

# “Theologically, we have no other experience of God but human experience”:

## An Interview with Martin Koči

*Martin Koči was born in 1987, not long before the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia was peacefully swept away by the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Raised in Karlovy Vary, a spa town in the western Czech Republic, he went on to complete a doctorate in theology at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.*

*Martin was one of four contributing authors in a stimulating English-language essay collection, A Czech Perspective on Faith in a Secular Age (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015.) Another was Monsignor Professor Tomáš Halík, the Czech Catholic Church’s most prominent intellectual. (For an interview with Monsignor Professor Halík, see the East-West Church Report, vol. 28, no. 2 (2020), 1-6.)*

*Martin Koči is currently a researcher at the University of Vienna, Austria, where he lives with his wife—a Protestant theologian—and young family. The editor of the East-West Church Report met with Martin in the heart of the Czech Republic’s second largest city, Brno, in November 2019. The conversation took place in English.*

### Did you have a Catholic upbringing?

Actually, I was not even baptized as a child. I converted in 2002, aged 15, through my engagement with a Catholic youth group in Slovakia. During my high school years I attended a parish there because the parish priest is one of my father’s best friends. Basically through this experience, my family returned to the Church. I was baptized, my sister was also baptized, and my father returned to the Church. After that, I became very active in Catholic youth work in Karlovy Vary, a spa town in the west of the Czech Republic, as well as in the diocese of Plzeň [Pilsen] generally. I decided to study theology because I wanted to work with people. Then, after two weeks of theology, I realized that academia was a world in which I felt very comfortable and for which I had certain talents that I wanted to unfold further. So I switched from fieldwork, so to speak, to academic work.

### What are you doing at present?

By training I am a theologian, but since January 2019 I have been working as a post-doctoral researcher in the philosophy department at the University of Vienna. The topic I am engaged in is the so-called “return of religion” from both philosophical and political perspectives—because almost all political concepts are secularized theological concepts. [Editor’s note: In the late 20th century, scholars who had predicted that modernization would result in an increasingly secular world were surprised to observe a global resurgence in religion.] I am reading particular philosophers, mostly French, because France has this experience of laïcité or secularization of Catholic culture followed by a return



Martin Koči (G. FAGAN)

to religious questions on a societal level, including in academia. The project I am involved in is entitled, “Revenge of the Sacred: Phenomenology and the Ends of Christianity in Europe.”

### What is phenomenology?

Phenomenology is a particular philosophical school founded by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the 20th century. It basically started as an inquiry into human experience. What do we really experience when we observe ordinary things, such as this coffee cup, this laptop? How do we obtain knowledge about the things that we see? The point was to explain the world, not from the perspective of some other, metaphysical sphere, but from our lived experience.

The philosopher who introduced phenomenology to then-Czechoslovakia was one of Husserl’s pupils, Jan Patočka (1907-77), the most important Czech philosopher of the 20th century. He is very important to me as a source of influence, inspiration, and encouragement.

**He is perhaps better known internationally as one of the most prominent activists in the Charter 77 human-rights movement in Communist Czechoslovakia.**

Patočka was a classical philosopher interested in questions of early philosophy, but because of his democratic, humanist orientation he was not allowed to teach at university under the Communist regime. He therefore became active in the so-called “Underground University” [unsanctioned academic seminars, typically held in private homes], and some students gathered around him. Professor Tomáš Halík was



**Jan Patočka**

(Source: Jindřich Přibík/Archív Jana Patočky)

one of them. Patočka became publicly visible in the 1970s when he accepted the invitation of certain dissidents to become one of three spokespersons for Charter 77. At that time, he wrote some of his more accessible, shorter texts on political and human-rights issues. As a consequence of this public engagement in Charter 77 and his negotiations with several Western politicians, he was interrogated by the secret police in March 1977. He was not tortured, but about a week after this lengthy interrogation he died. He was already elderly and in poor health at the time, and he suffered a brain hemorrhage as a consequence of the interrogation.

Interestingly, while Patočka was not a practicing Christian—though a baptized Catholic—I believe his work was very close to some lines of theological inquiry, and to Christian questions in general.

### **Did Patočka consciously involve Christian principles in his thinking?**

He never aspired to be useful to theologians. I think this is partly because in his time it was still very important for philosophers to be philosophers and not to exceed their competence—not to cross a boundary and appear to be theologians. But Patočka had many friends who were Protestant theologians, with whom he debated

and corresponded. He read the major theological works of his day. He was personally engaged with the question of religion throughout his life. His first publication, in 1929, was an essay entitled, “Theology and Philosophy,” and his last, in 1977, was “On Masaryk’s Philosophy of Religion,” Tomáš G. Masaryk being the first Czech president [1918-35].

If you examine Patočka’s unpublished manuscripts, which are just drafts of certain ideas, the theological input or inspiration is in fact much more apparent than in his published material. He encourages us, “Not only to live faith, but also to think it.” I am now trying to see how his philosophical ideas on solidarity in community, which he termed enigmatically “the solidarity of the shaken,” and the way in which relationships function may be applied to Christian practice—whether there might even be something fruitful in his thinking for our ecclesiological models.

### **You have written a book on this subject.**

Yes, *Thinking Faith after Christianity: A Theological Reading of Jan Patočka’s Phenomenological Philosophy* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020].

One of the main pursuits of phenomenology is to study how modernity has changed our experience of the ordinary world. During the course of the 20th century, society in the West—and here [in the Czech Republic], we are in Western culture—experienced several paradigm shifts due to modern development: the industrialization and technicalization of society, secularization and a rapid drop in religiosity. Christianity is no longer the framework through which we interpret the world. It is not something to which we refer when we want to explain how our society is structured, or how our personal relationships are set up, for example. It is no longer the major point of reference. Yet Patočka was still interested in Christianity despite its public decline. He described Christianity as “thus far the greatest, unsurpassed

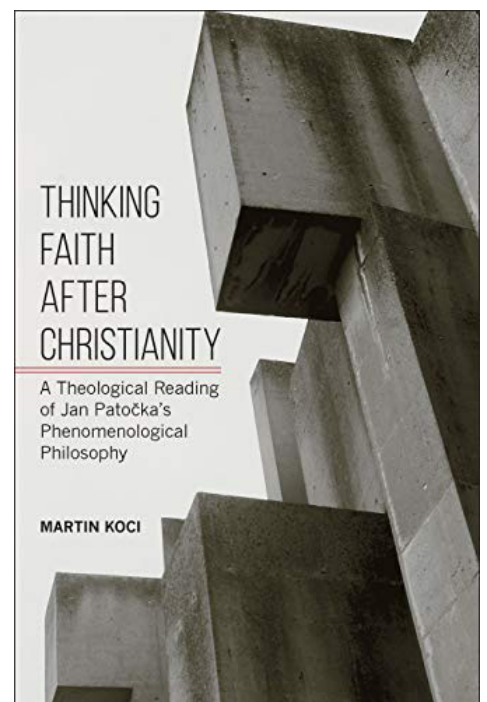
but also un-thought-through élan that enabled humans to struggle against decadence.” And I argue together with him that Christianity is still at work; this heritage is still with us.

I am further interested in how Patočka foresees the transformation of Christianity itself in the age after Christendom. We are not in Christendom any more, but Christianity is still here with us. It is of course with those who claim to be Christians, but it is also with those who have no idea what Christianity is. It is simply present in Western civilization, in our culture, and Patočka developed a profound sense of this presence. In *Thinking Faith After Christianity*, I try to use some of his ideas to think about Christian faith in the age after Christendom, in which conditions are not in favor of accepting Christianity as a common reference point or framework.

### **Patočka’s life straddled the pre-Communist and Communist periods in then-Czechoslovakia. Did his experience of Communism affect his understanding of the role of Christianity?**

That was actually my initial idea: to see how his thoughts on Christianity were inspired by his intellectual resistance to totalitarianism

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## Koči Interview *(continued from page 11)*

and dogmatism. But this is difficult to determine. Patočka was a very open-minded thinker who was well aware of certain dangers inherent in any big modern narrative, not just Communism.

**Your own formative years were in the post-Communist Czech Republic, when the Catholic Church was no longer constrained by atheist government policy. Have you seen positive change in popular attitudes towards the Catholic Church here during your lifetime?**

Not much, to be honest. Most people are just not interested. There is no real hostility, except if a politician makes use of the Church, or in connection with Church finances. The Church continues to function as a ritual aspect of society, as when Václav Havel [first post-Communist president of Czechoslovakia, 1993-2003] had a Church funeral because he was a baptized Catholic. But in general, there is not much interest in what the Church is doing or not doing, and the number of practicing Catholics continues to decline.

**How has the Church responded to this decline, and where do you see the problem?**

The response of the Church has been to try to build up its structures as if our society were still a Christian society. I see very little thinking about possible ways of experimenting with our particular situation. If you go from the Czech Republic in almost any direction, you find far more Christian societies, with the possible exception of the former East Germany. To the west and south, you have Bavaria and Austria—where the Catholicism is more cultural, but nevertheless prevalent. To the north and east, in Poland and Slovakia, there is a very strong Catholic presence. So I think the Catholic Church is missing its chance, not just of reaching intellectuals, but ordinary workers. Unlike British society, Czech society is very egalitarian—we do not really have social classes—and I think the Church is unable to work creatively across this social stratum. Of course, there are positive examples—if you go to Professor Halík’s church in Prague, you will see an island of “positive deviation.” But that is not a typical picture.

For me, the example of theological education is telling. Our Catholic theological faculty at Charles University

in Prague provides education not only to future priests and religious brothers and sisters, but also to would-be teachers of religion and people who are simply active in the Church—people who will do a completely different job, or who are already working in some other job and who are just interested in theology. This faculty is in a unique position, because it is located within a secular university and funded by the state. So it has the opportunity to be a melting pot of ideas at the crossroads between the Church and society, but instead the faculty focuses almost exclusively on training clergy for the Church. It is so eager to do this work for the Church that it forgets about its work for culture and society. And who else but theologians, or people who are at this crossroads of ideas, should think about the question you asked me—where is the problem? How come our numbers are still declining?

Of course, the easiest way of dealing with this question is to point outside: “It is not us, it is society—they are the problem.” Perhaps the Church is not much interested in having well-educated priests, because it is much more difficult to work with people who can think for themselves. (Laughs.) But it is a symptom of something larger—there is still a reluctance to reflect upon the situation and to take it seriously.

**Professor Halík has called upon the Church not to limit ministry to what he terms “dwellers”—those who already identify as practicing members—but to engage with apparent non-believers in wider society, whom he terms “Zacchaeuses” or “seekers.” What do you think of this?**

I now think that this binary division may be misleading us. In all of us there are multiple identities, which sometimes coincide with our religious allegiance and are sometimes in tension with it. We have our professional work, our private life, our hobbies, and these are no longer determined by our allegiance to a particular church. It is no longer simply the case that you are born into a Catholic family, receive First Communion, get married, are buried, and along the way you go to Catholic schools and are a member of Catholic societies. The world is simply not structured so that we can live our whole lives within a single narrative. And so we are not just either “believers” or “non-believers,” “dwellers” or “seekers.”

And if you talk about “seekers” when addressing people who are outside the Church—even inside the Church—it sounds wonderful, right? But then who wants



Noticeboard in Brno Cathedral advertises (clockwise from top left): a pilgrimage to Rome, Bible courses in Old Testament archaeology and on Mark’s Gospel, a two-day spiritual renewal event for young women led by Franciscan nuns, and a special Mass in Prague to commemorate 30 years since the canonization of St. Agnes of Prague in November 1989. (G. FAGAN)



**Franciscan Church of St. John, Brno  
(G. FAGAN)**

to be a “dweller”? Is the point to turn “seekers” into “dwellers”? I don’t think so. If we understand Christianity as “the Way,” as something constantly evolving in the individual life of a person, then we are all “seekers,” in a way.

**So there is no such thing as “dwellers.”**

Yes. That is not just the case in academic-leaning parishes in Prague, or here in Brno. In some little village church 20 kilometers from here, there are people who have their own questions and struggles, and I am not sure whether we can simply label them as “dwellers.” So when we talk about approaching “seekers,” we are not only talking about people who are at the margins of the Church, or even outside it. I think we are talking about ourselves. Maybe this is a partial answer to your question about what went wrong with the Church in Czech society, why numbers have fallen and people are not viewing the Church positively. It is because we simply forgot that we are “seekers” ourselves. We do not really think about how to approach ourselves as “seekers,” and we simply repeat this self-referential story of self-affirmation, which does not help us to grow. When our children hear that, why would they be interested in the Church?

I think we need to address people’s real questions. For instance, has

one ever heard a church representative in the Czech Republic say anything about the rise in housing prices? For young families it is getting very difficult to afford housing, while in Church you hear, “You need to have more children, otherwise we will die out.” Our connection with Christian values comes from our experience in the world. Theologically, we have no other experience of God but human experience. All we have is processed through us. It does not work just to point above or beyond something without reaching for what appears to us, to what really appears to be a problem, question, or struggle.

We cannot skip that, and we cannot just bombard people with some supernatural stuff without relating to general human experience. It is human experience that allows us to say that there is a certain limit to our purely human experience, and that is where faith begins.

**So this means thinking differently about ourselves and our faith, not assuming that we have a cut-and-dried catechism that is settled, or believing that we just need to find a better way of presenting it to young people?**

Absolutely. For example, if we add rock music to the Mass or make a YouTube video to explain the basics of Christianity, it doesn’t serve the cause. It is just marketing. It might work, of course. But will it be authentic? Will it be what we are really looking for? Influences such as technology engage with us even without our knowing it, and the point is to see what they are doing to our experience of the world. For example, we need to understand that to a 15-year-old, going to Brno and posting a photo on Instagram there is not a report, it is part of the experience. So the issue is not about finding a more entertaining language or more appealing music for the liturgy. It is about facing people’s real concerns.

**How is this currently playing out among Czech Catholics?**

There are people who identify as more liberal or conservative, and

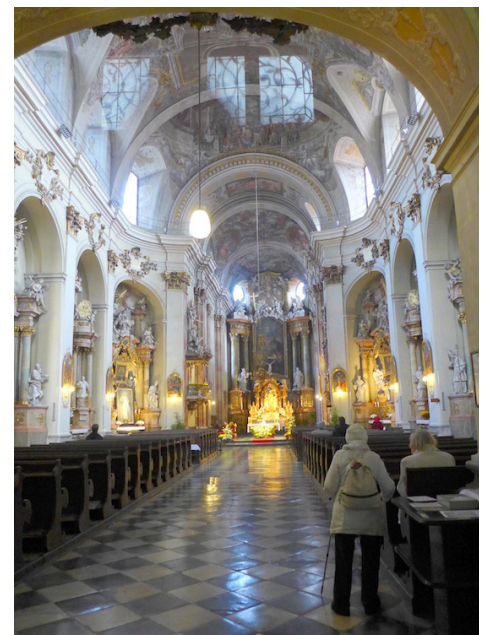
dialogue between them is nonexistent. It is the same as in the general public sphere nowadays—that we are divided. Unfortunately, debate is very polarized in Czech society, and there is not much will to see that we can have different opinions but still be united on very important things. I think this is a specter haunting the post-Communist mindset. My parents understood the distortion of the Communist regime and never identified with it, but it still influenced them, in the same way that we are now talking about technology influencing us. So we still have this mindset of who is with us, and who is against us.

In the present-day culture, I think that we need to take each other seriously, to see why someone thinks in a particular way, and also whether disagreement must end up in conflict, or just disagreement—whether we can think differently while still remaining together.

The Church also has to face up to the reality that the questions people have cannot be answered using the catechism. They may be existential, very human questions, but as Christians we believe that God became incarnate. God takes part in our humanity in all respects except for sin, and so we should take these human concerns very seriously.

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**Interior, Franciscan Church of St. John, Brno (G. FAGAN)**





**Does this approach necessarily mean being more liberal?**

No. The example of the current papacy of Pope Francis shows that this is precisely the case—that to be more sensitive to certain questions does not mean that we buy this or that solution. You can be sensitive to the questions, needs, and struggles of the current young generation without undermining anything that the Church holds to be true. To recognize that there is someone else who thinks differently does not mean that you have to give up your own beliefs or confessional allegiance.

I do not think we have started to reflect upon this yet in the Czech Republic. Our experience during the Communist period was that having debates was useless, because you could debate whatever you wanted, but somebody else would still decide. You could even think what you wanted, just not say it aloud, pretend to conform, and everything would be fine. This mindset is still somehow present. In order to defeat it, we just need to start to talk. ♦



Downtown Brno (G. FAGAN)

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Orthodox Christian Renewal Movements in Eastern Europe* edited by Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović and Radmila Radić

Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

354 pp., \$105 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-319-63353-4

#### ROLAND CLARK

Eastern Orthodox Christianity prides itself on following Tradition, on preserving the authentic faith of the Apostles, but that does not mean that nothing has changed in the past two thousand years. What it does mean is that change was frequently contested. Tradition does and must adapt to the times, but it is interpreted by the Church as a whole; no one person has the authority to innovate on their own initiative. During the late 19th and 20th centuries this paradox—that Tradition must adapt yet no one may adapt it—caused repeated tensions within the Orthodox churches of Eastern Europe. This volume explores 10 different renewal movements that emerged across the region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Individual chapters focus on specific movements, with five chapters dedicated to the God Worshippers (Serbian: *Bogomoljci*) in Serbia and two to the Lord's Army (Romanian: *Oastea Domnului*) in Romania and Serbia. Two chapters discuss the phenomenon as a whole. The first, by Meic Pearse, provides the historical context of modernization and nation-building in which these movements appeared, and argues that they were a result of Orthodoxy's encounter with modernity. The second, an Introduction written by Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović and

Radmila Radić, notes the remarkable paucity of research on renewal within Orthodoxy. It argues that—in addition to helping us understand religion better—elucidating these movements contextualizes “the social role of Church institutions, social welfare, experiences of modernity and patterns of social developments.” (17) Unfortunately, neither of these chapters offers much in terms of general analysis of causes, character, or consequences. Individual chapters do engage with some of these questions, but most are more descriptive than analytical, spending little time on historiographical debates. While discussing some of these movements for the first time in scholarly literature, the volume as a whole therefore throws up more questions than answers.

Many of the groups discussed here had a decisively Evangelical flavor. Milovanović and Radić tell us that they “were all characterized with intensity of personal religious experience, holiness, discipline, communion, Scriptural authority, use of vernacular languages in liturgical practice, hymn chanting, prayer.” (12) Yet in some cases, renewal movements seem to have emerged completely independently of Western influences. In late Imperial Russia, for example, Ioann Verkhovsky developed a new form of Old Belief by blending nationalism, Slavophilism, and democratic forms