

THE WORLD WITH (NO) BORDERS

ESSAYS



© by Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe, 2021

Editor
Tomasz Skonieczny

Translation and proofreading
Lingbart

Graphic design and typesetting
Adam Kolenda

Cover photo from Canva (www.canva.com)



The publication has been prepared within the framework of the project "Laboratory for Dialogue and Reconciliation", implemented by the Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Poland.

WOJCIECH SZCZERBA

THE WORLD WITH (NO) BORDERS

“Everything in the world has a hidden meaning... Men, animals, trees, stars, they are all hieroglyphics” – says the main character of the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis entitled *Zorba the Greek*. And then he adds: “When you see them, you do not understand them. You think they are really men, animals, trees, stars. It is only years later, too late, that you understand....” their hidden sense.

The motif of the unity and interdependence of the world to which Kazantzakis refers, is an important thread that has run through human history for thousands of years. It is present in myths, tales, philosophical deductions, theological reflections and scientific hypotheses. On many occasions, especially in archaic cultures, it is manifested as the tree of life. Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Indian, Semitic and Greek myths all refer to this. In one of the versions of the Akkadian Epic of Gilgamesh, the story of a hero who seeks immortality, this tree appears as the symbol of unity of life in general, the unity of all things. This unity and constancy of being - as in the philosophy of Heraclitus of Ephesus - maintained in spite of, or rather through, the passing of some generations and the appearance of new ones. The *tree of life* itself lasts forever. All that exists is part of one system or one *omniorganism*. Inanimate matter, organic matter, plants, animals, man, celestial bodies are all parts

of the *tree of life*, and at the same time its signs and symbols. When interpreting reality, it is possible to remain on its surface and see, above all, the diverse, unrelated entities, divisions and conflicts. But when interpreting nature, it is also possible to delve into its mystery and try to read the successive chapters of the *Book of Life*, and above all, begin to understand that the mythical *tree of life* is a symbol of the interdependent unity of being, in which inanimate matter, plants and people, together build a beautiful, interdependent organism and are its hieroglyphics.

Yet, the symbol of the *tree of life* also appears in a different sense in the fundamental myths and stories of humanity. The biblical book of Genesis, in its second account of creation (Gen.2) places the *tree of life* in the middle of the mythical Garden of Eden. Its leaves and fruit give health and life to those who eat them. Paradoxically, however, it becomes one of the main reasons for man's expulsion from Eden. The Yahweh God, who rules the Garden quite authoritatively, fears that fallen man, having eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, will reach for the tree of life and become immortal. Fallen and immortal? God cannot allow that, therefore, he removes man from the garden. "'Behold, man has become like Us,' he says, 'he knows good and evil, let him not now by any chance stretch forth his hand to pluck fruit also from the tree of life, to eat it and live forever'. That is why God sent him forth from the garden of Eden to till the ground from whence he was taken'". Irenaeus of Lyon (II c. A.D.) points out that God placed the first humans near Eden, on the other side of the road, so that they could see clearly what they had lost. The *tree of life* appears again in the last book of the Bible; its leaves and fruit give health to the chosen ones, who have been saved.

The tree of life. A metaphor of unity and interdependence of being? One of the reasons for man's expulsion from Paradise? A sign of health and immortality for the chosen ones? Or perhaps this symbol is so capacious that it comprises all of these meanings. Perhaps in its symbolic diversity, it reflects well the different ways in which the world can be read by contemporary man.

Here is the world of the 21st century, beautiful and at the same time tainted with terrible blemishes. The world which gives hope

for a wonderful life to millions of people, but also a place of uneasy existence, on the brink of survival for millions. This is a global world where travel from one continent to another is no problem, where cultures intermingle and inspire each other, where people live longer lives, are healthier, wealthier and better educated, and, thanks to new technologies, communicate with each other regardless of where they are ¹. The world of the 21st century is undoubtedly becoming a reality in which many of the old divisions, problems and challenges are disappearing. Here is a world without borders, a world of many possibilities and beautiful dreams!

At the same time, however, the world of the 21st century faces many problems and challenges. Here is a world in which the 1% of the richest people have twice as much wealth as the 6.9 billion others. Here is a world in which one in five children will never go to school². Here is a world where climate change - largely caused by human activity - could lead to the extinction of humanity within the next one hundred years. The World Bank has already predicted that about 216 million people will have to leave their homes by 2050 because of climate change ³. Here is a world of forced displacement and mass migrations. It is estimated that there are 82.4 million people in the world who suffered forced displacement by the end of 2020, and if we also add in other types of migration, this figure rises to 280.6 million people ⁴. This means that, by now, one in 27 people is a migrant or refugee of some kind. Of all the forcibly displaced people, almost 50% are minors, under the age of 18, and the majority of them are women. Here is a world of the 21st century, increasingly

¹ E.g.H. Rosling, *Factfulness. Dlaczego świat jest lepszy niż myślimy, czyli jak stereotypy zastąpić realną wiedzę*, Warszawa 2018.

² <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/issues/extreme-inequality-and-essential-services> [access on 05.11.2021].

³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/09/13/climate-change-could-force-216-million-people-to-migrate-within-their-own-countries-by-2050> [dostęp 05.11.2021], <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/climate-refugees-the-world-s-forgotten-victims/> [access on 05.11.2021].

⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> [access on 05.11.2021], https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stock_abs_&t=2020 [access on 05.11.2021].

devastated and divided by borders. A world of nationalism, conflicts and global challenges. A world in which unhappy people, without food, medical care or warm clothing, are camped on the borders of rich countries. Women, children, the elderly. Here is a world that remains silent in the face of terrible tragedies, though it would seem that, in the name of its highest values, it should speak through its secular and religious leaders about the tragedy of the poorest and defend them with all its might. Here is a world of borders, conflicts and dramas!

The above statistics and figures are beyond imagination, they make a person fall silent in helplessness, almost collapse into himself. What can be done about millions of dramas? How is it possible to stop the apocalypse of the world at the level of an individual? What can be done about the oppressiveness of secular and religious ideologies?

Sometimes, however, we are given the opportunity to personally experience the drama of modern man or the beauty of the modern world. Statistics and numbers accumulate them, in one or several faces, which suddenly become close to us, because we look into them and see ourselves in them. Perhaps this is the moment in which we manage to understand, if only for a moment, that everything in this world is the hieroglyphics of the book of life and that we all are part of the tree of life, one organism, from which the simple but fundamental truth emerges that we are interdependent and co-responsible for one another. When another person suffers, I also suffer. When a part of creation dies, then the whole tree becomes sick. On the other hand, when another person is happy, a part of their happiness comes down to me. When a creature raises its head with joy, the whole tree flourishes. Perhaps this is the moment when we can repeat after Adam Zagajewski: “[...] Praise the mutilated world and the gray feather a thrush lost, and the gentle light that strays and vanishes and returns”.

Here is our proposal: let's try to tell a few stories about our world, a world (without) of borders. Let us try to write some of its chapters together. Here is the first story.

ANTONINA SZCZERBA

MURAL BY THE MOSQUE

We encounter borders on our way virtually all the time. It does not take much effort to notice them all around us. They are defined by the world, the state, religions, other people or even by ourselves. They surround us on all sides like a great, almost never-ending wall. I would like to share a certain beautiful, but a slightly sad memory. I would like to tell you about a border I noticed between people professing different religions and how it was temporarily overcome.

Well, in June 2016, Imam Ali Abi Issa decided to commemorate the figure of Imam Si Kaddour Ben Gabrit, rector of the Grand Mosque in Paris, who saved 1,500 Jews from extermination during World War II. Imam Ali invited a well-known artist, performer and graffiti artist, Dariusz Paczkowski, to paint Si Kaddour's image in the form of graffiti on the wall next to the mosque. In addition, the Imam invited children from various schools and communities to paint a mural together with Mr Dariusz, in which a verse from the Quran in Arabic, English and Polish would be inscribed in Arabic patterns. "Diverse in order to get to know each other". The project involved children from the Muslim community, from the Evangelical Church, from a Jew-

ish school, and also children of refugees, including those of Syrian nationality and from other cultures and religions.

For three days, Dariusz and I painted the mural, taking breaks from work to play games, eat, play with a ball, take photos together, but also to relax and have simple conversations. It was an extraordinary experience, though as a little girl at the time I didn't fully understand how important and exceptional it all was. Now, 5 years later, my thoughts go back to it and I remember how, for those three days, I was part of something extraordinary and unique. My world lost its borders for a moment. We, children of different cultures, religions and races, completely integrated. The colours of our skins, nor our different languages, religions or backgrounds mattered to us. Everyone was themselves, we played, joked, and ate at the same table. We painted a mural. What an unusual atmosphere that was!

At first, a few children behaved a bit strange, they were rude. They jumped, shouted and poked others. One girl kept taking my dad's camera and taking pictures with it, and one boy kept spitting on others and teasing them. But all we had to do was to take them in our arms, hug them, give them the camera and suddenly everything was fine. The world was perfect for a moment. A world without borders!

Some of the children seemed familiar to me. I had seen them somewhere before, that black hair and dark complexion. And suddenly it dawned on me. These were the little children who begged in the Market Square. They accosted others and scammed money in restaurants. Indeed, it turned out that Imam Ali had invited children from a Roma encampment who were under the care of the Nomad Foundation. This was an unusual experience like a foretaste of paradise. Regardless of our race, colour, language, culture, origin, we formed a community. We accepted each other, we spent time together, we helped each other. Isn't this the way reality should be? Or is it just a utopia that deludes us with its unattainable dream?

Imam Ali's project is over. We have all returned to our own worlds. Me to my comfortable life, warm bed and teddy bears. The Syrian refugees disappeared somewhere over the horizon. The Roma returned to their encampment. I would see them from time to time, near the

Dominican church, on the Market Square, near the shopping centre. I passed them by, going to my classes, going shopping or meeting up with friends. Their familiar faces flashed across my mind. But now they were strangers again, even though we had once been close friends, playmates for three whole days. To this day I somehow cannot pass by them indifferently, remembering that beautiful time.

We returned to our own worlds, our old lives. However, something remained. The dream of being together, the desire to overcome barriers. A certain kind of taming that will never fade away. "A person exposes himself to tears once he allows himself to be tamed" – wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his book *Little Prince*. This is how it feels to me. My world lost its borders for a moment. In light of this experience I try to go through my life.

Let me invite you to see our mural and recordings related to its creation.

- <https://wroclaw.wyborcza.pl/wroclaw/1,35771,20197507,mural-z-cytatem-z-koranu-powstal-we-wroclawiu-zdjecia.html> [accesss on 05.11.2021],
- <https://www.islam.net.pl/slider2/> [accesss on 05.11.2021],
- https://ec.europa.eu/poland/160606_mural_wroclaw_pl[accesss on 05.11.2021],
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GzNplimUsM&feature=emb_logo [accesss on 05.11.2021].

AUTHORS

Wojciech Szczerba

Ph.D. (habilitation), philosopher and theologian, rector of Evangelical School of Theology in Wrocław. Editor-in-chief of *Theologica Wratislaviensia* and author of numerous publications on theology, philosophy, Reformation tradition and ecumenism. He has been involved in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue for many years. In 2018, he was awarded the Silver Cross of Merit by the President of Poland for his contributions to national and religious minorities in Poland. Since 2019, he has been affiliated with the Von Hügel Institute at the University of Cambridge.

Antonina Szczerba

A third-year high school student. She is interested in literature, history and culture in general. As a volunteer she participates in many social projects. Her texts are regularly published in the *Parish Word* of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Poland.