

Jan Hus

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In the year 2000 in our country, with the campaign for presidency of the United States, we are witnessing the struggle between the forces of the Democratic and Republican parties vying for power in the world of politics. The ground rules have long since been established and the parties function at their utmost capacity to influence the outcome which will result in the maximum control of power for their side. Each time an apparent victory is achieved, the opposition maneuvers to neutralize its adversary and achieve victory for itself. When finally he is identified, the vanquished candidate will exit these proceedings as dictated by the rules and a period of relative peace will prevail until the next challenge to the right to claim presidential power occurs.

In the times surrounding 1415 the Bohemian peoples were engaged in a struggle between two forces: the establishment and the forces of change. Their struggle was framed within an intricate set of laws and procedures which had evolved over several centuries. The fortunes of great institutions of state and of church and of individuals lay in the balance. Conformity to systems of thought and thinking was the great weapon of the establishment. The weapon of potential mass destruction, which was feared by the establishment, was original thought. In an effort to prevent the creation and dissemination of original thinking, innovators were subject to a fiery death. It is unlikely that young Jan Hus, born to a poor family in Husinec (Goosetown) in southern Bohemia around 1372 envisioned that he would meet with such a death half a century later. The village into which Jan was born contained one building of importance, a stone built church onto which a wooden bell tower was constructed. It was of course a Roman Catholic church, the only church authorized, for Catholicism was the state reli-

gion. While still a young boy, and in a land far away, the Great Schism occurred within the church and two men each claimed the right to the papacy, Clement VII and Urban VI, setting off a rivalry which would ultimately ensnarl him inextricably.

Jan received his early education in Prachatice, and followed his mother's desire that he become a priest; indeed it was while furthering his education that the young Jon of Husinec would adopt the name "Jon Hus." In his desire to further his education and achieve some measure of success in life, he benefited from a decision made in 1348 by Emperor Charles IV who established a university in Prague to rival the great universities of Paris, Bologna, and Oxford. It was the emperor's desire to create a university in his capital city, Prague, in which not only Czech students would be educated, but also students from other parts of his Holy Roman Empire (Saxons, Bavarians, Polish) as well. As was the custom at the University of Paris, Prague's schools were organized into these four national divisions. This fateful division along national lines would become a significant factor in Jan Hus' eventual undoing. By the early 1380's the population of Czech students comprised one half the population and tensions between Czech students and faculty on the one hand, and German speaking students and faculty on the other led to an innovative arrangement. For the first time, the Czechs accomplished the appointment of every second (rather than every fourth) professorship. As a result of this compromise, the University became well on its way to becoming a national university rather than the international character which it reflected since its founding in 1366.

There was a distinct flavor to the university life as the fourteenth century drew to a close. The university was an independent institution, governed by its own laws and its members were subject to their own jurisdictional rules. Admission to this auspicious body brought great privilege to the faculty member. For Jon Hus, among the first residents of Husinec to achieve such status, it may safely be written that his haughty, some may even say arrogant, regard for life may have had its beginnings at this time. It must be noted that university faculty were responsible for finding a means of income. In the School of Theology, the priests competed for "benefices" offered from the pope(s), bishops, churches, confessions, and indeed any source including indulgences. The competition was keen in Prague where 1,200 priests resided along with numerous other monks and nuns. The custom frequently followed by bishops was to withhold ordination if the young man did not hold placement somewhere offering him an income. Young Hus chose to pursue higher academia to assure him favorable consideration from the archbishop.

As a student of advanced standing, fully aware of the inordinate expense of parchment, it was no surprise to Hus that he would be expected to memorize the academic discipline to which he would be exposed. The aim of education, he no doubt was fully aware, was not to make the student think independently, but to assimilate all the accumulated wisdom of the past.(1) Striving for new knowl-

edge was suspect and regarded as leading down the path of heresy. Hus' studies were under the auspices of French doctors of theology who had deserted the University of Paris when that university had avowed its support for the Avignonese Pope Clement VII. Underlying their move to Prague, and serving as a basis for their teachings there, was a desire to see reforms introduced into schismatized church. Among his most learned Czech doctoral masters who lectured to Hus were men who had studied at Oxford rather than Paris, as a result of the split loyalties created by the two-pope arrangement still fracturing Europe. At Oxford, during the early 1380's a brilliant scholar was lecturing on a variety of unprecedented ideas concerning church dogma and relationships between the national sovereign and the papacy; his name is John Wyclif. Elemental to Wyclif's teaching is the notion that elements of reality are found in contemporary objects, and not in pre-existing ideas. This concept would later give safe harbor to future arguments opposing the papacy and asserting it as being the Antichrist. In 1396 Jon Hus passed his master's examinations and in 1398, after two years of teaching, he became a fully accredited member of the faculty of the University of Prague.

During the early years on the university faculty, Hus copied four of Wyclif's works for his personal library, and lectured frequently on Wyclif's philosophy. In one of the manuscripts that he copied, Hus wrote in the margin: "What you have now read is worth a guilder. . . May God grant Wyclif the kingdom of heaven."⁽²⁾ Undoubtedly Hus used his many skills well, for in 1402 he was appointed as rector and preacher at the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. Bethlehem Chapel was established in 1391 by two wealthy Czech citizens, and could accommodate 3,000 people. He was to retain this position until his death.

Several distinctions are associated with Bethlehem Chapel: since its inception it was a place where sermons were delivered in the Czech language, and Hus established a student hospice program designed to provide food and lodging for young men entering the university's theological school. This action was reflective of Hus' philosophy that clerics should live their lives closer to the model Jesus embodied. It became a theme of Hus' that extravagant living was antithetical to Christ like living. It should be noted that Latin was the official language in both church and state matters. Communication among the educated classes of all of the Holy Roman Empire took place in Latin. When Hus wrote his sermons he first wrote them in Latin and later translated them into Czech for delivery to the assembled worshipers. The services he led attracted unprecedented numbers of worshipers to Bethlehem Chapel. His dedication to the reform of church practices earned for him a preeminent position in the life of turn-of-the-century Prague and recognition as the unrivaled champion of the popular reform movement. Estimates are that he preached over 3,000 sermons between 1400–1415 to artisans, the lower and noble classes including Queen Sophia, who wrote directly to Pope Alexander V in support of free preaching in Bethlehem Chapel.

On the walls of the chapel are several very telling pictures which Hus is noted to have approved, although he stated that they were not to be worshipped. The pictures are thus described: "...one of them portrayed the pope astride a large horse, resplendent in all papal pomp; its counterpart portrayed Christ in all his poverty, carrying the cross. 'From this it was concluded that the pope is the Antichrist and the whole Roman Church is Antichrist's heretical sect.' The second pair of pictures depicted Emperors Constantine and Ludwig in the act of donating to the pope the city of Rome, a palace, the state with all its glory and power; Constantine places a golden crown on the pope's head, clothes him in a purple mantle, and both emperors hold for him the stirrup, helping him into the saddle. The companion picture represented Christ before Pilate, submitting to all abuse, having a crown of thorns placed on his brow; he was also depicted as fleeing when the crowd wished to make him king. Further, Peter was painted hanging on the cross with his head down. In another picture, the pope was depicted sitting haughtily on the throne having his feet kissed; in contrast Christ was portrayed in a kneeling position washing his disciples' feet."(3)

The papacy in 1402 remained in turmoil and the archiepiscopalship of Bohemia was vacant and in need of appointment. Pope Boniface IX received a payment well exceeding 2800 guilden from a Czech military man named Zbynek Zajic who wanted to be bishop, granted dispensation to the 25 year-old, and appointed him bishop of Bohemia. Zbynek had fought nobly in loyal support of King Wenceslas. Almost immediately upon assuming the duties of Bishop of Bohemia, Zbynek was petitioned by the German masters of the University of Prague who had had their powers and authority greatly diminished by the Czech university masters in prior years. The German masters' complaint was that the Czechs were promoting the teachings of Wyclif, which, among other things undermined the authority of the papacy. They wanted Wyclif's teachings declared heresy and all those who subscribe to it should be declared heretics. They insisted that the declaration made in London in 1382 by the Blackfriar Synod contained 24 articles of heretical material, to which the contemporary accusers now added 21 fresh articles of heresy. Among the articles of heresy submitted against Wyclif were:

"...stating that the bread and wine in the sacrament remain unchanged...

...that the bishop or priest in mortal sin does not ordain, transubstantiate, consecrate or baptize...

...a foreknown pope does not have power over the faithful...

...for a priest to possess property is contrary to scriptures...

...it is permissible for a priest or deacon to preach without authorization of the pope or bishop...

...habitually delinquent clerics may be deprived by secular lords of their temporal possessions...

...tithes are merely alms, and are not legally enforceable...

...Pope Sylvester and Emperor Constantine erred in endowing the Church...

...the Roman Church is a synagogue of Satan, and the pope is not an immediate successor of Christ and of the apostles...

...it is not necessary for salvation to believe that the Roman Church is supreme over all other churches...

...to believe in Papal or Episcopal indulgences is vain..."(4)

In his arbitration of the charges, Bishop Zbynek deferred to the University of Prague for resolution. At the university session, charges were made by the Czech masters that the German masters were misstating the facts of Wyclif. The arguments were to no avail, however, since the German masters that year held a majority of the council. The majority side declared for their side and the works of Wyclif were deemed to be, at least in part heresy. As a consequence, any person who professed to believe in the position postulated by John Wyclif would be subject to the charge of heresy, as well. The rift between the Germans and the Czechs at the University of Prague never mended and culminated with the mass resignation of 1500 German masters and students who abandoned the university and left for Leipzig in 1409. Thereafter, John Hus became the target of German vilification.

There is considerable inquiry as to whether Hus formulated his ideas independently of Wyclif; some of Hus' writings are very similar. Hus wrote *Simony* in 1413 and declared that simony is heresy. Simony, he writes is striving to secure the highest office in the Church on account of its power, dignity or wealth; similarly, to commit simony is to appoint someone to ecclesiastical office for a payment, especially when that person is unworthy or unqualified. To pay for one's own consecration into the

priesthood also is simony. As no pope appointed a bishop without extracting heavy payment from him, such papal indulgences are simoniacal and are heresy, Hus reasoned.

In another of Hus' most reform-minded sermons, *Postil*, he condemns the practice of kneeling before and kissing the "golden slippers" of the pope. In declaring against the persecution of priests who oppose the pope, he writes: "...in Bohemia and Moravia, in Meissen and England as well as elsewhere, severe persecution exists for that reason, as I myself am aware of, for they murder, torture and condemn faithful priests. Nor can one expect relief from Rome, for there is the summit of all Antichrist's wickedness of pride, miserliness, adultery, hypocrisy and simony."(5)

The papal crisis continued into 1409 when the Council of Pisa was called to consider the continuing problem of two popes, Gregory XII and Benedict XIII. Both popes were ordered to step down and a new pope, Alexander V was named. Neither pope stepped down and there now reigned three popes, all vying for power and support in the Roman Empire. After six months the Council of Pisa dissolved. All of France, England, Poland and parts of Bohemia pledged themselves to the new prelate, Alexander V. The part of Bohemia which did not pledge to the new pope was controlled by Bishop Zbynek who was still mulling over the proposal by the University of Prague that Wyclif's 45 articles be declared heresy. Magically, the pope committed to endorse Zbynek's declaration of the heresy contained in Wyclif's 45 articles, and Zbynek threw his allegiance to pope number three, Alexander V. As fate would have it, pope number three died mysteriously in less than a year, the same year Bishop Zbynek ordered the writings of John Wyclif burned. Jan Hus objected vehemently to this action, denied that the work of Wyclif was heretical, and led a public uprising against Zbynek's actions. He subsequently was excommunicated. Notwithstanding the excommunication, Hus continued to preach in Bethlehem Chapel until the end of 1412 when he succumb to the conspiracy to expel him from Prague which prohibited worship from taking place so long as he remained in the city.

The king of Hungary, Sigismund, was brother to the king of Bohemia, Wenceslas. Sigismund required his brother's concurrence if he were to be crowned Roman Emperor, and in bargaining with his brother committed to convene a church council at Constance at which he would negotiate an end to the schism. In so doing, it would be essential to eradicate the issue of Jan Hus' heresy from within his kingdom. Pope John XXIII, was outmaneuvered into agreeing to the council and it was scheduled for November 1, 1414. Hus was "invited" to the Council of Constance under the pretence that his accusation of heresy by way of association with Wyclif would be reviewed. He was very skeptical of the offer which included a promise of safe passage from King Sigismund, but felt compelled to attend since his own king, Wenceslas was being threatened by Pope John XXIII with war if heresy continued in Bohemia. Before departing for Constance Jan Hus wrote his Last Will letters in which he advises his pupil, expressing concern for his spiritual and temporal welfare.

Hus entered Constance on November 3 and almost immediately was entrapped and accused of having taught, preached, and held remanence; that a priest in mortal sin does not transubstantiate; that the Church does not consist of the pope, his cardinals, prelates, and the clergy subordinate to them; that Constantine erred in endowing the Church, and that the Church should not possess property; that an ordained priest or deacon cannot be forbidden to preach, etc. For nearly eight months, the proceedings against Hus were conducted openly and in accordance with the practices of the day. Accusers and defenders each had their chance to speak, and King Wenceslas sat in on the proceeding frequently. In the end, Jan Hus was given the chance to recant his heresy, a heresy he denied he committed. Refusing to recant, the judgement (which had been waiting since day one) was issued and Hus was immediately brought outside and burned at the stake.

Jan Hus was a prolific writer and a man deeply committed to the teachings of Jesus Christ. His belief that Jesus was the head of the Church, and not the pope, evolved from his extraordinary knowledge of scripture. He had a profound influence on his contemporaries at the university, Czech nobility, and the commoner who soaked up his preachings like a sponge. The influence of Hus' ideas led his followers to revolt. As preacher at Bethlehem Chapel, Jan Hus functioned in the role of political leader in a cause which endeared him to the masses, inspired a revolution, and inaugurated a Bohemian schism.

Resources

1. Matthew Spinka, Jan Hus a Biography, Princeton, 1968, p. 29.
2. Ibid., p. 38.
3. Ibid. p. 48.
4. Ibid., p. 63.
5. Ibid. p.199.

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