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**“He who lives by the sword...”
The images of death in Japanese samurai films**

**„Kto mieczem wojuje...”
Obrazy śmierci w japońskich filmach samurajskich**

ABSTRACT

Samurai Japanese film as a specific kind of film. Analysis of chosen images of death in representative samurai films. Comparison of the ideology of samurai films with values of Western culture formed by the Decalogue and the Gospel.

KEYWORDS:

samurai film, images of death, ethics of the Decalogue and the Gospel

ABSTRAKT

Ukazanie specyfiki gatunku japońskiego filmu samurajskiego. Analiza wybranych obrazów śmierci w reprezentatywnych filmach samurajskich. Konfrontacja ideologii filmów samurajskich z wartościami obecnymi w kulturze zachodniej, ukształtowanej przez Dekalog i Ewangelię.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

film samurajski, obrazy śmierci, etyka Dekalogu i Ewangelii.

One of the most characteristic film genres, which gained popularity all over the world after the Second World War, is the samurai film, obviously from Japan. There are many elements that contribute to the global fascination with this genre; the most characteristic, distinctive, and exciting ones are the spectacular fencing duels with the use of a special weapon: the samurai sword.

The global success of post-war Japanese cinema, and especially of the samurai film, was decisively influenced by the work of the brilliant director Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998) and the phenomenal actor Toshiro Mifune (1920–1997), an excellent actor who played the roles of warriors and knights.¹ Kurosawa’s work –

* This article was published in parallel in *Humanitne studie na aktualne probleme súčasnej spoločnosti*, edited by Beata Akimjakova, Ruzomberok 2011, pp. 69–82.

¹ “Kurosawa Akira.” *Słownik filmu*, edited by R. Syska, Krakow, 2005, pp. 330–331; “Mifune Toshiro.” *Ibidem.*, p. 353. Mifune played the main roles in the following films: *Rashomon*,

Rashomon (1950), *Seven Samurai* (1954), and *Kagemusha* (1980) – have gained the favour of critics, won recognition and awards at international festivals (Golden Lions in Venice, Oscars in the USA, and a Golden Palm in Cannes), and enjoyed extraordinary popularity among audiences. *Seven Samurai* is not only a canon of Japanese film, but also a global masterpiece of cinematography.²

Although Kurosawa's samurai films were set in the old days and in a country exotic to Western culture, critics and audiences found in them a universal message, common to all mankind; a peculiar cultural convergence, resulting from human nature and the universality and similarity of existential experiences, was illustrated by the Japanese director's adaptation of Shakespeare's works into the language of samurai film: the shocking *Throne of Blood* (1956) was a successful adaptation of Macbeth and the large-scale film *Ran* (1985) was a new production of King Lear.³ Samurai films, first screened in cinemas and then broadcast on television in various countries, often constituted a significant media message showing the global audience the worldview, mentality, traditions, and national values of the Japanese people and the specific cultural heritage of their country.

SAMURAI ETHOS AND THE SWORD

In order to fully understand samurai films, it is essential to have knowledge about Japanese history, culture, and civilisation. Its history reveals its uniqueness and the old feudal and social structure, in which a warrior caste was an exceptional group. A Japanese knight – a samurai – was most often the main character of the films about the old times of the Land of the Rising Sun, in which – during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600–1868) – about 80 per cent of the population were peasants. Samurai were an exceptionally privileged social group: they did not perform any physical work, but only had to practice martial arts as knights on duty with their feudal lords (*daimyo*). The symbol of the social status of knights was the samurai sword. Within the class of warriors there were also various divisions; a miserable group were the *ronin*, lonely, homeless knights, deprived of

Seven Samurai, *Samurai – as Miyamoto Musashi*, *Throne of Blood*, *Yojimbo*, *Sanjuro*, and *Ran*; he also played significant roles in *The Sword of Doom* and *Red Sun*.

² "Siedmiu samurajów." *Słownik filmu*, op. cit., pp. 569–570.

³ "Kurosawa Akira." op. cit., p. 331.

stable sources of income, who retained the privilege of wearing two swords as a sign of nobility, but were often despised and treated as outcasts.⁴

Samurai, who accounted for about 6%–7% of the Japanese population, mostly lived in cities and towns or, by the orders of feudal lords, in the duke's settlements; they held various functions as clerks, policemen, law enforcement officers, and even students.⁵ The two swords, which the hereditary warriors had the right and duty to wear, were not only dangerous weapons of war, but were also often regarded as works of art.⁶

"The sword has a unique place in Japanese culture."⁷ The evolution of the production of this weapon led, through various improvements, to the creation of a slightly curved, single-edged blade; this type of weapon is called a sabre, but due to the nature of Japanese fencing, it is more appropriate and justified to call it a sword. It was surrounded by an unusual cult, unprecedented anywhere in the world.⁸ The fascination with the sword gave it a symbolic meaning; in the shine of its head it saw the values which were the foundation of the samurai's honour: purity, simplicity, and fidelity.⁹

The unprecedented role and importance of weapons is evidenced by the Japanese sword being called a samurai's soul. The sword was a symbol of his power and valour, as well as a tool for shaping his personality; fencing, as the most cherished way of fighting, became a way to achieve physical and spiritual perfection. The ideal illustration of exemplary fencing was the ability to knock down an opponent with one blow.¹⁰

The specific link between the original martial arts developed in the East and the religions, beliefs, and worldviews there must not be overlooked. The sword was surrounded by respect and gained prestige because, according to Japanese beliefs, it was a gift from the gods and belonged to the insignia of imperial power.

⁴ Tubielewicz, J. *Historia Japonii*, Wrocław, 1980, pp. 275–280.

⁵ Gordon, A. *Nowożytna historia Japonii. Od czasów Tokugawów do współczesności*, translated by I. Merklejn, Warsaw, 2010, pp. 29, 37–38; Tubielewicz, J. "Samuraj." *Kultura Japonii. Słownik*, Warsaw, 1996, pp. 267–268; Henshall, K. G. *Historia Japonii*, translated by K. Wiśniewska, Warsaw, 2011, p. 76.

⁶ Tubielewicz, J. "Miecz japoński." *Kultura Japonii...*, op. cit., pp. 198–201.

⁷ Polak, K. *Leksykon broni japońskiej*, Warsaw, 2007, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Hokusui, I. *Miecz samurajski*, translated by M. Matusiak, Bydgoszcz, 2009, p. 13.

¹⁰ Śpiewakowski, A. *Samuraje*, translated by K. Okazaki, Warsaw, 2007, p. 59.

Improvement in fealty was one of the ways of striving for salvation, understood in terms of Buddhist ideals as a liberation from temporal conditions and an experience of enlightenment. Thus, some warriors practiced asceticism; the masters of martial arts there were also monks, because schools for the use of weapons were also located in Buddhist monasteries. Fluency in the art of fencing, the desire to get to know oneself deeply, and to exist in accordance with the laws of nature was a conglomerate of the way of the sword (*kendo*), resulting from the interpenetration and combination of Shintoistic, (Zen) Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian ideas. A specific mysticism of sword and feudalism emphasised the fact that fencing is an exercise of life energy, and in combat the most important thing is not the weapon, but the man who through long practice achieved extraordinary physical fitness, being a testimony of perfection, self-control, and inner harmony.¹¹

The way samurai behaved was regulated by a specific code of ethics (*bushido*); it emphasised nobility, and in the face of the feudal lords it emphasised the ideals of loyalty, fidelity, and even filial love. A samurai should be honourable, brave, reserved in his behaviour and speech, persistent, and always ready to die.

The process of forging the sword contained religious or, more precisely, magical elements; it was believed that the armourer was to be helped by good spirits and even gods; amulets were used to protect the forge from evil spirits. The art of fencing was also interpreted as a gift of bloody deities interfering in human conflicts and teaching their faithful followers the secrets of swordsmanship.¹²

¹¹ Tokarski, S. *Sztuki walki. Ruchowe formy ekspresji filozofii Wschodu*, Szczecin, 1989, pp. 56, 69–75.

¹² Zwoliński, A. "Sztuki walki. Kendo." *Leksykon współczesnych zagrożeń duchowych*, Kraków, 2009, pp. 533–536, 541–542.

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THE EFFECT OF IMPERFECTION

The heroes of samurai paintings are both historical and fictional characters. The most famous authentic figure, repeatedly shown in film, is Miyamoto Musashi, the most perfect swordsman of medieval Japan. He was a painter, a writer, and the creator of the original technique of fighting with two swords, who was invincible in more than sixty duels and called "the holy sword" (*kensei*). Legend has it he lost a battle with an old monk and was enlightened at that time, because there was only one thing he lacked: the experience of losing. As Musashi claimed, victories in swordplay duels raised doubt in him: for he was always wondering whether he had reached perfection or whether he had won thanks to the weaknesses of his opponents.¹⁴ Death therefore reveals a kind of imperfection in the rivals of the master swordsman, who set himself an inner illumination for life. His opponents appear to be inferior warriors not because of their combat skills and lack of training, but above all because of their moral condition. However, most of the films about Musashi remain in the convention of a historical-adventure spectacle, which overshadows the inner vision of battle as a way of reaching perfection, enlightenment, and salvation.¹⁵

THE WAY OF BRINGING BACK JUSTICE AND SOCIAL ORDER

Among the fictional characters who are the protagonists of samurai films, there is the lonely *ronin*, often cynical, but not without a sense of honour and justice. In Kurosawa's film *Yojimbo*, Mifune portrayed a warrior who is somewhat forced by

¹³ Tubielewicz, J. "Bushido." *Kultura Japonii...*, op. cit., pp. 38–39; Śpiewakowski, A. op. cit., p. 13.

¹⁴ Tokarski, S. op. cit., pp. 63–64.

¹⁵ See e.g. the Oscar-winning Samurai film *Miyamoto Musashi*, directed by Hiroshi Inagaki in 1954. Factual information about the films comes mainly from the relevant pages of the website www.filmweb.pl.

circumstances to fight a gang terrorising a town. Betrayed and beaten, he barely escapes with life and hides in a small temple. He no longer has his sword; a knife is all he has left. He realises that he would be doomed to lose a potential fight because the leader of the gang has a weapon even more effective than a sword: a revolver. However, the lone *ronin* practises stubbornly throwing the knife and secretly receives an old sword from the intimidated inhabitants; once he learns about the imprisonment of the man who helped him, the samurai sets off for the village. The final sequence of the film shows the victorious fight of the *ronin* against the bandits.¹⁶ A precise throw of the knife into the hand of the hermit holding the revolver reduces the thugs' advantage, and the samurai – a master of fencing – flashes his sword and takes down almost all the bandits one after another. The painting, full of symbolic content, shows the struggle of good against evil, the pursuit of perfection, and the desire to restore order and justice. Death inflicted by a sword seems to be the proper punishment for the thugs; the scene in which the samurai, with one precise cut, frees the man who helped him from his ties is significant. The sword, an instrument of death and punishment, turns out to be an instrument of liberation in this case. The words spoken by the *ronin* at the end of the film about order and leaving the scene of the struggle resemble the classic images of lonely sheriffs in westerns.¹⁷

A specific continuation of *Yojimbo* was *Sanjuro*, another work by the duo of Kurosawa and Mifune. This time, the *ronin* is entangled in a political conspiracy, helping rebels fight against corrupt officials. In the final duel, Sanjuro – like a true master – kills his opponent with one cut.¹⁸ A lone samurai and his sword become the servants of justice, meting out punishment and defending a just cause. The death of the criminals is therefore again shown as a way of restoring social order.

DEFENCE AND NECESSARY EVIL

The most outstanding work by Kurosawa, *Seven Samurai*, is a story about a group of *ronin* who, for a song, undertake to defend a poor village against forty bandits stealing crops from the peasants. The victory over the robbers is paid for by

¹⁶ Kurosawa, Akira, director. *Yojimbo*, 1961.

¹⁷ Zinnemann, F., director. *High Noon*, 1952.

¹⁸ Kurosawa, Akira, director. *Sanjuro*, 1962.

the death of four samurai.¹⁹ Undertaking a fight when outnumbered, and against a dangerous opponent, because they had three rifles, is a clear illustration of not only the chivalrous ideal of defending the oppressed, but, above all, of the ethical principle of taking the side of the good and risking one's own life in the fight for justice. The protagonist of the film, an old, experienced samurai, an excellent warrior and swordsman, is at the same time a sage. He has not only a wealth of combat experience, but also wisdom, which manifests itself in perfect knowledge of human nature; this profound spiritual knowledge contributes decisively to the victory of a handful of knights over a band of cruel robbers. Death as the only means of defence and the beginning of a new one in a sense is shown as a necessary evil; the last words of the old samurai were, "We have survived again. We have lost again. The villagers have won." The young knight's choice of a further path, that is, either to continue the path of the sword or to abandon it for the love of the village girl, illustrates the eternal dilemma of choosing the right means to achieve one's goals. The words of the samurai are accompanied by an image of the graves of the fallen knights and the men and women working in the field.²⁰ It is difficult not to see in this depiction a criticism of combat as a way of life and an affirmation of everyday, ordinary effort as a creative element of human and inner development.

THE SYMBOL OF THE STRUGGLE FOR DIGNITY

The vision of struggle and death as the only way to restore social order is rooted in the Japanese tradition of public service and moral obligation. However, the Samurai code of conduct (*bushido*) has been criticised; the downfall of the knightly class was shown in *Harakiri*.²¹ Its director, Masaki Kobayashi (1916–1996), in his next film, *Samurai Rebellion*, included a critique of tradition and the old cultural norms. The brilliant dramatic structure, depicting the conflict between a noble samurai and a cruel duke, was not only an allegorical picture of the clash of an outstanding individual with a dehumanised system of feudal power, but also a demonstration of the inner tension that resulted from the choice between

¹⁹ "Siedmiu samurajów." *Słownik filmu*, op. cit., pp. 569–570; Płużewski, J. *Historia filmu 1895–2005*, Warsaw, 2008, p. 245.

²⁰ Kurosawa, A. *Seven samurai*, op. cit.

²¹ Kobayashi, M., director. *Harakiri*, 1962.

absolute obedience and unfaithfulness to the sovereign, loyalty to him and love and the desire to defend family happiness, dignity, and honour.²²

In *Samurai Rebellion*, a feudal lord of the Sasahara family, a noble old samurai, (excellently portrayed by Mifune), defending the dignity of his family, rebels against the local ruler and takes up a battle he is doomed to lose.²³ The battle for dignity – despite the death of the samurai, his son, and daughter-in-law – was not fruitless: the surviving granddaughter is rescued by an old nurse, who – we may assume – will pass down to the child the memory of the family drama and the villainy of the ruler and the heroism of the grandfather, master of the sword.

SUDDEN AND UNEXPECTED

One of the characteristic heroes of samurai films is the figure of a blind man, a masseur, and a phenomenal swordsman. The blind warrior – Zatoichi – has been repeatedly shown in film.²⁴ He is not a nobleman, a samurai, so he has no right to carry a knightly weapon; he uses a simple sword hidden in a cane – the equipment of a blind man. He defends simple people from bandits, thus bringing upon himself the revenge of various gangs; however, he emerges victorious from all the fights and oppression. The advantage of the Zatoichi stems not only from his original way of fighting and masterful swordsmanship but, above all, from the fact that he recognises the surrounding reality better than the sighted. Death inflicted from the hand of a seemingly helpless blind man is sudden, unexpected; it strikes the wicked, punishing their iniquity and crimes. The tradition of the historical spectacle provides a background to show the eternal struggle of good against evil, humility against pride, and weakness and delusion against truth.²⁵

²² “Kobayashi Masaki.” *Słownik filmu*, op. cit., p. 326; Płażewski, J. op. cit., pp. 354–355.

²³ Kobayashi, M., director. *Bunt*, 1967.

²⁴ Cf. *The Tale of Zatoichi*, directed by K. Misumi, 1962; *Zatoichi*, directed by K. Misumi, 1967; *Zatoichi*, directed by J. Sakamoto, 2010. Since the beginning of the 1960s, more than twenty films about Zatoichi have been made in Japan, and television has broadcast a series with approx. one hundred episodes about him.

²⁵ *Zatoichi*, directed by T. Kitano, 2003; Płażewski, J. op. cit., p. 731.

REVENGE HAS THE FACE OF A WOMAN

A specific heroine of samurai films is a killer woman. Yuko Koshima, the Lady Snowblood, when asked who she is, answers that she is vengeance for the fate of the defenceless, who had suffered from the guilt of a man who had just been reached by her sword, hidden in the handle of her umbrella. Destined from the moment she was born to avenge her parents and brother, trained by a monk, she was supposed to forget about love and hatred, to think only of revenge, to be aware that she is not a person, but a beast, a demon, and that even the Buddha has turned his back on her. So she is determined to pursue the path of revenge, to kill all those who took part in the extermination of her family. The contrast between the abomination of crime and bloody revenge and goodness and beauty is highlighted by the fact that the title character is an exceptionally beautiful girl, with delicate, subtle features and a sensitive soul, who does not do evil unnecessarily. Her large eyes are sad; crying in the cemetery she expresses sorrow for the chance of family happiness lost due to the villains. However, the beautiful Lady Snowblood knows neither mercy nor forgiveness; she even kills the guilty party who expresses grief and repentance, confessing that from the day of the crime he has been plagued by remorse, begging for forgiveness and for his life to be spared.²⁶ Entangled in political intrigues, she helps with her unparalleled art of swordsmanship in the fight against a wicked authority.²⁷

The figure of the killer-girl also appears in the new wave of samurai cinema. Azumi, together with a group of boys who, like her, are orphans, is brought up and prepared by a master samurai for the role of a professional killer; she is to have a heart of stone which should not know mercy. The last attempt before undertaking the mission, that is to say the assassination of evil magnates, is to kill the friend with whom she was trained. Azumi kills the boy, then turns out to be a ruthless, perfect, invincible warrior.²⁸

²⁶ *Lady Snowblood*, directed by T. Fujita, 1973.

²⁷ *Lady Snowblood II*, directed by T. Fujita, 1974.

²⁸ *Azumi*, directed by R. Kitamura, 2003; *Azumi 2: Death or Love*, directed by S. Kaneko, 2005.

THE QUINTESSENCE OF EVIL

One of the most brutal and bloody samurai films, *The Sword of Doom*, depicts a samurai angry to the bone, ruthless, cruel, cynical, and subject to the basest lusts and instincts; Tsukue kills an innocent man randomly and provokes a fight in which many knights die. Nothing has any value to him but improving his combat skills, for which even his father, who was also his first fencing teacher, curses him. The final scene of the duel, or rather a pure slaughter, takes place in a burning house, as if an image of hell, where only evil, violence, blood, and death are present.

One of the most interesting and suggestive scenes is the fight between the Grandmaster of the Sword, Shimada, and a large group of samurai. Shimada – the best swordsman in Japan at that time – defeats all the attackers. To their leader he says angrily, “through your careless audacity, I have had to sin by killing”; to Tsukue, who looks away, he says, “a soul is enchanted by the sword. He who studies sword fighting reaches deep into the soul. An evil heart leads a wicked sword.” Tsukue decides not to duel with master, Shimada, because he realises that he would not have a chance of winning. The sword of doom is a drastic image of the dark corners of human nature, alienation, a sense of meaninglessness, and the spiral of evil intensified by pride.

SAMURAI FILMS AS ARTISTIC INSPIRATION FOR WESTERN CINEMATOGRAPHY

The comparison of Christianity with the ideology contained in samurai films can take place mainly on a moral level; however, such an analysis must also take into account the historical dimension, namely the Japanese Middle Ages, as the background for most samurai images.

Thanks to samurai films, Japanese cinematography has had a significant impact on the work of Western directors. The famous adaptation of *Seven Samurai* became a familiar-committees of the western: *The Magnificent Seven*; the adaptation of *Yojimbo* that was the motion picture *A Fistful Of Dollars*, in which the figure of a nameless gunfighter was played by Clint Eastwood; the image of a blind sword master, Zatoichi, was recreated in the motion picture *Blind Fury*; and the figure of a female avenger, warrior, and master of martial arts appeared in the *Kill Bill* series. A successful attempt to combine a samurai film with a western was the film *Red Sun*, directed by Terence Young (1915–1994), the creator of three James Bond films (*Doctor No* [1962], *From Russia with Love* [1963], and *Thunderball* [1965]) and starring a selection of world cinema stars: Toshiro Mifune, Charles Bronson, Ursula Andress, and Alain Delon. The most important attribute and symbol of samurai films, i.e. the historical sword, became a model of a sword of light, i.e. the noble weapon of Jedi knights from the famous film saga by George Lucas, *Star Wars*; the figure of Obi-Wan Kenobi also reminds one of Japanese fencing masters, whose art is the effect of inner perfection.²⁹

THE DECALOGUE AND THE GOSPEL TOWARDS THE IDEOLOGY OF SAMURAI FILMS

The various images of death which appear in Japanese samurai films, outlined and enumerated earlier, are a consequence of a certain tradition, worldview and mentality. It is definitely different from Western civilisation and customs, decisively shaped by the heritage of Greek, Roman, biblical, and, above all, Christian culture. The Decalogue and the Gospel have formed in Western civilisation a certain hierarchy of values, an ideal of behaviour, and a way of perceiving God, mankind, and the world.³⁰

²⁹ Cf. *The Magnificent Seven*, directed by J. Sturges, 1960; *A Fistful of Dollars*, directed by S. Leone, 1964; *Blind Fury*, directed by P. Noyce, 1989; *Kill Bill vol. 1*, directed by Q. Tarantino, 2003; *Kill Bill vol. 2*, directed by Q. Tarantino, 2004; *Red Sun*, directed by T. Young, 1971; *Star Wars*, directed by G. Lucas, 1977.

³⁰ It should be remembered here that from the very beginning of the existence of mass media (which in some way include film), the Church has been watching them carefully, taking the view that their action cannot be reduced to the logic of the market alone, but should comply with moral law and rich in content containing humanistic and Christian values. Where it was contrary to human dignity and fundamental human rights, the Church held ritualistic positions. See A. Adamski, Bł. ks. Ignacy Kłopotowski (1866–1931) as an educator of conscious, critical and active media audiences, "Biuletyn Edukacji Medialnej" 2010 nr 1, p. 76.

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Although there are also themes in Western culture about the uniqueness of some kind of weapon (such as King Arthur's Excalibur, the swords of Lancelot, Count Roland, Charlemagne, or Szczerbiec – known from Polish history, and from literature – Zerwikaptur (Coif-snapper) of Longinus Podbipięta from *With Fire and Sword* and Scyzoryk of Gerwazy from *Pan Tadeusz* [Master Thaddeus]), they are not identified (like a samurai sword) with the soul of a warrior, despite its symbolic meaning. The Church's teaching clearly, unambiguously, and firmly distinguishes spiritual from material things and personal from subjective matters. Thus, a weapon is an ordinary, although sometimes symbolic item (like coronation swords), but only a tool. Christianity emphasises the importance of human free will, which can use tools as a means to do good or evil. In the Middle Ages, the Church raised knights to use their swords only to defend peace and order; the ceremony of fitting in as a knight was religious in nature.³¹ The Church imposed penance for the task of death during a battle;³² it even reminded the crusaders that killing enemies is a sin.³³ The various rituals accompanying the knight's fitting in, as well as the concepts of God's peace, asylum, and a just war were to tame the class of warriors, limit violence and injustice, and protect the vulnerable and most exposed to lawlessness.

Thus, the church showed the example of a noble warrior, knight, and protector of women, children, widows, and orphans. The conditions proclaimed by the Church for a just war, the preservation of God's peace, and the observance of truce and holy times and places were intended to mitigate as much as possible the effects of numerous wars and to reduce the number of private wars. One of the most important demands was to avoid unnecessary violence, atrocities,

³¹ Flori, F. *Rycerstwo w średniowiecznej Francji*, translated by A. Kuryś, Warsaw, 1999, pp. 112–116.

³² Barber, R. *Rycerze i rycerskość*, translated by J. Kozłowski, Warsaw, 2000, p. 269.

³³ Aumann, J. *Zarys historii duchowości*, translated by J. Machniak, Kielce, 1993, p. 137.

repression, and looting; this demand was to protect civilians, especially women, the elderly, children, widows, and nuns, as well as other non-combatants, namely clergy, hermits, pilgrims, merchants, shepherds, farmers, and their goods. The rules of knightly orders, established during the Crusades, also contributed to the civilisation of the warrior class. Such values of the knightly ethos as honour, pride, and courage were enriched with tenacity and discipline, and above all with values that had an evangelical basis: modesty, humility, obedience, and piety.³⁴

The lack of respect for life can be regarded as one of the fundamental differences between the Japanese society shown in samurai films and the Western culture shaped by Christianity.

Fighting, which has always involved some kind of evil, including the greatest evil – murder – has not been understood by the Church as a way of achieving perfection and salvation. In antiquity, the Church advised the faithful against professional military service, because this profession could be associated with killing.³⁵ The message of the Gospel shows the vision of salvation as a gift and, at the same time, as a task that requires an appropriate moral condition, a specific way of dealing with emergencies and everyday life. The teaching of the Church strongly emphasises that only good can build and be a creative force in mankind, our hearts and consciences, while evil is always destructive and leaves deep wounds

³⁴ Cf. Contamine, P. *Wojna w średniowieczu*, translated by M. Czajka, Warsaw, 1999, pp. 274, 279–293; Barber, R. *Rycerze i rycerskość*, translated by J. Kozłowski, Warsaw, 2000, pp. 268–270; Flori, J. op. cit., pp. 102–103; Kusiak, F. *Rycerze średniowiecznej Europy łacińskiej*, Warsaw, 2002, pp. 10–13, 46–49, 71; Sire, H. J. A. *Kawalerowie maltańscy*, translated by H. Szczerkowska, Warsaw, 2000, pp. 34–35; Bordonove, G. *Życie codzienne zakonu templariuszy*, translated by A. Loba and M. Loba, Poznań, 1998, p. 34; Militzer, K. *Historia zakonu krzyżackiego*, translated by E. Marszał and J. Zakrzewski, Krakow, 2007, pp. 14–17; Ossowska, M. *Ethos rycerski i jego odmiany*, Warsaw, 1973, p. 99.

³⁵ Hamman, A. G. *Życie codzienne pierwszych chrześcijan*, translated by A. Guryn and U. Sudolska, Warsaw, 1990, p. 75.

in the human soul. Therefore, Christianity opposes the vision of necessary evil and the principle that the goal sanctifies the means. For Christianity, killing as an illustration of its own perfection is not only a caricature of goodness, but above all, it is against the precept of the Decalogue.³⁶

The lack of respect for life can be regarded as one of the fundamental differences between the Japanese society shown in samurai films and the Western culture shaped by Christianity. In the face of the phenomenon of violence, the Church has preached the doctrine of necessary defence and just war. It instilled in its rulers a sense of responsibility for the countries and people entrusted to them, and it stressed the importance of justice and the need to protect the weak.³⁷ In the hierarchy of knightly virtues it emphasised the importance of honour, but not as the most important value, for this has always been salvation and love of one's neighbour.

The feudal order, obedience to a feudal lord and even to a king, was not absolute by nature either, but was the consequence of a particular worldview in which the commandments of the Decalogue and the ideals of the Gospel were fundamental, overarching values. In the face of the wickedness of their actions, the rulers of their subjects could declare their obedience to him. The Church taught kings and princes sensitivity of conscience, called for the observance of God's laws, and proclaimed responsibility to the Creator and Saviour for their conduct and rules.³⁸

The hierarchical social structure formed over the centuries in Western civilisation affirmed the class of warriors. However, Christianity also emphasised the value of all honest work in its spiritual dimension; in a system of feudal submission and coercion, it tried to weaken oppression and severity and defended the dignity of every human being.³⁹

One of the most frequent motifs in samurai films is revenge. Christianity, on the other hand, aware that every evil can result in another evil, rejected vengeance as a motive for human behaviour; it even extended the call for loving one's neighbour to one's enemies and preached the principle of overcoming evil with

³⁶ Wj 20, 13.

³⁷ *O dwunastu stopniach nadużyć*, translated by S. Bełch, London, 1996, pp. 51–53.

³⁸ Łęcicki, G. *Światło Ewangelii. Wpływ Kościoła oraz chrześcijaństwa na rozmaite dziedziny życia, kultury i cywilizacji*, Warsaw, 1999, pp. 98–105.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 72, 76–77.

good.⁴⁰ The commandment to love one's neighbour has resulted in the formation of a mentality and morality that affirms the idea of mercy, pity, and forgiveness, especially towards sinners, who repent their evil deeds.⁴¹

Duels are an extremely spectacular element in all samurai films. Impressive battle scenes, the poignant swish of a sword, and the original art of fencing create dynamic, expressive, and suggestive images. In this context, the Church's struggle to ensure that fighting, and thus violence, is not a way to settle disputes should be emphasised. The Church has consistently condemned duels and imposed sanctions on those taking part in them.⁴² In medieval Europe, the testimony and demonstration of knightly skills were tournaments, which evolved into courtly spectacles. The Church condemned the tournament battles, as they were associated with fatal accidents and distracted knights from participating in crusades.⁴³ The Church's preaching of respect and sanctity of life also prohibited suicide.⁴⁴ The ritual suicide of samurai – *harakiri* or *seppuku* – is therefore foreign to Western culture and ethics.⁴⁵

Christian education has always aimed to educate the good and the righteous; the overriding value of love of one's neighbour excluded and condemned the deliberate formation of sinful and evil behaviour. The Church has called for the imitation of Christ, moral perfection, mercy, and generosity – even towards wrong-doers.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Cf. Prz 25,21; Matthew 5:38–48; Romans 12: 19–21; "Zemsta." *Encyklopedia biblijna*, translated by zb, edited by P. J. Achtemeier, Warsaw, 1999, p. 1371.

⁴¹ Cf. Delumeau, J. *Wyznanie i przebaczenie. Historia spowiedzi*, translated by M. Ochab, Gdańsk, 1997, pp. 17–20; "Miłosierdzie." *Słownik teologii biblijnej*, translated by K. Romaniuk, edited by X. Leon-Dufour, pp. 482–483.

⁴² Woods, T. E. *Jak Kościół katolicki zbudował zachodnią cywilizację*, translated by G. Kucharczyk, Krakow, 2006, pp. 220–222.

⁴³ Brzustowicz, B. W. *Turniej rycerski w Królestwie Polskim w późnym średniowieczu i renesansie na tle europejskim*, Warsaw, 2003, pp. 70, 77–78, 139–146.

⁴⁴ Woods, T. E. op. cit., pp. 218–219.

⁴⁵ Frederic, L. *Życie codzienne w Japonii u progu nowoczesności 1868 -1912*, translated by E. Bąkowska, Warsaw, 1988, pp. 145–146.

⁴⁶ Cf. Luke 6:27–38; Sikorski, T., and Zubierbier, A. "Miłość." *Słownik teologiczny*, edited by A. Zuberbier, Katowice, 1998, p. 293; Vauchez, A. *Duchowość średniowiecza*, translated by H. Zaremska, Gdańsk, 1996, p. 126–27; Idem. "Święty." *Człowiek średniowiecza*, translated by M. Radożycka-Paoletti, edited by J. Le Goff, Warsaw–Gdańsk, 1996, pp. 407–409.

Christianity, by proclaiming equal dignity for both sexes,⁴⁷ has shaped a new female ideal. The cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as the perfect model of piety, motherhood, and mercy, had the greatest influence on the formation of the medieval ideal of a Christian woman. Imitating the heroic trust in God, the boundless maternal love of Mary to her Son, and emphasising her qualities as Comforter and Guardian, influenced the profile of both the folk religiousness and the piety of women from higher social strata and ruling families.⁴⁸ The ideal of a good, right-wing, merciful woman therefore ruled out vengeance and killing as a motive for behaviour. The pattern of friendship formed in Western civilisation emphasised mutual help, solidarity, and trust;⁴⁹ it therefore ruled out murdering one's friends.

These Christian values are in clear contrast to many of the ideas contained in samurai films. It should be stressed, however, that this type of media message does not fully reflect the historical truth. Contrary to reality, in samurai films, religious elements appear sporadically and rather marginally, while the truth about samurai religiousness is deeper and more complex; inflicting death was not an act of indifference; even tempered samurai became monks to pray for their victims; the cult of the dead and the pursuit of unity and harmony with nature were an important factor in samurai piety.⁵⁰

In samurai films, however, one can also find intuitions and images close to the Western, Christian understanding of spiritual reality. The inner bondage to evil or the pride shown in *The Sword of Doom* are not far from the reality known to the Church. The ideals of helping the weak and the oppressed, defending order and justice – presented in the films *The Seven Samurai*, *Sanjuro*, and *The Guard* – are consistent with the demands placed on Christian knights. Film stories about Lady Snowblood and Azumi are very different from the educational and moral demands of Christianity and contradict the ideal of femininity proclaimed by the Church. The most significant difference, however, is the relationship to life; the lack of respect for life, as clearly shown in the films about Musashi and Zatoichi,

⁴⁷ Galatians 3:28.

⁴⁸ Rajman, J. "Kobieta." *Encyklopedia średniowiecza*, Krakow, 2006, p. 493; Idem. *Maria, Najświętsza Maria Panna, Matka Boża*, p. 613.

⁴⁹ Ozorowski, E. "Przyjaźń." *Słownik podstawowych pojęć teologicznych*, Warsaw, 2007, pp. 231–232.

⁵⁰ Cf. Frederic, L. *Życie codzienne w Japonii w epoce samurajów 1185-1603*, translated by E. Bąkowska, Warsaw, 1971, p. 135; Śpiewakowski, A. op. cit., p. 14.

may be due to the belief in the repetition of lives that contradicts the Christian doctrine of the one-off nature of human life.

Christianism interprets human life and conduct in an eschatological perspective; it shows humanity's personal responsibility to God for the way we live our temporal existence.⁵¹ The vision of death, judgment, eternal salvation, or condemnation has had a significant impact on the understanding of death. Since ancient times, the Church has called on the faithful to prepare for the end of the earthly pilgrimage and prayed for a sudden and unexpected death that would make reconciliation with God and neighbour impossible; the Christian *ars moriendi* taught responsibility and living death with dignity as a transition to a new life.⁵²

An analysis of the various images of death presented in samurai films reveals significant differences in worldview, morality, and mentality from the hierarchy of values formed in Western culture under the influence of Christianity. These differences may seem less and less clear, however, because in the current era of a globalised media message there has been a departure from the traditional morality shaped by Christianity.⁵³

About the autor

Grzegorz Łęcicki – born in 1958 in Warsaw. He holds a PhD in theology and is a press and radio journalist, an academic teacher teaching journalism at the Institute of Media Education and Journalism at the Faculty of Theology of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University and the Warsaw School of Humanities named after him. He is the author of over 10 books, including 5 on the life and ministry of the Holy Father John Paul II, biographies of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Father Zdzisław Peszkowski, Bolesław Prus, and, recently, "*Wyjątkowy poradnik szczęścia małżeńskiego*" [An Exceptional Guide to Marital Happiness].

⁵¹ *Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego*, pp. 1006, 1013–1014, 1021–1035, Poznań 2002, pp. 251, 253–258.

⁵² A. Adamski points out that death is not the end of a person's story, whether an atheist or a believer. For an atheist, the recording of their image, for example on a photograph (or film), is a way to survive in human hearts and memory. From the point of view of a Christian, at the moment of death, a person's story passes into another dimension – the eternal "now" and the way of cognition, which does not need to refer to the senses ("Fotoreportaż jako forma narracji." *Mistrzowie literatury czy dziennikarstwa?*, edited by K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, W. Furman, and J. Snopek, Warsaw, 2011, pp. 147–148.

⁵³ Peeters, M. A. *Globalizacja zachodniej rewolucji kulturowej. Kluczowe pojęcia, mechanizmy działania*, translated by G. Grygiel, Warsaw, 2010, pp. 41–43.