



Review of Martin Koci: *Thinking faith after Christianity. A theological reading of Jan Patočka's phenomenological philosophy*. New York: SUNY Press, 301 pp. Hardcover: ISBN: 978-1-4384-7893-7, \$95.00, paperback: ISBN: 978-1-4384-7892-0, \$32.95

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A growing influence of the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka (1907–1977) on contemporary thought can be documented by monographs dealing not only with Patočka's legacy in general or with his phenomenology but also with the topics not usually seen as belonging to the centre of his philosophy. Such a monograph, offering a theological reading of Patočka's phenomenological philosophy, has recently been published by Martin Koci. Being very well aware that Patočka is neither a theologian nor a philosopher of religion, the author still seeks to demonstrate Patočka's persistent and even increasing interest in Christianity and presents him as a forerunner to the so-called theological turn in continental philosophy. Koci's book thus has two major aims: first, to question standard understanding of Patočka as having little to say to theology; second, to contribute to contemporary theology by appropriating Patočka's ideas.

The book is written in a reader-friendly style. Its author does not burden the reader with incomprehensible terms or conceptions and makes efforts to develop easily understandable arguments. Thanks to that, the book should be comprehensible to all readers interested in either Patočka or theology, or both; there is no need for any previous knowledge of either Patočka or the theological turn in contemporary philosophy. Koci begins by justifying his aim to read Patočka from a theological perspective and continues by analysing Patočka's reflections on the age of modernity based on the following three crises: rationalism, religion and metaphysics. Subsequently, he explores Patočka's critique of metaphysics by developing a theological reading of Patočka's famous essay "Negative Platonism": Patočka overcomes onto-theology, yet his approach is neither non-metaphysical nor anti-metaphysical. As a next step, the author focuses on the question of what kind of Christianity can be derived from Patočka's thought. In this context, he critically evaluates Derrida's

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influential reading (and readings of Derrida's reading) of Patočka as a Christian thinker. Finally, he presents Patočka's distinctive concept of sacrifice as the pinnacle of his interest in theological issues.

Corresponding to its two major aims, the book can be evaluated from two perspectives: first, as a contribution to better understanding and appreciating Patočka's thought; second, as a contribution to theology, especially in the context of the theological turn in continental philosophy. In this review, I would like to mainly focus on the book as a contribution to Patočka studies. Do we need to read Patočka theologically to better understand his work and to further develop his ideas? Predominantly, the author is cautious: he does not claim that Patočka *should* be read as a Christian or theological thinker but only that he *can* be read in this way because his ideas are valuable from the theological perspective. By looking for possibilities to "connect" Patočka with theology, Koci adopts a specific perspective. It is an original and revealing perspective, yet if one seeks to understand the specificity of Patočka's philosophy, I consider this perspective one-sided and potentially misleading. In the book, there is no discussion of what I see as a crucial question: Why is Patočka reluctant to speak theologically? Why does he *not* do/say what Koci does/says in his theological appropriation of Patočka's thoughts? The author successfully demonstrates that one can meaningfully read Patočka in a theological way. But why is this possibility *not* realized in Patočka's oeuvre? Was Patočka unable, or rather unwilling to do so?

Koci's first chapter, in which he discusses relation between philosophy and theology, comes closest to answering this question. The author seeks to demonstrate that, for Patočka, philosophy and theology are not two separate modes of thinking. Referring to Patočka's quoting Saint Anselm's thesis "*fides quaerens intellectum*" (faith seeking understanding) and emphasizing that philosophy is somehow aware of the absolute, Koci interprets Patočka's standpoint as suggesting, implicitly, a sort of intertwining of philosophy and theology. There can be little doubt, of course, that Patočka's philosophy is interested, besides other things, in the topics addressed by theology (such as the absolute, finitude or transcendence). Yet, neither this thematic overlapping nor the fact that both philosophy and theology perform non-objectivist thinking justifies Koci's suggestion that (Patočka's) "phenomenology is theology" (p. 44). As a matter of fact, the idea of "*fides quaerens intellectum*" does *not* imply that we should open space for mutual intertwining of theology and philosophy. It opens space for theology, or more specifically for faith, to understand intellectually what it confesses. But, by quoting Anselm, Patočka does not urge philosophy to interweave with theology. Patočka's thought does not *need* theology to think the absolute or transcendence.

Now, let me move from theology to Christianity. With quite a few other scholars, Koci pays much attention to, and puts much emphasis on, Patočka's characterizing Christianity as "thus far the greatest, unsurpassed but also un-thought-through human outreach that enabled humans to struggle against decadence" (p. 108). I do not question that Patočka draws inspiration from Christianity, yet I insist that his philosophy does not invite us to become Christians, or Christian theologians. The above quoted statement both appreciates Christianity and expresses reservations about the Christian concept of the soul: what Patočka means when speaking of the "un-thought-through" (in Czech: "*nedomyšlený*") is that Christianity "never explicitly

thematized and never grasped philosophically” (Patočka, 1996, p. 108) the concept of the soul. It is indeed possible, and even desirable, to think this concept through taking into account Christian ideas, such as that of faith, yet it does not mean that Patočka wants to proceed theologically. Instead, he wants to rethink these concepts, or to think them through, philosophically.

This leads me to the second major dimension of the book. Koci nicely and convincingly demonstrates possible links between Patočka’s thought and the so-called theological turn in contemporary philosophy. What is more, he suggests that we can transform, or translate, Patočka’s philosophical thought into theological one – in other words, that we can make theology Patočkian. However, whereas Christian theology says a lot about the attributes of God or Christ, about the revelation, the creation and many other “things”, Patočka’s reflections on the concept of faith and the myth of God-man does not deliver such statements—Patočka’s message is rather, as Koci is very well aware of, existential. Patočka indeed “calls for courage to live and to strive for meaning while risking everything for that which is greater than any kind of thing, that is, for *nothing*” (pp. 224–225). Yet, a reader of Patočka cannot really decide whether this standpoint “differs from the negative theologies of postmodernism” (p. 237) because Patočka does not say whether this “nothing” is God and whether we can understand it as a person. (Allow me to mention here that, according to Patočka, “what a Person is, that really is not adequately thematized in the Christian perspective”; Patočka, 1996, p. 107.) Applied theologically, then, Patočka’s ideas would imply Christianity as nothing less, and nothing more, than “the community that guards being from reduction to *something*” (p. 225) because, as Koci formulates it, “shaking meaning is the kernel of Christianity (after Christianity) itself” (p. 237). The author himself acknowledges that this is a rather negative, and I would add: possibly a-theistic, concept of Christianity; but admitting this, he is hardly justified to claim that, with Patočka, we “do not find ourselves in Christianity without Christianity but in its enforced core” (p. 173). Shortly put, regarding the contribution of Patočka to theology, I would appreciate a more elaborate discussion of what might be *lacking*, both factually and methodically, in a theology inspired by Patočka.

Koci’s provocative book cannot but evoke such questions and critical remarks—and I praise it for doing so. Even if my interpretation of Patočka’s ideas on faith and Christianity differs in many ways from that by the author, his book succeeds in developing an inspiring (re)interpretation of Patočka’s thought, which sheds a new light on his philosophy and the possibilities of its further development. It promises to give new impulse to both Patočka studies and current theological thought.

Reference

Patočka, J. (1996). *Heretical essays in the philosophy of history*. Trans. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd. Open Court.

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