

AlbertMohler.com

An Uncaptive Mind at Rest

The recent death of poet Czeslaw Milosz robs the world of one of its most prophetic and powerful voices. As one of the world's most famous and celebrated men of literature, Milosz was a titan of poetry and prose. Nevertheless, his moral vision and prophetic insights should be of great interest even to those who are not readers of contemporary poetry, for Czeslaw Milosz was one of the most honest men of our times.

Thursday, August 26, 2004

The recent death of poet Czeslaw Milosz robs the world of one of its most prophetic and powerful voices. As one of the world's most famous and celebrated men of literature, Milosz was a titan of poetry and prose. Nevertheless, his moral vision and prophetic insights should be of great interest even to those who are not readers of contemporary poetry, for Czeslaw Milosz was one of the most honest men of our times.

Born June 30, 1911, to a Polish family living in Lithuania, Milosz emerged into a world then framed by the Russian empire. Later, he would experience firsthand the terrors of Nazi tyranny and Soviet totalitarianism. His moral courage and his resistance to the intellectual dangers of his day set Milosz apart from the Western intellectuals who could no longer tell the difference between good and evil.

Trained as a lawyer, Milosz would serve as a Polish diplomat during the early years of the Communist regime. Prior to that, he had resisted the Nazis and their genocidal attacks upon the people of Warsaw, particularly the Jews. As Milosz would later reflect, Warsaw became a symbol of the inhumanity of twentieth century totalitarianism, with spirits crushed first by the Germans and later by Soviet communism.

Even as a state functionary, Milosz began to write poetry as an avocation. He was actively engaged with the Parisian intellectual class in the years after World War II, when he served as a Polish attache in the French capital. When he was warned of his likely arrest and prosecution back in Poland, Milosz fled the Stalinist purges and emigrated to the West.

Very quickly, Milosz discovered that the liberal intellectuals he met in Western Europe had made themselves woefully blind to the true nature of Communist totalitarianism.

In 1951, Milosz wrote *The Captive Mind*, one of the century's great exposes of Communist tyranny. Milosz traced the problem directly to its philosophical roots. "It was only toward the middle of the twentieth century that the inhabitants of many European countries came, in general unpleasantly, to the realization that their fate could be influenced directly by intricate and abstruse books of philosophy," Milosz argued. Communism triumphed because far too many people—including the intellectual class—refused to believe that ideas really mattered. As Milosz would note, "The average human being, even if he had once been exposed to it, wrote philosophy off as utterly impractical and useless. Therefore, the great intellectual work of the Marxists could easily pass as just one more variation on a sterile pastime. Only a few individuals understood the causes and probable consequences of this general indifference."

Of course, the consequences of this indifference to ideas led eventually to Communist oppression and Stalinist murder on a massive scale.

Milosz understood that Communism had now replaced Christianity as the religion of a secular age. He rejected this "New Faith," lamenting the fact that many intellectuals were attracted to it like moths drawn to a candle. "In the end," he noted, "he throws himself into the flame for the glory of mankind."

The eclipse of Christianity became one of the great themes of Milosz's work. As a Polish Catholic, he observed the erosion of personal faith and public witness as the substance of Christianity was evaporated, even as the Communists

hijacked religious fervor for their own ends. With unique wisdom, Milosz saw that religion had itself “lost its hold on men’s minds not only in the people’s democracies [Communist nations], but elsewhere as well.” Tracing this slide into secularism, Milosz blamed it on a loss of theological commitment among the intellectuals. “As long as a society’s best minds were occupied by theological questions, it was possible to speak of a given religion as the way of thinking of the whole social organism. All the matters which most actively concerned the people were referred to it and discussed in its terms. But that belongs to a dying era.”

Over a period of time, theology was replaced with a sterile philosophy that sought to answer humanity’s most fundamental questions, but in the end could offer only repression and nihilism. Few intellectuals escaped what Milosz described as the “captive mind,” shaped by the totalitarian ideology and deadened by the spiritual famine of the Communist worldview. Milosz’s exposure to the intellectual class in Western Europe led him to believe that such persons were capable of massive self-delusion. In subservience to their own form of Marxist ideology, these intellectuals refused to see the obvious and were thus guilty of both moral blindness and complicity with the great evils of twentieth century totalitarianism. In 1960, Milosz left Paris and moved to the United States, accepting a professorship in the Slavic Department at the University of California at Berkeley.

In 1980, Milosz won the Nobel Prize for Literature. By that time, his poetry had been translated into several languages and his work had become celebrated throughout the free world. In accepting the Nobel Prize, Milosz described himself as “a child of Europe,” but wondered openly if Europe could be salvaged out of its intellectual and spiritual crises. A man of honest hope, Milosz told the Nobel committee of his hope that “our time will be judged as a necessary phase of travail before mankind ascends to a new awareness.”

The greatness of Czeslaw Milosz is rooted not only in his great poetic gift, but in his understanding of the fundamental importance of worldview and his affirmation of the unity of truth and value. Essentially, Milosz was a Christian writer who understood that once Christianity’s truth-claims had been stripped away, the foundation for art, literature, and meaning had been eradicated.

With piercing insight, Milosz defined the twentieth century as “the epoch of a sudden erosion of Christianity.” Even as the Christian worldview unified the good, the beautiful, and the true, the art and literature of the twentieth century destroyed “the very foundations of Christianity,” Milosz argued. “They voice a permanent complaint against existence which is pain and insufficiency, but instead of assigning an exceptional, central place to man, they include him in the chain of evolution, see in him a movement of atomic particles and chemical processes, submit him to the determinism of genes, so that his specificity utterly disappears.” In other words, this new secularized vision of humanism would destroy humanity itself.

Though he lived in hope, Milosz suffered few delusions about the reality of his times. “The history of our species has been a series of cruelties and crimes, yet humanity has never before known such crimes as those of the twentieth century, both as to their quantity and quality.”

In the face of the secular tide, some theologians and intellectuals proposed a reduction of Christianity’s truth claims—the very essence of what Rudolf Bultmann was all about in his method of “demythologization.” With acid wit, Milosz observed that such efforts amounted to “the selling off of religion’s properties, in the hope it would be possible to farm on a reduced area.” The result of that will be the surrender of Christianity itself.

Czeslaw Milosz died in his beloved Krakow on August 14. A spokesman for the family told reporters that the cause of death had not yet been determined. “It’s death, simply death. It was his time—he was 93,” was the explanation.

Almost twenty years before his death, Milosz imagined a time when he was no longer alive. His hope was to continue to speak through his writings. “I imagine the earth when I am no more,” he envisioned. “Yet the books will be there on the shelves, well borne, derived from people, but also from radiance, heights.” Czeslaw Milosz’s voice may now be stilled, but his words continue to speak to a world that still needs to hear.

