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Father Konstanty Michalski's outline of philosophy of history

Rev. K. Michalski is not only an outstanding mediaevalist and a pioneer of research on the achievements of the Polish Middle Ages but also the creator of an important philosophy of history, which has become a significant component of his research, especially during the dramatic period of World War II, although its framework had been developed already in the 1930s. Rejecting passive approach to tradition, he supported the creative attitude presented by Thomism. His concept of history is determined by an optimistic conviction of the constant evolution of social-cultural life of mankind towards more perfect forms.

Key words: man, humanity, Konstanty Michalski, philosophy of history, Thomism

Father Konstanty Michalski is an important Polish thinker of the 20th century. His whole scientific and didactic life was connected with Cracow as in this city in his early life he joined Congregation of the Mission founded by Vincent de Paul, where he obtained secondary and higher education, graduating also from Slavic Studies at the Jagiellonian University. After graduation from the Higher Institute of Philosophy in Leuven, he lectured for many years in Cracow, e.g. at the Theological Department at the Jagiellonian University. He was the dean of the Theological Department and at the peak of his academic career he became the rector of the Jagiellonian University. After the end of the war, during which he was imprisoned in jails and concentration camps, he came back to his beloved Cracow, where he died prematurely in 1947.

Father Konstanty Michalski is known, first of all, as a prominent historian of 14th-century philosophy and as a pioneer of research on the intellectual heritage of the Polish Middle Ages (which he harshly judged to be almost worthless). The outline of philosophy of history developed by him, less known than the rest of his scientific accomplishments, can be classified as a part of the strong current of Catholic historiosophy in the period before the Second World War. This current, attempting to analyse the complicated and increasingly

dramatic reality of the 1930s, as succinctly put by Z. Kuderowicz, strove to last “in search of hope”¹. The same author claims that Michalski in this respect shows optimism similar to E. Mounier, assuming the dependence of history on moral attitudes and human actions². Undoubtedly, it seems to be a pertinent observation, which Michalski presented in a synthetic form in the book of his life: *Między bestialstwem i heroizmem* [Between savagery and heroism], where he stated, sharing his own retrospections from the tragic times reigned by hate, that it is heroic love and not savagery that has the last word.

A. Usowicz and K. Kłósak, in a book dedicated to Michalski, rightly categorised his philosophy of history as a part of the Thomistic current³. C. Głombik considered Michalski’s perfectionism to be a modification of the providentialist conception of history⁴. S. Kamiński places this philosophy of history in the current of monistic interpretation, indicating that historical events here are a movement understood metaphysically or an evolution of mankind from a less perfect state to a more perfect one. From one generation to another, human nature undergoes actualisation; humanity is perceived as organicist, similar to a concrete personal being characterised by substantial unity⁵.

Summarising his moving in-depth analyses, searching for the sense of human history after the tragedy of the Second World War, Michalski wrote: “many times it happens that he who has studied history of philosophy for decades, then, for one reason or another, switches to another field, turning towards philosophy of history, which is facilitated by external circumstances, i.e. by the fact that forests are burning, monuments of centuries-old human culture are burning as well”⁶. In this statement, the philosopher clearly defines the deepest sources of his vision of history in a typically realistic orientation for Thomism: he is determined to locate it in the context of historical facts and events. The aim of philosophy of history, defined in this way, is, first of all, the pursuit of man in his determinant conditioning, especially those affecting him in the most powerful way. It comes as no surprise then that Michalski strives, first and foremost, to look for hope for humankind after the particularly traumatic historic events. In his opinion, the key issue is not to conduct abstract deliberations but to outline an optimistic perspective for humanity tomorrow: “in such moments, at least for some time, some labours grow smaller, some grow big-

¹ Z. Kuderowicz, *Filozofia dziejów*, Warszawa 1973, s. 265.

² Zob. tamże, s. 265–270.

³ Zob. A. Usowicz, K. Kłósak, *Konstanty Michalski (1879–1947)*, Kraków 1949, s. 196.

⁴ Zob. C. Głombik, *Tomizm czasów nadziei – słowiańskie kongresy tomistyczne, Praga 1932 – Poznań 1934*, Katowice 1994, s. 201.

⁵ Zob. S. Kamiński, *Dziejów filozofia* [w:] *Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii*, Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, t. II, Lublin 2001, s. 794–800.

⁶ K. Michalski, *Między bestialstwem a heroizmem*, Częstochowa 1984, s. 25.

ger in the eyes of conscience. And in the eyes of conscience you have to turn where it is burning and where it starts to grow”⁷. Michalski wonders: “man asks today what attitude generally and fundamentally he should take to the whole past, to tradition and history in relation to the issues of tomorrow; he asks himself how to regulate his attitude to life and the world. Here lies the most severe crisis experienced by the contemporary man, who impatiently strives to resolve it. No wonder that in such circumstances the long forgotten philosophy of history starts to come back to life”⁸. Just before death Michalski reminisced: “My interest in the issue of philosophy of history was born as my eyes started to fade, and for this reason I drifted away from work on medieval manuscripts and moved closer to life”⁹.

Not questioning in any way the sincerity of these declarations about the impact of tragic war events on undertaking research in the scope of philosophy of history, it is impossible not to notice that a marked turn towards issues of this kind could have been seen already at the beginning of the 1930s. The inaugural lecture *Zagadnienia współczesnej filozofii dziejów* [Issues of the contemporary philosophy of history],¹⁰ which he gave as the rector of the Jagiellonian University on the 11th of October in 1931, he dedicated in whole to reflection over history which he considered to be at its turning point in view of the climactic experience of crisis (about which he was not unfortunately mistaken). Considering the possibility of reconciling historicism with anti-historicism, tradition with creativity, he came to the conclusion that historicism should not be condemned, but it is necessary to reject such elements of the past which are, to some degree, dead. The argument between historicism and anti-historicism is, according to the philosopher, a dispute about the ideal of personality: “in historicism people are perceived as persons who can transfer the wealth of their spiritual life to others by means of tradition and symbols regardless of spatial and temporal differences, whereas in anti-historicism people are depersonalised, perceived as automata or atoms which have nothing to communicate and convey”¹¹. Assuming the perspective of moderate historicism, Michalski maintained that exaggeration in this scope is caused by relativisation of everything or congealment in one ideal from the past, which hampers progress¹². Rejecting historicism as being only an inertial respect for tradition, he supported Thomistic affective and creative attitude to tradition in the

⁷ Tamże, s. 36.

⁸ K. Michalski, *Zagadnienia współczesnej filozofii dziejów*, „Przegląd Współczesny” 1931, 10, t. 39, s. 162.

⁹ K. Michalski, *Dokąd idziemy*, „Znak” 1946, 1, s. 5.

¹⁰ „Przegląd Współczesny” 1931, 39, s. 161–180.

¹¹ K. Michalski, *Zagadnienia...*, s. 9.

¹² Zob. tamże, s. 10–11.

name of the principle *est continua creation*¹³. That is why discovering and analysing ideas and figures lying at the foundation of medieval philosophy, not only did he consider various epistemological terms and definitions, but also he attempted to reach man “taking place” and shaping history¹⁴. He saw man as a being able to create history or to draw conclusions from it, not being submerged in it with virtually no influence. After all, it is man as a reasonable and free being, at least to some extent, who marks history with his decisions and actions.

Another issue considered by Michalski in the inaugural lecture stems from gnosiology and metaphysics, so from the question about a deeper sense of historic reality. The author notices in this matter three main approaches: realists, intellectual idealists and voluntaristic idealists. In the first approach represented by idealists, e.g. W. Stern, historic events are the real world, independent of a historian’s thought. Intellectual idealism (G. Simmel) presumes that history is shaped by the human spirit through its own categories. According to voluntaristic idealism (T. Lessing), history has its source in emotional life. By analysing these attitudes, Michalski concluded that in this matter is necessary to assume realism which considers the freedom of human action to be the main source of history. Asking the question about the meaning of human history, he thinks that the answer is not provided by religion, philosophy and natural sciences. Religion speaks of the fallen man (*homo lapsus*) – achieving salvation through grace; philosophy – of *homo sapiens*, natural sciences, in turn, of *homo faber*, who is the hotbed of numerous drives. Each of these views determines a different way of perceiving history. However, it should not be concluded that in the real life there is only one pure type of man. “Undoubtedly – he wrote – that man of flesh and blood who we meet in everyday life is *sapiens*, *faber* and *lapsus* at the same time”¹⁵. Still he stresses that the contemporary man is threatened with a certain anti-rationalism which hampers the discovery of the meaning of what humanity has created so far thanks to reason¹⁶. It is difficult in this context to refrain from the conclusion that this threat seems to intensify rather than to be on the wane. The contemporary man appears to prefer increasingly not reason but emotions or feelings, often being submerged in a certain type of irrationalism.

In a speech delivered at the International Congress of Thomistic Philosophy in Poznań in 1934: *Tomizm wobec współczesnej filozofii dziejów* [Tho-

¹³ Zob. S. Borzym, *Filozofia 1900–1950*, Wrocław 1991, s. 160.

¹⁴ Zob. J. Kopiec, *Wkład ks. Konstantego Michalskiego w refleksję historyczną*, „Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne” 1998, 31, s. 295.

¹⁵ K. Michalski, *Zagadnienia...*, s. 22.

¹⁶ Zob. tamże, s. 22.

mism in the face of the contemporary philosophy of history],¹⁷ for the first time in the conception of history formulated by Michałowski it is possible to notice the term “perfectiorism”, meaning a constant evolution of cultural and social life towards more and more perfect forms¹⁸. The philosopher admitted that in the context of some circumstances, it might be difficult to assume this idea but such a situation takes place only when faith in Providence is not taken into account since Providence can “lead individuals and countries away from historical intricacies into wide tracks of development”¹⁹. This strict correlation of the idea of progress and faith in Providence is not motivated in this case by the defence of God for the condition of human reality typical of theodicy since Michalski refers to Providence to justify Man's faith in human progress.

In the article *Dokąd idziemy* [Whither we go]²⁰ Michalski dealt with the Thomistic philosophy of history with regard to its subject concerning three ideas: the ultimate goal of history, the idea of means which can lead to this goal and the idea of gradual improvement of humankind in the area of thought and social arrangements²¹.

Searching for the sources of Michalski's philosophy of history, it is necessary to apply the social and intellectual context dominant in the 1930s. According to the philosopher, it is the context that brought a new impulse to reflect on the past and the future. Philosophy of history from an academic discipline, dealing with disputes about the status of historic cognition and the usefulness of particular research methods, to a valid description of historic reality, was transforming itself, according to Michalski, into reflection increasingly permeated with metaphysics, a theory searching for order not in the description of reality but in the reality itself. “From among the older and new terms, three basic ones always gather all the remaining ones around themselves. Either matter, or blood or spirit is recognised as the main source of history”²².

Realistically evaluating the social and political reality of his times, Michalski thought that the history of the world proceeds in the context of the large-scale game between two different systems of thought, in which revolution of the state and political systems ran deeply into the human life. Analysing the dispute between the eastern and western neighbour of Poland, he foresaw that despite their mutual hostilities they share the negative attitude towards

¹⁷ „Studia Gnesnensia” 1935, 12, s. 1–29.

¹⁸ Zob. K. Michalski, *Tomizm wobec współczesnej filozofii dziejów*, „Studia Gnesnensia” 1935, 12, s. 23–24.

¹⁹ Zob. tamże, s. 27.

²⁰ „Znak” 1946, 1, s. 127–136.

²¹ Zob. A. Usowicz, K. Klósak, *Ks. Konstanty Michalski...*, s. 203.

²² Zob. K. Michalski, *Tomizm...*, s. 3.

religion: “there is a marked resemblance between the Bolshevik revolution and the national-socialist one in Germany since both of them reached the religious roots in the collective life, with one difference: the former desired to uproot them completely, the latter decided to replace them”²³. Michalski explicitly criticised Marxist historic materialism and the German national-socialist myth of Alfred Rosenberg and Ernest Kieck. Analysing Marxism and communism from the perspective of theoretical presumptions (he experienced the practical consequences of fascism a few years later as a prisoner in a concentration camp), he disagreed with the manner in which the issue of the main source of the historic process was approached. He opposed the struggle for existence in communism and the role of blood and race in fascism since these two conceptions have not gone beyond the framework of naturalistic or mechanistic thinking, and as such they could not explain the role of the inseparable elements in human history, i.e. freedom and spiritual creation. Simultaneously, he considered the creative forces of spirit and freedom not only to be irremovable from the historic process, but to be dominant by facilitating the understanding of the world created by people²⁴.

Noticing the reality of the threat of totalitarian systems, Michalski stressed that these political ideas and theories combined views on the world and life hostile towards Christianity, which requires a resolute reaction from Catholics. Warning against the intensification of the confusion in the hierarchy of human goals, resulting from their separation from the metaphysical foundation, he believed that the Church, holding the powerful tool of Thomistic philosophy, “contains resources of faith capable of withstanding any act of decomposition in the name of defence of the organic system of man and society”²⁵. There is no escaping the fact that such hopes soon had to be confronted with tragic historical truth as it turned out that even the best philosophy is helpless in the face of a brutal force, crossing the moral boundaries, which previously seemed uncrossable.

Michalski saw the theoretical counterpoise for historisophic solutions concerning race and blood in taking into consideration their metaphysical sense, directed eschatologically²⁶. At the same time he indicated that fascism and communism are the main but not the only obstacles for the development of this type of approach (others include cultural crises, improper humanism or

²³ Zob. K. Michalski, *Fermenty religijne w Trzeciej Rzeszy*, „Przegląd Powszechny” 1934, LI, t. 201, s. 348.

²⁴ Zob. K. Michalski, *Tomizm...*, s. 3, 22; tenże, *Fermenty religijne...*, s. 366.

²⁵ C. Głombik, *Tomizm czasów nadziei...*, s. 197–198.

²⁶ Zob. K. Heska-Kwaśniewicz, *O erudycji literackiej ks. Konstantego Michalskiego*, „Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne” 1998, 31, s. 301–305.

the unilateral worldview characterised by biologism, agnosticism and scepticism). He ascribed the sources of the popularity of fascism and communism also to the social and political context of that time, full of fear of a permanent economic world crisis: "heavy turmoil seen in contemporary societies to a large extent stems from ignoring the economic crisis and the resulting crisis of the labour class"²⁷. However, he indicated that in the context of metaphysically perceived history, the very "crisis, tensions between forces are needed as without them there would be no development"²⁸. The corollary of the crisis does not have to be a slump or a disaster, but the discovery of new solutions and goals contributing to further growth.

By listing the factors which Michalski sees as the existential context of 1930s, it is possible to notice his explicit ambivalence in the evaluation of contemporary science, especially in its impact on the development of technological civilisation. At the end of his life, after the atomic bomb had been used in Japan, he perceived atomic energy both as the source of significant progress for humanity and a threat to its existence. Still he underlined that by his creative work, Man can become similar to his Creator. By unleashing atomic energy, inventing new production methods and commencing a new period of economic life, Man came closer to the divine almightiness. Unfortunately, Man can still "take advantage of his success in a different way; he can bring disaster to the Earth, one that has never been dreamt of by philosophers such as Aristotle, when he created his theory of historical succession of cycles"²⁹. Humankind can only be saved from the disaster if it comes closer to the goodness and love of God and is elevated to such a high moral level that has never been imagined before. The possible atomic disaster and the resulting spectacular suicide can be prevented by Man only by the combination of incredible wisdom, providing him with the power to control nature with equally incredible goodness³⁰. It can be easily noticed that with regard to little interest on the part of humanity to combine wisdom with goodness, it is difficult to look with hope at the future of the world, in the context of Michalski's historiosophy.

The most significant attempt to provide a philosophy of history was found by Michalski in the spiritualistic conception by Spann. Criticising Spann for removing the concept of purposefulness, still he approved of his approach because "thanks to the category of organic wholeness and organic transformation, [Spann] shows history as a living unity, at one point in the static aspect, at another one in the dynamic aspect, and thanks to the category of ten-

²⁷ A. Kotakowski, *Biblioteka Polska*, Warszawa 2007, s. 361.

²⁸ A. Usowicz, K. Kłósak, *Ks. Konstanty Michalski...*, s. 48–49.

²⁹ K. Michalski, *Dokąd idziemy...*, s. 13–14.

³⁰ Zob. tamże.

sion between different collective wholes or between the wholes and their members, it acquires a character of concreteness and empirical justification in research in the scope of history and sociology³¹. Contrary to Spann, who considered spirit to be the main driving force of history and ignored secondary driving forces, Michalski takes them into consideration. Opposing the theory of materialism that the prime mover in history is matter, he proved, referring to Thomas Aquinas, that nature directly influences the vegetative and sensory life of Man, and indirectly also his spiritual life³². As Michalski colourfully observes: “the hammers that forge human fates are a system of created forces, but the course of history always proceeds according to God’s thought. Along historic routes God leads nations and countries through natural resources, through human constitution and wisdom, in one word the so-called *causa secundae*”³³. They constitute fate (*fatum*) within the Thomistic approach where each fate has two faces – the arrangement of natural forces and the providential thought of God implemented through sets of created causes³⁴. Claiming the all-embracing character of historic changes, Michalski came to the conclusion that only this approach eliminates one-sidedness and allows grasping the sense and dynamics of great historical courses. He notices logic in history as it is included in the history itself: its sense lies already in the very social structure where one whole is born from parts, and parts grow into one whole. In this internal union of part and whole lies the sense of social structure, which is expressed by the organic transformation gradually implemented in time. Sense is lost only in the eyes of those who cut up the living social wholeness, and, as a result, also history³⁵.

The question about the meaning of history, in Michalski’s opinion can be approached either from the human perspective, or the God’s. The answer to the question about the sense of history in the first approach consists in the attempt to discover the motives of humanity’s activity, which are often evasive and shrouded in darkness³⁶. The sense of human history approached from God’s perspective can be seen as the implementation of God’s idea. In Michalski’s opinion, it is possible to implement this idea thanks to the fact that God, despite his transcendentality, exists in the world immanently, sustaining its being, thus creating it anew³⁷. Providence constitutes the only and the highest instance capable of leading individuals and countries, despite many turmoils in

³¹ K. Michalski, *Tomizm...*, s. 15.

³² Zob. tamże, s. 17.

³³ Tamże, s. 19.

³⁴ Zob. tamże, s. 19–20.

³⁵ Zob. tamże, s. 13.

³⁶ Zob. Michalski, *Zagadnienia...*, s. 20.

³⁷ Zob. tamże, s. 22. Por. A. Usowicz, K. Kłósak, *Ks. Konstanty Michalski...*, s. 199.

the historic process, to the path of development. However, assuming that human history is accompanied by providential intent, the thought that its implementation always remains to be performed by people, who are a certain derivative of prudence of those in power and the maturity of enforced laws. Both this human activity and the historic dynamics is accompanied by a constant process of their improvement, the progression of actions, thinking and life from imperfect forms, with time, towards increasingly advanced ones, more corresponding to new conditions. He defined this process, perceived in an optimistic perspective, as rolling of history along the tracks of perfectionism³⁸. At the same time he was convinced that this theory “does not differ from progress, promulgated by Condorcet, and is far from the naive presumption that there have never been any tensions between one level and another, that there have never been any protests against anachronisms in legislation”³⁹. According to perfectionism, at the beginning of history of philosophy, there were also naive views, which were followed by more and more advanced, more critical ones. Also in social life at the beginning there are imperfect institutions, primitive ones, which with time become transformed into even more perfect ones⁴⁰. Aspects important for this development are the past, the present and the future: “the past is a powerful inspirer of the future; the present – since you always need to take into consideration the newly created tensions between the old norms and the present situation; the future – as you cannot fall into harmful utopias which destroy what is now, not offering anything better”⁴¹.

Out of the idea of progress, Michalski derived the idea of sublimation, consisting in the elevation of reality from a lower level to a higher one, which it deserves by nature. Since the highest level of sublimation in the supernatural order is the union of soul with God, leading to heroism, the idea of heroism is here strictly connected with the idea of theocentrism⁴².

The most visible expression of the developmental of social and cultural transformations are the dynamically changing relations between philosophy and life, reflection over the world and the practice of social life. These relations oscillate between the total separation of these spheres and their full contact. In Michalski's opinion, it is important to maintain the states of contact since they constitute a guarantee of continuity of culture and its further growth, which should be of perpetual nature, combining, on the one hand, memory about tradition and, on the other, active and creative attitude to the

³⁸ Zob. C. Głombik, *Tomizm czasów nadziei...*, s. 201.

³⁹ K. Michalski, *Dokąd idziemy...*, s. 20.

⁴⁰ Zob. K. Michalski, *Tomizm...*, s. 23–24.

⁴¹ Zob. K. Michalski, *Dokąd idziemy...*, s. 20.

⁴² Zob. K. Michalski, *Między heroizmem a bestialstwem...*, s. 161.

future. Its driving forces are always love and freedom, which are truly appreciated in the Thomistic philosophy of history⁴³.

Michalski's perfectionism shows optimism in the perception of the history of the world, even in the most tragic moment for humankind: "we hope that after the bloody world war the world will rise again and lift humanity from a lower level to a higher level of material and spiritual culture in the name of progress, which we have noticed in Thomas Aquinas... Christ's parousias happened time after time, constantly renewing the face of the earth. We expect that after the last world war, the face of the earth will be changed not only by releasing atomic power but also, first of all, by the emergence of a new world of social justice and love in order to become similar to God in all his attributes and perfections"⁴⁴. By indicating the process of imitation of God by humanity as the ultimate goal of human history, Michalski saw a path for this peculiar assimilation in the proper understanding and development of culture⁴⁵. Humanity can achieve its ultimate goal only by living "from art and through art, with reason and through reason but never through violence"⁴⁶.

In a world full of terror searching for a formula for the future, the words of father K. Michalski can be considered to be an important clue. This great Polish thinker reminds us that the future of the world to a large extent depends on people shaping their own fate. If we can build it reasonably on the basis of culture and not power and violence, we can be still optimistic about the future. However, it is impossible to build a truly human world by plunging into savagery and hate and relinquishing heroism and love.

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⁴³ Zob. L. Gawor, *Myśliciele mało znani. Filozofia polska końca XIX wieku i pierwszych dekad XX stulecia*, Rzeszów 2011, s. 36–37; S. Borzym, *Filozofia 1900–1950*, Wrocław 1991, s. 160–161.

⁴⁴ K. Michalski, *Dokąd idziemy...*, s. 23–24.

⁴⁵ Zob. tamże, s. 13.

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Księdza Konstantego Michalskiego zarys filozofii dziejów

Streszczenie

Ks. K. Michalski to wybitny mediewista, pionier badań nad dorobkiem polskiego średniowiecza, ale i twórca ważnej filozofii dziejów. Historiozofia stała się ważnym elementem jego badań zwłaszcza w dramatycznym okresie II wojny światowej, ale jej zręby stworzył już w latach trzydziestych XX w. Odrzucając bierny szacunek dla tradycji, opowiadał się za prezentowanym przez tomizm, twórczym do niej stosunkiem. Jego koncepcję dziejów wyznacza optymistyczne przekonanie o ciągłej ewolucji życia kulturalno-społecznego ludzkości ku coraz doskonalszym formom.

Słowa kluczowe: człowiek, ludzkość, filozofia dziejów, Konstanty Michalski, tomizm