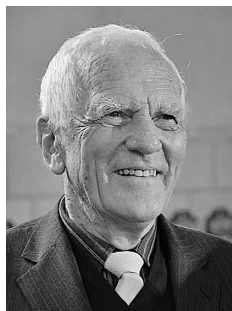


NOTES FROM THE COASTS OF BOHEMIA OR THE TEACHER AND FRIEND WE'VE LOST



For many scholars both in the Czech Republic and abroad, Petr Pokorný (April 12, 1933–January 18, 2020) has represented the face of the Czech biblical scholarship. For some of them he would be the only name they would recall from among Czech theologians.¹ He gained an international reputation for his treatise on the emergence of Christology, published in German in 1985.² In it, using a form-critical analysis of the titles and phrases

the early church frequently used in reference to Jesus, he traces how the Christian understanding of Jesus as the Messiah evolved.

Pokorný's monograph on the central issue of Christian theology develops from his thorough study of rather peripheral phenomena accompanying early Christianity, especially the Gnosis.³ Acknowledging the charm of Gnostic spirituality (and providing Czech readers with a fresh translation of the Gospel of Thomas⁴ and later with other Gnos-

¹ The full bibliography of Petr Pokorný can be found at <http://www.etf.cuni.cz/sat/Pdf/SAT%202008-1.pdf> (texts from 1959–2008) and at <http://www.etf.cuni.cz/sat/Pdf/SAT%202018-2.pdf> (texts from 2008–2018)

² Petr Pokorný, *Die Entstehung der Christologie Voraussetzungen einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1985). The treatise was translated to English as *The genesis of Christology: foundations for a theology of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987) and to Czech as *Vznik christologie: Předpoklady teologie Nového zákona* (Praha: Kalich, 1988).

³ See his unpublished habilitation thesis *Gnostická mystéria a novozákonní epištola Efezským: Rané křesťanství v boji s náboženským individualismem* [*The Gnostic mysteries and the New Testament Epistle to Ephesians: The early Christianity in a struggle with religious individualism*], (Prague: Comenius Protestant Faculty of Theology, 1962).

⁴ Petr Pokorný, *Tomášovo evangelium: Překlad s výkladem* (Praha: Kalich, 1982²). Reworked, the book later appeared in English translation as *A commentary on the Gospel of Thomas: from interpretations to the interpreted* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009).

tic writings⁵), he missed no opportunity to emphasize the earthly and fleshy character of Jesus as depicted in synoptical Gospels. The reality of Christ's incarnation obliged him to follow carefully the impulses of the "Jesus research," audible anew since the 1980s. He paid special attention to the Gospel of Mark and its surprisingly abrupt and sober ending.⁶

Since his doctoral thesis, which he submitted in 1959, he has been continually engaged with the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, on which he has published commentaries in German, English and Czech. In the last decades of his life, Pokorný discovered hermeneutics. Throughout his academic life he was concerned with the various strategies through which the New Testament writers mediated their encounter with Jesus. He understood that the gospel was not only information about what happened, but also an invitation to a new way of seeing and talking about things around us. Deeply inspired by Paul Ricoeur, he elaborated on his concept of witness, which became a key way of speaking "biblically" about God.⁷

His reflections on the significance of Christ's resurrection led him to a surprisingly positive assessment of history. The involvement of Christians in the struggles of history is a feature that distinguishes them from the Gnostics. In his essay from 2007 on the meaning of Christianity today, called *Daylight is on the Way*⁸ (invoking Paul's words "The night is nearly over, daylight is on the way" in Romans 12:13), he argues that human history is not just a dark tunnel leading to eter-

⁵ Petr Pokorný, *Píseň o perle: Tajné knihy starověkých gnostiků [The song of the pearl: The Secret Books of the Ancient Gnostics]*, (Praha: Vyšehrad, 1986); Petr Pokorný and Jan A. Dus (eds.), *Neznámá evangelia: Novozákonní apokryfy I. [Unknown Gospels: the New Testament Apocrypha I.]*, (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2001); Petr Pokorný and W. B. Oerter (eds.), *Rukopisy z Nag Hammádí [The Manuscripts from Nag Hammadi]*, (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2017).

⁶ Petr Pokorný, *Výklad evangelia podle Marka [The Gospel according to Mark: A Commentary]*, (Praha: UCN, 1974¹, 1981²), completely reworked as *Evangelium podle Marka [The Gospel according to Mark in the series Czech Ecumenical Commentary – New Testament]*, (Praha: Česká biblická společnost, 2016).

⁷ Petr Pokorný et al. (eds.), *Hermeneutika jako teorie porozumění: od základních otázek jazyka k výkladu bible [Hermeneutics as a theory of understanding: from basic questions of language to biblical interpretation]*, (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2006). Selected parts of the book appeared as Petr Pokorný and Anna Bryson Gustová, *Hermeneutics as a theory of understanding*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).

⁸ Petr Pokorný, *Den se přiblížil [Daylight is on the Way]* (Jihlava: Mlýn, 2007).

nity, but rather a sphere in which God's redemption takes place. The Gospel has an orienting function. It shows what attitudes and values are pleasing to God. But it also demonstrates, that these attitudes and values are ultimately successful already in this "pre-eschatological" history. Thus, adopting a tune not dissimilar to the Old Testament deuteronomistic historians, Pokorný claims:

It is far from just a history of decline. In history we can find traces of an event that goes beyond our historical assumptions and yet is real. As Christians, we must learn to reckon with it. [...] The idea of an unstoppable progress for the better is in itself an illusion. But we are certainly not marching to hell. The glorious counterpart, biblically called „the last judgment“ or „the kingdom of God,“ comes to us even in the midst of our downfalls, and is stronger than the catastrophes of history [...] Through the eyes of faith, one can discover in these catastrophes, at the lower level of history, inner relationships analogous to the basic nature of Christian hope and influenced by the same source of inner strength [...] Thus, for example, at the beginning of the Second World War, when Europe was occupied by the Nazis and England was the only one fighting Hitler, the certainty that D-Day would come was really only a matter of faith [...] Similarly, in the 1970s, the end of a dictatorship that appealed to socialist ideals seemed an unlikely hope [...] Faith is able to retrospectively reveal and understand what forms the axis of history. Faith is therefore the source of our historical orientation towards the future.⁹

One could almost say that Pokorný's thesis that the gospel positively influences immanent history is embodied in his personal and professional life. His marriage to Věra Kellerová, herself an accomplished psychologist, brought them four children and a number of grandchildren. The year of his marriage, at the age of 27, he joined the Czech ecumenical Bible translation team. Later, he was privileged to take part in the archaeological campaigns in Egypt, Jordan and Israel. A sought-after lecturer, he would spend several academic terms as visiting professor in Greifswald, Pittsburgh and Dubuque, Tübingen, Göttingen, Heidelberg and Princeton since the 1970s. Repeatedly, he served as a steering committee member of the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*. For the period of 1994–5 he served as the president of

⁹ Ibid., 46.

this scholarly organization. During his career he has received numerous awards, honorary memberships and doctorates. In the late 1990s he served as the dean of the Protestant Faculty of Theology.

How could he have achieved such a stellar success under communism? Certainly, Pokorný tried not to identify himself directly with the opponents of the communist regime, a line generally taken by Czech protestants in the 1950s and 1960s and by this theological faculty headed by J. L. Hromádka. Privately though, he and his family experienced many cases of second-class citizenship for being Christians. It is here, however, that a peculiar trait of Pokorný's character becomes apparent: he would never accept the position of a victim who complains about what he has been deprived of. On the contrary, he would persistently and patiently try possible ways to achieve his goals. As his former student and later colleague, the present Dean of the faculty of theology, Jiří Mrázek recalls,

in 1961 Pokorný naively applied for a scholarship at the Haardt Institute of Classical Philology in Geneva. Simply because he found an advertisement in the journal *Folia Philologica*, he gave it a try. It was hardly conceivable that he would get it, and if he did, that the regime would let him go. And the incredible thing happened: he got it. But the regime wouldn't let him go. And so the scholarship was waiting for him in Geneva, and he was waiting for it in Prague... the first year, the second year and the third year, until finally someone high up in the regime softened up and let him go [...] The story of his dissertation is in a similar vein. He submitted it in 1959, but had to wait three years to defend it. He graduated in 1963. In the meantime, however, he took the time to write his habilitation thesis, which he submitted immediately after defending his dissertation. This time, however, he had to wait five years to defend it. He was invited as a visiting professor at the *Sprachenkonvikt* in East Berlin – and was not allowed to leave. A year later he tried Greifswald – and was allowed to go...¹⁰

Pokorný learned on his life's journey that the forces of evil do not have unlimited power. As an experienced interpreter of the Bible, he

¹⁰ Quote from the speech of the Dean of the Protestant Faculty of Theology Jiří Mrázek at the farewell service to Peter Pokorný at the Evangelical Church in Vinohrady, Prague, January 25, 2020.

has found that the Gospel of the resurrection of Jesus Christ sheds a light of hope on sometimes entirely human efforts to improve the quality of human life and to build a more just society, even if they may not be carried out in explicitly Christian terms. Christians owe all such efforts solidarity, support and reassurance, summed up in the succinct slogan that Pokorný embraced in his last years and applied exactly to these efforts, namely “it makes sense.” The rationale that “it makes sense” may not be immediately obvious to secular activists, but for Pokorný, the Christians’ solidarity with them must be all the greater. And only at the appropriate time and after explicit questioning should it also be made clear what the deepest – spiritual – sources of this slogan really are. It was a very “appropriate” time indeed when we had a teacher and friend who explained to us the sources and structure of our own hope.

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