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Review: 'Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us'

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REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us. By Tomáš Halík. New York: Doubleday, 2009. xvii + 240 pages. \$23.95.

FOUR PERSPECTIVES

I

Tomáš Halík invites his readers into the gospel story of Zacchaeus because he finds there an account of “us.” Like the best of Benedictine *lectio divina* or Ignatian spiritual exercises, Halík wants us to enter fully into the story of a little man “on the fringes” of his society. He wants us to sit with Zacchaeus in his tree, feel simultaneously his marginalization and his attraction to Jesus. He wants us to make that exhilarated climb down with Zacchaeus to respond to Jesus’ calling him by name. Finally and most importantly, he asks us to find in Zacchaeus our contemporaries who dwell in “the zone of questions and doubts” (9). These contemporaries may, like the author, be believers, or they may, like many in his post-Communist Czech Republic, be atheists. Yet, they—or perhaps more accurately—we may share a surprisingly common identity as seekers on the margins of a world in which center stage is given to the battle between an aggressive and dogmatic secularism and an equally aggressive and dogmatic religious fundamentalism. He is right to entitle this invitation *Patience with God*.

I find Halík’s approach to the contemporary dilemma of religious commitment compelling. It displays none of the pretenses of the modern aspiration to provide a definitive systematic treatment in defense of faith or, for that matter, atheism. The chapters are reminiscent of monastic commentaries on Scripture as described in the LeClercq classic, *The Love of Learning, and the Desire for God*. Halík interweaves his reflections on Zacchaeus and other familiar biblical narratives with a wide ranging selection from Western humanistic traditions as they extend into the twenty-first century. Each chapter is a discrete reflection, like a sermon, and at the same time, each chapter is part of a single argument or more accurately a single invitation to embrace a God who remains hidden and to embrace those who cannot embrace such a God. It is also a *lectio divina* of our time informed by Halík’s life as a psychotherapist and a priest ordained in an underground church that now functions out in the open air of the religious free market within a secular Europe. The results of his ruminations are sometimes surprising and frequently thought-provoking.

Halík's counsel for "patience *with* God" has nothing to do with passive acceptance or denial of the dark nights of alienation and absence ever lurking in the lives of believers as well as unbelievers. In fact, he revels in the paradoxical proximity of belief and unbelief and asks us to join him in the revelry. A particularly intriguing instance is his juxtaposition of Nietzsche, the herald of God's death, with Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower of Jesus. Like others before him, Halík shows their connection is more than chronological. His pairing of Thérèse with Nietzsche is especially effective in extricating Thérèse from the saccharine piety of the Little Flower. Yet, he affirms her seemingly childish aspiration to be "love at the heart of the church" (31). Her singular importance as a doctor of the church for our time arises not from the brilliance of her theological writing but from her loving embrace of God's utter absence as "a mark of solidarity with unbelievers" (28). As she lay dying, Thérèse knew the devastating experience of loss of faith; she knew of what Nietzsche's madman speaks in proclaiming God's death. Halík invites us to consider Thérèse's witness as that of a mature faith, a faith displayed as "patience *with* God." Thérèse responds to her darkness not with bitterness or madness but with an expansive love that encompasses even the dark night of unbelievers who became her companions surrounding her deathbed.

Thérèse's response of love in the face of her uncertain final end echoes earlier discussions of negative eschatology, for example, a vision of the "absolute future" that follows from God's hiddenness. Halík rightly observes the difficulties facing contemporary Christians in their attempts to speak with authority concerning "the last things." He also calls into question secular alternatives that declare with unjustified confidence a future defined in absolute terms of global projects or political ideologies, particularly liberal democracy. Halík candidly acknowledges that negative eschatology offers little of the comfort found in an eschatology in which clear answers abound about heaven and hell. In fact, he chooses the word "thorn" to commend to us its effects. Negative eschatology can be a "critical thorn" in so far as it disallows any absolutizing ideology. More provocatively, Halík describes this eschatology as "a thorn of hope," a wonderfully paradoxical image that evokes the feeling of discomfort that goad of hope creates especially in the face of an uncertain "absolute future." No wonder he pairs "thorn of hope" with "holy restlessness." A patient faith may rest in the knowledge that the future belongs to a boundlessly loving and therefore mysterious God revealed in Jesus. A patient hope in a loving God revealed in Jesus, on the other hand, pricks the conscience to act, to seek ways of living the patient faith in the God revealed in Jesus. The instability suggested

in the phrase, “holy restlessness,” becomes the sure grounding for and open horizon of “solidarity with seekers” (21–22).

The seekers whom Halík praises have little to do with aimless wandering or new age self-absorption. His description of his principal protagonist, Zacchaeus, proves instructive. Zacchaeus actively watched for Jesus and quickly responded when Jesus called his name. Halík uses this detail in Zacchaeus’ story not only to commend the watchfulness of the tree climber but also to instruct us about the origin of Zacchaeus’ seeking. Human watchfulness mirrors that of God who is “the foundation and fount of our seeking, our watchfulness, our openness, our self-transcendence” (53). As revealed in Jesus’ words and deeds, God watches for the right opening to bring his “love and openness” to the likes of Zacchaeus, the “other,” who dwells on the fringes of belief (54).

Jesus’ privileging of those on the margin is presented as a challenge not only to the individual Christian but also to the community of believers, to the church. He specifically questions whether the Catholic Church has really fulfilled its Vatican II promise to extend itself in love to all those who live in the modern world. He is not calling for capitulation to modernity with some facile claim about the world being good. He is considering something more difficult—“a profound awareness of *God’s hiddenness, of how he ‘reveals’ Himself through the experience of ‘unbelievers’*” (58). Thérèse’s acceptance of unbelief exemplifies the radical demands of loving God, a mirror of the radical love found in Christ. Halík extends those demands to the Vatican II promise to engage in the modern world as a commitment to enter into the depths of individuals’ messy lives and into the heart of their cultures that are like his own Czech homeland with its tepid faith and indifferent atheism. In describing this foray into the heart of unbelievers and secular cultures, he invokes yet another biblical story, the example of Moses, who found God in the harsh desert environment, but who approached the harsh reality of a burning bush with great delicacy. He entered barefoot because he recognized despite all appearance that he was walking on “sacred ground” (67). Halík asks us to walk with delicacy onto our own secular landscape which despite all appearances is sacred ground.

Though he often addresses himself to the individual believer, Halík finds the church too important to spare it from his hermeneutic of paradox. Halík invokes the wildly divergent perspectives of Sancho Panza and Don Quixote concerning the truth about Dulcinea del Toboso to instruct us concerning the truth about the church. The church merits both Sancho’s realistic assessments of her abysmal failings and Quixote’s ebullient proclamation of her beauty. Yet, Halík does not stop with this literary metaphor. He turns even more helpfully to a figure from

Scripture, to Mary Magdalene, another woman who continues to endure endless debates about who she really is. Halík identifies his perspective with that of St. Gregory. He draws the conclusion that Mary Magdalene “could be the image of the seeking church, a church triumphing through its patient seeking and passionate longing” (88).

I am reminded here again of Thérèse who mirrors Mary Magdalene in so far as her faith like that of the Magdalene has born the “patient dwelling in the night of mystery” (108). But their patience has as its companion “passion,” a passion deeply informed by their irrepressible love for God, even when God appears to dwell in the depths of the tomb. Here again is that paradoxical proximity between the passionate believer and the passionate atheist, that is, the atheist whose passion appears as a protest against those who keep company with death, for example, “evil, pain, and painful issues” (107). Their protest assumes the existence of something against which such a protest is justified. Halík reminds us that believers have their wrestling matches with God over such death-dealing matters, and some like Jacob come away wounded. These “limping pilgrims” may discover in the atheist’s passionate protest the familiar feel of a wrestling match with the holy. Once again the paradoxical proximity between passionate believer and equally passionate unbeliever appears. Halík invites the believer to transform his wrestling with the unbeliever to an embrace that comes from recognizing a shared passion for a justice hidden in the disorder of contemporary society (108).

The paradoxical proximity between unbelief and belief rests in God’s hiddenness. Halík shows us how even that hiddenness is enmeshed in paradox. “*He is unknown not because He is too far away but because he is too close*” (114–15). Halík illustrates his claim by pointing to that which is closest to us, our faces. Human beings never see their faces except in a mirror. Human beings never see God’s face except in the mirror of Jesus, and because of Jesus, humans are called to think quite differently about their neighbor. Jesus transforms what we see in gazing at the face of another human being. Nietzsche illustrates the point. As Halík notes, Nietzsche understood one of the consequences of God’s death to be the death of the old human being, a creature. A new human, a superhuman, needed to pass into existence. Paul, Nietzsche’s apparent “rival” (125), also proclaimed that in a singular death, that of Jesus Christ, a new life, a new humanity, came to be. Halík reminds us that at the heart of Christianity is “the paradox of the Easter story” which reveals God’s “boundless love” that encompasses all forms of darkness, even abandonment on a cross, with newness of life (131). Halík invites us to look into the “Easter mirror,” to see ourselves as participants in *resurrectio continua*. Like God’s continuous

creation, so the Easter triumph made possible through Jesus' sacrificial love remains an effective presence into our very day (140). The questions that linger are: whether patience is enough faith "to trust in God's power to do something substantial with the world" (184); will St. Zacchaeus the "patron and protector of the eternal seekers" (186) truly intercede for those who dwell in "the zone of questions and doubts" (9) or will the "eternal Zacchaeus," who dwells in all of us and is concerned only for personal purity, be blinded by pride and fail to see in others what Jesus recognized in the little man perched in a tree? For the answers, I suppose we must wait in the patience enacted in faith, hope, and love.

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II

In a lecture delivered in 1980, which was later published as "The Church and Atheism," Karl Rahner declared that while the church is obliged to "struggle courageously and with all legitimate means against atheism," it is bound to do so in a manner proper to its own nature. That is, it must "struggle" in the same way it struggles with its own theism, namely, as a *mystagogy* of the experience of God. "The struggle against atheism," Rahner states, "is foremost and of necessity a struggle against the inadequacy of our own theism."¹

In a swift and elegant stroke, Rahner redirects the believer's instinct to assume a defensive posture into the more searching and purgative work of internal critique. He points towards a path of mystagogy by summoning us away from institutional entrenchment and attachment to well-worn formulas and more deeply into the incomprehensible mystery of God, with all the ambiguity and adventure this entails. The "struggle" for the theist is one of *passing through* atheism more radically than even the atheist, not in a spirit of competition or dialectical negation but in a spirit of intellectual repentance and charity, with the intent that faith might become increasingly non-possessive and our discourse more hospitable to those for whom God has either become an obstacle or a trifling matter. We must "rearrange our proclamation to some extent," he suggests, not by relinquishing the task of being witness to revelation but by rendering more compellingly the ongoing process of discovering the hidden God in our midst. With special appeal to the pastor, Rahner calls for experimentation in illuminating faith in

¹Karl Rahner, "The Church and Atheism," in *Theological Investigations*, vol 21, trans., Hugh M. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 148.