

A poignant
reflection on
Christianity's
crisis of faith



Tomáš Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity: The Courage to Change*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2024. Translated by Gerald Turner. Reviewed by Patsy McDonald, SHCJ

Effective communication is a mysterious thing. At its simplest, it can involve providing information, facts, thoughts. When it comes to communicating something about which one cares deeply, whether in teaching, preaching or even conversation, the process is more like striking up the music, or perhaps awakening the slumbering spark that the other may not even have known was alive in her.

The Afternoon of Christianity is communication of the latter sort. Its sixteen relatively short chapters will resonate with those who, having spent much of their lives trying to live faithfully and fully humanly in a world and church they thought they knew, now find themselves in a situation where the pace and scope of change are so dizzying that the temptation is either to cling on desperately to received ‘certainties’ or to abandon all such—and perhaps to resent or isolate themselves from the efforts of those who, in equal sincerity, make the other choice.

Halík’s theology is, as he says, a phenomenology of divine self-revelation that people experience (in different ways, and certainly not only ‘believers’) in acts of faith, accompanied by love and hope (p. 17). This involves skilfully and in an engaging manner guiding readers on a journey that reminds them of the complexity of their lives, both as individuals and as members of society at all levels, from the interpersonal to the global and beyond. He is addressing Christians, of course, and uses traditional ideas and terminology but often recontextualises them to enable readers to let go of some of their narrow, sometimes defensive, positions and to recognise broader possibilities as offering more life-giving potential. Faith (what it is and is not), culture (including art and music), history, secularisation, populism, non-belief, globalisation, the signs of the times, Christian identity, sacraments (particularly baptism), the turn to spirituality, and, throughout, the church—all, and more, are explored in ways that draw attention to available resources and potential hazards, thus enabling readers to reconsider and reevaluate their situation, personal and institutional.

So Halík is offering a basis for hope that can release energy in those who might have reason for thinking that, in the actual or impending loss of so many landmarks on which we had come to rely, all was at an end. There is to be an end, certainly, but it is eschatological, and the immediate task is to move into the ‘afternoon’ of his title (after the noonday crisis that he sees as lasting from late medieval times to post-secularism), aware that the movement is always towards God who is variously known to people (through hints and guesses—the result of grace) and is somehow present with us in all things. Read it!