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RELIGIOUS LIFE AFTER RELIGION:
JAN PATOČKA'S CARE FOR THE SOUL AND ITS RELATION
TO RELIGION

The much debated allegation of the “return of religion” after secularization suggests that the religions had disappeared from the scenes of public debate. Modern Enlightened criticism would have outdated them as mythical worldviews, but then they suddenly came back, as a phenomenon that asks for an explanation. In reality things are more complicated than this simple sketch. To mention just a few observations: religions have always had a tradition of rational reflection that might grant them a position beyond the opposition of myth and Enlightenment; already half way the 20th century, philosophical critique stated that Enlightened rationality bears in itself the myth of a complete rational insight in and domination of reality¹; ancient mythology is still reinterpreted again and again, showing insights in human life that can never be entirely explained by reason. On the other hand, enlightened critique actually has changed the role of religion in society, at least in Europe.

It is the purpose of this article, therefore, to offer some reconsiderations of religion and its relation to myth and Enlightenment. These reconsiderations will be guided by the phenomenology of Jan Patočka. The main thesis of this text will be that his phenomenological philosophy can lead us beyond myth, Enlightenment and religion, all three, without just leaving them behind, i.e., by taking them up in a new way. In Patočka's approach, myth, Enlightenment and religion are entangled with each other, in what he calls “living in truth” or “the care of the soul.” Patočka's renewed elaboration of this Platonic conception can very well be sketched as a sort of secular form of religious life. Like all forms of secularization in Western culture, Patočka's philosophy can be taken as a transformation of important aspects of the Christian heritage in a post-Christian framework.

In this article I shall discuss the relation between the Christian tradition and Patočka's philosophy, in order to show which are the threads that bind them together, and which are the differences that tear them apart. First, I shall highlight how Patočka's existential phenomenology culminates in the care of the soul (§1-3). Then the historical relation between Christianity and Patočka's care for the soul will be brought to the fore (§4-5), followed by a systematical reflection of their relation, that will discuss whether

¹ The classic articulation of this criticism can be found in M. Horkheimer and Th. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1947); another example can be found in Heidegger's critical reflections on the era of technology.

there is a place for religion in the rational attitude that Patočka's philosophy calls for (§6).

1. The three movements of human life

In the 1960s Patočka has developed his own phenomenological insights, in discussion with the work of his teachers Husserl and Heidegger. A profound and detailed critique of Husserl's Cartesianism—i.e. Husserl's conviction that epistemological certainty can only be found in subjective consciousness—led Patočka to the conceptualization of an "asubjective phenomenology." He argues that the "phenomenological field," the domain of manifestation of phenomena, does not consist in consciousness but has a validity of its own. It is the openness of the world itself, to which human subjects relate, that makes phenomena appear.²

The specific position of the human subject with regard to the field of appearing is elaborated by Patočka in his theory of the "three movements" of human life. Asubjective phenomenology and the three movements of human existence can be seen as the main original contributions of Jan Patočka to phenomenology. In line with the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Patočka describes human existence as a dynamical movement in relation to the world, a movement that can never grasp itself. Within the scope of this phenomenology he takes up an Aristotelian idea of movement and then discerns within human existence three basic movements that are always intertwined.³

The first movement is a movement of anchoring or rooting. We are rooted and embedded in natural and cultural structures to which we belong and in which we can be at home. Our relations with the world start on the basis of this passive and affective belonging, which we first of all receive and which have to be revitalized again during our entire life.

The second movement is a movement of self-extension or self-projection. We must be active to survive and to develop ourselves. This movement is dominated by self-interest, labour, conflict and calculation.

These first two movements do not question the contexts in which they are performed. The supposedly self-evident structures, the traditional arrangements and interests of life that guide these movements, are interrupted in the third movement of human life.

² J. Patočka, *Vom Erscheinen als solchem. Texte aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. H. Blaschek-Hahn, and K. Novotna (Freiburg, Munich: Alber, 2000); idem, "Der Subjektivismus der Husserlschen und die Möglichkeit einer 'asubjektiven' Phänomenologie," in *Ausgewählte Schriften: Die Bewegung der menschlichen Existenz. Phänomenologische Schriften II*, ed. K. Nellen, J. Němec, and I. Srubar (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990), 267-285; idem, "Der Subjektivismus der Husserlschen und die Forderung einer asubjektiven Phänomenologie," in *Ausgewählte Schriften: Die Bewegung der menschlichen Existenz. Phänomenologische Schriften II*, op. cit., 286-309.

³ J. Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, trans. and ed. E. Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 143-161.

Patočka calls this a movement of breakthrough, transcendence or truth. In this movement we transcend the usual structures and world-views and try to reach a rational understanding of the world and of our lives. Only by rational reflection on the truth and value of our opinions we can break through the alleged self-evidence of common opinions. This is a movement that makes human beings truly human. It does not come naturally, it is an achievement.

This rational understanding, however, can never be completed, because human existence is also finite. The third movement does not only reach for the world as a totality, it also confronts us with finitude and death. The world as a whole and our existence cannot be surveyed, they always remain questionable for us. Their meaning can never be entirely given. But after this movement we cannot easily go back to our habits and opinions, now that they are shaken. The search for rational insight and truth still needs to be taken seriously. Since the traditional rules and arrangements have lost their self-evidence, we need to give a rational account of our choices and of our points of view.

We cannot live, however, in permanent uncertainty. Life is only possible within structures that have at least some stability. After having been shaken, therefore, we must search “firm ground under our feet again.”⁴ We need to look for stability and meaning; this has now become a responsibility.

Only in and after this third movement, human life finds its true characteristics: it has to achieve and determine itself. In this development we can find our soul, our psyche, i.e., that what makes us human: our determining relation with the field of appearing. The openness and indeterminacy of this position, or better: of the oscillating movement between radical questioning and temporary answers, is in itself an essential element of being human. Trying to find the right way to live, to cope with the uncertainties of life and to reach some stability after all, this is what Patočka calls “the care of the soul.”⁵

II. Surrender

Patočka follows Merleau-Ponty in his emphasis on bodily existence and the relation to others as basic layers that are constitutive for our experiences. Our conscious existence is embedded in structures of the natural world, including social communities. But Patočka goes beyond Merleau-Ponty in his description of our relations to others and to the world as relations of surrender, devotion or dedication. In short, he describes these relations as forms of losing oneself in order to find oneself again:

The original thrust toward things is thus at the same time a thrust toward other beings like myself. This

⁴ J. Patočka, *Plato and Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 77.

⁵ J. Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, passim; Patočka, “Europa und Nach-Europa. Die nacheuropäische Epoche und ihre geistigen Probleme,” in *Ketznerische Essays zur Philosophie der Geschichte und ergänzende Schriften*, ed. K. Nellen, and J. Němec (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), 207-287.

is what makes possible a return from the world to the self. The return to the self is not analogous to a reflection in a mirror; rather, it is a process in which we seek and constitute ourselves, lose ourselves, and find ourselves again. It is a process of self-retrieval from the world, one of the fundamental episodes of our life's drama.⁶

Living on the basis of relations in and to the world means living in surrender. The three basic movements of human life are movements by which we give ourselves to the world without being able to control these interactions. In the first movement we passively give in to the natural and social bonds we are depending on. Patočka describes this as the mutual devotion of children and parents, which compensates for the bodily individuation.⁷

The second movement is also a movement of surrender, although the devotion is only relative here. "Self-extension takes place in the context of self-denial, overcoming instinctual, immediate desire. Though ultimately it follows an instinctual goal, the means is self-control."⁸ In this movement surrender takes the form of an economic calculation that gives up its immediate desires in order to have more and lasting profit in the future. However, there is also another side to devotion in the second movement: "Work is essentially this self-disposal of ourselves as being at the disposal of others."⁹ But the calculative self-development is clearly more prominent in Patočka's analysis of this movement.

In the third movement surrender receives its deepest meaning. We become aware that our true self can only be found if we give up our individual interests and self-centeredness, that we find our goal in openness for the world and for the other. The third movement is not only a breakthrough of current opinions towards a philosophical wonder and questioning, it is also a moral breakthrough of self-interest towards a life in devotion to others and to being:

My being is no longer defined as a being for me but rather as a being in self-surrender, a being which opens itself to being, which lives in order for things—as well as myself and others—to be, to show themselves as what they are. This means: life in self-surrender, life outside oneself, not a mere solidarity of interests but a total reversal of interest—I no longer live in that which separates and encloses, but rather in that which unites and opens, being openness itself.¹⁰

⁶ J. Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, 57.

⁷ J. Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹ J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, translated and edited by Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 31.

¹⁰ J. Patočka, "The Natural World' Reconsidered Thirty-Three Years Later," in *The natural world as a philosophical problem*, trans. by M. Pokorný and E. Abrams, edited by I. Chvatík, and L. Učnik (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 178.

In this way we find ourselves by giving ourselves away, to others, to the world, to being. This is why, in Patočka's words, the third movement is "the authentically human movement."¹¹ This position is what makes us human, this is our human "soul," our "psychè," this is what we have to take care of. The art of living well, therefore, is a "living in truth." Human existence has to shape and reshape itself, in relation to the world, by fundamentally questioning itself, letting go all certainties and then trying to reach a new stability again.

III. Care of the soul

In several cultures we can find efforts to perform this third movement. Patočka mentions e.g. Buddhism.¹² The most convincing attempt, however, to reach beyond mere opinions and habits, can be found in ancient Greek culture: in the development of the polis and in the beginning of philosophy. The breakthrough of the third movement is testified by the beginning of philosophy in wonder and by the freedom of the Greek civilians who constitute their social and political life. Patočka also finds here the beginning of religion.

Of course there have been rites and cults in the ancient mythical societies previous to the Greek culture in which philosophy originated. They are regular interruptions of everyday life that invoke what Patočka calls the sacred, the demonic and the orgiastic. In these rites the common structures are often put upside down, like in carnival, and people let themselves be overwhelmed by higher divine powers beyond their grasp. But in the end the alleged eternal and divine ordering of nature and society is affirmed. In the third movement these divine arrangements are questioned, the sacred is approached in a rational and responsible manner. This is the beginning of religion: a rational connection with the sacred and demonic. In other words, according to Patočka, religion is not a remainder of mythical culture that needs to be abandoned by rationally enlightened reflections, but it is itself a rational and responsible approach of the divine. Philosophy and religion are combined in the care for the soul. But there is more to be said about this combination.

The relation between philosophy and religion becomes more outlined in the history of the care for the soul. Patočka sketches this history in his fifth Heretical Essay and discerns three periods: Greek culture, Christianity and modernity. As we have seen, this history begins in ancient Greece. Patočka chooses Plato as the central figure of this period. In Platonism the soul becomes immortal and seeks its rational orientation through an internal dialogue towards the Idea of the Good. The sacred or demonic is interiorized and disciplined in this self-guidance by the soul, when, e.g., erotic desires are made subservient to the higher search for wisdom.¹³

¹¹ J. Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, 158.

¹² J. Patočka, "The Natural World" *Reconsidered Thirty-Three Years Later*, 177.

¹³ J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 103-106.

Christianity introduces several changes in the care for the soul. Instead of a rational Idea of the Good, man can now be guided by a personal God, who is the beginning and end of human life. Life starts as a gift of love, a mysterious and divine gift, beyond any understanding. In relation to this absolute gift, man remains unique and finite, dependent and responsible, and takes part in an endless struggle between good and evil. Whereas the several currents of Greek metaphysics all claim to have sufficient rational answers to the philosophical questions that evoked them, Christianity testifies of the finiteness of human thought. Man is part of a higher order that he cannot survey and that lies beyond his understanding. For this reason Patočka speaks of Christianity as a “drama of salvation and grace,” an “abyss in the divine and the human”, in which “anxiety and hope are inextricably intertwined.”¹⁴ Self-surrender has become *metanoia* and *kenosis*, followed by a resurrection of “[...] true fellow participants in a meaningfulness which they did not create but which they are called to bring about.”¹⁵ Because of the inscrutable depth of the soul, Patočka regards Christianity as the summit in the history of the care for the soul.

IV. Modernity and Enlightenment

In modernity, by contrast, the care of the soul gets lost. Reasonable reflection of the good is replaced by instrumental rationality, life in service of the good is expelled by technological calculation and domination: “Not a care *for the soul*, the care to *be*, but rather the care to *have*, care for the external world and its conquest, becomes the dominant concern.”¹⁶ Freedom becomes the freedom of an atomic individual that is mainly interested in self-maintenance and self-development. Nature turns into an object of mathematical knowledge and technological control. Rationality converts to instrumental rationality, a technological tool. All together this means a step back to a culture where the second movement of human life gets the upper hand again: “What had originally been a bulwark against orgiastic irresponsibility has now passed into the service of everydayness.”¹⁷

In a text from the 1950s, “Hypercivilization and its inner conflict,”¹⁸ Patočka analyzes modern civilization as the first civilization that actually succeeds in its efforts to claim universal validity. This has become possible thanks to its rationalistic secularization that discards the irrational and religious kernel which has prevented other cultures from reaching universal hegemony. The disadvantage of this success is the loss of the rationality that was found in ancient Greek philosophy, rationality as a relation to transcendence. Patočka outlines its

¹⁴ Ibid., 106-108.

¹⁵ Ibid., 67.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹⁷ J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 112; cf. J. Patočka, “Aufklärung,” in: *Andere Wege in die Moderne. Studien zur europäischen Ideengeschichte von der Renaissance bis zur Romantik*, ed. L. Hagedorn (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), 365-385.

¹⁸ J. Patočka, “La surcivilisation et son conflit interne,” in: *Liberté et sacrifice. Écrits politiques*, trans. E. Abrams (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1990), 99-177.

inner conflict as a distinction between a moderate and a radical “hypercivilization.” The former is aware of its restrictions and leaves some space for dimensions of life that cannot be mastered by science and technology. To this side of modernity belong humanism, pluralism and human rights. The latter, radical “hypercivilization,” takes itself as unlimited: everything is either explainable and controllable or useless. This leads to either totalitarianism or extreme capitalism. Patočka suggests that the radical variant has prevailed. However, he does not seem to prefer the moderate version, because both are symptoms of a deeper problem. They are blind for the crucial notion that human existence does not solely function at the level of objective facts and forces, that it transcends this level and has access to what is indeterminate.

In his later texts in the 1970s Patočka describes modernity as a whole as a period of decline. Manipulation and domination of things were meant to affirm and realize human freedom, but they dialectically turned into their opposites: man is reduced to a manipulable object on the factory floor, in bureaucracy and as a factor of production and consumption. In addition, modern science, technology and economic calculation have unleashed enormous powers that have developed autonomously beyond human control. As a consequence, modern civilization has resulted in a disequilibrium of gigantic scientific and technical potentials on the one hand and a loss of orientation on the other hand. The relapse to a prevalence of the second movement of human life also revives the demonic dimension of transcendence that was suppressed by the care for the soul. Patočka finds this reversion even in the heydays of Enlightenment, the first years of the French Revolution. He quotes Durkheim, who writes of an enthusiasm for secular ideas that “[...] were transformed into sacred, as Fatherland, Liberty, Reason.”¹⁹ This is, according to Patočka:

[...] an enthusiasm which, for all the cult of Reason, has an orgiastic cast, either undisciplined or insufficiently disciplined by a link to personal responsibility. Here a danger of a new decline into the orgiastic is acutely evident.²⁰

Together with the enormous potentiality of modern technology this has finally, in the 20th century, brought about orgies of violence in two world wars. But also in periods of supposed peace, the total mobilization of economy and technology make the 20th century “[...] an epoch of the night, of war and of death.”²¹ Even in times of prosperity, the lack of a sense of direction leads to boredom and decadence. Patočka’s very dark depiction of modern technological civilization is clearly reminiscent of Heidegger’s notion of *Gestell*, the framing of everything as calculable and manipulable.

In these extreme circumstances there is only an extreme way out. The third movement of human existence can be rediscovered

¹⁹ J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 113.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

through that which transcends the calculable, namely sacrifice. In the midst of the atrocities of the first world war, the “front experience” can manifest a true meaning of the sacrifice of the soldiers:

The sacrifice of the sacrificed loses its relative significance, it is no longer the cost we pay for a program of development, progress, intensification, and extension of life’s possibilities, rather, it is significant *solely in itself*.²²

Comparably, in the epoch of *Gestell*, an alternative for the dominant technological framing might be found in a repeated sacrifice that testifies of the core of human existence, which lies beyond any specific being, any cause and any force.

In short, in its criticism of religion, modernity has lost a sense of transcendence, which is essential for a good understanding of being human. Patočka’s critique of modernity and Enlightenment, therefore, seems to call for a reevaluation of religion, more specifically, of Christianity. But is that really the case?

V. A secular Christian care for the soul

Despite Patočka’s positive account of Christianity it is clear that there is a tension within the Christian tradition between critical rational reflection and dogmatic beliefs. However, Patočka does not abandon Christian metaphysics. Although a “life in truth” calls for a thorough rational critique of all beliefs, he emphasizes that rational reflection is certainly not expelled in Christian thought. On the contrary, a dogmatic framework may exclude some basic convictions from discussion, but this also delivers a safe context for bold reflection:

Rational cognition thus reaches transcendent goals without fear of going astray, while on the other hand we can devote ourselves to all speculative daring without being led to the regions of skepticism where meaninglessness lurks. Reason as the natural organ for the understanding of truth loses its place of pride in life, but we might claim that this loss is at the same time a gain: for it gains firm foundation, certainty, and with it daring.²³

Nevertheless, in the same passage where he calls the Christian tradition the greatest outreach in the history of the care for the soul, Patočka also states that it is “unthought-through.”²⁴ The Christian care of the soul is in need of clarification. Patočka’s approval of Christian metaphysics and his severe critical analyses of modern civilization do not mean that he would not be in favour of secularization. This is stated very clearly in another passage in the fifth *Heretical Essay*:

²² *Ibid.*, 129-130.

²³ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

Explicit clarity about humans cannot be achieved without an explicit relation to being. Religious and sacred forms of experience do not always include such clarity. [...] For that reason, in the question of being human religious conversions [...] do not have the fundamental importance of the ontological experience of philosophy. Perhaps for that reason, too, it may turn out that religion is subject to temporary obscurity until its problems have been resolved philosophically.²⁵

The Christian insights in human life are still obscure and in need of philosophical elucidation. In other texts, therefore, Patočka has tried to develop an ontological understanding of human existence, that is reminiscent of the Christian version of the care for the soul.

In "On Masaryk's Philosophy of Religion," his last philosophical text, Patočka again describes surrender and devotion as characteristic of man's position with regard to the field of appearing – or, in the more Heideggerian terms that he uses in this text, to Being. The openness of Being is a "wonder, due to which we are no longer among tools, instruments, equipment (Zeug), but among being, [it] is a union, an opening up that one may thus designate with the word 'love'."²⁶ This last word gives the whole idea of Being as openness a turn away from Heidegger and brings it much closer to the Christian care of the soul. Life is not a gift of love by a personal God, but a gift of love by Being. Being is not meaningless, it is a source of meaning. It gives us our life as a gift of love, that can be rightfully accepted by giving ourselves away, not by following our own interests, but by passing this love on to others:

And the main insight remains: Being is neither thing nor entity but what opens things and entities, binding everything to itself with the invincible power of love. And love does not belong among the things and contents of this world, but by the side of immortal Being. Being is not what we love, but that through which we love, what gives us to love, and on the basis of which we let things be what they are ...²⁷

In this quotation we can easily recognize the main aspects of the Christian care of the soul, except that now, to put it briefly, "God" is replaced by "Being."²⁸ Thus, Patočka's ontological

²⁵ Ibid., 101-102.

²⁶ Patočka, "On Masaryk's Philosophy of Religion," in: *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy XIV* 2015, eds. Ludger Hagedorn and James Dodd, 95-135, here 108.

²⁷ Ibid., 109; cf. "The 'Natural' World and Phenomenology," in: E. Kohák, *Jan Patočka. Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 239-273, here 267-268.

²⁸ The same goes for the last pages of Patočka's afterword to his dissertation, 33 years later, which was quoted here in section 2, footnote 10. This passage is followed by a description of "a new myth, one of the most profound and most widespread, a myth endowed, like all myths, with an inexhaustible meaning: the myth of the divine man, the perfectly true man, his necessary end and his inevitable

understanding of human existence is a secularized form of the Christian view of life as a gift of love that needs to be accepted in a life that truly finds itself by giving itself away.

A comparable secularization of the Christian thought can be found in a text on modern technological culture, where Patočka sees in sacrifice the only way out of the technological *Gestell*. Here the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is brought to the fore as a model that needs to be demythologized:

Christianity, as we might perhaps think, placed at the center a radical sacrifice in the sense of the interpretation suggested above and rested its case on the maturity of the human being. The divine in the sense of the suprahuman, the suprahuman in the sense of turning away from ordinary everydayness, rests precisely in the radicalness of the sacrifice. Perhaps it is in this sense that we need to seek the fully ripened form of demythologized Christianity.²⁹

In short, the renewal of the care for the soul that Patočka is looking for, is very similar to the Christian phase in the history of the care of the soul. The main difference can be found in the ontological secularization: the personal God is replaced by Being, and the dogmatic faith is replaced by uncertainty, by a *docta ignorantia*.

VI. *The care for the soul and religion*

The final question in this article, then, is: what is the relation between religion and the new secular care for the soul? Can a life in truth do without any religion? Or, more in general, how does this care relate to myth, Enlightenment and religion all three? Patočka has not answered these questions. A definite answer, therefore, is hard to give. But it is possible to elaborate on these relations on the basis of several passages that can be found in his work.

As we have seen, in the third movement critical questioning and surrender to what is higher than ourselves, intrinsically go together. Hence, an exploration of the religious connections of the care for the soul, should take as its guideline an analysis of the several stadia and aspects of surrender that can be found in the third movement.

To start with, the third movement is first of all a surrender to uncertainty, to the attitude of asking radical questions that will never be entirely answered. Questions about reality as a whole and about the meaning of life will never be rationally solved. This does not mean that we should not try to provide rational argumentation, on the contrary, but we have to realize that there will always remain something mysterious about them. This

'resurrection', see J. Patočka, "The Natural World" Reconsidered Thirty-Three Years Later," 178.

²⁹ Patočka, "The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger according to M. Heidegger," in Kohák, *Jan Patočka*, 327-339, here 339.

implies that the level of myth can never be entirely overcome. A mythical sense of the divine and of mystery will always remain in our critical reflections and in our spiritual life:

I think that the transformation of myth into religion still keeps certain elements of myth, and this is such that from mere passivity it lifts up into reflection, but at the same time shows that they are mythical elements we cannot do without.³⁰

Although the failure to find the right answers seems to be something negative, Patočka often emphasizes the positive side of it. For the postponement of definite answers creates the space for temporary comprehensions as well as discussions about them. Consequently, the answers that we do find, can be very valuable and remain open for corrections:

This sort of *epochè* is therefore extremely positive. The *logos*, that is articulated by questions and answers, delivers short and conditional temporary insights. These insights, however, are basic, and with all the corrections that are added in further questions, they remain.³¹

Thus, although we lack a definite view of reality as a whole, we do have partial truths that can really be called truth, sustained by rational insight and argumentation.

But there is more to this positive side. The care of the soul consists in an oscillatory movement. On the one hand going beyond traditional points of view, we have to cross the *chorismos*, as Plato calls the crevice between mere opinions and rational knowledge, in order to look for lasting truth. But on the other hand, we also need to return to everyday life and make our choices and decisions. Therefore, we have no choice but to adhere to principles that we can never completely justify with rational argumentation, but that we want to cling to after all. We do not really choose these principles, they are convictions, we are convinced by them. This is also an aspect of surrender in the third movement: a dedication to principles that are part of what Richard Rorty calls our “final vocabulary.”³² In the third *Heretical Essay* Patočka speaks of this in terms of relative and absolute meaning:

Every individual meaning refers to a global meaning, every relative meaning to an absolute meaning. [...] ...human life is not possible without either a naïve or a critically acquired confidence in an absolute meaning, a global meaning of the totality of what-is...³³

We cannot have relative and contextual truths without basing them on absolute convictions. Despite the absolute status of these

³⁰ J. Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 150-151.

³¹ J. Patočka, *Europa und Nach-Europa*, 263. In this text I give an English translation of the German original.

³² R. Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³³ J. Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 58.

convictions, we know that they are shaken, we know that others may be convinced by other principles, but still we tend to insist that our principles cannot be given up.

Another positive result of this is an understanding of intersubjectivity that Patočka referred to with the well-known but not easy to understand expression “solidarity of the shaken.” Even though we may not share the same principles with our fellow humans, we must be able to understand, accept and respect each other in the mutual recognition of being shaken. And it is exactly this experience and this openness that we least of all can give up. A practical consequence of this is a call for tolerance and human rights.

The most positive result, however, of this surrender, is that meaning cannot be found in specific opinions, convictions with regard to values and beings, but in “[...] the discovery of Being beyond all existents, [...] the wonder that there is Being at all.”³⁴

Actually we are dealing only with the uncovering of meaning that can never be explained as a thing, which cannot be mastered, delimited, grasped positively, and dominated, but which is present only in the *seeking* of being. [...] Thus the shaking of naïve meaning is the genesis of a perspective on an absolute meaning to which, however, humans are not marginal, on condition that humans are prepared to give up the hope of a directly given meaning and to accept meaning as a way.³⁵

Because we are always on the way to this meaning and truth, they can never be simply given, we have to seek for reasons and to accept responsibility for it. The surrender to this uncertainty leads us to a self-understanding of continuous surrender. In the dedication itself to truth we can find the meaning of our life. In other words, our connection with the phenomenal field of manifestation calls for an authentic accomplishment of this relation, i.e., a continuous surrender and dedication to truth.

This is more than just a matter of rational understanding. The care of the soul is a way of life that is a life of self-surrender in dedication. There is an intrinsic ethical value of this self-understanding as living in surrender and devotion, as part of ‘something’ higher that has to be understood in terms of love. Only in the line of this “loving” way of life we can find the real intersubjectivity that is even described by Patočka as “[...] a community of those who understand each other in surrender and devotion, and, through the negation of separate centers, cement a fellowship of dedication, a fellowship in devoted service, which transcends every individual.”³⁶ The mutual recognition of surrender and dedication in this way is what really shapes intersubjectivity.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁶ Patočka, “The Natural World” Reconsidered Thirty-Three Years Later,” 190.

The care of the soul thus consists in an oscillatory movement of critical reflection and acceptance of convictions that we cannot but adhere to. Part of this movement is a way of life that is willing to give itself away in devotion. These convictions and this way of life might be seen as inherently religious: without being completely irrational, they take us to the limits of rational reflection and argumentation. Living in truth, therefore, cannot be without an element of faith: "This is after all a decision that is not blind, yet it is not a decision without risk—in this there is something like a fundamental element of *faith*."³⁷ At the same time, faith and religion need to be questioned critically. Consequently, in *Plato and Europe* Patočka calls Plato "[...] the philosopher who recommends and objects to faith."³⁸

This – the recommendation of and objection to faith – is what can be called religious life after religion: a religious way of life that lies beyond myth, Enlightenment and religion, while still dwelling in their confines, without a definitive farewell. This way of life implies an openness to the mysteries of the world and of our existence, an openness for religious questions, while looking for rational clarity. It is also a mentality that keeps practicing the critical rational attitude that has always been characteristic for philosophy, but that takes distance from the metaphysics and individualism that have become prominent since 18th and 19th century Enlightenment – or, to borrow an expression of Derrida, a mentality that looks for a new Enlightenment.³⁹ This new care for the soul is a heretical way of thinking and living that has been developed through religion, leads beyond religion and then may accept religion after all while trying to be independent of it. What is most important in this respect, is not the possible religious or non-religious character of our beliefs, values and ethos, i.e., their dependence or independence of religious traditions, revelations or authority, but the necessary critical attitude with regard to the sources and content of religious or secular convictions, values and virtues.

In conclusion, it can be defended that there is a place for religion in the secular care for the soul. But then it is a prerequisite for this religion to give room to a boundless rational and critical reflection. No dogma or principle can be holy enough to withdraw from this criticism. Only if it is capable to take this risk, a religious conviction can have its place in the rational attitude of a life in truth, and it may even turn out to get stronger, as a contested but viable principle.

³⁷ J. Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, 139.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁹ cf. J. Derrida, *L'autre cap* (Paris: Minuit, 1991), 77; *idem, Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 145-149.