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From "The Ten Commandments" to the Decalogue

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Abstract
Krzysztof Kielowski's Decalogue, only recently released in North America, raises universal questions about faith and moral values through consideration of each of the Ten Commandments. The ten films transcend politics to plumb basic moral values, depicted in the daily lives of the dwellers in a Warsaw apartment house complex. Kielowski's films examine the moral dimension of human relations with God and with their fellow human beings.
If asked what film they associate with the phrase "Ten Commandments" most North American viewers probably would mention Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 epic of the same name. From a theologian's perspective, however, DeMille's title is somewhat misleading. *The Ten Commandments* is really about the whole Exodus event: the oppression of the Hebrews under Pharaoh, their liberation from Egypt, the Sinai Covenant (at the heart of which is *The Ten Commandments*) and the Israelites' arrival on the threshold of the Promised Land.

With the North American home video release of Krzysztof Kielowski's *Decalogue* series, however, North American viewers have a new association for "Ten Commandments."1 These ten one-hour films were originally shown on Polish Television in 1988 and have sometimes appeared in America as part of Kielowski or Polish film festivals (as in New York's Lincoln Center in the mid-1990s). "D-V" and "D-VI"2 even had an independent existence occasionally appearing, respectively, as *A Short Film about Killing* and *A Short Film about Love*.3 But the complete series has hitherto not been available on the general North American market (for contract and rights reasons, according to one explanation this author has heard). Their release, with English subtitles, now makes an important series on religion and film available to American and Canadian viewers.

When he died March 13, 1996, the *New York Times* described Kielowski as "one of the two [along with Andrzej Wajda] most important film makers to come
out of Poland." Western audiences are probably most familiar with such internationally acclaimed films as *The Double Life of Veronica* and his trilogy on the values of the French Revolution, *Three Colors (Red, White, and Blue)*. The *Decalogue* series has, however, unfortunately been largely unknown in North America.⁴

By the very nature of their subject matter, Kielowski's *Decalogue* is of obvious interest to students of religion and film. This essay will consider the religious issues posed by the film series as a whole, followed by comments on "D-I" ("Thou shalt have no other gods but me") and the question of social relationships treated in the films.

**Background**

In the mid-1980s Kielowski was very interested in producing a film about homicide: its origins, its cruelty, its judgment and punishment.⁵ The social context of contemporary Poland probably inspired him.⁶ Poland at the time was just emerging from the throes of martial law, imposed in 1981 by the country's satellite regime to suppress the independent *Solidarność* trade union movement. While apologists for martial law argue that Polish dictator Wojciech Jaruzelski thereby averted a possible Soviet invasion and likely ensuing bloodbath, Polish blood was still spilled. One of the most sanguine examples of that repression was the brutal
"pacification" of strikers at the Wujek Mine in Silesia. (The special police operatives involved in those events were acquitted in November 2001). The 1981 attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, Poland's national hero, at the hands of Mehmet Ali Agca also had a political angle: one theory holds that Agca was in the service of Bulgarian communists who themselves were acting at the behest of the Soviets, the latter concerned about the Polish Pontiff's "threat" to their empire. Finally in 1984, Poles learned of the brutal torture-murder of Solidarność activist priest Jerzy Popieluszko, kidnapped October 19 and subsequently drowned by members of the Polish secret police. (Popieluszko's life and murder is the subject of the film To Kill a Priest. Directors like Kielowski, Wajda and Krzysztof Zanussi were all pushing the envelope for political and cultural liberalization in the stagnant Polish Peoples' Republic. Discussing his idea for a film about homicide with Polish attorney Krzysztof Piesiewicz, the latter supposedly encouraged Kielowski to broaden his sights from an analysis of killing to an examination of the entire Decalogue, the "ten moral principles of the Old Testament on whose base rests a large part of jurisprudence ..." That focus on the Decalogue as a whole gave birth to the ten hours film series.

In that series, Kielowski examines each of the Commandments from the perspective of a moral dilemma that involves the values underlying that precept as experienced in the lives of ordinary Polish characters set in a typically gray
apartment house complex in what is apparently Warsaw. The characters cut across the full gamut of Polish society: a doctor, a professor, a lawyer, a taxi-driver, an unwed mother and her child, a postal worker. Indeed, the "anonymity" of those characters is one of the key achievements of the film series: in contrast to contemporaneous Polish film (and much of Polish literature), Kielowski’s main characters are not tragic heroes striving against Promethean odds in defense of their convictions. The main characters in the Decalogue series are rather ordinary people struggling with moral values amidst the present moment of everyday life. That's not to say that those struggles are insignificant: they can even involve life and death (as in "D-I" and "D-V"). That said, they are the moral struggles of Everyman trying to live up to the Ten Commandments. Film critic Tadeusz Sobolewski summed it up thusly:

From the time of Wajda and the young Skolimowski, i.e., since the 1960s, no Polish director (except for Polański) enjoyed such world recognition. But the career of the "Polish school" [of film] rested on something else: on the heroes of "Kanal" and "Popioł i diamentu" whom the world looked upon as tragic but exotic Samurai warriors. But Kielowski's heroes are people like everybody else, geographically anywhere. [Kielowski] situated the hero of Polish film beyond the "Polish complex" in the face of the mystery of evil, the mystery of fate, the mystery of God.11

For Kielowski politics is a secondary consideration, something he makes very clear.

"We began to assume intuitively that the Decalogue could become a universal film. We therefore resolved to eliminate politics from the films."12 Needless to say, such a decision also helped with the censors. But Kielowski is striving to plumb to
universal moral dilemmas. Even his policemen, he notes, are portrayed as humans first and only subsequently identified as to what side of the political fence they are on.\textsuperscript{13}

God certainly remains a mystery in the \textit{Decalogue} series. The Divine Presence is not overt: Kielowski does not preach. There is a special aspect to each film, however. In each film, the same silent figure of a young man appears. He does not speak. He passes by the main character at a critical moment of moral decision-making, and looks at the character. Some have said that this character symbolizes God. Others have said he is a Christ figure, incarnate in the here and now. Still others have suggested he symbolizes conscience, watching in witness.\textsuperscript{14} One writer has even suggested that he is the angel of death, at least in "\textit{D-I}."\textsuperscript{15} Kielowski himself spoke about the figure as a necessary artistic signal to the viewer, the "man in the black suit" at a funeral.\textsuperscript{16} Religious imagery is otherwise as commonplace in the series as it is in everyday Poland,\textsuperscript{17} but the silent figure is the closest we get to an explicit presence of God. For Kielowski's heroes, part of the moral dilemma is the challenge of faith, a theme explored explicitly in "\textit{D-I}."

\textbf{\textit{D-I}}

\textit{I am the Lord Thy God. Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Besides Me.}

The First Commandment establishes God's Primacy. By forbidding idolatry, the First Commandment wants to insure that the true God alone claims our
life and love. To whomever - or whatever - we owe our ultimate allegiance, that is our God. In his prepapal writings, Pope John Paul II frequently quoted St. Augustine to the effect that in human relations with the Divine, there were ultimately only two postures: *amor Dei ad contemptum usque or amor usque ad contemptum Dei.* Put bluntly, one can either love God to the contempt of self or love self to the contempt of God.

Human self-sufficiency was the kind of idolatry the Church had to address in Poland. Faced with a government dedicated to propagating atheism, the Catholic Church needed to explain why atheism was insufficient, precisely on human terms. What is the sense, the meaning of human existence? Why are we alive? Those questions become particularly focused when death enters the picture.

The act of faith and the worldview that flows from it stand at the heart of "D-I." Paweł is a young boy, living with his father, Krzysztof, a computer scientist. The mother is absent. The father does not openly proclaim his atheism; he is even so politically correct as to explain how believers might answer some of the existential and religious questions the boy poses. Krzysztof acts, however, as if he is convinced that science's providing the appropriate answers to human questions is just a matter of time. He is even convinced he can build a thinking computer. That computer will come back to haunt him.
The first chink in Krzysztof's rationalist armor, however, appears when Paweł comes back to the apartment, full of questions about death, the death of a neighborhood dog which froze in the snow. Krzysztof understands the physiology, but Paweł's questions won't be answered by mere knowledge about the cessation of biological processes. Krzysztof awkwardly puts forward the answer of "soul," but it is apparent he does not believe that notion is reconcilable with his convictions. In the end, the boy goes off, his curiosity still alive.

The other major figure in Paweł's life is his aunt Irena. Irena is a believer, who even makes a point of pushing the issue of the child's religious education. The lad takes his questions to his aunt, who explains she believes in God because God is Love, a conviction that sustains her although she cannot prove it with the rigor of syllogistic logic. By this point the child clearly can see two worldviews competing for his allegiance.

Krzysztof buys a new pair of skates for Paweł and the scientist-father tells his son that he can go ice-skating as soon as the temperature is cold enough for the water to freeze. With his passion for teaching his son physical science, he had even set up a program on the computer to allow the boy to calculate, on the basis of air temperature, when the ice would be sufficiently thick to go skating. That special day arrives.
But the ice does not hold and someone drowns. The police are out on the water, trying to retrieve the victim of the broken ice. Parents gather on the bank, hoping and fearing that their unaccounted for children not be that victim. Krzysztof also joins them, after having frantically gone to all Pawel's customary hangouts, ever more frightened when nobody reports having seen the boy. Eventually, the truth is undeniable: Pawel is dead.

In the last scenes, we see Krzysztof before an icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa, votive candles burning in the foreground. With the death of his boy, Krzysztof has lost his world. His faith in science and rationality has been shattered: the ice should not have broken. On the other hand, religious faith now seems as much a leap as faith in secular rationalism. Either way the question of faith, of God, confronts Krzysztof. The answer, however, cannot be plucked from a computer: Krzysztof cannot resolve this dilemma on the terms he always thought he could. Indeed now, like his son when faced with the dead dog, Krzysztof also comes face-to-face with mortality and is unsatisfied with the "scientific" answer to which he once all too facilely might have retreated. Yet at the same time one feels the silent question: how can a God who is supposedly good, indeed, "Love" as Aunt Irena had said, allow this young boy to perish? Krzysztof comes to no answers, but he clearly senses the crossroads at which he stands. And still God is silent, although Kielowski is careful to give us a close-up of Our Lady of Częstochowa, showing
the tears that appear on the icon's cheek. Heaven may be silent, but it does not lack compassion.

Such a conclusion is characteristic for Kielowski. The director does not resolve the dilemmas but he does lay the choices in relief. Human beings, as free moral agents, select among those choices living, with a greater or lesser degree of satisfaction, with the consequences that flow from those choices. And the first decision must be one about faith because, at life's crunch points, human beings are rational enough to want an answer and yet usually sufficiently undeluded to know that the best answers human knowledge can provide still leaves one unfilled.

The God of "D-I" is, in fact, known apophatically, i.e., by denial, negation and silence. Poland is a Roman Catholic country on the border between Western and Eastern Christianity. Cognizant of its limits, Western theology has nevertheless still often sought to approach God using reason: St. Anselm of Canterbury had in fact defined theology as "fides quarens intellectum," faith seeking understanding. St. Thomas Aquinas' classical "five ways" of knowing God's existence is a good example of this approach.

Eastern theology, however, has often dwelled rather on God's unknowableness, His Mystery. Eastern theology is in fact inclined to the apophatic, to a theology that tries to know God through knowing what He is not. Eastern
theologian Michał Klinger, in fact, makes a case for the God of "D-I" as apophatic. Klinger, in fact, argues that the true God is depicted in the film is silent while the false god, the computer, is forever "ready" to say something. The true God keeps silent solitude; the chatty computer just keeps on going. How faithful this interpretation is to the director's own intentions may be argued. Garbowski notes that in Polish film circles Krzysztof Zanussi, not Kielowski, was seen as the exponent of Catholicism. Without delving into the question of Kielowski's own religious beliefs, the author would cite one commentator who deemed it paradoxical that "somebody was found to take up the theme of the Ten Commandments, and especially that it was somebody declaring his own agnosticism, Kielowski." Regardless of its possible fidelity to the director's original intent, however, Klinger does have a point. Indeed, Klinger goes further: he argues that Kielowski's films mark a "rebirth of sacred art." They are, Klinger insists, religious. [They are] truly universal, rising above the political and cultural divisions of contemporaneity. Their drama has a reference not just to us who were subject, at the time the films were made, to the crisis of socialism, but also to our bretheran in the (somewhat over-) civilized West, where talking about God is somehow shameful ... Faith, to be faith, cannot be compelling. "2 + 2 = 4" is not an act of faith; its truth compels assent. But until they participate in the Beatific Vision and short of some mystical experience, human beings relate to God by faith. Catholic theology would insist that faith has a basis in reason - the so-called "preambles of faith" - but reason
only takes one so far. While the "preambles of faith" make the decision for faith rational (and not just some Kierkegaardian "leap") they do not replace faith. And therein lies the basic moral dilemma: can a person believe in a world, including a moral world, without God? That dilemma is the theme of "D-I."

A person's relationship to God may be his most important moral relationship, but it is not his only one. " . . [W]hoever does not love the brother whom he can see cannot love God whom he has not seen" reminds the New Testament. To Kielowski's treatment of interpersonal relationships we now turn.

**The Moral Dimension of Interpersonal Relationships**

The Ten Commandments are about relationships, both vertical (with God) and horizontal (with our fellow human beings). The traditional iconographic depiction of the Ten Commandments attests to this: two tables, the left inscribed I-III, the right IV-X. The first three commandments regulate human relationships with God, the last seven with their fellow human beings.

Kielowski considers the full range of human relationships. Apart from the question of faith, "D-I" also raises the question of man playing God. The same question is explored more fully in "D-II," ("Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain"). The main character is a pregnant woman. Her husband lies with an uncertain prognosis in a hospital. She is pregnant by another man, about
which her husband knows nothing. She approaches the ward doctor to inquire about her husband's condition. If he is to die, she will bear the child and not be alone in the world; if he will survive, she will abort the child. The doctor cannot predict the man's future with certainty, and he resists being put in the place of God, the fate of the woman's child hanging on his fallible prognosis.

The Polish director also warns against dangers to fundamental human relationships when not kept within their moral bounds. "D-IV" ("Honor thy father and mother") takes up the same starting-point for a motive as "D-II": indeterminate paternity. Anka lives with her father Michał, who has raised her since her mother died five days after she was born. Her affection for her father has always been strong. Her father kept a letter for her, written by her mother, just before she died. Once while he was away, Anka opened the letter. In the letter, Anka's mother tells her that Michał is not her real father. For Anka, two worlds collide: her discovery that the man who raised her, whom she assumed to be her father, is not, and new and ambiguous feelings towards Michał which take on the cast of incest. At a certain point, Anka tries to go back to the way things were before, pretending it was all a bad dream. But the genie has been let out of the bottle, and no matter how innocent their future ties may be, they can never resume the status quo ante. The unique paternal-parental relationship has been lost through contamination.
Similar issues are explored in "D-VII" ("Thou shalt not steal"). The Seventh Commandment is traditionally understood as relating to things; in "D-VII," Kielowski raises the ante, relating the Commandment to persons. Majka is a twenty-something woman who had a daughter, Ania, out-of-wedlock. To conceal the fact of the child's illegitimacy, Majka's mother Ewa has taken over raising Ania. Ania calls Ewa "mommy" and regards Majka as her older sister. Majka has resolved to restore the truth of their relationship by taking Ania away secretly with her to Canada. She spirits Ania away during a school play, taking her to the home of her former amour, Ania's father Wojtek. Wojtek had been Majka's teacher; Ewa, the school principal, had managed to cover up the situation. Wojtek left the school and now sews teddy bears from his home. Majka's unexpected arrival with Ania turns his world upside down, and he initially tries to get Majka back to her mother. Majka, eventually convinced that she is alone in the world, tries to flee with the child, only to be found by her mother in a suburban Warsaw train station. Ania, back in Ewa's arms, watches as Majka runs off on a departing train. Although the status quo has ostensibly been restored, we see from Ania's eyes as Majka's train moves off that innocence has been lost.

The sanctity of family life forms the backdrop of "D-III" ("Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day") where Janusz, a married taxi-driver, is led in a wild goose chase the entire night of December 24-25 by Ewa, his former girlfriend, who
is ostensibly looking for her lost husband. The quest ends on Christmas morning in Warsaw's train station where Ewa admits that, in her loneliness and abandonment, she had resolved to try to keep Janusz with her that whole night, or kill herself. Janusz returns home Christmas morning, affirming the primacy of married love and, pace Sartre, the hellishness of solitude.

The sacredness and importance of marital love is also implicated in "D-IX" ("Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife"), where the main character focuses on the problem of his impotence, and in "D-VI," ("Thou shalt not commit adultery") where a cynical and worldly-wise Magda becomes the object of the voyeuristic affections of Tomek, an immature postal clerk who spies on her through his telescope. For Magda, sex is just recreation. When she finally overcomes her initial anger at Tomek, she tries to seduce him, only to dismiss his feelings as so much physical combustion. Tomek, frightened, flees her apartment and cuts his wrists. During his hospitalization, Magda discovers another side of herself: her toughness gives way to a curious solicitude for Tomek, whom she now begins to search for at his old post office window. Nothing ever comes of it but, as in the other films, one's choices leave their marks, even in disillusionment.

Human relationships and religious obligations also enter the picture in "D-VIII," ("Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor"). The film touches upon the neuralgic question of Polish-Jewish relations from the perspective of an
old professor of ethics who now meets, as a middle-aged woman, the Jewish child she was once going to be a godparent for in an effort to rescue her.

Finally, the priority of persons over things in human relationships is underscored in "D-X," ("Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods") where two brothers, who had grown long apart, are brought together by their inheritance from their father: a stamp collection. The brothers cannot figure out the value and meaning of it all (even though one stamp is particularly valuable) and in the end they get swindled out of their fortune. In the process, however, they get to know the father they never really knew in life. They also get to know each other, too. One other unique feature of "D-X" worth mentioning: it is the only film in the Decalogue series that can be called a comedy.

Conclusion

Kielowski's Decalogue series gives adults a dramatically mature set of films in which to reflect on the fundamental moral values that undergird human life. They do not preach, but they invite the viewer to ongoing reflection. They challenge viewers to look at the values underlying the Ten Commandments in fresh ways, in ways that probe them more deeply. Students of religion and film will have a rich treasure trove to explore in these films.25

25
New Yorker Films Video, released in VHS format in North America April 2000.

In this article each of the "Decalogue" series films will be designated as "D" and the Roman numeral of the corresponding Commandment (e.g., "D-I"). This method corresponds to the way Kieślowski himself entitled the individual films. Kieślowski simply titles the films as, e.g., "Decalogue I," without naming the Commandment. According to Tadeusz Sobolewski (Gazeta Wyborcza, issue 122 of October 26, 1989, p. 8) when the films appeared in Western Europe, some theaters found it necessary to provide little cards with the text of the Ten Commandments printed on them to help viewers remember the subject of the particular precept.

Kieślowski explained that "D-V" was the film that he really wanted to do, but economic considerations in mid-1980s Poland made television movie serials more viable. While Telewizja Polska bought the ten one-hour "Decalogue" films, he also got additional funds from the Polish Ministry of Culture, which was interested in funding films for movie theaters. They wanted two films. Kieślowski insisted that one be "D-V" ("A Short Film about Killing") and left the choice about the other to them. They chose "D-VI," which became "A Short Film about Love." See Danuta Stok, ed., Krzysztof Kieślowski o sobie [Krzysztof Kieślowski on Himself] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1997), pp. 119-21.

Kieślowski was born June 27, 1941. He studied film in Łódź from 1957-68 and became associated with the TOR film company in Poland. He has been recognized for his artistic achievement at such festivals as Kraków, Mannheim, Venice, Moscow, and Cannes, and has been an Oscar nominee.


"W kraju panował chaos i bałagan - w każdej dziedzinie, w każdej sprawie i w prawie każdym życiu . . . Nie myślę nawet o polityce, ale o zwykłym, codziennym życiu ... Miałem dojmujące wrażenie, że coraz częściej ogladam ludzi, którzy nie bardzo wiedzą, po co żyją." [Chaos and disorder ruled in the country: in every branch of life, in every issue, and in practically every life ... I do not have politics in mind, but ordinary, everyday life ... I had the keen impression that I was ever more frequently looking at people who did not really know why they were living]. Stok, p. 111. All foreign language translations appearing in these notes, except where indicated, are the author's.

Directed by Agnieszka Holland and released by Columbia Pictures/France 3 Cinéma in 1988, starring Christopher Lambert.

There was supposedly a documentary featuring Kieślowski and Piesiewicz produced in 1994 by Dominique Rabourdin, "Dialogue autour de Décalogue," but this author has not seen it. It is mentioned in an article discussing documentaries about Kieślowski's life and work: see Mikołaj Jazdon, "Spotkania z Kieślowskim. O dokumentalnych potretach reżysera"[Encounters with

9 "... sui dieci precetti morali dell'Antico Testamento sul cui sfondo si basa anche gran parte della giurisprudenza ..." Murri, p. 77.

10 Kieślowski says that he picked a recently constructed apartment complex because, while it looked bad, it only suggested how much worse others might be. ("Wygląda dość okropnie. Można sobie wyobrazić, jakie są te inne."). Stok, p. 114. In mid-1980s Warsaw, with only grey socialist apartment blocks to choose from, Kieślowski’s observations might have applied to the general Polish reality. The boom in luxury housing for the better-heeled in districts like Ursynów or Konstanciń today might elicit other social justice critiques from socially conscious film directors.


12 "Intuicjnie zaczęliśmy przypuszczać, że Dekalog może stać się filmem uniwersalnym. Postanowiliśmy więc wyrzucić politykę z filmów." Stok, p. 113. At the same time, one cannot simply abstract from the concrete politico-cultural conditions which inspired Kieślowski. While the crisis of faith may be as great in the West as it was in Poland, its depiction in "D-I" is also colored by the fact that Krzysztof lived in a country whose rulers ideologically postulated atheism as the governing social ideology.

13 Stok, p. 112.

14 See Christopher Garbowsk, Krzysztof Kieślowski’s Decalogue Series: The Problem of the Protagonists and Their Self-Transcendence, in the "Eastern European Monographs" series, no. 452 (Boulder, CO: Eastern European Monographs, 1996). Garbowski, from the Catholic University of Lublin, provides a good Catholic theological context - the context within which Kieślowski would have been speaking in Poland - to these films.


16 Kieślowski related the story he heard from Witek Zalewski about Mach’s funeral anecdote. Mach had made a film that included a funeral scene. Asked what he liked best about the scene, a viewer said the man in the black suit on the left. Even the producer had not noticed that particular extra’s inclusion, but the viewer did. That silent figure is needed. Kieślowski says he
added his figure, the young man, because "Some people notice him as he looks around and observes. He has no influence on what goes on, but he constitutes his own kind of sign or warning to those whom he looks upon, if they notice him." ["Niektórzy go widzą, jak patrzy, przygląda się. Nie ma wpływu na to, co się dzieje, ale stanowi swego rodzaju znak czy ostrzeżenie dla tych, którym się przygląda, jeżeli go dostrzegają"). Stok, p. 125, translation the author's.

17 Thus, in "D-I" we see an icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa, much of the action in "D-III" takes place around the traditional Polish Christmas Eve ("Wigilia") and Midnight Mass ("Pasterka") celebrations, a young girl's First Communion picture is prominent in "D-V," and Baptism becomes a key motive for the action in "D-VIII."


19 I have the impression that the silence and ontological darkness of God is His proper topos, that which remains after the extinguishing of symbols by rationalism - great European rationalism." [Mam wrażenie, że milczenie i ciemność ontologiczna Boga, to jest swoisty topos, to co pozostało po wzgaszonych przez racjonalizm - wielki racjonalizm europejski - symbolach"]). Klinger, p. 54.

20 Klinger, p. 54.


23 1 John 4:20. See also James 2: 14-20.

24 French scholar André Chouraqui argues that "... si l’homme accomplissait ses devoirs élémentaires, don’t les principaux sont précisément contenus dans les Dix Commandements, une déclaration concernant les droits ne serait pas nécessaire. [If a man carries out his elementary duties, the principle ones of which being contained precisely in the Ten Commandments, a declaration about his rights would not be necessary]. André Chouraqui, Les Dix Commandements Aujourd’hui. Dix paroles pour réconcilier l’Homme avec le humain. (Paris: Édition Robert Laffont, 2000), p. 21, emphasis original. Chouraqui's subtitle encapsulates the position he (and the present author and arguably Kieślowski ) take: the Decalogue is "ten words to reconcile man with the human."