Preaching in Fourteenth-Century Bohemia. The life and ideas of Milicus de Chremsir (+1374) and his significance in the historiography of Bohemia
Moree, P.C.A.
It has been said in many ways and by many voices that fourteenth-century Europe was a place of glaring contradictions, great social turbulence and deep uncertainty. This century became known as the Age of the Black Death, which at its climax, in the middle of the century, wiped out between a fifth and a third of Europe's population. Due to climate changes and limited resources, hunger and starvation again became a reality for many after a period of stability and growth in economic and material matters. Rome — the ancient heart of Christianity and Western civilization—witnessed tyranny, anarchy and several uprisings and was abandoned by the pope for most of the century. Its splendor and glory seemed to vanish as many buildings and palaces were devastated. Even the emperor generally avoided facing the dangerous and hostile situation in Rome, the city which

---


2 For more on the Black Death see Klaus Bergdolt, Der Schwarze Tod in Europa, Die Große Pest und das Ende des Mittelalters, München 1994.
still symbolized the unity of Latin Christendom. Italy was disintegrating into minor states each controlled by its own nobility, who were unwilling to cooperate with the uniting structures of church and empire. France and England were draining one another's powers in an ongoing war which caused many casualties. The papacy established its seat in Avignon where it became a victim of French policy. For several years, there was an open conflict between the papacy and Lewis IV who was elected emperor in 1314 because the church refused to recognize his rights and even proclaimed him to be a heretic. This situation ended in 1346 when a new emperor was chosen — Charles IV of Luxemburg, the future king of Bohemia. After the pope had finally moved back to Rome in 1377, the church became seriously divided over the elections of two popes in 1378. The unity of the church, however, was threatened even earlier by radical Franciscans who partly supported Lewis IV. Theologians such as Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham profoundly doubted the authority of the pope and of the church hierarchy as such. Their criticism found support not only among isolated groups on the peripheries of the continent, but it initiated and stimulated one of the most important debates of the Middle Ages about the nature of the church and its right to own property. The lay movement placed increasing pressure on the church hierarchy to allow greater autonomy in spiritual matters. Mystics like Eckhardt and Brigitte of Sweden criticized the church for its lack of faith and leadership. The end of the century was marked by a number of events including the Great Schism that brought with it considerable confusion that manifested itself, for example, in the serious heresy of Wyclif's followers in England, similar movements in Bohemia and the deposition of Wenceslaus IV as emperor. The fourteenth century seems to have lacked a unifying force that embodied and communicated the same sense of political harmony that had existed during the High Middle Ages. The universe of scholastic theology and philosophy of that earlier period was also missing in this new age. None of the powers that constituted medieval society seems to have been able to convince the public of its leadership abilities and find new ways of coping with the changing tides. The fourteenth century was a period of a slow but inevitable disintegration of the social order that had been established in the twelfth century.

One part of Europe, however, is in some respects an anomaly among these developments. The kingdom of Bohemia experienced this turbulent century as its most peaceful time in medieval history. This peace was accompanied by substantial economic and cultural growth. The Black Death
An Island of Stability in a Turbulent Europe

The epidemic of 1348 hardly inflicted the country nor did it leave any traces of extreme suffering. The kingdom became a fully respected member of the community of the Holy Roman Empire and a pillar of political stability on the European continent. Its capital Prague became the residence of the emperor for almost thirty years resulting in a boom of construction, not only in the city but all over the country. Today, many still view this period as the climax and zenith of Czech history, the equal of which has not been seen since. By the end of the century, however, social unrest and political uncertainty had spread over the country and was a prelude to the revolutionary years of the Hussite movement.

Expectations at the beginning of the fourteenth century in Bohemia were not as optimistic as they became by the middle of the century. In 1306, the last king of the house of the Przemyslids, Wenceslaus III, was killed without leaving a successor to the Prague throne. De facto the Przemyslids, who had ruled the country from the tenth century, had died out. This left behind a vacuum of power since there was no natural heir, causing significant confusion and warfare among every possible coalition of nobility and their rivals and enemies. This ceased in 1310 when John of Luxemburg was chosen king of Bohemia, the result of his marriage to the last female member of the Przemyslid household, Elisabeth. John was nicknamed “the foreigner king” because he spent the majority of his time traveling abroad. Thus, he was unable to engage in matters of domestic politics which the Bohemian nobility saw as a great advantage. He had the reputation of being a passionate fighter and took part in most European battles of his day. This, together with his many visits to tournaments, may have been the reason why he was regularly absent from Bohemia. This enabled the Bohemian nobility to solve its own problems without destabilizing the country; in other words, there was a king but he seldom interfered with the affairs of the nobility since he did not have the opportunity to do so. The one time John tried to make

---


2 For John of Luxemburg see Jiří Spěváček, Jan Lucemburský a jeho doba 1296-1346 [John of Luxemburg and His Times 1296-1346], Praha 1994, or an older work by the same author entitled Král diplomat, Jan Lucemburský 1296-1346 [King Diplomat...], Praha 1982.
himself manifest on the domestic scene, all the noble families united in a
coalition against him.

John was the son of Henry VII of Luxemburg who was elected Roman
king in 1308 and crowned emperor in Rome in 1312. It is necessary to take
into account the ambitions of the House of the Luxemburgs in order to
understand the reasons for the connection between his family and Bohemia.
By the end of the thirteenth century the center of political power in Europe
had been moved to France. One of the clear signs of this balance of power
was the “Avignonese exile” of the papal court, which lasted from 1306 till
1377. The rise of the Luxemburg household on the European scene is also
evidence of this. Before becoming emperor of the Holy Roman Empire,
Henry VII had to compete with Albrecht of Hapsburg, a descendant of a
household that held old claims to the emperor’s throne. The political situa­
tion in Europe was more in favor of Henry since France supported him.
France, not being a part of the empire, could not nominate a candidate for
the emperorship. Both Henry and his son John had very good relations to the
king of France. This is seen by the fact that John’s son Wenceslaus, the
future emperor Charles IV, was educated at the French court. John finally
died in the Battle of Crécy in 1346, while fighting on the side of the French
against the English. For Henry, gaining Bohemia through the marriage of
his son was part of his strategy to extend his influence into other parts of the
empire. He received substantial support from his brother Balduinus, arch­
bishop of Trier, in getting his son to become the next emperor. The arch­
bishop had the right to vote in the college of electors which appointed the
head of the Roman Empire. Balduinus would also play a major role in later
getting his nephew Charles IV elected to the same position. Despite much
social and political confusion in Europe and in Bohemia, the House of the
Luxemburgs was relatively stable and reached its temporary climax during
the reign of Charles IV.

The situation of the church in Bohemia during the reign of John of Lux­
emburg was fairly complicated. John did not hesitate to use “royal” monas­
teries as a source of income. Those monasteries were founded by his ances­
tors in Prague and were considered property of the crown. Since John was in
constant need of money for his many campaigns abroad, some of the im­
portant religious institutions experienced a substantial decrease in their
welfare.5 In general, John’s attitude towards the church was based on his

5 Fiala, p. 16.
own personal and primarily financial aim of profiting from the gifts and benefits he bestowed on it.⁶

Tension over the jurisdiction of the mendicant orders characterized the Bohemian church in the first half of the fourteenth century. Like in many other countries, the rivalry between the secular clergy and hierarchy on one side and the mendicant orders on the other caused much confusion. The widespread and energetic activities of the Dominican and the Franciscan orders were derivative of their new understanding of pastoral care and preaching. As they were not bound to any local hierarchy, they presented a certain threat to the secular clergy. It was not only a conflict about spiritual authority but also about the financial benefits given to the clergy by the parishes and the believers. Several bulls and synods from the first half of the century are devoted to this issue. Pope Boniface VIII addressed the problem in his famous bull Super cathedram from the year 1300, where he advocates that the mendicants only preach in their churches when there is no service in the regular ones. As for the issue of confession, only the local bishop could grant mendicant orders the right to hear confession.⁷

This question was also discussed at the Council of Vienna in 1312 which mainly supported the view of Boniface VIII. The Bishop of Prague Johannes de Dražicz⁸ took part in this council and tried to implement its decisions back in Prague. However, he met with decisive resistance from the mendicants, who accused him at the papal court of sympathizing with some heretics in his diocese. As a result of this conflict, Johannes stayed in Avignon from 1318 till 1329 in order to allow himself time to investigate into his own case and to defend himself.⁹ For eleven years the Prague bishopric was practically vacant and this had a destabilizing influence on church relations. Both king and bishop — the heads of the secular and spiritual powers — were often absent and therefore were unable to influence matters within the church and society.

Johannes returned from Avignon a free man and stayed in office for some fourteen more years. Even when he was fully rehabilitated, the conflict

---

⁶Petitova-Bénoliel, p. 31.
⁷See Rolf Zerfaß, Der Streit um die Laienpredigt, Eine pastoralgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Verständnis des Predigtamtes und zu seiner Entwicklung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1974, p. 302 ff. We will discuss this in a broader context in the chapter “Preaching and Sermon Collections in the Middle Ages.”
⁸In Czech “Jan IV z Dražic,” in German “Johann IV von Dražitz.”
⁹Fiala, p. 24 ff. For more on Johannes de Dražicz see Zdeňka Hledíková, Biskup Jan IV. z Dražíc, Praha 1992.
with the mendicants continued and even led to an outburst of violence between members of the mendicant orders and secular clergy in 1334. Till his death in 1343 (he died at the age of 93) the bishop constantly faced this conflict.

Despite strong opposition against his authority, Johannes found the energy to give a significant boost to the cultural life of his day. He ordered several churches and monasteries to be built. The most important was the monastery of Roudnice north of Prague, founded for the order of the Austin Canons shortly after Johannes' return from Avignon. The Austin Canons were known for their emphasis on book culture, book production, individual study and self-education and are considered closely associated with the new spirituality of the *Devotio moderna*. During the first fifteen years of its existence, the monastery was accessible only to members who had both a Czech father and a Czech mother. Founded under the patronage of Johannes, this monastery gained the sympathy of Johannes' successor Arnestus de Pardubicz and of Emperor Charles IV. It became an important place for manuscript collections, relics and for Bible translation.

Many of the initiatives begun during the first half of the fourteenth century in Bohemia would come to fruition only in the second half of the century. Unlike in other parts of Europe where this age of instability and waning of old certainties brought confusion, war and epidemics, Bohemia was a place of prosperity and growth. From this point of view, the period of John of Luxemburg and Johannes de Dražicz was a time when energy was concentrated on preparing the way for what would come to be considered the golden age of Bohemia. Over time, new trends begun in the first half of the century were developed and brought to a rather unexpected climax. The foundations laid in this period enabled an impressive household of power, culture and welfare to arise later. True, this golden age would not be reached for a long time. At the end of the century, Bohemia experienced the opposite extreme of its previous stability and became a scene of social upheaval and political confusion. The politics and ideas of Charles IV, however, demon-

---

See Šmahel, 2, p. 183 and Winter, p. 34.

strate that he was a man of great stature who secured Bohemia’s prosperity and its connection to European affairs.

Charles was born on 14 May 1316 out of John of Luxemburg’s first marriage to Elisabeth Przemyslovna, the last descendant of the Przemyslid House of Bohemia. Originally his name was Wenceslaus, a clear sign that John and his son strongly emphasized the idea of continuity in this old Bohemian household. After being elected Roman king in 1348, he started to use the name Charles as a reference to the famous model and inspiration of all medieval rulers — and indeed not only medieval — Charlemagne. He was educated in Paris under the guidance of Pierre Roger de Beaufort, who became Pope Clemens V in 1342 (this schooling made Charles the first literate ruler of Bohemia). In 1333, Charles returned to Prague where he was appointed count of Moravia in 1334. This was an excellent opportunity for him to become acquainted with the domestic situation of the Bohemian kingdom that had been complicated by the nobility’s attempt to achieve broader independence. From the outset, it was clear that Charles would play a different role as king than his father had done since he was much more engaged in the affairs of the country. He formulated and formed a solid foundation for his reign, thus laying the groundwork for his rise to power after 1342. It was also clear that Charles’ ambitions went beyond that of ruling only the Bohemian kingdom and that he had powerful supporters on the European level who would help him on his way to the highest office in the empire. An important reason for the success of Charles’ international career was the good relationship the House of the Luxemburgs had with the papacy and France.

In 1342, John of Luxemburg turned his responsibilities and duties as king of Bohemia over to Charles. Four years later, John died in the Battle of Crécy and his son was officially appointed king of Bohemia. Very soon after, important steps were taken that would change the face of the capital Prague and elevate the city from a second-rate town to one of the major

---

capitals in Europe. In 1344, the diocese of Prague became an archdiocese which was no longer subordinated to the archbishop of Mainz.\textsuperscript{13} In 1348, under Charles’ initiative, the University of Prague was founded, which was the first university in the empire.\textsuperscript{14} In 1348, he started an immense project to enlarge Prague to about three times its original size, which had encompassed the castle, the Lesser Town and the (Old) Town.\textsuperscript{15} In the same year, he started the construction of a new cathedral at the Prague Castle, devoted to St. Wenceslaus (Bohemia’s main patron saint), St. Adalbertus and St. Vitus. Charles invited many monastic orders that were not yet present in Bohemia to come and begin their activities here. Within a few years, Prague became a major center on the map of Europe and an important player in the empire’s cultural and political events.

There are diverse reasons for this enthusiasm for growth and “progress.” Some explanations are on a European level. In 1348, Charles IV was elected Roman king after a period in which the animosity between the pope and Roman king (de facto emperor) had reached unexpected heights. Lewis of Wittelsbach’s election to the post of Roman king was not recognized by the pope, and the king became involved in a theological struggle that had its political impetus in the question of whether the church should own property. Lewis gave protection to radical Franciscans and other opponents of the church hierarchy who had been pronounced heretics by the pope. As a result, the king was also excommunicated, which made the political situation extremely convoluted. In 1348 Lewis suddenly died, thus creating a possible solution to the situation. Moderate powers on the European level who were on the side of the papacy or of the secular power saw in Charles IV a possibility to make a new start. Charles’ uncle Balduinus, archbishop of Trier, again proved very influential and got Charles elected to this office. The building activities in Prague were significant in that they strengthened Charles’ authority as the new head of the Empire.

However, there must have been more behind Prague’s expansion than this since preparations for it started long before Charles was elected Roman king. This indicates that the construction works were meant to support some of the Luxemburg House’s long-term goals. The concept of creating a more

\textsuperscript{14}See Ivana Cornejová, Michal Svatoš e.a. (ed), Dějiny Univerzity Karlovy [The History of Charles University], I, Praha 1995.
impressive Prague fitted in with the Luxemburgs' ambitions to found a new imperial dynasty in Europe. For the second time in this century, a member of the same house was chosen emperor and king of Bohemia, and this appeared to be a stable and strong basis for gaining and holding on to this position. These new dimensions of the Bohemian kingdom required that there be a representational seat for its ruler, who was also head of the empire. From this point of view, the expansion of Prague was merely another logical step in a political strategy that had been established when John of Luxemburg married the daughter of the last Bohemian king. This idea of creating a representational seat might have been strengthened by the political situation in the natural capital of the empire, Rome. The eternal city was devastated and for a fairly long time it could not serve as a representational seat for its formal head.

Much of Charles' behavior suggests that he had a substantial amount of religious sensitivity. In many instances, he used symbols with a clear religious or even prophetic meanings. When expanding Prague, he employed maps of Jerusalem — the Holy City of Christendom — intending to build a kind of new Jerusalem or Constantinople. Not only did Charles compare himself to Charlemagne, the great example of medieval Christendom, but he openly made references to Constantine who became the first Christian ruler of the empire. Charles also became a passionate collector of pious items which he acquired from every part of the world. The collections of relics in Bohemia grew considerably in these years. The collections confirmed Char-
les’ authority as emperor. The extensive enlargement of Prague certainly was connected to this religious sensitivity. There are also some indications that Charles believed that Slavonic Christianity offered a new chance for Europe to overcome this period of confusion and find a way to achieve the same stability that Slavonic people had brought to the Eastern part of Europe. This would mean that Charles saw his reign as the start of a new era in which Prague was to play a major role, as Rome or Constantinople had in an earlier stage in history.

Despite his strong religious awareness, Charles’ relationship to the church was mainly a political one. His policy towards the papacy and the domestic church was motivated by the significance these institutes could have for his own position. In some cases, this approach created disappointment and worsened relations. The clearest example of this disillusionment was the papal court which had high expectations for an emperor who had been educated by a future pope. Charles needed the support of the pope, e.g. to finally receive the imperial crown from the hands of the pope — a ritual which had to take place in Rome according to medieval thinking. The pope, on the other hand, again needed Charles to realize some of his ideas and goals through his church politics. It was a game of tactical alliances based on political calculations. An episode with Cola di Rienzo, a revolutionary from Rome, is a fine illustration of this relationship. In 1350, not long after Charles was elected Roman king, Cola di Rienzo arrived in Prague. Three years earlier he had organized a coup d’état in Rome that denied the pope any legitimate rights in the city. Cola, of course, was excommunicated. But as revolutions are not very kind to those who initiate them, his success did not last long and soon he had to flee from Rome. When he arrived in Prague, the pope immediately requested his extradition, but Charles did not hurry to fulfill the pope’s wishes. In fact, he gave Cola a kind of political asylum, imprisoning him in Roudnice. Finally, after two years of political negotiations and tensions, Charles sent his prisoner to Avignon, after having

---

18 For this see Karel Stejskal, Karel jako sběratel [Charles as a Collector], in: Karolus Quartus, p. 455-465.
19 So Chadraba, p. 445 ff.
20 Zdeňka Hledíková, Karel IV. a církev [Charles IV and the Church], in: Karolus Quartus, p. 137-155.
21 Jiří Spěváček, Politický profil Karlovy osobnosti a ideové kořeny jeho budovatelského díla [The Political Profile of Charles’ Personality and the Ideological Roots of his Building Efforts], in: Karolus Quartus, p. 17-35. See also Fiala, p. 123 ff.
been assured that the revolutionary would not be executed. Nevertheless, Cola's life had a fairly tragic end. In 1353 he returned to Rome, this time in the service of the next pope, but he was not accepted by the Roman citizens. He was murdered in 1354. Charles, on the other hand, was crowned emperor in 1355 by a delegate of Pope Innocent VI.

Charles had the same approach toward the church in Bohemia. The many nominations he made as well as his initiative to found many new monasteries secured his position in the country. In Bohemia, he extensively supported the moderate reform movement represented by some new orders and prominent popular preachers like Conrado de Waldhausen and Milicius de Chremsir. Both preachers did not hesitate to openly criticize the attitude and morals of many clergy members. In their conflicts with the clergy and the mendicant orders, they had the emperor on their side. Charles' favorite monastic order was the Austin Canons, who opened 17 new monasteries in Bohemia between 1350 and 1374 (the prestigious monastery in Roudnice belonged to them as well). Another politically motivated decision in church matters was the founding of the Emaus Monastery in the New Town of Prague. This community had to practice rites in the old Slavonic language maintaining its Byzantine connotations. Charles wanted to create a place where religious people from Slavonic countries could devote themselves to the tradition of Cyril and Methodius, the two apostles of the Slavonic people. At the same time, the presence of such an institution in his capital must have strengthened Charles' international reputation.

The Prague diocese became an archbishopric in 1344, which brought to a large extent independence to the internal affairs of the Bohemian church. The church lost some of its feudal characteristics, e.g. by abolishing patronage when nominating pastors and bishops. A separate court of justice for the clergy was established. In the course of the fourteenth century, the church in the Bohemian kingdom became increasingly organized in its details. Christianity finally reached the ground levels of society. A dense net of parishes was set up with more than 3,500 communities which gave the church an enormous influence on everyday life. Closely connected to this pastoral net and the possibilities it offered for local control was a strong centralism, which the Avignonese papal court also promoted. The local churches were

---

Fiala, p. 239 ff. See also a separate study by the same author on this subject: Správa a postavení církve v Čechách od počátku 13. do poloviny 14. století [The Organization and Position of the Church in Bohemia from the Beginning of the thirteenth till the Middle of the fourteenth Century, in: Šborník historicky, III, Praha 1955, p. 64-88.
used to collecting tithes and requesting other obligations from their parishioners. One effect of this centralism was that corruption spread among the clergy who asked for financial and other privileges such as services, or who received prebends for offices they actually did not execute.

Two popular preachers in Prague Conradus and Milicius both worked under the protection of Charles IV and strongly criticized this state of affairs. Charles might have viewed the extensive corruption in the church as a destabilizing element that needed changing. This is possibly the reason why he supported the moderate reformist movement in Bohemia. There are some reports of heretics existing in the southern parts of Bohemia in the first half of the fourteenth century. The reports from the inquisition mention Waldensians, whose numbers were very small. It seems they never were a real threat to the status quo in the country.

From 1343 till 1364 the Prague archdiocese was under the leadership of Arnestus de Pardubicz who was a close spiritual and political ally to Charles IV. He traveled with him on many of his diplomatic visits and negotiated the conditions of Charles' imperial coronation. Together with two other prelates, Arnestus is regarded as the driving force behind the reformist movement called Pre-Humanism. Arnestus himself studied in Bologna and Padua and probably was influenced by a new spirituality which had a profoundly individualistic identity. Back in Prague, he appeared to be a firm sympathizer of Bishop Johannes de Dražic's policy, and, as his successor, he went on to bring new influences into his country. Being well aware of the corruption in the church and the dangers of it, he started a program of reform that included regular instructive meetings for the Prague clergy. Like Charles, he protected Conradus and Milicius against attacks by clergy members and mendicants. The two other representatives of the moderate reformist movement were Johannes Oczko de Vlašim, Bishop of Olomouc, and Johannes Novoforensis, chancellor of Charles IV. The former became the successor of Arnestus in 1364 on Charles' request.

Charles' attitude towards the reformist movement seems to have been sympathetic but tactical. He actively supported the foundation of new institutions and orders but did not identify himself with them. As he was above all seeking to guarantee stability, he may have believed that the "old"

---

23 See Rudolf Holinka, Sektârstvi v Čechách před revolucí husitskou [Sectarism in Bohemia Before the Hussite Revolution], Bratislava 1929; Amedeo Molnár, Valdenští, Evropský rozzměr jejich vzdoru [The Waldensians, the European Dimension of Their Resistance], Praha 1991.
spirituality needed immediate reform in order to guarantee its existence in the world tomorrow. He saw himself as the Imperator mundi who had to care for the well-being of the whole world. Two of his main architectural works — St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague and Karlstein Castle just outside of Prague — demonstrate that Charles considered himself to be Christ’s servant, inheriting authority directly and indirectly from his ancestors who descended from Christ himself. A keen awareness of this vocation motivated Charles to try to establish a new dynasty that would rule the empire in the coming decades and centuries. The only plausible explanation why such immense financial investments and energy were put into state construction projects is that this was done in the hope that it would enable the House of the Luxemburgs to rise in importance on the European scene; that is, to establish an image of the stability and prosperity seemingly created under the guidance of Christ. Charles’ oeuvre shows no sense of crisis, uncertainty or confusion as had the works of many of his contemporaries. Charles’ world knew only stability — and it is true that in the fourteenth century, Bohemia would experience its most stable time for many years to come. During the reign of John of Luxemburg and his son Charles, the country witnessed no foreign army nor war within its borders. The foundation had been laid; now the future generations would only have to continue on this path.

Charles’ success was, however, quite an anomaly in fourteenth-century European history. The last great emperor of the Middle Ages died in 1378, leaving his offices both in Bohemia and in the Roman Empire to his son Wenceslaus IV. In no way the young ruler could match the stature of his father. He did not have a strong character, was unable to make firm decisions and was not wise enough to find ways to implement those decisions he did make. Soon he became the object of many political games domestically and throughout the empire. Unfortunately, his counterpart in the Bohemian

---


church Johannes de Jenštejn, who became archbishop in 1379, was ill and therefore unable to lead the church. The stable world of Charles IV was quickly turned upside down. In 1378 the Great Schism began which would divide the Western world for more than three decades. In 1400, Wenceslaus IV was forced to step down as Roman Emperor. A few years later, the movement led by Johannes Hus grew into a revolution and overthrew many of the basic principles of medieval society. Charles’ legacy remained unanswered as history moved in other directions.

Our main interest lies in the period of growth and prosperity during the third quarter of the fourteenth century in Bohemia. Let us return to the years of Charles IV, more specifically to the work and personality of the preacher Milicius de Chremsir, who, despite the stability and prosperity of Charles’ time, witnessed this deep unrest concerning the church and society and who reflected this feeling in his theological ideas about the immanent end of time.