

# 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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](http://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 Učňik

### Session III

**Lubica Učňik:**

*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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Co-Director, Center for Theoretical Study, Charles University, Prague; Founder and Director, Jan Patočka Archive, Prague

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around the black sun of atheism,” then this diagnosis mainly aims at the often privative, subtractive and defective character of atheism, which remains blind and deaf to the religious “input” even against its own will. The statement does therefore not entail an affirmation of theism, it rather points at the lack of capability and will to think beyond, or in-between, the old dichotomies. It is one of the concerns of contemporary phenomenology to overcome this biased understanding of religion (as in the works of Marion, Kearney, Steinbock, Caputo and others). But the current debate is also grounded in the phenomenological tradition. Jan Patočka (1907–1977) is one of the most important thinkers in that regard. The IWM project *Polemical Christianity. Jan Patočka's Concept of Religion and the Crisis of Modernity* was dedicated to his philosophical undertaking to rethink Christianity and aimed at relating his ideas to the contemporary debate.

For Patočka, reflections on the philosophical and political meaning of Christianity represented an important and crucial aspect of his thought. He is one of the few thinkers who already at his time conceived of the crisis of modernity not just in terms of its cultural and scientific dimensions, but explicitly analysed the need for a reassessment of religion and, in the European context, particularly of Christianity. From Patočka's very early writings until the late *Heretical Essays* there runs a core of untimely thoughts that are as provocative and heretical to the Christian tradition as they are to the triumphant secularism of modern times. This philosophical venture makes him stand out as an important forerunner of, as well as a critical counterweight to, the contemporary resurgence of religion in scholarly and intellectual discourse. More specifically, it is exactly the above-mentioned disintegration of religion and the modern scientific worldview that Patočka explained in his analyses of the two-sided potential for radicalization, pointing at striking examples for such violent disintegration in the European history of ideas.

Patočka's intimate engagement with Christianity is—as in the case of Nancy—that of a philosopher, not of a believer or non-believer. In his philosophy of history, he speaks about the “Post-Christian epoch” as the European reality from at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and it seems that this is something he simply takes as a given, without any undertone of either triumph or regret. He considers religion, especially Christianity, mainly with respect to its intellectual potential, i.e., as a profound challenge to philosophy and its continuing allegiance to Greek (“metaphysical”) patterns of thinking. Such reflections on the philosophical potential of Christian ideas underlie and permeate his work in general, but they are not elaborated systematically or developed into an explicit doctrine.

The philosophical background of Patočka, a student of both Husserl and Heidegger, is phenomenology. Our research activities aimed at

contextualizing Patočka's concepts of religion within his own oeuvre as well as in the philosophical tradition that it speaks from, evoking not only the phenomenological debate but also challenging the critique of religion most prominently formulated by Nietzsche. A crucial reference for our research was Patočka's long study *On Masaryk's Philosophy of Religion*. This text, the last that Patočka finished in his life-time and which thereby stands out as his philosophical legacy, is dedicated to the quest for meaning in human life amidst the maelstrom of nihilism and dogmatism. Nihilism and dogmatism defiantly negate or affirm a meaning of life, thereby paving the way for all kinds of political or religious ideologies, yet they both resemble each other precisely in their unwillingness to bear the openness of the question as such. It is precisely the attempt to think beyond such established dichotomies that Patočka advocates and that he projects as a “new phenomenology of meaning”. Looking at today's debates on the place of religion in (post-)modern society, these considerations address a contemporary intellectual desideratum. It finds inspiring resources in Patočka's insights.

While the Vienna University project *Beyond Myth and Enlightenment* runs until November 2015, the IWM project on *Polemical Christianity* came to an end in June 2014. Research results will be published in two forthcoming publications: 1) *Religion, War and the Crisis of Modernity*, an issue of the “New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy” that will be exclusively dedicated to Patočka. The issue will be edited by James Dodd and Ludger Hagedorn as guest editors and will comprise the results of the various research activities. Next to 12 scholarly articles analyzing Patočka's philosophical legacy within the context of contemporary debates, it will also present crucial texts by Patočka himself, including the long study *On Masaryk's Philosophy of Religion* as well as *Time, Myth, Faith*, one of his most important earlier articles, in which Patočka develops his understanding of faith as an openness towards the future, i.e., as he puts it, a “belief in life.” 2) *Secularization and Its Discontents. A Reconsideration of Religion beyond Myth and Enlightenment*—the volume will be edited by Ludger Hagedorn and Michael Staudigl and present 19 scholarly articles dealing with questions of religion in secular society. The authors are among the best-known scholars and experts in the field of phenomenology of religion. Both volumes will be published in early 2015.

In June, the IWM hosted the project's concluding conference (see p. 19). It was the last of five conferences organized as part of the project *Polemical Christianity. Jan Patočka's Concept of Religion and the Crisis of Modernity*. ◀

Ludger Hagedorn directed the FWF funded project *Polemical Christianity. Jan Patočka's Concept of Religion and the Crisis of Modernity* at the IWM.

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not have to incapacitate us but can point us to new possibilities of critically assessing and altering them. Instead of being dazzled or frightened by the fictional character of money, we can and should analyze the political legitimacy and justice of the institutions that govern it.

Today, the sublime powers of money creation are matched by the awkwardness of central banks' constitutional position. After the inflationary upheaval of the 1970s, a policy consensus formed that has since led to a gradual transformation whereby most central banks have been removed from direct democratic politics. Instead, they were granted a detached status of nominal independence, often combined with a specific inflation target. The effect of this “quiet revolution,” as Alasdair Roberts has described it, is hard to overstate. It has profoundly altered the role of states that now self-consciously constrain themselves in their ability and willingness to politicize economic conflicts. Until the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008, the consensus behind this transfor-

attempt to politicize transactions by conducting them in the conventional token of a political community. As the medium through which justice and equity were dispensed, currency asserted the authority of the polis over questions of value.

To point to the ways in which currencies form the bond of political communities already suggests an analogy between a currency and what has come to be known as the social contract tradition. Not unlike a social contract, a currency consists of an initial social covenant understood as an exchange of mutual promises that extend into the future. In *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes highlights currencies (along-side weights and measures) as prime illustrations for the kind of collective covenant based on mutual acknowledgment that was to found the political commonwealth. If the social contract tradition offers resources for grasping the role played by currencies, to study currencies as political institutions also complicates the conventional understanding of social contracts as overly legalistic and static. Central to the promise that undergirds currency is a rela-

sovereign paper money the social cement of circulating trust that constituted the soul of the state. The credit state as a persona ficta was furthermore potentially immortal, so that credit could be extended into an infinite future consisting of an endless chain of mediations. The state had become at once essential and invisible, centralized and circulating.

Only in the course of the last century did the subject of currencies drift away from political philosophy. Turning to today's normative political theory, one encounters a conspicuous absence of currency as a topic worthy of normative analysis and institutional design. It is barely mentioned by John Rawls and reduced to a mere steering medium by Jürgen Habermas. This absence should strike us as odd and ironic. After all, the centrality of state-administered fiat currency reached unprecedented heights precisely at the same time.

If currencies have today largely disappeared as a topic in political theory, the history of political thought suggests that this is a comparatively recent departure from a long and fertile tradition. From

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mation was rarely challenged. But since then central bankers have inadvertently found themselves in the political limelight in ways that were not intended and that inevitably raise questions about their supposedly independent status. As a result, monetary politics now again throws up nagging questions of political legitimacy and justice. If the application of these questions to money has become unfamiliar to us, the history of political thought contains an extensive discussion of currency.

The link between currency and the purpose of a political community was a foundational element of ancient Greek political thought. It is a remarkable historical fact that the invention of philosophy and Greek democracy coincided with the invention of coinage in Lydia—as captured by the mythical encounter of King Croesus of Lydia and the Athenian lawgiver Solon. Sometimes it is observed, not without reason, that the Greeks had no word for money. But *nomisma*, the term conventionally translated as currency or coinage, had a meaning that was at once broader and more specific. It denotes a currency as something created and sanctioned by collective acknowledgment. For Aristotle, as for the Athenians in general, currency was a constitutive pillar of the political community in at least two ways. Currency introduced a notion of commensurability that allowed for new habits of reciprocity among citizens, a point greatly stressed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But political currency also constituted an

ance on a fragile net of beliefs that the promise will be honored. The trust this presupposes, and in turn affirms, is the bond that keeps society together, as John Locke emphasizes in his writings on coinage.

Along with the modern state, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century brought the rise of public credit. Discussions of monetary experiments moved from the periphery to the center of political thought and discussion. The advent of a system of public credit it was, in J.G.A. Pocock's words, a “traumatic discovery of historical transformation” that brought with it a new sense of historical temporality and secular change. By placing value into a permanently postponed future, the pervasiveness of credit changed both the nature of the state and citizens' relation to it. Sovereignty and the imagined community mirroring it became temporalized. Money in this sense embodies, affirms, and presupposes a collective faith and trust over time that ties a political community together.

When England introduced paper money backed only by the promise of the state in 1797, the German Romantics were among the first to spot the deep analogies between the fictional constructs of money and language. In creatively updating the longstanding metaphorical link between coins and words for an age of fiat money, they celebrated the poetic and political potential of paper money and the forces of imagination sustaining it. Novalis remarked on the “Poetisierung der Finanzwissenschaften” while Adam Müller saw in

Aristotle's account of currency as the glue of reciprocal citizenship to modern analyses of the centrality of currency to the political authority of the state, currency has been a central topic in Western political thought. We may disagree about the precise political form and purpose currency should take in our politics today but we would do well to engage with it as a political institution that was long thought to be responsive to questions of justice and justification. ◀

<sup>1</sup> Mark Blyth and Eric Lonergan: *Why Central Banks Should Give Money Directly to the People*, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October, 2014.

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