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The Relationship Between Pagan Fate and Christian Grace in the Thought of Józef Tischner

Abstract

This article examines one of the greatest contributions of Józef Tischner to the area of anthropology and charitology by analyzing, in a systematical way, his original thought regarding the relationship between the pagan concept of fate (*fatum*) and the Christian concept of grace (*charis*). The originality of this contribution concerns three main areas. The first one concerns the historical-charitological aspect in which Tischner proposes a new approach which helps him to emphasize the personalistic aspect of grace. Instead of considering the problem from a typical intra-Christian perspective, he approaches the concept of grace by confronting it with the historical, pagan concept of impersonal fate. Secondly, he brings to the light an ancient Greek idea of the aesthetic overcoming of the tragic defeat caused by fate, and by showing its insufficiency, he discovers and demonstrates the depth, beauty and hidden ultimate power of the aesthetic dimension of Christian grace. Finally, he argues that the problem of the relationship between fate and grace is not an issue of the ancient past, but constitutes the core of one of the greatest contemporary challenges faced by modern Christian society: the ever growing wave of neopaganism.

Keywords

Fate, grace, freedom, paganism, Christianity, Tischner.

1. Introduction

Józef Tischner dedicated a lot of effort to study the relationship between the pagan concept of fate (*fatum*) and the Christian concept of grace (*charis*). The results of his work on this issue are scattered over a wide range of his research papers, books, interviews, and discussions. His reflection on this subject constitutes very important and highly original contribution to this specific area of research, which involves historical, anthropological and charitological studies.

However, this outstanding contribution has never been presented in a single systematic study. The aim of the present work is to attempt such a presentation without any claim to being exhaustive or complete. On the one hand, due to the abundance of material, it is necessary to be selective in the problems to be discussed in this article. On the other hand, some of the topics have been already discussed in other studies, so it will not be necessary to concentrate on them here. In the latter case we will refer the reader to the appropriate existing literature.

In the present study, we will concentrate on the issues which make Tischner's contribution particularly fruitful and original with respect to other approaches. One such issue which distinguishes Tischner's thought is his decision to look for pre-Christian "roots" in the problematics of grace. In this regard Tischner draws abundantly from the achievements of ancient Greek thought, and tries to confront it with the Christian tradition.

In standard charitological literature the problem of grace is usually studied within the framework of intra-Christian considerations. Tischner is absolutely convinced that this is insufficient. He sees the need to reach deeper into history in order to discover the relation of the notion of grace with corresponding pagan concepts, among which he distinguishes the notion of fate.¹

Thus, the first section of the present article will be devoted to a brief presentation of Tischner's view on the pagan concept of fate and its main characteristics. Particular attention will be paid to the issue of consciousness and the dignity of the human person facing the action of fate, and to the problem of the aesthetic overcoming of the ancient-tragic defeat caused by fate – one of the most beautiful and original of Tischner's contributions to the subject.

In the second section we will discuss Tischner's approach to the Christian concept of grace. Once again, we will focus only on the most important and

¹ See J. Tischner, *Podglądanie Pana Boga*, „Znak” 511 (1997) 12, p. 11–12.

original ideas: the aesthetic characteristics of grace and the essence of the opposition between grace (*charis*) and fate (*fatum*).

Finally, in the third section, we will show how the historical and theoretical considerations developed in the previous sections, can be applied to approach contemporary challenges faced by modern Christian society. In particular, we will consider the challenges coming from a new wave of neopaganism which is spreading so quickly, especially in European countries.

In Tischner's understanding, the enslaving faith in pagan fate is not the matter of the ancient past. On the contrary, it still constitutes the greatest threat to what he would call "the greatest gift of grace", i.e. our freedom: "Paganism is not just an issue of the past, paganism is with us today. [...] Strictly speaking, each of us is a pagan to some degree – insofar as we share a pagan disbelief in the word. I am a pagan insofar as I have a similar disbelief, similar distrust, and similar despair resulting from my consent to *fatum*. Paganism is within ourselves, we have it as our second soul. That is why the Christian struggle against paganism never ends. Christianity is still faced with new tasks, because every epoch, every generation carries with it some neo-pagan beliefs in fatalism – be it historical fatalism or individual fatalism."²

2. The Pagan Concept of Fate (*Fatum*)

Below we will briefly present some of the characteristics of the concept of fate (*fatum*) which were identified by Tischner in the perspective of his charitological study.³ In particular, we will be interested in the following two issues: the relation between *fatum* and human consciousness or dignity, and the problem of the aesthetic overcoming of fatalistic defeat.⁴

² J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 247. All the translations of Tischner's original texts quoted in this article are provided by its author.

³ Throughout the paper the English term *fate* will be used as the equivalent of the original term used by Tischner i.e. *fatum*. The later term comes from Latin *fatus* (speech, prophecy, fortune-telling) and indicates an oracle of some god, an inexorable destiny, an ominous prophecy, or a predicted defeat (Cf. J. Sondel, *Słownik Łacińsko-Polski*, Kraków 2006, Universitas, p. 375.). *Fatum* always refers to something that has been "said" or "spoken", i.e. to a decision that has already been made and all that remains is to bear the consequences.

⁴ The reader interested in a more comprehensive treatment of the subject can consult: L. Wołowski, *Łaska i wolność u Hansa Ursa von Balthasara i Józefa Tischnera*, pp. 20–26.

2.1. *Fatum* vs. Human Consciousness and Dignity

Developing his reflection on fate, Tischner notices that its prime characteristics regard the fact that it always acts beyond and behind human consciousness, and beyond any reach of human will. A human being subjected to fate is taken aback and confronted with an already “accomplished fact”: someone, regardless of the knowledge and will of this particular person, has made a decision about his or her future. In other words, an irrevocable and inexorable oracle has been given and there is nothing to do about it except to wait and see when and how it will come true.

A typical feature of fate, often found in Greek tragedies, reveals itself in the situation when someone, e.g. an ancient hero, disagrees with such an oracle and takes steps to avoid it. The hero may have learned the oracle in advance and may try to outsmart it, but regardless of all undertaken efforts, every step he or she takes, brings them closer to the foretold end. Tischner recalls, in this regard, the famous case of Oedipus.⁵

Based on these observations, Tischner formulates the first crucial characteristics of fate. Fate is a superhuman power, which cannot be surpassed, avoided, or outsmarted by a human being: “For fate was characterized by the fact that it was in power to decide about a person’s life behind his or her back. The person was like a feather on the river, tossed by its waves. Even if they knew the plans of fate, they would not be able to escape its power.”⁶

That is not all. Another characteristic, pointed out by Tischner, is even more frightening and discouraging. We already know that fate cannot be outwitted by human cleverness, but can it be, at least in some cases, appeased by a prayer? Unfortunately, ancient literature provides us with an inexorably pessimistic answer also in this case. The most famous quote, to which Tischner himself sometimes referred, comes from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, where one can find the following statement: “Fate, and the dooming gods, are deaf to tears.”⁷

To sum up the above characteristics of *fatum*, one may say that it simply does not respect, even in a slightest manner, the dignity of a human person.

⁵ See J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 247.

⁶ J. Tischner, *Podglądanie Pana Boga*, „Znak” 511 (1997) 12, p. 12.

⁷ F.M. Keener (ed.), *Virgil’s Aeneid. Translated by John Dryden*, VI, no. 376. This translation does not reflect directly the role of a prayer, however, it is clearly seen in the original Latin formulation: „Desine fata deum flecti sperare precando.”

The individual has no meaning whatsoever in fatalistic perspective: “The Greek hero was losing against fate. When he was losing, he was silent, because he had nothing more to say, neither to the gods nor to the people.”⁸

If Tischner was to decide on one single word which would characterize the reality of *fatum* in a most exhaustive manner, he would probably choose the word *defeat*: “No escape, no fight, no exchange of words, no conversation is an obstacle to the intention of fate. The lives of peoples and nations go on as bad fate wills it, and fate-*fatum* is leading man inevitably towards the final defeat.”⁹

2.2. *Fatum* and the Unavoidable Defeat vs. Its Aesthetic Overcoming

For Tischner, the problem of *defeat* is so intimately connected with the concept of *fate*, that he decided to explore it in more detail. First, when we are talking about defeat in the context of fate, we are not talking about an ordinary defeat. The very fact that the Greek concept of *fatum* appears abundantly in ancient Greek tragedy, means that the defeat associated with the reality of fate must have a much deeper meaning than the one commonly used: “What is a defeat? We can talk about a natural disaster, about a crop failure, about a defeat on the battlefield. But all these and the like of these kinds of failure are not defeats in the proper sense. A proper defeat, a defeat which is not only external, but also internal, is a defeat that touches a sense of responsibility. This means that the sense of responsibility turns out to be fruitless for a variety of reasons.”¹⁰

Thus, the defeat which is a result of the action of fate in human life, consists in the fact that a human person subjected to this fate, and hence to this defeat, becomes deprived of his or her sense of responsibility according to the rule: if everything is decided by fate, I’m not responsible for anything. But Tischner goes one step further and notices that this implies that once someone is deprived of responsibility, the same person is also deprived of creativity: “Responsibility always matures towards creation. But suddenly it turns out to be

⁸ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 264.

⁹ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 247.

¹⁰ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, pp. 243–244.

impossible. The proper defeat consists in the failure to undertake this striving for creativity, for building, for establishing something that has never been seen before.”¹¹

The loss of responsibility and creativity also has another name: it is simply equivalent to the loss of freedom. The heroes of ancient tragedies are martyrs of the enslavement. They are victims of the defeat, which in the end consists in the loss of hope of liberation: “Prometheus was the martyr, Oedipus was the martyr, and so was also Antigone. They were all martyrs of the underground *fatum*. The ultimate truth about the tragedy of man was hidden in their fate. One cannot escape from fate – this truth did not bring any liberation.”¹²

Thus, the following key question arises: Is there any way to overcome fate?

Tischner notices some light at the end of this presumably dark tunnel. He argues that in ancient Greek theater, the individual’s failure in his or her tragic struggle with the invincible force of fate could be, at least partially, positively interpreted from the aesthetic point of view. Namely, the tragic victim of fate could become a “beautiful” hero as if he or she were a work of art in themselves. Tischner says that the only positive element that Greek theater was able to draw from the tragic death of its hero, was to transform his or her tragedy into the beauty of the work of art: “Instead of despairing over the fate of the hero, this fate could be dressed in the category of beauty and made an object of admiration. Ancient Greek art performs a miracle: it makes you admire the tragic history of people. It brings some relief, causes distance, puts things in perspective, and to some extent it liberates you in a way. But it liberates you only in the sense that it moves bad things out of your sight.”¹³

Tischner gives this phenomenon a special name: *the aesthetic overcoming of the antient-tragic defeat caused by fate*. Obviously, this type of overcoming of fate is by no means sufficient or satisfactory – it does not help the victim, but it may provide some kind of relief for a spectator. What is important, however, is that at least it indicates, through an aesthetic argument, that there might be some way out of this seemingly closed circle of fatalism.

Nevertheless, Tischner notices: “The aesthetic overcoming of a defeat, does not constitute, however, its final or complete overcoming. It grows out of

¹¹ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, pp. 243–244.

¹² J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 264.

¹³ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 264.

paganism and remains within paganism, even when it must be recognized that such aesthetics are the supreme efflorescence of the pagan spirit. And why is it so that there is no overcoming? This is because aesthetics do not make bonds. Nobody is grateful to them.”¹⁴ It becomes obvious then that the real help must come from outside paganism.

3. The Christian Concept of Grace

As was observed above, paganism was not able to provide any trustworthy and stable way of overcoming the domination of fate. Tischner argues that the solution came along with Christianity and its concept of grace. As we will see below, for Tischner, the concept of Christian grace is a complete antonym of the concept of pagan fate, but there is an interesting link between the two realities, and it is exactly this aesthetic dimension which we have begun to explore above and which we will continue to explore below.¹⁵

3.1. The Aesthetic Dimension of the Christian Concept of Grace

Tischner was fascinated by the reality of Christian grace and spent a lot of time exploring the concept. He tried to focus on elements which are not mentioned or, if they are, then are usually mentioned only marginally in standard charitable textbooks. One of them is the aesthetic dimension of the concept which is already hidden in its etymological roots: “Grace in Greek means *haris* [χαρίς], and comes from *har* ([χαρ] «to shine»), it indicates the charm, gracefulness and appeal that belong to beauty. The biblical *haris* usually describes God’s personal attitude towards man – it is «God’s free and merciful favor in Jesus Christ towards sinful people».”¹⁶

¹⁴ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 264.

¹⁵ The reader interested in a broader perspective on Tischnerian concept of grace, apart from the reference mentioned before, can consult e.g.: K. Trombik, *Wolność a łaska. Interpretacja problemu w filozofii Józefa Tischnera*, „Analecta Cracoviensia” 50 (2018), pp. 173–190.

¹⁶ J. Tischner, *Łaska i wolność*, „Znak” 444, (1992) 5, p. 5. For the sake of faithfulness to the original text we reproduce here the exact Tischner’s spelling (*haris*) of the Greek term χαρίς. However, in the rest of the paper, in our texts, we stick to the most common, and in our understanding, more correct spelling, i.e. *charis*.

Tischner clearly sees a deep connection between grace understood as personal reality of the relation between God and human being, and as an aesthetic reality of charm and gracefulness: “The Latin word for grace is *gratia*. *Gratia* also translates as «gracefulness». What is grace? Grace is God’s gracefulness. Some unearthly charm touches human persons, guides them, directs them like a heavenly wind. The word «grace», *gratia*, comes from the sphere of the most deeply understood aesthetics. This beauty affects human person through gracefulness. God acts on humans a bit like beauty does – he comes to them gracefully – like some song, some music. People do not have to listen to this music, they may block their ears, they may not want to hear. But they feel that when they do not hear, they will lose a lot.”¹⁷

Grace is strictly aesthetically connected to gracefulness but it is also ethically connected to gratefulness. Tischner sees a great potential in this aesthetical-ethical correspondence. God’s gracefulness, experienced by people through grace, invites them to enter into the relation of gratitude towards Him. Tischner says even something more: in his understanding this gratitude is reciprocal: “Grace is *gratia* and *gratia* means gratefulness, that is, mutual gratitude between God and people. [...] Christianity, in this thought about the grace that flows from the sacrifice of the cross, carries with it a great metaphysics of gratitude. [...]. This is what grace is all about. This is precisely what Christianity used to overcome pagan fate.”¹⁸ In fact, for Tischner grace is not *something* that people experience in life, but *someone* they meet, *someone* who challenges and changes their lives forever: “Grace raises man to a new «level of life».”¹⁹

Tischner makes a lot of effort to ensure that the language he uses to speak about grace is a living language, which touches the experience of our everyday life and reflects the authenticity and dynamism of the relationship between people and God. In order to describe this aesthetical aspect of the attractiveness of God’s grace, he does not hesitate to reach for anthropomorphisms, which one would never find in standard textbook descriptions: “Grace means being able to start again. [...] Man acts under its influence because he is attracted to the grace of good, and not because he is driven to action by some insurmountable force. When along the way passes a charm in the form of a beautiful girl, it is precisely a metaphor of grace. No one knows where she came from, no one

¹⁷ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, pp. 311–312.

¹⁸ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 264.

¹⁹ J. Tischner, *Podglądanie Pana Boga*, „Znak” 511 (1997) 12, p. 24.

knows where she is going, but her appearance changes the sense of the world around her.”²⁰

All these rhetorical efforts have one deep goal: to show that grace does not force or constrain people, but it delights and attracts them; it opens them to the beauty and goodness of a free and gracious gift. This beauty, as the aesthetic dimension of grace, is deeply connected to its spiritual dimension, which in turn gives a new, much deeper, sense of human beauty and human life: “Beauty stands before us as a gift, as freely given grace. [...] Beauty is human beauty, beauty makes it possible to get acquainted with human mystery, it is the grace that allows us to live and die in a different way.”²¹

In this text, “different way” means: different than in the case of pagans. We will explore this difference in more detail, below.

3.2. The Difference Between Pagan Fate and Christian Grace

Tischner sees the Christian concept of grace as the only real and effective antidote for pagan fate. Although both concepts involve human faith – pagans believed in the action of fate whilst Christians believe in the action of grace – for Tischner, the same word “faith” means something completely different in both cases. Pagan “faith” or rather pagan beliefs are as different from Christian faith as much as pagan *fatum* differs from Christian grace.

This latter difference is absolutely crucial for Tischner but, according to his observation, not always sufficiently underlined and studied in the literature. He pointed it out explicitly: “Did the idea of grace, that Christianity brought in, have nothing to do with the belief in fate? Is it conceivable that its determinant would be only intra-church disputes? Even in the vast literature devoted to the history of the concept of grace, I did not find a deeper study of the subject of the relationship between grace and fate.”²²

Therefore, Tischner undertakes his own studies of the problem, which we are going to summarize briefly in the present section. The crucial task is to determine the real difference between both concepts. Some differences are obvious, but Tischner insists that there are also more subtle ones which can easily be overlooked or even misunderstood. For example, the first difference seems easy

²⁰ J. Tischner, *Przekonać Pana Boga*, p. 20.

²¹ J. Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu*, pp. 119–121.

²² J. Tischner, *Podglądanie Pana Boga*, „Znak” 511 (1997) 12, p. 12.

to identify: pagan fate means something bad – as we have seen above – it leads people to tragedy and defeat. Christian grace, on the contrary, is something good; it helps people overcome every evil they face in life. Tischner is not going to argue against such affirmations. In fact he fully agrees with them: “As the cruel *fatum* leads Oedipus to the defeat and guilt, the divine grace leads man to the victory and salvation.”²³

However, for Tischner, such affirmations are only scratching the surface. The real difference between grace and fate does not consist in the fact that one of them is good and the other is bad, but rather in the fact that one of them respects and interacts with human freedom and the other does not: “How does «grace» differ from «*fatum*»? Certainly, the difference is not that *fatum* is «bad» and grace is «good» – that grace is also a kind of fate, but «good fate». It is much more about the fact that fate acts in spite of a man’s will, and grace works on consciousness and through the consciousness of man. [...] The God of grace wants to deal with a different man than gods of fate do. Someone else is the subject of the drama of fate, and someone else of the drama of grace.”²⁴

The other difference concerns the problem of power. Pagan fate had unlimited power over humans. What about grace in this respect? We all say that God is powerful. Does it mean that grace is also a kind of power, which God uses in his relation with humans? Tischner insists on withdrawing from the language of power as much as possible, even at the cost of accepting paradoxical expressions: “Grace – one could say – is the power of powerlessness, but could one call God powerless? If we say that God is power, then, in this case, grace should be called the «powerlessness of the powerful». The powerful One acts through the lack of power, through his helplessness – through the word, through the choice, through justification.”²⁵

Thus, instead of thinking of grace in terms of power, one can observe that in biblical language grace is indeed powerful, but it is not a powerful force, rather a powerful medicine or a liberating power of truth, which enlightens the path of the blind: “What is grace in this context? Of course, it is not «power»,

²³ J. Tischner, *Łaska i wolność*, „Znak” 444 (1992) 5, p. 6.

²⁴ J. Tischner, *Podglądanie Pana Boga*, „Znak” 511 (1997) 12, p. 12.

²⁵ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 328.

it is not «violence», it is not a «cause» that becomes a link that breaks the chain of causes and effects. Nor is it a «quality» or a «form». Sometimes it is called «light», sometimes «medicine». Light serves the blind, medicine serves the weak.²⁶

According to Tischner, God does not have to show his power over people by giving orders, but that he can show it, much more effectively, in terms of gentle invitation: “God’s power uses its own language. In fact, there is no place for order there. The key words are: «If you want, you can...». You don’t have to. «If you want, you can...». And this «if», «if you want» – as it seems – opens a space for us to the mystery of grace.”²⁷ One can easily see here the difference between grace and fate: “Oedipus «cannot» do otherwise, because that is his fate. A Christian can do otherwise, because he is free, «as he was given this freedom by Christ».”²⁸

For Tischner, this is the final and decisive characteristics of grace: “it does not rule out freedom, but offers it”.²⁹ At a certain point, he will say even more. Freedom is not only one of the many gifts of grace, it is the greatest one of them: “freedom is like the grace of all the graces.”³⁰

4. Identifying the Difference Between Paganism and Christianity

This sharp difference between pagan fate and Christian grace, described above, helps Tischner to identify the most extreme opposition to Christianity in general. The task is not that obvious as it may seem at first glance. For example, some may argue that atheism, secularism or agnosticism represent approaches which are completely opposite to Christianity. Others may point to certain anti-Christian philosophical movements. Yet another possibility is to consider some heresies which contradict the very heart of Christian belief as its most extreme opposition. Interestingly, Tischner will not agree with any of the above suggestions. Being consistent with all his previous considerations, he will put up his own candidate: “we must ask – what is the opposite of the Christian bond? What is its

²⁶ J. Tischner, *Podglądanie Pana Boga*, „Znak” 511 (1997) 12, p. 23.

²⁷ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 328.

²⁸ J. Tischner, *Podglądanie Pana Boga*, „Znak” 511 (1997) 12, p. 23.

²⁹ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 327.

³⁰ J. Tischner, *Nieszczęsny dar wolności*, p. 12.

most radical opposition? Is it atheism? Is it secularism? Nothing similar. This opposition is what Christians, and even earlier Jews, used to call «paganism».³¹

Indeed, just as paganism is closely and accurately characterized by fate, so Christianity is, at least as well, characterized by grace. If we agree that the pair *fate-grace* is an antonymic couple, then it is almost a straightforward corollary that the pair *paganism-Christianity* must also be.

In fact, the discovery that the relationship between *paganism* and *Christianity* can be so accurately expressed in terms of the relation of *fate-grace* (and vice versa) constitutes one of the pillars or maybe even the fundamental axiom of Tischner's reflection on the subject. To put it more precisely, one may say that, according to Tischner, paganism is a condition *sine qua non* for the existence of *fatum*, and vice versa: faith in *fatum* defines the essence of paganism. And similarly in the case of Christianity: grace plays an analogical defining role.

4.1. The Pagan bond (*fatum*) vs. the Christian bond (*religio*)

The total opposition between fate and grace which – as shown above – illustrates the opposition between paganism and Christianity can be rephrased in many different ways. Tischner notices that some of them can help us understand better the depth of the difference between these two realities. In order to show it clearly he introduces the concept of a “bond” understood in the sense of Latin *religio*: “Latin *religio* means simply a «bond». What is this *bond*, which Christianity offers to people? [...]. What does it mean – a bond? What kind of bond does Christianity offer as our religion? [...] What, then, is the principle of the difference between the Christian *religio* and the pagan *religio*?”³²

For Tischner, pagan *religio* is nothing else than *fatum* itself. It is a bond which is thrown on people from above regardless of their wish, will or consent. It is the bond of enslavement; the shackles of evil. In the case of Christianity, *religio* also refers to some kind of bond, but this time it is a completely different bond; a bond which, instead of enslaving, liberates. A bond which, instead of putting shackles and unsurmountable constraints on people, establishes deep interpersonal relations and opens the space of infinite possibilities in front of them.

³¹ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 246.

³² J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, pp. 245–246.

Tischner says that all this is possible thanks to the key role of the *word* in Christian religion: “Christianity is a great religion of the word, the word that establishes a bond”.³³ Conversely, paganism is a “religion” of complete disbelief in the word: “The basic outrage and scandal of paganism was, from the Christian point of view, its absolute unbelief in the word and – being the other side of this absolute unbelief in the word – its absolute faith in fate. Paganism is, first and foremost, a world of *fatum*. Christianity is, first and foremost, about believing in the word.”³⁴

To illustrate clearly the opposition outlined above, Tischner juxtaposes the earlier mentioned examples of tragic figures of the ancient Greek drama with the story of the apostles described in the Gospel. He notices that it is in the life of the apostles that we can clearly see how Christ's victory over the greatest weapon of fate, i.e. over death (understood as the final defeat), once and for all changed the balance of power. The last *word* no longer belongs to fate and death. The grace of salvation creates a new bond between Christ and his disciples. A bond that cannot be overcome by any external fatalistic force: “Christ is not alone. From the very beginning, Christ gives birth to believers, that is, to those who know what the faithful gratitude is. That is why grace takes the place of fate. Fate bounded man with what was below man. Grace, that is the grace of the spirit, binds Christ with Peter, Peter with Paul, Paul with Theophilus, me with you.”³⁵

4.2. Christian Grace vs. Different Faces of Neopaganism

The above quotation exemplifies the timeless dimension of the *fatum*-overcoming feature of grace. The liberating bond of grace was as strong in apostolic times as it is today. This is why Tischner is not only interested in the relation between pagan fate and Christian grace in the context of historical considerations. He broadens the perspective by adding a contemporary component to the whole discussion.

³³ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 248.

³⁴ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, pp. 246–247.

³⁵ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 265.

It is true that grace liberated ancient people from the slavery of pagan fate, but that is not the end of the story, it is just the beginning. Today, the same grace frees modern people from their contemporary neo-pagan enslavements, which are surprisingly abundant in our times. Tischner notices that, in ancient times, the belief in fate was not restricted only to the artistic domain (mythology, drama), but it was present all around: “The belief in fate found an artistic expression in Greek drama, while its everyday manifestation was the need for fortune-tellers and astrologers who had the ability to «explain» to man his destinies.”³⁶

The same thing can be said about our present society. Paganism, understood as the belief in fate (instead of the belief in the word), does not disappear when we move from antiquity to the modern age. The only thing that changes is the replacement of the old term *fatum* with its modern equivalents, like e.g. “destiny”, “predestination” or “determinism”. The language may be different but the attitudes and activities remain exactly the same: fortune telling, astrology, esotericism, occultism are flourishing in our modern Christian societies, despite being strictly prohibited by the teaching of the Church.³⁷

Tischner notices it clearly and expresses his deep concern about it: “we are the witnesses of a new wave of neopaganism which is coming back to us, and even to the whole of Europe”.³⁸ This wave may possess different faces. Fortune telling and astrology constitute one of them. Tischner seems, however, to be more concerned about another one. He notices that paganism continues to live, hide and feed on various neo-pagan philosophies such as the already mentioned determinism, but not only; also nihilism, structuralism, Marxism and communism. The latter draws much of his attention in this respect: “Communism was the secular version of the religious theory of predestination and, going

³⁶ J. Tischner, *Podglądanie Pana Boga*, „Znak” 511 (1997) 12, p. 12.

³⁷ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states clearly in the article no. 2116: “All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to “unveil” the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London–New York 2004, Burns & Oates, p. 460).

³⁸ J. Tischner, *Nadzieja czeka na słowo*, p. 272.

even further, it was the modern version of the belief in fate [*fatum*]. It is puzzling that this faith has found such great appreciation in modern times. This recognition cannot be explained except by seeing in it the latest version of the «escape from freedom».³⁹

In this regard, it is worth referring to a discussion which took place between Czesław Miłosz and Józef Tischner in 1993, shortly after the fall of communism in Poland. The discussion centered around the meaning of communism. The main questions were: What did it mean? Why did it happen? Trying to answer the second question, Miłosz suggested that communism was a kind of mental and spiritual denture which was necessary once humanity decided to drift away gradually from Christianity.⁴⁰

After hearing that, Tischner immediately observed that this is exactly the opposite to what happened in ancient times when grace liberated people from the embrace of fate (*fatum*). In modern times the situation has been reversed: once people started to drift away from grace, they could not do anything else but fall back precisely to the same embrace of fate – and that is exactly what the threat of (neo)paganism brings: “From the moment when faith in grace disappeared, faith in *fatum* reappeared, hope had been forced into fatalism.”⁴¹

Further on, whilst continuing the above discussion, Miłosz returns to the problem of the origin of all these modern “-isms”, some of which have been mentioned earlier. In this regard, Tischner observes that, despite their apparent modernity, they all share the old ugly feature of *fatum* – there is no room for freedom:

“Czesław Miłosz: [...] It seems to me that all the «-isms» we witness in the West today arose in the minds of people trained in Marxism. I followed the gradually arising fashions in the West. First there was a fashion for Marxism, then for structuralism, now there is a fashion for deconstructionism – and they all have common roots, it may turn out that all these derivatives are just like communism; a farce.

³⁹ J. Tischner, *Nieszczęsny dar wolności*, p. 123.

⁴⁰ See Cz. Miłosz, J. Tischner, *Dziedzictwo diabła*, „Znak” 458 (1993) 7, pp. 126–127.

⁴¹ Cz. Miłosz, J. Tischner, *Dziedzictwo diabła*, „Znak” 458 (1993) 7, p. 127.

Józef Tischner: The common trait is that there is no room for freedom. Instead, there is a recurring idea of the death of man, the death of what is authentic. It is interesting that when one talks about the experience of evil in communism, one is not understood in the West; when the word “evil” appears, the thread of communication is broken.”⁴²

This last observation by Tischner is crucial. Just like thinkers from the West, who did not experience the effects of communism personally, are not able to see any evil in it, our modern society cannot see any evil in all fatalistic practices (like reading horoscopes, consulting fortune-tellers etc.) before they fall victim to them.

At the end of the discussion both participants agree that the only way to escape from fatalism in all its modern appearances, and from all its consequences, is to turn towards grace, and experience this way to true freedom:

“Czesław Miłosz: I suppose communism reveals a rather pessimistic truth. Humans are social apes; it is extremely important for them to adapt to others in order not to be distinguishable from them. Once again, I go back to Simone Weil. Simone Weil was a determinist, she believed that everything that a person does can be explained by physical, and/or psychological laws. For a completely determined man, the only salvation is Grace. Mustard seed.

Józef Tischner: I would put it this way: belief in fate brings fate to the earth, while belief in freedom brings freedom to the earth.”⁴³

5. Conclusion

The analyses conducted in the present article lead to two general conclusions.

The first one regards the importance of the notion of grace (*charis*) in its relation to the pagan concept of fate (*fatum*) for an appropriate self-understanding of Christianity considered as a religion and as a community of people jointed by a special bond (*religio*). For Tischner, Christianity is the „religion of grace”, which also – almost paradoxically – means that it is at the same time the religion of freedom and the religion of the strongest possible bond. The key point

⁴² Cz. Miłosz, J. Tischner, *Dziedzictwo diabła*, „Znak” 458 (1993) 7, p. 128.

⁴³ Cz. Miłosz, J. Tischner, *Dziedzictwo diabła*, „Znak” 458 (1993) 7, p. 132.

is that this bond has nothing to do with the fatalistic bond of enslavement, but everything to do with abundant in freedom bond of love.

Directly from this observation follows the second conclusion. The confrontation between pagan bond of fatalistic enslavement and the Christian bond of loving grace is not an issue of the ancient past. It is the main challenge that every Christian of any time has to face. The challenge is to discard the relation with the impersonal fate-*fatum* in form of neopagan enslavements and engage in the personal relation with liberating grace-*charis* in order to open one's life to a deeper meaning. This contemporary challenge is by no means smaller than the ancient one, but Tischner leaves us with words of encouragement: "Those who have received grace know that it is good to catch fish that satisfy man's hunger, but it is even better to catch people – creatures who «live not only on bread, but also on words that come from the mouth of God»."⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ J. Tischner, *Podglądanie Pana Boga*, „Znak” 511 (1997) 12, p. 24.