

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN

'Men Have Forgotten' God

This article is adapted from the address Mr. Solzhenitsyn gave on the occasion of his acceptance, in London on May 10, of this year's Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. The first winner of the Templeton Prize, in 1972, was Mother Teresa; last year's winner was the Reverend Billy Graham. In announcing the 1983 award, the Templeton Foundation described Mr. Solzhenitsyn as "a pioneer in the renaissance of religion in atheist nations." Mr. Solzhenitsyn's introductory remarks were made at the awards ceremony at Buckingham Palace, with Prince Philip presiding. The address proper was delivered later the same day at the London Guildhall.

I. The Response

Your Royal Highness: Permit me to express my appreciation to you for taking part in this ceremony. Your participation lends special dignity to these proceedings.

This is the first time that the Templeton Prize has been awarded to an Orthodox Christian. With gratitude that our share in the religious life of the world has now been accorded notice, I remain acutely conscious of my personal unworthiness to receive this award as I look back upon the venerable line of outstanding Orthodox churchmen and of Orthodox thinkers from Aleksei Khomyakov to Sergei Bulgakov. And I am very much aware that Eastern Slavic Orthodoxy, which, during the 65 years of Communist rule, has been subjected to persecution even fiercer and more extensive than that of early Christian times, has had—and still has today—many hands worthier than mine to accept it. Beginning with Vladimir Bogoyavlensky, metropolitan of Kiev, shot by the Communists before the walls of the Kievo-Pechersky Monastery at the dawn of the Lenin era, the list would extend to the intrepid priest Gleb Yakunin, who is enduring torments today, under Andropov: Forcibly deprived of all outward symbols of his priesthood, and even of the right to have the Gospels, Father Yakunin has for months at a time been held in a freezing stone cubicle, without bed, clothes, or food.

In this persecution-filled age, it is appropriate that my own very first memory should be of Chekists in pointed

caps entering St. Panteleimon's Church in Kislovodsk, interrupting the service, and crashing their way into the sanctuary in order to loot. And later, when I started going to school in Rostov-on-Don—passing on my way a kilometer-long compound of the Cheka-GPU and a glittering sign of the League of Militant Atheists—schoolchildren egged on by Komsomol members taunted me for accompanying my mother to the last remaining church in town and tore the cross from around my neck.

Orthodox churches were stripped of their valuables in 1922 at the instigation of Lenin and Trotsky. In subsequent years, including both the Stalin and the Khrushchev periods, tens of thousands of churches were torn down or desecrated, leaving behind a disfigured wasteland that bore no resemblance to Russia such as it had stood for centuries. Entire districts and cities of half a million inhabitants were left without a single church. Our people were condemned to live in this dark and mute wilderness for decades, groping their way to God and keeping to this course by trial and error. The grip of oppression that we have lived under, and continue to live under, has been so great that religion, instead of leading to a free blossoming of the spirit, has been manifested in asserting the faith on the brink of destruction, or else on the seductive frontiers of Marxist rhetoric, where so many souls have come to grief.

The statement of the Templeton Foundation shows an understanding of how the Orthodox spiritual tradition has maintained its vitality in our land despite the forcible promotion of atheism. If even a fraction of those words should find their way to my motherland past the jamming devices, this will bolster the spirits of our believers, assuring them that they have not been forgotten, and that their steadfastness inspires courage even here.

The centralized atheism before whose armed might the whole world trembles still hates and fears this unarmed faith as much today as it did sixty years ago. Yes! All the savage persecutions loosed upon our people by a murderous state atheism, coupled with the corroding effect of its