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## **COSTLY FREEDOM**

Freedom is one of the key concepts of our Western civilization. We could look at the history of modern times as the history of the cultural and political emancipation of mankind, as the history of the struggle for freedom. From the time we began our formal education, we were taught the important dates when freedom won. Nevertheless, we can also list the failures that freedom suffered. I am speaking about something greater than the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century that trampled on human dignity even more drastically than other historical events, which are often referred to as the dark ages of human history. For we may also describe modern culture as a progressive sequence of discoveries disclosing both the conditions which prescribe human existence and the limits of human freedom. The rational subject, the thinking human being, who from the time of Descartes seemed to constitute the foundation on which we can build all other values, turned out to be entangled in a network of powerful, determining influences. Darwin assigned human beings a humble place in natural history. Marx and Durkheim discovered their social and economic dependencies, while Freud identified numerous determinants of their rationality through an enormity of unconscious instincts and complexes. Structuralists described the conditions of human rationality within the framework of broadly understood culture, and all this was crowned with the discoveries of genetics, which enabled us not only to read our predetermined programming, but also made it possible – in a mechanistic way – to manipulate it.

If we want to reflect on the concept of freedom today, we cannot ignore these facts. Knowledge of the multiple determinants of human thought and behavior suggestively advances a deterministic understanding of human life and can lead to rejecting the idea of freedom as a mere illusion. This understanding of reality may prove enticing. However, those who relinquish freedom as a value also relinquish responsibility. In such a situation, one can attempt to hide behind an assumed alibi of innocence. My Polish friend Józef Tischner once asked a difficult and unpopular question: why did communism triumph in our part of the world and why did it last so long? Why do many people still long for the times of oppression, much as the Israelites did in the desert when they recalled dishes full of food during Egyptian captivity? In response, he argued that the totalitarian regime was, for all its atrocities, a "haven of innocence." Both the perpetrators and the victims could hide behind the regime's political machine, which gave no one room for true freedom.

This process also works the other way around. A person who denies the existence of the category of sin and guilt thereby denies the value of freedom. "How is it possible for a man to be guilty?" – asks Father Józef K. in Kafka's *The Trial*. This novel is perhaps one of the most profound literary analyses of the tragedy of modern man, whose guilt lies in his apparent innocence. The main character, however, loses responsibility because he succumbs to an alienated, superficial life that is directed from the outside. Józef K. is at first glance an innocent victim of an absurd judicial apparatus, the rules of which he does not understand. In a broader perspective, as the main character he becomes the embodiment of Heidegger's "das Man", i.e. an inauthentic life led in a manner consistent with the world ("Man lebt", in Heidegger's own words). His guilt is that he doesn't understand his situation and is unable to move beyond it.

"How is it possible for a man to be guilty?" Admittedly, a person often feels satisfaction when she learns of the possibility of transferring responsibility for everything she has done and will yet do to a number of external factors. It is as if we returned to the age of ancient tragedies, when everything – peoples' actions, thoughts and feelings – were initiated by the gods, and even the gods themselves were subject to a higher fate.

Despite all this, the Christian faith defends freedom. It understands freedom as the most precious thing that people have received from their Creator, as that which makes them to be like Him. Human beings received freedom from God as a gift and at the same time an obligation – *Gabe und Aufgabe*, as a difficult and demanding task. The great witness of Christ, Dietrich Bonhoeffer from Wrocław,

made a sharp distinction between "cheap" and "costly" grace. Grace, *gratia*, is by definition a free gift from God. It is not a reward or the fruit of our merits. However, it is a gift that obligates. "Cheap grace" is grace without repentance, without conversion, without the cross, without discipline, without following Christ. It is a denial of the living Word of God "made flesh." "Costly grace" is the gospel we must constantly seek, it is a gift we must ask for, it is the door at which we must keep knocking. It is a costly gift because it calls for imitation, because a person pays for this grace with their life. As Bonhoeffer teaches, what is costly to God cannot be cheap for us. I believe that by analogy we can develop a philosophy and a theology of freedom. "Cheap Freedom" is the freedom of an animal that has been released from its cage to do whatever it wants. Only the "path of freedom" which is combined with a sense of responsibility is truly human.

Considering my country in the nineties, when a free society was established after the fall of communism, we must not ignore the era of "wild capitalism", a typical expression of the animal understanding of freedom, of "cheap freedom". Many communists, especially those associated with the structures of the political police, quickly transformed themselves into the first capitalists. They were the only people in the early 1990s who had capital – financial resources, personal contacts, and information. The Lustration Act prevented them from exercising political functions, so they created an entrepreneurial elite, which to this day buys politicians like pawns placed on the chessboard of their own political interests and ambitions. While Václav Havel warned of this "wild capitalism", his opponent, Václav Klaus, crafted a simplistic ideology of inverted Marxism, claiming that changing the economic foundation would change the "superstructure", and all problems would be resolved by the "invisible hand of the market". Unfortunately, the "invisible hand of the market" was soon replaced by the "invisible hand of corruption". Ironically, it is in the name of "fighting corruption" that populists have come to power in recent years.

The specter of communism no longer haunts Europe. Its place was taken by populism, a mixture of nationalism, xenophobia and religious fundamentalism. Populists are now celebrating significant electoral success in post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, but they are also successful in Western countries with a long, uninterrupted democratic tradition, in the US (an example is the Trump phenomenon) and the UK (where demagoguery led to the fatal error called Brexit). The process of globalization appears to have reached its culmination in our time. One of its consequences was the collapse of the communist world, which could compete successfully in the open global market of goods and tho-

ughts. Now, however, the dark sides of globalization are emerging. One of them is the paradox in which the global integration of the world leads to an increasing divide between rich and poor countries, between the elite and the rest of society. Today we are witnessing a new "Cultural Revolution", which we might call the "Counter-Cultural Revolution". There is a global rebellion against the elite, creating "liquid anger". Populists incite this anger and forge it into the instrument of their success. Liquid anger is reminiscent of the situation that led to the rise of Nazism and communism. Today, however, the main source is not a social crisis, but rather a moral and spiritual crisis. It is understandable that people who failed to become part of the ruling elite, of those who possess financial wealth and influence, still want to be respected and to be able to decide for themselves. The revolt against the elite gained new tools in the form of social media on the Internet. Just as the printing press helped the Reformation, radio helped dictatorship, and television transformed democratic competition into showbusiness, social media transforms frustrated and marginalized social groups into an anonymous crowd that is easily manipulated by populists and demagogues. Populists are able to convincingly express what they feel to people who don't think for themselves, people whose strong negative emotions block their sober, critical judgment.

There is another significant aspect to consider here. The West is still reluctant to admit that modern Russia is waging a systematic hybrid war against it, not only through financial support for extremist movements, but also through intense psychological, propaganda and information activities via the Internet, using "fake news" and sophisticated brainwashing methods, which are mainly aimed at residents of post-communist countries. In many places on our planet, Russia's attempts to influence the results of elections and referendums have been demonstrated. Their aim is to undermine trust in the EU and NATO, cause chaos and division within societies, and inspire hysterical fear of refugees. The situation in Poland surprises me, where politicians who are definitely not Russian allies (such as Orbán in Hungary or Zeman in the Czech Republic) are actually aiding Russia in these efforts. Those who followed the mass demonstration in Warsaw, where crowds marched under banners with slogans expressing a dangerous combination of fear and hatred, those who heard the marchers singing "We Want God", had to ask themselves what kind of God these people want. I'm afraid the God they want has very little to do with the one Jesus called his Father and ours. History teaches us that behind political slogans such as "For God and the People!" and "Gott mit uns" there lies a dangerous idolatry that puts the people in the place of God. Populists are undermining the foundations of liberal democracy, and their

allies are conservative Christian circles, which have always felt an affinity for authoritarian regimes. There is a striking resemblance between these contemporary groups and *Action Française* and other fascist, anti-Semitic Catholic and nationalist movements in Europe, including the Czech Republic and Slovakia, on the eve of World War II. A similar attempt to combine Christianity and nationalism was made by some German Lutherans in the form of the so-called *Deutsche Christen*. As an alternative to them, Bonhoeffer and other Evangelical Christians created the "Confessing Church", the *Bekennende Kirche*. In the 1950's communists in our countries attempted to create collaborators with their regime in so-called "national Catholic churches."

If certain ecclesiastical circles join nationalist, authoritarian regimes or political parties in their countries, then after the collapse of these regimes – which can be expected sooner or later – there will be a rapid and radical departure from the Church and, unfortunately, also from the Christian faith. In traditionally Catholic countries, this may take the form of deferred secularization, which was paradoxically held back by communism. When deferred secularization takes place at last, it may even be stronger than what Western countries experienced two generations earlier.

The escalation of new populism is reminiscent of the disease of cancer. As in every organism, there are pathological cells in every society. However, if the immune system is functioning properly, then these cells do not pose a threat. If the immune system is weak, cancer cells start reproducing dangerously. According to Pope Francis, the Church should be like a field hospital. I am convinced that the task of such a hospital is, among other things, to prevent and treat the infections of infidelity, fear and hatred which give rise to populism, the greatest threat to freedom in today's world. Pope Francis received the same mission as his namesake eight centuries earlier: "Francis, go and fix my house!" The Church's house is in dire need of innumerable repairs. However, the most important reform must come in how Christians think. It is necessary to support this reform, both with the prayers that Pope Francis asks for in all his personal meetings, and with the combined spiritual and intellectual effort of Christians, going beyond the boundaries of churches, states and continents. Yes, the bell rings for all of us. First of all, however, let us listen to the sound of the bells of hope. I believe that today's ecumenical meeting is part of this hopeful sound.

Translation

**Joel Burnell**