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Templeton Prize Lecture by Monsignor Professor Tomáš Halík

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It is with joy, respect, humility, gratitude and, above all, an awareness of responsibility and moral commitment, that I join the family of Templeton Prize winners this evening.

Initially – over 40 years ago – the Templeton Prize was described as an award for “progress in religion”. At that time linking the words “progress” and “religion” must have sounded odd to many people. Many believers believed there was no need for progress in religion because religion should be a guardian and guarantor of firm order in society. Many non-believers believed that religion was not capable of any progress, that secularism was the final word in cultural evolution. One generation later Jürgen Habermas declared that we now live in a post-secular world.

It is an odd world, however. It contains many unexpected surprises for religious and non-religious people alike. Globally speaking the phenomenon of religion is not dying but being transformed. Not only are “new religions” and religious movements being created, but the old religions are being transformed and assuming new political and cultural roles. Where traditional religions are suppressed, secular phenomena themselves become a religion. It is small wonder that many representatives of the old religions and “new atheism” started to panic.

II.

When I first visited Britain almost half a century ago, I arrived from a country whose violently imposed state religion was so-called “scientific atheism”. Not only was religious freedom totally suppressed in the name of the militant ideology of scientific atheism, but so too was freedom of artistic creation and scientific research. I was happy to be allowed to visit Britain, a country with a long tradition of tolerant Christianity – the wise and cheerful Christianity of Chesterton and C.S.Lewis.

Half a century has passed. Buses drive around London with the message “God probably doesn’t exist” on their sides, and the statement that Britain is a Christian country gives rise to heated polemic and protest. No, I’m not seized by panic. I always find efforts to understand others more congenial than calls for cultural wars. In a certain sense I’d be more radical than Mr Dawkins. I am convinced that the God of Dawkins’ atheism – God as a naïve scientific hypothesis – doesn’t probably not exist, it definitely does not exist. It is not the God of my faith, that’s for sure. It is not the God of the faith for whose freedom we fought atheism linked to political power.

No, it is not religion as such, or science, or even the atheistic interpretation of science that causes difficulties, but instead/ people with closed minds who think they need to belittle and insult the beliefs of other people/ in order to propagate their own.

History in our part of the world has shown that atheism is no more immune to the temptations of power than religion. I simply wish that when the “new atheism” will be older and more adult, it will be at least as tolerant as our old European Christianity of today.

III.

But where is our western Christianity today, what form does it take and what is its vision for the future? I am not surprised that statements such as “Britain is a Christian country”, or “Europe is a Christian continent” should cause a storm. On the one hand there are number of historical and sociological arguments in support of them. After all, the secular character of society is itself an offspring of Christianity, and in a certain sense even European atheism is a Christian phenomenon. On the other hand, statements such as “Britain is a Christian country” or “Europe is a Christian continent” are bound to provoke the question: What do you mean by them? And what conclusions do you draw from them? What form of Christianity could help our world be a better place for the lives of all – both Christians and non-Christians, both believers and atheists?

We have witnessed how the power of religious symbols can become a destructive force and source of violence when linked to political interests. Now it is necessary to ask: How can the power of faith be used to create a culture of mutual respect, a civilisation in which difference will not be perceived as a threat but as scope for mutual enrichment. What progress should occur in religion in order for us to enjoy a culture of sharing in place of the fear of clash of civilisations?

What can religions (and specifically Christianity) do to transform the globalisation process into a culture of communication?

IV.

At the time of my first visit to Britain, in the summer of 1968, Russian tanks in my country crushed the Prague Spring's slender hopes of at a least a bit of freedom and democracy. My second visit to Britain was possible only after the fall of the gigantic Soviet empire that was ruled by a combination of old-style Russian imperialism and the ideology of "scientific atheism".

Today not only the countries of central and eastern Europe are watching with great concern the attempts of the Kremlin rulers to resurrect the old empire. The ideology of "scientific atheism" died a long time ago in Russia, but old-style Russian nationalism and imperial dreams are still very much alive. During World War II, Stalin, one of the cruellest persecutors of religion in human history, realised that the Russian people were not prepared to die for the Communist ideology of "scientific atheism" and he tried to use the Orthodox religion and Russian patriotism to save his empire. We now have the spectacle of former KGB agents kissing the icons of Christ and the Mother of God. Will the leaders of the Russian Orthodox church have the moral courage of the Biblical prophets to tell the present Kremlin rulers: You must first drive from your heads and hearts the demons of Dostoyevsky's *Possessed* before bringing your sacrificial gifts to the House of the Lord?

In the light of the dangerous developments in Eastern Europe we must be aware of our responsibility for preserving and enhancing the great project of a united Europe. The strong political integration of Europe is the only protection for the European nations, not only against external dangers but even more so against an explosion of barbarism within, against the extreme nationalism, chauvinism and xenophobia that are once more raising their ugly heads in the countries of Europe.

If the dangerous temptation of national selfishness and isolationism were to triumph in Europe, leading to the tragic collapse of the European Union, the nation states of Europe would not acquire greater sovereignty, but instead would be exposed far more to the forces of chaos and destruction from within.

If the common European home is to be a real home, it cannot be based solely on administration and trade. Culture has a decisive role to play in creating the spiritual and moral biosphere of society. The Communist system in which culture was controlled by ideology was unable to survive in the free global market of ideas. But what will happen to a society whose culture has lost its spiritual dimension and instead is dominated by the commercial entertainments industry?

A crucial role in the emergence of Europe was played by the churches ability to create a culture that combined the message of the Bible with the philosophical wisdom of Greece and the legal system of Rome. But that form of Christianity – Christianitas, “Christendom” – now belongs to the past. Christianity is no longer the common language of Europeans. The Europe of the future will be an even richer polyphony than it has been so far. Christianity today is only one of many voices. Let us not ask whose voice will be stronger in Europe tomorrow, but instead whose will contribute more to a culture of coexistence based on mutual respect and understanding.

Christianity’s central message is that God is love and that the triune God is itself a community of sharing. Belief in a God who is love and community of sharing is not a scientific hypothesis but a moral commitment with obvious cultural and political implications. It is a commitment to accept the plurality of our world and to strive constantly to transform it into a culture of communication, sharing and mutual enrichment.

Christianity does not need to be a flag flying over Europe, but Europe and the world needs people who restore to the word love the profound meaning that it had in the radical message of the Gospel.

V.

Our western Christian culture and its important historical phase of Enlightenment gave rise to the great idea of tolerance.

Tolerance is the secular translation of the Gospel injunction to love one’s enemies. But when religious concepts are translated into secular language and concepts something is usually lost. In order to tolerate an unpleasant neighbour I really don’t need to love him in any sense. It is enough for me to ignore him, since I don’t care about him. We each have our own life, our own style, our own truth.

A certain model of “multiculturalism” based on the principle of tolerance resulted not in a community of citizens, or neighbours, but in a conglomeration of ghettos. “Let everyone live as they like, so long as they don’t disturb or restrict others”. This is certainly a more humane situation than constant quarrels or even permanent warfare, but can it be a lasting solution? That sort of tolerance is fine for people living alongside each other, but not for people living together.

The trouble is/ that our world, the “global village”, has become too cramped for us to live undisturbed like that/ alongside each other. Our numbers have grown, and, whether we like it or not, there are

more and more people who are “different” from us. Our fences are not as far apart as they used to be. We can see into the kitchens and smell the aroma of exotic soups from the dining rooms of those others. We can’t ignore family rows of which we had no inkling before. The tolerance model was created for a different world, for a different city architecture. But those cities of yore are no longer standing or they look completely different from the way they used to. We live together whether we like it or not – and therefore we must find different rules for this coexistence than simply: “keep out of my circle”.

VI.

But our circles have already been violated. Such close proximity often leads to conflict. One cannot back away in the face of violence. It is necessary to protect and defend the innocent. One must turn only one’s own cheek if there is hope of halting evil thereby, but not the cheeks of others; those we must defend, we have responsibility for them.

But we can and must do everything to stop things getting to that point. In many threatened places there is still time for the prevention and treatment of violence, time for dialogue.

Inter-religious dialogue usually takes the form of conferences – opportunities for well-educated representatives of various religions to meet. Such meetings can definitely serve as an important signal, but they have one weakness: little by little they create a sub-culture of “dialogists” who soon understand each other much better than they do the extremists in their respective communities. Most people prefer to associate with those who listen to them and accept them. But is it not the duty of those who take part in such meetings to ask themselves how much scope and courage they have to influence those within their own communities who perceive believers of other religions with a mixture of prejudice, fear and hatred?

And is it not one of the fundamental duties of religious leaders to have the prophetic courage to protest against the misuse of religion in the service of power and to take a stand against all those who commit injustice and violence against the innocent?

VII.

Two thousand years ago the rabbi from Nazareth was asked: Who is my neighbour? That question has lost none of its urgency in the meantime. Jesus turned the question round in an astonishing way. Don’t ask who is your neighbour, become a neighbour yourself! Be close to others, particularly

those who need help and love. Offer freedom to those who languish in the prison of their own hatred and guilt by showing forgiveness and a readiness for reconciliation.

Jesus' call for unconditional love, love even for one's enemies, seems absurd chiefly to those who regard love as a sentiment, as an emotion. But love is something greater than that. It is a space of security in our hearts and lives that we offer to others to let them truly be themselves. Only in a space of love and acceptance can we discover the truth about ourselves, can we develop the best that is within us. But love is always a bold and risky step. Whoever loves risks being disappointed and wounded.

Only at this point may I answer the question about the future of faith. I believe in a faith that bears wounds. Crucial to my Christian faith is one particular scene in John's Gospel – the encounter between the apostle Thomas and the resurrected Christ. Within Thomas' heart, as in the hearts and minds of many people today, faith and doubt are in conflict. Only when Jesus shows him His wounds does Thomas cry out: My Lord and my God!

Our world is full of wounds. It is my conviction that those who close their eyes to the wounds in our world have no right to say: My Lord and my God. A religion that ignores people's misfortune and suffering is an opium of the people. A God that does not bear wounds is a dead God. When someone offers me their God, I ask: Is it the God of love, wounded by our world's suffering? I am not willing to believe in any other god.

I recently read the spiritual diary of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the first Templeton Prize winner. I had previously known how she filled her days, namely, with service to the poorest, the sick and the dying. Now I know what her nights were like: she endured the grim trials of religious doubt, the dark nights of the spirit, the experience of God's silence. She bore the cross of a dual solidarity. In the daytime she was sister to those who needed their bodily wounds healed and the hunger of their empty stomachs assuaged. At night she shared the darkness of those who feel themselves far from the light of God and suffer emptiness of the soul.

Yes, therein lies true "progress in religion". It is the courage to combine spiritual depth with the open embrace of solidarity with all those who suffer.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, another Templeton Prize winner, once answered the question what would follow communism: a very, very long period of healing.

My answer to the question what will come after the period when many believers and non-believers thought it was so easy to talk about God is: I expect a very, very long journey into the depths. And I pin my hopes on it.

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