

GOD IN QUESTION: QUESTIONING AS A PREREQUISITE FOR THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

There are questions that are so important that it is a pity to spoil them with answers. No doubt, the question of God is one of them. Contrary to many presuppositions, theology is not capable of providing us with the final answers in this respect. On the contrary, theology professed as *fides quaerens intellectum* is an ongoing struggle with questions. Modernity interrupted this paradigm of theological questioning. Theology was withdrawn from the realm of understanding and shifted to the realm of explanation. Modernity brought the univocalization of God. Nonetheless, the attempts to tackle the question of God lead to hegemonic narratives about God. Such narratives are rightly criticized in a postmodern context for their totalizing pretensions. The problem of postmodern criticism is its one-sided emphasis on the apophatic dimension of theological discourse. I propose that theology can go a step further beyond postmodernity. In order to do so, I deal with the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, who provides an opportunity to rethink God from the perspective of questioning in a new way. Patočka's insistence on problematization is the main reading key of his work. In this line of thought, I interpret Patočka's student Tomáš Halík and his thesis about the necessity to take the metaphor of an unknown God into account. I argue that theology must avoid the temptation to remove God from the question and make a well-known God of him. The time has come for theologians to turn their answers back into questions and dwell with them.

Key words

Theological method, Modernity, Postmodernity, Questioning, Jan Patočka

*E*ia nunc ergo tu, domine deus meus, doce cor meum ubi
et quomodo te quaerat, ubi et quomodo te inveniat.

...

Neque enim quaero intellegere ut credam, sed credo ut intellegam.
Anselm of Canterbury¹

¹ *Proslogion*, I.

“There are questions that are so important that it is a pity to spoil them with answers.”² No doubt, the question pertaining to God may be one of those best left unanswered. For we believe, we put God in question. In this line of thinking, Anselm of Canterbury developed a way of theology based on his thesis *fides quaerens intellectum*. Indeed, it is the essence of faith that it seeks understanding. The connecting line between faith and understanding is *intellectus fidei* – an intellectual reflection on faith, i.e. theology.

Contrary to many presuppositions, theology is not capable of providing us with final answers. Theology is always provisional and on the way.³ Theology is the quest for insights, not for proofs. Anselm himself does not provide us with a mere *probare* but *intellegere*.⁴ The method of *fides quaerens intellectum* provokes us to think about faith over and over again. Theology is the adventure of an ongoing struggle with questions from which we cannot escape.

Nevertheless, questioning is not a strategy for its own purpose. On the contrary, questioning is a prerequisite for a deeper relationship with God. “The question installs a quest and suggests a wealth toward which one is being orientated.”⁵

In the following paper, I will turn my attention to the theme of theological questioning in general. Firstly, I will sketch the nature of questioning in modernity and postmodernity. My contention is that questioning has not been sufficiently or adequately addressed, either by modern rationalism or postmodern criticism. At the end of the day, the former withdraws from questioning and the latter becomes lost in *aporias*. Therefore, I will argue that, in defining questioning, we must turn to the lacuna between modernity and postmodernity. I find this in the philosophical thought of Jan Patočka, who lived on the threshold of postmodernity but was still firmly rooted in late modernity. On the one hand, Patočka criticized modern metaphysical absolutism, which is the reason why some philosophers interpret him as a forerunner of

² Tomáš Halík. *Chci, abys byl: Křesťanství po náboženství*. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2012, p. 15 (my translation).

³ As Karl Barth puts it: “Every theological statement is an inadequate expression of its object [... because] God shatters every syllogism.” Karl Barth. *Anselm, Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselm’s Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme*. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press 1975, p. 29.

⁴ Cf. Barth. *Anselm*, p. 14.

⁵ Graham Ward. Questioning God. In: John D. Caputo – Mark Dooley – Michael J. Scanlon (ed.). *Questioning God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2001, p. 280.

postmodernity (e.g. Derrida or Rorty). On the other, Patočka's critique is not a simple deconstruction. Patočka was intrigued by the concept of problematicity in opposition to the unproblematic; i.e. giving simple answers to most difficult questions. Patočka does not constrain philosophy from any side, either modern or postmodern. For him, it is possible to claim something permanent and valid unless all are aware that it is always problematic.⁶ Thus, Patočka is neither another modern thinker nor a postmodern philosopher. He perhaps deserves a category *sui iuris*.⁷ Anyway, since he stands in the middle, his insights and observations might be inspiring for theology and its method after the death ends of (post)modernity.

1. Modernity: Forgotten Questions

Questioning is an epistemological operation in the search of knowledge. Nevertheless, the manner in which we ask questions is conditioned by the perspective on knowledge we adopt. For many classical authors, ancient and medieval, the right knowledge was a matter of contemplation, intellectual insight and understanding. Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum* might be a typical example of this way of reasoning. We may say that the main focus of human life, its central *telos*, was put on the care for the soul.

This notion was rejected in modernity, which caused the rupture with the preceding tradition. Features, such as claims for (i) the supreme authority of reason (*ratio*), (ii) the highest authority of natural sciences, especially mathematics, and (iii) the idea of eternal progress, constituted the modern ethos.⁸ Above all, modernity brought up changes in the conception of knowledge. For the first time, knowledge was defined as a power (Bacon). Knowledge made humans effective

⁶ Cf. Edward F. Findlay. *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age: Politics and Phenomenology in the Thought of Jan Patočka*. Albany: State University of New York Press 2002; see especially the section entitled "Patočka as Postmodern: Antifoundationalism, Theology, and Liberalism", pp. 193–205.

⁷ I suggest to develop a specific category of post-totalitarian thinkers against the background of the so-called postmodern thinkers from the West. The category applies to those who experienced and suffered under a totalitarian oppression and thus formed an intellectual opposition to hegemonic thought patterns. In this respect, Jan Patočka was, for sure, one of the leading figures.

⁸ Cf. Robert B. Pippin. *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfaction of European High Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell 1991, p. 4.

and only what was effective was deemed knowledge. Thus, knowledge enabled humans to become the masters of the universe (Descartes).⁹

Naturally, this modern shift changed theology and heavily influenced theological epistemology.¹⁰ The richness of theological-intellectual reflection was narrowed. Before modernity, “most Christian theologians were struck by the mystery, the wholly otherness of God, and the inadequacy of any human categories as applied to God”.¹¹ Thomas Aquinas speaks about God’s unknowability. Martin Luther insists on the hiddenness of God. This point of view has never completely disappeared. However, the idea that theology could speak clearly about God became common sense among modern theologians and philosophers.

This is not to suggest that theological reflection should be irrational or unscientific. This has never been the case. The history of theology has testified, since the very beginning, that masters of *theologia sacra* have never resigned from the use of their reason. Before proceeding with the argument, it is worthwhile to draw a fundamental distinction between *rational* and *reasonable*.¹² The former assumes that everything is rational and, therefore, explainable by the means of *sola ratione*.¹³ Human reason is the ultimate authority and the eminent instrument for the foundation of certainty. The latter, however, represents the virtue of intellectual insight seeking understanding, which includes reason, intuition and experience; i.e. a more holistic approach to knowledge based on a particular story and history. To put it bluntly, “Justin’s claim that Christian belief is reasonable is thus different from saying that it relies on mere instruments of human reason”.¹⁴

⁹ Cf. Jan Patočka. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. Chicago: Open Court 1996, pp. 83–84.

¹⁰ By the way, I believe that the whole problem of postmodernity is, in fact, the problem of modernity. In other words, the problem of contemporary theology is neither that it is postmodern nor pre-modern but that theology is too modern.

¹¹ William C. Placher. *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1996, p. 6.

¹² I am indebted to Ivana Noble for this elucidating perspective. Cf. Ivana Dolejšová. *Accounts of Hope: A Problem of Method in Postmodern Apologia*. Bern, New York: Peter Lang 2001, p. 299.

¹³ Some authors argue that Anselm of Canterbury might be considered as a predecessor of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. In my opinion, Karl Barth rightly shows that *ratio* of Anselm’s theology is *fides* which is essentially *quaerens intellectum*. In other words, it is the essence of faith that desires understanding (cf. Karl Barth. *Anselm*) The modern conception of rationality turned Anselm’s *sola ratione* upside down.

¹⁴ Dolejšová. *Accounts of Hope*, p. 82.

Modernity developed a new form of rationalism, the rationalism of mastery,¹⁵ and theologians followed this method. Modern scholarship “made the traditional modes of theologizing obsolete; a good many professional theologians agreed with that. Never before or after was science, philosophy, and theology seen as almost one and the same occupation.”¹⁶ Modern scientists, such as Descartes, Leibniz, Newton and many others dealt with explicit theological questions. Modern scientists, who were at the same time first secular theologians, sought an unequivocal, clear and distinct language.

Modern theology adopted an unequivocal language. Amos Funkenstein shows in his comprehensive study on theology and the scientific imagination that modern theologians followed science and reexamined God in its terms. God was reflected in terms of mathematics, geometry, symmetry and so on.¹⁷ For example, William Desmond refers to John Craig’s book *Theologiae Christianae Principia Mathematica* (1699), which used algebra to prove the Christian truth claims.¹⁸ This mathematical univocalization simplified the perception of nature, human beings, and God. The theological reasoning follows like this: the machine of nature is full of little walking and thinking machines-watches. Therefore, there must be a master of the universe who is the watch-maker. It is no surprise that this modern mathematical and rational monotheism foreshadows atheism.¹⁹

The univocalization of God is the first step of removing God’s mystery.²⁰ The problem of ‘God in Question’ might be restated as the struggle between the problem of *mastery* and *mystery* – the *shift* from *intellectus* (seeking an insight) to *ratio* (an instrument of clear and distinct knowledge). It means the shift of God from the realm of understanding to the explanatory realm. However, explanation unlike understand-

¹⁵ Cf. Patočka. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 110.

¹⁶ Amos Funkenstein. *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1986, p. 3.

¹⁷ Cf. Funkenstein. *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, pp. 28–51.

¹⁸ Cf. William Desmond. *God and the Between*. Malden, MA: Blackwell 2008, p. 61.

¹⁹ “The will to make God so rational can end up with irrational consequences, when the atrocities of evil are shoehorned syllogistically into the best fitting cosmos. There is not enough of open space for freedom, and the overdeterminacy that releases it. There is too little of the surplus of the origin, and the mystery of the gift of being that stuns us, and that always stays with us, should mindfulness not fall into the sleep-walking of reason, programmed by its own constructions of determinate intelligibility.” Desmond. *God and the Between*, p. 68.

²⁰ Placher. *The Domestication of Transcendence*, pp. 71–72.

ing seeks an end.²¹ Thus, God becomes one of comprehensible and graspable *things* among others. In sum, the reference to God in modernity does not point towards a fundamental question but towards an ultimate explanation.²² After modernity, God does not dwell in questions any more.

2. Lost in the Postmodern Cul-De-Sac

While the question of God is present, God is actually present. Modern attempts to conquer this question resulted in hegemonic narratives about God. As we have seen, the modern belief in reason and optimism about the epistemological abilities of humans is almost unlimited and influenced theological reasoning. This pattern is still influential in today's situation. Borrowing the terminology of Jean-François Lyotard, the forefather of postmodern philosophical thinking, theology finds itself in a continual temptation to treat God and the universe in totalizing master narratives. It is my contention that postmodern critical consciousness provides valuable tools for theology in this respect and I ask together with Lieven Boeve: "Can God escape the clutches of the Christian master narrative?"²³

Postmodern criticism brings to light the strategy of master narratives as hegemonic totalizing discourses that create all-encompassing theories of everything. They are all-inclusive and have everything under control. Nothing can escape. Totalitarian structures become surrogates for univocalized reality. These totalitarian structures are subsequently refused, due to the horrific experiences of the last two centuries, as Lyotard says:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible,

²¹ Cf. Nicholas Lash. *Holiness, Speech and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God*. Aldershot, Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2004, p. 9.

²² "God, too, who used to be the measure of all things, now had to measure up the criteria set forth by reason. To be sure, God passed this test with flying colours and came out *summa cum laude*, first in his class, the *causa sui*; that than which nothing more perfect could be conceived. Too little, too late. The damage had been done." John D. Caputo. *Truth*. London: Penguin Books 2013, p. 121.

²³ Lieven Boeve. *Lyotard and Theology: Beyond the Christian Master Narrative of Lovv*. London, New York: Bloomsbury 2014, p. 59.

of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality.²⁴

In other words, the modern project has failed. The absolute determination of everything brought up a disillusion and incredulity. Perhaps we can restate Lyotard's diagnosis in the following way: Postmodern criticism alludes the end of clear and distinct ideas formulated from the bird's perspective, about the world, human beings and, last but not least, about God. Postmodern critical consciousness initiates a different strategy, namely the sensitivity for the inexpressible, the un-representable and for otherness. Using technical theological terminology, postmodernity reconsiders *mystery* again.

This cultural sensitivity that "consists of the awareness that everything we say and everything we represent is accompanied and surrounded by that which remains inexpressible, un-presentable"²⁵ caused a sort of philosophical re-appropriation of the tradition of negative theology. For example, Derrida suggests that deconstruction is the proper praxis of negative theology. Lyotard points out the notion of *différend*, which refers to an inexpressible event, one which escapes the ultimate conceptualization. To shorten the story, many theologians have taken this postmodern turn to apophatic theology as a sign of the return of God and as an inspiration for speaking about God in a postmodern context. They refer to God as incomprehensible, hidden or entirely absent, while they adopt the language developed by postmodern philosophers. Their "apophatic theology is the consequence of a theology that opposes the hegemonic discourse strategies of [modernity]".²⁶ The positivist one-sidedness of modernity is substituted for the negative or apophatic one-sidedness of postmodernity.

Thus, contemporary theology lapses into a philosophical form of negative theology too easily. Placher hits the nail on the head:

²⁴ Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984, pp. 81–82.

²⁵ Lieven Boeve. The Rediscovery of Negative Theology Today: The Narrow Gulf between Theology and Philosophy. In: Marco M. Olivetti (ed.). *Théologie négative*. Padova: CEDAM 2002, p. 445.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 446–447.

We have to try to hear God speak to us, if we are to escape worshipping an idol. That means we cannot simply fit God in as one component of our intellectual systems, or think only of a God who fits our categories and purposes. But we cannot climb to heaven on a pile of negatives and paradoxes either.²⁷

Negative theology might be a way of safeguarding the mystery of God. However, it cannot be the only possible way of theologizing in a contemporary context. Negative theology is not enough and cannot be placed in the center of theology, though it is a necessary complement of positive theological statements.²⁸ We have to move beyond mere negations. But where should we go so that we would not lapse into a too positive theology again? Perhaps the answer might be found in the art of ‘questioning’ itself. On this basis, an alternative to negative theology emerges - a theology of questioning. Asking questions is different from sheer negations. Questioning presupposes creativity. It aims to pin down some answers but never final conclusions. Moreover, good answers open a new space for even better questions. The history of Christian dogmas may serve as an example. In this case, questioning led to certain answers. These answers, however, provoked new questions. The history of Christian dogma is a story of continual, tireless questioning.

Nevertheless, for example, Boeve argues that questioning is not a sufficient solution.²⁹ He refers to Lyotard’s idea of ‘Jewish thinking’.

²⁷ Placher. *The Domestication of Transcendence*, p. 17.

²⁸ “Apophatic theology does not abandon cataphatic theology, but qualifies it.” Lieven Boeve. *Theological Truth, Particularity and Incarnation: Engaging Religious Plurality and Radical Hermeneutics*. In: Mathijs Lamberigts – Lieven Boeve – Terrence Merrigan (eds.). *Orthodoxy, Process and Product*. Leuven: Peeters 2009, p. 346. It is true that Boeve’s opinion has developed in this respect. In his early articles (e.g. Lieven Boeve. *Postmodernism and Negative Theology. The A/theology of the ‘Open Narrative’*. *Bijdragen: Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie* 58 [1997]), he is much more positive about drawing an inspiration from the postmodern apophatic thought. It seems that his initial outline of a theology in open narrative is even equivalent to a kind of post-modern negative theology. Nevertheless, his later studies (e.g. Boeve. *The Rediscovery of Negative Theology Today*, pp. 443–459) provide a deeper critical analysis and warn against an easy recuperation of the philosophical into the theological.

²⁹ Even though Boeve agrees that the entire logic of dogmatic teaching might be considered in terms of openness and open narrative, he does not make a direct connection between his notion of openness and questioning. Cf. Lieven Boeve. *Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology*. In: Terrence Merrigan – Jacques Haers (eds.). *The Myriad Christ. Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*. Leuven: Peeters 2000, pp. 577–593.

This “is concerned with asking questions, not to receive an answer, but [to] remain questioning”.⁵⁰ Even though Boeve approaches this method with sympathy, he interprets it as another form of negative theology. I think that this reading of ‘Jewish thinking’ in particular and consequently the strategy of questioning in general is not correct. Questioning is not necessarily another form of negative theology. Rather, it is never-ending listening to God – a theology of asking, one that is directed at and which listens to the Other.⁵¹ Of course, there might be strategies of questioning which end up in the trap of *aporias*.⁵² Nevertheless, these shortcuts do not discredit the method of questioning as such. I argue that not only openness but active questioning is a prerequisite for theology in the postmodern context. In order to address the issue of questioning, I will turn to the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka.

3. Beyond (Post)Modern Pitfalls

I suggest that Patočka’s philosophy offers an inspiration to rethink theological questioning in a new way. True, Patočka can hardly be considered a philosopher of religion. He does not dedicate any study solely to theological problems, but he addressed ‘religious thinking’.

What is religious thinking in the eyes of the Czech philosopher? The easiest way how to give an answer is to present his distinction between myth and religion. For Patočka, these notions represent polar opposites. Myth is static, religion is dynamic; myth is apathetic, religion is reflective; myth gives certainties while religion is problematic; myth is a-historical whereas religion is an event of history. “The myth knows all in advance; it concerns an archetype, an event that is over,

⁵⁰ Lieven Boeve. Theological Truth in the Context of Contemporary Continental Thought: The Turn to Religion and the Contamination of Language. In: Frederiek Depoortere – Magdalen Lambkin (eds.). *The Question of Theological Truth: Philosophical and Interreligious Perspectives*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi 2012, p. 88.

⁵¹ For example, the Talmudic argumentation consists of debating; i.e. asking question and looking for answers. However, every answer provokes new debatable questions. Furthermore, the debate has never ended. It has been continuing in the Yeshivot for centuries. The goal is clear – to reread, rethought and rephrase over and over again. Thus, ‘Jewish thinking’ is a serious engagement with the question of God which touches all the spheres of human life. Cf. Louis Jacobs. *The Talmudic Argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984.

⁵² Cf. Ward. Questioning God, pp. 274–290.

and which can only be repeated.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, myth is essentially impersonal, whereas religion gives birth to a personal responsibility.⁵⁴ Myth is something clear and distinct, pre-problematic, without questions and thus *demonic*. The ‘demonic’ means that it allows us to partake in the world without questions.⁵⁵ In short, myth does not count with mystery.⁵⁶

Myth is a grand passive fantasy – a fantasy that is not aware that it is fantasy and that answers to certain deep affective needs of man. Myth is wholly practical. Religion, on the other hand, is something which requires a personal act of faith; it is something actively carried out by us.⁵⁷

In contrast, “[religion] implies that the ‘demonic’ has been overcome”.⁵⁸ Religion is a constant movement beyond. Religious thinking is a kind of transition from non-problematicity to problematicity; from answers to questions. This creates a space for questioning. Religious thinking is thus parallel to philosophical thinking.⁵⁹ The impulse of philosophical questioning is seeking the truth. For Patočka, “truth is something not given once and for all, nor merely a matter of observing and acknowledging the observed, but rather a life-long inquiry, a self-controlling, self-unifying intellectual and vital practice”.⁴⁰

For the philosopher, the world is not self-evident. The world is problematic, indeed. But one does not have to be a philosopher to notice it. From time to time, everyone (i) experiences that the world

⁵⁵ Roger Scruton. *The Philosopher on Dover Beach: Essays*. New York: St. Martin’s Press 1990, p. 85.

⁵⁴ Cf. Ludger Hagedorn. *Beyond Myth and Enlightenment: On Religion in Patočka’s Thought*. In: Ivan Chvatík – Erika Abrams (eds.). *Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology: Centenary Papers*. Dordrecht, New York: Springer 2011, pp. 247–248.

⁵⁵ Cf. Patočka. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, pp. 12–15.

⁵⁶ “And, ultimately, is there not at the very core of reality itself something like the mysterious and the mystery? Is mystery necessarily something subjectively private while actually it means such clarity that it can outshine all that seems clear in our everyday life? Is not the infinite depth of reality possible only because we cannot see its bottom, and is not just that a challenge and an opportunity for humans in their reach for meaning which is more than the flowering and perishing of the lily of the field in the eyes of the gods.” Patočka. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 75.

⁵⁷ Jan Patočka. *Plato and Europe*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2002, p. 122.

⁵⁸ Hagedorn. *Beyond Myth and Enlightenment*, p. 247.

⁵⁹ We find a similar idea in Richard Schaeffler. *Religion und kritisches Bewusstsein*. Freiburg: Alber 1973.

⁴⁰ Patočka. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 82.

is not self-evident, (ii) loses the presupposed meaning and (iii) that everything is problematic.

For a theologian, God and the world are not self-evident either. God is a problem. God is a trauma. Only God is God. Theologians cannot but speak about God bearing in mind that God is a strange God indeed who is not at one's disposal. Theology is a permanent critical inquiry, a provisional solution of an insolvable crisis. Thus, theology is a perpetual critical endeavor – one that is always discerning and asking questions.

Once, however, that question had been posed, humans set out on a long journey they had not traveled hitherto, a journey from which they might gain something but also decidedly lose a great deal. It is a journey of history. At its inception, humans are the powerless serfs of life, but they do have the natural world with its gods, their service that suits the gods, and art as an expression of their service and of their bond with sacred. In setting out on their new journey, humans place all that at stake.⁴¹

Patočka speaks about the experience of the night.⁴² This metaphor helps us to understand why Patočka's thought is important for theology. We have seen that modernity provides the ideas of the day - brightness, light and optimism. It is no surprise that these concepts are not able to deal with the night, darkness and uncertainty, which we humans experience. A common contemporary experience is to live 'with' questions and 'in' questions. We do not ask the question of God because we can but because we must. Both the experiences of the last century and the essence of God throw us into the dark night. The shake of night causes that we cannot but ask questions. We look into things because they seem problematic to us. God revealed Godself as a problem *par excellence*. The Christian confession reads that God is the Alpha and the Omega. Nevertheless, 'to confess' means to acknowledge that everything that lies between the Alpha and the Omega is open to questioning. What nobler question exists than the question of God?

The lesson from Patočka reveals the following: Questioning unveils something that is familiar yet still remains unknown. Questioning is not about unveiling structures, systems and laws. Questioning does

⁴¹ Ibidem, pp. 25–26.

⁴² Cf. ibidem, pp. 119–138.

not seek an explanation; questioning seeks rather understanding. It is not about ‘what is’ beyond a question but about ‘who is’ in the core of a question. Truth emerges within this relationship. Who is that unknown God who encourages us to ask the question of God?⁴³

4. God in Question

Proper speech about God ends with a question mark. Our words, concepts or metaphors simply crack in themselves as the reality of God is so ungraspable and unquantifiable. Great theologians, such as Augustine, knew this. They never used univocal statements. Rather, they used open and paradoxical confessions (symbols). The encounter with God (in question) led them to the confession: ‘*Quaestio mihi factus sum*’ – I have become a question to myself.⁴⁴

Questioning is the way of continual interruption.⁴⁵ It is a crossroad of two shortcuts: an arrogant dogmatic nihilism and a fundamentalist certain self-assurance. Questioning is the pathway of doubts. Questioning bears upon intellect as it searches for insights and understanding. Questions give energy. But honestly, do we pursue a theology wherein questions are prerequisites for a meaningful way of reasoning; or do we live in a too rationalist world where questions are seen as obstacles to be overcome, resolved or conquered?

Nonetheless, humans cannot live without some answers. It is impossible to live in the certitude of a big eternal question without a single possibility to rest for a moment on firm ground. Nevertheless, does this not mean that humanity cannot live with an adventure that embraces questioning in the midst of a problematic world?⁴⁶

⁴³ Cf. Jan Patočka. Deset náčrtů ke Kacířským esejům. In: Ivan Chvatík – Pavel Kouba (eds.). *Péče o duši III*. Praha: OIKOYMENH 2002, pp. 450–452.

⁴⁴ *Confessions* X, 35, 50. “He [Augustine] thought he knew all the answers when he set out to climb the ladder of the imperial Roman world, but after his conversion, after coming face to face with the mystery of God, he was forced to confront the mystery within himself.” Caputo. *Truth*, p. 256.

⁴⁵ I am indebted to Lieven Boeve in this respect. Boeve extensively elaborates upon the notion of interruption and develops his own theological method on its basis. Lieven Boeve. *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*. New York: Continuum 2007. Nevertheless, Boeve does not associate his concept of interruption with the method of questioning.

⁴⁶ I paraphrased Patočka: “Humans cannot live without meaning [...] that means: humans cannot live in the certitude of meaninglessness. But does not that mean that they cannot live with a sought for and problematic meaning? [...] Lessing, when in the choice between ‘having the truth’ and ‘seeking the truth’ prefers the latter, might

Our situation seems to be peculiar, though. The challenge to reflect on ‘God in question’, for some, may imply an erroneous and misleading assumption that God should be somehow removed from the question. Some people might expect that, by departing from the situation of ‘God in question,’ it is possible to arrive at the state of affairs which can be described as ‘God in answer’. I am convinced that such a perspective is wrong and should be even avoided. Was this not a mistake that the Apostle Paul made at the *Areopagus*? He wanted to resolve the question of an unknown God. In doing so, he omitted a speech about the cross of Christ, which is surely a permanent question mark that confronts humankind, a trans-cultural scandal that questions us and makes us question God. It is only on the cross that the question remains: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Maybe our profoundest prayers could take the form of questions. Maybe our profoundest questions could become prayers. [...] Maybe in the history of theology we gave too many hasty answers where there was time and space more for questions and contemplation. Maybe the time has come for us to turn our answers back into questions again and dwell with questions in the house of God’s silence and hiddenness.⁴⁷

It is not simply that we can speak now about ‘God in question’ from our postmodern perspective or however else we refer to our current era. Perhaps God prefers to be with us in question all the time. It may be better to say: ‘God is question’. Do Christians too quickly and too often presuppose that faith is the answer to the question of God? On the contrary, faith is the courage to ask this question. Faith is the patience to remain within this unresolved question, God’s question. “The question is an occasion for something to occur—a theophany of a kind: the appearance of the divine not as the answerer but, nevertheless, the receiver of questions.”⁴⁸

he not have had the same in mind.” Patočka. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, p. 75.

⁴⁷ Tomáš Halík. *Speech at the launch of the Italian version of his book Viciano ai lontani* [2013-06-13]. <http://www.halik.cz/ja/speech_in_rome2013.php>.

⁴⁸ Ward. *Questioning God*, p. 275.

Conclusion

Perhaps God is present in the patience of questioning. Patočka's depiction of religious thinking can assist in this respect. For him, it is essential to cling to a question, even though the temptation to resolve it is omnipresent. Patočka's notion of problematicity informs theology that questions must not be resolved but embraced. If we too quickly or too simply resolve, for example, the question of God, only the unbearable lightness of being will remain. Surely this would result in a theological travesty.

What is then the concept of theological questioning we should practice? After the course of this paper, it would be foolish to propose a coherent concept for I cannot imagine how to do so without fundamentally betraying my endeavor. Rather, I want to encourage us, theologians reflecting on 'God in question', to contemplate this question which is a quest-in-relation. Anselm addresses his questions to an addressee: "*Domine, si hic non es, ubi te quaeram absentem?*"⁴⁹ Indeed, the problem of some postmodern philosophical theologies is that the addressee is missing. The question evaporates in an open space of nothing. The problem of modern strategies is reductionism, which shrinks God's mystery. Thus, the question of God is coped with.

Patočka, without addressing God explicitly, points out that questioning recovers mystery. Questioning opens the depths of the mysterious problematicity. The question of God, a principal theological question, is not a mere problem which I find before me as something external.⁵⁰ On the contrary, I am involved in this quest. The question of God presupposes an ontological relation between the questioner and the questioned. Theology which does not follow the pathway of questioning is in a continual temptation to reduce the mysterious problematicity to a mere problem to be resolved. Nonetheless, it is questionable if

⁴⁹ *Proslogion*, I.

⁵⁰ "A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity." Gabriel Marcel. *Being and Having*. Westminster: Dacre Press 1949, p. 117. I find Patočka's conception of problematicity closer to the Marcelian notion of mystery than to his notion of problem. Cf. Jan Patočka. *Living in Problematicity*. Praha: OIKOYMENH 2007. I am indebted to my colleague and friend Pavel Roubík, who directed my attention to the distinction of Gabriel Marcel and its relevancy for this paper.

mystery might be resolved at all. After all, the Gospel tells the story about an irresolvable mystery of God, which Jesus accepted in faith.

In summary, and to illustrate poetically what we have been exploring let me conclude with the words of Rainer Maria Rilke:

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.⁵¹

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ABSTRAKT

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Bůh jako otázka: Tázání jako předpoklad teologie

Některé otázky jsou tak důležité, že je škoda kazit je odpověďmi. Není pochyb, že otázka po Bohu je jednou z nich. Navzdory mnoha předpokladům, ani teologie není schopna poskytnout v tomto ohledu konečné odpovědi. Teologie pojatá jako *fides quaerens intellectum* je nepřetržitý nekončící zápas s otázkami. Moderna narušila toto paradigma teologického myšlení. Modernita učinila z pojmu Boha pojem „univocitní“ a vyjmula jej z oblasti otázek. Teologie napříště náležela do oblasti vysvětlení. Avšak pokusy zodpovědět otázku po Bohu s konečnou platností vedou k hegemonii. Tento způsob myšlení je právem kritizován postmodernou. Problém postmoderní kritiky je však její jednostranný důraz na apofatickou dimenzi teologického diskursu. V tomto článku tvrdím, že teologie může nejen přijmout některé aspekty postmoderní kritiky, ale dokonce postmodernu překonat. S tímto úkolem se vyrovnávám za pomoci myšlení českého filosofa Jana Patočky, který otvírá příležitost k přehodnocení otázky po Bohu. Patočkův důraz na problematičnost je hlavním interpretačním klíčem. V tomto duchu dále interpretuji i Patočkova žáka Tomáše Halíka a jeho návrh metafory o neznámém Bohu jako způsobu, jak se s otázkou po Bohu v dnešním kontextu vyrovnat. V závěru argumentuji ve prospěch teze, že teologie se musí vyhnout pokušení vyjmout Boha z výhně otázek

⁵¹ Rainer Maria Rilke. *Letters to a Young Poet*. A Book Virtual Digital Edition, pp. 23–24.

a učinit z něj dobře známého Boha/bůžka. Nadešel čas, aby teologové obrátili své odpovědi zpět v otázky.

Klíčová slova

teologická metoda, moderna, postmoderna, otázka, Jan Patočka