

## What Time Is It?

I have recently been enjoying Tomáš Halík's *The Afternoon of Christianity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2024). More on that in a moment. But as I hail from Scotland, whilst also living in Macao and Hong Kong, I have the luxury of being able to compare and contrast the fortunes of the churches. So please allow me to explain.

One could be forgiven for thinking that when logging on to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland website, one's internet had been hacked. For almost immediately, the casual browser will be taken to a large selection of churches, chapels and manses – all marked “for sale”. This may well be one of the most organised retreats in ecclesiastical history. The Church of Scotland ministers to a population of around 5.5 million. But to meet rising pension costs for clergy and address the falling numbers attending churches and chapels, it recently decided to offload 40% of its buildings. That means churches and chapels at the centre of community life for centuries are on the market. As are the manses where clergy have met with parishioners, and offered pastoral care and counsel to all who have crossed the threshold. The number of clergy is set to remain almost level. Put simply, the market for organised religion is in deep recession. The Church of Scotland is cutting its cloth accordingly. It claims it cannot afford to do otherwise.

There is an old piece of folklore that claims one of the questions put to potential officers in the Royal Air Force poses a hypothetical moral dilemma. Those sitting the test are asked to imagine that they are piloting a badly damaged aircraft in wartime, flying over an urban area. With insufficient fuel to make it back to base, they must choose between crashing the aircraft on a hospital (clearly marked by a red cross) or an infant school (clearly identifiable by its tiny playground). Which site for crash landing does the would-be pilot choose, and why? Like most exercises of this kind, it is essentially a trick question.

Some opine that, as the hospital is already full of the dying, sick and injured, it makes more moral sense to crash there. Furthermore, on-site resources are available to treat the injured. Others argue that the schoolchildren represent the future, so they must be spared. Others believe that the adults cannot be spared in a time of war, and though highly regrettable and tragic, the school is the more rational choice for a crash landing.

None of these responses constitutes the correct answer. The examiners are looking for their riddle to be met with this question: “What time is it?”. The time matters because the school is only open from 0830-1500 each day. There is no school on Saturday or Sunday. And for 40% of the year, outside term-time, the school will be mostly empty. Crashlanding at a school on a Sunday in August is likely to lead to no fatalities at all. But any time, any day of the year, will result in multiple casualties at a hospital. So the right answer to the question is another question: “What time is it?”

That is the same question Halík’s book, *The Afternoon of Christianity*, seeks to answer. Here, Tomáš Halík provides a poignant reflection on Christianity’s crisis of faith while offering a vision of the self-reflection, love, and growth necessary for the church to overcome and build a deeper and more mature faith. He has been called “The Apostle to the Disillusioned”. While the book is written from a Catholic perspective, Christians of all stripes can learn from it. Halík’s prose style is ruminative, and in this remarkable book, he surveys the state of Christianity in our late modern times and pleads for a shift in how Christians see the secular world around them. This, Halík argues, is a work of ecumenism and subtle evangelisation. Above all, Halík seeks to build bridges to the disillusioned—especially to those souls who believe that they cannot cross the Rubicon into a firmer conviction.

In a world transformed by secularisation and globalisation, torn by stark political and social distrust, and ravaged by war and pandemic, Christians are facing a crisis of faith. Tomáš Halík brings his unique blend of biblical, cultural, ecclesial, sociological, psychological, theological and political insights to bear upon the crisis. He argues that the churches are at a crossroads. One road leads toward division and irrelevance. The other road may provide the opportunity to develop a deeper, more credible, and mature form of church, theology, and spirituality—an afternoon epoch of Christianity. In sixteen compelling and accessible chapters, he argues that the future vibrancy of the churches now depends on a reconnection with the deeper spiritual and existential dimension of faith. Furthermore, Christianity must transcend itself, giving up isolation and self-centeredness in favour of loving dialogue with people of different cultures, languages, and religions, and free itself from self-absorption.

Halík claims that his methodology is a kind of ‘kariology’ (from the Greek *kairos*, meaning sacred or auspicious time). So Halík’s afternoon is a season ripe with promise if Christians can read “the signs of the times” and act imaginatively and

courageously. Here I find myself wholly in tune with kariology, although I have some quibbles about which signs to read, what counts as distractions or misdirection, and what these times consist of.

That said, what exactly is Halík's new way? First, it means taking seriously people's life experience. Second, it means a less dogmatic church, and one centred on more reflective and frank conversation. Third, it means a humble, honest church capable of self-criticism. Fourth, it means a church rooted in reception and reciprocity – a listening church changed by what it hears. Finally, the afternoon of Christianity is not necessarily the prelude to the darkness and death that the night will bring. The afternoon is, rather, the time when the daystar may start to become visible. Put more starkly, the more the church recedes, the greater the possibility of Christ's revelation.

The great strength of Halík's method and approach is that it directs us towards hard data and concrete reality in assessing the health of the churches and the times, contexts, and cultures in which they operate. Halík points us away from the tempting seductions of ecclesial managerial marketing makeovers, fanciful vision statements, and unrealistic targets. Instead, we are invited to grapple with the grounded, concrete reality of church life and face the real difficulties that denominations must now address.

For example, the 2022 Church of England statistics show a significant demographic shift in the ministry and paint a sobering picture. Of the 7,600 paid clergy, approximately 500 are not in parish ministry but in diocesan administration or other posts. The age distribution is equally striking, with 14% under 40, 30% between 40-59, and a staggering 56% over 60. Additionally, there are 2,700 non-stipendiary clergy. These figures indicate that the Church of England is on the brink of witnessing the retirement of almost two-thirds of its clergy in the next decade.

As the workforce of the Church of England depletes, so does the volume of work, particularly in marriages and funerals. The Marriage Act of 1994, which allowed non-religious buildings to conduct marriages, had a profound impact. Initially, the adoption of secular civil ceremonies was slow. Less than a decade ago, the Church of England was still responsible for nearly 75% of all religious marriages. However, the Church of England's continued opposition to the remarriage of divorcees (if the previous partner is still alive) until the 21st century, despite being permitted by Parliament (1969 Divorce Reform Act), left the church

isolated. The eventual relaxation of the policy came too late, leading to a significant decline in the Church of England's role in conducting marriages.

Funerals are also a significant part of the religious recession. In 1974, the sociologist William Pickering observed that registrars and funeral directors asserted that close to 99% of all funerals were conducted by clergy or a minister deputed to perform the service. Pickering, writing seven years later in 1981, estimated that the Church of England conducted something like 75% of English funerals. The clergy funeral workload was estimated to be around 30 per year for nearly three-quarters of clergy – in other words, once every nine days. Ronald Presto, the Samuel Ferguson Professor of Pastoral Theology at Manchester University, concurred with these statistics.

Fifty years later, the figures look very different for the Church of England. The figure for 2024 (estimated) is probably just under 100,000, representing around 20% of all deaths. As a percentage of funerals, the UK has entered an era where the majority of funerals (60%) are now non-religious or are religiously unaffiliated, with 40% of ceremonies being religious. For Church of England clergy, that equates to fewer than 10 funerals annually if unpaid, honorary or retired clergy are included – or one every 35 days. There are several contributing factors to this collapse.

First, the Church of England lost its monopoly over consecrated ground for burial. As churchyards and graveyards have closed, civic cemeteries and crematoria have grown, and the Church of England is now competing for its share of the funeral market on a (er, level) burial ground.

Second, cremations have increased, and the movement of the deceased directly from the hospital to the crematoria, cutting out the home and the local church, cuts out the clergy. Most people die in a hospital, a hospice, or a care home. Death in the home is now very rare.

Third, the last fifty years have seen a steady decline in the clergy's professional standing, authority in public life, and public trust in the church and the clergy. Against this, funeral directors are far more skilled, creative, and flexible in their engagement with the bereaved and the dying. They are no longer there to convey the body from the church to the ground or crematorium with a slow, dignified journey.

Fourth, the decline in demand for traditional funerals has led to a rise in the personalisation of rites marking the end of life. Bespoke music choices, humour,

no sermon, but tributes, poetry and not bible readings, modes of dress (e.g., the family request you wear bright colours) and celebrating life rather than marking a death are all contributory.

The churches could reasonably argue that they can only accommodate these trends in contemporary culture to a very modest degree without compromising their fundamental identity and integrity. I do have some sympathy with that position. However, the trend towards non-religious funerals seems to be inexorable. In 2022, London Church of England clergy officiated at around 4.5% of the funerals in the capital. Nationally, a 2015 YouGov poll found that only 25% of the English population wanted a religious service at all conducted by a minister for their funeral. However, nearly the same number again did not mind if some religious or spiritual materials were woven into the service.

Secularisation is a modern Christian heresy and is believed and promoted by the churches with some degree of fervour. Like most heresies, it looks almost too good to be true, and is ultimately misleading and doctrinally deviant. What the secularisation thesis does is tempt the churches into a dangerous delusion – that God and society are separate, as are the sacred and profane and the church and world. The allure of the heresy appears to give some account for why the churches are depleting, and the power and influence of Christianity are waning. The secularisation heresy then purports to protect the remnants of faith and defend all that is godly and sacred from all that is worldly and profane.

But Christians are committed to the doctrine of the incarnation. Jesus was born into a world of powers, authorities, customs, practices, cultures, and histories from which he was not separated. In becoming human and one of us, he then finds faith in the ‘secular’ world around him, outside Jewish territories, and in people and places that know nothing of Judaism, let alone Christianity. As such, Jesus, in his life, work and ministry, not only bridges the perceived tribal and ideological boundaries of the secular and sacred realms but sets about dissolving them at every opportunity. The Holy Spirit continues that work. Christians now find God in the secular. The secular is not some rival agency that threatens to overrun religion. On the contrary, the secular is now precisely the place where Christians are expected to encounter the work of the Holy Spirit.

This may all sound too much for some Christians because the church has groomed believers into thinking that they possess the truth and that the world knows nothing of God. Again, we must reckon with what the first Christians understood by faith. We moderns think of it as belief, meaning a set of dry doctrinal and rational propositions. But the Greek word for ‘faith’ (*pistis*) in the

New Testament is better rendered as ‘trust in’ or ‘divine persuasion’, rather than ‘believe’ or ‘belief’. Thus, John 3:16 is better read as “for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever trusts in him shall not perish but have eternal life”.

I don’t have to believe everything a bishop tells me, and that is just as well because I often don’t. Sometimes, even as a teacher of the faith, they can just be wrong. Sometimes, with a thin grasp of affairs, their analysis is weak and off the mark. Sometimes, their media training leads them to say things meant to sound good, reassuring, and convincing, but they are neither accurate nor convincing. I can live with that in small doses because belief is not ultimately crucial to our relationships, including those between ourselves and God and to ultimate salvation.

But trust is indispensable, integral and essential to faith. Like doubting Thomas, I may not easily be persuaded, but I am nonetheless asked to trust. I may see the risen Jesus and not know what, how or why I have, and I cannot explain it. But like the women at the tomb, I am asked to trust. Trust is the key to faith, and it is the key to salvation. When you cannot trust church leaders, no amount of assertion of what is meant to be believed to attain salvation or keep the show on the road will ever compensate for the absence of trust. Faith deserts us at this point. Because if the church cannot be trusted, then nothing it says or does can really be believed.

Children will eventually learn that not everything their parents told them was believable. Spoiler alerts are coming: Father Christmas and the tooth fairy are not true. Sometimes, a parent may tell a child something that, though untrue, was only to protect them from harm or trauma. However, what any child cannot easily recover from is a parent they cannot trust. Faith is trusting in the person, even though you may not have the reasons to believe them (just yet), or the knowledge to confirm your gut instincts and intellectual hunch.

When the church puts its PR or propositional belief statements above trust, it binds itself to a self-secularising future that only ends in heresy, failure and divorce. True religion is ultimately only secured in authentic trust and love. Belief and knowledge come in a distant third, in joint third place. Yet church leaders imagine that if only they keep loudly spouting beliefs and propositions, the tide of secularisation will somehow turn. It won’t.

The Christian faith will continue to recede in public life until we have church leaders we can all trust. That is, trust to be good, truthful, just, authentic, act

with integrity, and be unafraid of scrutiny and transparency. There can be no trust until this is addressed. And that means faith will continue to decline. In that sense, Halík is right to name this time as the “afternoon” of Christianity. The sands of time are running out, and if the churches do not change, they will succeed in their programme of self-righteous self-inflicted exile.

### *Conclusion*

As I have argued before (c.f., *The Humble Church*, *The Precarious Church* and *The Exiled Church* – all SCM-Canterbury Press, 2020 & 2024), it is self-secularising churches that promote the heresy of secularisation. It appeals to church leaders as a thesis because it presumes that there was once a golden religious era and that external forces such as industrialisation, urbanisation and consumerism have caused the decline. Thus, with the decline attributed to external forces and factors, church leaders immediately distance themselves from responsibility and blame. But this won't do as a paradigm. In Great Britain, only 12% of the population went to church in 1800. In 1850, after a rapid and intense period of industrialisation and urbanisation, the figure rose to 17% and remained relatively stable until 1900.

That said, social historians and sociologists such as Hugh McLeod have shown that church attendance has been in decline for around 250 years. The 1960s probably mark the period when the decline became most pronounced, with McLeod comparing this “rupture” to the trauma of the Reformation. However, it wasn't an intellectual thesis, political ideology or theological argument that had caused the decline and rapid depletion of Christianity. It was simply the recognition that there was no obligation to attend church, no means of coercion in belief, as people could now *choose* the faith they wanted – or none, if they so desired.

Furthermore, with religious belief and practice becoming opt-in choices rather than awkward social opt-outs, there was little sense in which faith and religious affiliation served as a religious glue. As for passing on faith to the next generation, the 1960s saw women return to the workplace (NB: there have been few eras in which women could not afford to work), leaving little time for children's spiritual formation. Sunday School attendance declined. Weekends became filled with leisure activities and recreation. Parents no longer taught their children how to pray. Schools gradually moved away from assemblies with bible readings and hymns. The young were no longer being socialised into Christianity.

Ultimately, the spiritual market remains unpredictable—sometimes buoyant, at other times flat. It mixes intensity and extensity, recession and growth, trusted brands with entirely new offerings, and long-term investment with short-term transitional opportunities. As a marketplace, all we can say about the present is that the number of spiritual traders, investors, consumers, spenders, and savers in the 21st century doesn't point to an emerging world that is religionless in character, or indeed to any society that has ceased to make space for the spiritual. But it does not follow from this that the churches will fare well. Halík's kariology seems to suggest that without deep and empathetic engagement with people's real-life experiences, less dogma, and a church more centred on reflective and honest reciprocity, the churches may struggle to see out the 21<sup>st</sup> century as viable institutions. As John Robinson noted in *The New Reformation* (SCM 1965, p. 27), the future of Christianity might need to be far less churchy and much more focused on building the kingdom of God. So, on this afternoon, I close with Robinson's prescient admonition:

“We have got to relearn that ‘the house of God’ is primarily the world in which God lives, not the contractor's hut set up in the grounds...”.

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