

## **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 1983 Templeton Prize Acceptance Address**

Over 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 twentieth 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 go to hell! The pitifully helpless state to which the contemporary West has sunk is in large measure due to this fatal error: the belief that the only issue is that of nuclear weapons, whereas in reality the defense of peace reposes chiefly on stout hearts and steadfast men.

Only the loss of that higher intuition which comes from God could have allowed the West to accept calmly, after World War I, the protected 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 its 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 anaesthetic — 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’. That 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 contemporary 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 which 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 patterns 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 ill-fated internal schism. In the 18th, the country was shaken by Peter's forcibly imposed transformations, which favoured 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, Russian educated circles had virtually lost the faith; and amongst the uneducated, its health was threatened.

It was Dostoevsky, once again, who drew from the French Revolution and its seething hatred for 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 preached 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 diabolic ends, communism needs to control a population devoid of religious and national feeling, and this entails a destruction of faith and nationhood. Communists proclaim both of these objectives openly, and just as openly put them into practice. 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 1920s in the U.S.S.R. 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 in

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 dekulakization 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 our peasants. 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 being planned in the U.S.S.R. today, to be perpetrated against the Russian land itself, whereby the Russian North is to be flooded, the flow of the northern rivers reversed, the life of the Arctic Ocean disrupted, and the water channelled 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 show-case 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 levelled, where a triumphant atheism has rampaged uncontrolled for two-thirds of a century, where the clergy are 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 labour 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 steam roller 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 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 enmity, to say nothing of the tide of secularism which, 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.

Unnoticeably, through decades of gradual erosion, the meaning of life in the West ceased to stand for 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 appeal to eternal concepts, 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. What other evidence of godlessness does one need, if a

blasphemous film about Jesus is shown throughout the United States, reputedly one of the most religious countries in the world? Or if a major newspaper publishes a shameless caricature of the Virgin Mary? When external rights are completely unrestricted, why should one make an inner effort to restrain oneself from ignoble acts? . . .

Or why should one draw back from burning hatred, whatever its basis — race, class, or zealous 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 hate for their own society. Amid all the vituperation, it has been forgotten that the defects of capitalism represent the basic flaws of human nature, freed from all limitations just as the various human rights are; that under communism (and communism breathes down the neck of all moderate forms of socialism, which are unstable) — under communism the very same flaws become completely unbridled in any person with the last degree of authority; and that everyone else under that system truly does attain ‘equality’ — the equality of destitute slaves. Such incitements to hatred are coming to characterize today’s free world. Indeed, the broader the personal freedoms are, the higher the level of prosperity or even abundance, the more vehement, paradoxically, is this blind hatred. 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 unquenchable hatred then spreads to all that is alive, to life itself, to the world with its colours, sounds and shapes, to the human body. The embittered art of the 20th century is perishing from this ugly hate, for art is fruitless without love. In the East art has collapsed because it has been forcibly knocked down and trampled, but in the West the fall has been voluntary, a decline into a contrived and pretentious quest where the artist, instead of attempting to make known the divine plan, tries to put himself in the place of God.

And here again, the same result is produced both in East and West, through a world-wide process, by the same cause: that men have forgotten God.



Confronted by the onslaught of world-wide 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 the apparently lesser precision of their religious concepts, and despite the same unassailable 'freedom of choice' that exists in the West, both the society and the younger generation have preserved a moral sense to a greater degree than is true in the West, 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 100 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. But for such a purpose the steps taken are much too slow.

There also exists 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 U.S.S.R. Not to see the facts is impossible; 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 receipt of this prize last year [Billy Graham]— in the very months 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 U.S.S.R. 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 on 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.

Before the mountains, nay, the whole mountain ranges of such global events, 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. The social theories which have promised so much have demonstrated their bankruptcy, leaving us in a dead end. The free people of the West could reasonably have been expected to understand that their environment includes 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 without a repentant return of our consciousness to the Creator of all: without this, no exit will be illumined, and we shall be unable to find our way. The means we have left 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. And particularly in a free and highly- developed society, for in that case we have surely done everything by ourselves and 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 which leads to superficial remedies being proposed for each difficulty? In every field of endeavour they all must be subjected to a clear-eyed review while there is still time. The solution of the crisis will not be found along the well-trodden paths of conventional notions.

Our life consists not in the pursuit of material success but in the quest of 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, unflinchingly granting us the energy of existence; when this assistance leaves us, we die. In the life of our entire planet, the Divine Spirit moves with no less force: this we must grasp in our dark and terrible hour.

Instead of the ill-advised 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 only reach with determination for the warm hand of God, which we have so rashly and self-confidently pushed away. If we did this our eyes could be opened to the errors of this unfortunate 20th century and our hands could be directed to set them right. There is nothing else to cling to, in the landslide: all the thinkers of the Enlightenment can give us nothing.

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