

The Man Who Killed Marxism

By **Mark Michalski** In *Real Clear Religion*

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Leszek Kolakowski was not well known in the United States for a long time, but with the release of a collection of essays, *Is God Happy?*, his daughter, Agnieszka, hopes to change that.

Professor Kolakowski, who died in 2009 at the age of 81, has published more than two dozen books in philosophy, fiction, plays, and poetry. Undoubtedly a leading authority on Karl Marx and variations of his philosophy, Kolakowski has spent most of his life studying the history of philosophy, religion, and ethics. Kolakowski's principal publication, *Main Currents of Marxism* (in three volumes, about fifteen hundred pages), is a monumental treatise analyzing Marxism's historical origins, development, and dissolution.

Kolakowski began writing *Main Currents of Marxism* in the late sixties during the so-called revisionist period in Poland, still believing in "Marxist humanism." ***He had been one of the pioneers of Polish Marxist humanism from the early days of the post-war social order. But after some time, he became disillusioned with Marxist dogma after the short-lived revolution of 1956, when his progressive journal Prostu (Straightforward) was discontinued.***

After the first widespread social uprisings occurred, Kolakowski, then a young philosopher and still an idealist, in one of his essays entitled "What is Socialism?" summarized the real nature of the system. Using Rabelaisian negations to express "what socialism is not," Kolakowski unveiled its real face describing it as a state

in which a person who has not committed any crime sits at home waiting for the police, in which there are more spies than nurses and more people in prisons than in hospitals, in which one is forced to resort to lies...in which a person who does not think at all lives better -- and which wants all citizens to have the same opinions in philosophy, economics, literature, and ethics, in which the philosopher and writers always say the same thing as the generals and ministers, but always after them, in which one must each day refute what one affirmed the day before and always believe it to be the same.

Kolakowski concluded his essay by sardonically stating that this was "the first point. But now listen attentively, we will tell you what socialism is -- well then, socialism is a good thing."

Kolakowski's support of the student movement in the Spring of 1968 cost him the chair of philosophy at Warsaw University. Ultimately he was expelled from the university and the Party. Stripped of livelihood, he was compelled to leave the country. He became a visiting professor at various universities: Montreal, Yale, Chicago, California at Berkeley, and Oxford.

In *Main Currents of Marxism*, Kolakowski wrote that "**Marxism has been the greatest fantasy of our century.**" According to him, socialism signifies giving the solution which can never exist. "At present," the author pointed out, "Marxism neither interprets the world nor changes it; it is merely a repetition of slogans." And this is because the ruling elite does not represent the society's needs, but **places empty ideology above anything else. Clearly the most important premise of the socialist rule is that it can be exercised by those who possess power. The system which exacts stern order and blind obedience may only triumph through violence, fear, and military coercion.** At the same time **this system generates only alienation, and stagnation.** The sad story of our times is that the system which claims to embody the rights, privileges and welfare of the working class is the same system whose biggest enemy is its very citizens. Kolakowski jokes that socialism would be a splendid idea if only there were no people.

In **his most provocative book *Religion***, Kolakowski returns to the basic questions of mankind to which marxism so readily gives simple answers. **The book is more a search than a definite statement, and more provocative than conclusive.** It is an argument about the existence of God and particularly about the conclusions that would follow if there is no God. "In order that something be true," he asserts, "a subject that cannot err has to exist. This subject has to be omniscient. Thus despair becomes an alternative to faith, following Plato's dictum: 'If One is not, then nothing is.'"

Kolakowski is **seriously concerned with the nature of man.** Accepting the view that human nature is bestowed by Nature he **views man as more than a mere biological artifact.** A natural scientist sees love as a mechanism of propagation and seeks to explain its exclusiveness in terms of such a reduced function. **Kolakowski sees love as a premonition of the mystical union with God and the anticipation of an event without conscious reason. He endorses the view that human experience may be better expressed in the open language of phenomenology.**

Kolakowski argues that God is not, and cannot be, an empirical hypothesis. **Faith is a function of an attitude. Anyone who sees signs of God's presence in life admits that faith precedes his acts of reading these signs, not the other way around.** Thus, the old wisdom is confirmed that **neither learning nor scientific sophistication makes anybody's Christian faith better. The strength of Christianity does not rest on its prophecies and miracles but on the way of the cross.** Kolakowski seems to be convinced that the **experience of daily life allows people with faith, strong beliefs, and a purposeful order to see ultimate meaning in everything.** The importance and value of such an attitude is that **one is better prepared to sustain the inevitable blows of destiny and not to succumb to despair.**

Concerning material and spiritual life, Kolakowski notes that **human suffering does not result merely from the corruptible nature of our body, but is due to the fact that we are striving to assure and enhance the individual and illusory existence of our perception. To be free from evil,** it is not enough to become free from the bondage of the body; **one must overcome those desires which maintain self-**

imposed isolation, a part which constitutes a significant force in everyone's drive to perform and achieve. By this the author means **the conflicting goals that we set for ourselves which obviously, by reason of physical constraints, cannot be reconciled.**

He cites Pascal to demonstrate the validity and the influence of God in our life:

If there were no obscurity, man would not feel his corruption, and if there was no light, man would have no hope for a remedy. This is not only just, but useful to us that God is hidden in part and discovered in part, for to man it is as dangerous to know God without knowing his own misery as it is to know his misery without knowing God.

Kolakowski also notes Pascal's famous dialogue in which God's existence is questioned. We may first ask, "Why does God not show himself?" to which we receive the reply, "Are you worthy of it?" If we answer "Yes," then "You are presumptuous and thereby unworthy." If we answer "No," then the reply comes back: "And so, you are unworthy."

Kolakowski points out that ***"there is never a shortage of arguments to support any doctrine you want to believe in for whatever reasons."*** ***The point of exploring the arguments, he explains, is to clarify the questions.*** Perhaps one of Kolakowski's many merits is that ***he demands that one attend to these questions.*** Kolakowski is not always easy reading, though he uses rather common language. His prose is plain and clear, but many of the thoughts he expresses require serious effort and often a second reading. The depth of his thoughts and the precision of his writing have resulted in works of high rank. The most impressive feature of Kolakowski's style is his comprehensive grasp of the subject matter and his ability to distill the essential ideas and present them in such a way as to inspire the reader.

In person-to-person conversation Kolakowski never tried to project the image of a celebrated philosopher, educator, and author of many influential works. ***Like few other intellectuals, Kolakowski seemed unconcerned about convincing his listener. He merely desired to explain what he knew, and what he had learnt the hard way. In his gentleness which was never sentimental, his distance which was never disengaged, and his solitude which was never aloof, Leszek Kolakowski was a true philosopher.***