

Cologne Letters

May 2014

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An old man's musings on Christian perspectives



I have never denied that although my interests lay in the philosophical approach to religion ¹ this is not the suitable starting point when trying (no so much to *understand* religious belief and unbelief, as) to engage in a *dialogue* with unbelievers, even with a tacit hope to “evangelise”, a hope that should never be made explicit in a mere dialogue.

When once asked on an online forum about “my” definition of God, apparently to tease me, I replied ² by quoting from the recent book by *David H. Hart, The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (Yale UP 2013) preceding it with the remark that, as with all such “definitions”, it has to assume something that some can understand and agree with, and others can't:

“God is not only the ultimate reality that the intellect and the will seek but it is also the primordial reality with which all of us are always engaged in every moment of existence and consciousness, apart from which we have no experience of anything whatsoever. Or, to borrow the language of Augustine, God is not only *superior summo meo* — beyond my utmost heights — but also *interior intimo meo* — more inward to me than my inmost depths.”

I silenced the atheist teaser, but I am sure I did not make him better understand our faith. For a believer, such “definition” of God might be insightful but it almost never works the other way around: one cannot evangelise by trying to explain

what all the words in this “definition” are supposed to mean.

This is so, irrespective of what one understands under evangelisation: making people believe in a transcendental, supernatural reality, or in (the Christian understanding of) God, or accept Jesus Christ of the Scriptures as a moral authority, or even the Catholic Church as the mediator of this authority or what? I tried to arrange these things logically on four levels as explained in the previous issues of these *Cologne Letters*. This presentation might provide a theist/Christian/Catholic with an insight into what his/her beliefs (not faith!) are all about. And perhaps also inform an open-minded outsider.

However, evangelisation does not work along such a rational succession of beliefs, because evangelisation is about more than that, about faith rather than mere beliefs (or what *John Newman* calls *intellectual consent*).

Blaise Pascal is right to point to this extra-rational,

dimension of faith: “The heart has its reasons, which Reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. It is the heart which feels God, and not Reason. This, then, is perfect faith: God felt in the heart.”

So evangelisation must appeal more to heart than reason, building more on the human condition and life experiences, than philosophy and science. Philosophy — including philosophy of science and

When after the fall of Communism Christ's followers came freely into the open ... they did not notice ... *that the trees around them were full of Zacchaeuses* (c.f. Luke 19:1-8) — those who were unwilling or unable to join the throng of old or brand-new believers, but where neither indifferent nor hostile to them. There Zacchaeuses were curious seekers, but at the same time they wanted to maintain a certain *distance*.

The only person capable of addressing Zacchaeus, however, is someone for whom those people hidden in the branches of a fig tree, are not strangers nor aliens — someone who does not disdain them, who has concern for them, someone who can respond to what happens in their hearts and minds.

Tomáš Halík in *Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing In Us*, Doubleday 2009

¹ Notably inspirations obtained by comparing insights from philosophy of science with those from philosophy of religion, along of what was started by *Ian Barbour* in his now classical *Myths, Models and Paradigms: The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language*, SCM Press 1974.

² I actually preceded this with “You can define a concept by means of other, more basic concepts, so the “definition” would depend on what basic self-explanatory concepts you choose to define the new concept with. I know what is the definition of a topological space, but I do not know how to “define” mathematics, time, culture, religion, God etc to everybody's satisfaction”.

philosophy of religion — can *confirm*, support with rational arguments, the beliefs underlying a Christian's faith, but it cannot on its own *lead* to faith, to conversion.

David Ferguson ³ referring to *Michael Buckley* ⁴ expressed it thus:

Instead of grounding faith in religious experience, attempts to establish it on philosophical and scientific grounds merely exposed it to further hostile attacks. ... (T)he fundamental reality of Jesus as the embodied presence and witness of the reality of God within human history was never brought into the critical struggle of Christianity in the next three hundred years. ... The "proof" of God lies within the act of faith but this does not absolve theology from from the responsibility of attending to the claims of atheism.

In the first issue of *Cologne Letters* I wrote, that

if evangelisation is the aim, then certainly the psychological, much more than the metaphysical/philosophical approach, is the level at which encounters are to be held.

In particular, this could imply that if a young Catholic person feels he/she wants to dedicate his/her life to spreading Christ's message (especially if he has problems with e.g. celibacy), psychology, psychotherapy, eventually even psychiatry should be his/her field to become a professional in, rather than theology defending a system of beliefs on an abstract metaphysical/philosophical level sprinkled with authoritarian do's and don'ts.

In other words, if it is true that the Church needs more role models than apologists, it is even more so that it needs more psychotherapists in the confessional than Canon law enforcers and moralists.

So it should not be surprising that I was quite excited when I read that Mons. *Tomáš Halík* (b. 1948), a Catholic priest, prolific author, psychotherapist and professor of sociology at *Charles University* in Prague (my *alma mater*), had been awarded the 2014 *Templeton Prize* ⁵.

Professor Halík, as he himself puts it ⁶, though baptised as a baby, grew up in a non-religious family. His father left the Church soon after Czechoslovakia was created when the slogan "Away from

Vienna, away from Rome" became widespread in the Czech lands (and alienated many Slovaks from the very beginning). During his teenage years he became interested in religion, later Christianity and finally he made his first Confession and Communion at the age of eighteen.

He studied sociology and philosophy in Prague and in Bangor, UK. During Communist rule, he was banned from teaching and worked in various occupations, e.g. as a psychotherapist for drug addicts and alcoholics. He studied theology clandestinely in Prague, and in 1978 he was secretly ordained a Catholic priest in Erfurt, East Germany. Before the "Velvet Revolution" in 1989 he was active in the so-called "underground church", and in the 1980s he was a close associate of Cardinal František Tomášek, then archbishop of Prague. He is a member of a number of scientific societies. ⁷

I have no personal experience with the Catholic situation in Prague. According to a 2010 poll only 16% responded positively to "I believe there is a God" ⁸ which makes Czechs the nation in Europe with the highest percentage of people who can be called atheists. And I do not think it was much better during formative years of professor Halík. It certainly was not better between 1954 and 1965 when I lived in Prague, and the churches were almost as empty as they are in Cologne today. That was the big difference — and I think it is still valid to a point — between overwhelmingly Catholic Bratislava and areligious Prague.

So in addition to his scholarship, Mons. Halík is also a product, or better a witness, of a cultural environment that today has become the default situation in West European countries. This is another reason to view him as that kind of priest and spiritual leader that the Church (at least in the West) needs in order to overcome the "dark night of its soul" that She is presently going through.

³ *Faith and its Critics*, Oxford UP, 2009

⁴ *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Yale UP, 1987

⁵ A prestigious award, coming with £1,100,000, which "honours a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension."

⁶ c.f. <http://halik.cz/cs/o-halikovi/vzpominky/>.

⁷ c.f. <http://www.czechlit.cz/en/authors/halik-tomas/>.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_atheism

Let me intercept here with a few personal nostalgic memories. I was seventeen when I came to Prague in 1954 to study at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics of the Charles University ⁹ (Halík was six at that time!). My father, apparently wanting for me to have a point of contact to like-minded adults, introduced me to an old Czech Catholic family, and through them I came to meet Prof. *Jaroslav Beneš* (no relation to president *Edvard Beneš*), one of the best known Czech Thomists. I visited him a number of times in his modest flat in the Vinohrady quarter of Prague, he even gave me a signed copy of his *René Descartes či Tomáš Akvinský?* that I cherished but found it incomprehensible for my teenage mind. What impressed me more were the many clocks in his study, showing time in different places throughout the world, and I often think of him when I look at the number of clock-widgits on the dashboard of my iMac, showing time in different parts of the world where my family and friends live.

The Prague of those times was areligious, even among those who opposed the regime. Also the popular Czech attitude towards Slovaks was rather patronising, even condescending ¹⁰. This was certainly not the case with Prof. Beneš and other Czech Catholics (not many) that I came to meet during my eleven years in Prague.¹¹

If I remember correctly, there were regular masses for Slovaks in the church of St Salvator, presently the Parish Church of Mons. Halík. I did not attend these, since in those times all masses were in

Latin. My sentimental attachment to Mons. Halík's St Salvator, is of a different nature: the church is in the vicinity of Klementinum, the then University library, where I spent countless hours studying for my exams. The church I usually attended during my student years was the Jesuit church on the Charles square ("na Karláku"), which later in the sixties, after I already had left Prague, became allegedly the venue of a "Czech Catholic renewal" around a priest attracting young people.

Later the Prague cultural milieu became an important determinant of my intellectual growing up, but thanks to my father — who was my only philosophy teacher during my teenage years in the intellectual and moral catacombs of socialist Czechoslovakia — I never saw it as an alternative to my Catholic upbringing, but rather as its enrichment, a widening of its scope. I suddenly came to see Prague as my intellectual but also emotional home, not only during the three years as a tutor at the Faculty but especially after I was fired ¹² and met many sympathising not only colleagues but also ordinary Czechs ¹³.

But Prague was still areligious, almost half a century ago and probably it is still. So I find it very encouraging that there are now "*trees ... full of Zachaeuses ... who are unwilling or unable to join the ... believers, but were neither indifferent nor hostile to them but... curious seekers, who at the same time they wanted to maintain a certain distance.*" (c.f. the window on the first page).

⁹ In that year the Comrades made a mistake by awarding the first few in the *Mathematical Olympiad* with a free entry to any University in the country, which meant not only no entry exams but also — more importantly — no political and ideological scrutiny (*kádrový pohovor*), where the question of whether one was "religiously burdened" (*nábožensky zatížený*) usually arose. So I naturally chose Charles University. Next year they realised their mistake and switched to financial awards.

¹⁰ Students half-jokingly liked to speak of "our Slovak colonies", it was safer to refer to oneself as "coming from Slovakia" (*ze Slovenska*) than being a Slovak, etc. I am not familiar with the situation today (except for what can be read on the internet) but I think that today it is most often on Slovak initiative that such Czech patronage is sought also among the Catholic intellectuals. Many Slovaks still think — as my father used to say — that the shortest route from Bratislava to Vienna (hence the West) leads through Prague. This is — besides the obvious similarity of languages — simply a consequence of the political circumstances throughout most of last century that made Slovak cultural and intellectual developments in the twentieth century captive of those in the Czech lands.

¹¹ For instance, it was an "underground" Catholic, *inženýr Kněz* — *nomen est omen*, since *kněz* in Czech means priest — who helped me later to acquire a flat (in the vicinity of the *Břevnov* monastery) in a Cooperative which at that time was rather unusual for an unmarried single.

¹² The official reason was my religious background (that they should have known before), the actual one was my father's refusal to cooperate with the STB (the Czechoslovak equivalent of KGB) in spying on the then *Trnava* bishop *Ambróz Lazík*.

¹³ I worked as a labourer until "rehabilitated" two years later and invited to come to work at the Mathematical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Science in Bratislava, until in 1968 I was able to accept an offer from Monash University (Melbourne) and settle in Australia.

Enough of nostalgia! The point I wanted to make, was that the Church needs *both*, late converts *and* cradle Catholics. It is true that many a cradle Catholics' faith is wanting in comparison with that of the enthusiastic adult converts', and conversely, some adult converts can be insensitive to the tradition that is an essential part of the cradle Catholic's identity.

Nevertheless, Catholics who can be sincere in their faith and able to look forward without being disloyal to the Pope or loosing sight of the Catholic tradition, can be found among *both* cradle *and* convert Catholics. And they both can play an important role today, since the new emphasis on mercy that Pope Francis is bringing into the Church is often not easily accepted by those (cradle) Catholics who suffer from the older brother complex (reference to the *Prodigal Son* parable) and not satisfactory for those who want the Church to almost completely surrender itself to the *zeitgeist*.

Professor Halík is the author of many books, published mostly in Czech. English translations are available of two of them, *Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing In Us*, Doubleday 2009 (Czech original: *Vzdáleným nablízku*, NLN 2007) and *Night of the Confessor: Christian Faith in an Age of Uncertainty*, Image 2012.

In the Introduction to his *Patience with God* Halík says:

I am not saying to atheists that they are wrong, but that they lack patience. I am saying to them that their truth is an incomplete truth

These words seem to be aimed not so much at atheist zealots of the Richard Dawkins ilk, but at those who define themselves as "lacking belief in God or gods" probably meaning lacking faith but still open-minded, even curious, his Zacchaeuses.

I did not notice many "Zacchaeuses hanging in the trees" of Prague in my times, neither do I see them here today, although they are probably there, not only in Prague but also in Cologne and elsewhere. It indeed needs a priest/confessor with psychotherapeutic qualifications like Mons. Halík who *can* see them, and more importantly, understand and *communicate* with them.

I can identify very much with this passage in *Patience with God*:

It would be a reprehensible neglect if Christianity failed to use for its own benefit the fact that, during the modern era, it was subject, more than any other religion, to the purgative flames of atheist criticism; it would be just as unfortunate to lack the courage to enter that smelting furnace as to renounce, in the midst of the flames, the faith and hope that are intended to be tested and refined.

This resonates with my reasons for engaging on-line with open minded (or not) atheists ¹⁴.

I shall not review Prof. Halík's books here but instead finish by concentrating on a few points he made in his [Templeton Prize Lecture](#).

The following caught my attention immediately:

The thought occurs to me whether we Christians have not in the course of history constantly fallen prey to the temptation to exchange the paradoxical God of Christ's Easter story for a "familiar god" conforming to the human notions and expectations of specific epochs. Wasn't the identification of the Biblical God with the god of the ancient philosophers as described by Plato and Aristotle - so fateful for the history of Christian theology - precisely one of those substitutions?

I do not think Halík wants to set the "God of the philosophers" strictly against the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", a tendency I discern, perhaps erroneously, in Barthian theology. I guess he rather wants to warn against too much emphasis on the former neglecting the latter, too much philosophical at the expense of biblical approach to God, especially too much reading of the Book of Nature and neglecting the Book of Scripture, to use Galileo's (or was it Bacon?) words.

Professor Halík, a theologian and psychotherapist, should know what he is talking about so even I, who prefer philosophy (of science) to biblical exegesis, have to listen. Jesus is indeed what Christian faith sees of God as in a mirror, to use Halík's metaphor, and in this mirror image the face of the God of Scriptures is certainly in the foreground. [Or, to use my language about "levels of Catholic beliefs" (see *Cologne Letters* 1 and 2), a philosophising Christian should not allow attention given to levels ONE and TWO to overshadow that given to level THREE, the essence of Christian faith.]

Maybe in the next issues of *Cologne Letters* I should devote more "old man's musings" to the question of the "God of the philosophers" interpreting the "God of Abraham" (and Jesus) and vice versa, tak-

¹⁴ see e.g. <http://forum.onlineopinion.com.au/user.asp?id=1953&show=history>.

ing into account also Benedict XVI's warning in his famous 2006 Regensburg lecture:

In the light of our experience with cultural pluralism, it is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was a preliminary inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures. The latter are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that inculturation, in order to inculturate it anew in their own particular milieu. This thesis is not only false; it is coarse and lacking in precision.

Another point is again a warning:

We seek him among the gods of this world, among philosophical constructs, projections of our own desires and fears, among "supernatural beings" and fruits of our imagination. ... We can't see him because he is too close. He is not a being far above us; he is the depths of our life, he is in our being ...

In other words, "Do not go afar: seek within thyself. Truth resides inside of man" (Augustine of Hippo). This can perhaps be expressed also as follows: a Christian understanding of God has to involve consciousness *explicitly*. [This makes this understanding essentially different from that of scientific concepts, even the most abstract from quantum physics.]

The next point would be Halík's exhortations about the Easter message, which can be summarised as the need to take the cross and Resurrection *together* and as another warning not to see them as simply *beliefs* that these things happened but as the very subject of *faith* understood as an existential state of the whole mind.¹⁵

The last point would be that the Easter message addresses also those to whom it came in such a form that they could not accept it in all good conscience or in the light of their understanding "insofar as they cherish within their lives the same sacrificing love that led right to the cross, insofar as they try to overcome their own selfishness, and insofar as they do not accept as final the setbacks which that love encounters in the course of their lives".

This apparently addresses the Zacchaeuses of our times, but could also be seen as a warning for us, Catholics, not to pray as the Pharisee in Luke 18:12, self-satisfied that "the others", unlike us, will end in hell.

To the end of the lecture, there is a thought I especially cherish:

Many distinguished theologians support the theory of "creatio continua" – continuing creation; could we not similarly speak of a "resurrectio continua", a continuing Resurrection?

I have also read some of Prof. Halík's writings concerning Slovak Bishops, their recent *Pastoral Letter* addressing the spread in Slovakia (and the whole EU) of the so-called gender ideology (see e.g. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Butler) and their role in the so-called Bezák affair (see below). Here I would beg to differ, but *sub specie aeternitatis* this is less important than his other views that I am so enthusiastic about.

The Bezák affair and its victims

When in April 2009 *Robert Bezák* (b. 1962), a relatively young and hitherto unknown Redemptorist village parish priest, was consecrated Archbishop of the prestigious Slovak Archbishopric of Trnava, as surprising as it was, notably to priests of the Archdiocese, very few could have expected the consequences that would turn out to be more harmful to the Catholic Church (not necessarily to Christianity as such) in Slovakia, than the decades of Czechoslovak Communist oppression. It is not hard to guess at whose initiative this unfortunate

appointment took place, since there is only one Slovak cardinal influential enough at the Roman Curia, of which he himself is a former member.

In 2012 an Apostolic Visitation from Rome was ordered and as its consequence Benedict XVI asked Bezák to resign, and when he refused, dismissed him on 2nd July 2012 allegedly for mismanaging his archdiocese. This led to dividing up Slovak Catholics, including priests, into two camps: supporters of *Roma locuta, causa finita* and supporters of the popular idealistic but inexperienced

¹⁵ see my [Viera ako belief a viera ako faith](#) (in Slovak), where I tried to explain the difference between the English usage of religious belief and faith, a distinction not available in many other languages.

bishop ¹⁶ Bezák. The latter were joined by many non-Catholics, even non-Christians for whatever reasons. The damage to the Church caused by this imprudent appointment that had to be rescinded was enormous, but self-inflicted, an own goal as they say in football, made then use of as a Trojan horse by all sorts of Church's adversaries. And at the same time a disservice to Bezák, though probably more with his appointment than with his dismissal.

It was never clear what were the accusations relating to "mismanagement" (treatment of subordinates?) although one thing should be emphasised — *there was never even a hint from official sources that they were of a doctrinal, or even personal moral, nature.* I myself was rather ambivalent as to whether the firing was justified until Bezák's repeated interviews on Slovak and Czech TV (that could be watched over the internet) in December 2012, where he displayed, among other things, also an inclination to complacency, something one does not like to find in an archbishop.

If disobedience was one of the reasons for his dismissal, in these interviews Bezák himself proved Benedict XVI right a posteriori. Nevertheless, my impression is that had Bezák known about the impending "change of atmosphere" in the Curia with the coming of Pope Francis, he would have refrained from these public displays of dissent and disobedience, and instead quietly awaited an eventual rehabilitation, which has now become less probable, though still not impossible.

The interviews were then followed by the publication of books the purpose of which was to present Bezák as an innocent victim of Vatican. The proceeds Bezák wanted to donate manifestly to a Catholic charity organisation. It was rejected since it was obvious for what purpose the donation was intended (otherwise he would have donated anonymously, c.f. Mathew 6:2 about "trumpeting" when "doing thy alms").

Also, I think there is a difference between being loyal to the Holy Father and being a "populist Church of customly-folkloristic piety" (*lidová církev zvykově-folklorní zbožnosti*) which Halík — to much extent rightfully — associates with Slovak Catholicism. Mons. Bezák challenged the

first much more than the second feature of Slovak Catholicism.

Here in Germany it is unconceivable that somebody in authority would liken his/her own institution to Nazism. Many Slovak Catholics, especially those older than Bezák, have a similarly absolutely negative memory of Communist (Stalinist) authorities and their methods, so it should not be surprising that Bezák's public likening of the disciplinary procedures in the Catholic Church to those of the Communists shocked many.

In my opinion, up to the Bezák affair Catholic Slovakia had a slim chance of modernising itself — of leaving the stage of "populist customly-folkloristic piety" — without falling into the infantile rejection of Catholicism defined as loyalty to Pope and the Vatican, as did some of the formerly Catholic European nations. I am afraid this unprecedented leap might now be out of their reach. This is not a tragedy only the loss of an illusion.

And this illusion is the third victim — besides Mons. Bezák himself and Slovak Catholicism.

(E)very priest who is no longer naïve and yet not cynical must be tired by the often difficult task of helping people seek the narrow, conscientious path between the Scylla of the harsh and uncompromising "thou must and thou shalt not" that cuts heartlessly like cold steel into the flesh of painful, complex, and unique life stories, and the Charybdis of the wishy-washy, speciously soft-hearted "everything's OK so long as you love God." ...

A confessional conversation without a "sacral dimension" would be mere psychotherapy (and often amateurish and superficial to boot). ...

People sometimes come to a confessor ... in situations in which ... they feel themselves to be in a "blind alley" and are often unaware whether it happened as the result of some more or less conscious or self-confessed moral failing or "sin," or whether it is to do with some other changes in their personal life and relationships, or whether they have only now realized the outcome of some long and unperceived process during which their faith dwindled and guttered out. Sometimes they feel a void, because in spite of their sincere endeavors and often long years of spiritual search they have not found a sufficiently convincing answer in the places they have looked so far, or what had so far been their spiritual home has started to seem constricted or spurious.

Tomáš Halík, *Night of the Confessor: Christian Faith in an Age of Uncertainty*

¹⁶ A consecrated bishop, unlike Archbishop, remains a bishop, the same as an ordained priest remains a priest, even when he loses his ecclesial position.