The National Idea, Secular Power and Social Issues in the Political Theology of Jan Hus*

František Šmahel

The Czech Nation Enjoying Full Rights – The Right of Disobedience to the Superiors – The Ideal of a Harmonic Society

Jan Hus, like most famous historical figures, has two historical lives: one that he actually lived, and one that reflected his first life, as rendered by historians, interpreters, admirers, and opponents. The factor of time plays a particularly important role in both of these periods. In the two decades of his public activities, Hus in fact had to alter many of his opinions on substantial, even essential issues. This partly arose from his own intentions, but mostly he was caught in the whirl of events, to which he had to react. Hus's afterlife, on the other hand, includes six centuries and goes beyond the present into the future. As a consequence of specific developments in the Czech lands – the loss of independence after 1620, the forced recatholicization, and the Germanization of official administration – the Hussite movement remained a neuralgic component of ‘live’ history. Since the middle of the twentieth century, moreover, the picture of Hus as well as the Hussite movement has changed almost every twenty years. The constant alteration of views and evaluative judgments has been quite typically manifested in the issues that will be dealt with in the discussion below. Also for this reason, it will be useful to mention some controversial standpoints at the beginning of each of the three thematic chapters.

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Hus was rebuked for his animosity towards domestic Germans already during his life. Whether this was justified or not will be shown later. Not only at the council in Constance but still at home before his departure, he had to defend himself against the accusations that in his sermons he provoked hatred against Germans.1 The German member of the papal Curia, Dietrich of Niem (†1418),

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1 See “Depositiones testium contra M.J. Hus anno 1414,” in Documenta, ed. Palacký, 177, No. 4, and Hermann von der Hardt, Magnum oecumenicum Constantiense Concilium, Tomus IV (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1699), col. 442: “suscitavit Boemos contra Theutonicos.”
reproached Hus and Jerome for having used force to expel their ‘noble benefactors’ (masters of the German Nation, thanks to whom they had acquired education in Liberal Arts and Sacred Theology at the University of Prague), only because they had not wanted to be involved in the reformers’ fallacies and had been bringing the erring Czechs back to the right path.\(^2\) Hundreds of German masters and students had left Prague in the spring and summer of 1409, in protest against the Decree of Kutná Hora by King Wenceslas IV concerning a change in the division of the university ‘votes,’ and had taken back with them a great hatred for Czech Wycliffites and their leader, Hus. Although ignominious insinuations about the ‘heretical’ Czech nation had appeared already earlier,\(^3\) after Hus’s burning at the stake in July 1415, such innuendos became ever more frequent. The popular opinion in the neighboring lands seems to have been expressed well by the chronicler Ludolf of Sagan, according to whom the Czechs were the “sons of heretical wickedness.”\(^4\)

Even in the subsequent centuries, the nationally focused attacks on Hus did not entirely disappear in the neighboring lands, but religious disputes came to the fore. In the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, the rehabilitation of Hus and the Hussite movement in the work of František Palacký aroused a sharp response on the part of German historians living in the Czech lands. Fuel to the fire of the rising national wave was again added in 1856 by Professor Konstantin Höfler, with his intention to put an end to the fashionable surge of rhetorical compilations that had recently embellished the historical puppet of Jan Hus.\(^5\) The blame Höfler had placed on Hus for the secession of the German students and professors in 1409, as well as the equally sharp response from the pen of František Palacký, had both left their mark on domestic research on the Bohemian reformation for entire centuries.\(^6\) The sporadic


\(^{3}\) “Articuli primi a clero propositi archiepiscopo Pragensi anno 1408,” in *Documenta*, ed. Palacký, 153.


\(^{5}\) Konstantin Höfler, *Geschichtsschreiber der hussitischen Bewegung in Böhmen*, Teil I (Wien 1856) Fontes rerum Austriacarum, Scriptores VI: 1, VIII.