

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Templeton Address

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Editor’s Note: This article, which originally ran in the July 22, 1983 issue of *National Review*, is adapted from the address Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn gave on the occasion of his acceptance, in London on May 10, 1983, of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. In announcing the 1983 award, the Templeton Foundation described Mr. Solzhenitsyn as “a pioneer in the renaissance of religion in atheist nations.” Mr. Solzhenitsyn’s introductory remarks were made at the awards ceremony at Buckingham Palace. The address proper was delivered later the same day at the London Guildhall.

I. The Response

This is the first time that the Templeton Prize has been awarded to an Orthodox Christian. With gratitude that our share in the religious life of the world has now been accorded notice, I remain acutely conscious of my personal unworthiness to receive this award as I look back upon the venerable line of outstanding Orthodox churchmen and of Orthodox thinkers from Aleksey Khomyakov to Sergei Bulgakov. And I am very much aware that Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy, which, during the 65 years of Communist rule, has been subjected to persecution even fiercer and more extensive than that of early Christian times, has had – and still has today – many hands worthier than mine to accept it. Beginning with Vladimir Bogoyavlensky, metropolitan of Kiev, shot by the Communists before the walls of the Kievo-Pechersky Monastery at the dawn of the Lenin era, the list would extend to the intrepid priest Gleb Yakunin, who is enduring torments today, under Andropov: Forcibly deprived of all outward symbols of his priesthood, and even of the right to have the Gospels, Father Yakunin has for months at a time been held in a freezing stone cubicle, without bed, clothes, or food.

In this persecution-filled age, it is appropriate that my own very first memory should be of Chekists in pointed caps entering St. Panteleimon’s Church in

Kislovodsk, interrupting the service, and crashing their way into the sanctuary in order to loot. And later, when I started going to school in Rostov-on-Don – passing on my way a kilometer-long compound of the Cheka-GPU and a glittering sign of the League of Militant Atheists – schoolchildren egged on by Komsomol members taunted me for accompanying my mother to the last remaining church in town and tore the cross from around my neck.

Orthodox churches were stripped of their valuables in 1922 at the instigation of Lenin and Trotsky. In subsequent years, including both the Stalin and the Khrushchev periods, tens of thousands of churches were torn down or desecrated, leaving behind a disfigured wasteland that bore no resemblance to Russia such as it had stood for centuries. Entire districts and cities of half a million inhabitants were left without a single church. Our people were condemned to live in this dark and mute wilderness for decades, groping their way to God and keeping to this course by trial and error. The grip of oppression that we have lived under, and continue to live under, has been so great that religion, instead of leading to a free blossoming of the spirit, has been manifested in asserting the faith on the brink of destruction, or else on the seductive frontiers of Marxist rhetoric, where so many souls have come to grief.

The statement of the Templeton Foundation shows an understanding of how the Orthodox spiritual tradition has maintained its vitality in our land despite the forcible promotion of atheism. If even a fraction of those words should find their way to my motherland past the jamming devices, this will bolster the spirits of our believers, assuring them that they have not been forgotten, and that their steadfastness inspires courage even here.

The centralized atheism before whose armed might the whole world trembles still hates and fears this unarmed faith as much today as it did 60 years ago. Yes! All the savage persecutions loosed upon our people by a murderous state atheism, coupled with the corroding effect of its lies, and an avalanche of stultifying propaganda – all of these together have proven weaker than the thousand-year-old faith of our nation. This faith has not been destroyed; it remains the most sublime, the most cherished gift to which our lives and consciousness can attain.

II. The Templeton Address

More than half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: “Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.”

Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our Revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: “Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.”

What is more, the events of the Russian Revolution can only be understood now, at the end of the century, against the background of what has since occurred in the rest of the world. What emerges here is a process of universal significance. And if I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire 20th century, here too, I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again: “Men have forgotten God.” The failings of human consciousness, deprived of its divine

dimension, have been a determining factor in all the major crimes of this century. The first of these was World War I, and much of our present predicament can be traced back to it. It was a war (the memory of which seems to be fading) when Europe, bursting with health and abundance, fell into a rage of self-mutilation which could not but sap its strength for a century or more, and perhaps forever. The only possible explanation for this war is a mental eclipse among the leaders of Europe due to their lost awareness of a Supreme Power above them. Only a godless embitterment could have moved ostensibly Christian states to employ poison gas, a weapon so obviously beyond the limits of humanity.

The same kind of defect, the flaw of a consciousness lacking all divine dimension, was manifested after World War II when the West yielded to the satanic temptation of the “nuclear umbrella.” It was equivalent to saying: Let’s cast off worries, let’s free the younger generation from their duties and obligations, let’s make no effort to defend ourselves, to say nothing of defending others — let’s stop our ears to the groans emanating from the East, and let us live instead in the pursuit of happiness. If danger should threaten us, we shall be protected by the nuclear bomb; if not, then let the world burn in Hell for all we care. The pitifully helpless state to which the contemporary West has sunk is in large measure due to this fatal error: the belief that the defense of peace depends not on stout hearts and steadfast men, but solely on the nuclear bomb.

Only the loss of that higher intuition that comes from God could have allowed the West to accept calmly, after World War I, the protracted agony of Russia as she was being torn apart by a band of cannibals, or to accept, after World War II, the similar dismemberment of Eastern Europe. The West did not perceive that this was in fact the beginning of a lengthy process that spells disaster for the whole world; indeed, the West has done a good deal to help the process along. Only once in this century did the West gather strength – for the battle against Hitler. But the fruits of that victory have long since been lost. Faced with cannibalism, our godless age has discovered the perfect anesthetic – trade! Such is the pathetic pinnacle of contemporary wisdom.

Today’s world has reached a stage which, if it had been described to preceding centuries, would have

called forth the cry: “This is the Apocalypse!” Yet we have grown used to this kind of world; we even feel at home in it.

Dostoevsky warned that “great events could come upon us and catch us intellectually unprepared.” This is precisely what has happened. And he predicted that “the world will be saved only after it has been possessed by the demon of evil.” Whether it really will be saved we shall have to wait and see: this will depend on our conscience, on our spiritual lucidity, on our individual and combined efforts in the face of catastrophic circumstances. But it has already come to pass that the demon of evil, like a whirlwind, triumphantly circles all five continents of the earth.

We are witnesses to the devastation of the world, be it imposed or voluntarily undergone. The entire 20th century is being sucked into the vortex of atheism and self-destruction. This plunge into the abyss has aspects that are unquestionably global, dependent neither on political systems, nor on levels of economic and cultural development, nor yet on national peculiarities. And present-day Europe, seemingly so unlike the Russia of 1913, is today on the verge of the same collapse, for all that it has been reached by a different route. Different parts of the world have followed different paths, but today they are all approaching the threshold of a common ruin.

In its past, Russia did know a time when the social ideal was not fame, or riches, or material success, but a pious way of life. Russia was then steeped in an Orthodox Christianity which remained true to the Church of the first centuries. The Orthodoxy of that time knew how to safeguard its people under the yoke of a foreign occupation that lasted more than two centuries, while at the same time fending off iniquitous blows from the swords of Western crusaders. During those centuries the Orthodox faith in our country became part of the very pattern of thought and the personality of our people, the forms of

daily life, the work calendar, the priorities in every undertaking, the organization of the week and of the year. Faith was the shaping and unifying force of the nation.

But in the 17th century Russian Orthodoxy was gravely weakened by an internal schism. In the 18th, the country was shaken by Peter’s forcibly imposed transformations, which favored the economy, the state, and the military at the expense of the religious spirit and national life. And along with this lopsided Petrine enlightenment, Russia felt the first whiff of secularism; its subtle poisons permeated the educated

classes in the course of the 19th century and opened the path to Marxism. By the time of the Revolution, faith had virtually disappeared in Russian educated circles; and amongst the uneducated, its health was threatened.

It was Dostoevsky, once again, who drew from the French Revolution and its seeming hatred of the Church the lesson that “revolution must necessarily begin with atheism.” That is absolutely true. But the world had never before known a godlessness as organized, militarized, and tenaciously malevolent as that

practiced by Marxism. Within the philosophical system of Marx and Lenin, and at the heart of their psychology, hatred of God is the principal driving force, more fundamental than all their political and economic pretensions. Militant atheism is not merely incidental or marginal to Communist policy; it is not a side effect, but the central pivot. To achieve its diabolical ends. Communism needs to control a population devoid of religious and national feeling, and this entails the destruction of faith and nationhood. Communists proclaim both of these objectives openly, and just as openly go about carrying them out. The degree to which the atheistic world longs to annihilate religion, the extent to which religion sticks in its throat, was demonstrated by the web of intrigue surrounding the recent attempts on the life of the Pope.



The 1920's in the USSR witnessed an uninterrupted procession of victims and martyrs amongst the Orthodox clergy. Two metropolitans were shot, one of whom, Veniamin of Petrograd, had been elected by the popular vote of his diocese. Patriarch Tikhon himself passed through the hands of the Cheka-GPU and then died under suspicious circumstances. Scores of archbishops and bishops perished. Tens of thousands of priests, monks, and nuns, pressured by the Chekists to renounce the Word of God, were tortured, shot in cellars, sent to camps, exiled to the desolate tundra of the far North, or turned out into the streets in their old age without food or shelter. All these Christian martyrs went unswervingly to their deaths for the faith; instances of apostasy were few and far between.

For tens of millions of laymen access to the Church was blocked, and they were forbidden to bring up their children in the Faith: religious parents were wrenched from their children and thrown into prison, while the children were turned from the faith by threats and lies. One could argue that the pointless destruction of Russia's rural economy in the 1930s – the so-called de-kulakization and collectivization, which brought death to 15 million peasants while making no economic sense at all – was enforced with such cruelty, first and foremost, for the purpose of destroying our national way of life and of extirpating religion from the countryside. The same policy of spiritual perversion operated throughout the brutal world of the Gulag Archipelago, where men were encouraged to survive at the cost of the lives of others. And only atheists bereft of reason could have decided upon the ultimate brutality – against the Russian land itself – that is being planned in the USSR today: The Russian north is to be flooded, the flow of the northern rivers reversed, the life of the Arctic Ocean disrupted, and the water channeled southward, toward lands already devastated by earlier, equally foolhardy “feats of Communist construction.”

For a short period of time, when he needed to gather strength for the struggle against Hitler, Stalin cynically adopted a friendly posture toward the Church. This deceptive game, continued in later years by Brezhnev with the help of showcase publications and other window dressing, has unfortunately tended to be taken at its face value in the West. Yet the tenacity with which hatred of religion is rooted in

Communism may be judged by the example of their most liberal leader, Khrushchev: for though he undertook a number of significant steps to extend freedom, Khrushchev simultaneously rekindled the frenzied Leninist obsession with destroying religion.

But there is something they did not expect: that in a land where churches have been leveled, where a triumphant atheism has rampaged uncontrolled for two-thirds of a century, where the clergy is utterly humiliated and deprived of all independence, where what remains of the Church as an institution is tolerated only for the sake of propaganda directed at the West, where even today people are sent to the labor camps for their faith, and where, within the camps themselves, those who gather to pray at Easter are clapped in punishment cells – they could not suppose that beneath this Communist steamroller the Christian tradition would survive in Russia. It is true that millions of our countrymen have been corrupted and spiritually devastated by an officially imposed atheism, yet there remain many millions of believers: it is only external pressures that keep them from speaking out, but, as is always the case in times of persecution and suffering, the awareness of God in my country has attained great acuteness and profundity.

It is here that we see the dawn of hope: for no matter how formidably Communism bristles with tanks and rockets, no matter what successes it attains in seizing the planet, it is doomed never to vanquish Christianity.

The West has yet to experience a Communist invasion; religion here remains free. But the West's own historical evolution has been such that today it too is experiencing a drying up of religious consciousness. It too has witnessed racking schisms, bloody religious wars, and rancor, to say nothing of the tide of secularism that, from the late Middle Ages onward, has progressively inundated the West. This gradual sapping of strength from within is a threat to faith that is perhaps even more dangerous than any attempt to assault religion violently from without.

Imperceptibly, through decades of gradual erosion, the meaning of life in the West has ceased to be seen as anything more lofty than the “pursuit of happiness, “a goal that has even been solemnly guaranteed by constitutions. The concepts of good and evil have been ridiculed for several centuries; banished from common use, they have been replaced by political or class

considerations of short-lived value. It has become embarrassing to state that evil makes its home in the individual human heart before it enters a political system. Yet it is not considered shameful to make daily concessions to an integral evil. Judging by the continuing landslide of concessions made before the eyes of our very own generation, the West is ineluctably slipping toward the abyss. Western societies are losing more and more of their religious essence as they thoughtlessly yield up their younger generation to atheism. If a blasphemous film about Jesus is shown throughout the United States, reputedly one of the most religious countries in the world, or a major newspaper publishes a shameless caricature of the Virgin Mary, what further evidence of godlessness does one need? When external rights are completely unrestricted, why should one make an inner effort to restrain oneself from ignoble acts?

Or why should one refrain from burning hatred, whatever its basis – race, class, or ideology? Such hatred is in fact corroding many hearts today. Atheist teachers in the West are bringing up a younger generation in a spirit of hatred of their own society. Amid all the vituperation we forget that the defects of capitalism represent the basic flaws of human nature, allowed unlimited freedom together with the various human rights; we forget that under Communism (and Communism is breathing down the neck of all moderate forms of socialism, which are unstable) the identical flaws run riot in any person with the least degree of authority; while everyone else under that system does indeed attain “equality” – the equality of destitute slaves.

This eager fanning of the flames of hatred is becoming the mark of today’s free world. Indeed, the broader the personal freedoms are, the higher the level of prosperity or even of abundance – the more vehement, paradoxically, does this blind hatred become. The contemporary developed West thus demonstrates by its own example that human salvation can be found neither in the profusion of material goods nor in merely making money.

This deliberately nurtured hatred then spreads to all that is alive, to life itself, to the world with its colors, sounds, and shapes, to the human body. The embittered art of the 20th century is perishing as a result of this ugly hate, for art is fruitless without love. In the East art has collapsed because it has been

knocked down and trampled upon, but in the West the fall has been voluntary, a decline into a contrived and pretentious quest where the artist, instead of attempting to reveal the divine plan, tries to put himself in the place of God.

Here again we witness the single outcome of a worldwide process, with East and West yielding the same results, and once again for the same reason: Men have forgotten God.

Confronted by the onslaught of worldwide atheism, believers are disunited and frequently bewildered. And yet the Christian (or post-Christian) world would do well to note the example of the Far East. I have recently had an opportunity to observe in Free China and in Japan how, despite their apparently less clearly defined religious concepts, and despite the same unassailable “freedom of choice” that exists in the West, both the younger generation and society as a whole have preserved their moral sensibility to a greater degree than the West has, and have been less affected by the destructive spirit of secularism.

What can one say about the lack of unity among the various religions, if Christianity has itself become so fragmented? In recent years the major Christian churches have taken steps toward reconciliation. But these measures are far too slow; the world is perishing a hundred times more quickly. No one expects the churches to merge or to revise all their doctrines, but only to present a common front against atheism. Yet even for such a purpose the steps taken are much too slow.

There does exist an organized movement for the unification of the churches, but it presents an odd picture. The World Council of Churches seems to care more for the success of revolutionary movements in the Third World, all the while remaining blind and deaf to the persecution of religion where this is carried through most consistently – in the USSR. No one can fail to see the facts; must one conclude, then, that it is deemed expedient not to see, not to get involved? But if that is the case, what remains of Christianity?

It is with profound regret that I must note here something which I cannot pass over in silence. My predecessor in the receipt of this prize last year – in the very month that the award was made – lent public support to Communist lies by his deplorable statement that he had not noticed the persecution of religion in the USSR. Before the multitude of those who have

perished and who are oppressed today, may God be his judge.

It seems more and more apparent that even with the most sophisticated of political maneuvers, the noose around the neck of mankind draws tighter and more hopeless with every passing decade, and there seems to be no way out for anyone – neither nuclear, nor political, nor economic, nor ecological. That is indeed the way things appear to be.

With such global events looming over us like mountains, nay, like entire mountain ranges, it may seem incongruous and inappropriate to recall that the primary key to our being or non-being resides in each individual human heart, in the heart's preference for specific good or evil. Yet this remains true even today, and it is, in fact, the most reliable key we have. The social theories that promised so much have demonstrated their bankruptcy, leaving us at a dead end. The free people of the West could reasonably have been expected to realize that they are beset by numerous freely nurtured falsehoods, and not to allow lies to be foisted upon them so easily. All attempts to find a way out of the plight of today's world are fruitless unless we redirect our consciousness, in repentance, to the Creator of all: without this, no exit will be illumined, and we shall seek it in vain. The resources we have set aside for ourselves are too impoverished for the task. We must first recognize the horror perpetrated not by some outside force, not by class or national enemies, but within each of us individually, and within every society. This is especially true of a free and highly developed society, for here in particular we have surely brought everything upon ourselves, of our own free will. We ourselves, in our daily unthinking selfishness, are pulling tight that noose.

Let us ask ourselves: Are not the ideals of our century false? And is not our glib and fashionable terminology just as unsound, a terminology that offers superficial remedies for every difficulty? Each of them, in whatever sphere, must be subjected to a clear-eyed scrutiny while there is still time. The solution to the crisis will not be found along the well-trodden paths of conventional thinking.

Our life consists not in the pursuit of material success but in the quest for worthy spiritual growth. Our entire earthly existence is but a transitional stage in the movement toward something higher, and we

must not stumble and fall, nor must we linger fruitlessly on one rung of the ladder. Material laws alone do not explain our life or give it direction. The laws of physics and physiology will never reveal the indisputable manner in which the Creator constantly, day in and day out, participates in the life of each of us, unfailingly granting us the energy of existence; when this assistance leaves us, we die. And in the life of our entire planet, the Divine Spirit surely moves with no less force: this we must grasp in our dark and terrible hour.

To the ill-considered hopes of the last two centuries, which have reduced us to insignificance and brought us to the brink of nuclear and non-nuclear death, we can propose only a determined quest for the warm hand of God, which we have so rashly and self-confidently spurned. Only in this way can our eyes be opened to the errors of this unfortunate 20th century and our bands be directed to setting them right. There is nothing else to cling to in the landslide: the combined vision of all the thinkers of the Enlightenment amounts to nothing.

Our five continents are caught in a whirlwind. But it is during trials such as these that the highest gifts of the human spirit are manifested. If we perish and lose this world, the fault will be ours alone.

