All Souls College

# LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI

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23 October 1927–17 July 2009

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Address by
Professor Charles Taylor

Saturday, 28 November 2009

I first met Leszek Kolakowski in this college. It was in the late '50s; I was an Examination Fellow, and he, in the aftermath of the upheavals of 1956, had been able to travel to the West for the first time since the deep freeze of Stalinism. He was known then as one of the foremost theoreticians of a renewed, humanistic Marxism, which many people hoped might help bring about an internal evolution of the Communist societies towards greater freedom, and perhaps even democracy. I should say that Leszek was virtually lionized by a big part of the Left in Western Europe, just for this reason.

But it was not to be. The ideal of a more humanist socialism was crushed, in 1956 and again in 1968; and Leszek himself evolved intellectually, became a strong critic of Marxism, and wrote one of the most important books on its rise, its inner divisions, and its – as he saw it – grave inadequacies.

What we can see through this whole development was the tremendous intellectual integrity of the man. Neither the threats of the apparatus, nor the prospect of acclaim in the Western Left, could turn him an inch from the course he was engaged on. He was involved very young in a truly catastrophic political project, which he at first supported, and he owed it to himself and his country and

his world, to work out how and why this had gone wrong. Nothing was going to deflect him from this path.

But he had another quality which doesn't always accompany undeviating integrity, and that was his humour, his wonderful ironic sense of humour; an irony which was often self-irony. A saying of his comes to my mind:

> I was almost omniscient (yet not entirely) when I was 20 years old, but, as you know, people grow stupid when they grow older. I was much less omniscient when I was 28 and still less now ('My correct views about Everything', p. 19).

It was these qualities, together with another which I'll mention in a minute, which made for the extraordinary moral authority that Leszek enjoyed in Poland. It hasn't always been the case that people who were in public opposition to Communist regimes have remained important figures in the freer societies that emerged after their fall. Think of Solzhenitsyn; even to some extent Havel in today's Czech Republic. But the respect, I could almost say reverence, for Leszek Kolakowski, remained undimmed in Poland. People went on turning to him until his death three months ago.

This has a lot to do with the courage and integrity he showed during the most difficult years.

But it also has to do with his deep knowledge and understanding of Polish thought and the European matrix in which it has evolved, and which it refracted, always in its own special way.

Leszek was one of the key thinkers who articulated a new path for a free Poland. If the engine driving Poland's striving for freedom from the dead hand of Communism was a kind of nationalism suffused with Catholicism, the outcome of this freedom was anything but a return to the pre-War past. The triumph of the new Poland – alas, still somewhat fragile – is that it has begun to free itself from the sterile and destructive features of the old nationalism, from chauvinism, anti-Semitism and clericalism. Poland has been able, for instance, to establish a new kind of relation with its eastern neighbours. The vision which enabled this turn was nourished by a handful of thinkers, including Czesław Miłosz, the publishers of *Kultura*, and of course, John Paul II. But a leading, unique figure in this crucial constellation was Leszek Kołakowski.

But Leszek was not only a Polish thinker; he was also a philosopher with an impact on the world. Can we try to formulate what this consisted in? A number of different qualities contributed to it: the depth of his scholarship in European and Christian thought, certainly; the wry, ironic turn of

mind, undoubtedly. But I would like to mention something else which I think gets close to the heart of it.

Much of contemporary scholarly and intellectual work strives to reduce the sense of perplexity, even of mystery, that we naïvely feel when we contemplate the evolution of human life, and the development of human reason, and the history of human thought. Loud voices pronounce with unshakeable certainty on these questions, in the name of science, or of Revelation, or of some *a priori* moral principle. Amid the shouting, it is sometimes hard to get a voice heard which points out how little we still understand about all this, and how much the big questions are not only still unanswered, but still deeply puzzling.

This is what Leszek continued to remind us of, sometimes half in jest, but always with full limpidity. Here is someone whose early training took place in the vicinity of two traditions whose strong suit was denying mystery: Marxism, and the Polish brand of positivism. He emerged out of these, but not – as with so many ex-Marxists – to rush into an equal and opposite dogmatism.

But nor did he flee into a disengaged agnosticism. On the contrary, we have to understand Leszek's path in terms of the Marxist-Leninism he rebelled against. For him, this ideology in its

Marxist roots was profoundly Promethean. It denied or ignored the essential limitations of human beings. Among these limitations, which the Promethean spirit is tempted to deny, Leszek counted our need for a sense of the Good, of Truth, of meaning, as values independent of our own choosing. Without these, he thought, human life, in particular the common life of a culture, would be impossible.

So to see through the fragility of the dogmatic answers, by science, religion, metaphysics, was not – could not be – to invalidate the questions. This was the uncomfortable – some might think aporetic – site that Leszek occupied, and that he elaborated in a series of striking images.

The lesson he drew from our terrible twentieth-century experience of state Marxism was that the important struggle is to keep the questions alive, to define their contours in our lives, against all Procrustean attempts to iron them out and make them tractable.

For this we are all – Poles, Europeans, everyone – deeply in his debt. He still lives with us, and inspires anew our undying gratitude.