

Božena Komárková: Toward an Existential Christian Philosophy of Human Rights
Lilly Foundation Research Conference on Human Rights and Christianity
Samford University, November 14, 2004
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Introductory Remarks, Part 1: Philosophical indicators

Božena Komárková was an eminent advocate of human rights whose works are well-known in her homeland, but whose insights remain relatively unfamiliar outside of the Czech Republic. Thus, I am honored to have an opportunity to introduce you to this scholar who defended a dissertation entitled “The Community of Plato and Augustine: The Origin and Significance of Human Rights” just three years after being released from a Nazi concentration camp and just a few days before the Communist Party assumed control of Czechoslovakia. That totalitarian regime prohibited Komárková from pursuing a teaching career, and after working as a librarian for several years, she was forced into early retirement at the age of forty-five. Although she spent the rest of her life under constant surveillance, Komárková continued working for, and writing about, human rights in ways which were distinguished by the sorts of scholarly integrity and creativity that are evident in an essay entitled “Human Rights and Christianity” that she wrote during the 1960s.

The initial section of this paper will attempt to enumerate some of the major themes that characterize this essay in which Komárková seeks to identify some of the key developments that contributed to the classical statements regarding human rights that were issued by the United Nations in 1948 and 1966. Specifically, Komárková discusses the Calvinist Reformation, the political struggles that followed the societal transformations engendered by the Reformation, and related changes in the concept of natural law. Implicit in her consideration of these matters are some important ‘indicators’ of Komárková’s own philosophy of human rights. Thus, rather than summarizing – or analyzing – the argument that Komárková puts forth in “Human Rights and Christianity,” I want to identify five themes that seem to have central significance for her.

Parenthetically, I should acknowledge that I will refer to few secondary sources and untranslated texts in what follows. This approach reflects the fact that I view this paper as serving to introduce Komárková’s life and work to English-speaking scholars. Thus, I have chosen to focus on her thoughts and on the limited number of essays that are available in English. It seems to me that comparisons with other thinkers and considerations of various interpretations of her work may best be reserved for another time. Furthermore, although my considerations are informed by insights offered by colleagues at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University who knew Komárková personally and who have studied her thoughts with care, some of my interpretations have arisen somewhat independently, as a result of my immersion in Komárková’s perspective during the process of translating a number of the essays which are included in a collection entitled *Human Rights and the Rise of the Secular Age*. Although some of my comments may thus seem to be a bit ‘adventure-some,’ it is hoped that they will serve to invite others to engage in a serious consideration of a resourceful theorist whose works are rich enough to merit extensive reflection.

Theme 1: The right and responsibility to challenge oppressive political authorities

Early in her analysis of the political significance of the Reformation, Komárková asserts that

[s]imultaneously with the theory of the covenant and the right to

protest in the event of its violation, the importance of the masses was elevated.... Lest political leaders not fulfill their responsibility, people were found to be legitimate agents of opposition against authorities who were unfaithful to God's covenant. The private individual, attending to godly things, became a direct deputy of God, and, thereby, a statutory subject as well" (SA 71).

Komárková's awareness that all human beings have a fundamental right and obligation to challenge oppressive political entities is thus expressed in the theological terms that are an indispensable component of many of her writings.

Developing this theme in her discussion of the French Huguenots, Komárková seems to be speaking of a bygone age when she asserts that "...people cannot confer rights on a king that they themselves do not have; consequently, they cannot entrust their conscience to [a monarch] since that belongs to God." However, in an instant, the timeless contemporaneity of Komárková's perspective is revealed by her affirmation of the Huguenots' "...awareness that there is an area of life, which, on account of its nature, must be removed from external legal intervention..." (SA 71). This shift from historical specificity and overtly theological language might be seen as a capitulation to the trend that Komárková describes when she asserts that "[b]y the end of the 17th century, theological argumentation begins to subside in favor of discursive reasoning, and the achievements of religious struggles are changed into philosophical postulates" (SA 72). Yet, it is more likely that Komárková's strong sense of the limitations of all human orders leads to this change of diction, which avoids linking the transcendent dimension of existence with any human construct, social authority, or expression of individualism.

Theme 2: The transcendent foundation of human rights and the finitude of all human orders

The preceding hypothesis may be supported by Komárková's analysis of the radically different outcomes that were spawned by opposing strains of Enlightenment thought. She astutely asserts that the rational method "...could generate plans of social order in which a single individual could disrupt all of the cohesion of society, but it could also generate opposite schemes of order in which its members were bound by shackles much more rigid than the legacy of the Middle Ages against which the Enlightenment had set out to battle" (SA 74). She goes on to propose that the only perspective that could balance such extremes was grounded in "an awareness of the penultimate nature of empirical experience" in which "[n]either the society nor the individual had unconditional merit and value" (SA 74-75).

Paradoxically, these statements seem to suggest that recognition of "the conditional nature of everything human" is the root and guarantee of the inalienable freedoms that Komárková identifies with "[r]ights which must remain...untouched by the state..." Yet, she conversely asserts that human rights "...are invariably subject to an aspect of life that is not encompassed by the three-dimensional reality" which encompasses the human, natural, and cosmic spheres (SA 75). In short, Komárková's emphasis on the penultimate quality of human life is complemented by a strong sense that human rights and freedoms must be rooted in an ultimate source, lest the norm of human behavior become identified with conditional reality.

Theme 3: Human responsibility for securing human rights

Komárková characteristically identifies the transcendent basis of human rights with God, whom the English Enlightenment depicted as being "...the center, binding the

individual and the state in mutual responsibility to aims that exist beyond them”(SA 75). Thus, although she asserts that John Locke “...has in mind a completely secularized state,” she nevertheless concludes that, for Locke, “[t]he function of the state is not to lead the human being to perfection.” Rather, “the human being has this task as God’s creature.... Within God lies the *ultima ratio* of the human being, as well as of the state and of the laws that govern the state”(SA 76-77).

Her acknowledgement of God’s preeminence does not lead Komárková to lose sight of the inherent worth of the human being. Indeed, although she notes that for the English branch of the Enlightenment, “[n]either society nor the individual had unconditional merit and worth,” Komárková seems to be positively disposed toward Immanuel Kant’s conviction that “...the human self has an unconditional value, from which its freedom – that is, its right to moral self-determination – arises”(SA 75, 81). Her high regard for the fact that Kant was the only continental philosopher of the Enlightenment who “...challenged the state’s right to control the spirit” seems to be well-complemented by her affirmative declaration that “the concrete human being remained an underived and irreducible reality and value” for the theologically-receptive John Stuart Mill (SA 82, 87).

For Komárková, the unconditional worth of the human being does not issue in a naive affirmation of radical individualism. Indeed, her analysis of the Virginia Plan stresses that insofar as “[o]nly God has given validity and blessing to all human freedoms,” “...living in the sight of God remain[s] as [the] precondition” of basic rights, over and above personal well-being (SA 83). Radical individualism cannot be the aim of human rights and freedoms. Their godly mandate entails radical responsibility, or, to use Komárková’s diction, “freedom can exist only as a fruit of virtue” (SA 83). Komárková appears to be convinced that human rights must be made manifest through concrete acts of justice, love, and humility like those which Locke sanctioned (SA 77).

In short, Komárková holds that rationalistic principles about abstract human beings do not provide an adequate context for the establishment and furtherance of human rights. Instead, human rights are contingent on an active struggle to live with care by exercising “free responsibility in the sight of God”(SA 84). Komárková specifically stresses that human beings must actualize their inherent value by ‘fulfilling their *vocatio* to serve’(SA 77). Thus, a pioneering scholar of her work groups Komárková with a number of highly principled dissidents who, “in spite of their limited possibilities..., tried to teach social responsibility” (Keřkovský,10).

Theme 4: The essential role of change

Her emphasis on human responsibility means that human rights are not static ideological constructs for Komárková. Nor does their transcendent source distance them from the realm of human relationships. Indeed, that is precisely where they must ‘acquire practical significance’ by means of ‘positive application’ (SA 70, 85). Needless to say, such a dynamic view of human rights necessitates a radical reassessment of the Enlightenment theory that the human being is “...an immutable Cartesian substance whose relationships toward the threefold order of humanity, nature, and the universe remain unchanging as well” (SA 85).

As might be expected, Komárková initiates a reconsideration of the Cartesian model when she notes that “...within the framework of evolution, the human being ceases to be an unchangeable ontological substance. Not only because he is changed by history, but especially because he changes through history”(SA 85-86). Komárková implicitly criticizes the new ontological standard, which was set up by evolutionary theory, when she contrasts its

tendency to absolutize historical and natural forces with the fact that British thinkers "...did not establish closed systems...and did not turn [their] findings into a metaphysical standard" (SA 86). Yet, she also realizes that evolutionary theory played an important role in disabusing the Enlightenment belief that "[t]he rational order was an authority higher than the human being" whose logical dictates could be 'satisfied by human virtue' (SA 85, 86).

Since Komárková is continually alert to false absolutes and human *hubris*, she values the fact that British philosophers "...did not permit logic to be mistaken for ontology..., and at no time, reduced reality to a single common denominator" (SA 86). She notes that, according to the British school, "[t]he paradigm for life [is] not complete" (SA 87). Thus, human beings are subject to – and must be free for – change. In other words, the moral initiative of concrete individuals must never be suffocated by a 'penultimate absolute.' Komárková's thoughtful analysis of the ideas of John Stuart Mill similarly stresses that insofar as "God's will is empirically indiscernible," human beings are responsible for engaging in a "continual struggle...for superior forms of life" (SA 87). It thus appears that, notwithstanding the paradoxical relationship which exists between authentic transcendence and human endeavors, the very conditionality of existence predisposes and requires human beings to engage in on-going processes of searching, struggling, and refining.

Theme 5: The necessity of error and imperfection

In considering the role that tension plays in the development of human morality, Komárková notes that, according to Mill, "...error is...necessary so that truth may be refined by it..." (SA 88). Furthermore, in contrasting Mill's perspective with the monistic philosophies advanced by Hegel and Comte, in which "everything is complete," Komárková examines the vital role that aberrant elements have played in the emergence of human rights (SA 94). In particular, she argues that Comte's description of "...society as an all-encompassing, immortal organism did not leave room for any negative feature.... The Social Being acquired all of the attributes once considered to be divine..." (SA 93). Yet, rights necessarily entail "...the possibility of bringing the human being to fruition" (SA 94). Thus, "[t]here was no place for human rights in such a system" (SA 93). In other words, both incompleteness and imperfection are essential features of human rights because rights have meaning, and are necessary, only in a world which admits that human existence is contingent and evolving.

Insofar as Komárková holds that "[r]ight...arises from the tension between what is and what should be," she necessarily concludes that "[h]uman rights arose as the safeguard of freedom in an imperfect world." (SA 94, 96) Likewise, she maintains that human rights are superfluous to 'eschatological' fantasies of Hegel, Comte, and Marx, which anticipate an ideal society of "total freedom" that 'will not need any rights at all' (SA 95). Komárková perceives that when such utopian visions portray conditional human orders as possessing absolute truth and power, there is a real danger that "a totalitarian solution to human questions" will be imposed. (SA 100) Thus, she concludes her essay on "Human Rights and Christianity" with this critical appraisal: "All totalitarian social structures are the...product of a civilization that [has] lost a sense for the transcendent aspect of life and therefore, [has] had to elevate the law of its society to [a position of] ultimate worth" (SA 101).

Interpretive Conclusion, Part 1:

Insofar as Komárková considers an awareness of transcendence to be a necessary component of a civil society, she perceives it to be imperative that human rights not become a new manifestation of an idolatrous absolute. Thus, she humbly identifies human rights as

being the ‘equipment that people need for a journey through an imperfect world and the aid that people need in order to live responsibly before God’ (SA 102). Her adoption of this unassuming view of human rights may effectively ‘de-absolutize’ Komárková’s critique of conflicting philosophical views. That is to say, it seems likely that humility before the transcendent dimension of being enables and requires Komárková to both critique the theological heritage which underlies her passionate concern for the concrete individual and to entertain the possibility that even totalitarian systems may be a breeding ground for constructive responses to human imperfection. It thus seems reasonable to conclude that insofar as their very shortcomings may pave the way for a refinement of truth, all conditional perspectives must be given serious and constructive consideration.

Komárková seems to support this claim, and to take a step beyond the human tendency to divide the world into oppositional entities, when she asserts that “[f]ighters for the right of freedom...[may] be set free for responsibility by God, even if they forget his name” (SA 102). Komárková expands on this conclusion when she follows a phrase that appears in several of her writings – “the spirit of God blows where it pleases” – with the assurance that this spirit “is limited neither by confession nor by atheism” (SA 102). Insofar as all human realities are conditional, they are all privy to the refining operation of the transcendent dimension of being. Thus it may be that P. Keřkovský precedes his description of the very system that sought to stifle Komárková’s voice by declaring: “It cannot be said that the triumph of the communist ideology and power was total” (10).

Introductory Remarks, Part II: Existential indicators

With these conjectures, the existential aspect of Komárková’s work is called to mind. That is to say, my proposition that even totalitarian systems may engender a passion for, and insight into, human rights might seem to be an example of wishful thinking ventured by a person who has never been subjected to an oppressive system. However, as I consider her life story, I am convinced that Komárková’s encounters with Nazi and Communist absolutisms deepened her insights into existential questions and quickened her commitment to human rights. I am persuaded that Komárková’s statements about such matters carry particular weight because they were forged within the crucible of two oppressive political regimes.

A remembrance shared with me by one of her friends may offer tactile confirmation of these assertions. It seems that in her apartment, Komárková kept some small figures of animals and people fashioned from bread, which she had brought with her from the concentration camp when she was released in 1945. Thus, I am bound to conclude that Komárková’s words are marked by a rare degree of existential integrity. In a very concrete and personal way, she did not let herself forget the horrors of her past. Nor did she let herself be bound by the circumstances of her present. Rather, Komárková let her direct encounters with two forms of totalitarianism guide her to constructive assessments of historical events and social conditions, in spite of the recurring danger in which she thereby placed herself.¹

The existential aspect of Komárková’s commitment to human rights is particularly evident in essays in which she focuses on Christian themes. Thus, at this point, I want to explore some representative passages which may reveal the Christian roots of Komárková’s conclusion that “Christ is the manifestation of the brother for which the human being is clamoring” (SA 133).²

¹ These comments are based on the translator’s introduction that I wrote for *Human Rights and the Secular Age*.

² I did not use the phrase “brother and sister” to translate passages in which Komárková uses the word *bratr* because her references to “brother” often appear to draw on Bonhoeffer’s specialized use of that word.

Example 1: Restoring lost humanity

As early as 1957, Komárková wrote some compelling words, which may be as valid now as they were then. “We cannot approach our brother in the world with sermons about being lost in sin,” she declared in an essay entitled “The Heidelberg Catechism in Our Century.” However, we can speak “...about our being lost in a world of inhumane humanity, about our need to have a neighbor, about the true neighbor who is Christ, and about a life of joyful, reciprocal service” (SA 136).

Komárková precedes this assertion with the observation that “[i]n the framework of scientific thought, sin is a heterogeneous and incomprehensible idea. Therefore, the concept of sin has slipped out of human consciousness..., and [even] in the church, where sin has remained the buttress of dogmatics and worship, there is more talk about it than suffering from it” (SA 132). Yet, she also states that in the technological milieu, “...the relationship of people...is not a human relationship. It is an indissoluble relationship of cold and impersonal social duties in which the human being remains a shadow...” (SA 133). Komárková thus surmises that “...an existential question is rending the human being from the core...,” leading individuals to ask: “What can I do so that people will see a person in me, so that they will be humane toward me...?; where [can] I find a brother, so that by him and through him, I can become a human being?” (SA 133).

When she proceeds to ask “[i]sn’t this elementary need for humanity and humaneness the imperative call of Christ,” Komárková again seems to suggest that the imperfect systems of the technological age may unwittingly provide contexts where authentic transcendence may be encountered and truth may be refined. This interpretation appears to be borne out by Komárková’s declaration that “[w]here the relationship of human beings have...fallen to the level of being relationships to things, the living God himself must take a stand in order to reveal...that the only relationship which he has ordained for people is love and that only love will restore lost humanity to the human being” (SA 133).

These remarks context key elements of Komárková’s philosophical analysis of human rights in concrete realities that are familiar to participants in the technological age who have firsthand knowledge of the dehumanizing consequences of conditional technological orders, which seek to impose finite ‘absolutes’ without ‘seeing the person’ (SA133). Thus, it is likely that the people whom she addressed in lectures delivered at conferences held by the Academic YMCA (before it was abolished by the Communist Party in 1950) had a clear sense of the threat that Komárková describes with these potent words: “Presently, in the east as well as in the west, existence is possible only as social existence..., and the faceless, reified, depersonalized humanity under which we are all laboring is weighing heavily upon us” (SA 134, 135). Furthermore, her affirmation that “[t]he fulfillment of humanity lies in fellowship with God and human beings” must have had profound significance for those members of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren who heard Komárková speak of the possibility of experiencing “life in a new dimension.” (SA 135, 134).

Likewise, insofar as Komárková had suffered at the hands of oppressors who had demonstrated “the impossibility of living humanely among people,” the dissidents who gathered in her apartment for discussion and support during the communist era must have been heartened by her awareness that “[o]ur conditions of living, forcing us – without our will or even against it – into a collective life, are helping us to live in a fellowship in which, our existence ought to be fulfilled in accordance with God’s determination” (SA 135). Likewise, when Komárková stressed the need for people to engage in responsible acts of advocacy on behalf of other persons, her words must have had the potential to introduce her

colleagues to an alternative way of being that could enable exploited individuals to become “real” human beings, “...rescued from faceless, depersonalized humanity” (SA 134). Finally, when Komárková concluded that a person thus “...emancipated from cruel anomie...is free so that he may be of service – and [that] he serves freely because he loves,” she unwittingly may have been describing herself (SA 134).

Example 2: Rebuilding a fractured peace

Komárková’s call to responsible action in the face of false absolutes and dehumanizing conditions engineered by conditional social orders surely is relevant in this time when a climate of fear and revenge is entrapping many people in a warring madness that does not view significant segments of the world community as being ‘brothers’ and that responds to dehumanizing actions in kind, rather than by seeking to emulate the self-sacrificing love of Christ on behalf of the ‘brother’ – who remains a ‘brother’ even if his actions are of a sort that invite condemnation.

This assertion might sound like a call for clemency on a scale that is not reasonable in a beleaguered world, and some might judge it to be an illusory fantasy of a peace-maker who knows nothing about the strong steps that are required to quell mortal threats or to ease the strong feelings that invariably are stirred by tragedies borne of violence. Yet, Komárková was not a stranger to the calamitous cycles of war. Indeed, the profound ways in which the Second World War impacted her are well-illustrated by the diary that she kept while she was imprisoned by the Nazis and by other passages that are found within her writings.

An essay entitled “Czechs and Germans in Our Century” provides a striking example of Komárková’s reflections on the Second World War. That essay begins with a historical analysis of the relationship which existed between Czech and German residents of Czechoslovakia prior to start of the war. However, its rather terse, reportorial style is transformed when Komárková suddenly declares: “I cannot describe what came next except in terms of personal experience” (*Tolerance* 96). She proceeds to offer a haunting description of the arrival of uniformed German troops in her hometown on May 15, 1939. “Until then, we had understood uniformed power to be a safeguard against the violation of order and justice,” she writes, but “[n]ow, for the first time, we experienced that power *encroaching* on both justice and order...” (*Tolerance* 97). “Spring was very beautiful that year,” she poignantly recalls before adding that “[i]n an empty factory building at the edge of town, the International Red Cross had set up a camp for Jews from southern Moravia who had fled the Nazis after the Munich Agreement. Now members of the German army paced there, and methodically flogged the people. We heard orders and shrieks, but we could do nothing...” (*Tolerance* 97). Komárková concludes that “[t]he contrast between this and the radiance of nature was unbearable. An unstrained hatred began to grow within us..., and we became numb to human suffering..., so that we would not ‘cave in’ because of it” (*Tolerance* 97).

Komárková is quite aware that such hatred may issue in a quest for revenge and that such numbness may give rise to a cynical disregard for human life. She openly laments such tendencies when she recalls: “The younger generation was affected even more adversely. It learned violence from those it hated, and it subsequently perceived that to be the substance of justice! The experiences of those six years had brought the students to this: they were now doing the very thing that they had been contemptuous of at the beginning.” Komárková is not blind to the fact that “the sad consequence of those six years” was “a hunger for revenge, a desire to repay evil with evil.” However, she perceives that it is possible to take a different

course. Integrity molded by suffering permeates her admission that “[o]nly...in prison did I learn to overcome this hatred, with the help of God” (*Tolerance* 97).

Pavel Keřkovský notes that although the diary that Komárková wrote in prison “... bears witness to her ‘Jeremaic dispute’ with God,” she also makes her first reference to the “advent nearness of God” in that journal. Insofar as Komárková uses that phrase to refer to “a dimension [of grace] that breaks into our world unexpectedly,” her ability to overcome hatred and to follow a different course is contexted in struggle, transcendence, and a sense that refining dynamics can humanize the harshest situations. (Keřkovský 14) The fact that Komárková encountered the advent nearness of God in the midst of unthinkable brutality must have enabled other people who had experienced merciless atrocities at the hands of the Nazis to step beyond the web of anger and apathy that threatened to engulf them.

Indeed, church colleagues and like-minded dissidents must have been challenged and empowered by her position regarding the post-war expulsion of German residents from the Czech Sudeten land. In the passage where she takes issue with President Beneš’ insistence that this action was necessary and right, Komárková declares: “I needed to put the question differently! After what had happened, how could we live together,” she asks before stating: “I knew a single way. [Living together] would be possible only through joint repentance.” (*Tolerance* 98) Komárková acknowledges that “...repentance does not belong among the categories of world history.” (*Tolerance* 98) However, in an essay entitled “The Czech Question,” she holds out the hope, which our present agonized world desperately needs to entertain, that “[i]t lies within our power to surmount the past and its discontinuity by a collective admission of our mistakes and our guilt,” thus a new course may bring us to “...a unity that is full of life and [is composed] of dissonances that will be able to establish a greater harmony” (*SA* 194).

Example 3: Practicing solidarity

Near the end of “Czechs and Germans in this Century,” Komárková gives theological expression to her conviction that victims of war and oppression do not necessarily need to succumb to a spirit of violent revenge or apathetic numbness when she declares: “Beneath the cross, we can overcome the past” (*Tolerance* 98). Elsewhere, she asserts that “[t]he cross was not Christ’s fate, but a free act of love” (*SA* 135). Likewise, in an essay entitled “New Testament Worship,” she maintains that with the collapse of “[t]he illusion of progress as a self-actuated approximation of God’s kingdom..., [c]hasms of good and evil have deepened before us, and simultaneously have split so far apart that decision-making is practically impossible without a vision of Christ’s cross” (*SA* 147).

Such representative citations suggest that for Komárková, the cross is a significant theme, which cannot be brushed aside without careful consideration. However, her tendency to link the cross of Christ with human responsibility means that Komárková’s allusions to this complex symbol are not empty platitudes designed to foster a simplistic brand of sentimental pietism. Thus, at the conclusion of an essay entitled “Changing the World,” Komárková asserts that “Jesus Christ calls each generation to carry the burden of the world as its cross and to draw strength from it for living in the abiding hope that God’s intention for the human being is joy and peace” (*Ve Světě* 68). Although its positive depiction of God’s will for humankind tempers this call to radical responsibility, the exacting nature of Komárková’s understanding of the cross is evident when she follows an affirmation of the central significance of that symbol with these words: “The *kairos* of the end of our millennium is the restoration of Christ-like sacrifice to the center of life” (*SA* 147).

In a related essay entitled “In the World and Not of the World,” Komárková realistically observes that “[e]vil, as the outgrowth of human guilt *vis-à-vis* God and thus *vis-à-vis* humankind, complicates the tableau of the Christian world and, against the backdrop of the uncompromising constructions of the secular world, makes it seem confused and uncontrollable” (SA 111). Yet, a viable and hopeful alternative to this scenario is presented when Komárková declares: “The body, which the Son of God accepted..., is not only a confirmation of God’s love for humankind and the source of the human hope that overcomes even the most negative features of life; it is also an affirmation of all created reality.... This is why everything that exists has value and is very good.... This is why it is acceptable to love the world and its gifts: because they are God’s gifts” (SA 110).

For Komárková, this positive assessment of the created order does not absolve human beings of their responsibility for ‘carrying the burden of the world.’ Indeed, she stresses that “...the glory of God is revealed only insofar as a brother gives himself up in sacrifice for his brother” (SA 143). The nature of such sacrifice is alluded to when Komárková notes that the Son of God was “...a human being living in poverty among the despised and humiliated of the world...” (SA 110). Furthermore, Komárková radicalizes the implied appeal for human beings to stand alongside their powerless brothers and sisters when she adds: “Through Christ’s sacrifice – which put him in solidarity with humankind and the world to the point of death in a place for outcasts – our responsibility for our brothers and sisters, for the world, and for the task of taking the place of the weak, i.e., of all who do not know God’s grace, has been set forth” (SA 110).

Although Komárková rarely refers directly to human rights in essays that are focused on theological themes, a profound appreciation for God’s solidarity with finite human beings appears to underlie her advocacy of human rights. Moreover, in “New Testament Worship,” she explicitly states that “[w]ith Jesus’ sacrifice, every person has become untouchable; no one may violate his dignity with impunity. This is the deepest reason that our age of the continuing objectification of the human being is clamoring, with such urgency, for the dignity of the person to be guaranteed in the social sphere by legal safeguards in the form of human rights” (SA 145). Komárková perceives that because of Christ’s sacrificial love, concrete individuals may not be treated as mere “products of nature and history” (SA 111). Human beings are not “lost cosmic or social atoms” (SA 111). Rather, they are “creatures made in the image of God;” persons “whom God has called by their own names” (SA 111). These conclusions mean that, for Komárková, human rights are much more than attempts to protect self-interest and secure personal entitlements (see SA 142). Instead, they are an expression of solidarity among humans and with God. Thus, Keřkovský may be speaking accurately when he states that Komárková “...goes to the root of things” (15).

Interpretive Conclusion: Part 2

Komárková’s emphasis on the responsibility that human beings have “to serve their neighbor in the fullness of love” is part of a legacy that spans centuries. (SA 144) For instance, in 1415, Jan Hus, the renowned figure who initiated the Czech Reformation and inspired Martin Luther, wrote these words prior to his martyrdom at the hands of Catholic authorities: “I write this letter to you in prison, bound with chains and expecting on the morrow the sentence of death.... I entreat this... of you, that ye love one another, defend good men from violent oppression, and give everyone an opportunity of hearing the truth” (Otter 31). Two centuries later, John Amos Comenius advocated human rights and worth when he asserted that laws established by the state must be designed to ensure that “...people

are not burdened by yokes of slavery, but, on the other hand, are preserved in freedom”(item 10). Similarly, in 1988, Jan Milič Lochman, a exiled Czech theologian, declared: “From the theological standpoint..., we must affirm quite categorically that tolerance in the Christian sense can never be equated with indifference...because the command to love God and our neighbor excludes relationships of sheer indifference. Love courts fellow human beings, sides with them, and therefore struggles with them for truth” (58-59).

Related ideas were recently expressed by former dissident and noted ethicist, Jakub Trojan who was a personal friend of Komárková and a co-signer of Charter 77, the Czech declaration of human rights for which Komárková prepared petitions and other documents. In reflecting on the impact of globalization, Trojan emphasizes that “[t]he hope of our faith is based on the biblical vision of the fullness of life engaged in peace and with justice.... In light of this vision, we are obligated to eliminate the most flagrant manifestations of human brokenness, blatant displays of injustice and poverty, and underlying, systemic inadequacies. Criticism of everything that injures or destroys the life of our neighbors and of the whole of creation must be part of our witness of faith.” (items 5-6) In short, it appears that throughout the communist era, Komárková quietly preserved a long-standing Czech tradition of advocating truth, freedom, love, and the acts of resistance that sometimes are necessary precursors of justice and peace. Furthermore, it is evident that she developed this tradition in creative ways which may be particularly meaningful in this seculo-centric age.

Introductory Remarks, Part III: Indicators of a holistic dialogue

The preceding examples of Komárková’s theological reflections on existential issues may seem to be fundamentally different in focus and kind from the philosophical concepts discussed in the first part of the paper. Although her primary philosophical concerns are not absent from essays that use theological diction to wrestle with existential questions, Komárková makes few explicit connections between her philosophical analyses and her theological deliberations. Nevertheless, such connections may not need to be specified insofar as, in keeping with the holistic methodology that underlies much Czech scholarship, Komárková’s philosophical perspective informs her theological reflections and her theological inclinations underlie her philosophical positions.

Such an inclusive approach to reality was already part of the Czech heritage in the 17th century when Comenius advocated “a unified approach to the whole of reality” by focusing on “the interrelated nature of all aspects of life” (Čapková). Komárková displays an appreciation for this worldview when she states that according to Comenius, “...the span of the human spirit has only one axis and therefore is never partial, fragmentary, or inutile.” (*Tolerance* 60) It seems reasonable to conclude that in keeping with this intellectual lineage, Komárková’s work demonstrates a rare appreciation for the interrelatedness of theology, philosophy, and existential realities. Keřkovský lends credence to this hypothesis when he notes that Komárková’s “...intellectual struggle...ranges over the fields of theology, philosophy, law, and history.” (11) He concludes that “it is difficult to classify Komárková as belonging to any particular school or academic discipline” because she “provides an example of a thinker engaged in interdisciplinary dialogue” (15).

Theme 1: The theological significance of the profane world

Keřkovský notes that in the midst of her penchant for theology, Komárková “...does not abandon philosophy, but, on the contrary, cultivates it.... [H]er philosophical vocabulary is enlarged by the addition of terms coming from the biblical tradition.” Thus, she dares to

address themes like “guilt and grace,” “serving God and responsibility in the sight of God,” and repentance, salvation, and desacralization (15).

Nevertheless, Komárková does not turn theological imagery into an ideological possession or an idolatrous abstraction. Thus, in “New Testament Worship,” she states: “In Czechoslovakia, the fact that [the powerless God] has become the theme of philosophers rather than theologians has a very special significance. No one knows from which direction the spirit of God will blow” (SA 147). Elsewhere, Komárková asserts that “[t]he spirit of God blows where it pleases and is also audible to the Christian conscience in the profane world.” (SA 193) Furthermore, she indicates that theological insights may come to expression in ‘desacralized’ ways in contexts where people are estranged from religious establishments. “Truth is not limited to the confessional community,” she writes. “More than that: the profane world is the condition of freedom for Christians as well” (SA193).

Such statements invite the hypothesis that Komárková is open to letting her theological considerations be informed by the content and vocabulary of philosophy, law, and history. Furthermore, openness to scientific method is evident in “In the World and not of the World,” where philosophical and theological emphases are closely intertwined and reciprocally enriching. In that essay, Komárková observes that “[u]sing the intellectual approach that has become customary in the scientific analysis of reality, theology, too, has subjected its own past to a radical criticism...; it has rejected *a priori*, universal truths..., and has made factuality its basis” (SA 107). In the years since Komárková wrote those words, such positivistic approaches to theological issues have been critiqued and supplanted. Yet, Komárková interprets the tendency to “materialize the Bible” in a compelling way when she says: “Theology’s “...central domain [has become] the objectivity of God’s deeds, revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, a specific person, burdened by history.... In the dialectical tension between God and humankind, the weight has shifted to the human side” (SA107, 109).

Theme 2: Secularism’s transformation of theology

After observing that this adaptation has sometimes been developed “...right up to the limits of Christian possibilities,” Komárková identifies some of the major shifts in emphasis that have thereby been introduced into Christian thought. For instance, she observes that “[e]ffectiveness, measured in social terms, has become [the] yardstick, at least latently. An act of obedience is not understood unless it has some social impact” (SA 109). Insofar as Komárková’s awareness of the insufficiency of all social structures and ideological systems prevents her from venerating the hallmarks of the technological age, she is implicitly critical of many of these trends. Thus, after observing that contemporary “Christians remain an integral part of their... world,” she acknowledges that “[i]n their similarity to, and solidarity with, [that world] lies both their strength and their limitation” (SA 112).

Komárková’s keen sense of human limitations also precludes her from idolizing the forms that Christianity has taken across the centuries. She does not assume that historical manifestations of Christianity are less liable to critique than socio-cultural orders are. Indeed, in keeping with her premise that the identification of errors may facilitate refinement, Komárková candidly concludes: “It is its condemnation by the world that has helped theology find its true center. This condemnation has enabled theology...to see its own biblical sources in a new way and to gain new, liberating insights from them...” (SA 111). Furthermore, insofar as “[r]ooting itself in Christology has made theology free for the world around it,” Christianity is now able to “...accept the service that the world performs for it. It can even accept the world’s defection from the church as being such a service” (SA 110-11).

Theme 3: In the world and not of the world

The beneficial impact of the world's 'defection' is anticipated when Komárková asserts: "For perhaps the first time in its existence, theology has abandoned the theme of the enemy [and is abandoning the motifs of the institutional church]. It is concerned only with the theme of the brother..., [and i]ts definitive motif is sacrifice, not so much for the righteous, as for the reprobate. This is the *imitatio Christi* of today's world. In spite of all of its relativity, such an understanding of faith is the only true one. It is Christ's understanding." (SA 112) This statement appears to be quite promising; yet, it also raises a paradoxical issue. That is to say, in light of her sensitivity to the dangers of relativity and the limitations of human constructs, it is surprising that Komárková describes the understanding of faith which characterizes the secularized world as being 'the only true one.'

Of course, her assertion that today's Christians "are like their world, living its secular existence" seems to invite the conclusion Komárková's hearty affirmation of "the exclusive Christocentrism of contemporary theology" reflects her participation in "the affinity of theology with its age" (SA 113, 111). Nevertheless, Komárková is convinced that this affinity requires and enables Christians to challenge and transform the society in which they live. Thus, she does not acquiesce in the ambiguous consequences of socio-centric secularism. Instead, she states that the similitude of theology and its epoch "is not a phenomenon that has appeared in the current era for the first time. It resounds with force in Augustine and the Reformation. Nevertheless, even at those times, what speaks to us most radically is theology's...dialectical tension in relation to its age..., which brings about a qualitative transformation of all of its formal affinity with contemporary themes" (SA 111).

Komárková's treatment of the biblical allusion, "in the world, but not of the world," seems to reveal that her iconoclastic inclinations have not been weakened by her acknowledgement of Christianity's affinity with its age. When using that phrase, she replaces the word "but," (Czech: *ale*), which is typically found in popular paraphrases of John 15:19, with "and" [Czech: *a*]. Thus, emphasis is placed on the simultaneity of the Christian community's participation in, and transcendence of, the socio- and tempo-centric realities of the world in which it finds itself. Komárková perceives that on the one hand, "the secularized and seculo-centric world is the home of Christians..., " who "are like their world..." (SA 107, 113). And she realizes that on the other hand, "Christians share neither the optimism nor the pessimism of [the linear constructions of the secular world.] They are kept from the former by their knowledge of humankind and from the latter by their knowledge of Christ..." (SA 111-12). Thus, "they are strangers" to, as well as participants in, seculo-centric realities. (SA 113)

Theme 4: Theology's transformation of secularism

Komárková's considerations of the relationship between her Christian contemporaries and the secular world are necessarily paradoxical because she perceives that if the church has benefited from the reassessments which were prompted by 'the defection of the world,' society also needs to be impacted by the transforming potential that is inherent in "the constant identity of the Christian message" (SA 111). Looking to history, Komárková observes that such constancy "...brought about a qualitative transformation of... Augustine's Platonism and the climate of the Renaissance..." (SA 111). Examining the present, she concludes that the theological insights, which characterize the christological emphases of this time, are enabling present-day Christians "...to view the situation of the world more clearly than the world itself is able to" (SA 111). Thus, she perceives that Christianity "...is also transforming today's seculo-centric world" (SA 111). Furthermore, anticipating the future,

Komárková calls Christians to be “[f]aithful to the end to the motif of this time – to the calling not to interpret the world, but to change it” (SA 113).

Although she does not offer explicit examples of ‘the constant identity of the Christian message,’ Komárková indicates that in this age, “faith is a down-to earth” phenomenon, which “...has relocated the mystery of God’s existence from the universe of space and time into a dialogue carried on in the existential setting of human life...” (SA 112). Thus, she places great emphasis on the need for solidarity with the other and on “...the figure of Jesus, who lives the secular human existence so completely that he transforms...the sacral motif of the priest’s sacrifice into the sacrifice of his very self...in a place lying under a curse...” (SA 113). Such emphases inform Komárková’s sense of the direction that societal transformation needs to take. Thus, she proposes that in the present age, Christians – both those within the church and those outside of its bounds – need to “...work for this world and bear its wounds” (SA 113). Komárková concludes that as Christians “...make the glory of God manifest by giving themselves for their brothers and sisters, they may thus invite the world to break free of its seculo-centric captivity” (SA113). In the final analysis, it appears that Komárková is persuaded that the self-absorption of the secular mindset, which “deliberately encloses itself within realities that do not overstep the boundaries of the sensory realm,” must be challenged, deepened, and transformed (SA 104).

Theme 5: A hidden seed

When Counter-reformation policies forced Comenius to go into exile in 1621, he declared that ‘a hidden seed’ would continue to preserve the traditions of the Czech Reformation. This prophetic claim was fulfilled throughout the Counter-reformation as “[s]mall groups of *secret Protestants*, called ‘*Still Ones in the Land*,’ the ‘*Hidden Seed*,’ or the ‘*People of the Lamb*’” faithfully met together in spite of relentless persecution (Otter 41). Insofar as the image of the “hidden seed” continues to exercise great power in the Czech psyche, it is not surprising that Komárková speaks of “a hidden church” made up of “...servants of the God who has hidden his face from the three-dimensional world” (SA112).³

Komárková acknowledges that people “serving the world to which they have been sent” may be found both “within churches and outside of them” (SA 193). However, she seems to have a penchant for “the hidden seed,” which eschews the approach taken by church bodies which cling “to the delusion that in difficult times, it is their task to...[persevere] in places that are hermetically sealed off from the hostile world...,” so that they can “...rejoice among themselves in the certainty of their own salvation” (SA 193). Komárková emphasizes that since ‘the world has been consecrated by Christ’s sacrifice and has become his dwelling place...,’ “Christ’s followers are called to go beyond...the shelter of the walls of the holy city...” (SA 145). Yet, whether the ‘hidden seed’ is part of the church or operates outside of it, “Christ’s people must live in the world” because “the glory of God...is heralded in all of life’s circumstances by the one who stands in for the other as a brother.” (SA 145, 146)

Conclusion: Breaking down the barriers

Komárková’s awareness that secular orders and the Christian tradition are related in a constructive sort of symbiosis combines with her vision of the ‘hidden seed’ to engender an openness to collaboration with various theological, philosophical, and secular schools of

³ Komárková uses the Czech word, *trojrozměrný*, to refer to the three aspects of empirical experience, which Czech tradition identifies as including human beings, nature, and the universe.

thought and practice when it comes to matters of human rights and values. Thus, she not only advocates cooperation between disparate parties; she actively participates in collaborative endeavors. For example, as we have already seen, she does not claim that only theologians can address the issues of truth and freedom. Thus, when reflecting on the death of Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka, at the hands of communist interrogators, she says: “In spite of the dissimilarity of our starting points, we found a common framework for working together years ago, and we provided an example of an intrinsic willingness to remain devoted to that collaboration and to the values that united us” (SA 193-94). After remembering that “...it was Jan Patočka who used the citation: I do not have the truth; the truth has me,” she declares: “We are servants of an appeal that lies beyond us. Humility before a moral appeal generates responsibility and tolerance, and is also the condition of the cooperation that is necessary for clarifying points of view in the face of polemics” (SA 194).

In an essay entitled “Tolerance as a Condition of Life,” Komárková identifies another milieu of unforeseen collaboration when she indicates that “[t]he inner rebirth of Catholicism belongs among the most striking transformations of recent times. ... In it, the independent appeal of faith is relativizing institutionalized truth, and is becoming the leaven of new life. ... A new regard for repudiated values of civil life is being engendered by [Catholicism’s] struggle on behalf of the undefended rights of the powerless before the powerful, the persecuted before the persecutors” (SA 155). In light of the deep scars that were left on the Czech psyche by the oppressive practices, which characterized the Counter-reformation, Komárková’s assessment of Catholicism’s revitalization is both candid and positive. On the one hand, she observes that for hundreds of years following the Reformation, “Catholicism was closed to the values of the new era, which projected the worth of the human being as a free creature endowed with inalienable rights into new institutions.” (SA 153) However, she also asserts that their experiences under communism have led Catholics to understand that faith is not “a way of domination but [an approach] of service and cooperation” extended by “an equal among equals” (SA 155).

Komárková offers a practical example of Catholicism’s nascent involvement in collaborative endeavors when she suggests that insofar as “[t]he history of power has ceased to be a source of inspiration...” for Catholics, “Charter 77 has also become a foundation and a platform for [them]” (SA155). Elsewhere, she obliquely states that “...broad agreement about the type of institutions toward which our entire development was directed for hundreds of years (...) has strengthened ties among dissimilar groups, and has established a firm foundation for common endeavors in the future. Charter 77 arose from that foundation, and informal cooperation among such groups has never really stopped” (SA 190). Insofar as the Catholic Church typically did not share the ‘broad agreement’ that Komárková mentions, it is not clear whether Catholics are included among the ‘dissimilar groups’ to which she refers in this citation (SA 153). However, Komárková immediately proceeds to assert that the amicability which has begun to characterize renewed relationships between Catholics and Protestants inheres in “the oneness that binds them in a common faith” (SA 191). It thus seems reasonable to surmise that a concern for human rights may enable disparate groups to reclaim the shared heritage of tolerance and compassion that underlies long-standing differences and to discover a common point of focus.

The nature of that common focus is spelled out in an essay entitled “The Modern Era and Religion” when Komárková reiterates a dominant theme of her work. “A serious vision of the concrete human being is necessary for all humankind,” she asserts. “More love and devotion are needed for the human being, than for an abstract idea. Only from that point of

view will the greatest danger to our civilization, which once against is threatened by war, recede” (SA 141). This analysis is in keeping with Komárková’s stress on the limitations of the conditional conceptualizations on which human establishments are based. Becoming enmeshed in structures and ideologies will invariably lead human beings to lose themselves in futile struggles to preserve dissimilar (i.e., finite) ‘absolutes.’ However, focusing on the concrete human being will expose false absolutes by bringing human beings face to face with the incomparable claim of the unconditional worth and value of life. Thus, it may be that a moderate cleric reflecting on the proliferation of terrorist acts perpetrated by religious extremists against fellow Muslims recently said: ‘We must see the human face of our brother.’

Komárková expands on this theme by noting that “[a] serious vision of the concrete human being and an effort to really help him causes the ideologies by which human beings explain themselves to be less solid barriers.” Thus, direct encounters with actual human beings may ultimately make ideologies held by Christian advocates of human rights and secular agencies that work to preserve those rights more permeable. As a result, diverse groups that are committed to human rights and values may be able to cultivate respectful tolerance and responsible cooperation. Komárková contends that when conceptual barriers collapse, “[ideologies] cease to be a demonic force and become the resource – the help – that they originally should have been.” She adds: “Only where there is devotion to, and love for, the concrete human being... is there also a true, vital optimism, a real overcoming of nihilism.”(SA 142).

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