

Religion and the Crisis of Modernity

BY LUDGER HAGEDORN



Photo: Jan Patočka Archive

What is the reason for re-considering religion? What is the philosophical challenge it poses? What can be the meaning of some “return of the religious” when—at least in the European context—religion seems to have ceased giving life and offering “sense”? Addressing questions of religion today, we often seem to be hinting at a mere spectre, the gruesome shadow in an empty cave that Nietzsche speaks about in his *Gay Science*.

Yet it is precisely this shadowy nature of religion in the secular world which might pose a problem. On the one hand, looked at from inside of religious worldviews, the public pressure on religion is felt as repression and a denial of its right to exist. This paves the way for all kinds of radicalizations and simplifications. A religion deprived of its cultural rooting is more likely to fall prey to the stubborn insistence on its own dogmatic supremacy and will enforce it by almost any means. French political scientist Olivier Roy has recently described this attitude as “sainte ignorance” (English title *Holy Ignorance. When Religion and Culture Part Ways*).

On the other hand, in the eyes of the secular-scientific worldview, this development once more confirms the reservations against religion. It leads to the outright denial of religion’s meaning for today and pushes religion even further back into its niche of seclusion. This reinforces religion’s dogmatic self-immunization (thereby corroborating

its seeming incompatibility with the modern world and reaffirming the vicious circle of ignorance), but it also deprives the secular world itself of a great deal of its historical and cultural sources. As a result, the dominant intellectual landscape of our globalized world is ever more becoming a “wasteland of sense and truth”, as Jean-Luc Nancy put it from his point of view as a philosopher—not as a believer or non-believer. It seems therefore that it should be the task of philosophy today to work on the

The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (1907–1977) is considered one of the most important Central European thinkers of the 20th century. Having studied in Prague, Paris, Berlin and Freiburg, he was one of the last students of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. He was a co-founder and speaker of the civil rights movement Charter 77. On 13 March 1977, shortly after the publication of the declaration, he died after a series of police interrogations. His writings include reflections on history and politics, essays on art and literature, studies in ancient philosophy as well as an inspiring history of modern ideas. The research focus *The Philosophical Work of Jan Patočka* at the IWM, initiated in 1984, aims at collecting, exploring and disseminating his oeuvre. For that purpose, an archive was established at the IWM in close collaboration with the Patočka Archive in Prague. It has provided the basis for numerous publications in various languages and projects, such as the current project *Polemical Christianity. Jan Patočka’s Concept of Religion and the Crisis of Modernity* funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF grant no. P22828). Further details on: www.iwm.at/research/patocka

“mutual dis-enclosure” of religious and secular-scientific worldviews.

Over recent years, research at the IWM has increasingly dealt with questions of religion and secularism. A lecture series entitled *Beyond Myth and Enlightenment* aimed at a reconsideration of religion beyond old dichotomies. Speakers included, among others, Islamic scholar Gudrun Krämer, sociologist Martin Endress, as well as philosophers Jean Greisch and Hans Joas. The lectures provided vivid debates on different aspects of the dispersion of religion and challenged the modern, perhaps all-too-secular, self-conception.

This series, which ran from 2011 to 2014, was a cooperation of two FWF-funded research projects directed by Ludger Hagedorn (IWM) and Michael Staudigl (Institute for Philosophy, University of Vienna). Both projects evolved out of a phenomenological perspective that involves “bracketing” ideological debates in order to focus on underlying structures of meaning (*Sinnstrukturen*). Especially in the context of debates on religion, this approach enables us to clarify religious attitudes and implications free of the constraints of the short-sighted dogmas of theism or atheism. It is not only the proximity of the two terms in logics (one is simply the negation of the other), but rather the dogmatic character of both standpoints that retains the essence of what it negates. If, as Jean-Luc Nancy holds, “all contemporary thinking” will once be seen as “a slow and heavy gravitational movement

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Conference Human Existence as Movement Patočka’s Existential Phenomenology and Its Political Dimension June 3–5, 2014, Vienna

Program

June 3, 2014

Keynote Speech:
Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback:
Exodus, Exile, Existence—A Draft
Chair: **Ludger Hagedorn**

June 4, 2014

Session I

James Dodd:
Deep History
Chair: **Klaus Nellen**

Session II

Susanna Lindberg:
After the Earthquake. Questions to Patočka’s “Fréhistoire du Mouvement”

Ludger Hagedorn:
Without God and Future. Patočka’s Reading of the “Brothers Karamazov”
Chair: **Lubica Učnik**

Session III

Lubica Učnik:
Dostoyevsky: A Seismographer of Disintegration. Patočkian Reflections
Chair: **Sandra Lehmann**

Session IV

Gustav Strandberg:
Jan Patočka and the Idea of Politics
Peter Trawny:
Das Unerzählbare. Anmerkungen zu Jan Patočkas Aufsatz „Was ist Existenz?“
Chair: **Jan Frei**

June 5, 2014

Session V

Ciaran Summerton:
Three Perspectives of Politics and History: Patočka, Hayek, and French Positivism
Chair: **Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback**

Session VI

Hans Ruin:
Life after Death
Agustín Serrano de Haro:
Arendt’s Idea of Totalitarian Elements after the Defeat of Totalitarianism
Chair: **Michael Staudigl**

Session VII

Jakub Homolka:
The ‘Spiritual Person’: A Link between the Existential Movement and ‘Non-Political Politics’?
Chair: **Klaus Nellen**

Session VIII

Ivan Chvatík:
Jan Patočka’s Spiritual Politics—Is It Possible?

Chair: **James Dodd**

Participants

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