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Theological Reflections on the Narrative of Kieślowski's Television Series *Dekalog*²

Abstract.

This study examines the relationship between Krzysztof Kieślowski's television series *Dekalog* and the biblical Ten Commandments, whose extra-diegetic position raises the question of the title's theological legitimacy. It challenges the assumption that the series was influenced by Tadeusz Żychiewicz's contemporary work on the Decalogue and instead proposes a non-legalistic, non-deontic interpretation in which the commandments appear as expressions of freedom grounded in divine love and covenantal trust. Drawing on interdisciplinary theological and philosophical sources, the study highlights convergences across Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant traditions. It argues that the liberating character of the Decalogue is reflected in the narrative's openness and in its address to the viewer as a free agent. The analysis of selected episodes – especially One, Two, and Ten – demonstrates how the series integrates the Decalogue as a horizon of freedom, a reading further supported by Kieślowski's later work and the socio-political context of the series' production.

Keywords: *Dekalog*, Ten Commandments, freedom, commandment, love

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1. Introduction

Krzysztof Kiesłowski's television series *Dekalog* takes its title from the Bible. The word "Dekalog" appears in the opening credits of each episode. Yet the biblical Ten Commandments do not explicitly figure within the plotlines. Where they do surface, they exert no discernible influence on either the characters or the course of events. The *Dekalog* television series stands as a complete and coherent work of art; it does not require supplementary legitimation. Kiesłowski's undertaking is neither the dramatization nor the illustration of a theological concept, nor is it a confessional work.

Nevertheless, the question remains legitimate: is there a theological warrant for foregrounding the biblical Ten Commandments in the very title of the narrative – and for doing so in the manner adopted by the series? Which interpretation of the Decalogue might substantiate the choice of title? Is there a dimension of meaning, a hermeneutical layer, or an ethical-theological message within the biblical Decalogue that the television series renders accessible, discloses, or integrates into itself? Or is the allusion to the Ten Commandments merely an act of artistic arbitrariness – perhaps even a marketing device intended to attract viewers' attention?

It is a matter of fact that the television series bears the title *Dekalog*. Consequently, it is neither artificial nor extraneous to examine, from a theological perspective, the narrative's mode of relation to the Ten Commandments.

A comparison suggests itself between the television series and Tadeusz Żychiewicz's homiletic work on the Ten Commandments, *Dziesięcioro przykazań*, first published in 1983, with a third edition appearing in 1986 – an indication of its popularity in Poland. The first episode of *Dekalog* was broadcast on 10 December 1988; the remaining episodes followed in the subsequent year. A considerable number of viewers may well have been familiar with Żychiewicz's book. Andrzej Garbowski even suggests that Kiesłowski and his co-screenwriter, Krzysztof Piesiewicz, were themselves acquainted with Żychiewicz's work and may indeed have been influenced by it.³

³ GARBOWSKI, Christopher (1996): *Krzysztof Kiesłowski's Decalogue Series. The Problem of the Protagonists and Their Self-transcendence*. Boulder – New York, East European Monographs – Columbia University Press. 6: "Tadeusz Żychiewicz published an essay collection on the Ten Commandments, [...] whose influence appears to be evident in certain aspects of their films."

It is questionable whether the Żychiewicz influence can be confirmed by philological means.⁴ The present study argues that Żychiewicz and Krzysztof Kieślowski relate to the biblical Ten Commandments in fundamentally different ways.

This study seeks to substantiate the hypothesis that – contrary to Żychiewicz's approach – the narrative decisions of the television series can be brought into alignment with other theological interpretations of the biblical Ten Commandments. This applies, first, to the extra-diegetic presence of the Decalogue; second, to the image of God articulated in the first episode; and third, to the correspondence discernible between the openness of the narrative and the commandment understood as a bearer of human freedom.

2. Kieślowski's Television Series and Its Relation to the Biblical Ten Commandments

2.1. The Series Is Not Casuistic

The Ten Commandments appear solely in the opening credits. Yet, alongside the word "Dekalog", one finds not ordinal but cardinal numbers. The titles therefore do not assign the individual episodes to specific commandments.

2.2. The Creators – And the Narrative Itself – Leave the Connection between the Commandments and the Individual Episodes Undecided

Neither the plotlines nor the filmmakers' statements clarify which confessional division or enumeration of the Ten Commandments is to be regarded as normative.

The commandments do not possess a pre-established or predetermined meaning within the narrative to which the characters – or the viewers – must subsequently conform. Rather, what becomes accessible is that dimension of their meaning that discloses itself

⁴ Garbowski (1996) does not specify where or in what form such Żychiewiczian influence may be identified. Neither Stok (1993) nor Krall (2017) mention Żychiewicz in connection with the circumstances surrounding the genesis of the series (STOK, Danusia (ed.) (1993): *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*. London – Boston: Farber and Farber; KRALL, Hanna (2017): *Fantom bólu. Reportaże wszystkie*. Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie. 685–687, 1107–1111, 1127–1128, 1216–1217).

to the characters within their concrete situations of action, in the attunement of their lived experience – what, here and now, becomes available to them.

The assignment of particular commandments or prohibitions to the stories of specific episodes thus becomes the viewer's creative hermeneutical task, one that can only be undertaken by accompanying the protagonists along their path.

According to the filmmakers, a single commandment may be connected with more than one episode.⁵

It appears that Krzysztof Kieślowski does not, in general, consider it possible to establish an unequivocal correspondence between a given situation and a specific commandment. With regard to the moral boundary crossings of everyday life, he rejects “any description or exact definition of right and wrong [...] I think that an absolute point of reference does exist.”⁶

The commandments exert no plot-organizing function; they do not motivate or propel the characters, nor do they surface within their deliberations. No one explicitly names them.

The narrative does not stage an encounter between viewer and commandment outside the action itself.

In two distinct senses, the narrative remains open.

First, the opening credits offer the viewer the possibility of interpreting the characters' actions in relation to the biblical Ten Commandments. Yet they also grant the freedom to recognize – or not to recognize – the potential for such a correlation and, if recognized, to interpret accordingly.

⁵ CIMENT, Michel – NIOGRET, Hubert (1989): Entretien avec Krzysztof Kieslowski à propos de *Décalogue*. In: *Positif* [Revue de Cinéma]. 346(décembre). 36–43. (The interviews published as CIMENT – NIOGRET 1989 and CIMENT 1989 are cited from the Hungarian translation: CIMENT, Michel (1991): Szikár történetek véletlenekről és sorsokról. Beszélgetés Krzysztof Piesiewicz forgatókönyvíróval és Krzysztof Kieślowski rendezővel [Disciplined Stories of Accidents and Fates: A Conversation with Screenwriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz and Director Krzysztof Kieślowski]. In: *Filmkultúra*. 27, 4. 48–54). CIMENT–NIOGRET 1991, 52: “[Kieślowski:] Certain films could be exchanged – the sixth with the ninth, the fourth with the seventh.” In the same issue of the journal, Krzysztof Piesiewicz remarks of *Two* that it is “least connected to the commandment it illustrates” (CIMENT, Michel (1989): Entretien avec Krzysztof Piesiewicz. In: *Positif* [Revue de Cinéma]. 346(décembre). 33–35, qtd in CIMENT 1991, 48).

⁶ STOK 1993, 149.

Second, the stories are open-ended. If one compares the television series with the published *Screenplay*⁷ and with the two feature films derived from episodes *Five* and *Six* – *A Short Film about Killing* (1988) and *A Short Film about Love* (1988) –, it becomes apparent that within the same narrative framework the same characters are endowed with different character traits. As a consequence, the plotlines unfold differently and culminate in distinct outcomes.

3. The Example of *Two*

In the case of *Two*, the question arises: which commandment is transgressed – and by whom – in the published screenplay and in the televised version?

3.1. *The Chief Physician*

If the term “Progresja” in the diagnosis of Andrzej, Dorota’s husband, is to be understood as indicating improvement in his condition,⁸ then the Chief Physician swears a false oath to Dorota.

In the *Screenplay*, the Chief Physician swears (falsely) by God (*Bóg*),⁹ thus invoking the divine name deceitfully and in vain. In the televised episode, he does not explicitly swear by God; yet a false oath is, *par excellence*, directed against God. Even if no harm ultimately ensues, such an act would still constitute transgression in the mode of *pasha* – that is, as culpable breach.¹⁰

⁷ Hereafter, references to the screenplay in the main text refer to the following volume: KIEŚLOWSKI, Krzysztof – PIESIEWICZ, Krzysztof (1990): *Dekalog. Scenariusze filmowe*. Chotomów, Verba.

⁸ The actors’ performances also allow the diagnosis (“Progresja”) to be interpreted as referring to the progression of Andrzej’s illness – that his condition is worsening –, in which case the Chief Physician’s oath would not be false. The narrative appears deliberately to leave the meaning of the diagnosis undecided. See KICKASOLA, Joseph G. (2004): *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski. The Liminal Image*. New York, Continuum. 179; cf. STADLER, Eva M. (2016): Visual Reverberations: Decalogue Two and Decalogue Eight. In: Badowska, Eva – Parmediani, Francesca (eds.): *Of Elephants and Toothaches. Ethics, Politics, and Religion in Krzysztof Kieślowski’s Decalogue*. New York, Fordham University Press. 84, 87.

⁹ KIEŚLOWSKI – PIESIEWICZ 1990, 56.

¹⁰ Cf. RAI, Tamás (2003): *Bibliaiskola. A szentírás kulcsszavai és szállóigéi*. Budapest, Makkabi. 36. In the Septuagint, *pasha* is most often rendered as *adikia*, more rarely as *anomia*.

The Chief Physician's false oath violates the Catholic enumeration of the Eighth Commandment insofar as it would cause harm to Dorota (the birth of the child could expose her adulterous relationship).

According to the Reformed enumeration, the Chief Physician violates the Ninth Commandment, since he bears false witness against his neighbour. Dorota and the Chief Physician are neighbours, residing in the same apartment building, and the exposure of adultery would indeed work against her. Yet the adultery is not exposed – or at least it does not leave a stain upon Dorota's marriage. In *Five*, Dorota appears visibly pregnant, standing beside her now-recovered husband; they seem happy. Thus, even indirectly, the Chief Physician's oath does not turn against her.

In the televised episode, the Chief Physician violates the Jewish enumeration of the Second Commandment and the Reformed enumeration of the Third. When Dorota asks whether he believes in God, he replies that he has his own god – that is, he acknowledges another object of ultimate allegiance.¹¹

3.2. Dorota

Dorota ultimately gives birth to her child and therefore does not transgress the commandment "You shall not kill." The Ten Commandments do not recognize sin committed in thought (*peccare cogitatione*); accordingly, it cannot be held against her that she had previously scheduled an abortion.

Within the narrative, Dorota is not adulterous; indeed, she breaks off her relationship with her lover. In the Chief Physician's apartment, she expresses repentance for her dissatisfaction with what her husband offers her.¹²

Dorota invokes the name of God disingenuously when she urges the Chief Physician to seek absolution from God for his refusal to state whether her husband will die.

In the *Screenplay*, Dorota confesses to the Chief Physician that she does not believe in God.

¹¹ In the *Screenplay*, he responds with a simple "yes". Cf. GARBOWSKI 1996, 100.

¹² Cf. KICKASOLA 2004, 177–179.

3.3. Which Commandment Motivates the Two Characters?

Dorota's appointment for an abortion should not be assessed from the perspective of the free exercise of reproductive self-determination, since that freedom is not curtailed. No one obstructs her decision, nor does anyone attempt to persuade her otherwise.¹³

Dorota is nearly divided against herself: she would sacrifice both her unborn child and her motherhood as an act of atonement in order to preserve the unstained integrity of her marriage. Everything hinges, for her, on her husband's recovery. At the same time, she also awaits his death so that she might give birth (as she herself notes, given her age, this is her last opportunity). Dorota is helpless and uncertain; she sees no way out of the dilemma. She evades decision by making everything contingent upon the Chief Physician.¹⁴ In doing so, she relinquishes precisely her own self-determination.

Dorota assigns responsibility for the abortion to the Chief Physician ("do not feel that your conscience is clear – within an hour I will have an abortion", she tells him in the televised episode). This strikes the Chief Physician deeply, for according to his professional ethos he deals with health and illness but does not decide matters of life and death.¹⁵ If Dorota transfers responsibility for the abortion to him, then he does not decide in her place; rather, vested with that responsibility, he decides according to his own judgment – in favour of the life of the unborn child.

Both Dorota and the Chief Physician seek to protect the life of the foetus. Without ever articulating it explicitly, the commandment "You shall not kill" animates their decisions. *Two*, therefore, is most closely associated with the Fifth Commandment. Both characters avoid transgressing it: the Chief Physician by exercising his freedom and moral autonomy, accepting the possibility of a wrong decision; Dorota by relinquishing her autonomy, withdrawing herself from moral accountability, and thereby stepping outside the order of the commandments. Dorota does not violate the Decalogue – yet this does not, in itself, render her virtuous.

¹³ Cf. KRAKUS, Anna (2018): *No End in Sight. Polish Cinema in the Late Socialist Period*. Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press. 101.

¹⁴ Cf. KRAKUS 2018, 100; GARBOWSKI 1996, 81.

¹⁵ Cf. KRAKUS 2018, 102.

3.4. *Kieślowski's Narrative Is Not Causal*

A causal reading is deontic in character. One invariably hears, within the logic of cause and effect, the semantic overtones of the “inevitable” and the “necessary”. Read causally, *Two* appears to suggest that the Chief Physician can uphold the commandment “You shall not kill” only at the cost of violating the prohibition against false oath. This leads to the conclusion that obligation towards God obstructs obligation towards one’s fellow human being. Such a conclusion is misleading: it attends neither to the singularity of the situation nor to the particularity of the person. Nor, in the other episodes of the television series, is it self-evident which commandment should serve as the decisive norm. The very act of weighing such matters is itself moral knowledge – indeed, itself a virtue –, for one searches in vain within the biblical Decalogue for any ranking among the commandments. A causal reading does not assist in the moral assessment of the characters.

The Chief Physician assumes responsibility for his transgression. With regard to the prohibition of false oath, he accepts his position as a lawbreaker in order, with respect to the Fifth Commandment, to see – and to present – himself as law-abiding, even virtuous. Dorota, by contrast, refuses to assume responsibility for her own frailty and culpability.

In *Eight*, during her seminar, Zofia analyses the events of *Two*. According to her interpretation, what matters is simply that “the child lives” – that it was born.¹⁶ This pragmatic perspective retrospectively renders irrelevant the path (the means) that led to the goal, suspending the moral dimension of personal decision. It restricts the assessment of action to the mere presence – or absence – of the intended outcome, thereby emptying morality of substance. The act is deprived of its wider horizons (community, God, past, future, sustainability, and so forth), severed from its context, and thus withdrawn from interpretive scrutiny.¹⁷

¹⁶ Cf. STADLER 2016, 87–89.

¹⁷ From a hermeneutical perspective drawing on Aristotle, virtue cannot dispense with *phronēsis*, that is, with the application of normative measures to the particular situation and to the acting person (cf. GADAMER, Hans-Georg (2004): *Truth and Method*. Rev. ed. London – New York, Continuum. 311: “the task of moral knowledge is to determine what the concrete situation asks of him – or, to put it another way, the person acting must view the concrete situation in light of what is asked of him in general”; 312: “An active being [...] is concerned

The irony of *Eight* lies in the fact that this very approach is proposed by the professor of ethics herself.¹⁸

4. What May Theologically Legitimate the Series' Choice of Title?

Does the extra-diegetic position of the biblical Ten Commandments distort their meaning – or restrict access to them?

The television episodes are not didactic dramas; they do not present their stories through the causality of sin–sinner–punishment–atonement. The unfolding of events and the behaviour of the characters are not driven by the Ten Commandments. Nor does the narrative, at the close of the stories, awaken either its characters or its viewers to the relevance or truth of the commandments. The narrative does not presume to possess surplus knowledge in relation to its viewers concerning the Decalogue. The narrative of the television series is not omniscient.¹⁹

with what is not always the same but can also be different. In it he can discover the point at which he has to act"; 315: "What is right, for example, cannot be fully determined independently of the situation that requires a right action from me."). The moral credibility of virtue lies in the fact that the norm – and its applicability to a given situation and person – can always be reconsidered.

¹⁸ In *Eight*, Elżbieta attends Zofia's seminar as a guest. At the time of the narrative, she is a Holocaust researcher living in New York. She is the former Jewish girl whom Zofia had promised to help hide in 1943, only to break that promise – invoking precisely the prohibition against bearing false witness. After hearing Zofia's argument, Elżbieta confronts her with this past action. Zofia excuses herself by claiming that she acted in the interest of the Kedyw (the counterintelligence division of the Home Army operating underground). Yet despite her later concern for the girl, Zofia did nothing to find out what had become of her. She does not adhere to her own pragmatic principle that the child's life is paramount. It appears that she invokes her ethical principles primarily to compensate for her earlier transgression (cf. ŽIŽEK, Slavoj (2001): *The Fright of Real Tears. Krzysztof Kiesłowski between Theory and Post-theory*. London, British Film Institute. 116; WACH, Margarete (2014): *Krzysztof Kiesłowski. Zufall und Notwendigkeit*. Marburg, Schüren. 309; GARBOWSKI 1996, 19).

¹⁹ On the term "omniscient narration", see BORDWELL, David (1985): *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison (Wisconsin), The University of Wisconsin Press. 57–61, 65–66.

5. The Difficulty of Deriving Theological Legitimation for the Title from Żychiewicz's Book

Tadeusz Żychiewicz's work presupposes readers for whom biblical texts function self-evidently as sources of orientation – readers who display an interest in the commandments and attribute authority to them.²⁰

For such readers, Żychiewicz offers illumination on the commandments by presenting them as law. His homiletic and popularizing intention would scarcely be served by a theological argument elaborated through philological minutiae. His approach is casuistic, insofar as he associates particular cases with the commandments as illustrative examples to which they may be applied. It is also causal, in that he draws conclusions for everyday human life from the observance – or violation – of the commandments.

Żychiewicz advances several arguments in support of the necessity and legitimacy of the commandments: a) when persuasion proves ineffective, commandments become necessary; b) the commandment, by analogy with instructions for use, is practical and beneficial; c) the mode of life proposed in the commandments accords with human dignity and freedom; d) the violation of the commandments does not diminish either their credibility or God's creative being; e) for God the Father – who is also Father to humankind – it is a source of joy if His Son is loved. The Decalogue encourages love towards one's fellow human beings and towards the surrounding world; without such love, love for Jesus cannot be realized.²¹ In his legitimation of the commandments, Żychiewicz does not invoke God's liberating act in Egypt.

His book speaks of freedom in several senses. He first identifies two deficient modes of freedom. One meaning of freedom is licence, or unbounded permissiveness²² – something the Decalogue cannot prevent, though the law cannot be blamed for the detrimental consequences that follow from it.²³ The other is autonomy, which Żychiewicz treats critically as self-legislation; for him, autonomy signifies the denial of the validity of laws and commandments.²⁴

²⁰ ŻYCHIEWICZ, Tadeusz (1983): *Dziesięcioro przykazań*. Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, Wydawnictwo Calvarianum. 6.

²¹ Op. cit. 8–12.

²² Op. cit. 9–11, 16–17, 57, 86–87, 92.

²³ Op. cit. 11, 87, 92, 127.

²⁴ Op. cit. 7.

While the first meaning might suggest that the law guarantees a good life, this is counterbalanced by his remark – attached to the second – that the commandments provide only firm ground for human existence; they do not exempt one from failure or hardship.²⁵ In a third sense, freedom consists in respecting the divinely ordered structure of the world assigned to humanity.²⁶

6. A Possible Theological Legitimation

6.1. Developing an Interpretive Argument

A line of thought may be constructed – drawing upon mutually resonant texts by Franz Rosenzweig, André LaCocque, Paul Ricoeur, and Jan Assmann – that affirms the television series' connection to the biblical Ten Commandments.

6.1.1. *The Decalogue Addresses all Persons Universally*

Accordingly, every viewer may feel personally addressed.

Rosenzweig, interpreting Psalm 115 (113B):16 (“[the Lord] has given the Earth to humankind”), writes: “‘to humankind’ – not to the community of Israel; in its belovedness and in trust, the community knows itself as unique, yet in the act of love only as human, [...] as the other in general – as the neighbour.”²⁷

According to Assmann,²⁸ “it does not play a decisive role whether the Exodus from Egypt is historical or fictional, for its truth and validity rest upon what stands upon it – and this concerns not only Judaism but also the religions that emerged from ancient Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”

LaCocque approvingly cites Walter Harrelson,²⁹ who maintains that the commandments apply “to every individual and to every group of individuals at all times and in all places”.

²⁵ Op. cit. 127, 26, 118.

²⁶ Op. cit. 109–110.

²⁷ ROSENZWEIG 1988, 281 [All translations of originally non-English texts/quotations are mine throughout the article unless otherwise stated.].

²⁸ ASSMANN, Jan (2022): *Der Mann Mose und Gottes Gesetz*. In: *Zur Debatte*. 52, 2. 36.

²⁹ LACOCQUE, André (1998): „Tu ne commettras pas de meurtre” Exode 20,13. In: LaCocque, André – Ricoeur, Paul: *Penser la Bible*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil (Essays). 155.

6.1.2. The Decalogue as Orientation in a Disordered World

During the production of the television series, contemporary Polish social and private life – according to Kieślowski and Piesiewicz – was marked by the absence of order: chaos, intolerance, inner division, and fragmentation. Set against this, the Ten Commandments may be seen as offering orientation to the individual within the world of social being.

According to Assmann, “both tablets of the stele upon which God inscribed the Ten Commandments [...] pertain to the entirety of the life-order of God’s people.”³⁰

LaCocque maintains, “the commandments attend to rightly ordered social relationships”, and in his interpretation, the Torah is nothing other than “orientation, a way of life, education, pedagogy”.³¹

6.1.3. Only through the Commandment of Love Can a Community of Human Beings Come into Being

In the Third Book of Part Two of *The Star of Redemption*, Franz Rosenzweig comments on the injunction “Love your neighbour.” It is important to note that the cited formulation does not include the phrase “as yourself”, as one might expect on the basis of Lev 19:18, Matt 22:39, or Mark 12:31. According to Rosenzweig’s interpretation, “with this commandment, the soul leaves the paternal home of divine love and ventures forth into the world”.³² In the absence of the commandment of neighbourly love, “the mere blessedness of the soul immersed in God’s loving gaze relapses into enclosure”.³³ A few pages later, Rosenzweig writes, “the world is the other pole towards which neighbourly love strives”.³⁴

6.1.4. The Commandment Is Love

According to Rosenzweig,³⁵ the commandment of love (“you shall love me”) is the manifestation of the loving God directed towards the human being loved by Him.

³⁰ ASSMANN 2022, 41.

³¹ LACOCQUE 1988, 109, 115.

³² ROSENZWEIG 1988, 229.

³³ Op. cit. 1988, 230.

³⁴ ROSENZWEIG 1988, 243; cf. also op. cit. 238; LACOCQUE 1998, 118.

³⁵ ROSENZWEIG 1988, 199–201.

For the one who loves, the command is the only possible verbal self-communication of divine love.

For Ricoeur, the apodictic laws may be called divine “by virtue of their proximity to the commandment of love, a commandment that arises from love, which is God”.³⁶

6.1.5. The Commandment Is Not Law

According to Rosenzweig,³⁷ because the love of the lover lives in the present – and because the commandment of love arises from the moment and is pure presence³⁸ –, it is “incapable of becoming law”. Law, by contrast, “reckons with temporalities – with the future and with duration”, whereas God commands “today”, and it is “today” that His voice must be heard.

Rosenzweig further maintains³⁹ that the remaining commandments of the Decalogue, though they may assume the outward form of law “from without and as if subsequently”, remain commandments: they are the unfolding of the one and first commandment.

LaCocque rejects the claim that the Decalogue constitutes law. His arguments include the following: a) the books of the Torah do not designate the Decalogue as law but as “ten words” (*dix paroles*); b) the Decalogue leaves significant domains of human action unregulated; c) its apodictic formulations do not constitute covenantal contract stipulations; d) it contains no sanctions; e) it derives its authority from itself rather than from external coercive power; f) in its negative formulations, compassion, anticipation, and confirmation are the determining modes of relation; g) as an existential ground, the commandment precedes law.⁴⁰

6.1.6. The Commandment as the Guarantee of Human Freedom

According to Raj, Rosenzweig, and LaCocque,⁴¹ although the human response expected by the commandment of love is obedience, the command's foremost significance

³⁶ RICOEUR, Paul (1998): Une obéissance aimante. In: LACOCQUE – RICOEUR 1998, 190.

³⁷ ROSENZWEIG, Franz (1988): *Der Stern der Erlösung*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp. 197–198.

³⁸ Cf. ROSENZWEIG 1988, 182, 197.

³⁹ Op. cit. 197, 239.

⁴⁰ LACOCQUE 1988, 122–123, 109, 117–118.

⁴¹ RAJ 2003, 24 ; ROSENZWEIG 1988, 296–297; LACOCQUE 1988, 107–108.

lies in human freedom and its protection. Following the initial address, the Decalogue continues to speak to the human being in their freedom of interpretation, decision, and action.⁴²

LaCocque advances several arguments:⁴³ a) obedience does not constrain the scope of human agency;⁴⁴ b) the Decalogue establishes no “binding order” to which the human being is compelled to submit; c) its predominantly negative form preserves the freedom of inventive initiative.

Ricoeur maintains that loving obedience – mandated by divine love through the divine command – is not an obstacle to moral autonomy but rather its support.⁴⁵

Rosenzweig further observes that human freedom is “boundless in relation to God”, extending even to the freedom to tempt God⁴⁶ and to be tempted by Him.⁴⁷ The weight of this freedom may be illuminated by the Lord’s Prayer: *mé eisenenkēs hēmas eis peirasmon* (Matt 6:13; Luke 11:4) – where *peirasmon* may be understood as temptation, or trial.

6.1.7. The Relevance of the Decalogue in the Light of Comparable Historical Circumstances

The presentation of the Ten Commandments as orientation – as horizon – is also warranted in the television series by virtue of analogous historical circumstances.

The development of the screenplay, the production process, and the broadcast of the series took place during a period marked by the curtailment of citizens’ rights; the end of Poland’s military dictatorship was not yet foreseeable.

⁴² Cf. LACOCQUE 1998, 154–155, 147.

⁴³ Op. cit. 123–125, 134–135.

⁴⁴ Op. cit. 125 – he further maintains that “the aim of the Decalogue is by no means to create for God an immobile human partner”.

⁴⁵ RICOEUR 1988, 192, 190, 177–178.

⁴⁶ ROSENZWEIG 1988, 297. Cf. ROSENZWEIG 1988, 295: “in relation to the Redeemer, the human being [...] does possess the freedom to act – or at least the freedom to decide”. Cf. MOLTSMANN, Jürgen (1993): *The Crucified God. The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press. 272: “God is free in himself and at the same time interested in his covenant relationship and affected by human history.”

⁴⁷ Cf. ROSENZWEIG 1988, 296: “if [...] the freedom of prayer manifests itself in the possibility that the human being can tempt God, might the human being’s being tempted by God be the precondition of this freedom?”

As Assmann observes:⁴⁸ “YHWH [...] founded a religion built upon faith and fidelity.” Within this new religious formation, lawgiving is removed from the sphere of politics. It emerged “in a situation characterized by the complete loss of kingship, state, temple, and territory [...] no longer dependent upon state, kingship, or territory”, which compelled the Jewish people “to relinquish external stabilizing factors”.

7. The Example of One (The Application of the Theological Hermeneutical Framework within the Television Series)

7.1. Temptation: A Theological Reading of One

In the *Screenplay* version, the first episode follows the dramaturgical pattern of sinful protagonist – sin – punishment. Paweł's death may indeed be interpreted as divine punishment inflicted upon his father, Krzysztof, who has transgressed the First Commandment by turning against God and by idolizing the artificial intelligence he himself has constructed.⁴⁹

In the televised version of the first episode, however, there is no indication that Krzysztof is an idolater. His conduct is neither atheistic nor anti-religious; his rationality is consistently accompanied by critical self-reflection. Paweł's death – drawing on Rosenzweig's reflections – may rather be understood as a trial directed by God towards Krzysztof, to which Krzysztof responds by counter-tempting God: he overturns the altar. In this way, *One* may be said to portray the freedom entrusted to the human being in the biblical Ten Commandments.

⁴⁸ ASSMANN 2022, 41, 39.

⁴⁹ Cf. KIEŚŁOWSKI–PIESIEWICZ 1990, 17–18, 20, 28, 30–32. The following interpretations apply only to the *Screenplay*, not to the televised version (they do not take into account the differences between the two): ŽIŽEK 2001, 118; HALTOF, Marek (2004): *The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski. Variations on Destiny and Chance*. London – New York, Wallflower – Columbia University Press. 82; SOBCHACK, Vivian Carol (2004): *The Expanded Gaze in Contracted Space: Happenstance, Hazard, and the Flesh of the World*. In: Sobchack, V. C.: *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley, University of California Press. 90; GOLD, Moshe (2016): *Decalogue One. Witnessing a Responsible Ethics of Response from a Jewish Perspective*. In: BADOWSKA – PARMEDIANI 2016, 60.

According to Rosenzweig,⁵⁰ God “must tempt the human being; He must [...] deceive him. [...] so that he [the human being] may have the opportunity [...] freely to believe and to trust in it. Conversely, the human being must also reckon with the possibility that God merely ‘tempts’ him, so that in the midst of all his struggles he may preserve his trust.”

In *One*, this “trust” (*Vertrauen*) appears when, after his son’s death, Krzysztof enters the church,⁵¹ where – through the tears of Mary – God may manifest His compassion with the grieving father.⁵²

7.2. Mercy: An Alternative Theological Reading of One

If we accept Rosenzweig’s claim⁵³ that “compassion [*Erbarmen*] is precisely not love”, then an interpretation of the final scene of *One* drawing on Walter Kasper may be distinguished from a Rosenzweigian reading.⁵⁴

The prophet Hosea (Hos 1:6, 9; 11:8–9) speaks of God preparing to reject Israel, yet ultimately changing course as pity arises within Him for His people. Kasper⁵⁵ interprets this as meaning that “mercy [*die Barmherzigkeit*] prevails in God over justice”. God’s mercy is not the mere “whim” of an angry deity, nor is it “cheap grace”. The prophet’s

⁵⁰ ROSENZWEIG 1988, 296.

⁵¹ Cf. BUBER, Martin (2017): Gottesfinsternis. Betrachtungen zur Beziehung zwischen Religion und Philosophie, In: Buber, Martin: *Werkausgabe Bd. 12*. Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus. 437: when we speak of religion, we essentially mean “holding fast to God” (*das Festhalten Gottes*). This does not signify “holding fast to our faith in God” but rather “holding fast to the existent God”.

⁵² Cf. GARBOWSKI 1996, 92; GOLD 2016, 60. By contrast, Mary’s solidarity with the father’s grief is denied in HALTOF 2004, 83; ŽIŽEK 2001, 118; SOBCHACK 2004, 97; BARTLEY, William (2014): Faith, Doubt, and Chiasmus in Krzysztof Kiesłowski’s Decalogue I. In: *Journal of Religion and Film*. 18, 2(October). 16; COATES, Paul (1999): The Curse of the Law: The Decalogue. In Coates, Paul (ed.): *Lucid Dreams. The Films of Krzysztof Kiesłowski*. Trowbridge, Flicks Books. 96.

⁵³ ROSENZWEIG 1988, 193.

⁵⁴ This resonates with Moltmann’s observation (1993, 272): “Love is the source and the basis of the possibility of the wrath of God. The opposite of love is not wrath, but indifference.”

⁵⁵ KASPER, Walter (2019): *Barmherzigkeit. Grundbegriff des Evangeliums – Schlüssel christlichen Lebens*. Freiburg – Basel – Vienna, Herder. 66–69.

words indicate that “God’s holiness [...] does not reveal itself in justified wrath [...]; rather, God’s divinity is manifested in mercy”. In the prophetic text, the phrase “in your midst” signifies that “in His mercy, God [...] paradoxically reveals Himself as one who is wholly near to us”.⁵⁶

Kasper’s reflections resonate with those of Jürgen Moltmann: “God is interested in the world to the point of suffering”, and “He enters not only into the situation of the limited creature, but even into the situation of the guilty and suffering creature. [...] In his ‘indwelling’ in the people he suffers with the people, [...] feels sorrow with the martyrs.”⁵⁷

7.3. Narrative Openness

One also exemplifies the manner in which Krzysztof Kieślowski integrates the biblical Ten Commandments into his narrative conception as freedom and liberation.

The previously noted differences between the *Screenplay* and televised versions illustrate how open the narrative remains in its handling of characterization and plot construction.

8. The Biblical Ten Commandments in *Ten*

Ten is exceptional in that it refers to the biblical Ten Commandments *expressis nominis et verbis*, albeit in the mode of negation, within the lyrics of the framing song performed by Artur, the lead singer of an alternative neo-avant-garde band. In the opening sequence, he sings: kill, murder, destroy, fornicate, commit adultery, indulge in lust all week long; on Sunday beat your mother, your father, your sister; beat the weaker one and steal, because everything around you is yours (*wszystko jest twoje*).⁵⁸ In other words, the human being is free to violate the commandments. This resonates with Rosenzweig’s view that the human being is free even to tempt God.

⁵⁶ Cf. also KASPER 2019, 51.

⁵⁷ MOLTSMANN 1993, 271, 273.

⁵⁸ The *Screenplay* includes the film’s opening song only in Scene 15 and provides its lyrics there (KIEŚŁOWSKI – PIESIEWICZ 1990, 280). It neither indicates nor reproduces the coda and its text. What Artur urges in the opening is addressed by the prophets (cf. Jer 7:9; Hos 4:2). Kasper’s interpretation of Hosea may aptly be related to the television series.

At the end of the episode, the continuation of the opening is heard: “Darkness and malice, mockery and lies, lies all week long, all week long. You are the only hope, the sole ray of hope. You are everything. Everything depends on you (*wszystko jest twoje!*)”⁵⁹ Accordingly, the closing resonance of the series suggests that the human being is likewise free to transform the corruption of the world.

9. Trois couleurs: Bleu

Kieślowski’s feature film trilogy – projecting onto the screen the ideals of the Enlightenment (liberty, equality, fraternity) – attests to his sustained engagement with the question of human freedom. A theological reading of the television series that understands the biblical Ten Commandments as a bearer of freedom thus stands in continuity with the director’s later oeuvre.

The freedom-themed instalment of the trilogy, *Trois couleurs: Bleu*, presents freedom in its multivalence. After her husband’s death, Julie’s actions initially manifest freedom as release from constraint. She moves out of their shared home and plans to sell it. She relinquishes the task of preserving her husband’s musical legacy. She seeks to part with the material remnants of his life and withdraws from public visibility. Yet her independence does not take the form of selfishness. She secures the continued existential stability of her household employees and of her mother, who suffers from dementia. She declines the advances of her admirer – her husband’s collaborator – without violating his human dignity. She acts in solidarity, supporting the prostitute who lives in her apartment building.

A decisive turning point occurs when it emerges that her husband had a lover who is now pregnant. From this moment on, the narrative portrays Julie’s actions as freedom in a substantive sense: as self-determination, self-activity, and the unfolding of her own possibilities and capacities. Julie re-chooses herself within the newly opened situation. She leaves the house she shared with her husband to his lover and the unborn

⁵⁹ The phrase “everything is yours [*wszystko jest twoje!*]” in the opening may refer to objects available for theft, but also to the unrestricted possibility of transgression – the line thus subverts Paul’s words (1 Cor 3:22: *wszystko jest wasze*). At the close of the episode, the same line appears to refer instead to the choice of the good. Kickasola (2004, 241) does not take into account that the song’s lyrics differ at the end of the episode from those at its beginning.

child; she reciprocates her admirer's love; together they orchestrate her husband's unfinished composition – a musical setting of Paul's *Hymn to Love* (1 Cor 13).

10. Conclusions

The study has proposed a reading of the biblical Decalogue that proves illuminating for Kieślowski's television series. Its credibility rests not only on its interdisciplinary grounding – drawing on philosophical, biblical, theological, and historical sources whose interpretations converge – but also on its explanatory force. It accounts for the differences between the screenplay and the televised versions as expressions of narrative freedom in both plot construction and characterization, demonstrating that these divergences are conceptual rather than incidental.

This reading situates the Decalogue at the intersection of commandment, love, and freedom: not as external law but as an address that calls the human being to responsible self-determination. The narrative's openness mirrors this dynamic, inviting viewers to respond interpretively rather than conform normatively. In this sense, the biblical Decalogue functions less as a rule than as a horizon within which freedom becomes meaningful through love.

The centrality of freedom in Kieślowski's later work – most notably in *Trois couleurs: Bleu*, where Julie's decisions unfold between loss and relational renewal – further reinforces this perspective. Both the biblical Decalogue and the series emerge from contexts marked by instability, yet in each case the search for orientation turns away from institutional authority towards trust, responsibility, and relationality. Theologically and hermeneutically, this suggests that the Decalogue may be understood not as a closed norm but as an interpretive event: one that continues to disclose the conditions of human freedom within changing historical worlds.

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