

# Cologne Letters

An old man's musings on Christian perspectives

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6



Professor Mons. *Tomáš Halík*, who coined the phrase “populist Church of customary-folkloristic piety” ([lidová církev zvykově-folklorní zbožnosti](#)) when referring to the Church in Slovakia, is also the author of the following lovely anecdote (I can't find the link so I am translating from Czech from my memory): A professor of philosophy was asked to play Santa Claus to a group of kindergarten children, so his entrance was “Dear children, I have incarnated myself into this appearance so that I can communicate with you.” Of course, strictly speaking, that is what he was supposed to do, but this was not the way to achieve what he wanted to with the given audience. When [reading](#) (or [listening to](#)) online links, where Prof. Halík provides support for the ousted Slovak archbishop Mons. *Robert Bezák*, I was wondering whether he, Prof. Halík, through this public endorsement was not indirectly committing the same mistake as his absent-minded philosophy professor by condoning Mons. Bezák's insensitivity as archbishop to the particulars of the situation in his archdiocese, so much different from e.g. Halík's home archdiocese of Prague. This in spite of my enthusiasm for Halík's assessment of, and approach to, evangelisation in post-Christian Western Europe (explained in detail in my *Cologne Letters* 3 of May 2014 that present-day Czechia — much more than Slovakia — typically belongs to.

## In defence of the “populist Church of customary-folkloristic piety”

When many years ago, as a fresh emigré from Czechoslovakia, I had been asked about the religious situation there, I always had to stress that it was hard to assess the situation in the country as such because it was very different in its Czech part (one of the most atheist of European lands) and Slovakia (one of the most Catholic lands). Czech Catholic tradition has suffered from the national “pobělohorský” anti-Catholic complex <sup>1</sup>, underlined by Masaryk's post-WWI “away from Rome” <sup>2</sup> slogan, whereas Slovak national tradition has been much more pro-Catholic, the Church often representing a

shelter for ethnic/national feelings.

This difference could explain also the fact that after WWI Catholicism in Slovakia did not become nearly as uprooted as in the Czech lands (with its eastern part, Moravia, being rather less affected), its traditional counterpart being Lutheranism rather than atheism or agnosticism as in Czechia. Twenty century's Slovakia survived Masaryk's gentle anti-Catholicism as well as the anything-but-gentle anti-Catholicism of the Communists, who right after WWII were much more popular among “godless” Czechs than among Slovaks.

It is on this historical background that one can attempt to understand not only the “customary-folkloristic” feature of traditional Slovak Catholicism, and its equally traditional *strong loyalty to the Pope* and Rome, but also a certain insensitivity of Czech Catholics, especially adult converts, towards these two aspects of the cultural identity of Slovak, especially cradle, Catholics.

Perhaps typical is a Czech emigré priest's reaction almost half a century ago, when I tried to explain to him this difference: “Ale oni nás potřebují” (But they — meaning Slovak Catho-

<sup>1</sup> A reference to the the Battle of White Mountain (Bílá hora) in 1620 where the Czech Protestant army was defeated by that of the Catholic Holy Roman Emperor followed by a restoration of Roman Catholic rule in the Czech lands.

<sup>2</sup> Masaryk as the founder of Czechoslovakia, plays an important role in the Czech — including Catholics — national narrative. I remember how Prof. *Jaroslav Beneš* — a prominent Czech Thomist of his times whom I had the privilege to meet personally as a student in Prague in the 1950s — painstakingly argued that Masaryk was actually not so much anti-Catholic and even was about to return to the Church. The Slovak Catholics' perception of Masaryk, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, was more ambivalent.

lics — need us). Given the almost completely Czechoslovak cultural context of present-day Slovak intellectual life as a result of the political reality of the last seven decades, he was right. At least to some extent.

To see to what extent, let me first quote [Mons. Halík's valid observation](#):

Slovakia will soon have to go through what Spain or the French part of Canada went through recently, and Poland, Moravia Italy and other “traditionally Catholic lands” of the West are going through presently: the type of “populist Church” of customary-folkloristic piety is passing away, retreating into the past, proportionally with the inevitable dissolution of its socio-cultural biosphere, the traditional village community. The Church cannot keep on relying on the inertia of tradition and nostalgic yearning for the past ...

These and other insightful views about contemporary Catholicism in Western Europe were presented also in a [speech](#) he gave to an audience of enthusiastic supporters of the rebellious Mons. Bezák (although it is not clear to me why it was necessary to introduce them with a condescending sarcasm, like Slovak Catholics believing that their Tatra mountains could stop the “tsunami of secularisation”).

Without further going into particulars about Slovakia's case being different from those of the other “traditionally Catholic lands”<sup>3</sup>, I think that before the Bezák affair Catholicism in Slovakia had a chance of modernising itself without forgetting the emotional features of its roots (characterised by Halík as “customary-folkloristic piety”) and without loosening its unconditional loyalty to the Pope, including Benedict XVI and now Francis.<sup>4</sup> Now after Bezák I am

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Slovakia only recently amended its constitution by adding the proviso “Marriage is a unique bond between a man and a woman” to safeguard a European tradition respected until recently *by all Europeans*, not only those Catholics whose piety is limited to its customary-folkloristic forms. On the other hand, such a traditionally Catholic Western country as Ireland is going to hold a [referendum](#) on 22nd May to insert a clause into its constitution stating that “Marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex.” (the proposed amendment has received the endorsement of all major Irish political parties). Another step towards selling out European traditions and values to those advocated by the gender ideology of [Judith Butler](#)?

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, one can only speculate how else things could have developed in Catholic Slovakia, had they listened to the input that could have come from emigré thinkers after 1989. They, after all, were better informed about contemporary Catholic thinking than domestic thinkers like *Ladislav Hanus* or *Anton Neuwirth* whose

not so sure, and Halík is probably right that Slovak Catholicism will have to go through the same “dark night of its soul” before modernising itself on a “higher” level not only in the spiritual but also intellectual meaning of the word. This might be a pity but not a tragedy.

One of the main manifestations of this customary-folkloristic piety is Marian devotion not only in Slovakia, and certainly not only in Europe. This is a fact irrespective of theological disputes about *Mediatrix* vs *Co-Redemptrix*, or a psychological need for a *yin* dimension (expressed by the more Eastern references to *Theodokos/Bogoroditsa*) beside the more dominant in the Abrahamic religions *yang* dimension (God the Father)<sup>5</sup>. These factors can explain — but not explain away — the meaning of Marian devotion for the masses of “folkloristic” Catholicism. It also represents the emotional, sentimental or nostalgic dimension of the faith of intellectually more sophisticated cradle Catholics.

I think that this nostalgic awareness of one's (personal or generally cultural) stages of customary-folkloristic piety (that included veneration of Mary but also of other Saints and other customs) is one of the distinguishing marks of the difference between cradle Catholics and converts.

An educated cradle Catholic can (and should) attain a level of intellectually satisfying expression of his/her faith but it will coexist with fond memories of, and understanding for, a faith on the more emotionally coloured folkloristic-spiritual level.

A late convert might have also developed an understanding of this folkloristic piety but he/she will not have fond memories of it.

Of course, there are “intellectually sophisticated” as well “intellectually not so sophisticated” persons among both cradle Catholics and converts (or reconverts), since the intellectual feature of one's faith is not nearly as important as the spiritual. This spiritual aspect might be supported sometimes more by an intellectual, some-

intellectual contacts with Western Europe dated from the 1930s and 1940s. Or would a Bezák disruption been inevitable even possible had the emigré Archbishop Mons. *Dominik Hrušovský* been allowed to have a say in the direction Slovak Catholicism was taking after 1989?

<sup>5</sup> Or the bridge she might represent when trying to evangelise Muslims (Mary is more often mentioned in the Quaran than Jesus). So again “mediatrix”, only this time in a quite different meaning of the word.

times more by an emotional (of a purely personal, or communitarian, e.g. folkloristic, nature) “scaffolding”, depending on the overall cultural, educational and psychological orientation of the individual.

Certainly the vast majority of the 6 million Philipinos who attended the Manila outdoor Mass with Pope Francis on 18. January 2015 found an expression of their faith in an intellectually not very demanding piety of the customary-folkloristic form, rather than some intellectually satisfying one. This shows that as the future of Catholicism lies outside of Europe, such form of piety should not be underestimated. It is a necessary *complement* of the contribution to modern Catholicism by European, and generally Western, professors of theology, philosophy, psychology.

Of course, one should not forget that outside these two traditionally “European” alternatives, or rather features, of Catholicism — “folkloristic” or “intellectual” — there is also a challenge coming from *evangelical* or *pentecostal* movements that are of both extra-Catholic and extra-European provenance, exerting a pressure on Catholicism from an opposite to the atheist/secularist challenge. Nevertheless, these movements can also mean an inspiration for future Catholicism, but that is a different story.

The problem with customary folkloristic piety arises when it is being set as against an intellectually more satisfying form, rather than comple-

menting it. This conflict usually does not come from genuine and sincere practitioners of this form of piety but from bigots who hide their anti-intellectual, anti-science, anti-whatever complexes behind naïve verbatim interpretations of the Bible and Tradition that implicitly (seldom explicitly) accompanies these folkloristic expressions.

To summarize, the *ideal* passage from a stage of a populist Church of customary-folkloristic piety to a modern, intellectually, culturally and politically more sophisticated, more up-to-date Church should be possible without having to pass through a stage of condescending criticism, even ridicule of its culturally superceded forms of expression. Prof. Halík is probably right that this ideal is no more realistic in Europe including (post-Bezák) Slovakia. Maybe Catholicism will have to pass through a stage of *denial* of its customary-folkloristic manifestations, (that often goes with also a denial of the very essence of Catholicism), before reaching a higher intellectual but also spiritual level where these folkloristic-cultural traits are seen and re-appreciated as contributing factors of the Catholic version of modern-day Christianity without impeding its intellectually more satisfying but spiritually still fulfilling perception.

Something like no getting to a synthesis from a thesis without having to pass through an antithesis? OK, as long as one does not get stuck in the antithesis of one’s own roots.

## God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or God of the philosophers?

When Blaise Pascal, the well known French mathematician and philosopher, died, a scrap of paper was found in the lining of his coat. On it was written “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jakob, not the God of the philosophers.” Pascal was a contemporary of Descartes, so the latter is apparently a reference to the omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent metaphysically *constructed* Being of Descartes’ but also of Aquinas that some contemporary philosophers, and theologians, including Catholics, reject.

For instance, the Catholic theologian *Michael J. Buckley* SJ speaks about the “inferential theology of Thomas Aquinas” and writes:

Is God intellectually established for Aquinas not by experience — let alone disclosed in Christology — but only by inference and “natural theology”? ... Inference cannot simply substitute for experience. ... One will

not long affirm a personal God, who is fundamentally inferred as a conclusion rather than disclosed as a presence, one with whom there is no intersubjective communication. The most compelling witness to a personal God must itself be personal. To attempt something else as foundation or as substitute, as has been done so often in an effort to secure by inference the reality of God, is to move into a dialectical process generated by internal contradictions of which the ultimate resolution must be atheism. (‘Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism’, Yale Univ. Press, 2004, p. xvi.)

It seems that also the Lutheran theologian *Karl Barth* would agree with this, although his categorical rejection of natural theology seems to me as going too far.

I could not resist listing the following increasing sequence of denials, although artificial in the sense that *Bas Van Fraassen* — philosopher, founder of constructive empiricism and a con-

vert to Catholicism — does not fit in-between the other two, well known atheists:

1. **God is dead** — *Friedrich Nietzsche* in ‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’, 1883;
2. **Metaphysics is dead** — *Bas Van Fraassen* in ‘The Empirical Stance’, Yale Univ. Press, 2002
3. **Philosophy is dead** — *Stephen Hawking-Lionard Mlodinow* in ‘The Grand Design’, Bantam 2010.

An explanation is needed here. Van Fraassen actually states explicitly (p. 1.):

The God of the philosophers is dead. He is dead because he is a creature of metaphysics ... — and metaphysics is dead.

and explains it in an endnote:

The type of metaphysics to which I refer, and which I take to be the enterprise engaged in by, for example, Descartes and Leibniz, is characterized by the attempted construction of a theory of the world, of the same form as a fundamental science and continuous with (as extension or foundation of) the natural sciences.

I shall not elaborate on technical (philosophical) details of Van Fraassen’s seeming rejection of the God of philosophers (at least when related to what he calls “analytical metaphysics”), which is certainly different from Nietzsche’s “God is dead”, and instead quote his critic [Lydia Jaeger](#):

Van Fraassen ... gives preference to a mystical approach of religious experience ... (H)e still maintains a kind of immanent grounding of knowledge in the form of direct, unmediated experience, in spite of his claimed rejection of classical foundationalism.

and further

(Van Fraassen) draws a sharp distinction between the philosophical construction of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent Being ... and the God who is “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not the God of the philosophers”... Thus experience, not doctrine, is at the center of true religion <sup>6</sup>.

Except for the “sharp distinction” I am inclined to agree with this. More precisely, my — philosophically and theologically probably naïve — take on this is that, the God of philosophers (however understood or “constructed”) **complements** the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”: These are just two sides of the same coin, two approaches to the same God, the one more intellectual, the other more spiritual or biblical.

In other words, when I *think* about God it is the

<sup>6</sup> see also the quote from the book by Walter Kasper at the end.

“God of philosophers”, though not necessarily as understood by this or that metaphysical or theological school <sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, when I *pray* to God, it is the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” or rather the God as revealed by Jesus. To paraphrase a famous quote from *Bhagavat Gita*, whatever God of philosophers (or other religions) a man worships, if he prays, it is the God as revealed by Jesus who answers his prayer.

One cannot completely neglect the “God of philosophers” approach also for reasons of it being related to our Hellenic heritage. As quoted in *Cologne letters* 3, Benedict XVI said it explicitly 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.

and consequently

The courage to engage *the whole breadth of reason* (my emphasis), and not the denial of its grandeur — this is the programme with which a theology grounded in Biblical faith enters into the debates of our time.

In pastoral praxis there is, of course, a need to emphasise the biblical God (Jesus) rather than metaphysical and theological (often rather naïve) constructions of God. Cardinal *Walter Kasper* expresses this rather succinctly in his book — famously praised by Pope Francis — ‘Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life’, Paulist Press, 2014:

The reason for the paltry treatment of mercy becomes obvious when we see that the divine attributes that are derived from God’s metaphysical essence as Subsistent Being itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*) are the focus of the handbooks: simplicity, infinity, eternity, omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, and other attributes. The metaphysical determination of God’s essence, which has shaped the entire theological tradition since the early days of the church, should in no way be fundamentally questioned ... (W)ithin the parameters of the metaphysical attributes of God, there is scarcely room for a concept of mercy, which derives not from the metaphysical essence, but rather from the historical self-revelation of God.

<sup>7</sup> My inspirations come more from contemporary philosophy of science, where also Van Fraassen’s constructive empiricism offers valuable insights ignoring metaphysical constructions.