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Personal Development of the Biblical Nicodemus in the Light of Kazimierz Dąbrowski’s Theory of Positive Disintegration

Abstract: In this article, the author undertakes to analyse three passages of the Fourth Gospel (John 3:1–21; 7:45–53; 19:38–42), mentioning Nicodemus, who belonged to the party of the Pharisees and is mainly known for his encounter with Jesus in the secrecy of the night. Based on these three passages, in which the behaviour and utterances of the biblical protagonist can be observed, an attempt is made to determine the level of Nicodemus’ development as well as to trace the path of his personal growth in the context of the assumptions of the theory of positive disintegration, created by the Polish psychiatrist and psychologist Kazimierz Dąbrowski.

Keywords: positive disintegration, Nicodemus, personal development, Gospel of John, Gestalt psychology, Kazimierz Dąbrowski

Introduction

As defined by the World Health Organization, mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”¹ Lack of mental health limits a person’s ability to function fully and freely in society, and at the same time, it causes great suffering. Among many theories of mental health, the concept of the Polish psychiatrist and psychologist Kazimierz Dąbrowski (1902–1980), which he called the theory of “positive disintegration,” is worth noticing.

¹ World Health Organization, *Promoting mental health*.

Professor Dąbrowski should be considered an extraordinary and enlightened figure, and his thought is still relevant today. Being a psychologist, educator, psychoanalyst, sociologist, Polish language scholar, philosopher, and physician, Dąbrowski gained education both in Poland (the University of Lublin, the University of Poznań and Warsaw University) and abroad (at the University of Vienna, the University of Geneva, the University of Baltimore or Harvard). In his clinical research, he proposed to distinguish diseases based on disorders (neuroses, obsessions, psychoneuroses) from crises that closely resemble disorders, which, however, when properly experienced, lead to reaching a higher stage of development, thus shaping the person's identity and personality. According to the theory of positive disintegration, identity and personality should be considered values that determine the meaning and purpose of life, and achieving this goal is possible thanks to the strength of the will and determination despite various inner uncertainties, crises of life and instability experienced by an individual.

Based on Dąbrowski's proposals, a question arises: can his theory be applied to the characters portrayed in the Bible? Is it possible to observe personal developments of New Testament characters who often experience crises, as was the case with the apostles Peter and Judas? Such questions emerge at the interface of two fields: biblical studies and psychology. The issue of a psychological approach to the biblical text was officially considered by members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its document entitled "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," published in 1993. In the section "Methods and Approaches for Interpretation," the documents states that "psychology and theology continue their mutual dialogue" but "the dialogue between exegesis and psychology or psychoanalysis, begun with a view to a better understanding of the Bible, should clearly be conducted in a critical manner, respecting the boundaries of each discipline."² At the same time, it was noted

² Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," I, D, 3. J. Harold Ellens ("Bible and Psychology," 198–207) presents criteria and principles whose application should safeguard scholars from methodological abuses in their research bordering on the Bible and psychology. In his opinion, all possible

that psychological studies “do bring a certain enrichment to biblical exegesis” and “lead to a multidimensional understanding of Scripture.”³ The present attempt to read the behaviour of biblical characters considering the psychological aspect is in line with what is today called *social-scientific criticism*.⁴

In the context of specific biblical characters, some steps towards recognizing the interdependence between biblical studies and psychology have already been made.⁵ However, the figure of Nicodemus has not been analysed from the perspective of the theory of positive disintegration, which would include an analysis of his personal crisis leading to his personal development.⁶ This is what I intend to do referring to the suggestions proposed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. My aim has been to: (1) present the basic assumptions of Dąbrowski’s theory of positive disintegration, and (2) interpret Nicodemus’ attitudes, mentioned in the Fourth Gospel, in the light of these suggestions; this will allow me to show, at least in outline,

literary and psychological tools should be used in textual analyses of biblical literature so that texts are properly interpreted and understood. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Kille, “Psychology and the Bible,” 127–132.

³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” I, D, 3. Cf. Hareźga, “Znaczenie dokumentu,” 40–41. It is noteworthy that early Christian writers included psychological reflections in their commentaries on biblical books. Medieval theologians were also familiar with spiritual analyses that included the complexity of the human psyche. Abuse in this matter was observed in the 20th century, when biblical texts began to be adapted to the assumptions of psychoanalysis proposed by Sigmund S. Freud and Carl G. Jung. Yet, the 1980s were characterized by research that was appropriate from the perspective of the methodology of both fields. Citlak, “Poza psychologię głębi,” 122–123.

⁴ This trend included attempts to analyse and interpret early Christian literature (including the Bible), and more specifically, its social and cultural context with reference to concepts taken over from social sciences. Martin, “Social-Scientific Criticism,” 125. See also Elliott, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?*, 138–74; Elliott, “Social-Scientific Criticism,” 1–10.

⁵ It is impossible to list all works in this field. Consider, for example, Callan, *Psychological Perspectives*; Dolto – Séverin, *The Jesus of Psychoanalysis*; Halperin, *Seeking Ezekiel*; Sanford, *King Saul*; Zelig, *Moses*; Martins – Martins – Martins – Ribas – Santos, “Borderline.”

⁶ The figure of Nicodemus is discussed by Whitenton, who applied a blending-based approach, see Whitenton “Toward a Blending-Based Approach,” 498–529.

the path of his development, including his relationship with Jesus. My considerations will end with (3) conclusions, which will recall the most important moments of Nicodemus' development.

Moreover, editorial issues of the Fourth Gospel that consider the process of possible shaping of the narrative about Nicodemus in the post-paschal community will be omitted in this study. Consequently, the final form of the Gospel as an inspired text transmitted to the community of the Johannine Church will be in focus. Nevertheless, while recognizing the historicity of John's Gospel, it is assumed that the biblical narratives about Nicodemus constitute objective descriptions of his actual transformations. Theological problems presented in the Gospel passages about Nicodemus will support our analyses and conclusions that may rightly seem incomplete due to the scarce biblical narratives about this figure. Thus, our research should not be treated as obligatory but rather as an attempt or proposal to understand the biblical Nicodemus' attitudes through the lens of Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory.

1. An Outline of the Theory of Positive Disintegration

In the context of the positive shade of the term "integration," disintegration⁷ seems to refer to something negative because of its negative prefix. Therefore, the very term "disintegration" becomes the opposite of integration.⁸ Since integration should be considered a process of combining elements into a specific whole, disintegration should be perceived as "separation." Dąbrowski used this term in the context of "breaking down," "disintegration" of something already existing, ultimately leading to something positive: development, which should be considered a good thing being brought about. Thus, it

⁷ He introduced this term in his works on the psychological foundations of suicide and developed this issue in his doctoral dissertation, see Dąbrowski, *Les conditions psychologiques*.

⁸ Before Dąbrowski, the terms "integration" and "disintegration" were used by the French scholar René Descartes, the philosopher Herbert Spencer, the neurologist John Hughlings Jackson, the bacteriologist and pathologist Charles Sherrington or the physiologist Ivan Pavlov. See Maj, "O rozumieniu reguł," 177.

seems that specifying this concept as “positive” ultimately gives the term “disintegration” a positive meaning.⁹ Dąbrowski’s positive disintegration should be recognised as a concept of mental health, a process leading to personality development and personal identity. Multidimensional and multilevel development observed in the structure of reality should be considered fundamental to his theory. Based on that, Dąbrowski postulates multilevelness, consisting in forming an inner mental structure, experience and knowledge in people functioning in a multilevel reality (internal and external) and developing through their experiences of disintegration processes.¹⁰ Dąbrowski draws attention to the developmental potential that contains three sets of factors that control development: (I) innate constitutional and biological potentialities of the organism; (II) external environment with its social and cultural influences, and (III) autonomy and authenticity, which are formed in the individual as a result of the first two factors. However, he excludes direct influences of both biological and environmental factors on the individual.¹¹ The existence of the autonomous factor that enables the individual to make authentic choices (including the need to deny some part of yourself) leads to a significant breakthrough in personal life.¹² Dąbrowski focuses on the third factor, which he defines as conscious choices of certain values in the individual’s internal and external environment.

In the course of development, individuals give up certain tendencies that they do not accept in order to develop more valuable forms of thinking and acting. Then the dependence on the opinions of the external environment decreases to a minimum and even disappears completely, and this also testifies to the process of personal maturing. This factor manifests itself in the need to move to higher levels of development, in creative talents, tendencies to achieve perfection, self-awareness, self-determination and self-education. It

⁹ Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 11.

¹⁰ Chojnowski, *Pedagogiczne implikacje*, 46–47.

¹¹ Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 42; Dąbrowski, *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia*, 56–57.

¹² Branicki, “Autentyczność osobowa,” 131.

appears relatively rarely in one-level disintegration, but it is often observed in multilevel disintegration.

This factor “judges, approves and rejects, selects and affirms certain external and internal values.”¹³ The developmental potential takes shape while forming “an internal environment” in the individual’s mental structure, which, under the influence of internal stimuli, transforms the action that initially began in the external sphere.¹⁴ This process should be treated as freeing individuals from biological, social and psychological influences, which ultimately causes a turning in their development. Therefore, there emerges a foundation needed for the creation of the “third factor,”¹⁵ which should be considered crucial for understanding the theory of positive disintegration because it determines the proper personality development and personal identity.

Dąbrowski distinguished five levels in the process of positive disintegration, beginning with primary integration, through three levels of disintegration, which should lead to secondary integration. At this point, it is worth specifying that the levels of disintegration, involving as many as three stages, based on inner struggle, should be considered as an opportunity for an individual to go beyond the state of psychic trauma. It is therefore appropriate to briefly present the meaning of these levels of development.

Primary integration – the first level of development, should be considered a structure with the lowest level of development. Individuals on this level are influenced by their unstable drives. They are characterized by low emotional sensitivity, insensitivity to the suffering of others and indifference to the death of persons close to them. They are not capable of having inner conflicts, although such conflicts may occur only to a very small extent.¹⁶ According to Dąbrowski, primary integration mostly characterizes individuals who can be described as “average/common.” This

¹³ Dąbrowski, *Osobowość*, 100–105; Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 42–47; Dąbrowski, *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia*, 161–162.

¹⁴ Dąbrowski, *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia*, 56.

¹⁵ Tylikowska, “Teoria dezintegracji pozytywnej,” 236.

¹⁶ Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 9.

group also includes psychopathic individuals and those who are at the border of normality and psychopathy.¹⁷

On the second level of development (after primary integration), one can observe an initial loosening of the individual's internal structure, and Dąbrowski calls this process "one-level disintegration." It can be initiated by external factors (changeable feelings and events causing injury or disease process) and internal factors (normative conflicts and one's own psychophysical characteristics), ultimately leading to the development of "an internal environment."¹⁸ According to Dąbrowski, this disintegration is observed in developmental crises, when individuals must make choices in external situations that are uncomfortable for them.¹⁹ Importantly, on this level, the factor of autonomy and authenticity ("third factor") is not yet observed, and ultimately, individuals quickly return to the patterns of primary integration.²⁰ In Dąbrowski's opinion, a significant part of society reaches one-level disintegration, i.e. their highest level, and this may be surprising.²¹

The third level of development is spontaneous multilevel disintegration, characterized by extensive differentiation of mental structures and impulsivity. However, Dąbrowski notes that individuals on this level are capable to be astonished with themselves and the surrounding world, show disquietude with themselves, dissatisfaction with themselves, feelings of inferiority towards themselves, shame and guilt and positive maladjustment. One can also observe their creative actions and predispositions to move to a higher level of development. The mental construct is characterized by the formation of a "third factor." Thus, individuals are capable of self-assessment and self-reflection, leading to discovering a hierarchy of values.²² An ideal personality is also formed.

¹⁷ Dąbrowski, *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia*, 53.

¹⁸ Tylikowska, "Teoria dezintegracji," 242.

¹⁹ Dąbrowski, *Osobowość*, 51–54.

²⁰ Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 13.

²¹ Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 10.

²² Dąbrowski, *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia*, 54; Tylikowska, "Teoria dezintegracji pozytywnej," 244–245.

A higher level of development is organized multilevel disintegration (the fourth level). Autonomous and self-reflective actions and a developed hierarchy of aims and values reduce tensions and conflicts previously experienced by individuals. On this level of development, individuals are characterised by a high level of empathy,²³ self-awareness, self-control, creative dynamism, and inner psychic transformation,²⁴ which ultimately leads to self-perfection.

The fifth level of development, on which a new consolidation of mental structures can be observed is secondary integration. According to Dąbrowski, secondary integration can be “realized in many ways; (I) a return to the former forms of integration in a more perfect form, (II) a transition to a new form of integration, but with the same primitive elements of structure without a higher hierarchy of values and aims, or (III) a transition to a new structural form with a new, higher hierarchy of values.”²⁵ On the last, fifth level of development, Dąbrowski assigns a fundamental role to the “third factor,” which is fully formed only in secondary integration. Although the factor of autonomy and authenticity²⁶ is created considering both biological elements as well as social and cultural influences, it is not their exact reflections. Thanks to this factor, individuals are capable to choose those aspects that prove to be beneficial for their development, transforming or negating

²³ Dąbrowski writes that empathy “enables us to look at a person not as an enemy, but as someone who, if he or she does something wrong, he probably does it because of inherited factors, environmental influences and a low level of consciousness. Empathy allows us to adopt an attitude of supra-personal understanding towards such a person” (*Trud istnienia*, 87). Branicki adds that “above all empathy means understanding oneself, and thus those who have developed this function, being aware of the deterministic tragedies of some of their decisions and actions, can bear the responsibility that results from them” (“Autentyczność osobowa,” 132).

²⁴ Dąbrowski, *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia*, 55. Cf. Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 46.

²⁵ Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 27–28.

²⁶ The concept of autonomy should not be understood as independence or inner struggle, but as the ability to become independent from lower levels and submit to higher values. Authenticity, on the other hand, should be understood as compatibility of behaviour in accordance with the declared values. Zabłocka-Skupieńska, “Człowiek skazany na rozwój,” 67.

those aspects that are unwanted.²⁷ It should also be noted that only on this level of integration, with particular emphasis on the third factor, can we talk about a properly formed personal identity and personality. Further development is therefore possible thanks to the pattern known as our ideal of personality, which develops on the basis of two qualities of the human essence: the individual and the social. The first quality concerns aptitudes and sincere interests, enabling individuals to create lasting bonds of love and friendship. The second quality refers to the community in which individuals are functioning.²⁸ Personality should be considered a structure relating to the mental sphere, which is formed on the highest level of personal development. In this case, it is necessary to develop both individual and social qualities of the human essence, which is equivalent to identity in the conceptual aspect.²⁹

Dąbrowski developed his five levels of mental development based on his clinical research, observing chronic cases, analysing his patients' autobiographies as well as biographies of individuals whom he considered outstanding.³⁰ At this point, he indicated that he had adopted "the assumption of multilevelness of emotional and instinctive functions, and thus multilevelness of values."³¹ It is worth noting that achieving higher levels is spread over time and is a difficult process, culminating in the replacement of a lower structure with a structure from a higher level.³² Therefore, the question arises about the advisability of analysing the aforementioned levels of integration and disintegration. According to Dąbrowski, the process of transformation that individuals experience by observing what is happening to them is supposed to lead them to conscious decisions taken in accordance with developed moral norms. Consequently, it is necessary to truly know oneself, which Dąbrowski defines as "using experience and

²⁷ Dąbrowski, *Osobowość*, 103–104.

²⁸ Dąbrowski, *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia*, 55–56.

²⁹ Tylikowska, "Teoria dezintegracji pozytywnej," 239.

³⁰ Examples of developments of historical personalities can be found in Dąbrowski, *Osobowość*, 181–226.

³¹ Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 55.

³² Dąbrowski, *Elementy filozofii rozwoju*, 30.

thinking to evaluate what is not ‘me in me,’ and what is already beginning to be me, although it is not yet consolidated, as well as what it should be me, even though it is not me yet, but what I am striving for with persistence of my will, thinking, silence of contemplation and everyday effort.”³³

2. Positive Disintegration versus Nicodemus’ Personal Development

Bearing in mind what was presented above in the context of the theory of positive disintegration, we now intend to discuss the figure Nicodemus, a protagonist depicted in three biblical passages only in the Fourth Gospel (John 3:1–21; 7:45–53; 19:38–42). Therefore, the question arises whether Nicodemus’ personal development can be seen in the selective history of this character in the Gospel of John, taking into consideration the assumptions of Dąbrowski’s theory. The answer to this question will be provided based on the analysis of three passages mentioning Nicodemus.

John 3:1–21

The reader meets Nicodemus in the “Book of Signs” (John 1–12). A closer context for the mysterious conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus is the Passover festival, mentioned by the Evangelist (John 2:23). According to the Johannine Gospel, Nicodemus belonged to the Pharisees, and moreover, was called “a leader of the Jews” (John 3:1: ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων) – he must have been a scribe, and it was this group that cared for the development of education and judicial system in Israel at that time.³⁴ This brief but factual presentation of Nicodemus becomes a clear indication that we are dealing with an educated man, expert in his field, and a kind

³³ Dąbrowski, *Trud istnienia*, 77.

³⁴ Rosik, *Judaizm*, 165–169. Barnabas Lindars (*The Gospel of John*, 148–149) notes that in the time of Jesus, all “leaders” belonged to the Pharisees. The Pharisees, including the biblical Nicodemus, in the Fourth Gospel are depicted in detail in Doberenz, “Ambiguity Among the Pharisees,” 68–89.

of authority for the society of that time.³⁵ Referring this information to Dąbrowski's theory, we can state that Nicodemus could be characterised with developmental potential as the most important drive in positive development. The Evangelist's short note about Nicodemus allows us to conclude that Nicodemus achieved a lot. He was a scribe and a teacher of the Torah. Considering the office he held, his opinions were taken into account. Personal development *de facto* depends on this potential. According to Dąbrowski, the developmental potential is considered to be a specific hereditary feature, determined on the basis of abilities, talents, excitability and autonomous factors.³⁶

Nicodemus decided to meet Jesus. His desire could have been caused by his keen interest in the person of Jesus, about whom he had probably heard a lot; he had also witnessed the signs Jesus performed.³⁷ However, the Evangelist clearly writes that Nicodemus "came to Jesus by night" (John 3:1: ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτός). In the Fourth Gospel, the puns "light–darkness" and "day–night" are significant. Night and darkness are symbols of evil, deception and ignorance. Considering the theology of the Fourth Evangelist, we can refer to the rabbinic traditions according to which the secrecy of the night was considered the best time to study the Torah.³⁸ So Nicodemus would come to Jesus who in this Gospel is depicted as the New Torah.³⁹ Coming to Jesus by night, Nicodemus symbolically moves from darkness to light who is Jesus (cf. John 8:12). His visit in the secrecy of the night could really have been caused

³⁵ Jonge, "Nicodemus and Jesus," 338.

³⁶ Chojnowski, *Pedagogiczne implikacje*, 38–39.

³⁷ Lincoln, *John*, 484. Beginning his conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus said, "Rabbi, we know (οἶδαμεν, *oidamen*) that you are a teacher who has come from God." The plural form used by Nicodemus – "we know" – suggests a reference to John 2:23, where the Evangelist indicates that many believed in Jesus' name because they saw the signs that he was doing. In Stanisław Mędala's opinion (*Ewangelia*, I, 417), this beginning of faith is important for the Johannine theology. However, we must move on and recognize the significance of these events and understand the mystery of revelation. Declarations and confessions alone are not sufficient.

³⁸ Mędala, *Ewangelia*, I, 416; Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 536.

³⁹ Lioy, *Jesus as Torah*, 88–94.

by his fears of the Jews and their reactions to such a meeting, as well as the penalty of exclusion from the synagogue community (cf. John 12:42–43).⁴⁰ Roberto Vignolo recalls other possible motives for Nicodemus' decision, explaining his arrival at night. They include Nicodemus' desire to have an undisturbed, quiet conversation with Jesus or to maintain its mysterious character.⁴¹ However, it seems that his fear caused by the threat from the Jewish party should be considered the first premise for the decision to make a visit by night, which is in fact a search for the truth and the moment of unmasking our hero. This detail becomes understandable only in the context of the entire pericope.⁴² There is no reason not to state – and this would even be consistent with John's symbolism – that in this passage, we also see Nicodemus' inner dark night. In addition to his inner fears, this condition is also evidenced by possible tensions he could have experienced as a result of the said fear and his initial rigid attitude. In this image, Nicodemus is still far from confessing true faith in Christ. Benedikt Schwank says that Nicodemus is “ein innerlich schwacher, äußerlich allerdings angesehener.”⁴³ After all, Nicodemus' behaviour is full of contrast: he comes to Jesus, but he does it by night. The immaturity of his faith is hidden in the shadow of this night.⁴⁴

The reader does not receive direct information about the spiritual condition of this biblical hero. Nicodemus seems to be uncertain and fearful in the decisions he made, as evidenced by his hiding under the cover of the night. Jesus' presence in Jerusalem could have forced him to self-reflect and ask questions about the presence of the announced Messiah in Israel.

It can hypothetically be assumed that the reader meets Nicodemus at his stage of multilevel spontaneous disintegration (the third level of development). Nicodemus might have already entered the initial phase of wanting to change, taking his fate into his own hands; after

⁴⁰ Hakola, “The Burden of Ambiguity,” 440.

⁴¹ Vignolo, *Personaggi*, 105.

⁴² Lindars, *John*, 149.

⁴³ Schwank, *Evangelium nach Johannes*, 100.

⁴⁴ Vignolo, *Personaggi*, 105–106.

all, he decided to come to Jesus. Nevertheless, he seemed to be in suspension between his functioning and lifestyle as a scribe and his inner need to change this status and thus reaching a higher level of development and relationship with YHWH. Dąbrowski defines such a period “layered disintegration,” using Søren Kierkegaard’s “fear and trembling.” An individual experiencing a kind of crisis finds no support in primitive impulses, social principles or a higher level of development. This period is associated with the experience of spiritual emptiness, self-isolation, and thus loneliness and misunderstanding. During this “passion of the night,” the meaning of present life seems to have no value, and it is then that the dispositional and driving centre prevents the individual from returning to lower levels, pushing him towards personality development.⁴⁵ Nicodemus’ decision to come to Jesus, despite the possible consequences of exclusion from the synagogue community, may also indicate the development of an autonomic “third factor” in him, a factor on which Dąbrowski placed great emphasis.

In the Evangelist’s account, Nicodemus begins his conversation with Jesus, but the latter imposes the topic of being “born of water and the Spirit.” The Pharisee’s questions show that Nicodemus does not understand what the Teacher is saying. Nicodemus seems to be lost and confused about this topic. He only speaks three times (John 3:2, 4, 9), and after his third utterance, i.e. his second question directed at Jesus,⁴⁶ Jesus responds asking him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10). Nicodemus does not answer this question and remains silent till the end of the scene. Jesus seems to have hit a nerve with Nicodemus, sarcastically referring to the authority he had as a Jewish leader and to the knowledge he should have as a scribe and Pharisee.⁴⁷ Silvano Fausti comments on Jesus’ reproach, “An expert in Scripture should know that the Spirit, the source of creation, is the great promise of the Prophets for the time of renewal. However, it is possible

⁴⁵ Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 50–51.

⁴⁶ At this point, Vingolo (*Personaggi*, 113) imagines the hushed voice of Nicodemus, testifying to his total loss in the content he hears from Jesus.

⁴⁷ Brown, *John (I–XII)*, 144; Lindars, *John*, 154.

to know the Law and not know what spirit animates it; one can keep all the commandments and neglect love, which is the commandment par excellence. For love is known not by those who strive to love to the point of suffering, but by those who calmly accept that they are loved.”⁴⁸ Our hero will have to wait for this experience of unconditional acceptance. Later, addressing Nicodemus as a representative of the Jewish elite, Jesus reproaches him for the unbelief of the Jews, and then announces salvation, which will be achieved through the exaltation of the Son of Man on the cross and the judgment of those who do not come to the light, i.e. Jesus (John 3:11–21).

After this utterance, the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus seems to be suddenly interrupted, as if suspended. The reader does not receive any information about what happened with the hero or how he experienced his meeting and conversation with Jesus.⁴⁹ However, it can be assumed that after Jesus’ ironic reproach, Nicodemus entered a state that Dąbrowski calls an internal conflict. Nicodemus’ interlocutor made him realize that what he devoted his entire life to (studying the Torah, together with the scribes) was insufficient to understand the teaching of being born “from above” (ἄνωθεν).⁵⁰

According to Dąbrowski’s theory, inner conflicts, which can be solved only by those who experience them, mobilize individuals to think, and this in turn leads to disintegration and personal transformation. Moving to a higher level of development causes individuals to have to face their fears, anxiety, and pain. As Dąbrowski noted “developmental crises are essential elements of positive development. A person cannot develop properly without experiencing, becoming aware of and overcoming his creative developmental crises. It can be said that the human development drama usually includes periods of many crises, more or less complicated; detailed consideration of individual elements and specific developmental crises as well as

⁴⁸ Fausti, *Rozważaj i głos Ewangelie*, 76.

⁴⁹ This information is, for example, in the scene of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, who having recognized the Messiah, ran to the city to tell her fellow countrymen about him (John 4:28–30).

⁵⁰ It may be surprising that Nicodemus did not understand Jesus’ teaching; the new birth, or birth from God in the context of new creation, was part of the Judaic tradition. For more on this topic, see Keener, *John*, 542–544.

the inclusion of positive elements, i.e. developmental potential in these crises, constitute an appropriate psychotherapeutic approach.”⁵¹ Conflicts decrease in proportion to the emergence of new mental structures. It turns out that a highly developed person, with his own hierarchy of values, should sometimes cause creative conflicts.⁵² As stated by Dąbrowski, conflicts cannot be clearly assessed negatively as they may become a driving force in positive personal development. In his opinion, non-conflict is caused by a negative compromise that in no way contributes to development.⁵³ “Crisis situations and conflicts that result in a breakdown or even disintegration of the human psyche often lead a person to change his aspirations, discover his inner mental structure and master his primitive drives, which also allows for intensified creative work.”⁵⁴

The Evangelist’s silence about what happened to Nicodemus immediately after his conversation with Jesus seems to be intentional. It can be said that the narrator tried to maintain the intimacy of Nicodemus’ inner struggle, a condition in which only he could help himself. Nicodemus’ experiences of internal conflicts and tensions were intended to help him move to a higher level of development, more mature and integrated.

John 7:45–53

Nicodemus’ reappearance on the Gospel scene, this time during the day, is situated in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles, which is an important factor, probably about eighteen months after his first encounter with Jesus.⁵⁵ The Evangelist shows Jesus teaching

⁵¹ Dąbrowski, “O psychoterapii,” 291.

⁵² Chojnowski, *Pedagogiczne implikacje*, 39.

⁵³ Dąbrowski, “Pozytywny konflikt,” 39–40.

⁵⁴ Chojnowski, *Pedagogiczne implikacje*, 41.

⁵⁵ In the Fourth Gospel, the salvific events revolve around the Passover. This is important from the theological point of view because the author of the Gospel emphasizes the strong connection between the Paschal events and the saving acts performed by Jesus. In the Johannine Gospel, the author mentions three Passover festivals: (1) John 2:13–3:21; (2) John 6 – events before the Passover festival, and (3) John 13–20, around which Jesus’ activity revolved. Nicodemus’ first meeting

in the temple. On the last day of the festival, the great day, Jesus invites those who believe in him to come to him and drink living water – sign of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39). This teaching causes a division in the crowd because of him (John 7:43). Delighted with Jesus' speech, the temple guards refrained from arresting him, for which they were reprimanded by the chief priests and Pharisees. Nicodemus replies with a question to their question directed at the guards, "Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?" (John 7:48). The Evangelist specifies that Nicodemus was the one "who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them" (John 7:50). Referring to the law, Nicodemus proposes to first give Jesus a hearing to find out what he was doing before judging him (John 7:51).

As noted by R. Vignolo,⁵⁶ the fact that Nicodemus made no specific decision and commitment to Jesus may testify to his inner tension. Nevertheless, Nicodemus' courage and public utterance in favour of Jesus should be appreciated. Some commentators negatively evaluate his words as they do not show his direct confession of faith and explicit proclamation of the person of Jesus.⁵⁷ However, we can observe the hero's development. Even if Nicodemus' words in defence of Jesus is not a direct confession of faith, the context of the pericope indicates that Nicodemus is characterised by such faith in Jesus.⁵⁸ In the first scene, Nicodemus had many fears about his encounter with Jesus and the reaction of those around him. Now, in the presence of the members of the ruling council, he officially shows his sympathy for Jesus, expressing his disapproval of their hasty accusation. Ultimately, our hero is humiliated by his interlocutors, who compare him to the Galileans, considered unclean in terms of origin, thus attacking his intellectual sphere and denying

with Jesus took place around the time of the first Passover festival. Considering John 7 and Nicodemus' second reference to the person of Jesus, which was related to the second Passover (John 6) and the Feast of Tabernacles celebrated in the autumn season, the period between the first and second mention of Nicodemus should be considered as 1.5 years.

⁵⁶ Vignolo, *Personaggi*, 118.

⁵⁷ Grochowski, "Nicodemus," 661–663.

⁵⁸ Bassler, "Mixed Signals," 640.

his knowledge of the Law.⁵⁹ Zbigniew Grochowski aptly comments on the words of Nicodemus and his subtle defence of Jesus, “This ‘disciple in *statu crescendi*’ gradually steps out of the shadow to give an intrepid testimony, and adhere to Jesus.”⁶⁰

One may wonder whether Nicodemus’ open statement in defence of Jesus (in the context of the previous visit by night) is not a sign of a higher level of ordering, multilevel spontaneous disintegration (the fourth level of development). On this level, an individual distinguishes between higher and lower values.⁶¹ His inner structure is still being destroyed but he begins defending his aims and values,⁶² and this can clearly be seen in Nicodemus’ attitude, his defence of Jesus. In the context of Dąbrowski’s proposal, inner tensions are still present at this stage, but they are under control, and development aspirations are sublimated. Moreover, the autonomous features of the “third factor” can be observed with even greater intensity, and in this light, Nicodemus’ reaction and his proclamation of the person of Jesus, despite the scribes’ reluctance and insults, become understandable.

John 19:38–42

Finally, the reader meets Nicodemus in the second part of the Gospel, the so-called Book of Glory. Here the Pharisee appears with Joseph of Arimathea, whom the Evangelist calls “a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one” (ὢν μαθητῆς τοῦ Ἰησοῦ κεκρυμμένος).⁶³

⁵⁹ According to Mędala, Jesus’ interlocutors accused him of his Galilee origin (Mędala, *Ewangelia*, I, 655), which cannot be concluded from the question beginning with the Greek particle μή, which requires a negative answer (see John 7:52).

⁶⁰ Grochowski, “Nicodemus,” 652.

⁶¹ Dąbrowski, *Psychoterapia przez rozwój*, 15.

⁶² Dąbrowski, *Trud istnienia*, 50–52.

⁶³ It seems that the mention of Nicodemus in the context of Joseph of Arimathea, the hidden disciple, allows us to see the similarity of both characters in their relationships with Jesus. This is based on the mention of their names, the Evangelist’s information about their relationships with Jesus, similarities in their behaviour (Nicodemus comes by night, Joseph is a hidden disciple), as well as their actions on the day of Jesus’ burial. Grochowski, “Nicodemus,” 653.

Joseph asks Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus, while Nicodemus, mentioned as the one who had at first come to Jesus by night (John 19:39), brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes.⁶⁴ Bearing in mind the Evangelist's numerous references (implicit and explicit) to the Old Testament, we could note that myrrh and aloes (מר ואהלות) occur three times in the Hebrew Bible: Ps 45:9; Song 4:14 and Prov 7:17. Importantly, these terms always refer to living people and in the context of professed love.⁶⁵ The abundance of Nicodemus' gift – a hundred pounds (ὡς λίτρας ἑκατόν), i.e. ca. 32.7 kg⁶⁶ – also testifies to his kindness and appreciation towards Jesus. Attention should also be paid to the preparation of Jesus' body for burial and wrapping it with “the spices,” which the Evangelist describes by using the Greek term ἄρωμα (John 19:40). In the Old Testament and non-biblical texts, this term also refers to kings' funeral ceremonies.⁶⁷ The use of expensive burial linen cloths (the Greek term ὀθόνιον) and the prior preparation of the tomb may also prove that Jesus was buried according to the royal burial custom, as indicated by the Evangelist (John 19:40–41).⁶⁸ This was the burial of Jesus made by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

Nicodemus' manifestation of faith and his presence at the burial of Jesus should be associated with his internal development. This biblical hero seemed to be confident in his decisions, and therefore, in his relationship with the Messiah, Jesus. His attitude was authentic and sincere, and also autonomous because Nicodemus was no longer dependent on the opinions of the Sanhedrin. It

⁶⁴ Some commentators relate the abundance of the spices and the lavishness of the burial to the disbelief of Nicodemus and Joseph in Jesus' resurrection. See Jonge, “Nicodemus,” 343; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 136; Mędala, *Ewangelia*, II, 261.

⁶⁵ Grochowski, “Nicodemus,” 656.

⁶⁶ In the New Testament, the weight of one Roman pound was 327.45 grams. Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, 216.

⁶⁷ Burials of King Asa (2 Chr 16:14), Herod the Great (Josephus, *B.J.* 1.670–671; *Ant.* 17.196–199 – see Josephus, *Jewish War*, 318–319; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 462–463) and Aristobulus III (*Ant.* 15.61 – see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 30–31).

⁶⁸ Grochowski (“Nicodemus,” 659) refers to Maria-Luisa Rigato, who having analysed texts from extra-biblical literature, estimated the price of the linen cloths at between two and five thousand drachmas. Keener (John, II, 1162) only notes that burial in linen cloths was a sign of honourable burials of the righteous.

can be said that by his presence at the deceased Jesus, rejected by the elites of that time and thus by society, Nicodemus chose what he believed would serve his greatest good. He openly sides with Jesus, offering a gesture of friendship and love towards him. “During the first attempts to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus timidly sided with him, appealing to the rule of law (cf. John 7:50–52). Now he can see closely the One he defended. His enemies put him into his hands.”⁶⁹ In the scene of Jesus’ burial, the Evangelist presents Nicodemus as a convert, and following Dąbrowski’s theory, we can ask about the formation of his personality that should “result from the objectification of emotional and drive functions as well as the objectification of values, from a spiritual product of going through a period of difficulties, anxiety, crises, inhibitions, sadness and depression, obsessions, fears and most psychoneuroses on a higher level.”⁷⁰ Despite Nicodemus’ silence throughout the burial, his behaviour may indicate his development that reached the fifth level, which, according to Dąbrowski, is secondary integration.

Given what has been said, Nicodemus’ present during the burial of Jesus is an expression of his faith, now publicly and definitely professed, in the messianic and royal dignity of Jesus and in his continuing reign as the living One. Nicodemus entered the path of discipleship with his first encounter with Jesus (John 3) and from then on, also through the event described in John 7:45–53, he experienced growth in his faith in the Son of God and matured in his new role as a disciple, who had been hidden until then.⁷¹ Ultimately, he became a true disciple who finally found the courage to publicly confess his faith in Jesus, regardless of the reactions of the environment he came from and in which he operated. Based on that, we can speak about Nicodemus in the context of his new personal identity – identity of a disciple of Jesus. According to Dąbrowski’s theory, developing a new organization and harmonization of personality is the final level of personal growth, which in “positive disintegration does not go from personality

⁶⁹ Fausti, *Rozważaj i głoś*, 592.

⁷⁰ Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, 35.

⁷¹ Grochowski, “Nicodemus,” 653.

and identity to personality and identity ideal, but from being *only* a person to being a personality with an identity.”⁷²

Conclusion

Developing his theory of positive disintegration, its basic assumption being personal development through properly experienced crises, Kazimierz Dąbrowski, drew attention to the fact that difficulties and failures were inherent in the life of every individual. However, it depends on specific individuals, on their capabilities and desires, whether these difficulties and crises would lead them to mental dysfunctions or would allow them to rise to a higher level of development. In this study, in addition to presenting Dąbrowski's assumptions of positive disintegration, we demonstrated their validity when analysing the behaviour and attitudes of the biblical Nicodemus, mentioned three times by the Fourth evangelist. Nicodemus was initially full of fears and anxiety, coming in a state of uncertainty to Jesus, whom he became fascinated with. Jesus introduced Nicodemus into an even deeper internal conflict, which ultimately led the scribe to personal development. In the process of working out the personality in his inner self, of which the reader of the Johanne Gospel is not a direct witness, Nicodemus gathered the courage to side with Jesus at the right moment of his personal development, and finally, he took his stand with Jesus on Good Friday, preparing the body of his Master for burial.

As a result, it should be said that Nicodemus discovered a new organisation of identity in himself, becoming no longer a hidden and fearful but a courageous disciple of Jesus, independent of the opinions of the members of the community among whom he had lived so far. Nicodemus met Jesus on his path of life, and after being exposed to testing and challenges, after months of inner struggle, he experienced feelings of fulfilment by paying his last respects to his Christ, about whom Dąbrowski wrote that “gave us the highest models and achievements of human nature, models of its transformation towards the most ideal, and at the same time,

⁷² Tylikowska, “Teoria dezintegracji pozytywnej,” 255.

real direction; through this fact, Christ gave us, as it were, a huge glimpse into the future; in the science of human action, Christ showed a hierarchy of values moving beyond the human nature, and therefore, in general lines, reaching divinity.”⁷³

Rozwój osobowy biblijnego Nikodema w świetle założeń teorii dezintegracji pozytywnej Kazimierza Dąbrowskiego

Abstrakt: W niniejszym artykule autor podejmuje się analizy trzech fragmentów czwartej Ewangelii (J 3,1–21; 7,45–53; 19,38–42), w których wspomniany zostaje należący do stronnictwa faryzeuszów Nikodem, znany przede wszystkim z nocnego spotkania z Jezusem. Na podstawie tych trzech passusów, w których obserwuje się zachowanie i wypowiedzi biblijnego bohatera, zostaje podjęta próba określenia poziomu rozwoju, momentu kryzysu oraz prześledzenia drogi rozwoju osobowego Nikodema w kontekście założeń teorii dezintegracji pozytywnej autorstwa polskiego naukowca prof. Kazimierza Dąbrowskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: dezintegracja pozytywna, Nikodem, rozwój osobowy, Ewangelia Jana, psychologia postaci, Kazimierz Dąbrowski

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⁷³ Dąbrowski, *W poszukiwaniu zdrowia*, 186.

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