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Two symbols of spiritual struggle in the Hussite ideology
– John Hus and the Antichrist

Abstract: The article presents two important Hussite symbols of spiritual struggle. The first one is John Hus himself who was treated by different Hussites more as a symbol of the proper Christian attitude and martyrdom than as a teacher. As an opposition we may see the main enemy – the Antichrist who is a key figure in the Hussite fight – both military and spiritual. The Antichrist, who represents everything that damages or destroys Christ’s teaching, uses a special method to influence Christians. The Hussites call that method “the venom” that was infused in the Church with granting bishops and priests secular power and wealth.

Keywords: John Hus, Antichrist, spiritual struggle, the Hussites

It is very important to see the role of symbols in every religious movement, especially if the movement evolves into an independent denomination or becomes a significant and unique part of the spiritual scene in the society. In that case one may distinguish between the symbols naturally taken from the main branch or root-denomination, the symbols that were reversed (or slightly changed their meaning) and new symbols that appeared during the process of forming the new movement.

The new symbols are essential for building identity in a newly formed community. They are needed to recognise each other, set a token of unity and to defend from the opponents. The Hussite movement was no different in that. When we look at the history of the Czech early reformation, we may notice how symbolic thinking shaped the movement which consisted of many groups and many ideas, sometimes clearly contrary. The unity of the Hussite movement was impossible to achieve, but for some time it appeared as such in the eyes of its western opponents and enemies. Especially two of them are worth analysing, because they formed opposite images – the positive of a martyr and teacher – John Hus, and negative of an evil opponent – the Antichrist. Apart from them there were some other symbols unifying the Hussites (like the chalice, the God’s Law etc), but it is a case for a wider study.

Symbol of spiritual struggle – John Hus

John Hus is definitely not a person who organised or led Hussite movement or even some reformist group, but he became a symbol for different Hussite fractions that appeared during the years of revolution and afterwards. It was his death in Constance rather than his...
teaching that became a connector between them, sometimes lacking other common ideas or points. Hus was also used as an example. In many treatises and letters, even in the Hussite manifestos we may usually see him as a martyr, a person who gave life defending God’s truth rather than a teacher or a man whose views were referred to.

In some of the manifestos, addressed to the Czechs, Hus is referred to in such a way. There are no quotations of his thought or ideas. But probably his role is most visible during the discussions with catholic opponents. Let us look at the debates with the Council of Basel that took place in 1433. The Czech delegation, consisting of both moderate and radical reformers, tried to explain and defend their main views – the so-called Four Articles. First of the orators, Jan Rokycana, did not mention John Hus at all in his long lecture on the communion under both kinds. But another Hussite leader, Nicholas of Pelhřimov, the so-called Biskupec (the Bishop), used his example. Nicholas tried to connect the case of Hus with the problem of communion, but could do it only using the composition of his speech. That impression was needed to formulate the accusation, that John Hus was innocent and sentenced to death wrongfully. In his whole speech, Nicholas focused on that belief. Naturally, that aroused unrest between the members of the Council. The same thing happened, when Peter Payne had his part to explain. He also said few words about Hus. Although he did not know the preacher from Prague himself, he said he heard many good things about him and confirmed earlier statement.

Hus’s case was a very delicate question and when both sides, (the Council side and Czechs) debated on the rules of discussion a year earlier in a Bohemian city of Cheb, they omitted it not to touch any points that could break the talks and rule out the agreement. But during the actual disputes, the problem recurrently came back from January till April. There was no discussion over Hus’s teaching, rather on his example as a honest person wrongfully condemned by the Council in Constance. One person, John Rokycana was clearly trying to avoid the topic, being spiritual grandson of John Hus. He was a follower of Jakoubek of Stríbro, who was considered the Hus’s disciple and successor. But when the problem aroused, he also had to make his statement. The most moderate of all, he said that whether Hus was right or wrong, it is now for God to decide. This rhetorical hint with biblical background did not cover his whole opinion. He added, that he considered Hus a very honest man and could not find any errors in his teaching.

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6 Payne’s statement was noted and mentioned by one of the council members and the Hussite opponents in the discussion, John of Ragusa, see: Johannes de Ragusio tractatus quomodo Bohemi reducti sunt ad unitatem Ecclesiae, [in:] F. PALACKÝ (ed.), Monumenta conciliorum generalium seculi decimi quinti, vol. I, Vindobonae 1857, p. 270.

7 That attitude may be seen in the form of the agreement signed by the Czech delegation and the council side. They try to avoid the situation that happened during the council in Constance, however do not mention names of Hus and Hieronymus, see: J. MACEK, Ktož jsú boží bojovníci, Praha 1951, pp. 240-242.

Hus stayed as a symbol of spiritual struggle. New radicals, forming the Unity of Brethren, a community, then a denomination in the end of 1460s also referred to his creed as an example and introduction in one of their letters. But the teachings of Prague’s preacher were rarely used as a basis for discussion, sometimes caused even some troubles to hussites. During one of the disputes between Czech Catholics and utraquists which took place in Prague’s castle in the beginning of 1465 two catholic priests Hilarius of Litoměřice, who was an administrator of the Prague’s church and Václav Křižanovský decided to evoke Hus’ teachings. It was quite easy for them, because both were brought up as utraquists, and then converted during their stay in Rome. “Your Hus believed that…” – “Vester Hus” sounded as an accusation to John Rokycana, who was their opponent at that time. Hus was and stayed as an example, a symbol of the unity of Czech reform movement, which was really very divided and as a symbol of fighting for God’s Law, understood sometimes differently by his followers.

**Symbol of opponent – the Antichrist**

The term “Antichrist” was once named a key term for the Hussite revolution by one of the Czech scholars, Michálek. It is true, the whole Czech late medieval reform movement was based on the idea of fighting with the influences of the Antichrist in church and world. Sometimes the term was used strictly in a symbolic way, sometimes the symbol had its precise *designatum*. Long before Hus’ death in Constance, in the end of the 14th century influential Czech reformers saw the Antichrist as a main problem in the contemporary world. First John Milič of Kroměříž, and then Matthew of Janov described the idea of the Antichrist and suggested solutions.

The former saw the Antichrist as someone who could use wealth and weapons as sources to conduct his indecent intentions. The latter formed a definition which left a hint where to find the Antichrist while analysing church and state. His approach was quite a systematic one. He started his attempt to identify the Antichrist beginning with language research. His etymological deduction lead him to interesting conclusions. First of all, he tried to imagine a structure of all possible Christ’s adversaries. Among them there should be those, who oppose him explicitly. He gives examples of Jews and Muslims. But there are those, who oppose Christ in a more damaging way. Those are people who know his teaching, and formally admit being his followers. However, as we look at the name, they must be against Christ, as prefix “anti” means “contra”, against. So they are visibly his followers, but it is only an apparent impression. As we may see, the biggest factor constructing the idea of the Antichrist is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy constructs and is a corner stone of the body of the Antichrist. But Matthew goes further in his deduction. He builds something that can be compared to a *crescendo* in music. The bigger hypocrisy, the bigger Antichrist, or a part of Antichrist it is. So at the top of that construction is *summus Antichristus* – the Antichrist. Matthew never gives the exact answer who that person was, but it is quite clear from his writings. The one, who is supposed to know Christ’s teaching best, the one who is supposed

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9 Čtvrtý list k Mistro Rokycanovi (hereinafter referred to as: Čtvrtý list), [in:] J. BIDLO (ed.), Akty Jednoty Bratrské, vol. 1, Brno 1915, p. 16.
10 Hilarii Litomericensis, s. Ecclesiae Pragensis decani, Disputatio cum Ioanne Rokyczana coram Georgio, rege Bohemiae, per quinque dies habita anno 1465, ed. B.V. STRAHL, Praeagae 1775, p. 65.
to be the best Christian, the one who should live a pure and moral life, and willingly and knowingly does not do that – that person is the highest Antichrist. The higher you are in a hierarchy, and you live a life of a hypocrite, the more Antichrist you are.

It was Matthew, not Hus, who had more influence on the Hussite ideas, especially those radical ones, but Hus also saw an important role of the Antichrist in the poor state of mankind and church. He clearly divided visible and invisible church and his main goal was to do what is possible that the visible and invisible church were the same one. It was not easy though, so he supported his view with a division of clergy. One part, the faithful one, consisted of priests taking example from Christ. Another one was in hands of the Antichrist. Those were interested in human laws and in human benefits. Hus was not such a structuralist as Matthew, he was not interested in pointing a finger, either. His main concern was to warn his listeners and church authorities about the consequences of bad and neglected service. But he did not avoid difficult and rather harsh questions, when he asked whether electing a pope lacking Christian virtues, only with a help of secular power would not be like electing the Antichrist?14

After the outburst of the revolution in 1419 everything became much simpler. The Antichrist was easy to spot, one could see him in an opposing community. In one of the manifestos from the beginning of the revolution, the pope’s legate, Ferdinand de Palacios, who was a bishop in Iberian city of Lugo, was described as a false legate, not apostolic, but compared rather to a demonic person dragging it flock to the river of death.15 Another clear example was that of John Želivský, a fierce monk and preacher, who gave sermons in New Town’s church of Saint Mary in the Snow. During the siege of Prague in 1420, Želivský was very active as not only a clergyman, but also a radical political leader.16 In one of his sermons he compared king Sigismund to the dragon from the Revelation, as Louxembourg’s banners were decorated with a red dragon.17 Naturally, there are lots of such examples from the years of revolution.

The actions taken by the Antichrist needed to be stopped, which led to different opinions in which the role of the symbol was clear and visible. At one point Nicholas of Pelhřimov, the spiritual leader of radical Taborites had to answer accusations that concerned his factions. Some of the moderate reformers condemned cruelties that were a part of the Taborite military actions, and all accused radical clergymen of taking part in the struggle. Trying to defend his position, Nicholas quotes the accusations. He places a great emphasis on the role of the Antichrist. In his opinion it was the main reason why the Hussites were obliged to use force – in order to defend the God’s law. The radical this way were truly the spiritual offspring of John Hus. However, the theologian from the Bethlehem Chapel did not use force, but he also stood against the oppression of the Antichrist and tried to spread the true teachings of Christ.18 Thus the main point of his defence lies merely on the justification of the cause. The radicals were in need of fighting with the enemies of God. If the peaceful methods were enough, they should be administered. But if they were not sufficient, and the true Christians were confronted with the military force, they had the right to defend in such a way. However, that right was not everlasting and unconditional. The moment the opponents change their minds and split off from the Antichrist, the military actions must be stopped and the force is not warrantable. The spiritual fight is more important, and one

15 Žaloba České Koruny na uherského krále Zikmunda, [in:] Molnár (ed.), Husitské manifesty, p. 100. The author does not use the term “the Antichrist’s nuncio”, but the opposition he draws between the figure of Ferdinand and the characteristic of a true apostolic representative is more than explicit.
16 B. Auštecká, Jan Želivský jako politik, Praha 1925, p. 28 and passim.
18 Mikulaš z Pelhřimova, Vyznání a obrana Táborů, eds A. Molnár, F.M. Dobilaš, Praha 1972, pp. 236-238.
must rather pray than fight and kill using weapon but doing so may not be unconditionally denied. He states, that at the beginning of the revolution it was a common opinion between both radical reformers and university masters.

Two symbols are used to prove the rightful decisions made by the Taborites. First, the opponent – the Antichrist, who led the pope and king Sigismund to oppose true Christians. Second is John Hus, whose life and martyrdom in the eyes of Nicholas show the need to active defence.

But there were also some other visions, which included the opponent. One of the most difficult to analyse was presented by Peter Chelčický in his two treatises about the image of the beast. Chelčický explained the symbols from the book of Revelation, focusing on the role of the first and second beast and of the Great Whore. But the great author and original thinker mixes the images, so one can not exactly split the symbols and form a clear definition or name them in actual history. The main difference with other reformist writers lies elsewhere. Chelčický suggests that the final struggle leading to the end of the world will engage the followers of the beasts and the Great Whore. For Christians it is important to stay calm, lead Christian life and watch the whole thing happen. The forces of evil shall kill themselves in a great chaos, without active role of the Christians in that fight.19

### The symbol of developing evil – the venom

Although they had different opinions on who exactly the Antichrist was or when actually he came or would come, there are similarities in the diagnosis of the state of the church. The Antichrist and the devil himself could operate only on some basis of sin. To explain that reformers eagerly use the symbol of venom. It is very convenient as it is founded on a single sentence which may be found in different writings, from the manifestos, to treatises and letters. It says about the venom that was infused in the body of church – “hodie venenum est infusum in Ecclesia”.

The venom is vague in definition, but it is commonly understood as wealth and secular power that helped the Antichrist to mislead the priests, bishops and popes who started to focus more on their secular activities than on the spiritual life of the Christian flock. We may see this symbol in several texts. Jakoubek of Stříbro, the most important person among utraquists after the death of John Hus uses it in his commentary to the book of Revelation.20 The Taborites write about it in their manifesto from 1431.21 Peter Chelčický in one of his polemics with John Rokycana and the members of the Unity of Brethren in their letter to the utraquist archbishop of Prague.22 But the venom that was infused in church is not originally a hussite invention. The term may be found in the 13th century writer Walter von der Vogelweide.23 However, the Hussites took it rather from Dante’s Divine Comedy, which was very popular. Browsing the polemic treatises and letters we may find also other references to Dante’s masterpiece.

The venom infused in church is strictly connected with the concept of the Donation of Constantine. However, some of the Hussite opponents like Pius II (Piccolomini) had already knew there was no such document in history, and the Donation is a forgery, the Hussites generally believed in the fact. It did not matter whether the exact document existed, but the effects of merging secular and spiritual power seemed to prove its consequences. They fiercely opposed the idea even when among themselves the priest played main roles in conducting political issues. The Donation was used as a symbol. It showed the moment in history, when

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19 P. Chelčický, Tuto se již počíná jiná řeč o šelmě a obraze jejím..., [in:] Čítanka Petra Chelčického, ed. J. Obrátil, Brno 1925 (hereinafter referred to as: Čítanka), pp. 128-129.
21 List z celé země české, [in:] MOLNÁR (ed.), Husitské manifesty, p. 188.
22 P. Chelčický, Replika proti Rokycanovi, [in:] Čítanka, p. 144; Čtvrtý list, p. 17.
the venom of evil started poisoning the church. It also described the structure of the problem in an easy way. There are many references to the Donation, but one of the most colourful is that written by Chelčický in his treatise “The Net of the Faith” (Sit’ víry). Using biblical image of fish damaging the net, he focuses on two great fish in it. The pope and the emperor cause the biggest damage, breaking the net of faith. Apart from that expressive image he also “reconstructs” the events that must have happened between the Pope Sylvester I and emperor Constantine. The pope, who was earlier scared and hid in caves fearing for his life, was then approached by the emperor. The emperor gave him an expensive cloth, sat him on a white horse and gave him power. The change in his position was overwhelming for the pope, so he was quite astonished, but liked the new situation. In such a satirical way, portraying the pope rather like a nice, sympathetic fool who was seduced than a powerful and indecent genius, Chelčický left a vivid depiction of the Donation.

The Hussites used the symbols very eagerly. The more vague they were, the more important they became in creating the unity of the movement. The main base for symbolic thinking was naturally the Bible, but they also used other cultural sources. The most important person for the movement – John Hus became also a symbol and one may say that he was more a symbol than a teacher for his followers. Hus gave not only his name. Next to a chalice, goose was the most important image of the reform movement in Bohemia. He became a symbol of honesty and Christian martyrdom. Those two virtues were so universal for fiercely religious Hussites, that served all of the different factions, even when they were fighting against each other. The same, however opposite role played the Antichrist, the main opponent of the true Christians, no matter who the idea represented at the time and in each mind.

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24 P. Chelčický, Sit’ víry, ed. F. Šimek, Praha 1940, p. 38 and passim.