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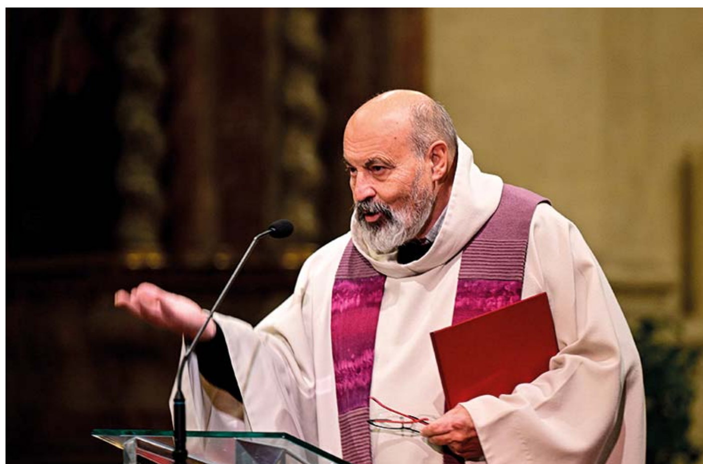
Out of this darkness

by Austen Ivereigh

The old categories dividing belief from unbelief ... practising from non-practising, are insufficient.



Fr Tomáš Halík at a service for peace in the Holy Land at St Salvator's church in Prague.

The transmission belts of faith are frayed and breaking, but a visionary Czech priest-philosopher sees the crisis facing the Church heralding not the extinction of Christianity, but its transformation.

WHAT FORM of Christianity is coming? What will the Church look like in the new era? To begin to find an answer to that question, please join me at a recent gathering of parish delegates from the two adjacent Welsh dioceses of Cardiff and Menevia.

It was in a parish hall in Miskin, outside the Welsh capital, at the urging of Archbishop Mark O'Toole (named in April 2022 as *both* Archbishop of Cardiff *and* Bishop of Menevia) who wanted us to consider the prospect of formally merging the two dioceses into one. No surprises there. Faced with nosediving numbers, such mergers are being considered across England and Wales, with Rome's blessing. The point of this shake-up is not just to rationalise and cut costs. No one quite articulates this, but something bigger is afoot: a reset, a shake-up. For a long time we've been in "emergency mode", is how the archbishop explains it, and we can't go on like this. We have to consolidate and cooperate for the sake of mission, in a Church where

parishes are *both* spread out over a large and diverse territory (Menevia includes Welsh-speaking Catholics, Cardiff the English periphery of Herefordshire) *and* shrinking and ageing.

The crisis is not a shortage of priests, but a shortage of *people*. England and Wales have one of the highest ratios of priests to lay people in the world. The archdiocese of Cardiff, spread over 1,180 square miles, has 131,280 Catholics (8.4 per cent of the population) but just 8,276 at Mass, down from roughly 20,000 in 1990 and 14,000 in 2019, just before Covid snatched more than a third of them, never to return. The ancestral rural diocese of Menevia, spread over 3,590 square miles, has just over 26,000 Catholics (three per cent of the population) and 4,650 at Mass, compared with roughly 12,000 in 1990 and 6,000 in 2019. The trend will continue to slump.

So you'd imagine that this meeting on 10 February would be sombre, even grumpy: competing narratives to explain the decline and to vindicate agendas; sadness about the future; a painful sense of loss, especially of the young; a sense, perhaps, of failure. I've often found such desolation in our parishes these days, speaking around the country about the Synod. Yet the Miskin meeting had none of those craters: it was upbeat, and creative. No magic wands were waved, but we saw change coming, and the grace in welcoming it. Horrified at the prospect of ageing, beleaguered enclaves, we sat round tables imagining a future of mucking in together for mission. People said this would need a culture change: you can't go on in the same way, can you? You have to go out, learn to listen, hear from the young who don't want to come in, and the elderly who since Covid stay away. We have to learn to share ministries and resources for mission, go beyond boundaries, build bridges and synergies. We need to create means of decision-making in common, through strong local deaneries and a diocesan pastoral council. One person at my table said synodality had re-energised her parish, and she now realised how key it was to the future.

I doubt anyone in Miskin that day had read Tomáš Halík's *Afternoon of Christianity: The Courage to Change*, published in English this week. It's been swirling around inside my head for many months: the Czech priest prophet has penned the most compelling, thorough account of what Pope Francis means by this being a "change of era" in the Church. The shift is much bigger than most realise, one that requires re-imagining much of what we take for granted. But before letting Halík himself explain that change, let's name the key spiritual move being made here.

IN ONE OF my books on Pope Francis, *Wounded Shepherd*, I describe what happened at the Latin American bishops' meeting in Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007, and how it has shaped the pontificate of Francis, who was the chief redactor of its concluding document and, by all accounts, the *spiritus movens* of the assembly. The key decision of the bishops at Aparecida – or perhaps key "disposition" would be more accurate – was to "discern and reform" rather than "lament and condemn", faced with the changes they saw all round them. Seeing how the transmission belts of faith were frayed and breaking, they did not, as the rich-world Catholic bishops often did at that

time, double down, lamenting and deploring the ocean of godlessness eroding their citadel. In Aparecida they understood “secularisation” – a term we’ll return to – as heralding not the extinction of Christianity, but rather its transformation. They understood that the Spirit was moving in this place, asked what new thing was being done, and how it would require the Church to change. The Latin Americans, in short, opened up to the Spirit; they were capable of self-transcendence. And that’s what I saw in Miskin that day: that the ordinary faithful are capable of discerning and reforming, not just lamenting and condemning.

“The time has come for Christianity to transcend itself,” Halík writes: to move out beyond its existing mental, institutional, and cultural boundaries, to ask how the Spirit is acting, to find a new cultural home. It’s what Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires told the cardinals just before they elected him, that the Church is called to “come out of itself”, to open up to the peripheries, and receive the new thing the Spirit is doing. Halík does not know Francis the way he once knew John Paul II, but sees what Francis is doing, and applauds. Where he sees John Paul II and Benedict XVI bringing to a close the long phase of the Church coming to terms with modernity, he believes Francis has opened a new phase, one in which “the Church’s greatest competitor is not secular humanism or scientific rationalism, but a spirituality that rolls like a swollen river out of the trough dug by traditional religiosity”. *The Afternoon of Christianity* is not about this pontificate, but the synergy is astonishing. It should be essential reading for every cardinal who will be in the next conclave, every bishop who oversees a diocese, and everyone who is concerned for the future of faith.

Halík is great company: energetic, smiling, a pastor-philosopher ready to laugh at ironies or to relish a paradox. He is big and bearded: even at 76 he seems better built for mountain hikes than poring over books. His is a filmable story. He decided to convert aged 18 after Graham Greene and G.K. Chesterton had led him to stand at the back of churches, inching his way into the Mass. “I had a vivid sense of something – or rather Someone – entering my life, that a gate had opened and I had crossed a new threshold,” he wrote in his 2019 memoir, *From the Underground Church to Freedom*. Two years later, deeply involved in the 1968 Prague Spring, he was in Bangor studying English (“I had long been an Anglophile”) when the Soviet tanks rolled in to restore winter.

RETURNING TO WHAT was now an underground Church, he gained a doctorate in sociology and philosophy from Charles University, then blew up an academic career in an act of spiritual courage. Having been asked to read the graduation speech, he prayed to the Holy Spirit, ditched the official message he had been handed, and paid homage to truth, which, he said, was greater than power. His parrhesia led to the communist authorities banning him from holding academic posts. He worked as a sociologist in an industrial institute and as a psychotherapist in a clinic for alcoholics and drug addicts. But on the side, in the shadows, he received a formidable post-conciliar theological formation which set him on the road to priesthood.

Although his “first love” was the Jesuits, he opted to join a clandestine association of secular priests. Secretly ordained in Erfurt, in East Germany, just after the election of the first Polish pope, he became a key figure in the underground Church of the 1980s, a close associate of Cardinal Tomášek, and regularly harassed by the secret police. By day he was a psychotherapist for addicts; at night he was part of a network of philosophers who met in private apartments to read and discuss Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur. Through those networks he became friends with Czech playwright and later president Václav Havel. Following the 1989 Velvet Revolution, Halík was an adviser both to Havel and to Pope John Paul II, who kept him close and named him as a consultor to the Vatican body in dialogue with non-believers. He was also, finally, able to take up a career as professor of sociology at Charles University.

And it is there he has been these last 25 years, pumping out books on religion and spirituality and collecting awards and prizes, including the Templeton Prize in 2014, and serving as pastor of the academic parish of St Salvator. His is the country with probably the world’s highest proportion of “nones” – those who tick “none of the above” when asked for their religious affiliation. A hotbed of reform movements and upheavals, religious wars and authoritarian restorations, Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic has since the nineteenth century undergone what Halík describes as three waves of secularisation: industrialisation, communist persecution, and postmodern culture. The result is a “strongly dechurched” society, within which apatheism (indifference), agnosticism, religious illiteracy, anticlericalism and many kinds of spiritual seeking and spiritualities co-mingle. Halík’s books show his commitment to the dialogue with contemporary modernity as a social scientist and psycho-therapist. But he does so not as a detached observer but a pastor who has given his life to Christ.

In his new book Halík shows how impoverished is the believing/non-believing distinction, how not just institutional Christianity but also dogmatic atheism is in crisis. Young people’s allergy to churches is more often the result not of unbelief, he points out, but something more like faith: a conviction that the Church has become alienated from its mission, captured by identitarian ideology, aloof from contemporary questions and concerns, and something like a corporation, interested only in itself. Halík sympathises. When he hears certain sermons or bishops’ declarations, it strikes him “that we should not only investigate why people leave, but also where the ones who remain get their strength and patience.”

I am struck by how closely this diagnosis matches Cardinal Bergoglio’s homily at Aparecida in May 2007, when he likened the Church to the paralysed woman in Luke’s Gospel, unable to see beyond the small area round her, while “the People of God are off somewhere else”. It wasn’t so much that people had left the Church, but that the Church had left the people. Halík approvingly quotes Bergoglio’s speech to the cardinals in March 2013, how Jesus is not so much knocking at the door asking to come in (Revelation 3:20) as trapped in the sacristy, knocking to be let out, to the peripheries.

The Afternoon of Christianity is dedicated to Francis, "with reverence and gratitude", and begins by quoting him on the importance of uncertainty in faith: "If one has the answers to all the questions – that is the proof God is not with him," says Francis to Antonio Spadaro in 2013, adding: "It means he is a false prophet using religion for himself." Today, says Halík, the greatest differences are not between the Churches but within them, between very different ideas about God and ways of being religious: ones capable of self-transcendence, and others whose faith is essentially ideology.

At the same time, he sees the walls between believers and non-believers are coming down: dogmatic believers and militant atheists are being marginalised by the rise of those for whom faith and unbelief are intertwined, or at least not so easily separated. (Imagine a dialogue between a faithful Mass-going Catholic who is disillusioned with the Church and a Catholic who no longer goes to church but spends time in nature because "it feels more spiritual". Then imagine either of them talking to a militant atheist or believer convinced they have all the answers.)

The "soft secularisation", especially among the young believers-without-belonging, the seeker-searchers, is the place where Halík discovers the "hidden Christian stream" in Western culture, one that often reflects an intrinsic religiosity – open, tolerant, flexible, socially sensitive, sacrificial, sympathetic. The point here is that *how* we believe (*fides qua*) is as important as *what* we believe (*fides quae*): converted life, in other words, shows in how we live in relationship to God, Creation and each other. Whatever I might believe about the origin of the universe, what affirms my relationship with God is how I treat fellow creatures, human and non-human. The Spirit blows where it wills; faith can be manifest, or latent; God is welcomed, or resisted, in humans' hearts, whatever their belief.

So when there is a growing disjuncture between those two, when we are confronted with the "faith of unbelievers" – especially the fanaticism that masks unbelief, belonging without believing, Catholicism without Christianity – in contrast to the "unbelief of believers", Halík's point resonates. The old categories dividing belief from unbelief, faith from atheism, practising from non-practising, are insufficient.

In calling Catholicism to a humble, dialogical, "third ecumenism", Halík means not just building a bridge between Churches and faiths, but now between believers and nones. The future of Christianity, he says in *Afternoon*, "will depend primarily on the extent to which Christians relate to the spiritual seekers among the nones". This is a mission *ad gentes*, not to small groups: nones are the third largest "religious" group in Western society, after Christians and Muslims, but won't be for long. Recently Switzerland became the first country where more citizens claim no religious affiliation (34 per cent) than the largest religious group, the Catholics (32 per cent). In culturally church-going America, those who deeply dislike organised religion have been growing for three decades, and are close now to a third of the population.

HALÍK'S CONVICTION that the Church needs to learn to accompany seekers has grown over time. He knows this requires a culture shift, a humility, to carry out; for

the risk – he writes in his memoir – is that “not only they but we, too, will be transformed, because we do not possess the whole truth; the truth is our common goal”. Rather than an apologetic, proselytising approach that seeks to squeeze the nones into the existing boundaries of the Church, he says “these boundaries need to be crossed and opened up”. *The Afternoon of Christianity* is about this call to self-transcendence in a time of transition, and its dangers and opportunities. It is about the fork in the road the Church has now reached: whether to hunker down in beleaguered self-referentiality, or to go out of itself to encounter the risen Christ appearing in barely recognisable forms in the Galilee of our day.

BECAUSE THE constant in Halík’s extraordinary life is Charles University, I begin our email exchange by asking about the shootings there just before Christmas. A 24-year-old masters student of world history with no criminal record shot and killed 14 people (two of them were lecturers, the rest students) in the Faculty of Philosophy building. The day after, Halík organised a prayer in the academic parish church, which was packed to overflowing. “There are times when even ‘non-believers’ feel that secular language and secular gestures are unable to express what they are experiencing,” he tells me, adding that at such times, churches should be “field hospitals”, part of the social immune system that builds the social capital of trust and solidarity, offering a space where painful questions can be asked and prayed over.

The shootings were not just the isolated acts of a seriously disturbed young man but a sign of what he calls “a dramatic change in the moral climate of society”, marked by widespread feelings of disorientation and anxiety, depression and despair. This is a well documented phenomenon, which explains the rise of populists and conspiracy theories, and Halík, a trained psychotherapist, has seen it at first hand in the increase in unstable and depressed young people.

It is a sign of the times to which he believes the Church must urgently attend, and it saddens him, as it does Francis, that so many church leaders remain obsessed with slogans from culture wars long since lost, harping on narrow moral questions while oblivious to the epidemic of malaise in society, seen especially in the young. He sees this institutional detachment as a defensive clinging to a confessionally closed, counter-cultural, modernity-era “Catholicism”.

Those who cling to the myth of an unchanging institution in a time of rapid change are rejecting the Easter journey, refusing to accept the suffering and death necessary for the profound transformation of the Resurrection. They are deeply mistaken, he says, for what is alive is always changing – even a dead body that is decomposing. “Today we can smell the stench of dead forms of Christianity,” Halík tells me.

*The Afternoon of Christianit*y uses a metaphor from depth psychology to capture the coming era on whose threshold we are now poised. Carl Jung uses the day to describe the dynamic of human growth (at the end of each day, the cycle starts back again): the morning of life is youth and early adulthood, a time of hunger for achievement, when we develop a persona or outer face that allows us to build career and family. Then comes the noonday, the mid-life crisis, a time of disorientation,

depression and burn-out. If a person can get through this, and use it to integrate what they had been evading, to face the truth about themselves, they are ready for the "afternoon" of maturity, depth and humility, to abandoning their myth of self-sufficiency, and uncovering their buried talents. For this journey, spirituality – the discovery that God is much greater than our schemes, which helps us through death into new life – is key; without it, people risk the egotistic neuroses of "bad ageing": rigidity, self-pity, suspicion, and the embarrassing, self-defeating attempts to go back to the morning.

The Church's morning, in this metaphor, is the first millennium of Christianity, well into the Middle Ages: the construction of *Christianitas*, or Christendom, the building up of its juridical institutional framework and a complex body of doctrine. The Church built a powerful persona, becoming culturally dominant, a major player, capable of uniting and reshaping disparate nations and languages, above all in Europe. Then came the long midday of modernity: Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, secularisation. These phases, including the last, knocked the Church off various perches, but did not bring about the decline of Christianity, but its transformation. (Indeed, secularisation is the continued outworking of the Gospel's desacralisation of power, for which the medieval "division of spheres" laid the foundation.)

The story of late or post-modernity is that the role of *religio* – the system of rituals and beliefs expressing the identity of society – is no longer played by the Christian faith; and the gospel-inspired institutions that so shaped Western culture, the schools and hospitals, have been taken over by the state. The Church has become culturally homeless, treated as a "world view" among others, a private institution concerned with the morality, beliefs and practices that unite a community. And in so doing, it has too often accepted the secular humanist view of it as an ideology, a system of ideas and principles that it seeks to persuade society to adopt. It is this "ideological" Catholicism – one that identifies the Church with the juridical institution and the clerical caste, and reduces faith to assent to beliefs – that is now in crisis. The midday is a time of purification. Francis has so often named the corruptions: clericalism, moralism, neo-Pelagianism and neo-Gnosticism, worldliness, triumphalism. They are a form of ecclesio centrism, or ecclesial egotism, that displaces the centrality of Christ and makes the Church itself the object.

The Second Vatican Council enabled this move away from the ideological trap. But the Council showed the way to go, not the destination; it allowed the Church to seek a more universal, ecumenical living space, yet it happened, says Halík, at the moment modernity itself entered into crisis, and institutions began to lose legitimacy. In the abuse and other crises, the Church itself entered a sharp phase of its mid-life crisis, a deepening darkness at noon just before the afternoon breaks in.

Christianity has always had different forms, and the transitions between its eras are always marked by crisis and uncertainty, as well as a deepening of spirituality. Halík believes today's post-secular search must avoid two pitfalls or temptations

characteristic of the midday crisis: the resurgence of identitarian Catholicism, whether in traditionalism or national-populism; and the lure of a spirituality outside the Church and tradition – what Francis would call a "gnostic" spirituality. The afternoon of Christianity, Halík believes, will be born not of these, but of those who have lived through the dark night of the twentieth-century Church.

When I ask him for some examples of bad ageing risks for the Church, he focuses on "the illusion that we are already at the goal", when we are, in fact, on the way together, as the Greek word *syn-hodos* makes clear. That is why Francis' call to develop the mindset and practices of synodality are so important. The search for Christianity's new home is a call to "rediscover our identity," he tells me, while realising that "our identity does not lie in a system of doctrinal or institutional structures, but is constituted by the Risen Christ and his Spirit. The process of the Resurrection in the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the world is still ongoing; we must always seek the Christ who is *semper maior*, always greater than our ideas and concepts.

THE MODERN heresy of traditionalism opposes the very essence of tradition by attempting to fix for all time what is a living stream, to make an idol of what is relative – the "form" of Christianity. Halík is brilliant and scathing about the rage of opposition to Francis, the growth of traditionalism in seminaries, and the pandemic of clerical abuse of minors over decades. He sees the last as partly a compensation by some priests for the loss of secular power, which they made up for "by exercising and abusing their own power and authority within the Church, particularly in relation to the defenceless, to children and to women, who did not enjoy their full rights within the Catholic Church, and still do not".

But Halík also critiques progressives who suffer from the same temptation to "fix" the crisis with superficial measures: that if only we changed this or that structure, that part of canon law, those morality textbooks, we would be "credible". The German *Synodaler Weg* process is responding honestly to issues Francis himself has raised, Halík believes, asking "questions that cannot be tabooed", but it puts too much faith in reform programmes; German Protestant Churches have carried out those reforms yet still suffer exculturation. Halík believes – and in this, he echoes exactly Francis' idea of synodal conversion – that the prerequisite for any true reform is a change in our horizon, a spiritual deepening, rather than the celebrity changes proposed by progressives as panaceas. In his address to the European synodal assembly in Prague in March last year, Halík called this "self-realisation through self transcendence", arguing that "the turn of Christianity towards synodality, the transformation of the Church into a dynamic community of pilgrims, can have an impact on the destiny of the whole human family".

Halík was kept awake at night during Covid, haunted by the shuttered, empty churches. He saw them as a prophetic sign of the future, an acceleration of the trends de-churching Europe (which – as our Cardiff figures show – is what, in fact, happened). In a widely read article, "Christianity in a time of sickness", he predicted

the empty churches would be the future if we continued to put off the pastoral conversion of the Church to which Francis is calling us. A field hospital Church, Halík argued, must offer competent diagnosis (to help people read the signs of the times), a prevention strategy (strengthening the system of immunity against infectious ideologies such as populism, nationalism and fundamentalism), as well as provision for therapy and long-term recovery (reconciling and healing of wounds after times of violence and injustice).

AFTERNOON fleshes all this out, looking ahead, in its final chapters, to the Church as source of a new humanism. And he suggests four "ecclesiological concepts" as guiding principles: the Church as People of God journeying through history; the Church as a school of wisdom, helping people search for the truth; the Church as a field hospital; and the Church as a place of encounter and conversation, of accompaniment and reconciliation. All four are key themes that have emerged from the synod on synodality. From Miskin to Prague to Rome, it seems as if the Spirit is beginning to sketch out the contours of the afternoon home of Christianity.

So often in Christian history the major reformations have failed to meet, existing side by side, or in deadly rivalry: not just the Lutheran and the Catholic, but in recent times, the Second Vatican Council and the rise of evangelical Christianity. Maybe now, says Halík, there is a chance for Francis' synodal and missionary reform to meet and engage with "none" spirituality, to come out of itself to accompany that restlessness and searching, to meet that anguished, unquiet, young heart in the Galilee of contemporary culture. And there, just maybe, we'll meet the risen Christ, in a form we will struggle at first to recognise, and he'll lead us with our "none" friends into our new afternoon home.

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