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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

MAGISTER JAN HUS¹

I

JAN HUS derives his surname from the village of Husinec where he was born in 1370, of Czech peasant stock, but he enters history when we find him enrolled as a student in the University of Prague in 1390. With the University he was to be associated for the rest of his life. In 1396 he graduated Master of Arts, and came under obligation to teach and to lecture to undergraduates. He was elected Dean of his Faculty in 1401. He also studied Theology and took his Bachelor's degree, but did not proceed to the Doctorate. Hence he is known to fame as Master Jan Hus.

The University of Prague had been founded in 1348 by Charles of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, and Holy Roman Emperor, on the model of the universities of Paris and Oxford, the only academic institutions then existing in Europe outside of Italy. Charles no doubt intended his foundation to lend lustre to the principal town of his kingdom, for which he had also obtained from the Pope the dignity of an Archiepiscopal City. But a university was then in no sense a national institution. It was a chartered corporation of learned men, with liberties and statutes of its own, and a high self-consciousness as an organ of universal Christendom. Fortified by its privileges it enjoyed, at least until the end of the fourteenth century, considerable freedom in the expression of opinion. Its speech, like that of the Church, was Latin, and its "citizenship" was open to all who loved or sought learning, from all lands of the Christian West. Its dominating science was Theology. But already the ominous word "nation" had been introduced both in Paris and Oxford, though hardly in the modern sense of the term. By the Founder's Statute the University of Prague was organised for certain purposes in four "nations"—Saxon, Bavarian, Polish and Czech—of which the first three were largely composed of Germans. It must be remembered that Charles was

¹ An address delivered in the Scottish Czecho-slovak House, Edinburgh, 6th July, 1942.

Emperor as well as King of Bohemia; and that even his hereditary Bohemian kingdom contained many German subjects, not only the ancestors of those whom we have recently learned to call the Sudeten Germans, but also the inhabitants of the purely Germanic provinces of Silesia and Lusatia, which pertained to the Bohemian crown.

When Jan Hus became a student in Prague the universities of Europe were entering upon what must be regarded as the most influential epoch in their history. As recognised organs of learned opinion they were beginning to play a leading part in the ecclesiastical and political life of the age. It looked as if the Studium might take its place as a third force, side by side with the Regnum and the Sacerdotium. The intellectuals of Prague did not lack for subjects of real and exciting debate in addition to the somewhat arid and threadbare themes of ordinary scholastic disputation.

There was, first of all, the Wycliffite question. John Wyclif is properly regarded as the last of the great Oxford scholastic philosophers and theologians, the glory of his university for a generation. He attained the height of his fame and influence about 1377. Some time before this he had dabbled in politics as a supporter of Edward III's policy of financial resistance to the French Pope at Avignon. But from mere tactical anti-papalism he had gone on to a radical criticism of the Church—the Papacy, the hierarchy, the Religious Orders, the morals and manners of the clergy, their excessive wealth, popular superstitions, finally even the doctrine of transubstantiation. Moreover he put forth a revolutionary theory of authority both in Church and State. He maintained that all true lordship or authority (*dominium*) was founded on grace, and drew the conclusion that it lapsed when its holder fell into mortal sin.

The English Hierarchy, backed by the Pope, early took proceedings against him, but with the support of the university, of a faction of the nobility, and of the commons of London, he maintained himself until 1382 when he and his doctrines were condemned and hounded out of Oxford by Archbishop Courtenay. He was, however, left to continue his work in peace in the retirement of his rectory of Lutterworth, where he died in 1384. He had given to Mediaeval religious dissent its completest expression, theologically grounded in Holy Scripture. His is the academic heresy *par excellence*.

Whatever sympathy there might have been for his views in Paris, it was not to be expected that an English theologian would find support in a French university during the Hundred Years' War. But in Prague it was different. The Plantagenets of England and the Luxembourg dynasty had been drawing together diplomatically, and this was symbolised when in 1382, after protracted negotiations, Anna of Luxembourg, daughter of Charles IV and sister of his son and successor Wenceslas, was married to Richard II. This situation presumably led to closer relations between the universities of Oxford and Prague, and Czech students appear to have come to Oxford instead of, as formerly, to Paris, by preference. At all events, from 1382 Wyclif's writings began to be disseminated in Prague, where they were vehemently discussed both in regular academic disputations and in private gatherings of Masters and Doctors. In the Czech "nation" especially, but not exclusively, Wyclif's views found champions; among them Master Jan Hus.

In 1403 the ecclesiastical authorities of the Archdiocese of Prague submitted to the University for its condemnation Forty-Five Articles said to have been excerpted from the writings of Wyclif. After debate in which Hus took part, they were condemned by majority vote, and it was forbidden to teach or defend them publicly or privately. From this condemnation Hus and his associates dissented. Not that he maintained that all the articles were true. Some he decisively rejected. But he claimed that some of them were substantially true, and should not be condemned with the others "en bloc". From this position he never departed, and we shall have occasion to return to it later.

II

Another question in which the universities took a leading part was the healing of the contemporary Papal Schism. In 1378, shortly after the return of the Papacy from Avignon to Rome, Urban VI had been elected Pope. But soon the bulk of the Cardinals, being Frenchmen, on the plea, not altogether unjustified, that the election had been carried through under threat of violence, withdrew from Rome and elected Clement VII, a Frenchman, who resumed residence in Avignon. Each claimed to be the true Pope and anathematised the other. It looks now like a straightforward question of fact and law, but it soon became complicated when each of the rivals found support and

Christendom was divided in allegiance between them. Italy, the Empire, England and Bohemia adhered to the Roman Pope, while France, Spain and Scotland adhered to the Pope of Avignon. Matters only got worse as time passed, and the growth of vested interests made the evil more and more intractable.

To its credit the University of Paris, which belonged to the allegiance of Clement VII, realised the scandal of the Schism and undertook a long campaign for union. Failing to secure the resignation of either or both Popes, it tried other methods, one of which was to induce princes to withdraw their allegiance and to support a Council which as a last resort might depose the contending Popes.

For this purpose an embassy was sent in 1409 to Wenceslas, King of Bohemia. He himself was disposed to favour the project, but he was faced with the opposition of the Bohemian clergy, most of whom in thirty years must have received their benefices from the Roman Pope whom they had obeyed at that time, and were thus bound to him by loyalty and interest. The King therefore submitted the question to the University of Prague. By majority vote of three "nations" to one the university rejected the proposed neutrality, the dissentient "nation" being the Czech. The king thereupon took the drastic step of altering its constitution, giving three votes to the Czechs and one to the others. The aggrieved Germans therefore withdrew to Saxony. Hus was later charged with having procured the king's decree, and with disrupting the university. At all events he seems to have been the leader of his "nation", for he was elected Rector for the year 1409.

The Council that was to give union to the Church met at Pisa in that same year and proved a dismal failure. It deposed the two rival Popes and elected a new one. But inasmuch as neither of the two would recognise the deposition and as both could still count on albeit diminished support, the Schism was made worse. There were now three Popes instead of two.

The Schism, strictly speaking, need only have raised questions of fact and Canon Law, but it actually raised harder questions of theology. It brought to a head the century-old debate on the nature and limits of Papal authority. Papalists claimed for the Pope, by divine right, not merely Spiritual Supremacy, i.e. absolute control over all the means of grace by which men hoped to secure eternal felicity, but also,

inasmuch as man's eternal salvation is a higher concern than any temporal ends, temporal supremacy over kings and governments. "To submit to the Roman Pontiff is for every human creature absolutely necessary for salvation." This assertion was so deeply rooted in Christian tradition, and so plausible from the point of view of Christian moral sentiment that it was extremely difficult to attack. None but totalitarians would to-day deny that considerations of Religion, or at all events of morals, are superior to those of secular politics. When the Pope really represented spiritual and ethical interests his position was impregnable. Even when the Pope was in fact a bad man notoriously, or abused his absolute power, as it was all but universally believed he did in the fourteenth century, theology was practically helpless. Few were willing, with Marsilius of Padua, to subject the Spiritual to the Temporal power. Wyclif refused to recognise any merely official or formal claim to power. Spiritual power must be truly spiritual and righteously exercised, or it is to be rejected as Anti-Christ. His test of righteousness was obedience to the divine law of Scripture. The Paris Doctors hazarded the theory that a General Council representative of the entire Church was the supreme authority in spiritual matters, with the Pope as its executive officer.

The problem must have engaged the attention of the learned Doctors and Masters of Prague, but we know nothing of their discussions before 1409. But in that year it became prominent, when Hus defied a Papal Bull, excommunication and citation to Rome, and appealed to Christ and the Law of God. The Pope, he declared, is the successor of the Apostles when he leads the Apostolic life and fulfils the duties of an Apostle, not because he happens to be the legal head of an institution which passes under the name of the Church. This is clearly Wycliffite doctrine, and indeed the part of his teaching generally felt to be most dangerous. Hus's old friends and teachers of the Theological Faculty now deserted him and maintained the absolute "Spiritual" supremacy of the Pope. His most important Latin writings are devoted to a polemic against them and their thesis.

This brings me to another side of Hus's work, which was perhaps nearer to his own heart, more characteristic of the man, and in the event more influential.

About 1400 he had been ordained priest, but unlike most

university men, including Wyclif himself, he neither sought nor received any ecclesiastical benefice. Instead he was in 1402 appointed preacher in the Bethlehem Chapel at Prague.

This was, I imagine, a unique foundation in the Middle Ages. It had been founded and endowed by two Czech laymen solely for the purpose of preaching the Word of God in the Czech tongue, the incumbent being bound to preach twice on Sundays and Holy Days. Other such preacherhips were founded in various places in the late Middle Ages, but normally in connection with a Cathedral or other Church. Bethlehem had neither altar, font nor cemetery, and the administration of sacraments was almost explicitly excluded from its functions. Nevertheless it had to pay a rent to the rector of the parish of Sts. Philip and James in which it was situated, by way of compensation for any possible trespass on his parochial rights and dues.

From the traces of it that can still be seen the Bethlehem Chapel must have been a plain, irregular oblong building, with the pulpit in the middle of the east wall, to which a doorway, still preserved, gave direct access from the preacher's manse. If there was a gallery all round, as there may have been, it belongs to a type of ecclesiastical architecture with which we are very familiar in Scotland. It was simply a great auditorium. But it is interesting to note that Hus introduced into the services the unusual practice of congregational hymn-singing, naturally in the vernacular. It is tempting to see in this chapel the embodiment of the ideas of the preachers now known as the "precursors" of Hus, who had aimed at the purification, the popularisation and the personalisation of religion among the Czech people. At all events during Hus's ministry, the chapel exerted an immense influence. The congregation was drawn from all parts of the city. Nobles attended when they chanced to be in town, and the Queen Sophia herself testifies that she had often heard the Word of God preached there.

III

At first Hus's preaching consists entirely of what we should now call moral exhortation. But he called it evangelical. He fulminated against the deadly sins, and exhorted the people to obey the commandments and follow the counsels of the Gospel. His message was a strenuous personal ethical Christianity, founded on the precepts of Christ. But he soon began

to handle the thorny subject of Church Reform, or at least to attack with ever-increasing vigour the lives and manners of the clergy. They were accustomed to that sort of thing and could stand a good deal of it in their own Synods where it was harmless and ineffectual. "Reform of the Church in Head and Members" must have been the theme of innumerable Synod sermons, as well as of a multitude of academic disquisitions. But it was a different matter to be held up to opprobrium before vast audiences of lay folk drawn from every class in the community. In 1408 we find the clergy complaining to their archbishop of Hus's excessive attacks on them by which he made them odious to the people; denouncing especially benefice-hunting, pluralism, simony, exactions of payment for the sacraments, and all the well-known scandals of clerical life in the later Middle Ages. It seems that by this time, too, Hus was dealing with the topics of controversy current in the schools, and had been praising Wyclif as Doctor Evangelicus, who had set forth the true and effective method of Church Reform; viz., that of bringing back the clergy to the life of primitive simplicity and evangelical poverty.

The archbishop had formerly been friendly to Hus and had indeed invited him several times to preach to his diocesan Synod. But he had opposed him on the question of neutrality as between the two Popes. In 1409, however, he made his peace with the new Pisan Pope, and obtained from him a Bull prohibiting preaching save in Cathedral, College, Parish or Friary Churches. It was, of course, aimed at the Bethlehem Chapel. Hus refused to be silenced, and attacked the Bull as a direct contravention of Christ's command to preach from the housetops. He asked for and received the enthusiastic support of his congregation. The inevitable consequence was public disturbance, which reached its height when three young enthusiasts were killed in a riot, and were buried in Bethlehem Chapel by a tumultuous throng with all the honours of martyrdom. In 1412 the King intervened in the interests of order, and Hus was compelled to withdraw from Prague and devote himself to controversial writing on the subject of Papal power.

The scene now shifts to Constance where towards the end of 1414 a great Oecumenical Council slowly assembled which was to remain in being for three-and-a-half years. It is unnecessary

to dwell on the tedious negotiations which preceded its meeting. The demand for a Council was universal but it was supposed that only a Pope could convene one. There were three Popes but a Council was the last thing any of them wanted. Events drove John XXIII into the arms of the Emperor Sigismund who compelled him to summon a Council and to constitute it in person. The Emperor also tried to induce the other two Popes to come or to resign, but in vain.

Sigismund was the younger brother of Wenceslas and heir to the Bohemian crown. He was therefore interested in smoothing out the troubles that had arisen in that kingdom. He invited Hus to come to the Council, promising him a hearing, and giving him a written safe-conduct both to go and to return. Unlike the Popes Hus made no difficulties; indeed he was overjoyed at the prospect. He shared the great expectations which the Council had aroused of a Reform of the Church. He hoped, as well he might, that he would find himself among men equally eager for Reform who would listen sympathetically to his views and might even share them. He did not reckon with his enemies; Czech clergy infuriated by his attacks and resentful for injuries received in the Prague riots; German Doctors who blamed him for having deprived them of their position in the university; and, worst of all, timid academic Reformers with grandiose theoretical schemes of Reform in their books, but thirled in practice to the system to which they owed their benefices and dignities. One thinks of Pierre D'Ailli, Cardinal Archbishop of Cambrai, whose zeal for Reform had cooled sensibly with each successive step in his advancement. A few trivial reforms were actually attained, but on two things only was the Council sincerely united, the reunion of the Church under one Pope, and the condemnation of Jan Hus.

The principal achievement of the Council of Constance was undoubtedly the Union. Gregory XII resigned. Benedict XIII after long negotiations refused to resign, but was deposed and withdrew into insignificance. John XXIII early fled from Constance, but was brought back a prisoner to stand his trial on a long list of miscellaneous accusations of the grossest immorality. He was deposed and detained for a time but was finally restored to his Cardinalate, and died in honour and dignity.

The patience of the Council with this notoriously bad man is in glaring contrast with its treatment of Hus. For seven

months he was imprisoned in a series of loathsome dungeons. When at last in June 1415 he did obtain a hearing, it was to be faced with the demand to recant the errors of Wyclif. When he spoke of his conscience he was angrily told that his conscience had nothing to do with the matter. He was condemned, degraded from the priesthood, and handed over to the civil arm for punishment. On the orders of Sigismund, in despite of his promised protection, he was burnt at the stake in Constance on July 6th, 1415. As an indication of the spirit of the man I may be allowed to quote from one of his last letters to his friends. "O most loving Christ, draw us weak men after Thee, for except Thou draw us we cannot follow Thee. Give a brave spirit that it may be ready though the flesh be weak. Give a fearless heart, a right faith, a firm hope, and perfect charity that we may with great patience and joy lay down our life for thy sake. Written in prison, in chains."

Hus was condemned by the Council of Constance as a Wycliffite, and his modern detractors, German-Austrian Roman Catholics, have continually repeated the charge. Loserth, by placing passages from the writings of Hus and Wyclif side by side in parallel columns, has demonstrated that Hus took over from Wyclif not only ideas and phrases but whole paragraphs, and has drawn the conclusion that he was quite unoriginal. The figure of Hus in the nineteenth century was a bone of contention between Pangermanism and Panslavism. Loserth was not untouched by the Herren-Volk Complex, which seems to have originated on the German-Slav borderline. He was gratified to give what honours were going to Wyclif, who was contemptuously described as Teutonicus by an English knight, ambassador of Henry IV to the Court of Prague. Surely a late survival of Norman disdain for the Anglo-Saxon!

Whatever Hus may have owed to Wyclif, he certainly did not follow him all the way. He did not reject Transubstantiation, and, indeed in violent contrast to Wyclif, stood in line with his older fellow-countryman, Matthias of Janov, for a full-blooded sacramentalism. Nor did he follow Wyclif in his political and social radicalism. It cannot be shown that he owed to Wyclif his ecclesiastical reforming views, which were long current in Bohemia as elsewhere. But he found in Wyclif a theologian of distinction who was travelling the same way towards a thoroughgoing Reformation.

By its condemnation of Wyclif and Hus the Church committed itself to continuing in the old ways, and proved that Reform from within was an idle dream. It postponed the Reformation for a century until another conscience refused to be overborne by the terrors of spiritual and temporal power, and this time escaped martyrdom. Luther himself paid tribute to the stand taken by Hus, and strengthened himself by the thought that a Council could err. On the German Reformer's monument at Worms a prominent place is assigned to Jan Hus as a Forerunner of the Reformation.

IV

But we are gathered here, as it were on Czecho-slovak soil to celebrate the day of the Czech National Hero, who receives honour from all sections of his countrymen, Roman Catholic as well as Protestant. His memorial, unlike the sequestered statue of John Knox in Edinburgh, stands impressively in the midst of the Old City Square of Prague. It was not his theological writings that gave him that place. He did not himself introduce the doctrine or practice of Communion in both kinds which gave to the Husites their distinctive slogan and symbol. At most he gave it his blessing from his prison at Constance. The Taborites went far beyond him in their religious and social ideals.

Was it, then, as a German historian says, that he was "a Czech, full of glowing hatred of Germans"? No trace of such hatred appears in his Latin works, the only ones accessible to me. I have noted only two statements in this respect and they seem both remarkably moderate. "According to the Law of God and natural instinct (especially the latter, he might have added) Bohemians should hold the highest offices in the Kingdom of Bohemia as the French do in France and the Germans in their own lands." And again: "What profit is there if a Bohemian, ignorant of the Teutonic speech, should be priest or bishop in Germany? He will have the same effect as a dumb dog about a herd of sheep—not being able to bark! So is a Teuton amongst us Bohemians."

From the advent of the Luxembourg dynasty to the throne of Bohemia, and especially from the reign of Charles IV, the Czech people had been gaining self-consciousness. Their culture was advancing under the fostering care of their king who was more French than anything else. He had fought on the French side at

the Battle of Crécy, where his father lost his life. The Czech language was becoming a literary medium in the hands of distinguished scholars and writers, who employed it for the spiritual uplift of the people. Hus's contribution in this direction is highly esteemed from the literary point of view by his own countrymen. But in his passion for righteousness the nation found its soul.

His martyrdom profoundly stirred his people and set on foot a movement embracing all classes. Soon indeed it was bitterly divided, but Hus's name was honoured by all parties alike, by the conservative Utraquists, by the radical Taborites, and by the pioneers of the pacifist Unity of Czech Brethren, which perhaps came nearest to his spirit, and which alone survives to this day after a chequered and moving and fruitful history. Its greatest glory was Jan Amos Komenski.

The Husite Wars were not primarily wars of National Independence. That they can be represented at all in that guise is due to the fact that the crusading hosts hurled by the Church against the Czechs were composed mainly of Germans. But the Husite propaganda, reaching as far afield as Scotland, clearly shows that the ideals of the movement were religious and social rather than nationalistic. They aimed at the liberation of man from the tyrannies that enslaved him. As such they met with widespread welcome.

From the purely nationalistic standpoint the Husite Wars must seem an unmitigated calamity, bringing the nation to disunion, exhaustion, misery and centuries of eclipse, comparable to the Thirty Years' War in which modern German historians take no kind of pride. Yet Palacky and the Czech historians have found in the Husite Wars the heroic, because the idealistic, period of their nation's history, and have elevated to the rank of National Hero the man who was their cause. Evidently their nationalism is compatible with an appreciation of moral and spiritual values greater than national success or glory, and valid for all mankind.

None of us would have any comfort in being invited to share in the cult of Frederick the Great—in spite of Carlyle. But we can with all our heart join with the Czech people in *their* Day of Hero-worship, because they honour in Jan Hus the courageous stand for conscience and righteousness, admiration for which unites all free and Christian people the world over.

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