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Book Review

And the Nightingales Sing: Theological Reflections and Dialogues by Jakub S. Trojan. Prague: Oikúmené, 1992. Paperback, 312 pp. (Translated by Lesley and Jan Čulík and Gerald Turner.)

This selection of articles, meditations, memoirs and dialogues by today's leading Czech Protestant theologian provides the closest access I have so far obtained to the informal philosophical and theological debates which played a seminal role in the moral opposition to communism in Czechoslovakia. What topics were discussed? How did a theologian present the Christian angle to people who were radically secularised? What contribution did Christian thought make to the critique of communist society and the evolution of the principles of civil society? Trojan reconstructs typical discussions, often linked in series, and sets them in typical places and contexts, with fictitious participants coming home from work, rubbing oil from their hands and discussing day-to-day problems before they settle down to listen to theological expositions and thrash out their thoughts on God, man, Christ, contemporary society and corruption, guilt, consumerism, loving your neighbour as yourself, how to live with power. Trojan provides deeply reasoned and often illuminating insights. His is a complex personality, in which reason and mysticism intermingle, so this is not an easy book, especially for readers like me who are not familiar with his basic German Protestant theology – but then neither were the participants in the discussions. The book certainly repays a second reading, and it could be used to set off discussion groups here in the West. It is full of searching insights which are readily quotable: 'We can only learn the truth about power if we retreat to the territory of powerlessness.'

Some of the essays, redolent with atmosphere, are sparked off as friends meet in the Slavia Cafe and swap tales of their latest arrests and cellmates, or relax in the family cottage in the mountains. There are some wonderful descriptive passages like that of the bus he commutes on daily: 'the large slug of an animal. First seen at the bottom of the square, with two horns glinting on its forehead and its sidelights wild like the eyes of a beast of prey. Breathing heavily, it slows down, its empty belly rumbles, its skin sweaty and stinking.'

Some of the autobiographical material is immensely moving. It was only by chance that Trojan became a Christian, attracted by a YMCA conference addressed by Professors Ján Patočka and Božena Komárková. They did not talk about the existence of God, as he had expected, but about young people's postwar orientation and their responsibility for the life of society under the new circumstances. All this was totally different from what went on in his village Catholic church, which was nearly empty and where the few young people were mainly interested in dating each other. Not long after his conversion, and five months after his marriage, Trojan was dispatched to an elite penal camp in Slovakia. He might have been there for life; he was

released after three years. How much separation could his wife stand? He tells how each day on his return from work he would look at the grey blanket on his bed to see if there was a letter from her. One night he had a dream in which he and a friend had a vision of a voice coming from a luminous centre where huge copper discs overlapped and then regrouped into something like a huge figure. Its message was 'Go, fill our lives with meaning'.

Ironically it was in prison camp, as the only Protestant among young members of the Catholic resistance, including 150 monks, that he built up warm relationships and a sympathy for Catholicism which was to bear fruit years later in the seminars and in Charter 77. The final chapter of his book is called 'I believe in the Holy Catholic Church'.

Much of his theology is taught by presenting God and humanity as joint participants in a story. Individuals can gain entry through an act of faith, a response to the divine initiative. Their stories can be integrated into God's story as they are stimulated and carried along into it.

The touchstone of the new spirituality is the ability to be a message-bearer both to the individual and the human community. The message must be as universal as God's mercy to us ... to join in the renewal of the self and of the social reality ... in mutual dependence. Only if we are drawn towards a deeper self-awareness combined with a sense of responsibility for others and for public affairs – thus tasting the unity of the undivided life – have we any hope of taking the right path. As I follow Christ on his travels, back and forth across the land of Israel ... I begin to get some inkling of the significance for Jesus' own inner world and for His service to others of a life of deeply anchored unity. Is his ascent on the Mount of Transfiguration ... not a sign that, in the midst of our life's tasks, we too, like Him, can experience the power of ecstasy and anticipate community with Him whom, on Christ's injunction we too call: 'Our Father!?' (pp. 274–5)

As an analyst of societies and trends in the West, as well as in the East before the collapse of communism, Trojan predicted some of the less estimable developments in postcommunist Czechoslovakia. His is one of the great prophetic voices of the second half of the twentieth century and what he says is as relevant today as before the revolution. The tragedy is that in the current Czech religious scene he could increasingly become a lone voice. When he gave me this book he described with sorrow how relations between Catholics and Protestants – except with long-term friends like Václav Frei, one of his fellow prisoners – had changed for the worse. He told me how the newly reinstated Catholic faculties were sealing themselves against influences from the western world, refusing gifts of libraries from German Catholic theologians. 'Young priests who are being trained today are being insulated from the thinking and life of the people to whom they will be sent,' Václav Frei told me. 'A priest with no understanding of developments in western theology will be powerless to cope with the complex problems he will meet today.' There is no danger of this happening to the students of the Comenius faculty, where Trojan is dean.

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