censored out by the Communist authorities.

64Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 298.

65 Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 317.

66Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 317.

67 Tischner, Jak zyc 148.

68Tischner, Jak zyc 57.

69The title of one of Tischner’s articles is “Wolność - łaska wszystkich łask” [Freedom - the grace of all graces]. It is found in Nieszczesny dar wolności 10-13.

70See footnote 13. This statement gives rise to some questions pertaining to Christology. Does salvation history ultimately depend on human beings or the incision of the Christ-event into human history? Tischner’s stance on freedom as grace “from the outside” rescues him from the first potential accusation. Tischner ultimately roots salvation in Jesus Christ. Far from being Pelagian, he merely wants to underscore human freedom. For example, in “the Phenomenology of Justification”, we read: “There would be no justification if it were not for Christ’s offering. ...In order for God to “justify” the sinner, the sinner should ‘convert’, but in order for the sinner to convert, he or she must accept the fruits of redemption. In the act of redemption, someone ‘just’ intervenes between God and the sinful human being, which on the one hand enables God to perform the act of justification; on the other hand it enables the human being to “raise” its nature to the level of ‘justice.’ There is no justification without the savior. The human being alone insults God, but is not capable of rectifying the insult alone.” Tischner, Spór o istnienie człowieka 189-190. See also Tischner, Książeczka na manowcach 79-80.

71Gaudium et Spes, no. 17, Walter Abbot, ed., The Documents of Vatican II (New York: Guild Press, 1966) 214. See also Sacrosanctum Concilium, no. 11 and Dignitatis Humanae 11.

72Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. II. Human Destiny (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964) 110.

73Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. I, 260.

74Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. II, 118.

75Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II, 116.

76Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II, 118.

77Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II, 155.

78Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II, 128.

79While Niebuhr's homeland was "relatively" prosperous compared to a place like Poland, Niebuhr was deeply disturbed by what he saw on a visit to Germany during World War II. See Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: a biography...* 78.

80Tischner, *Nieszczesny dar wolnosci* 69.

81 Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II, 71.

82Romans 12: 20-21 (NRSV): "No, 'if your enemies are hungry feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

83Richard Wightman Fox cites an illuminating quotation from Niebuhr's diary. "I am not going to let my decision in regard to war stand alone. I am going to try to . . . experiment with the potency of trust and love much more than I have in the past." See Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: a biography...* 79.