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.

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Conclusions

It might be our main conclusion that in all periods of history, Milicius became in one way or another — openly or more secretly — a hostage of the age. This was not only the case in the times of the nationalistic historiography of the 19th century, but the process as such had its first appearance in the very first texts about Milicius written shortly after his death. It began with Matthias de Janow who, for his own reasons, made Milicius out to be an apocalyptic preacher. He found himself in a fundamental and lasting conflict with his archbishop and other church authorities, in which he finally had to declare his obedience to his superiors and retract some of his statements about the church, the laity and the frequency with which the lay people received Holy Communion. Matthias constructed a life for Milicius in which he mainly defended himself in his dispute with his opponents. In telling Milicius’ story, Matthias justified his own course and teachings.

The fate of the second biography is no less afflicted by the church political interests of its author or final editor. We know it in its final form by Bohuslaus Balbinus, the influential Baroque chronicler and historian from the Jesuit order. He certainly employed older material that he probably found in the rich library of the monastery of Třeboň, as he said he did in his introduction to his work on Bohemian saints. The Vita is to a large degree highly hagiographic, nevertheless it provides a lot of information about

1For the biographies see ch. II.
Milicius’ life and doings. The tone of the biography is in close harmony with Balbinus’ main aim which is to cleanse Bohemian history of its heretical and unfaithful image, caused by Hussitism and Utraquism. Balbinus was in desperate need of Czech saintly figures and depicted Milicius as a true son of the church, full of good deeds and teachings, who certainly deserved to be canonized. This aim might have been the reason that the biography simply does not discuss Milicius’ eschatological ideas. Through his story of Milicius, Balbinus demonstrated the orthodoxy of the Bohemian tradition and church.

The vastly divergent tendencies of the two biographies turned out to be decisive in the centuries to come. Basically we can say that they influenced the two main images of Milicius that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The image painted by Matthias de Janow became the basis for the Protestant, Czech depiction of Milicius as the Father of the Bohemian (Czech) Reformation and even of the Czech National Revival. The direction established by Balbinus became the cornerstone of the idea about Milicius that accepted him as a good (Catholic) Christian, but at the same time denied any connection between him and the Hussite movement.

Historiography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was therefore no exception whatsoever to the trend of taking Milicius hostage. František Palacky used Milicius to support his concept of Czech history and the nation. In his view Milicius represented the inner strength of the Czech nation, which gave birth to the Hussite movement of the fifteenth century, the Bohemian Brethren of the sixteenth century and finally to the rebirth of the Czech nation in the nineteenth century. Milicius did not take his deepest inspiration from other, foreign movements or persons, but from the inner, independent, spiritual source of the Czech nation. One of Palacky’s followers, the popularizing historian František Loskot, basically vulgarized this image of Milicius, calling him the “incarnation of the Czech spirit.”

Palacky’s main opponent Constantin Höfler had no choice other than to reject Milicius. His idea of German provenience of the Bohemian tradition excluded independent Czech sources of any kind. He regarded Milicius as one of the unstable forces in Bohemian history, who promoted an aberration from the main and rational path.

\[1\] See p. 208 ff.
\[2\] See p. 215 ff.
In the course of the twentieth century nationalistic historiography lost its attractiveness, even when elements of it were still present in the depiction of Milicius. Some like Jan Sedlák⁴ — coming from a Catholic background — accepted the preacher but separated him from the heretic Hus to demonstrate that critical voices of reform can have a place in the church. Others like Johanna Girke-Schreiber⁵ — coming from a German background — took the same position in an effort to appropriate as much history as possible for her own national identity. Even the latest studies show signs of an argumentation that pays tribute to distinctions made along nationalistic or confessional lines in issues of the past. The effort of Pope John Paul II to reconcile the areas of Europe that were divided from the church by historical developments is certainly a laudable initiative. It is, however, another moment which makes use of history, trying to find ways to accept the hereticized Johannes Hus, one of the powerful symbols of the Czech nation.

History was manipulated as it will always be because it is a reflection of who we are. In the mirror of past events and contexts we can understand ourselves and our society.Color 2022-03-08 22: 11: 20 UTC

The same is true of the reverse: to a large extent the writing of history is a reflection of our present social constellation. In this sense it is our human fate to be confined to understanding only through the use of a mirror. It is, however, the duty of historians and theologians to try and understand our past as objectively as possible, even when we know that our model of understanding has a temporary significance, determined by our time. In the case of Milicius, historians like Palacky, Höfler, Loskot, Bartoš, Winter and others offer us, precisely because of their one-sided approaches and biases, the possibility to engage in a dialogue that is necessary to understand our own aims and strivings. In discussing their standpoints we become aware of our reasoning and sources of information.

The evaluation of the views of Palacky and other nationalistically or confessionally biased historians brings us to the conclusion that in many ways the message of Milicius de Chremsir was overshadowed by later events. Milicius gained significance only in the light of the Bohemian Reformation or even of the National Revival. Understanding Milicius as a forerunner of the Hussite Reformation of the fifteenth century closes our eyes to many details of Milicius' work and finally misleads us in our understanding of the nature of it. Even if nowadays the modern version of this

⁴See p. 224.
⁵See p. 249.
approach rejects the nationalistic language and perspective of Palacký and Loskot, it still regards Milicius mainly as a forerunner to Johannes Hus, thus overlooking the deeply medieval and scholastic concerns of the preacher’s theological ideas.

The understanding of Milicius as a representative of the Devotio moderna, though attractive, does not fully take into account the “old-fashioned” character of the preacher’s devotion. He did not reflect on the way the individual soul may live with God, nor did he refer to a threefold Vita activa, contemplativa and nova. An alleged similarity between the lives of Geert Groote and Milicius or between Milicius’ range of activities and the nature of the Devotio moderna cannot justify this model of understanding. A sudden and profound conversion like Milicius or Groote experienced before they became preachers and founders of their communities belongs to the life of any saintly person in the biblical and ecclesiastical tradition. In all his writings Milicius stressed with his full weight the significance of a renewal of the old and safe order. His ideas about this order were close to those of Boniface VIII as formulated in his bull Unam sanctam at the beginning of the fourteenth century: a strong church, to which the secular power is obedient. Rulers and kings have to guarantee a peaceful life for their people and the church. In Milicius’ view preachers have to play a key role in the return to the old world. There is no sign in Milicius’ writings of an inner, individually experienced spirituality — he simply did not allow himself time for that. To him the presence of corruption and decay in the church was a sign of the eschatological character of the age.

This study has tried to understand Milicius de Chremisir primarily in the light of the preacher movement that found its origins in the Renaissance of the twelfth century. This approach offers some new insights into the work and motivation of the preacher who devoted his life to reforming the church by using the weapon of the word. To him the church is a holy body threatened by the moral attitude of many of the clergy. In spite of their many faults, Milicius does not doubt in any way the authority of the clergy. They belong to the hierarchy, the backbone of the holy order, of which the pope is the head. He is the highest authority on earth, who has to decide which steps to take toward reform.

Milicius was without a doubt a venerator of saints. Our survey of the way he regarded the Bohemian saints in both his postils pointed out that

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6See p. 247 ff. and 250.
Milicius did not pay much attention to their miraculous qualities. Saints are characterized by their evangelic life, helping the poor, defending the helpless, leading the people to Christ and pouring out their blood for the church. Milicius encouraged his audience to follow their example, thus defining sainthood from a moral point of view.

Milicius was primarily a person and theologian who was fascinated by the power of the spoken and, to some extent, written word. To him those who use the word are able to change the world either in a good or bad way. The word is the main weapon against the power of evil present due to the lack of discipline in the church and disorder in society. In this respect we could compare Milicius to many individuals from different groups in our times who use mass media to evangelize the world. His understanding of preaching brought him to regard it as a separate office in the church, with preachers holding their own mandate. Their role is to distinguish between good and evil and identify this as characteristic of an eschatological age.

It is deceiving to portray Milicius as an apocalyptic preacher who predicts the exact year of the coming of Antichrist. His two writings about Antichrist were both written in a year of crisis, which the year 1367 was without a doubt to Milicius. His experiences in Rome may have colored the wording of both the *Sermo de die novissimo* and the *Libellus de Antichristo*. The sermons in *Abortivus* and in *Gratiae Dei* do not elaborate on apocalyptic issues anywhere. Milicius’ ideas about the end of time have to be characterized as eschatological and not as apocalyptic.

As such Milicius was very much a part of the preaching movement which started in the twelfth century and gained an important place in the developments of the late Middle Ages. As a result, ordinary people were more and more confronted with the church and its demands, which were mainly of a moral character. The preacher movement of the twelfth till the fourteenth centuries was the main vehicle of this second Christianization of Europe. Milicius’ idea of the preacher and his influence being a key to the reform of the church and society is a product of this movement and a contributing factor to its reception in Bohemia.

Many questions about Milicius and his significance in the Bohemian context have yet to be answered. Special attention should be paid to the role of saints in the works of Milicius’ contemporaries to identify the character of his own remarks about them. The sermons of Conradus de Waldhausen, Milicius’ fellow preacher, have not been analyzed yet. Many other preachers have worked in Prague during the fourteenth century, but their work and imp-
portance has not been studied systematically. Archbishop Arnestus de Par-
dubicz played an important role in the reform efforts during the reign of
Charles IV. What was the scope of his ideas and church politics? The
relationship and mutual influence of those men is basic to comprehending
the spiritual mentality in Prague in the third quarter of the fourteenth cen­
tury. What was the interdependence between Milicius and his milieu in
Prague and, in a broader context, in Central Europe and eventually in
Avignon and Rome?

For the first time after a long period of totalitarian rule the political ori­
entation of the Czech Republic is not an obstacle anymore for the study of
medieval church history. This offers many new possibilities for scholars to
continue in the work of their ancestors of the nineteenth century. At the
same time they have the difficult task to pull down the many historical
myths in Czech history and historiography7 and to show new ways of
understanding key periods and figures of the past.

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7 For a survey of the Czech national myths and their present significance in Czech society
see Ladislav Holy, The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation. National Identity and the
Post-Communist transformation of society, Cambridge 1996. For an impression of the new
tasks of Czech historiography see: Dušan Třeštík, Die Tschechische Geschichte und die