

# Magna est Veritas et praeualebit\*

Allan White OP

'Jeszcze Polska Nie Zginela' ('Poland is not Dead!'). It was with these words that Václav Havel, Czechoslovakia's new President, closed his address to the Polish Sejm and Senate on 21 January, 1990. He was quoting from the Polish National Anthem, the Mazurek of General Jan Henryk Dabrowski, who in 1797 assembled a Polish legion to fight with the French revolutionary armies. The quotation would have been familiar to every Pole:

And from the trumpets to the heavens sped

That march of triumph: 'Poland is not yet dead!'

The verse itself is incorporated in a large epic poem, *Pan Tadeusz* written by the Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz in 1834 as he languished in exile after the failure of the Polish revolution against the Russians four years earlier.

Adam Mickiewicz (1798—1855) belonged to a group of poets which included Julius Słowacki (1809—49) and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812—59) collectively known as the Polish Messianists. A theme common to all of them was an emphasis on the manifest and representative destiny of the Polish people. In their struggle for independence and national integrity the Poles were not only fighting for the fulfilment of a purely political design but for the realisation of a humanitarian and cosmopolitan dream with a strong vein of spirituality. Many of the images they used were drawn from the Christian symbolic repertoire with, not unnaturally, a particular emphasis on the significance of the resurrection of Christ. This messianic theme was quietly alluded to by Havel in his January address in Warsaw. Clearly he understands the recent upheavals in East and central Europe not simply as a political crisis but as a crisis of humanity. In his view the peoples of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, now have a significant opportunity to establish a new order in the territories that previously formed parts of the Habsburg empire. Moreover, their efforts to establish societies based on respect for human dignity and creativity have something positive to offer the rest of the world. As he said: 'We have awakened and we must awaken those in the West who have slept through our awakening. That is a task that we shall fulfil better, the more united we set ourselves to it.'<sup>1</sup>

Havel's call is not only to a process of national renewal, which in itself would be inadequate and run the risk of recreating the conditions of the past, but to a renewal of the person. Only in the reassertion of the

abiding value of the individual and a determination to live in the truth can the tyranny of ideology be evaded. President Havel's speech was a reminder to the Polish people of the value of their witness to the rest of the world couched in the language of their ancient heroes.

In many ways the road which led Václav Havel to Warsaw in 1990 had begun with the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979. The Pope's almost mesmeric presence amongst the Poles gathered peacefully in their thousands, galvanised them and imparted a courage and a sense of freedom and community denied them since the horrors of the war; one year later Solidarity was founded. Solidarity's economic and political clout was provided by the shipyard workers and the coal miners but its social and intellectual dynamism was the work of philosophers, artists, journalists, poets, historians, novelists and engineers. It has been well-observed that 1989, like 1848, might be called a 'revolution of the intellectuals', but the seeds of the 1989 revolution were sown ten years earlier when Lech Walesa invited Tadeusz Mazowiecki, now Prime Minister of Poland, to be his special adviser.

The message communicated by the Pope in 1979 to the Polish people was not an alien or novel vision. All of those who have been influential in forming the revolutions of 1989 would recognise the material from which it was wrought: Marcel, Maréchal, Scheler, Blondel and Heidegger in philosophy as well as St Thomas Aquinas and the great mystics of the Carmelite tradition, together with Lubac and von Balthasar in contemporary theology. In his recently issued collection of essays Václav Havel shows the influence of at least some of these authors, with Heidegger most prominent among them. However, there is another strand of significance which might seem slightly abstruse to those Westerners unfamiliar with the breadth of Polish life and literature. The Pope, as a man of wide and humane culture, makes frequent literary references in his carefully constructed speeches. In Poland the Pope made many direct and oblique tributes to the works of Mickiewicz and Słowacki in particular, although he himself gave the imagery they use a more direct reference to the Redeemer. The Pope too shares a vision of the wider responsibility of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe for the wider global polity. When he addressed the Polish people in Victory Square in Warsaw he reminded them:

Christ demanded of Peter and of the other apostles that they should be witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). Have we not the right, with reference to the words of (the resurrected) Christ, to think that Poland has become nowadays the land of a particularly responsible witness?<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely this plea for responsible witness, couched here in religious terms, that can be found in the more secular and humanistic works of Václav Havel.

In John Paul II and Václav Havel it is possible to see two related

responses to similar social and political circumstances. The relationship arises not simply because of the identical threat posed to the Polish, Czech and Slovak nations by Soviet imperialism but through the intellectual reservoir which both Woytyla and Havel draw upon in their defence of their own community. The cultural *Gesellschaft* from which both emerge is that of the Austro-Hungarian empire, whose intellectual history will have an increasingly powerful effect on the unfolding of events in Eastern Europe. The influence of phenomenology is apparent in both Havel and Woytyla, although in the case of the latter it is mixed with what has often been described as Transcendental Thomist Personalism. However, the central concern of both men is the question of human identity and subjectivity. The Pope, following Aquinas, stresses that any discussion of justice must be situated within an anthropology since justice involves the exercise of that virtue by which every man receives what is his due. Injustice is the deprivation of what is due to each person. As Havel demonstrates in the context of existence in a totalitarian state, injustice issues in the deprivation of an individual's very self, his identity, his personhood.

Neither Havel nor Pope John Paul would see the threat to personhood coming solely from one source. The experience of confinement of the individual and the erosion of personal responsibility and freedom is perhaps most clearly seen in the overtly totalitarian systems of the Soviet Union and its satellites, but its manifestation there is only 'one aspect of this general inability of modern humanity to be the master of its own situation.'<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Havel interpreted circumstances in pre-revolutionary Czechoslovakia as standing as 'a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies.'<sup>4</sup> Far from there being no relation between the experience of East and West, the hierarchy of values existing in Western countries had been transposed to the Soviet bloc, with all its social, intellectual, and psychological consequences. The alienation which is so stunningly obvious in Eastern Europe is also evident in the West, albeit inadequately disguised in the rags of consumerism. The upheavals in Eastern Europe are a particularly powerful articulation of the crisis of contemporary technological society as a whole; as the boundaries of technological possibility expand for us we have found our own moral space contracting. Far from resisting this development, we have become eager co-operators in our own progressive enslavement. 'We look on helplessly as that coldly functioning machine we have created inevitably engulfs us, tearing us away from our natural affiliations.'<sup>5</sup> The justification for this evasion of personal responsibility and abdication of self is described by the Pope in philosophical terms as 'alienation' and by Havel in dramatic terms as 'living a lie'. What toppled the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe was not the Svengali of Capitalist democracy but the impossibility of continuing to live that lie.

In a society in which the form and order of public life is projected in terms of mere appearance and illusion the vitality and concern which

should sustain the structures of society is transferred to the private realm. The desire for security and the urge to self-preservation result in a 'privatisation' of morality and a rejection of the communal. The privatisation of morality is a direct consequence of the nationalisation of truth. When the state appropriates the truth and insists that there is no alternative it substitutes ideology for authenticity. In order to protect themselves from this counterfeit reality whilst enjoying the security of some material certainties, individuals withdraw to the forms of an alternative society. The cement of this alternative society is rampant individualism robbed of any spiritual and moral integrity. Provided the hidden reality of private commerce and corruption does not come to the surface, the system may survive. Its strength is an illusion, however, since it is vulnerable to just one individual who is prepared to live in the truth and disclose in his criticism the catastrophe visited on personal identity when theory informed by power attempts to shape reality, rather than be formed by it.

Clearly Václav Havel owes his position as President of Czechoslovakia to his being just such a person: a fusion of martyr, prophet and philosopher-king. In his moving inauguration speech to the people of his country he reminded them that:

We had all become used to the totalitarian system and accepted it as an unchangeable fact and thus helped to perpetuate it. In other words, we are all—though naturally to different extents—responsible for the operation of the totalitarian machinery, none of us is just its victim: we are also its creators.<sup>6</sup>

The loss of identity and degradation of personality which came about through collusion with the unreality of the totalitarian regime can be purged by the acceptance of responsibility. The personalist emphasis, which is characteristic of much contemporary Central European philosophy, makes its appearance throughout Havel's Presidential addresses. In them he discloses the fundamental presuppositions as to the nature of the properly human which resonate with those held by the Pope.

Personhood is best seen in terms of ethical behaviour; man is most truly himself when he acts morally. Given this perspective, the Czech revolution becomes much more far-reaching in scope. Havel's summons is not simply to political reconstruction but to moral regeneration. The integrity of Czechoslovakia depends not on its participation in international alliance systems or its relation to wider economic communities but on the moral health of its people.

... we live in a contaminated moral environment. We felt morally ill because we became used to saying something different from what we thought. We learned not to believe in anything, to ignore each other, to care only about ourselves. Concepts such as love, friendship, compassion, humility or forgiveness lost their depth and dimensions and for many of us

represented only psychological peculiarities, or they resembled gone-astray greetings from ancient times, a little ridiculous in the era of computers and spaceships.<sup>7</sup>

The endeavour to which Havel summoned the Czech and Slovak peoples stands firmly in the cultural tradition of their corporate history. In popular iconography he has been linked with Thomas Masaryk, the *pater patriae* of Czechoslovakia, with whom he shares a community of vision. Like Masaryk, Havel sees his country as being closer to a Western cosmopolitan European tradition than to the 'pan Slavic' aspirations of some of his colleagues in former Iron Curtain countries. Yet, at the same time, he sees the contribution Czechoslovakia can make to a reconstructed and self-confident European civilisation as being distinctively Central European in tone. Already closer ties are being forged with Austria, Hungary and Italy, a symbolic recapitulation of the validity of the Austro-Hungarian polity. The nuance of this Czechoslovak strand in European development is distinctively moral in character. Like Masaryk, Havel is faced with leading a renewal amounting to the virtual recreation of a viable state out of a fragmented coalition of different peoples, religions and language groups. Masaryk's option was the rallying cry of a cultivated humanism which encouraged development through the exercise of individual responsibility. It is this doctrine of *drobná práce* ('small scale work') which forms the background to Havel's conviction that only a moral revolution will provide the conditions in which national creativity and self-confidence may thrive once more. Cultural reconstruction follows a renaissance in human identity.

Havel, following Masaryk, interprets working for the good of the nation in terms of an exercise of personal responsibility which issues in authentic existence and hence human fulfilment. The community of the state opens up the arena which permits the expression and development of individual identity. It is the deliberately willed human act which is the key to the latent philosophical anthropology of Havel, an emphasis which also appears in Pope John Paul II's *Acting Person*. In this context the principle of subsidiarity is an essential safeguard against the development that totalitarianism which so characterised Eastern European governments in the post-war period.

Havel interprets the functions of the institutions of the state in terms of the principle of subsidiarity as it was enunciated by Pius XI in the Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. *Quadragesimo Anno* insists that this principle relates to that of justice and is to be understood as that process by which individuals realise themselves through the free choice of commitments in co-operation with others for the development of the human community. Pius XI articulated the principle in the midst of a hostile dialogue with Mussolini and was keen to emphasise that larger associations should not usurp the functions which are proper to smaller bodies. Havel's view that the organisation of the state exists to serve the people and not the other way round is an example of the incorporation of this principle into European

philosophical discourse.

The political reconstruction of Eastern Europe will clearly involve an archaeology of the human person. The failed utopia of Czech Communism provides a vital illustration of the inadequacy of founding government on structures devoid of conviction. In the absence of any large-scale consent, and of a common vocabulary of ideals, governmental institutions are forced to rely on constraint. As we in the West are learning to our cost, where consensus is lacking coercion is rife and alienation inevitable. An essential feature in Havel's personalist programme for the restoration of his country's integrity, and a corollary of living in the truth, is the necessity of dialogue and reconciliation; two emphases which also appear in papal utterances on Justice and Peace.

Stability in Czechoslovakia, and, for that matter, in other totalitarian states in the region, was created through the cultivation of institutionalised deafness. The impossibility of dialogue within society, and the lack of the degree of openness needed in any culture if it is to be saved from ossification and internal decay, prompted a flight from engagement. This lack of engagement could be characterised in terms of emigration, either physical or psychological. The haemorrhage of East Germans from their homes into the welcoming uncertainties of West Germany is a particularly graphic parable of forty years of life under Communism. Those who remained had undergone their own internal migration in the form of a retreat into self-protective individualism with few opportunities for self-realisation. Both forms of emigration are powerful protests and both deal the community of the realm a crippling blow, depriving it of the dynamism that stems from dialogue. Emigration, whether physical or psychological, fractures that solidarity which is necessary for the flourishing of any national or political community. It represents a powerful protest against 'the facts' and a sign of the impossibility of that openness in truth which forms the basis of any community of truly autonomous individuals.

Clearly for both Pope John Paul and Václav Havel the question of justice and freedom cannot be considered in isolation from the issue of the human person. However, it is not quite clear whether both would agree on the foundation on which a theory of personality could be laid. John Paul II is uncompromising in his assertion of the dignity of the human person and his own view as to why that dignity has been violated:

Perhaps one of the most obvious weaknesses of present day civilization lies in an inadequate view of man. Without doubt, our age is the one in which man has been most written and spoken of, the age of forms of humanism and anthropocentrism. Nevertheless, it is paradoxically also the age of man's abasement to previously unsuspected levels, the age of human values trampled on as never before.<sup>8</sup>

In the Pope's mind this unhappy situation arises from man's submission to the temptation of refusing God. It is only in the acceptance of the transcendental cast of human life and through participation in the full

realisation of the mystery of humanity made visible in the Incarnate Word that growth in personhood is possible. The Pope's vision is that it is Jesus who reveals man to himself, that the exercise of true freedom is possible within the space of the Incarnation.

Havel's view, although founded on a similar metaphysical basis to that of the Pope and carrying within it striking echoes of Christian existentialism, does not follow the same dogmatic and theological path. Admittedly, the practice of Christianity and the language of Christian humanism is the broad ground on which Havel operates. In his view alienation is possible only because there is something within humanity to alienate, and this something includes a sense of transcendence over the world of existence. This is a long way from the Pope's message of evangelisation as the process through which the image of God in man may be realised, but at least the grammar of dialogue has been laid down. Havel makes no claims to be a professional philosopher; neither does he profess to disclose a coherent dogmatic vision in his writings. He is principally a dramatist who through his medium explores the existential framework of decision which forms the underpinning of so much of his own life. Doubtless as the responsibilities of his new office weigh more heavily on him a new synthesis of literature, philosophy and theology will emerge.

Both John Paul II and Václav Havel see the process of conversion as essential to the project of cultural regeneration. They are both situated in the Augustinian tradition that justice in society is an impossibility unless it also reigns in the life of the individual. The Pope sees this process as a return to Christian life and institutions, Havel categorises it much more vaguely as a rejection of a 'contaminated moral atmosphere'. However, each in his own way is proclaiming a related message expressing the paramount need for a humane culture to animate a spiritually impoverished Europe dehumanised on the one hand by a self-deluding Communism and on the other by a rampant and cynical Capitalism. Havel recently reminded his fellow-countrymen that at one time Czechoslovakia was the 'spiritual crossroads of Europe'. He looked forward to the time when the same could be said again. Quoting Masaryk, he said:

Our first president wrote: 'Jesus, not Caesar.' In this he followed our philosophers Chelcicky and Comenius. I dare to say that we may even have an opportunity to spread this idea further and introduce a new element into European and global politics. Our country, if that is what we want, can now pre-eminently radiate love, understanding, the power of the spirit and ideas. It is precisely this glow that we can offer as our specific contribution to international politics.<sup>9</sup>

The Pope too proclaims a special role for Europe in the work for justice and peace in the world. Like Havel with regard to Czechoslovakia, he urged that Europe could only seize its destiny if it 'seeks its soul and the inspiration which enables its spiritual unity.'<sup>10</sup> European unity based

simply on economic co-operation and capitalist principles is inconceivable to the Pope. In order to flourish and grow into true unity Europe must retain its openness to the transcendent which has always been associated with its Christian heritage. It was the abandonment of this dimension which contributed to the degradation of the human person and the rejection of the objectivity of creation.

Both John Paul II and Václav Havel, formed intellectually and spiritually in the oppressive shadow of totalitarianism, see in the history of their own cultures the consequences of the flight from reality and the failure to live in the truth. It is this experience which makes their voice so powerful in a continent at the crossroads, in which the systems of East and West mirror each other in an uncanny mimesis. The functionalisation of personality which is a feature of life in both East and West reduces the individual to an object to be used in order to attain preordained economic goals. There is not much difference between a Polish coal miner and a young professional working on the London money market, both are 'owned' by their respective systems and both are expendable. Free-market Capitalism and centralised economic Communism have rendered the personality of man equally opaque, one through ruthless individualism and the other through corrupting collectivism.

The Western individualist tradition exalts freedom of the subject at the expense of the objectivity of creation and the human community. It is the vision of reality as subject to human control and ingenuity, the notion of what is as being human projection, which has brought about that disastrous divorce between man and nature issuing in the ecological crisis which now faces us. Both Havel and Pope John Paul have summoned their respective communities, and through them the wider international communities to which they belong, to an act of 'recollection', a determination to live in the truth. On April 20 John Paul II and Václav Havel meet in Prague and that encounter, perhaps more than any other, could help to open an alternative road of development and co-operation in which Europe might 'set itself up as a beacon for world civilisation'.<sup>11</sup>

\* 'Truth is great and shall prevail': an old Hussite motto which was adopted by Masaryk and rendered into Czech as *Pravda Vítězí*.

- 1 President Václav Havel, Speech to Polish Sjem and Senate, January 21, 1990. *New York Review of Books* vol xxxvii no.5, p.18.
- 2 Williams, George Hunston. *The Mind of John Paul II: Origins of his thought and action*. (New York, 1981) p. 314.
- 3 Havel, Václav. *Living in Truth* (London, 1990) p. 115.
- 4 *Living in Truth* p. 54.
- 5 *Living in Truth* p. 114.
- 6 President Václav Havel, Inaugural Address, *The Spectator* 27 January 1990, p. 12.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 8 John Paul II, Address to Latin American Bishops, *John Paul II in Mexico* (London, 1979) p. 74.
- 9 Havel, Inaugural Address, p. 12.
- 10 John Paul II, Address to European Parliament, 11 October 1988. *Briefing* vol. 18, no. 22, p. 471.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 473.