

Tomáš Halík, *Night of the Confessor: Christian Faith in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Doubleday/Image, 2012).

This inspiring book is an intimate and unfeigned confession of Tomáš Halík-the-confessor. As the author explains, being a Catholic priest for more than a quarter of a century, he has lent an ear to several thousand people who came to the sacrament of reconciliation, or for a “spiritual chat” (since many of them were anabaptised or nonpracticing Catholics). In his capacity as a confessor, he has been helping people – to use his own somewhat poetic phrase – “seek the narrow, conscientious path between the Scylla of the harsh and uncompromising ‘thou must and thou shalt not’ that cuts heartlessly like cold steel into the flesh of painful, complex, and unique life stories, and the Charybdis of the wishy-washy, speciously soft-hearted ‘everything’s OK so long as you love God’.” This experience has shaped him over many years and allowed him to acquire a distinct lens through which to view not only particular stories encountered in the confessional but the entire world process, with all its extrinsic and intrinsic aspects. It is precisely this fresh and unassuming perspective of Halík-the-confessor, who *hermeneutically* applies his spiritual experience to the contemporary (post)secular culture and Christianity’s paradoxical place in it, that makes this book one of a kind.

On the most basic level, the author’s frank witness about the process and the attitude required of a confessor in order for the act of confession and reconciliation to bring desirable fruits can be read as a lesson in listening that is at once penetrating and non-judgmental. But since Halík draws a persuasive analogy between this “maieutical” art of accompanying people on a spiritual journey (as “care of the soul” in the Socratic sense of the term), and a midwife-like act of being emphatically present in the world with a view to enabling reality as such to *birth meanings* into our existence, the actual lesson turns out to be far broader and more universal in scope. In fact, Halík’s insight goes even deeper as he suggests that there is some sort of mysterious link, a mutual correlation between the shifts occurring in the spiritual lives of many people that he encounters as a confessor and what lies beneath the surface of individual stories and belongs to a kind of “hidden face” or “mood of the times,” i.e., their “inner tuning.” From an epistemic perspective, however, what deserves special attention is the fact that the book offers guidance, albeit mostly implicitly, on how to listen *and* respond to multiple, often conflicted and utterly confusing voices in the postmodern culture. Halík masterfully describes how the unique “mode of perception” expected of a confessor like himself can be, and should be, *transposed* into our attitude *vis-à-vis* all that is. In this context he speaks, for example, of an endeavour to listen patiently and attentively, to discriminate and do one’s best to understand (so as to obviate the risk of asking seemingly prying questions that might be wounding), to try to “read between the lines” to discern what others are unable (and often slightly unwilling) to say, etc.

Like his other books, *Night of the Confessor* offers readers an insight into Halík’s *deep theology* that emphasizes “the hiddenness of God” (hence the recurring reference to the “night” which serves as a

metaphor for the darkness, or as the book's subtitle puts it, the "uncertainty" of our age). Halík's reflection is contextual through and through. Joining the long line of the "theologians of paradox," including Saint Paul, Augustine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard, among others, he situates it at the crucial moment in the history of Western civilisation in general and Christianity in particular. Halík labels our epoch as post-optimistic. In contrast to the conservatives' romantic nostalgia for an imagined glorious past and the liberals' naïve optimism about an illusory future, he insists that Christian interpretation of the "signs of the times" should rather be grounded in the realism of the Cross, but always seen in the light of the "Easter paradox." Ours is the time when evil is becoming globalized in a striking fashion – international terrorism and the intensification of natural disasters due to climate change being perhaps its most blatant manifestations. What is more, Halík's reflection on faith comes at the time of a great crisis of Christianity when religion that many were accustomed to is truly "dying off." But for him, to interpret the current situation of faith either *optimistically* or *catastrophically* is to miss the point altogether. While the first option leads to various "technical solutions" like a return to premodern religion or its facile "modernization," the second speaks (yet again) of Christianity's final demise.

Instead, the author of *Night of the Confessor* believes that, like in the biblical parable about the seed, faith has to undergo radical diminution both in human experience and in the course of history. In the spirit of the Gospel's paradoxical logic, in which diminution means openness to the advancement of God's work and where loss is profit, such a crisis proves to be also the "time of visitation," the Kairos, i.e., an opportune moment for a new kenotic Christianity to emerge. In terms of a broader hermeneutic circle, this "paschal mystery" of the faith itself cannot occur, however, unless an adequate theological interpretation is offered that enables the church to identify and reflect on "the signs of the times," thus opening up new scope for the life of faith. It is worth reiterating that, for Halík, the interpretation of "our present crisis" (as Christians and as a species) needs to be centered on what is the very nub of Christianity, namely the "enigmatic Easter story – that great paradox of victory through defeat." The author thus posits the paradox of faith itself, not simply as a topic for theological speculation, but primarily as a matter of lived experience which, as such, becomes a hermeneutic key to understanding the spiritual situation and challenges of our times.

It does not come as a surprise that the German version of the book (*Nachtsgedanken eines Beichtvaters*), published the same year as the English edition, was selected to be the best theological book of July 2012 in Germany. *Night of the Confessor* has the potential to speak not only to Christians who have a settled place in the church but also to spiritual seekers both within and without the church. To the former, it will offer, above all, a *blessed disruption* and disillusionment, an opportunity to recognize certain aspects of their Christian life as an expression of what Halík labels a "religious clownery"—a deeply humbling realization, no doubt, but a liberating one insofar as it creates space for a genuine Christian hope. Halík describes the latter as "an openness and a readiness to search for meaning in what is to come," and juxtaposes it with a naïve enthusiasm of the Left and Right which, by contrast, relies on "a cockeyed assumption that we always know in advance, after all, what is best for us." To the spiritual seekers, the book may be an invitation to accept, with gratitude and relief perhaps, that their current search and lack of certainty are characteristic of the very attitude that Jesus urged his disciples to adopt when he called them to have the "little faith" the size of a mustard seed. Once again, Halík extrapolates this view of faith to identify it as the only adequate "mode of perception" *vis-à-vis* not only the mysteries of faith but the Mystery of Life itself.

The "great faith" (or credulity), Halík warns, easily degenerates into a religious fundamentalism, fanaticism or a triumphalist ideology based on false certainties, i.e., idols – in this context, the author

reminds Augustine's famous dictum: *si comprehendis, non est Deus* ("If you understand it, it is not God"). By contrast, a "discreet faith," with "a touch of skepticism, irony, and commitment to critical reason as a permanent corrective," offers an antidote to all sorts of parochialism and idolatry. The tandem of faith and doubt (two sides of the same coin which Halík considers organically connected), has, therefore, one major advantage over the "great faith" of false certainties, one that – from his dialogical perspective – can hardly be overestimated, namely its potential to bring believers, seekers and even non-believers together. In philosophical terms, it could be claimed that this model of faith relies on, and also carries within itself a potential for developing, a *hermeneutic of empathy*. As Halík himself points out, the "little faith" allows believers to "feel the absent God of those who do not pray, so that the latter may catch an intimation of the God who is present."

For the ideologically polarised public sphere of our age, such a *hermeneutic of compassion* appears particularly critical with regard to a dialogue between faith and science. Halík emphasizes in this context how significant it is, for both believers and scientists, to deliberately and reflectively adopt and articulate a *philosophical position* that creates the condition of the possibility of any such dialogue. He shows the similarities between the attitude of the (pseudo-)scientists who attempt to do without the strenuous work of philosophical reflection and derive a would-be "philosophy" or "world outlook" directly from scientific knowledge, and that of the (pseudo-)believers who, waving the Bible in one hand, and a hamburger in the other, harangue their audience at stadiums or from the TV screens with information about what God's current intentions are. In this regard, a *hermeneutics of empathy* purported by Halík serves as a reminder that neither in faith nor in science "can one yearn for 'fixed systems' of secure knowledge." With this realization in mind, prejudice and suspicion accumulated throughout the centuries of misunderstanding between faith and science will be more likely to succumb to "the courage to trust" and the shared desire to build bridges.