Preaching in Fourteenth-Century Bohemia. The life and ideas of Milicus de Chremsir (+1374) and his significance in the historiography of Bohemia

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Introduction

Research on late medieval Bohemia and developments in the church and spirituality at that time is generally dominated by Johannes Hus, the Hussite movement and the Bohemian Reformation. This is not surprising when we take into account the range and influence the movement had inside and outside Bohemia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Hussites became an impressive power in Central Europe, which for the first time in medieval history seriously threatened the unity of the church and the authority of the hierarchy, thus forcing the church to negotiate compromises and solutions. The movement has the effect of a magnet in and on historiographical research, radiating a field of influence that has colored interpretation of preceding and succeeding periods and events. This is not only the case in Czech scholarship, where moreover the long years of Communist rule stimulated a focus primarily on Hussitism, not wanting to draw attention to other periods in the history of the church and spirituality. Also Anglophone and German research concerning late medieval Bohemia concentrates mainly on Hus and his followers, frequently viewing them as the forerunners of the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation.

Milicius de Chremsir we encounter predominantly as one of the so-called pre-Hussites or even as the “Father of the Bohemian (Czech) Reformation.” In nationalist Czech historiography he is practically depicted with an aureole for being the first person to embody the true Czech spirit. He is understood to be the one who prepared the way for the work of Johannes
Hus by founding the community “Jerusalem,” of which “Bethlehem,” the chapel where Hus’ disciples gathered, was simply a continuation. From this perspective, Milicius was the first Czech to make an independent appearance in European history after the Middle Ages.

One might suppose that titles such as “the Father of the Bohemian (Czech) Reformation” were given to Milicius on the basis of large editions of his writings or at least on solid research of them. Unfortunately this is not the case. From Milicius we have two large postils with 271 sermons for the whole liturgical year, a letter to Pope Urban V, a sermon on the Last Judgment, a treatise about Antichrist and some liturgical prayers. Furthermore, we have two biographies, one hagiographic with substantial detail on his activities and the other depicting him as Elijah revealing the Antichrist and other enemies of truth. Only a handful of writings has been edited (the letter to the pope, the sermon on the Last Judgment, the Treatise on Antichrist and three sermons to the Prague Synod), together with the two biographies. Research has been based on those editions and on the liturgical prayers. No systematic attention has been paid to the vast bulk of Milicius’ work, which, moreover, is structurally connected to his concept of practical evangelical life. Both postils *Abortivus* and *Gratiae Dei*, though they are the fruit of Milicius’ efforts in his community, have been overlooked in the discussion on the significance of the preacher. Impressive adjectives used in connection to Milicius are employed based on an analysis of a very tiny portion of his writings and on the two biographies which clearly have church political intentions.

This study is a reaction to the disproportion between Milicius’ alleged significance and the small number of analyzed sources. Its main question is whether sermons from both postils do confirm the image of Milicius as a preacher inspired by apocalyptic visions, as a pre-Hussite, as the Father of the Bohemian (Czech) Reformation and as a person bearing the other qualities assigned to him. This study is not so much interested in comparing Milicius to his contemporaries, whose writings have not been edited systematically either. Its first aim is to add new material and a critical analysis of the current views of Milicius to the existing research in an effort to give a more complete idea about the preacher.

The main sources for this study are the two postils *Abortivus* and *Gratiae Dei*, which Milicius compiled for his disciples. On the basis of a general survey of all the sermons, twenty-seven of them have been selected for a closer analysis and they form the foundation of this research. In the first pla-
ce sermons with an eschatological scope were chosen to get a more complete impression of Milicius’ ideas about the end of time, the Last Judgment and eventually about Antichrist. The second group contains sermons that present ideas about issues of church and society. Here we meet with questions on the hierarchy of the church, poverty and the status of secular power. Thirdly, the selection concentrates on some sermons that focus specific attention on the role and place of the preacher in the church and society. The last group contains sermons on the Bohemian saints. These sermons refer directly and exclusively to the church in Bohemia and might therefore reflect more closely the contemporary circumstances Milicius lived in.

The evidence that emerges from the selected sermons is divided in two parts with several thematic groups which do partly overlap. The first part presents an analysis of Milicius’ idea of the very alarming state of church and society. Here we speak about the church and the hierarchy, the clergy, the place of secular power and eschatological awareness. In the second part brings Milicius’ answers to the crisis, thematically divided in the work of the preacher and evangelical life as lived by individual saints. This thematic analysis forms the heart of this book and is presented in the fourth and fifth chapter.

We lead up to this by briefly looking at the circumstances in fourteenth-century Bohemia during the reign of Charles IV. He was a ruler who had impressive ideas and did his utmost to reestablish stability in the Holy Roman Empire. His enormous efforts, however, could not eliminate social unrest. Chapter II presents a survey of the two biographies on Milicius. Both biographies have their own agenda, depicting Milicius either as an apocalyptic preacher or as an austere saint. In the first biography the author Matthias de Janow employed Milicius in defending himself against accusations from church authorities. In the second, Bohuslaus Balbinus, the editor of the extensive Vita, was trying to purge Bohemian history of suspicion of heresy. This chapter also contains a brief overview of Milicius’ life related to other sources.

In the third chapter we turn to Milicius’ preaching activities, placing them within the framework of the extensive European preaching movement from the twelfth century onwards. The preaching movement became an important weapon in this new era for further Christianizing the structures of society. This chapter also presents a dating of Milicius’ two postils.

The chapters IV and V thematically introduces several topics from Milicius’ sermons in the postils and creates the image of a preacher who was
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deeply rooted in the church of his day. Finally, chapter VI presents a survey of research on Milicius mainly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As it turns out, in all ages Milicius became a hostage of the times with their political and social needs. Nationalist historiography wanted him to be the forerunner of Hussitism, the "incarnation of the true Czech spirit," thereby proving that the Czech nation has its own, independent roots. For the opposing side he was — precisely for the same reason — a heretic and aberrant soul. In the course of the centuries, historiography lost some of its ideological features which enabled a more detailed picture of Milicius to emerge. Nevertheless, the need to appropriate him by means of historiography is still present.

A final remark has to be made about the spelling of the names. The basis of this problem is very much connected to nationalistically biased historiography, which still has its influence today. Many proper names and geographical names from the Bohemian context had both a Czech and German spelling in the past. Prague was both Praha and Prag. Due to the course of recent history we generally use only Czech names today and the use of German names is still felt to be improper in the Czech Republic. In an attempt to free research from such hidden but influential inclinations, this study uses predominantly the English and Latin spelling of names. In cases where persons are well-known figures in European history like kings, popes, emperors etc., their names are written according to the English spelling. The same method is adopted for geographical names. The approach is different with names not generally known outside the Czech context, like Milič z Kroměříže. In such cases names are written according to the Latin spelling, i.e. Milicius de Chremsir. The word "Bohemian" is used here as a reference to the territory of what is today the Czech Republic, whereas "Czech" refers to the Czech nation. Quotations of the Bible in English are taken from the Revised Standard Version.