



continuous conversion

Jan Hus, Christian martyr

You can't walk too far in Prague without running across a reference to Master Jan Hus (John Huss to you anglophones out there). The typical Czech person's attitude toward Hus is typically Czech: full of ambiguity and offering a bewildering multiplicity of perspectives, all at once. Hus is (all at the same time) a noble martyr for Christ, a



Master Jan Hus at the stake in 1415. From www.gry.cz/images/janhus.jpg

misunderstood man trying to make reasonable changes in an unreasonable time, a victim of bureaucratic deception, a country man who made good in the big city, a forerunner of the Protestant Reformation, a great influence on German theology, a copier of English theology, a violent reformer who inspired violent followers (the Hussites), a gentle scholar who was Rector of Charles University, and a traitor to Catholicism. Who was this man who only wanted peace but set off social devastation that has yet to be fully healed?

Jan Hus, the Bohemian preacher

Hus was born circa 1373 in South Bohemia*, in the village of Husinec. His parents were well-to-do Bohemians of the peasant class. Hus worked his way through Charles University in Prague; of his student days he said, "when I was a hungry scholar, I made a spoon of my bread as long as I had peas, then I ate the spoon" (quoted in *The Goose Holds the Key*, Bill Higgins, Grey Pilgrim Publications, 1992).

* The ancient kingdom of Bohemia is now part of the Czech Republic, along with Moravia and Silesia.

by Sara Tusek

Hus became a professor at Charles University and a priest in the Catholic Church at the age of 30. He began his preaching career in 1402, when he was appointed Rector of Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. Here the habit already existed of preaching in Czech rather than in Latin; the service focused less on the Latin Mass than on the preaching, no doubt because the congregation could understand what was being said in the sermon.

In these years Hus read the works of Englishman John Wycliff, whose central message was the primacy of the Scriptures (the "written Word of God") as the final authority in matters of religion. This message got Wycliff into trouble with the Catholic Church, as the logical outcome of such a belief would be the questioning of the historical authority of the Church (which was, of course, at that time the one holy catholic and apostolic church, founded by St. Peter).

It could be said that Hus was merely exercising a kind of scholarly consideration and investigation of Wycliff's inflammatory beliefs. Perhaps if the Church officials of the day had been willing to allow priests a bit of flexibility when preparing their sermons, the history of Bohemian Christianity would be milder and less filled with upheaval, and the acceptance of the Christian church in the Czech Republic today might be more favorable.

As it happened, though, the Archbishop of Prague was ordered by Pope Innocent VII to put a stop to all so-called heretical teachings. Hus did not heed this decree. In 1411 he was summoned to appear before the papal court. In the midst of negotiating with the Pope, denying that he was a heretic, Hus then became caught up in another controversy involving a crusade, the sale of indulgences, rival popes—all the ingredients of Reformation melodramatic evil-doing—that produced a tide of righteous indignation in Prague, of which Hus became a key spokesperson.



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Hus under scrutiny

Hus, predictably, spoke out in the pulpit against the latest crusade and the sale of indulgences by the Church of Rome. At this point Hus lost the support of the royal court, which was not willing to defy the papacy any longer. Jerome of Prague and other leading clerics, as well as the public, still supported Hus, but were worried that events were getting out of hand.

The symbolic public burning of the two papal bulls (documents concerning the crusade and the indulgences) by religious reformers was answered by the king with the execution of three Bohemians, who became martyrs in the popular mind. Hus left Prague in 1412, just in time to avoid being seized by the king to be delivered to the Pope, who was by now quite angry with Hus and his persistent refusal to stop preaching what the Church considered heresy.

The Council of Constance

A reckoning was on its way. Defying the Church, even a Church whose actions were questionable and whose authority was being challenged from many quarters, cannot be overlooked indefinitely. As Hus slipped into the background in Bohemia, quietly writing in his country retreat, The Council of Constance (Germany) was convened, with the hope of solving some of the thorny theological questions revolving around the authority of the Church of Rome. This council was the event of the day—all the biggest names in the Church would be together, discussing current problems and examining possible ways to move forward in a spirit of inquiry, not condemnation.

At least, this is what Hus was told would happen in Constance. Hus was granted a guarantee of safe-conduct to Constance by the Emperor Sigismund; Hus trusted that he would be able to travel to the Council and return with no fear of molestation. But no sooner was

Hus in Constance than angry bishops had him arrested (over the weak protests of Sigismund) and thrown into prison.

After a year in his cell, a weakened and ill Hus was finally taken to the Council to defend himself. He offered to recant any of his stated beliefs that could be proven to be contrary to Scripture; no such scriptural proof was offered. Being still convinced that he had not acted against the Scriptures, Hus refused to recant and was burned at the stake on June 6, 1415. This burning ignited (please forgive the pun) a conflagration of religious wars and treachery that eventually all but destroyed Central Europe for more than a generation.

The Council of Constance

A brave man who refused to back down when his beliefs were challenged. A foolish man who disobeyed the Pope, his earthly Father, after taking holy vows of obedience. Was Hus a hero or a heretic? He set the Scriptures above the Church, which is of course one key theme of the Protestant Reformation. Yet even today there is still informed debate as to the wisdom of placing anything above the Bride of Christ (the Church).

The Protestant Reformation, even as it was above all an attempt to purify the Bride of Christ and bring Her out of error, was also the crucible for the lengthy European conflict between the authority of the Church of Rome and that of secular rulers. Jan Hus can be seen as a modern symbol of both Protestantism and national pride; he can also be seen as a man who refused to bend, when bending just a little might have given him more years to preach and change minds. It's very typically Czech to withhold judgment on Hus, a man who himself tried to withhold judgment on the Church of Rome and remain within its communion. For this reason, if no other, Jan Hus may serve as one of the more typical symbols of the Czech nation.

From the New York Times Archives:

Dec. 18, 1999. ITALY: JAN HUS APOLOGY -- John Paul II apologized for the "cruel" execution of Jan Hus, a Czech religious reformer who was burned at the stake in 1415. The apology was timed for the visit from the Czech president, Vaclav Havel, who donated the Christmas tree outside St. Peter's that is to be lighted today. Alessandra Stanley (NYT)

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