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John Huss

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John Huss

Introduction

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century is considered by many to be the greatest religious reformation in the history of Europe. It is associated closely with the life of Martin Luther, the great German Augustinian monk, who in October 31, 1517 nailed 95 theses on the bulletin board of the Wittenberg University chapel protesting against the abuses of the indulgences and called for a debate. This event was seen by many as the spark that ignited this remarkable religious revolution. However, Matthew Spinka is more accurate when he says this event was not the beginning of the Reformation but the result of a reform movement that began two centuries before and was particularly effective during conciliar period.¹

During the previous two centuries before Luther called for a debate on the indulgence issue, and his eventual revolt against the church, there were many voices within the Roman Catholic Church who saw the deplorable conditions of the church and called for reform. Time and time again their voices were silenced. They were condemned, called heretics, and executed as traitors to the church. But no sooner than their voices were silenced, others were raised up calling for reformation. Most notable among these voices were the English philosopher/professor

¹ For a description of highlights of this reformatory movement see Matthew Spinka, ed. and trans *John Huss at the Council of Constance* (New York and London Columbia University Press 1965, 3-86.

John Wycliffe at Oxford University, Girolamo Savonarola, the charismatic priest at Florence Italy and John Huss, the scholar/preacher/professor at the University of Prague in Bohemia.

When we consider the long road of reform in the church, “the reformatory demands of John Huss should not be treated as a sporadic and isolated effort on the part of a single individual, but an integral part of an organized movement of which his very judges at the Council of Constance were outstanding representations. Huss work therefore may be regarded as a transitional stage from the earlier medieval period to the Reformation and thus provide a link between the old and the new reform movement”.²

The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze how the reformation began by John Huss anticipated and inspired the great Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. In John Huss’ native Bohemia, there were reformers who preceded him and laid the foundation for the reform that he would spearhead. Among the most notable were: John Milicz of Kromeniz (1325-1374), Matthew of Janov (1355-1393) and Thomas of Stitne (1331-1409).

John Milicz is called by some the “Father of Czech Reform.” Not much is known of his early days. He became troubled by the avarice of his fellow church officials. After spending five and a half years in the chancery he was ordered to the priesthood and appointed canon of St. Vitus Cathedral, the highest position short of the prelacy available to any of the Prague clergy. He gave up his position in the church and devoted himself to a life of poverty and preaching the gospel of Jesus. He had great zeal for the gospel and denounced superficial religiosity and external conformity. He preached in German and Czech and soon large crowds of people flocked to hear him. Soon he had a devoted group of followers. One of Milicz’s most remarkable achievements was transformation of a brothel into a hospice for some two hundred

² Matthew Spinka, *John Huss: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 1968), 3.

converted prostitutes. Milicz was accused of acting as a superior to these women and was later charged with heresy and he went to Rome where he was cleared and later to Avignon where he died before a verdict was reached. The reform work he established was taken over by the church and his pupils and friends were tried and expelled from Prague. Thus Milicz's work appeared to have ended.⁵

But his work of reform would not die. It would be carried by Matthew Janov who became an enthusiastic disciple of Milicz. He spent nine years at the University of Paris studying theology. When he returned home to Prague devoted himself to the zealous study of the Scriptures and preaching. He received a small income from his post as cathedral preacher and penitentiary. Like his mentor before him, Matthew embraced the life of apostolic poverty. He was a diligent student of the Bible and began preaching against the sins of the church, denouncing the Pope Clement VII as the antichrist⁶

Janov did not, as his precursors had done, limit himself to denouncing the glaring abuses of the clergy; he went further. He waged war not only on the Pharisees, who rigidly observe "the letter" but ignore "the spirit" of "the text"; who, as he himself explained, were more given to trust the intentions of men than to remain faithful to the truths of life and to charity towards one's "neighbor", but he is also caustic with the "*book of ceremonies*" which is no longer a "means" but has become an "end" and sands in the way of direct communion of the soul with God. Religious rituals are of secondary importance. The priest may actually be an unnecessary

⁵ Spinka, 14-16; See also Herbert B. Workman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* 2 vols (London: Charles Kelly, 1902), 2:102-105.

⁶ Spinka 17, See also Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 15, 28.

intermediary between man and his Maker.⁷ These ideas were already anticipating the Protestant principles of the priesthood of all believers.

Janov devoted time and energy in translating the Bible into Czech, so the laity could have access to the word of God. He along with two other reformers were called before a solemn assembly of the synod and forced to recant publicly. Janov had to withdraw his opposition to idolatrous veneration of images, relics and the saints and particularly to cease his advocacy of frequent communion. He was forbidden to preach half a year, to confession and to administer the Eucharist anywhere but his church.⁸

Janov instead focused on his literary work with greater zeal aiming primarily on the exposition of scriptural truth. He denounced the abuses in the churches and the overemphasis on external ritualism and ceremonialism of the church. His reform program may be summarized as “restitutionalism – the return by the church to teaching and practice of the gospel of Christ and his apostles as established in the primitive church.”⁹ This anticipated the reformation emphasis of the radical reformers.

Among the devoted followers of both Milic and Matthew was Thomas Stitne, a student of the University of Prague. His main contribution in the reform movement were his writings in the Czech language that made his work accessible to the common people.¹⁰ The desire by many of these Czech reformers to make the word of God accessible to the common people would become one of the great themes of the Protestant reformers. The work of these early Czech reformers would provide the blueprint and inspiration for the 16th. Century reformers.

Life of John Huss

⁷ Spinka 18, Kaminsky, 192.

⁸, 18. See also Christine C. Ames, *Medieval Heresies* (Cambridge: University Press, 2015), 296.

⁹ 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19-20; The trio Milic, Janov and Stitne were also sometimes referred to as the “Bohemian Brethren.” See George Wainwright, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 312

John Huss (Jan Hus) is considered by many reformation scholars as a leading anticipatory reformer that would set the stage for the great Reformation of the 16th century. In many ways his work anticipated the work of some of the leading reformers of the 16th century, especially Martin Luther.

John Huss was born in 1373 in Husinec, a village in Southern Bohemia and died at the stake by burning on July 6, 1415 in Constance, Germany. His Czech name means goose. It was said that before his untimely death a prophecy was proclaimed. “Let the goose be sacrificed, but one hundred years hence out of the ashes, there will arise a swan, who would uphold the truth that he defended.”¹¹ Many believe that this referred to Martin Luther who would carry on the work of Huss and beyond.

“Huss youth was n from that of the young men of his time, that is to say and licentious. Surely, the following self-approach which Huss made in one of his letters must refer to that period: “To have been overly fond of elegant clothes and gambling.” In his early youth he took part in, “roistering escapades, but as he learned the Sacred Scriptures he repented.”

Not much is known of Huss’ boyhood and university career. His father died when he was young and his mother took special care in his development, teaching him how to pray. His

¹¹ See also Benito Mussolini, *John Huss The Veracious*, (New York: Italian Book Company, 1932) 68. Benito Mussolini is best known as a despotic leader of Italy who participated in the rise of fascism during the World War II. However, before entering into fascist party, Mussolini was a scholar and writer, starting out as a socialist newspaperman. Mussolini published a book on Jan Hus in Italian in 1913, which was reprinted in English in 1929 and in 1932. Mussolini saw Hus as a socialist reformer.

Thomas A. Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform and Social Revolution in Bohemia* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 196-97.

mother appears to have a great impact on his later spiritual life.¹³ Huss studied in the department of Arts, Philosophy and Theology. He obtained a BA degree in 1393, BD in 1394, and MA in 1396¹⁴He supported himself by singing in the church as Luther did over a hundred years later.Huss was far from ascetic. He admits to have fallen under the influence of his friends who only spent their time on drinking and feasting. It was only after he graduated that he became ashamed of his earlier days and decided to dedicate his life to study of Scriptures.¹⁵

, assigned to preach in the Chapel of Bethlehem, a sort of national sanctuary founded by a wealthy burgher of Prague and the knight John of Mulheim. The Chapel was capable of holding three thousand people, yet in spite of its size it was always overflowing. The preaching of Huss won the favor of the crowds and that of the Court, and in a particular manner that of Queen Sophia, consort of Wenceslaus, then king of the Bohemians. It is maintained that Huss was the queen's confessor.

The sermons delivered by Huss at the Chapel of Bethlehem proposed to purify the Roman Church, which was at this time weathering a great crisis. The rivalry of the two Popes of Rome and Avignon and the scandals in his and low ranks were fomenting heresy, and were stressing the need and the urge of radical reform.¹⁷

The Historical Context of John Huss' Life

¹³ Ota Pavlicek and Frantisek Smahel, *A Companion to Jan Hus* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 11.

¹⁴ David Schaff *John Huss- His Life and Teachings After Five Hundred Years* (New York Charles Scribner's and Sons 1915), 20

¹⁵

¹⁷ Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 6.

An understanding of the historical church context in which Huss lived provides some clarity on the nature of the issues Huss faced. John Huss lived during one of the most tumultuous periods of medieval Christianity. Medieval Catholicism had recently ended the infamous period of the Babylonian captivity in the period the Papal Schism.

Between the years 1377-1417, the papacy was moved to Avignon, France and came under the domination of the French monarchy. During those seventy years, all the popes were French. The majority of the cardinals in the Sacred College were French. It was such a period of venality and corruption that contemporaries called it the Third Babylon "Church offices were set for sale and lucrative livings were filled before their incumbents were dead, two or even three ecclesiastics paying for the right of succession and standing, as it were, in line until the living incumbents died, and the others, one by one, filled out their turns."¹⁸

The Babylonian captivity was followed by the Papal Schism. In their attempt to resolve the issue of who and where the real pope should live, they created a bigger problem. Pope Urban VI was elected in Rome but alienated many in the Roman curia who then returned to Avignon and elected Clement VII. Now there were two popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon, hurling curses at each other. This in turn created a division in Europe about whom they should give loyalty to. At the University of Prague when Huss was a student. They tended to be loyal to the pope in Rome. It was within this spiritual morass and moral confusion that the young John Huss lived. It is no wonder that later in his life he would question the legitimacy and authority of the papacy.

Intersection of Nationalism and Religious Reform

¹⁸ Schaff, *John Huss; His Life and Teachings*, 16.

One historian ironically called Huss a “German Hussian paved the way for Luther and Protestantism”.²³ The political and religious circumstances of Bohemia would provide a startling intersection between nationalism and religious reform, which would later find its historical parallel in Luther’s Germany. In Bohemia, the religious reform took on a national character because of the history of conflict against the Germans who dominated Bohemian life and were major guardians of church traditions and authority. The most licentious and moral profligate among the Bohemian clergy were prelates of German nationality. However, it was a German speaking Austrian by the name of Conrad Waldhausen who would emerge as the first major reformer. He would greatly influence the three major Czech reformers had a profound impact on John Huss.

Waldhausen remained faithful to the Church but he denounced those prelates who showed their unfitness for their mission by their profligate and corrupt behavior. Although threatened and persecuted by those who attacked, the leading church authorities protected him and he lived out his life in peace.²⁵

The increasing animosity between the papacy and Bohemia evolved into a conflict that became more and more nationalistic, when the pope issued his interdict against the city of Prague and silence and gloom descended upon the land majority of the Sacraments were prohibited, church bells no longer rang, and the dead were interred without the benefits of the last rites. These events were seen as hostility against the Bohemian people and only seemed to arouse the.

“Huss,” says 19th century historian Henry Milman, “was now no isolated teacher, no mere follower of a condemned English heretic; he was even more than the head of a sect; he

²³ Mussolini, 100.

²⁵ Mussolini, 22.

almost represented a kingdom-no doubt much more than the half of Bohemia. King Wenzel and his Queen were on his side, at least as against the clergy.”²⁶ Like Luther’s, Huss’ words were half battles. His books on the abominations of monks and the members of Antichrist, directed against the hierarchy, were sledge-hammer blows that were felt throughout Europe²⁷.

Yet Huss was not a chauvinistic nationalist. On one occasion he said, I prefer a good German to a bad Czech which meant that for the sake of justice he strove for national freedom but regarded it as a means to a supra national justice order supra-national justice and order.²⁸ This was the first national revolution against the Church of Rome, a hundred years before the Reformation had showed that for the sake of religion a whole people might rise in revolt.²⁹

Huss grew up among Czech peasants who consciously and bitterly saw their rights being curtailed by the ever-stronger nobility, the German kings and the rapacious church, which they also called the German church. They enviously watched the German colonists and citizens who with self-government and their rights grew richer and richer. There was an atmosphere of social and national tension among the³⁰ “Religious conflict, reinforced by social factors, broke out and as the socially and religiously discontented in Bohemia were almost exclusively Czechs it gained an irresistible momentum. The part played by national feeling made this revolt unique. For the first time in modern history a united nation was to rise in arms. It was fighting for its faith, but national feeling, particularly strong for social reasons, was also engaged. For the first time the

²⁶ Henry H. Milman, *History of Latin Christianity* 9 vols. (London: John Murray, 1872), 8:242.

²⁷ William H. Withrow *Beacon Lights of the Reformation* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1899)44

²⁸ Paul Roubiczeh and Joseph Kalmer, *Warrior of God: The Life and Death of John Hus* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1947), 4.

²⁹ 5.

³⁰

overwhelming and fateful strength of national feeling was revealed. John Hus personifies the fusion of these three compelling forces”³¹

“The religious problems in Bohemia too, coincided with the social and national one. The state taxation, which cripples the people, is dwarfed by the exactions of the Church. The poor people, the Czechs, are again the victims. And the rich, powerful Germans, who must lose power by any change, strive against a reformation of the Church, which they rule; they oppose such an innovation as sermons in Czech. But above all, and this is more important than any social or national consideration, the people, devout and Godfearing, find themselves thrown back on the instrumentality of a Church who uses a language they do not understand, whose morals they must despise, and whose demands for money they cannot satisfy. The Church, whose service the people need, no longer opens the way for them but bars it and brings it into doubt and contempt. It destroys the people’s link with the God they cannot do without. With their last strength the people try to satisfy the demands the Church makes upon them, but in vain. The man who will point out to the people the immediate way to God without this mediation of the Church will be the liberator of the nation”³²

The reach of Huss influence and how it intersected with the state could also be shown by the willingness of many of the nobles of Bohemia to appeal to King Sigismund for the release of Huss while he was incarcerated at Constance. A petition dated May 8, 1415 signed by eight Moravian noblemen and other noblemen addressed to Sigismund and interceded for the release of Huss. They affirmed that he was a good man and faithful and honest preacher and minister of the Holy Scriptures. Another appeal dated May 12 and signed this time by two hundred and fifty

³¹ 40

³² Roubiczeh and Kalmer, 39

Moravian and Bohemian nobles addressed to Sigismund reminding him of his safe keeping pledge to Huss. They also affirmed the honesty and faithfulness of Huss. In another appeal signed by other Bohemian nobles “an urgent appeal was made to the Bohemian and Moravian nobles at Constance to be insistent in interceding with the king not to permit the iniquity being perpetrated upon Huss to continue.”³⁴

Schaff described these appeals as representing the views of the people at large. Huss’ character is vouched for and also his fidelity in preaching the gospel. His arrest and treatment are treated as criminal injustice and violation of solemn pledges. Huss treatment is seen as an insult to Bohemia³⁵ In other words Huss represented the nation of Bohemia, he was their champion against injustice that was constantly being inflicted on them, their holy warrior against corruption, vanity and a decadent church, and he embodied their dreams, hopes and visions of an independent nation. Many of these ideas would reoccur during the period of Luther’s reformation and gave fuel to the reformation in Germany. So the intersection between national politics and religion fueling reformation found its antecedent here in the experience of Huss in Bohemia, many years before it would become a major feature of the 16th. Century Reformation.

Influence of John Wycliffe-Warrior of God

John Wycliffe (1331 –

1384) was an English [Scholastic philosopher, theologian](#) translator, reformer and university teacher at Oxford in England.³⁶ Wycliffe downplayed the importance of the sacraments as the

³⁴ Schaff, *John Huss- His Life and Teachings*, 198, 199

³⁵ Schaff, *John Huss- His Life and Teachings*, 199

³⁶ For a recent biography see: Andrew Larsen, “John Wyclif c. 1331-1384” in Ian Christopher Levy (ed.), *A Companion to John Wyclif: Late Medieval Theologian* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1-61.

only way to salvation and insisted that holiness of an individual was more important than official office; that is, a truly pious person was morally, and thus ecclesiastically, superior to a wicked ordained cleric. Wycliffe despised the orders of friars and monks, as being repugnant to scripture and challenged the privileged status of the clergy and the exorbitant luxury and pomp of the churches and their ceremonies.³⁷

The influence of John Wycliffe on John Huss was profound and far-reaching. But the influence of this English man was more than that of one man on another man. There was a strong bond between Bohemia and England. Princess Anne of Luxemburg, sister of Wenceslas, king of Bohemia, was given in marriage to King Richard II of England. She was a pious believer and took with her to London the Gospels in Latin, German and Czech. She also facilitated contact between the universities of Oxford and Prague which enabled the writings of Wycliffe to reach Prague. Other students from Bohemia bought Wycliffe's books.³⁸ A personal friend of Jan Huss, himself a notorious Bohemian reformer, Jerome of Prague, studied in England for a short time and brought back from Oxford copies of Wycliffe's work. He praised and lauded Wycliffe's work without mentioning the fact that Wycliffe was already considered a notorious heretic and that his followers were being exterminated by fire and sword. Jerome got Huss to read Wycliffe and initially Huss gave only a passing glance and begged his friend to dump the books in the Vltava River.⁴⁰

³⁷ For Wycliffe's view of sacraments see Stephen Penn, "Wyclif and the Sacraments" in Levy, *A Companion to John Wyclif*, 199-291. Wycliffe was also an early advocate for translation of thinto the common language. He completed his translation directly from thintoEnglish in the year 1382, now known as

³⁸ Roubicez and Kalmer⁵⁴; For a further study on connection between England and Bohemia see Alfred Thomas, *A Blessed Shore: England and Bohemia from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 98-119.

⁴⁰ Roubicez and Kalmer, 74.

In However, after a more careful examination, 1398, Huss completed the copy of five of Wycliffe's treatise in 1398 and used them as the basis for his lectures. These writings began to awaken in Huss a fire and a bolder zeal for reformation. One writer noted that he could not conceal his joy and wrote in the margin, "Dear Wycliffe God grant you external bliss" . . . he continued, "Wycliffe you will turn many a head."⁴¹

As the teachings of Wycliffe penetrated into Bohemia, especially the University of Prague, and although most felt the need for reform, two opposing camps emerged. The conservatives, cautious and vacillating party composed mainly of Germans. On the other side stood the Wycliffites as they were called, consisting mainly of Czechs.⁴² Although in many ways, Wycliffe served as a spiritual and theological mentor for many Cze reformers, Huss was not quite as radical. "He did not fiercely attack the adoration of saints, nor the medieval church service . . . In the sacrament of communion he only fought against the abuses within the church and not against the doctrine." Perhaps he was aware of the charges of heresies against Wycliffe.⁴³

Huss and Wycliffe, later on along with Luther, were not calling for any new doctrine but for what they believed was a restoration of pure Christianity as taught in the Bible. Although at first theological and devotional their efforts, facing the resistance from the church, swiftly revolution. In their defenses from Papacy, both Wycliffesaw more clearly the error of the church

⁴¹ Roubicez and Kalmer, 65.

⁴² Roubicez and Kalmer, 74. The leader of Czech Wycliffites was the master at the Prague University Stanislav of Znojmo. (See Kaminsky, *A History of Hussite Revolution*, 58-61.)

⁴³ Roubiczeh and Kalmer, 60.

and the gap between themselves and the became so wide that their views took on a revolutionary nature.

Nature of the Reformation

John Hus along with his Czech reforming colleagues had one great desire in reformation effortsto return the Church to the primitive of the early churchapostolic age. defined it as restitutionalism – the return of the Church to the teachings and practices of the gospel of Christ, and his apostles as exhibited in the primitive church.⁴⁴

While the magisterial reformers like Luther, Calvin and Zwingli – spoke of returning the Church to its primitive roots, their reform was nowhere near as radical and they chose a more moderate course. It would be the radical reformers like the Anabaptists who would advocate a more drastic reform. These radical reformers were in some ways theologically more in line with some of the ideas of the Hussite reformation. The radicals of the 16th century understood their reform not simply the renovation and repairing of the old system. For them restitutionalism was the complete abandonment of the old, or the tearing down of the old and the building of a new structure. I am not sure that Huss and his colleagues intended to go that far, but they would provide the theological pattern or model for the radicals of the 16th century.

Use of Local Language

In the area of worship and word in local language, John Huss along with other Czech reformers who preceded him made this a central goal in their reform efforts. All of them possessed a

⁴⁴ Spinka, *John Hus*, 19.

burning desire to bring the gospel both in the written form and the spoken form to the people in their local language. They also understood the power of language in persuasion. The use of the Czech language was a central part of this religious revolution. The Roman church deliberately stifled the use of the local language so they could control the entire worship process. Because Huss along with the other Czech reformers made this a central element of their reforms, no wonder they appealed to so many in their country. Their message was heard and understood all over.

The Bethlehem's chapel to which Huss was assigned as a preacher was founded with the avowed purpose of preaching in the Czech language. It was consciously intended by its founder as the continuation of Milicz's Jerusalem, particularly of that part of the former foundation, which was to serve for the training of preachers imbued with the ideals and spirit of Milicz.⁴⁵ It was named Bethlehem (house of bread) because its chief function was to feed the people with the bread of life, the word of God.⁴⁶ It is in this public space that Huss was able to preach freely and shared his revolutionary religious ideas with the people.

There was only one other place where the people could hear the word of God in Czech. Those Czech preachers who wanted to preach in Czech had to do so in homes or other hiding places. The church authorities opposed those activities and those who participated in them preached at the peril of their lives.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Mussolini, 49; For connection between John Huss and John Milicz see Peter Moree, *Preaching in Fourteenth-Century Bohemia: The Life and Ideas of Milicius de Chremsir* (Herspace, Czech Republic, 1999), 203-54. See also Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, 9-14.

⁴⁶ Mussolini, 48, Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform*, 6, 12-15.

⁴⁷ Mussolini, 50

Huss contributed his most prominent service to the reform movement through his preaching. He preached twice on Sundays and it is estimated that during his twelve years of ministry at Bethlehem he preached 3,500 sermons, not counting the sermons he preached in other places. His preaching established him as the leading voice of the reform movement. The Czech populace of Prague soon thronged the chapel, both the artisans and the lower classes and also the representatives of the educated and even noble classes from among the royal entourage among them Queen Sophia herself. The university masters and students also attended the services in large numbers.⁴⁸

Huss was not only an eloquent preacher, but also devoted pastor. He had a profound care and compassion for those under his care, like the Apostle Paul. Some of his letters revealed the tender compassion of Huss even as he was facing death. Huss was not only a gifted preacher and a devoted pastor but also an excellent writer. One writer distilled his views in these four major articles: 1. Communion in both kinds, 2. Free preaching of the divine word, 3. Secularization of clerical property, 4. Punishment with temporal penalties of mortal sin and violation against the church.⁵⁸

“Huss denied the necessity of auricular confession. He deplored the adoration of images as idolatry, he demolished papal infallibility, he stormed against the ceremonial which tended more to screen the substance, and he denounced ecclesiastical Phariseism which was satisfied with keeping up appearances.”⁵⁹

⁴⁸ Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform*, 59.

⁵⁸ Mussolini⁸⁰

⁵⁹ Ota Pavlicek and František Šmahel, *A Companion to Jan Hus*, 368.

Corruption in the Church and among the clergy.

The Reforms set forth by

John Huss in many and various

ways anticipated the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century in both practice and doctrine.

John Huss along with his Czech predecessors all experienced a profound spiritual encounter that

transformed their lives before they became reformers. It stands to reason that a deep spiritual

revolution must take place in the life of one before he can take up the work of reform. This

reality would later be experienced by almost all the major reformers of the 16th century. His was

a life marked by poverty, humiliation, and self-sacrifice. John Huss denounced the corruption of

the church and the venality of its leaders. Huss recognized that the Church had lost its spiritual

morningsThe mercenary pursuits of the ecclesiastical hierarchy knew neither limits nor

obstacles. Offices were bought and sold for what they would bring. With money one could even

attain to mount to Peter's seat. The barter of offices within the ecclesiastical hierarchy was one

of the mainsprings of income to the Roman Curia. Hus here continued the work of Wycliffe and

Pierre D'Ailly (1351-1420), advocating for the change on the highest levels of this simoniac

society.⁶⁴ The monasteries, originally intended by their founders as sheltered retreats for men of

tried virtues, had become the handouts of all sorts of parasites who worshipped the Lord after a

fashion of their own, through voluptuous delights and vicious pleasures.⁶⁵ The people, who

shouldered at the cost of their toil and blood the grand stand of that ecclesiastical and civil

society, were plunged in shocking ignorance and most abject poverty by monks and laymen

⁶⁴ For Wycliffes' tract denouncing Simony, which was essentially reproduced by Huss see Terrence A. McVeigh (ed.), *On Simony* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 5. See also Louis B. Pascoe, *Church and Reform: Bishops, Theologians, and Canon Layers in the Thought of Pierre d'Ailly (1351-1420)* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 107.

⁶⁵ Mussolini, 14

alike. The least thought or threat of revolt was crushed under the fear of persecution and massacre.

Sale of Indulgences

Many of the conditions and circumstances that gave rise to the Lutheran reformation of the 16th century were present during the time of John Huss. One of these situations was the selling of indulgences in the regime of Bohemia.

The blasphemous sale of remission of sins past and permission for sins in the future, which a century later awoke the indignation of Luther, also aroused the abhorrence of Huss. Indulgences played a significant role in religious life in Prague. Hus boldly denounced the impiety of the “sin-mongers. The opposition to indulgences called for action in Rome and in March 1412 a Papal bull came to Prague confirming the sale of indulgences. While Huss was content to merely preach against the bull, Huss’ student, Jerome of Prague organized a student demonstration in June on the main square where the multitude burned all the indulgence documents, including the papal bull.⁶⁷“Dear master,” said the Town Council to , “we are astonished at your lighting up a fire, in which you run the risk of being burned yourself.” But the heroic soul heeded not the prophetic words. He went everywhere preaching with tongue and pen against the doctrine of indulgences, the worship of images, the corruption of the clergy. “They who cease to preach,” he said, “will be reputed traitors in the day of judgment.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Frantisek Smahel, *Die Präger Universität im Mittelalter: gessammelte Aufsätze* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 268.

⁶⁸ William Withrow, H. *Beacon Lights of the Reformation* (1898) (Reprint. London: Forgotten Books, 2013), 43.

Perversion of the Gospel

Huss like the reformers of the 16th century spoke much about the perversion of the gospel by the church and the need to teach and preach the gospel. What was this gospel that needed to be preached? It was primarily the message of justification by faith, which would later become one of the central pillars of the Protestant Reformation - *sola fide*. This gospel was presented as a counterweight to the pernicious doctrine of salvation by works that manifested itself in myriads of forms in medieval Catholicism. Although the views of Huss and Luther on the matter of Justification were not entirely similar, yet they both made this doctrine the central teaching of their reforms. They both recognized that bad theology leads to erroneous practice, so they both focused on correcting what they perceived to be false and erroneous teachings of the gospel.

Hus followed Augustine's exposition and concluded that the "rock" in Matthew 16:18 upon which the church had been built was Christ, not Peter. Huss' theology was strongly centered on Christ and His love for fallen humanity.⁶⁹ Huss believed that infant baptism takes away the initial sin. However, the man has a depraved nature and continues to consent to sensual desires.⁷⁰

How does one respond to God, if a soul is so depraved in sin that it cannot help but fall? Huss believed that while one part of human mind yearns for depravity there is yet one part of the mind, which desires righteousness. Divine grace enables the man to respond to the call of God. However there is no concept of irresistible grace in Hus. The individual can reject the call of

⁷⁰ Sermon for Advent III in *Magistri Iohannis Hus Opera Omnia* 22 vols. edited by Aneska Schmidtova (Prague: Academia scientiarum bohemo-slovaca, 1971), 7:39.

God. The word “predestination” does not appear in corpus of Huss’ writings nor in the writings of any Czech reformer.⁷¹ The mystery why some accept God’s grace and some don’t lays in the individual choice - the mystery of iniquity.⁷²

Hus claimed that God made his channels of grace sufficiently available for humans to develop faith and to obtain salvation. For Hus, Communion and Holy Scriptures were these “channels” of grace by which the individual is *strengthened* to respond to the call of God.⁷³ Huss held that taking sacraments or uttering the words of repentance – even on one’s deathbed - was not in itself enough for salvation.⁷⁴ The sacraments, just like Scriptures, are the channels of prevenient grace that lead a person towards personal and earnest confession and repentance.

The divine means of grace (scripture and sacraments) enable the individual to obtain faith necessary for repentance. The faith comes from hearing the word of God, claimed Hus, citing Apostle Paul.⁷⁶ A soul awakens under such influence of divine grace and has a *choice* whether to accept God’s call or not. If the individual yields to the call of God, the penitent becomes filled

⁷¹ Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reformer*, 41

⁷² John Huss, *Super IV Sententiarum* edited by Vaclav Flajshans 3vols. (Prague: Bursik and Vilimek, (1904-1907), 1: 167-168, 177, 344, 623. See also his sermon “*Spiritum nolite extinguere*” in *Iohannes Hus Positiones* edited by Aneska Schmidtova (Prague: Statni pedagogicki nakladitevstvi, 1958), 141-143.

⁷³ Huss, *Super IV Sententiarum*, 19. See also “Sermon for Easter” in *Opera Omnia* 7:180-181; See also sermon “*Dixit Martha at Jesum*” in *Positiones*, 171.

⁷⁶ Huss, *Super IV Sententiarum*, 452-454. See also “Sermon for Epiphany” in *Opera Omnia* 7:74-75.

with the Holy Spirit and with love for God.⁷⁷ Individual response to the grace of God is what is needed.⁷⁸

Only such individual filled with the Holy Spirit can perform the good works. Stimulated by grace and faith a believer grows in obedience to Christ. Huss held with Apostle James that a true faith always bears good fruit and a faith without evidence of good works of charity is not a true faith.⁷⁹ Fudge summarizes Huss' view on works: "Hus stressed the value of works...however, Hus emphasized that only God could provide the ability to live in righteousness, otherwise it might be assumed that humans could perform sufficiently so as to merit salvation on their own terms, an idea Hus deplored."⁸⁰

Use of Pictures to Teach Truth

The 16th century reformers, especially those in Germany, made much use of pictures to transmit their messages to the population that was for the most part illiterate. This strategy of using pictures was by the reformers in Bohemia. Behind the famous Bethlehem chapel where Huss served as rector was a residential quarters for poor students with an extensive hospice called College. The chapel was decorated with several pictures decorated in groups of two. In

⁷⁷ Hus, "Advent Sermon" in *Opera Omnia* 7:66; See also Fudge. 42-43.

⁷⁸ Hus, "Sermon before the Synod"(1407) in Matthias F. Illyricus, *Historia et Monumenta Ioannis Hus etque Hieronymi Pragensis* 2 vols (Nürnberg: Montanus et Neuberus, 1715), 2:52.

⁷⁹ Hus, *Commentary on James* in Illyricus, *Historia et Monumenta* 2:204-208; see also Super IV Sententiarum, 6, 45-65 and 453-455.

⁸⁰ Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform*, 44, commenting on Hus, *Historia et Monumenta* 2:202-203 and 194-195.

one picture was the Pope sitting in resplendent attire atop a large horse. The opposite picture showed Jesus carrying a cross. The second picture shows the Emperor Constantine and Ludwig greeting the Pope in the city of Rome, a palace, the state with all its glory and power. Then Constantine places a crown on his head, clothes him in purple and then helps him up on his horse. The opposite picture showed Jesus before Pilate being abused and a crown of thorns placed on his head. In a third picture the Pope is depicted as sitting on his horse and his feet being kissed, in contrast Christ is kneeling down, washing the disciples feet. The people noted the contrast and concluded that the pompous pontiff must indeed be “the one who acts contrary to Christ,” or shortly - the antichrist.⁸¹

Huss also used similar in his sermons, condemning the pride of Papacy and denouncing the veneration of the Pope as blasphemy.⁸²

The Council of Constance 1415

This Council was called to deal with three major issues:

1. To put an end to the papal schism that had torn the church apart for 36 years.
2. Reform the state of had suffered great because of the chronic strife and schism.
3. To suppress heresy.⁸³

⁸¹ Fudge, *Jan Hus, Religious Reform*, 65.

⁸² Huss, *Postill in Opera Omnia 2*: 68, 178-179, 326.

⁸³ Edward Peters, *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 286-289; See also Philip Stump, *The Reforms of the Council of Constance (1414–1418)*. (New York: Brill, 1994).

John Huss was invited to appear before the Council and under the safe-conduct issued by Emperor Sigismund of Germany he journeyed to Constance. On his arrival he was greeted graciously by Pope John XXIII“Pope John XXIII, who was trembling for fear of his own safety, received him graciously. He solemnly declared: “Though John Huss had killed my own brother he should be safe.” John XXIII had two rival Popes to contend with-Gregory XII and a Benedict XIII. (They were all three subsequently deposed by the council, and Martin V. elected in their place). To prevent or postpone his own deposition, Pope John entered upon the persecution and suppression of heresy, an object, which he felt would unite, for the time at least, all the rival factions of the council.⁸⁵

nemies of Huss had preceded him and placed charges of heresies against him. Summoned before the Pope and Cardinals he demanded to be arraigned before the entire council, nevertheless he complied saying, “I shall put my trust in our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and shall be more happy to die for his glory than to live denying the truth.”⁸⁶

In spite of the emperor’s safe conduct, Huss was arrested and put in a dungeon described by the author in the following way, “In this loathsome vault-its walls reeking with damp, and so dark that only for a short time each day was he able to read by the feeble light struggling through an aperture in the roof-for wellnigh eight weary months, with irons on his legs, and fastened by a chain to the wall, the valiant confessor languished, and only escaped from its duration vile through the door of martyrdom.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Joelle Rollo-Koster and Thomas M. Izbicki (eds.), *A Companion to the Great Western Schism (1378-1417)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 241-244.

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⁸⁷ 47.

Enduring Influence of John Huss

Augustine, Bernard, Luther to speak only of religious characters exercised their influence by their lives and unity. Huss chiefly by his in prison and the flames. Paul's death was an incident in his career. In dying Huss accomplished more than he did by living.⁸⁸

Schaff asserts that there were three great institutions of medieval Catholics in the papal monarchy, the church, and the Inquisition. John Huss belonged to a group of individuals in five different groups that belonged to one of them. He attacked all these three institutions. Huss was essentially following a movement which recognized the supreme authority of scripture and the right of conscience.⁸⁹

Wycliffe and Huss were considered the arch heretics of this period who opposed these three medieval constructions. They contested the proposition that what the visible church teaches must be believed because the church teaches it. They turned away from an infallible people and an infallible visible church to the living Christ who rules personally in the hearts of believers and the scripture. They questioned and denied the churches right to punish heretics with physical punishment, in one sense they were setting in motion the idea of religious freedom that would become a hallmark of modern Protestant Christianity. Bibliography

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⁸⁸ David Schaff, *John Huss, His Life, Teaching and Death after Five Hundred Years* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p 9.

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