

In Search of Faith, Part 2: Charter 77 and the Return to Spiritual Values in the Czech Republic

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When Czechoslovakia was formally divided into two separate republics on 1 January 1993, the momentous gesture of separation occurred, ironically, exactly 16 years after another key event, whose purpose had been one of reconciliation and agreement. The release of *Charter 77* came as a reward for the efforts of isolated but determined dissidents who had kept the cause of human rights alive since the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968. Even when Czech dissident activities were at their height in the 1980s the declaration was destined to gain no more than 1000 signatures; but from the vantage-point of today, when attitudes to politics, ethics and religious belief have become bitterly polarised, it is worth recalling the unity of beliefs and values which *Charter 77* embodied, as well as the process of mutual discovery heralded by its appearance.

The 5000-word document, launched on 1 January 1977 for the start of Political Prisoners' Year, focused on discrimination in the areas of education, public expression of opinion, access to information and religious conviction. It also called on Czechoslovakia's communist government to honour its human rights pledges under the 1968 international covenants of the United Nations, which had been reaffirmed in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and entered in the country's Register of Laws the following year.

The human rights and freedoms underwritten by these Covenants constitute features of civilised life for which many progressive movements have striven throughout history, and whose codification would greatly assist humane developments in our society ... Responsibility for the maintenance of civil rights in our country naturally devolves in the first place on the political and state authorities. Yet not only on them: everyone bears his or her share of responsibility for the conditions that prevail, and accordingly also for the observance of legally enshrined agreements binding upon all individuals, as well as upon governments.

It is this sense of co-responsibility, our belief in the importance of its conscious public acceptance and the general need to give it new and more effective expression, that led us to the idea of creating Charter 77, whose inception we today publicly announce.¹

The Declaration stressed that the Charter 77 movement was not an organisation with formal rules and members, and was not intended to form the basis for a political opposition. Rather, it was a 'loose, informal and open association of people of

various shades of opinion, faiths and professions, united by the will to strive individually and collectively for the respecting of civil and human rights'. It would embrace everyone who agreed with its ideas and participated in its work.

Like many similar citizen initiatives in various countries West and East, it seeks to promote the general public interest. It does not aim to set out its own platform of political or social reform or change, but within its own field of impact to conduct a constructive dialogue with the political and state authorities, particularly by drawing attention to individual cases where human and civil rights are violated; to document such grievances and suggest remedies; to make proposals of a more general character calculated to reinforce such rights and the machinery for protecting them; to act as intermediary in situations of conflict which may lead to violation of rights, and so forth.²

Patočka's Final Testimony

If *Charter 77* could be said to have reflected an overall agreed standpoint, its articulation was generally attributed to the humanistic philosophy of Jan Patočka, who was to serve alongside Václav Havel and Jiří Hajek as its first public spokesman. Sacked from his Charles University post after the 1948 communist coup, Patočka had enjoyed only a brief reinstatement at the time of the Prague Spring 20 years later. However, he still passed much of his time meeting students and academics at Prague cafes, and remained an object of reverence among younger Czech intellectuals.

In his voluminous writings, long since banned by Czechoslovakia's communist rulers, Patočka saw the origins of European spirituality in the dual streams of Greek Platonic philosophy and Judaic-Christian teaching. In Patočka's view the former had bequeathed key reflections about politics, law and civil society while the latter had created concepts of dignity, charity, truth and love. These two traditions had become separated in European civilisation with disastrous consequences and needed to be reintegrated if technologically advanced modern society was to be capable of ensuring stability and genuine human freedom.

By the mid-1970s, intellectuals all over Eastern Europe had returned to the philosophers of ancient Greece in an effort to explain from the beginning the dilemmas and injustices of communist rule. The Hellenic concepts of state and citizen, in particular, were widely thought to have contemporary importance, as a kind of prelude to the concepts elaborated in Christian anthropology. Drawing on these ideas, Patočka had resurrected the idea of natural law, as the only viable and philosophical foundation for practical humanitarian commitment. Although baptised a Catholic and deeply versed in western Christian traditions, he had long since ceased, like most Czech intellectuals, to practise any religion. Later in his life, however, like Tomáš Masaryk before him, he gave increasing prominence to religious ideas, and began to look again to Christianity as the inner core of western culture.³ Miloslava Holubová, an art historian who survived a prison sentence in the 1950s, remembers that while her friend was cautious towards the claims of the Catholic Church he nevertheless became increasingly sympathetic to Christianity itself. 'It is often forgotten that while Patočka had influenced noncommunist students and intellectuals, he had also taught the reform communists who brought him back to prominence how to reflect and ponder the great philosophers,' Holubová recalls. 'In this way he had helped to prepare a wide cross-section of the generation of 1968. That was why Patočka was seen as such a grave threat.'

Ironically, the anger of the communist regime was to give Patočka's influence a heroic quality. It was clear from the beginning that as police pressure mounted the frail 69-year-old must relinquish his position as Charter spokesman or risk illness and death. Patočka's final philosophical essays, including those elaborating the purpose and sense of the *Charter* itself, were simply and modestly written, suggesting the composure of one who already knew that his life's endeavours were nearing their end. On 13 March, less than three months after the release of *Charter 77*, the celebrated philosopher succumbed to a heart attack following an 11-hour police interrogation. The unveiling of the *Charter* had been his final protest.

Patočka's contribution to what he himself had dubbed 'the solidarity of the shocked' was already assured. Describing the aims of *Charter 77*, he insisted that its signatories were not questioning legitimate state prerogatives, nor were they pursuing special interests or claiming to speak as the 'conscience of society'. Rather, the protest was guided by a conviction that morality and state power should be linked through adherence to law and respect for Czechoslovakia's international obligations.⁴

Looking back today, Miloslava Holubová thinks the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect preeminent in Patočka's thought was vital to the effectiveness of the dissidents' moral claims. 'Resistance without hatred constituted the very spirit of *Charter 77*,' the historian recalls. 'Some complained about the fact that Catholics, ex-communists and others were cooperating together. But the idea of mutual forgiveness and coexistence, and of unity behind shared ethnical priorities, was to be vindicated by later events.'

It was also to be an inescapable requirement for effective dissent. Although only 247 people signed *Charter 77* at the time of its release, the movement's active sympathisers were to prove far more numerous, extending the importance of *Charter 77* as a testimony of values and principles far beyond its narrow circle of active promoters. Although interrogations and arrests began within a week of its unofficial publication, its initiators had succeeded in issuing more than a dozen written public statements by the end of 1977.

The Meeting Point

After Patočka's death, it was decided that each set of three Charter spokesmen should comprise a former Marxist, a 'representative of independent culture', and a Catholic or Protestant Christian. This ensured that contrasting viewpoints were equally represented, turning *Charter 77*, in the words of the Catholic dissident Dana Němcová, into something akin to a school of democracy. 'It was thanks to the Charter,' recalls Němcová,

that we began to encounter old friends from the 1960s whom we already knew as people of integrity, devoted to the pursuit of truth. All statements had to be approved by representatives of the different streams, so they had to reflect shared purposes rather than particular interests. Resisting the communist hegemony and defending the authentic rights of all was to be a priority common to Marxists, Christians and non-Christians alike.

Among the Marxists who signed the document, several were well known as veterans from the reform communist generation of the early 1960s, such as the philosopher Milan Machovec and Erika Kadlecová, minister for religious affairs during the Prague Spring. Yet there were younger men as well, such as the journalist Jiří Dienstbier and the political scientist Miroslav Kusý. If these found an elder

statesman in the former foreign minister Jiří Hajek, Charter 77's founder-spokesman, their acknowledged leader in meetings and discussions was Zdeněk Mlynář, who had played a key role as a theorist of reform communist ideas in the 1960s. Among the exponents of 'independent culture', the leading position was held by the playwright Václav Havel, whose *samizdat* essays, based on themes and observations culled from his own 'philosophy of life', would contribute much to the conceptual framework of Chartist thinking from the late 1970s onwards.

Charter 77 had made its appearance at a time when public resignation and apathy were at their height as regime-enforced 'normalisation' seemed to be gaining a measure of international acceptance. Against this background Marxists and humanists could concur immediately on the necessity for a reliable legal order and for an atmosphere free of distortions. This latter requirement inevitably carried weighty political implications, graphically described by the reform communist Miroslav Kušý: 'Consistently calling things by their proper names means pulling away the entire ideological facade of real socialism, taking down the scenery and then removing the masks in this pantomime about the achievement of paradise on Earth.'⁵

Charter 77 could also count Christian believers among its active supporters, several of whom had already played noteworthy roles in promoting dialogue and encounter with secular and ex-Marxist dissidents. One Catholic signatory, Václav Benda, was from a predominantly agnostic family with social-democratic ties, and had come to Catholicism as a student after experimenting with Marxist and Protestant ideas. He had got to know a wide range of independent-minded people while attending Milan Machovec's philosophy seminar at Charles University in the late 1960s, and had come to prominence as a leader of the 'Nezávislé studencké organizace' (Independent Students' Organisation) in 1968. He coordinated the work of unofficial church groups, and would later argue that peaceful resistance required the creation of alternative forms of organisation alongside the official structures of the state.⁶ Jiří Lederer, a journalist who was jailed for three years in October 1977 for smuggling manuscripts abroad, thinks that the Christian contribution to *Charter 77* was substantially underestimated from the start. Not only were the Charter's overall aims, however unconsciously, in full accordance with Christian values, Lederer argues, but Christian supporters were able to do a lot for its public moral image, and also helped to bridge the gap between the present day and a national past which had been largely eradicated.⁷ In its section on religious freedom *Charter 77* invoked Article 18 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, listing the 'constant threat of refusal' and actual withdrawal of state permits from outspoken priests as one of several actions violating recognised rights. Among the 12 Catholic priests and 15 Protestant pastors who signed the document, several had already found themselves in this category. Most, with the exception of the Catholic theologian Fr Josef Zvěřina, were not top-level thinkers and would owe their prominence to their courage and dedication rather than to innovative intellectual ideas.

By uniting people of such varied political and ideological backgrounds in a common struggle for rights and principles, the Charter project had achieved something remarkable and unexpected. For all its uniqueness, however, Eva Kantůrková, a former communist party activist who signed the *Charter* in March 1977 after its first wave of signatories had been sacked, detained and interrogated, thinks historical parallels can be drawn. The friends and confidants who met regularly under the shadow of repression to share ideas and convictions had something in common with the earliest Christian communities, Kantůrková believes. They could also look for precedents to a long and complex Czech tradition, stretching from Jan Amos

Komenský and the Czech Brethren in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the Enlightenment and Romantic-era circles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth, who had sought to maintain national identity and culture at a time when open political activities were impossible.

Charter 77 was more than a mere discussion club, and those engaged saw different functions and purposes in it. Whereas ex-communists tended to regard it as being predominantly a political forum, others saw it more as Patočka had done, believing that there were certain things one had to struggle for, and that it was always worthwhile taking action against prejudice. But everyone contributed something very important from their own attitudes and orientations in the search for a consensus. We were joined together by the feeling that we could rely on each other. And we were all equally eager to defend every victim, even when the victims in question presented viewpoints very different from our own. This kind of mutual solidarity gave Charter 77 its spirit.⁸

In Search of Spiritual Assurances

It soon became clear, however, that the Charter spirit extended further than this. It was already providing the impetus for significant mutual influences, among which some of the most dynamic were occurring between secular and religious signatories.

Although the humanist playwright Václav Havel had been baptised and confirmed by his lapsed Catholic parents, he had long since relinquished any claim to be a practising Christian. As with Patočka, however, his experiences in opposition reawakened long-dormant spiritual impulses. Besides being steeped in Patočka's ideas and interpretations through a long friendship, Havel had also begun attending the seminars run by Radim Palouš at the Křesťanská Akademia (Christian Academy), and invited participants regularly to his family's north Bohemian country house. 'He would sit listening to the lectures very quietly, saying little,' remembers a participating Catholic priest, Tomáš Halík. 'I think these sessions exerted an influence on his thinking, and that his own ideas about the priority of moral values over political and economic calculations were conceived largely under the impact of this philosophical circle.'

During his years in prison after 1979, Havel ensured that his brother Ivan kept him up to date with the Christian Academy. Jan Sokol, Patočka's son-in-law, who was denied a school education in the postwar period because of his family's Catholic links, but who later produced the first Czech translation of Teilhard de Chardin, remembers delivering a lecture on the Jewish 'philosopher of dialogue' Emanuel Levinas, during which Ivan Havel took copious notes. Havel made references to Levinas in his prison letters.⁹

The playwright's prison experience was also influenced by two cellmates, the Dominican priest Fr Dominik Duka and the Jesuit Fr František Lízna, with whom he spent many hours pondering Christian beliefs. Another friend and confidant, Fr Václav Malý thinks that it was largely thanks to these discussions that Havel, while unable to accept the Christian faith in full, nevertheless came to admire the figure of Jesus Christ as a real historical personality. While he would never overcome his doubts sufficiently to declare a belief in God, Malý reasons, he became increasingly aware of the moral and cultural importance of Christianity. In this way, his ethical deductions and spiritual consciousness brought him close to the Church.

Havel's religious quest, though intensely personal, could be seen as quintessen-

tially Czech, evincing a combination of scepticism and spirituality which has found numerous echoes in national history. By the mid-1970s, however, a revival of more conventional religious impulses was under way in Czechoslovakia, among students and young intellectuals in the larger cities.¹⁰ Against this background, there were many who gained their first contact with Christianity through Charter 77, and for whom the experience of dissent opened a path to deeper conversion.

Born in 1947, Petruška Šustrová was brought up a 'normal communist party child' by her unmarried activist mother, enthusiastically enlisting in the Pioneers Youth Movement like other Czech teenagers. In 1968 she enrolled at Charles University's Philosophy Faculty to study Czech history. After giving birth to a child in her first year, however, Šustrová admits that she was 'more interested in politics than academic theories'. She joined the 'Hnutí revoluční mládeže' (Union of Revolutionary Youth) and became prominent in extreme-left circles of the Prague Spring student movement. Following the August Warsaw Pact invasion, her mother resigned from the party in protest. Šustrová herself was shadowed and harassed by the secret police, and in November 1969 she was finally arrested and charged with belonging to a 'Trotskyite organisation'. The Union of Revolutionary Youth had been the first opposition group to go underground after the invasion, with a programme pledging to 'join forces with working people' in neighbouring East European states and to reject the 'myth of legality' as a 'tool of bureaucracy'. Its leader, Petr Uhl, was jailed for four years at the same time.

Šustrová denies having felt any strong ideological motivation. Although she despatched letters and documents about the situation to Marcuse and other western 'New Left' idols, her main reason for involvement had been a simple desire to 'stop the Russian tanks'. After her release in 1971 she was allowed a job at the local post office, but in her spare time she teamed up with former Marxist Prague Spring friends to help the families of political prisoners. Through them she also began for the first time in her life to encounter people from Christian milieux.

The first contacts took place in the flat of the Němec family in central Prague, where she came for meetings alongside leading ex-communists like Zdeněk Mlynář and Pavel Kohout. What she found there was destined, over time, to affect her profoundly.

Since childhood, I had seen the Christian faith as something from past ages, and had thought the churches I saw in the street were just architectural monuments. It amazed me that normal, intelligent adults could actually admit to believing in God. But then I began to notice something unusual about these people. For one thing, their world seemed simpler, and their worldview a lot less complex. It appeared that the love they had inside them was helping them to understand things, where non-believers saw nothing but chaos and stupidity.

Šustrová's developing spiritual awareness was helped by books, particularly the *samizdat* edition of Martin Buber's *Ich und Du* (*I and Thou*), but she was also lucky to find a sympathetic guide in Dana Němcová. Despite having deep personal problems of her own, Šustrová remembers, her friend never spoke openly about them. 'I sensed something uniquely strong in her,' she explains,

as if her only real partner was God. She lived and worked to help others – that was her function. And it was only through God that she could come to

terms with her hardships and somehow find an answer. At one time, I'd have regarded such attitudes as foolish. But when I finally understood them, everything seemed to become clearer.

Another important influence during Šustrová's quest was the banned priest Fr Václav Malý. By the time they both signed *Charter 77* Šustrová herself had four children and was Malý's senior by several years; but it was with him that she first began to read the Bible and to discuss God and the church as well as politics and contemporary issues. In 1978 they both became cofounders of a Charter 77 offshoot, 'Výbor na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných' (the Committee for the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS)). 'He was always kind and ready to listen, and he understood very well all the doubts and anxieties from which we all suffered,' Šustrová recalls. 'That was why Malý had such a big influence on many people.'

Of course, while religious experiences like this were common, they represented individual cases only, and could not be regarded as exemplifying any general tendency among former communists. Petruška Šustrová spent a long time pondering her own conversion. Although it seemed to come naturally for some friends and colleagues, what she found hardest to accept was the idea that God really existed.

I had realised how important metaphysical elements were for my thinking and feeling, in moments of happiness and expectation as much as in sadness and loneliness. But my last moment of understanding came when I discovered I could actually speak with God myself. Once I finally realised that I *did* believe in Him, baptism as a Christian seemed the obvious step.

Although still in close touch with Fr Václav Malý, she chose another *Charter 77* signatory, the Jesuit Fr František Lízna, as her godfather. Her own parish priest refused to accept her on the grounds that her marriage was a civil one only, but after a three-year search she found another who believed that baptism could not be refused and agreed to receive her into the Catholic Church.

Defining the Charter Spirit

Inevitably, stories like Šustrová's encountered scepticism in some quarters. Was it not probable that some self-proclaimed converts would give their newfound Christian convictions an ideological colouring, seeking the same certainty in religious faith that they had once found in the intolerant embrace of the party? Was it not also likely that the religious impulses of some converts would be merely diverted towards opposition activities, and deprived of the space and means to acquire deeper spiritual roots? Even if these doubts were valid, a larger underlying question still remained open: was the Charter, in the end, no more than a tactical alliance for those concerned to oppose communist injustices, or did the varied backgrounds of its initiators also signify some deeper philosophical rapprochement?

When the question was posed this way, it often gave rise to suspicion. Fr Dominik Duka, the Dominican priest jailed with Václav Havel at the end of the 1970s, believes the possibilities of cooperation through Charter 77 were the consequence of two earlier phases when people of different outlooks had been exposed to each other: the Stalinist era of the early 1950s when Christians, communists and others found themselves together in the camps and prisons; and the short-lived Prague Spring, when the various initiative groups had shared a common reformist platform. 'For many Christians, though,' points out Duka,

the presence of communists in the Charter remained a problem, which could not be entirely resolved until both sides had more experience of working and suffering together. For one thing, the communists expelled from the party tended to be tightly disciplined. For another, some were unconvinced that, once they spotted their chance, the ex-communists would not just use the Charter as an instrument for their own return to power.

The question of a deeper rapprochement, however, was mused over not only by Christians and humanists, but by Charter 77's Marxist signatories too. Zdeněk Mlynář, the acknowledged leader of the ex-communist side in Charter discussions, was stripped of his Czechoslovak citizenship, along with Pavel Kohout, while making a brief visit to Vienna. He believed that, as a focus for opposition unity, the Charter 77 movement was 'the most radical event since 1968'. In response, Czechoslovakia's secret police, the StB, were trying hard to create divisions, Mlynář stressed. They had ridiculed the idea that Christians and ex-communists could work together at all. They had also encouraged the fear that ex-communist Charter signatories would merely use their non-Marxist interlocutors as temporary allies of convenience, before turning their backs on them, just as their precursors had done in 1948.¹¹ Yet in the run-up to the document's release, Mlynář conceded that the question of what its signatories had in common was indeed a valid one. Without a convincing answer, *Charter 77* could hardly be expected to have an impact.

The ex-communist found his own answer, at first, in the language of rights and freedoms. The release of *Charter 77* had to be seen 'mainly as a political fact', Mlynář admitted. But in the changed situation of 1977, it also had an importance going far beyond tactical calculations. After the 1968 invasion, people like himself had refused to betray their 'reformist Marxist ideology'. For them too, signing *Charter 77* was the natural consequence of their stand against totalitarian power. Mlynář wrote:

The ex-communists of Charter 77 no longer represent the ideological avant-garde and Moscow, and are now being persecuted like others. Our signatures mean that, by this political act, we are going beyond our experiences of 1968, and seeking a genuine dialogue according to pluralistic rules and democratic principles. The communists signing *Charter 77* have become ex-communists – this makes their stand more trustworthy. While they belonged to the ruling elite, they could pursue reforms from above. Today, they are conscious that true reforms can be achieved only from below.¹²

Charter 77, Mlynář insisted, had created an atmosphere of 'real tolerance', and an opportunity 'to live democratically within a framework of contrasting viewpoints'. However, today's ex-communists also knew from experience that it was necessary to struggle beyond that too, for a system of deeper values capable of sustaining a democratic society and state of law.

The relationship between Marxists and Christian humanists will continue to play a crucial role, since both groups are clearly dealing with non-political problems too, and both regard politics as a means of struggling for respect for the inner meaning and values of human life. There is no question that the Marxist orientation has failed, despite discussions about the authentic Marx. Communist politicians have discredited it as a value-

based orientation, highlighting a vacuum of values and the falseness of official social structures. Indeed, in all spheres of life under communism, from politics to culture, each person now faces three choices: to become emptiness itself; to become a cynic; or to struggle against both of these options by looking for values outside the officially proposed path.¹³

Towards a Deeper Consensus

If this common search for values had created an opening for some form of mutual philosophical recognition between Marxists, Christians and humanists, its practical implications were another matter. Basic political convictions continued to contrast sharply. They had to be treated warily when it came to shaping common statements and initiatives. And this, as the *Charter 77* declaration had noted, effectively discounted the Charter as the basis for a political opposition.

Yet the Charter had also established that, in circumstances of extreme pressure, Marxists, Christians and humanists were capable of uniting behind certain values and objectives, whose credibility depended in turn on the readiness to set aside individual interests and priorities. This at least provided the stimulus for more intimate discussions and reflections; and in these, the underlying readiness for a deeper consensus was often apparent – even though sometimes accompanied by an awareness that this was a negative form of solidarity, formed in opposition to communist abuses, and that the resulting ties of friendship and common purpose were likely to prove temporary.¹⁴ ‘If Charter 77 acquired political significance, this was only because of the totalitarian regime,’ points out Václav Benda, who was to lead a reborn Czech Christian Democratic Party after the 1989 overthrow of communist rule.

We all respected each other. But we had to accept certain limits and avoid the temptation to transgress them. If the Charter had been turned into a political organisation, this would have destroyed its very *raison d’être* – as a forum for civic solidarity, and for defending human rights which were respected by everyone, whatever their political and ideological stand-points.

Where genuine dialogue occurred, Benda thinks, the main barriers were posed by difference of temperament and mentality, rather than of philosophical or ideological conviction. Benda himself could work much better with the ‘Troskyite revolutionary’ Petr Uhl, a lifelong atheist, than with some politically like-minded fellow-Christians. Uhl’s wife, Anna Šabatová, was herself a devout Catholic, but Uhl was never known to have raised objections to her regular religious observances. Meanwhile the ex-communist Zdeněk Mlynář had spoken apprehensively of Uhl’s Union of Revolutionary Youth, describing it as a ‘small minority group, very united ideologically and capable of vigorous sacrifices and firm action’, and warning that its involvement in Charter 77 would pose serious problems given its members’ rejection of parliamentary democracy and contempt for other opposition groups.¹⁵ Petruška Šustrová, Uhl’s one-time comrade-in-arms, who was to serve as deputy interior minister after the return of democracy, agrees that individual attitudes constituted the key factor. In her own case, religious belief and human rights activism both sprang from closely related emotions.

The communist regime had few political functionaries with any sense of tolerance. So the absolute priority in Charter 77, whose documents neces-

sitated consensus, was simple mutual understanding. That was why the Charter could aim only at defending human rights and legality: where politics were concerned, we were all entitled to our own views and opinions. For myself, the imperative of human rights seemed to be enshrined in the Ten Commandments. But through my involvement in the Charter, I also came to understand what the political path meant, and to realise that the purpose of politics must always be to safeguard and consolidate human rights, while also respecting and observing the autonomous sphere occupied by religion and personal belief.

Marie Rút Kříšková, a literary historian, had been converted to Catholicism in 1974 after a rigidly atheist school upbringing, and had been sent to work as a forestry labourer after being dismissed from her expert's post at Prague's Czech Central Gallery. She signed the *Charter* in mid-January 1977 with the help of her former philosophy faculty supervisor, Professor Václav Černý, after being alerted to its existence by the hostile official media campaign. Kříšková announced her decision to sign *Charter 77* in letters to Czech Radio and *Rudé Právo*. She accused the Czechoslovak regime of violating human rights, and said she intended to support both Černý and Patočka against any attempt to discredit them. She also revealed that she had become a religious believer.¹⁶ During the first of many subsequent StB interrogations, she was told her letters would never be known about publicly: they had been sent unopened to the Interior Ministry by the radio and newspaper editors.

For her own part, Kříšková believes the Charter initiated a 'deep, continuing dialogue'. Its three spokesmen, with their contrasting backgrounds, had to reach agreement on all public statements and declarations, of which there were to be 572 under communist rule. When she served as a Charter 77 spokesman herself in 1983–4, Kříšková's partners were Anna Marvanová, a former communist party journalist, and Jan Kozlík, an electrical fitter and one-time theology student. If agreement proved difficult, previous spokesmen were summoned, often in hazardous conditions, to give help and advice, as well as 'shouldering particular tasks and sharing every responsibility', as the *Charter* had specified.

Besides our awareness that communism no longer offered any perspective for the future, and besides our shared conviction as to the universal validity of human rights, we were also united by the recognition that we had to take care of each other, keeping an exact record of all detentions, interrogations and acts of harassment. This helps explain why, in the end, there were no differences between Christians, Marxists and humanists. Of course, some kept their Marxist worldview, while others asserted their religious beliefs. But we also knew that if we failed to respect each other, we would never fulfil our task of helping others.

To achieve this, it was necessary to struggle with stereotypes and prejudices instilled over two generations, Kříšková adds – such as that religious believers were 'second-class' people, or that Marxists and communists were always 'dishonest and hungry for power'.

Reflecting on the same dilemma, Zdeněk Mlynář insisted that ex-communists were already treating Christian believers as equal partners, seeing their faith as a serious proposition capable of making its own contribution. In his own case, that did not extend to identifying with the Church itself. Several Charter 77 documents, Mlynář explained, had drawn a necessary distinction between supporting the 'Christian ori-

entation in values' and identifying with real-life religious associations which had often compromised their principles under pressure from the system.¹⁷ What mattered now, however, was not the old archaic struggle between faiths and worldviews, but 'mutual openness to a demystified reality' and to the concrete hardships and injustices facing Czechoslovakia's 15 million inhabitants. At its best, the milieu of ex-communists and Christians in Charter 77 could become a kind of communal workshop – not for preparing a political programme, but for working out a system of values which would enable people to live in a dignified, humane way under the adverse conditions of communist rule. 'The human being will be rescued only when subordinated to higher values', the ex-communist Mlynář acknowledged, 'values which he can admire, but which are also above him in a way enabling the categories of good and evil to become the basic starting-point for his own perceptions.'¹⁸

A fitting Christian response to Mlynář's gesture was provided by Ivan Medek, a Catholic journalist at that time sharing his enforced exile in Vienna. Whatever Charter 77's ultimate achievement, Medek argued, it should be recognised that the past silence in the face of human rights violations had now been broken. In its place, a mirror was being held up to both the communist regime and Czechoslovak society, a mirror fashioned by people of various opinions, beliefs and worldviews.

Asked how Christians can work together with ex-communists, we can offer three answers. First, we can cooperate with everyone who defends human rights and treats this as a human duty. Second, we cannot, as Christians, forget that people themselves can change. And third, most importantly, we cannot underestimate the extent of guilt also faced by Christians for today's situation. Now is the time to draw conclusions for the future from this fact.¹⁹

Religion and the Primacy of Truth

How far such sentiments had been influenced by the work of Charter 77's patron and founder-spokesman, Jan Patočka, was open to question, but reflections on the themes of tolerance and forgiveness, mutual respect and shared ethical priorities had sooner or later to return for inspiration to the work of the late Czech philosopher.

Patočka's friend Miloslava Holubová believes that the religious rediscovery which marked his final years could not be explained purely on the basis of Patočka's inner philosophical deductions. It was also the natural outcome of a life of painstaking study and reflection. Patočka was deeply versed in Christian writers from Augustine to Aquinas. He had also studied the works of contemporary figures ranging from Simone Weil and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Karl Rahner and Yves Congar. As early as the 1950s, Holubová recalls, the philosopher had acknowledged that no other personality in history could claim such permanent validity as Jesus Christ, and that the cultural formation of all western countries remained, whether recognised or not, avowedly Christian. Over the subsequent 20 years, this realisation had deepened and strengthened.

Unlike his Moravian-born teacher Edmund Husserl, who had embraced the Catholic faith at the end of his life, Patočka had rarely spoken about his own personal convictions, Holubová points out. These were best described as 'spiritual, transcendental thinking which takes God into account', rather than in purely religious categories. His phenomenology had exerted a strong philosophical influence on the Prague intellectuals who gathered around him. It taught that preexisting phenomena

must be accepted as 'given', and that objective values exist – values which human beings must strive to serve, however much their views and notions may diverge. This, in turn, meant repudiating Marxism's radical interpretation of history as a process governed by some universal, all-encompassing logic whose 'iron laws of necessity', unlocked by a gnostic key, had invalidated objective truths and values and justified so much communist-imposed suffering. On the contrary, Patočka reiterated, people were themselves actors and participants in history. If meanings were given to history, they were given only in certain ways and at certain times by human actions and thoughts. This imposed a 'responsibility for history' on everyone, however insignificant his or her efforts might seem. Despite everything, the future remained open. Individual deeds of commitment and self sacrifice always held the potential to make a great difference.

In reaching this understanding Patočka's notion of the relationship between Greek, Judaic and Christian philosophy was of pivotal importance. Christianity had developed around the conviction that Man is innately sinful but also harbours within him an inherent capacity for goodness; and out of this perception had emerged the 'concern for the spirit' which served as the motor for Europe's cultural development. 'This concern for the spirit means that the truth is not given to us once and for all,' Patočka wrote in his *Kacířské eseje o filozofii dějin (Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History)*. 'Nor does the truth mean understanding and accepting certain information. The truth continues throughout one's life, deepening the process of self-control and the practice of thinking and living.'²⁰ If the search for a common good had proved difficult, this was only to be expected. The same dilemmas had underpinned the thinking of philosophers throughout history, and were continually manifesting themselves in the contemporary conditions of both East and West. The essential problem confronting humanity was not conflict between rational liberalism and communist totalitarianism, since both, for all their differences, concurred in their refusal to acknowledge anything outside objective, concrete categories, and had jointly failed to find 'the right place for the human person' in their visions of the world.²¹

Patočka's pupil the Catholic philosopher Radim Palouš, who was appointed rector of Charles University in 1990, 12 years after being dismissed from his teaching post for signing *Charter 77*, thinks Patočka's notion of personal responsibility owes much to Husserl, as well as to his one-time fellow-student at Freiburg, Martin Heidegger, but that in general his philosophy conforms to an older Czech philosophical tradition, which links the Catholic theologian Bernard Bolzano and the Lutheran historian František Palacký in the nineteenth century with Tomáš Masaryk and Emmanuel Rádl in the twentieth. The common factor is concern for the primacy of truth, the point at which all genuine philosophies, however mutually antagonistic, can ultimately find common ground. In Patočka's hands, the theme of truth had yet to acquire the comprehensiveness of a philosophical system. But it had, for the time being, lent overwhelming authority to the shared humanitarian postulates of *Charter 77*.

To prove credible, the Charter had needed integrating personalities, ideas and experiences. Among the personalities, Jan Patočka had made the most significant contribution, not only by virtue of the universal traditions richly represented in his thinking, but also as a man who had personally testified to the authenticity of what he said and wrote. As integrating ideas, notions of truth and service had guaranteed *Charter 77*'s continuity with the national movements of Czech history, while also providing an agreed starting-point for future aims and priorities. Meanwhile, the inte-

grating experiences had been created by a shared exposure to hardships and sufferings, as well as by the sense of trust and mutual dependency generated between one-time rivals and opponents.

However scattered and isolated its active supporters might be, Charter 77 had offered, like KOR and its collaborators in Poland, a model less of active organised resistance than of constructive moral thinking, which contained within it the seeds of a future alternative system.

Notes and References

- ¹ From *Charter 77*. Full text in John Keane (ed.), *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (Hutchinson, London, 1985), pp. 217–21.
- ² *ibid.*, pp. 220–1.
- ³ See E. Kozak (ed.), *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Klaus Nellen, Jiří Němec and Ilja Šrubar (eds), *Jan Patočka: Die Bewegung der menschlichen Existenz* (Klett-Cotta Verlag, Stuttgart, 1991).
- ⁴ Jan Patočka, 'La Charte 77: ce qu'elle est et ce qu'elle n'est pas', *Cahiers de l'Est*, nos 9–10 (1977), p. 167. The historian Vilém Prečan, who was unable to sign *Charter 77* after going abroad, saw a connection between contemporary dissident motives and ideals associated with Masaryk: the ideals of work and progress through small daily deeds; of civic opposition to state errors and misdeeds; and of adherence to moral truths and the values of national culture. The connection was most evident, Prečan noted, in the essential sphere of culture. 'In Czechoslovakia, intellectuals and others are treated worse than notorious thieves and violent criminals in other countries ... But while appeasement is a terrible thing in politics, in culture it means death – the very negation of culture's existence ... Living culture means also, and above all, men of culture, who cannot exist without civil rights and the freedom to create. Their duty is to defend freedom wherever it is threatened, and incessantly to redefine and widen its limits.' See *Index on Censorship*, vol. 4, no. 4 (Winter 1975).
- ⁵ Quoted in Raymond Taras, *The Road to Disillusion: From Critical Marxism to Post-communism in Eastern Europe* (M. E. Sharpe, New York, 1992), p. 127.
- ⁶ Benda's essay *Paralelní Polis* (*The Parallel Polis*) was written in May 1978 and circulated in *samizdat* in Czechoslovakia before being published in London by the *Palach Press Bulletin* in 1979. See also Václav Benda, 'Catholicism and Politics' in Keane, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–24; and *A Besieged Culture: Czechoslovakia Ten Years after Helsinki* (Charta 77 Foundation, Stockholm, 1985), pp. 62–9.
- ⁷ Jiří Lederer, 'Charta 77 a křesťane', *Studie*, vol. 6, no. 84 (1982), pp. 581–6. Several leading signatories came from large, well-known Prague Catholic families, including Jiří Kaplan, Jaroslav Šabata and Václav Frei. Jiří Němec and his wife Dana Němcová insisted on removing their children's names after they had followed their lead in signing, although several later signed again after their parents were arrested. Radim Palouš' son Martin Paloš, a computer programmer, served as a Charter spokesman in 1986 and became Czechoslovakia's deputy foreign minister in 1990.
- ⁸ For a fuller account of Kantůrková's personal background and evolution, see Jonathan Luxmoore and Jolanta Babiuch, 'The Road to Damascus: three Eastern European intellectuals on the dilemmas of faith and ideology', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 21, nos 3 and 4 (1993), pp. 328–35.
- ⁹ See Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga* (A. Knopf, New York, 1988).
- ¹⁰ By the end of the 1970s only a quarter of Catholic parishes in Bohemia and Moravia had priests, and the total number of priests in Czechoslovakia had fallen by half to 3300. However, around 350 banned or unofficially ordained priests were also ministering secretly, including 30 in Prague alone, assisted by members of religious orders like the Salesians and Dominicans, and an 'underground' Oasis youth movement numbering up to 20,000. In a 1971 state-sponsored survey, 32 per cent of young people aged 18–24, 38 per

cent of professional employees and 57 per cent of industrial workers claimed to be religious believers, although no clarification was given of the survey's methods and categories. Later research by the Institute of Scientific Atheism in Brno claimed the number of 'religious people' in the Czech and Slovak republics had fallen from 80 per cent in 1946 to 30 per cent in 1980, with belief in God now professed by only 19 per cent of Czechs and 38 per cent of Slovaks: *Ateizmus*, no. 1, pp. 7–13; and *Statistická Ročenka ČSSR* (1982), pp. 93–4. However, the *World Christian Encyclopedia* of 1982, citing independent research, estimated the total proportion of baptised Christians at around two-thirds of the Czechoslovak population. It also put the decline of religious attitudes between 1970 and 1980 at just 1.2 per cent and the number of waverers and potential converts at 5.3 million adults and 1.7 million children.

¹¹ Zdeněk Mlynář, 'Exkomunisté a křesťané v Chartě 77', *Studie*, vol. 6, no. 60 (1978), pp. 420–1.

¹² *loc. cit.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 423.

¹⁴ This point was pondered by Václav Havel. 'I know from thousands of personal experiences how the mere circumstance of having signed *Charter 77* has immediately created a deeper and more open relationship, and evoked sudden and powerful feelings of genuine community among people who were all but strangers before. It is as though the mere awareness and acceptance of a common task and shared experience were enough to transform people and the climate of their lives ... Perhaps all this is only the consequence of a common threat. Perhaps the moment the threat ends or eases, the mood it helped create will dissipate as well ... Yet even if that were so, it would change nothing in the question I have posed.' Václav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless', in Keane, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹⁵ Mlynář, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹⁶ In her open letter dated 13 January 1977 Křīšková explained her religious faith: 'I have begun to understand more deeply the meaning and price of my conversion ... Before, it was a hopeless desert of empty life, of life without God and without an aim, a life whose only foundation was my search for the truth.' Quoted in Patrick Michel, *Politics and Religion in Eastern Europe* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991), p. 220.

¹⁷ Mlynář, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 425.

¹⁹ Ivan Medek, 'Křesťané a exkomunisté nejen v Chartě 77', *Studie*, vol. 2, no. 62 (1979), p. 147.

²⁰ Jan Patočka, *Kacířské eseje o filozofii dejin* (Aletheia, Warsaw, 1988), p. 56. See also Jonathan Luxmoore and Jolanta Babiuch, 'Truth prevails: the Catholic contribution to Czech thought and culture', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1992), pp. 113–17.

²¹ Patočka, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

Any quotation without a referenced footnote comes from personal conversation with the authors.

Throughout this article, 'Charter 77' is used when the movement of that name is referred to; '*Charter 77*' means the document itself.