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# Templeton Prize Ceremonial Meeting

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I must admit, before attending this ceremonial meeting in the Karolinum on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, I had never heard of the Templeton Prize. A rudimentary bit of research prior to attending had me blown away. The award has an incredibly rich history of remarkable recipients, among them the very first Templeton Prize winner, Mother Teresa in 1973, and 2013 winner Desmond Tutu. Once I realized the gravity, the prestige of the award, I pounced on the opportunity to attend.

The event was remarkably well organized, as I noticed the minute I walked in the door and was directed to the Great Hall immediately. There was a coatroom and a desk handing out headphones for translation for those who didn't speak Czech, and everyone was extremely helpful and attentive. On entering the Great Hall of the Karolinum, I was stunned. The room was so ornate and grandiose; I knew that I was in for something special. As the room began to fill out and the crowds gathered in anticipation, the music began and the guests of honour entered the room. Everyone stood to attention as the throngs passed, among them the President of the Templeton Foundation himself, John Templeton Jr., the Minister of Culture of the Czech Republic Daniel Herman, Vice-Rector and Professor in the Institute of Art History Jan Royt, Rector of Charles University Tomáš Zima, and the guests of honour, 2007 Templeton Prize winner Charles Taylor and this year's Templeton Prize winner, Tomáš Halík.

From the moment the event began I was in awe. First to speak was Jan Royt, who gave a brief history of religion in the Czech Republic, calling Prague the spiritual capital of Central Europe. He did not speak for long before handing over the reins to another honoured guest, John Templeton Jr. himself, who gave a beautiful speech outlining first the history of the Templeton foundation itself. He explained how it had been formed in 1972 by his father, John Templeton, with the purpose of awarding those who led us to new insights into the limitless potential of the human spirit. He spoke extremely highly also of Professor Halík, who he said had rigorously pursued intellectual discussion of the bond between the mind and the spirit, and had embraced both believers and non-believers. After finishing his speech, he presented Halík with a beautiful crystal pyramid to commemorate the event.

Next to speak was former Czech priest, and now Minister of Culture Daniel Herman. While he kept his speech relatively short, he too praised Halík for his promotion of freedom of religion and intellectualism.

Tomáš Zima, Rector of Charles University, was next to speak. He gave a brief background to the audience on Charles Taylor, and highly praised his work as a philosopher, calling him "among the best known and most acclaimed of the modern generation of philosophers." He pointed out that Dr. Taylor was a frequent visiting lecturer at Charles University, and how he had been the Chairperson of the Jan Hus Educational Foundation in 1980-81. After completing his praise of Taylor, he presented him with the Charles University Gold Medal, which Taylor accepted gracefully and amid much applause.

He then went on to give an excellent speech and subsequent lecture which was remarkably interesting. First he gave a history of his experience in Prague in the 1980s, which to me was perhaps the most interesting purely because I had never heard of the Jan Hus Educational Foundation before. The Jan Hus Educational Foundation was set up as an underground education network in former Czechoslovakia under Communist rule. Taylor stated that the lectures he gave to those students who he taught in utmost secrecy there were the most rewarding of his life; that people starved of knowledge, hungering for it, were among the best students he had ever had. I found this truly fascinating.

He went on to give a remarkable lecture on the difference between Christendom and Christianity; how they are often seen to be of the one but are in fact disparate from one another. As he explained; Christendom is a culture, a society profoundly penetrated by the Christian faith, and Christianity is merely the faith itself. He pointed to the building of the Karolinum as an example of the wonders that can be achieved under a Christendom, but also remarked that there are dangers to it; that when Christianity becomes bound by rules, regulations and chains of command, it can become perhaps too rigid. He feels that modern society seems to be dissolving the Christendom but that this does not mean Christianity is dying; merely evolving into a new, perhaps better form, as demonstrated by the forward-thinking manner of Pope Francis.

Next came the musical interlude. I was truly blown away by this portion of the ceremonial meeting. The first performance was on the oboe accompanied by the piano, and it was beautiful. What followed was even more so, as a violinist and a singer entered, giving a soulrending performance together. Next, the oboe and the violin performed a harmonic duet, and finally, all 3 came together, accompanied by the piano. The awed silence throughout was matched only by the thunderous applause that followed.

After the musicians had left, Tomáš Halík was given the floor. The ovation given as he approached the podium went on for minutes before he could begin speaking, a symbol of the respect the audience had for the man. As he began, I was immediately drawn in to his speech. The man's booming voice commanded attention; even if I had to listen to a translation through headphones, I could see that this was a man who was no stranger to speaking to crowds. The first thing he pointed out in his speech was that he was the very first Czech Templeton Prize laureate, something I was not aware of; truly a momentous achievement. Next, in a very interesting anecdote, he told the tale of the only other time he had ever stood in the Great Hall of the Karolinum, 42 years before, in 1972. He was to receive his doctorate that day, and to give a speech. In the speech, he commemorated Jan Palach, among with the many professors who had been fired from their jobs for speaking out against the Communist regime. He was banned from ever teaching in Charles University on the spot, a ban that was not lifted for almost 20 years. He never dreamt that he would be standing there again, an awardee of the prestigious Templeton Prize, so far in the future. After that bit of personal history, he began his fascinating lecture on his endeavours not to allow our modern society to lose its spirituality.

He spoke on how the concepts of progress and religion had often been parallel concepts to many people, never seeming to meet in the middle. He made the point that Christianity is not disappearing, it is transforming into something better. That while the role of Christianity in telling people what was happening in the world had been mostly replaced by the media, the sociopolitical role was still as strong as ever.

Most interesting for me, however, was the discussion of the concepts of faith and doubt. The manner in which Professor Halík approached the apparent warring of these concepts was very unique, in what for me was the best quote of the evening: "Faith without doubt can lead to fanaticism; doubt without faith can lead to cynicism and pragmatism."

He stated his ideas that Christianity should move away from the missions that have marked the last few centuries, should stop attempting to rally troops to the cause, and should instead guide people on their spiritual journey, allowing them to come to rest wherever they felt comfortable. As he finished his speech, I was well aware of why this man had won the Templeton Prize. His thoughts on harmony and freedom between religions are so unique and multi-faceted that they have even influenced Pope Francis himself, and it was an honour to be in the same room as him.

In conclusion, I would say that this event had a large impact on me. I have never been a religious person, and probably never will be, and so when I entered first and saw the Rector and others garbed in full medieval-like academic attire, I was worried that I had stepped into a Church service. But once the discussion began, spirituality was at the forefront. Freedom of religion and expression was the theme of the evening. I was delighted to see that the leading Christian minds and philosophers of the modern era are so open and unbiased, that even someone with no religion can walk in, listen to the talks, and truly enjoy the intellectual discussion aside from anything else. This was perhaps one of the best events I have attended in my time here, and I would say congratulations to all involved.