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On the Threshold of Mystery: Tomáš Halík on Cultural Witness in an Age of Uncertainty and Change

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Abstract: Tomáš Halík (born 1 June 1948) has established himself as one of the most thoughtful commentators on public cultural witness in a time of change and uncertainty, especially in central Europe. As an academic at Charles University (founded 1348) and a Catholic priest in the "Academic Parish of Prague", Halík played an important role during and following the collapse of Marxism in Czechoslovakia in the "Velvet Revolution" of November—December 1989, even being mentioned as a possible successor to Czech President Václav Havel, while at the same time offering reflections on religious engagement with a complex and changing secular culture. This article engages some leading themes of Halík's approach to cultural witness, focusing especially on cultural quests for false certainties, the need for churches to create liminal spaces enabling seekers to grasp what lies at the heart of the Christian faith, the dangers of romanticizing a lost past of faith which encourages disengagement with the present, and the need to understand faith in terms of a constant movement of thought rather than a fixed system of ideas. The article considers how these ideas can find wider application in engaging the challenges of cultural witness, particularly in a European context, and what can be learned from them.

Keywords: Academic Parish of Prague; atheism; Czech Republic; Tomáš Halík; liminality; Marxism; mystery; postsecularism; seekers; secularism; Charles Taylor

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1. Introduction

The Czech Catholic priest and academic Tomáš Halík (born 1948) has established himself as a winsome and gracious religious voice in contemporary reflection on cultural witness, bringing together the virtues of intellectual excellence, cultural perceptiveness, and personal humility. He is a figure who is held in great esteem in my own university, the University of Oxford, which awarded him an honorary Doctorate in Divinity in 2016. He played a major role in the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989 (Vaněk and Mücke 2016) which ended Marxist rule in his native Czechoslovakia. Halík's most significant contribution to contemporary Christian thinking arguably lies in the domain of cultural witness—the complex, multifaceted, and critically important practice of exhibiting, embodying, and explaining the Christian faith in a cultural context that is weary of simplistic answers to complex questions and suspicious of appeals to past certainties. Although many studies of political and social change in Central and Eastern Europe reflect an outdated sociological universalism that treats this region as a politically and culturally undifferentiated whole, it is clear that there are certain distinctively Czech features of the "Velvet Revolution" which highlight the importance of local approaches to cultural engagement and witness (Marada 1997; Halík 2003). Halík's cautious correlation of political and theological themes in his Prague ministry helped secure a significant role for religion in the initial phase of the Velvet Revolution, even though this was not sustained subsequently.

This article explores a central concern that is engaged by Halík, namely developing forms of cultural witness that are relevant to societies that seem to be losing their connections with their Christian past, such as the Czech Republic. In engaging this question, an historicophilosophical methodology will be used to determine Halík's views from primary

sources, linked with an assessment of how these ideas developed in relation to his historical context, and the manner in which he applied them through his writing and his ministry in Prague. While this method is entirely appropriate for the specific purposes of this article, a more thorough investigation would need to use additional methods, such as determining the extent to which Halík is cited, both in Czech and other languages, and the specific aspects of his thought which are picked up and developed by his readers. Halík's basic question of concern for cultural witness is stated with admirable clarity as follows:

> What will be Christianity's future role in a society where 'secular culture' will have forced the ecclesiastical form of faith onto the fringes of society, among 'interest groups', and in which 'the pursuit of faith' will be regarded as a private free-time activity—as a private 'hobby'? (Halík 2015b, p. 58)

In what follows, we shall consider Halík's complex approach to this question, and how it might inform and stimulate the task of bearing cultural witness more widely in a European context.

2. Introducing Tomáš Halík

Tomáš Halík was born on 1 June 1948, four months after the post-war Marxist coup in Czechoslovakia. He studied sociology, philosophy, and psychology, and graduated with a doctorate from the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University in Prague (Halík 2019). At that time, Czechoslovakia was part of the Soviet Bloc, and severe restrictions were placed on the churches and clergy. Halík studied theology in secret and was ordained into the Catholic priesthood in Erfurt in 1978 in a private clandestine ceremony. For the next eleven years, he served as a priest in the "underground church", and became a close associate of Cardinal František Tomášek (1899–1992), Archbishop of Prague. The "Prague Spring" of 1968 created an appetite for social and political reform in Czechoslovakia and was a significant factor in leading to the eventual fall of Marxism in the bloodless "Velvet Revolution" of 1989 and the renewal of interest in Catholicism in the region. The re-emergence of Catholicism as a significant presence was reaffirmed through John Paul II's April 1990 visit to Czechoslovakia. In 1993, Czechoslovakia dissolved itself peacefully into the Czech and Slovak Republics in a process generally known as the "Velvet Divorce".

After the ending of Communist rule, Halík served as General Secretary to the Czechoslovakian Conference of Bishops (1990–1993) and lectured in pastoral psychology and sociology at the re-established Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague. In 1990, Halík became the parish priest of the "Academic Parish of Prague (Akademická farnost Praha)" based at the church of St Salvator in the Old Town of Prague [1]. He has retained this position since then, developing this institution as a center of cultural witness in the Czech capital city.

Halík's importance for the theme of "cultural witness" is best considered under three broad categories. First, his extensive period of ministry in the "Academic Parish of Prague" led to him developing ways of communicating the Christian faith in a shifting context, aiming to connect with a growing number of "seekers" drawn to the intellectual and spiritual vision of the Christian faith, yet uneasy about its institutionalized aspects or potential implications (Staněk 2008; Grün et al. 2019, pp. 72–84). Second, he was concerned about how the church related to a post-Marxist cultural situation, in which he believed it made some errors of judgment and failed to respond sensitively to a changing cultural mood. Third, Halík offered a theologically informed account of how churches might learn something from the shifting cultural mood, exploring this in works such as *Patience with God* and *Night of the Confessor*. We shall consider these three themes throughout this article, as we explore what might be learned from Halík's carefully considered insights on cultural witness.

3. The "Academic Parish of Prague": Halík on Ministering to "Seekers"

Over the last thirty years, the Academic Parish of Prague has provided both pastoral care and theological support to students, teachers, and employees of Prague universities.

Halík and his colleagues created "a platform, rather than a parish, where people, both believers and non-believers, could meet to receive spiritual support, support their social life, and cultivate their intellectual capacity" (Muchova 2021, p. 61). Many were drawn to Halík's distinctive form of institutionally embodied ministry, which is perhaps more that of a university professor than that of a regular parish priest. The preaching ministry of the parish was smented in the 2010s by the establishment of regular retreats at Kolín, a former Capuchin monastery (ibid., pp. 69–70).

For Halík, the need for cultural witness raises a fundamental ecclesiological question: "Should the Church function as a comfortable home for dwellers or should it *also* become an open space for seekers?" (Halík 2015b, p. 129, emphasis added). Halík points out the need to move away from "the traditional believers-nonbelievers paradigm to the new *seekers-dwellers paradigm*" (ibid., p. 127, italics in original). This way of thinking, originally developed by the American sociologist Robert Wuthnow and subsequently by the Canadian philosopher and social theorist Charles Taylor (Wuthnow 1998, pp. 3–9; Taylor 2012) has clear relevance for cultural witness in the Czech situation, while having a wider appeal. While simplifications are dangerous, many of those who attended these events at the Academic Parish of Prague are to be seen as "seekers", rather than those who have found a settled faith or feel that they "belong" within established Christian institutional structures.[2] So how can such "seekers" be addressed?

In his remarkable book *Patience with God*,[3] Halík emphasizes the importance of the "fringe"—the liminal zone at the interface between the church and the world, which prevents that church from becoming a sect, rather than a church in the proper sense of the word (Halík 2009, p. 77). The "fringe" is a "zone of questions and doubts" (ibid., p. 9), where a "seeking church" can encounter and engage seekers who are both curious and shy and prefer to remain on the margins of an institution they distrust. The maintenance of this fringe is thus essential to the continuing ministry of the church, not least in providing a space within which those whose original faith has been shaken can arrive at a deeper faith that is at home with paradox. Christians must thus be willing to be "seekers with those who seek and questioners with those who question" (ibid., p. 8; cf. Kočí 2014). Christians should "read scripture and live the faith also from the standpoint of our profound solidarity with people who are religiously seeking, and, if need be, with those who experience God's hiddenness and transcendence 'from the other side'" (ibid., pp. 18–19).

Halík suggests that the gospel narrative of the encounter between Zacchaeus and Christ (Lk 19: 1–10) opens up a way of envisaging the tasks and strategies of a church in this age of uncertainty. Zacchaeus is a paradigmatic "curious seeker" who dwells on the fringes of belief, watching from a distance and maintaining that distance. Like many seekers of today, Zacchaeus was neither "indifferent nor hostile" to faith. Though clearly drawn to Christ, Zacchaeus chose to stand at a safe distance from him as he reflected on his potential significance (ibid., p. 3). Many of those on the margins of the church are seekers who have *chosen* to remain within their own safe places. These seekers

> . . . are still on the journey, dusty and far from the goal. They are not yet 'ready' to display themselves to others in the full light of day, maybe because they find themselves in a blind alley on their life's journey. . . . And yet they sense the urgent moment when something of importance passes by them. It has a force of attraction, as it had for Zacchaeus, who longed to set eyes on Jesus. (ibid., p. 6)

For Halík, the gospel story of Zacchaeus helped him to frame his "own particular mission and vocation"—not as a missionary seeking to convert people, but as an understanding neighbor who could show and explain what faith was all about. This task demands patience and a willingness to respect a seeker's hesitations. "Let's not drag these seekers onto our side too hastily. Let us respect the rhythm of their journey. Let us respect their self-understanding and give them time and freedom to decide when—and if ever—they want to take the step of name change" (ibid., p. 103).

Yet Halík's approach is freighted with ecclesiological implications. Many churches that hold to an Augustinian "mixed-body" ecclesiology recognize the importance of the

“fringe”, a liminal zone between the church and the world in which seekers can attend and explore without commitment. Many find that cathedrals offer a hospitable space for curious outsiders to attend anonymously without expectations, facilitating the kind of encounter that Halík seems to have in mind (Doležalová and Foletti 2019). Some churches, however, adopt a more Donatist ecclesiology, creating an expectation of explicit commitment on the part of those who attend that might deter seekers who prefer to stand on the fringes, watching and wondering. Halík’s reflections on the need to engage the “zone of questions and doubts” clearly raise the question of how such a safe space on the threshold of the church might be created and deployed apologetically.

One model is provided by the “Alpha Course”, a highly influential form of cultural engagement and outreach pioneered at a London church, Holy Trinity Brompton. This course involves the creation of a neutral exploratory space, in which life’s great questions can be explored in a context that is tolerant of “questions and doubts” (Atherstone 2022). As has often been pointed out, although this course introduces what C. S. Lewis famously termed “mere Christianity” (McGrath 2013; Marsden 2016)—a basic, consensual Christian orthodoxy—this can be smented locally with doctrines and practices that are denominationally specific.

Yet perhaps the most authentic instantiation of Halík’s approach is found in his own “Academic Parish of Prague”, which both respects and engages the doubts and questions of a distinct audience of urban and educated people. In her important study of the work of this parish, Adela Muchova (2021) points out, drawing on the work of the Austrian Catholic theologian Paul Zulehner, that too many churches give answers to “questions that nobody is asking”, while being “silent on questions which are important for people” (p. 61). The sociological specificity of the audience for Halík’s homilies is thus to be seen as a strength, rather than a weakness. “The specific character of the parish, serving primarily to a community of people affiliated with institutions of higher education, emphasizes the speaker’s responsibility to address this specific congregation no matter how non-appealing it might be for others” (ibid., pp. 66–68).

By engaging an audience that he knew, and whose concerns he understood, Halík ensured that a wider audience sharing those concerns would be drawn to hear him. Halík’s homilies—which were typically 15 min long—were smented by the more detailed team-taught “Basics of Faith Course (*Kurz základů víry*)”, which allowed more thorough engagement with questions of faith once individuals felt ready to explore these (ibid., pp. 66–68). These lectures were delivered by Halík, other parish team members, or guest speakers every Tuesday evening between 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. over a period of two academic years in the sacristy of St Salvator, the largest public space within the church.

Yet the institutional context is only part of this process; it is also important to note the distinctive voice of Halík himself as a “personal convinced doubter”, more concerned to explore questions than offering “concrete and restrictive answers” (ibid., p. 62; cf. Kočí and Roubík 2015). Halík’s essay “Befriending the Nonbeliever within” (Grün et al. 2019, pp. 123–38) sets out the apologetic strategy that lies behind this approach, helping us understand how Halík aims to step into the *persona* of an atheist or doubter and explore those concerns sympathetically as one who understands, and at times perhaps even shares, such concerns, and difficulties. “I sometimes feel closer with my Christian faith to the skeptics or to the atheist or agnostic critics of religion . . . However, I regard their interpretation of this feeling as too hasty, as an expression of impatience” (Halík 2009, p. ix).

4. Halík on Witnessing Amidst a Shifting Cultural Mood

During the period of Marxist rule in Czechoslovakia following the Second World War, many saw the church as offering a powerful and attractive moral vision in the face of an authoritarian government. The fall of Marxism might, therefore, have been expected to lead to a sustained resurgence in Christianity. Yet, as Halík noted, nothing of the sort happened.

> According to opinion polls the Church achieved immediately after the fall of communism in the eyes of the Czech public an authority that it had clearly never

> enjoyed previously in modern history. However, the situation began to change sharply in the following years: according to current opinion polls, fewer people in the Czech Republic than in any other European country—with the possible exception of the former GDR—acknowledge membership of the Church or a faith articulated through the Church.[4] (Halík 2015a, p. 48)

So what went wrong? Halík's analysis is important for two reasons: first, in understanding the situation at this time in Czechoslovakia; and second, in explaining why he developed his own specific approach to cultural outreach.

Following the "Velvet Revolution", Halík argues, the Czech Catholic church seemed to many outsiders to become increasingly concerned with its internal structures and preoccupied with preserving its social influence as an institution. Those who were questing for an authentic spiritual experience found these developments puzzling and alienating. Why such inwardness and self-preoccupation? Why not be attentive to the sense of receptivity towards the spiritual in Czech culture? Since most Czechs can be seen as "seekers" of one sort or another, rather than as "dwellers", the church's perceived self-preoccupation since the "Velvet Revolution" quickly became a barrier to outreach and engagement.

Although many in the West now regard Czechs as generally atheist, more reliable research suggests a wide level of interest in non-materialist interpretations of reality and spiritualities (Hamplová 2013), linked with suspicion of religious institutions. They are seekers, who nevertheless keep their distance from an institution they distrust, and whose ideas they find difficult to understand and correlate with their own existential, moral, and emotional questions. Yet the Czech Catholic church seemed unwilling or unable to adapt to this changed cultural situation. As Halík pointed out, "instead of initiation to the mysteries of faith, memorizing the catechism was imposed" (Kočí and Roubík 2015, p. 100). Faith was framed in terms of assent to external norms, not in terms of internal appropriation and appreciation of a faith that led to a transformation of both life and thought.

As his preaching ministry at the Academic Parish of Prague makes clear, Halík believes that it is possible to respond to these developments. A central theme in his writings concerns the need to be attentive to the historical and cultural location of such "seekers", and to translate the Christian faith into categories and vocabularies that carry conviction for them. He thus highlights the extent to which what many consider to be "traditional" Christian views are actually quite recent and are shaped by cultural forces in ways that often represent diminishments or distortions of earlier and wiser formulations of faith.

For this reason, Halík commends a critical appropriation of the Christian past, which he considers to have the potential to engage today's challenges. "Conservative Christians are surprised when we show them how relatively modern and extremely limited is the form of Christianity that they wish to conserve, and what enormous intellectual and spiritual wealth resides in much older traditions of the church" (Halík 2017, p. 57). Halík's particular concern is that more recent forms of Christianity represent uninterrogated accommodations to the Enlightenment, which "marked the beginning of theology's inability to respond creatively to the changing picture of the world". As a result, it found itself trapped in a particular cultural framework, without the means to reform and revitalize itself.

In some ways, Halík's understanding of theology resembles the British public philosopher Mary Midgley's approach to philosophy, which she stated with particular clarity and force in her final book *What is Philosophy for?* Our philosophies, Midgley declared, can never be considered definitive or final; they are best seen as appropriate interim responses to a changing cultural context.

> Philosophizing, in fact, is not a matter of solving one fixed set of puzzles. Instead, it involves finding the many particular ways of thinking that will be the most helpful as we try to explore this constantly changing world. Because the world—including human life—does constantly change, philosophical thoughts are never final. Their aim is always to help us through the present difficulty. (Midgley 2018, p. 6; cf. McGrath 2020)

Halík holds that theological statements are not to be seen as fixed and definitive, but are rather stated in forms and ways that are appropriate for expressing and conveying the mystery of God in a range of cultural contexts. Every generation of Christian leaders has to articulate faith in terms that make sense to their cultural context, rather than merely mechanically repeat theological formulations of the past. Any formulation of faith which refuses to acknowledge its own cultural location will encounter difficulties in engaging a new cultural location.

Halík's analysis of how Christianity might respond to the cultural changes of recent decades is partly shaped by his analysis of how it came to find itself in this situation in the first place. Although he engages the nature of modernity at several points in his works, his most significant analysis is found in *I Want You to Be* (Halík 2017). The God who modernity found irrelevant is itself a modernist construction, one of many "inventions of the Enlightenment thinkers" that need to be challenged and reconsidered—not least through retrieving older and wiser insights. "It was not until Kierkegaard, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and 'death of God' theology that Christian theology came to realize that the death of God announced by Nietzsche and others was *the death of the banal god of modern times* and that that event could be liberating for Christian faith" (ibid., p. 59, italics in original).

By demanding an excessively objective account of faith, modernity severed the long-standing connections between an objective statement of faith and its subjective aspects, leading to a form of faith that is both deficient and discontinuous with a richer and older tradition of faith (cf. McGrath 2022). Halík's concern is that many Christians have mistakenly assumed that this specific and "historically conditioned form of Christianity" is normative for all times—despite its relatively recent historical origins and its clear emotional and imaginative deficiencies. "Theology in those early days of modernity adopted unthinkingly, inadvertently—and hence uncritically—modernity's division of reality into subject and object" (Halík 2017, p. 59).

Halík's concern is that modernism creates a false objective God, to be studied with scientific detachment, lacking any engagement with the interior world of human beings—and thus facilitating the rise of secularism. For Halík, secular humanism is the tragic and unintended consequence of Christian theology failing to respond empathetically or creatively to modernity. Secularism can thus be seen as the "prodigal son" or the "unwanted child" of Western Christianity. Halík argues that the banal and emaciated gods of modernity—whether secular or Christian—must be discarded and replaced with the living God of the mystics, who defies the neat rational categorizations of modernist philosophers and theologians.

Halík's concerns about forms of Christianity that have overaccommodated to modernity are borne out by many recent influential interventions in the world of natural and social science, which point to the human sciences and the natural sciences as two epistemically distinct enterprises, yielding different forms of knowledge (McGrath 2019). Karl Popper suggested that scientific knowledge is "knowledge without a knower" (Popper 1979, p. 109). In the same way, modernist approaches to God seem to offer an emotionally and imaginatively deficient account of God, which fails to do justice to the concerns, needs, and interests of the "knower". Similarly, Emile Durkheim suggests that the basic principle of the sociological method is that "social facts must be studied as things, that is, as realities external to the individual" (Durkheim 2002, p. xxxvi).

There are important parallels here between Halík and other European writers who have expressed misgivings about the existential dreariness and distance of modernist over-intellectualized notions of God. In his influential work *The Master and His Emissary*, Iain McGilchrist suggests that we can adopt two rather different approaches to reality (and God). One, drawing on the rationalism of the bygone "Age of Reason", represents the world in a way that is "fixed, static, isolated, decontextualised, explicit, disembodied . . . [and] ultimately lifeless" (McGilchrist 2019, p. 93). While this form of encounter with the world possesses the somewhat limited virtue of rational clarity, people (unsurprisingly) feel detached and disengaged from it. The other mode of engagement, however, offers a vision

of reality that is "interconnected, implicit, incarnate", which is "in the nature of things never fully graspable, always imperfectly known". This form of engagement, however, makes emotional sense of the world and is capable of connecting with humanity's deepest intuitions and aspirations.

5. Waiting at the Threshold of the Mystery of God

Halík insists that we need to recognize the limits of any attempt to conceptualize God, in that this runs the risk of reducing God to human categories or theories, and then treating these limiting categories and theories—rather than the inexhaustible actuality of the living God—as the basis of certainty and trust. For Halík, the "first and last sentence of any theology" should be the words "God is mystery" (Halík 2009, p. 46). Yet despite his emphasis on mystery, Halík believes that it is possible to speak positively of God in a culture that so clearly needs to rediscover the transcendent dimensions of life. The unlimited reality of God is such that our institutions, reflections, and actions can never capture the full reality of this mystery (ibid., p. 9); it is something that must be encountered, experienced, and—however inadequately—*expressed* and *embodied*.

Some have suggested that there seems to be an inconsistency here. How can Halík "make such an easy link between God and the meaningful order of reality and, at the same time, claim that God is an unknown mystery?" (Kočí and Roubík 2015, p. 123). In responding to this concern, we need to concede that there has always been a tension in Christian thought between recognizing that the gospel cannot be adequately framed and conveyed in human language on the one hand, and the more pragmatic insistence that we have to use human words in order to proclaim the realities that lie at the heart of faith on the other (Eilers 2011). This is a significant theme in the theology of Rowan Williams, who writes of the "*gratuitous mysteriousness* of what theology deals with, a sense of language trying unsuccessfully to keep up with a datum that is in excess of any foresight, any imagined comprehensive structure" (Williams 2000, p. xv; italics added). Christ is thus the basis of both a disruptive and critical theology challenging the adequacy of our accounts of God, and a celebrative theology that rejoices in what can be known of God in Christ.

In a similar manner, Halík emphasizes the unique capacity of Jesus Christ as the "fullest self-expression" of God, the "best real symbol and forceful sign of God's presence for us and among us". Perhaps most importantly of all, Christ is the "window through which we see God at work", the "face of the invisible and name of the unnameable" (Halík 2009, p. 137). Halík's reflections on the death and resurrection of Christ—too rich to summarize here—undergird his vision of the central role of Christ in disclosing a God who penetrates the dark spaces of human life.

Although Halík's concerns and approaches at this point can be understood on their own terms, it is helpful to remember that Halík was a student of the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (Kočí 2014, p. 51), who made some significant critiques of modernist accounts of God (Dodd 2018). Patočka argued that modernity, taking its cues from Descartes (Patočka 1996, pp. 83–84, 110), developed a new form of rationalism—a "rationalism of mastery". A core element of this rationalist remastering of God was the insistence on a univocal sense of God. "The univocalization of God is the first step of removing God's mystery. The problem of 'God in Question' might be restated as the struggle between *mastery* and *mystery*—the shift from *intellectus* (seeking an insight) to *ratio* (an instrument of clear and distinct knowledge)" (Kočí 2014, p. 55, italics in original).

The inevitable outcomes of this transition have been unhelpful theologically. In the first place, God comes to be seen as one of many things or objects in the world that are for that reason amenable to scientific analysis. In the second, God has been relocated from the realm of human *understanding* to the more intellectualized realm of *explanation*. As Dilthey famously remarked, "we *explain* nature, but we *understand* the life of the soul" (Dilthey 1961, p. 144, emphasis added; cf. Apel 1979; Taylor 1980). The philosopher Richard Swinburne, for example, treats God primarily as an "explanatory hypothesis" which aims to explain our experience of the world (Swinburne 2008, p. 16), rather than as enriching the life of

the soul. Halík argues that this reduces God to the level of the rational, and thus fails to grasp or express the conceptual immensity and existential inexhaustibility of God, which reason is unable to fully comprehend or master. “Understanding is not directed toward a discrete object, but involves seeing the relation of parts to other parts and perhaps even the relation of part to a whole” (Zagzebski 2001, p. 241). Understanding thus involves grasping coherence, seeing how things “fit” or “hang” together, and how we fit into this greater scheme of things (Greco 2021, p. 130).

In arguing for the recovery of understanding as a religiously significant category, Halík draws on an insight of the Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe, who was highly critical of those who believed that the idea of God was introduced simply to resolve the puzzles of the world. McCabe was emphatic: theology draws attention to a mystery—the mystery that stands at the heart of the Christian faith. McCabe thus emphasizes the importance of the category of mystery in challenging simplistic forms of faith, which lack the depth and richness of the living God of faith (McCabe 2010, p. 128). Mystery is something that is irreducible, defying the human yearning to conquer and master reality as an act of control or hegemony. We need to be receptive to mystery, to the “Depth of Being” that invites and excites us to ask questions that open up new ways of understanding our world, rather than merely explaining its functions.

Halík suggests that post-Marxist Czech culture wanted quick and easy answers to deep questions and thus found itself drawn to shallow ways of thinking which, “like cheap instant coffee, offer to slake the thirst for transcendence quickly and simply” (Grün et al. 2019, pp. 36–37). It lacked patience and a willingness to immerse and explore something deep and complex. A mystery cannot be mastered; in the end, it masters us, demanding that we adapt our apprehension of the world to accommodate it, rather than reducing it to what we can intellectually manage. Halík insists that a real mystery cannot be overcome or conquered. “One must wait patiently at its threshold and persevere in it—must carry it in one’s heart—just as Jesus’s mother did” (Halík 2009, p. x).

In making this important point, Halík draws on the French existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel’s distinction between a “mystery” and a “problem” (Hernandez 2018). The world of problems is the domain of science, rational inquiry, and technical control. We live in a “broken world” which is resistant to a disinterested total comprehension. This “broken world” is “riddled with problems” on the one hand yet is “determined to allow no room for mystery” on the other (Marcel 1995, p. 12). A problem is something that can be viewed objectively, and for which we can find a possible solution. A mystery, however, is something that we cannot view objectively, precisely because we cannot separate ourselves from it (ibid., p. 117). While problems can give rise to universal or generalized solutions, mysteries simply do not admit such generalized solutions. Life, according to Marcel, is thus not a problem to be solved *theoretically* but a mystery to be lived out *existentially*.

Developing this point, Halík (2012) argues that, from a Christian perspective, faith is what draws us into “the Mystery that is called God” (p. 59). Faith is perhaps best seen as “a journey, a way of seeking, a way into the depths of meaning” (Halík 2015b, p. 128). It is about approaching a mystery that cannot be mastered epistemically or exhausted spiritually, something that helps us to understand and cope with the challenges and enigmas of life, but which cannot be reduced to the banality of an explanation or expressed with the confidence of the pseudo-certainties of cultural and religious fundamentalisms.

This means that we cannot achieve certainty or fixity in our ideas, in that these are grounded in a dynamic and continuing engagement with the reality of God, as we confront new situations that demand a translation of our language about God. Faith changes us, as it causes us to grow in wisdom. Certainty is simply not an option in relation to what Karl Popper famously termed “ultimate questions”—such as the meaning of life, or the nature of the good. Only *shallow* truths or explanations can be proved to be correct—and such truths lack relational and existential traction.

Halík’s analysis of mystery may be helpfully set against Jorge Luis Borges’s playful critique of those who aspire to precision and exactitude in the human comprehension and

representation of complex realities. Borges invites us to imagine a map that corresponds precisely with the details of the territory it represented. To capture every aspect of this rich landscape, the map had to be expanded to the point where it became unusable. "The Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province" (Borges 1998). To map a mystery requires "a map on a scale of 1:1" (Peters 2008, pp. 10–15), a map of depth and vastness corresponding to what is being mapped. The best way of discovering this mystery is not through consulting a map, but by entering this territory and journeying through it, experiencing its immensity and struggling to express this in words. This brings us to consider Halík's critique of the quest for certainty in Western culture and its debilitating effects on religious faith.

6. The Search for False Certainties

"Faith does not mean to rely on pillars of certainty but to enter the clouds of mystery and accept faith as a challenge" (Grün et al. 2019, p. xvi). Halík's emphatic criticism of the shallow certainties of ideologies and worldviews counters a cultural trend that inevitably leads to fundamentalisms, whether religious or secular. In 2006, the movement now known as "New Atheism" captured the public imagination in parts of the West. Writers such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett set out what were asserted to be a set of simple rational certainties, backed up by the natural sciences, which made religion a cultural and intellectual irrelevance. The journalist Gary Wolf coined the term "New Atheism" in 2006 to refer to the messianic atheism of Dawkins and his colleagues and highlight the rhetorically aggressive means by which they asserted their beliefs (Wolf 2006). Wolf was struck by the trenchant certainties of this form of atheism, which many people found arrogant and improbable, amounting to a significant intellectual overreach on their part. "People see a contradiction in its tone of certainty. Contemptuous of the faith of others, its proponents never doubt their own belief. They are fundamentalists".

Paradoxically, Dawkins's public attacks on religion, particularly Christianity, actually generated a surge of interest in exploring religious faith. As the sociologist Tina Beattie remarked, shortly after the publication of Dawkins's work *The God Delusion*, it seemed that Dawkins had reawakened public interest in God "more effectively than any preacher could have done" (Beattie 2007, p. vii). However, more significantly, Dawkins's certainties turned out to be highly questionable, representing ephemeral cultural prejudices rather than scientifically demonstrable facts, at most leading to the uncertainties of agnosticism rather than the secure certainties that many in Western culture demanded.

As some within the "New Atheism" movement became increasingly aware of the intellectual vulnerability of its core beliefs, a new emphasis began to emerge on the asserted *infallibility* of its leading representatives. When Dawkins's ideas proved to be decidedly fallible, the "New Atheist" faithful refocused on the personal authority of Dawkins as a sage. Dawkins was presented as a figure of wisdom, who was to be trusted as a result of what Max Weber described as his "charismatic authority" (Joosse 2014). For the atheist apologist P. Z. Myers, a biologist at the University of Minnesota, a "cult of personality" now emerged within the "New Atheism", in which Dawkins and Hitchens were "turned into oracles whose dicta should not be questioned, and dissent would lead to being ostracized" (Myers 2019). Myers (2019) considered it to have been a serious error of judgment to allow Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens to assume a leadership role within the movement. Within a year, "New Atheism" seemed to have morphed into a new religious movement, with its infallible prophets and authoritative texts, above all Dawkins and his *God Delusion*.

Today, "New Atheism" is generally regarded as having imploded, increasingly (though perhaps unfairly) being seen as the crystallization of the gendered cultural prejudices of old white Western males. Many of its former members, disenchanted by its arrogance, prejudice, and superficiality, have distanced themselves from the movement and its leaders.[5] The cultural mood began to shift, as many who had initially embraced "New Atheism" found that it failed to deliver the secure knowledge that they longed for or a sustainable

vision of the "good life". New Atheism may have presented itself as an antidote to religious delusions; its critics argue that it merely propagated a somewhat different delusion about the omnicompetence of reason and science. Additionally, disillusioned by such spurious pseudo-certainties, many began to look for better answers, wondering if there were alternatives that might be more credible, attractive, and satisfying. As the extent of Dawkins's personal and intellectual overreach became increasingly clear, some chose to look again at alternative ways of engaging the world, more open to the problem of uncertainty in relation to "ultimate questions".

As many commentators have noted, there is a constant temptation in a time of cultural fragility to seek certainty in the present or to retreat to the asserted certainties of the past (McGrath 2021). Halík is an important voice in exploring how we might live meaningfully and hopefully with such uncertainty, arguing that one of the core challenges facing both culture and Christianity is a misguided cultural quest for false certainties, ultimately resting on the overstatements of modernity. "'Fundamentalism' is a disorder of a faith that tries to entrench itself within the shadows of the past against the disturbing complexity of life" (Halík 2012, p. 21). "The world we inhabit is profoundly ambivalent", allowing space for both atheist and Christian interpretations (ibid., p. 61). As Pascal pointed out in the seventeenth century, there is enough light for those who desire to see, and enough darkness for those who do not (Marion 1994).

Halík would find support here in the Oxford academic Isaiah Berlin, himself an émigré from Eastern Europe, who was scathing in his criticism of the pseudo-certainties of modernity. In his famous 1988 lecture "The Pursuit of the Ideal", Berlin (1991) offered a philosophical demolition of those who "have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakeable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt" (p. 14). Berlin considered this as an unjustified epistemic arrogance, which amounted to little more than wish-fulfillment: "I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of forms of self-induced myopia, blinkers that make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human". Berlin shared many of Halík's insights into the human situation, and their potential implications for the rise of fundamentalist ideologies of both the Left and Right, as well as their religious alternatives. Yet, Halík observes, many today find it difficult to live with this lack of precision and certainty, which they mistakenly believe to be essential for authentic existence. Although Halík engages some significant cultural figures in his exploration of uncertainty, his most fundamental resources are biblical, grounded in individual believers wrestling with issues of doubt (Thomas 2013).

Halík suggests that tension between "believing and unbelieving" *within the same individual* has become characteristic of Western humanity as a whole, following the collapse of the false certainties of the past. Secular certainties have been eroded, replaced with uncertainty and hesitation. Many in Western culture are *seeking*—not necessarily knowing what they seek, but nevertheless sensing that there is something worth seeking that has not yet been found or grasped (Halík 2015b). Where many once sought refuge in the capacity of reason or science to establish certain foundations of faith, these supposedly firm foundations have turned out to be decidedly questionable. There are clear parallels between Halík and Kierkegaard on these points, including their mutual suspicion of institutional churches and recognition of the paradoxes of faith (Poettcker 2019).

What some might see as a crisis is thus seen by Halík as an opportunity. Many of the great theological and spiritual writers of the past found themselves facing times of transition, as an old order seemed to be giving way to an indeterminate and unpredictable future, in which the trusted certainties of the past might no longer be valid. We are called to move into these uncharted and unfamiliar territories, realizing that this might enable us to break free from past limiting notions of God or the gospel, which have led us to enclose the living God within "the confines of our notions, concepts, traditions, and creeds" (Halík 2009, p. 53).

In the secular world, Halík argues, "'fixed systems' of secure knowledge" arose in the form of ideologies, such as Marxism (Halík 2012, p. 71). These systems, so often treated as self-evident normative truths defining a cultural tribe (cf. Žižek 1989), are no longer possible; what now prevails is a "constant *movement of thought*", which cannot be crystallized or frozen at any particular moment of its development (Halík 2012, p. 71; italics original). "We prove our faithfulness, not by clinging to a specific tradition of the past, but, like Abraham, by entering new territory" (Halík 2009, p. 53). The Christian God is a "pilgrim God", resistant to being captured by our intellectual systems and traditions, who leads us out of our "homes and heartlands", even though we would prefer to remain there and fortify them.

The "seeking church", Halík suggests, should thus be characterized by patience and longing, recognizing the cultural suspicions about "organized religion", and waiting attentively and lovingly for those who are at a distance to choose to come near. That distance can be overcome by joining such seekers as they journey through life, accompanying them, and bringing them "to the heart of mystery, which is inexhaustible and bottomless" so that they may encounter this for themselves (ibid., p. 9). Those who are seeking, longing, and hoping can come to realize that God is "the foundation and fount of our seeking, our watchfulness, our openness, our self-transcendence" (ibid., p. 53)—and thus to encounter and embrace the one who is both the origin and goal of human longing and desire.

7. Conclusions

The philosopher of religion John Cottingham (2018) recently suggested that "understanding the world religiously is not an attempt to dissect and analyze and explain it in the manner of modern science" but is rather to be seen as "a mode of engagement, or connection, with reality as a whole" (p. 31). This bold statement marks a rejection of modernism's attempt to master God and reduce the divine to manageable and clear abstract objective concepts. Where some chose to adopt simplistic apologetic strategies of rationalist arguments for faith, Halík points towards the recognition of God as a "mystery", not in the sense of something that is irrational, but as something vast and inexhaustible that simply cannot be reduced to the banalities of human reason. A mystery cannot be mastered epistemically, nor exhausted spiritually. To rediscover the mystery of God is to retrieve wisdom from the pre-modern age that was prematurely and precipitately rejected by the "Age of Reason". It allows today's church and believers to encounter a vision of God that transcends the explanatory banalities of reason, and which, like a spring of fresh living water (Jn 4: 14), can meet our deep thirst for meaning and significance.

Halík's approach to cultural witness sets out a rich vision of the multiple elements of such an engagement. Three may be singled out for particular emphasis. First, the important role of appropriate institutions or agencies in creating safe spaces in which "seekers" can explore questions of faith in dialogue with Christian speakers who can empathize with their concerns, misgivings, and aspirations. There is a need for a "zone of questions and doubts" on the threshold of the church, in which seekers can explore questions without any presumed commitment on their part. Second, the importance of affirming the inevitability of uncertainty in relation to the big questions of life, and exploring how the Christian faith allows people to live authentically and hopefully in the midst of such uncertainties. Individuals need to be helped to wait patiently at the threshold of mystery, as they gradually discern its depths and wisdom. Third, Halík notes the importance of working with cultural "givens" rather than imposing an alien cultural framework in order to facilitate conversion. For Halík, the abject failure of "fundamentalist evangelical Christians from the United States brandishing a bible in one hand and a hamburger in the other" to convert Czechoslovakia following the collapse of Marxism (Halík 2020, p. 26) is a powerful reminder of the need for cultural *empathy* and *patience* as a prerequisite for effective cultural witness.

Although Halík's approach reflects and addresses the specific issues relating to cultural witness in the Czech situation following the downfall of communism (Kočí and Roubík 2015), his insights have much wider application. They speak powerfully to those who feel

the loss of religious presence and power and can see no way ahead of them. Many are distressed by the challenge of living with uncertainty and are constantly searching for new certainties on which they might base their lives more securely.

Halík commends a form of *ressourcement*—a theology of rediscovery and reappropriation (D'Ambrosio 1991), through which we can learn from the past without being burdened by its mistakes, and in which our journeys through an unfamiliar world force us to rediscover a living and inexhaustible God, rather than encouraging us to rely upon a fading cultural memory of God. As the Czech church—in common with so many others—transitions from being "the default church of the majority" to the "fragments of a diaspora" (Taylor 2012, p. 23), Halík's approach offers wisdom and encouragement to the enterprise of cultural witness across Europe in this changing context, as we seek to explore fresh forms of engagement and evangelism adapted to the new social realities of our age (Halík 2016).

While this study has aimed to identify the characteristic features and potential importance of Halík's form of cultural witness, more work needs to be done. In particular, further work needs to be carried out on the sociological aspects of the "Academic Parish of Prague", clarifying both the identity of this audience and what they found attractive and relevant about Halík's presentation of Christianity to their lives. There is also a need for a critical assessment of the precise extent to which Halík is cited by other writers, the specific aspects of his thought which are found helpful by his multiple audiences, and how they are being adapted to deal with new contexts and questions.

Yet, on the basis of the analysis presented in this study, it is clear that Halík's appeal to his audiences lies in his willingness to engage questions of cultural anxiety and epistemic uncertainty. Halík's framing of the concept of "mystery" as something which is inexhaustible (rather than merely something that resists definitive interpretation) emphasizes the limits of human understanding on the one hand and the richness of God on the other. This theme has considerable potential for religious preaching and pedagogy in an age of uncertainty and change, by encouraging exploration and experience of the depths of faith, rather than a superficial engagement with its creedal formulations.

For Halík, believers need to wrestle with "mystery", in that there is always more to discover and appreciate in the journey of faith, in which old answers can be given a new vitality and depth to meet the challenges of our complex cultural situation. The life of faith is not a passive reception of creedal statements, but an active engagement with the mystery that lies at the heart of faith. Rather than settle for predetermined verbal expressions of mystery, as these are found in the Creeds or Catechisms, we are invited to discover these for ourselves by wrestling with the mystery of God, appreciating both the wisdom of traditional doctrinal formulations and the theological depths of experience that lie behind them. Perhaps this may prove to be Halík's most significant contribution to the recovery of Christian faith in an increasingly post-Christian context.

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Notes

1. The parish website can be viewed at: http://www.farnostsalvator.cz/akademicka-farnost-praha, 31 January 2023.
2. This is not to suggest that "seekers" and "dwellers" are mutually exclusive categories. Taylor's analysis suggests that "seekers" and "dwellers" function as "ideal types", so many people find themselves overlapping these categories (Taylor 2012, p. 21). Halík's approach connects with both these audiences.
3. The titles of the English, French, and German translations of this work (all of which are variants of "Patience with God") unfortunately failed to pick up the nuances of the original Czech title *Vzdáleným na blízku* ('To Stand by the Distant'). The Italian translation—"Vicino ai lontani"—is more faithful to the original.

[4] The abbreviation "GDR" refers to the former "German Democratic Republic" or "East Germany", which became part of the Soviet Bloc in 1949, and collapsed in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

[5] For a highly insightful critique, see Hamburger (2019).

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