

## CZECH NATIONAL HUMANISM

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**Abstract:** The paper focuses the problem of adoption of humanism and classic antiquity in Czech society after the Hussite revolution. The Czech milieu featured specific social and cultural background. The society was divided by religious confessions and very suspicious to foreign influences. Therefore the adoption of humanism was difficult. The opinions on this problem differ. Some scholars say that there was the particular Czech national humanism, on the other hand we have the opinions, that there were no humanism in Bohemia at all. We will summarize the opinions in this topic and we will try to set the „Czech national humanism“ in the contemporary context.

**Keywords:** Czech Humanism – Utraquism – Czech Historiography

### 1.1 Rise of utraquism

The advent of humanism to Bohemia was gradual. First cautious steps of humanism, mostly imported from Italy thanks to activities of Emperor Charles IV. and members of his court, hindered growing reformist moods and activities, which later resulted in Hussite revolution.

The position of Czech hussite movement in the context of European reformation is a subject of research and scientific disputes. For our purpose we rely on the opinion of Czech ecclesiastical historian Amedeo Molnár, who classified hussitism along with other radical movements of late Middle Ages as the first reformation (John Wycliff, John Ball, Jan Hus). The movements in this classification share the Bible as the primary imperative and as the source of universal and irreplaceable Divine law, obligatory for all people and whole society requiring a radical social change.<sup>1</sup> The second reformation is represented by Luther or Calvin reformation. The second reformation is socially conforming, conservative and the word of Gospel is the source of the right faith and the appeal how to accomplish the divine mercy.<sup>2</sup> Czech reformist movement evolved from 1380 and was driven by two main stimuli: the rising social and economical discontent on one hand and on the other hand the intellectual reform activity of the members of Prague University. Both were expressing the aversion to the conduct of the Catholic Church, to the contradiction between words and deeds of priests and ecclesiastical representatives, and disapproval of the rise of secular power of the Church, who was more and more alienated from the ideas of the poor Church of Christ.

Reformist movement culminated by the activity of Jan Hus (c. 1369–1415), master of Prague university and simultaneously influential preacher. His personality merged both academical and popular movement. Jan Hus was able to step out from the elitist academic environment and to mediate his opinions to wide public in native language. His martyrdom in Constanz followed by the death of his colleague Jerome of Prague (1416) deepened the social tensions and after the death of king Václav IV. (1419) the revolution broke out with full strength.

After the Hussite revolution no other personality like Jan Hus appeared in Bohemia. There was no one who would merge sensitive religiosity and intellectual depth, through which he would contemplate and analyze social and religious needs and find out appropriate solutions and above all to assert them with sufficient influence. Such personality is born once in decades or maybe in centuries, so we can not wonder, that immediately after the death of Jan Hus there was no other strong reformist in Bohemia, who would be able to lead the reformist ideas and movement through the revolution and beyond as did almost 100 years later for example Martin Luther.

The completion of Basle Compactata in 1436 officially terminated 15 years long wars between hussite Bohemia and catholic Europe. King Zikmund of Luxembourg died shortly after that (1437) and for the following 20 years the Czech kingdom was with some short exception without strong royal governance. This period was marked by the rise of the power of the higher nobility, whose members struggled to secure for themselves of the rich property of

<sup>1</sup> In the hussite movement and hussite revolution were involved strong social and economical elements. Therefore marxist historians classify hussite revolution as early bourgeoisie revolution as Wat Tyler's Peasant revolution or the Revolt of the Ciompi.

<sup>2</sup> MOLNÁR, A., *Husovo místo v evropské reformaci*, Československý časopis historický 1966, p. 6n.

the marginalized Catholic Church and fought among themselves for the supreme power. The winner was Jiří of Poděbrady elected 1458 as Czech king. Jiří was utraquist and was called the Hussite king. During his reign Jiří consolidated the economical situation and finished the local wars and compactata became the main state law.

The contemporaries coined a term „kingdom of two people“ for this period between the Hussite revolution and the battle of White mountain (1620), which is still used by historians of our era. There were people of two religions, catholic and utraquistic who officially lived side by side in Bohemia. Catholicism was mainly observed in western Bohemia or southeast Bohemia, and prevailed in other parts of the Czech kingdom, including Moravia as the second largest region. In other lands of the Czech kingdom Compactata were neglected. In Bohemia itself utraquism was stronger in Prague and surroundings and east and south Bohemia. Compactata, actually the transformation of original hussite program based on Four Prague articles, became in fact the constitution of utraquist regions of Czech kingdom. In towns the oath on Compactata was inevitable to become a citizen or a member of the guild, the same condition was demanded to enter Prague University. The original reformist program was after the hussite revolution in fact reduced to the praxis of communion sub utraque specie for lay believers. Other points of the original hussite program were fulfilled only partially or not at all.

Utraquist religion did not have its own proper theology. The most important representatives of the utraquist church were members of Prague University, who became the leading platform of utraquist ideology and also leading element of utraquist community. This task was not appropriate for such an institution, because academic environment was more and more torn off from the common life and university academics observed suspiciously alternative opinions growing from popular life as chiliasm and other excesses. Therefore university became the conservative element tending to the prerevolutionary opinions and praxis, based on chalice as the sign of autonomy of Czech reformation. This attitude closed to the Prague university the access to the new philological and exegetical study of Bible and cut them off from reformist humanists who were the leading personalities of European reformation streams at the end of 15<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Paradoxically, the Moravian intellectuals, as catholics refusing the reformation, tended more to humanism.<sup>3</sup> Utraquistic theology stagnated mostly in tradition of Jan Hus and was not able to formulate persuasive and permanent ideological base for new doctrine in new situation after the end of the Hussite revolution. For most of the utraquist clergymen the theological questions were not as essential as they were for the first hussite generation and they had not so much fancy to fight for them.<sup>4</sup>

The martyrdom of the spiritual leader in Constanz, regarded in the Czech society as a flagrant injustice, i. e. Czech utraquist society, along with the unconsolidated new reformist ideas and crusades against Czech heretics (since 1420) formed in the Czech society the feeling of permanent insecurity and threat. This feeling resulted in „group cohesion, initiation of social defensive mechanisms and forming of feeling of own uniqueness, which was strong among university masters in the time of struggle for language character of the Czech reformation.“<sup>5</sup> The sense of threat was strengthened from outside, because Bohemia was in 1465 as a heretic land put under papal ban. The contacts with outer world, economical and cultural, frozen almost absolutely till the end of 15<sup>th</sup> century when the ban was lifted, but even after that the isolation continued, because the resentiments and prejudices prevailed on both sides.

These attitudes had strong influence on acceptance of humanism in Bohemia. Humanism was regarded suspiciously as something strange and potentially dangerous, because it was coming mostly from decadent corrupted Italy, where among others, was the seat of Pope and the corrupted Church. The religious and political tensions still forced Czech humanists to concentrate more on reformation than on renaissance.<sup>6</sup>

The isolation was not complete, some contacts were still used. The cultural and educational exchange of ideas with other countries was maintained mostly by catholics, who were not confined so tightly by religious reluctance. Young men mainly from noble or high bourgeoisie families, able to support expensive studies, attended the universities in Germany and in Italy. Studies at universities abroad were attended by utraquists too, but in some cases they returned home as catholic converts. This was for example the case of Hilarius Litoměřický and Václav Křižanovský, the close friends of utraquist bishop Jan Rokycana.<sup>7</sup> These cases deepened even more the distrust of utraquist society in foreign influences.

## 1. 2 Bohuslav Hasištejnský z Lobkovic

In this situation in 1490s two different courses of humanist authors evolved. It is symptomatic, that both were active outside the circles of Prague university. Bohuslav Hasištejnský z Lobkovic (1461–1510) studied in Italy, than travelled a lot and for a short time he was engaged at the royal court as a lawyer. Hasištejnský represents the purest humanist of his era in Bohemia. The family fortune assured him independent life conditions and he was able to fully concentrate on his humanist work. Hasištejnský collected a huge library, formed his own circle of fellow humanists, exchange correspondence with other men of similar interests home (Augustin Olomoucký, Jan Šlechta) or abroad (Hieronymo Balbo, Konrád Celtes etc.). The most important is of course his own production. He wrote poetry and moralities, obviously in latin. He considered Czech a barbaric

<sup>3</sup> NODL, M., *Česká reformace* (2011), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> NODL, M., *Česká reformace* (2011), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> NODL, M., *Česká reformace* (2011), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> MACEK, J., *Hlavní problémy renesance* (1988), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> ŠMAHEL, F., *Svět antiky a česká vzdělanost* (2002), p. 303.

language. Typical is his reaction on Řehoř Hrubý's translations of one of his elegies in Czech „Irascor facto bipedis vehementer aselli“.<sup>8</sup>

He is the most productive humanist of this era. It is far more evident that he as the genuine author in contrast to other contemporary humanists, who dealt mainly with translations. His latin was cultivated, poetry encompasses huge thematic width (odes, elegies, epigrams, satyrae), prozaic works contain mainly treatises of contemporary social and political situation. But response of his contemporaries was faint. His antiutraquist expressions was very unwelcome among utraquists and his exclusively latin production was sensed as strange.<sup>9</sup> Confessionally based discrepancy was probably behind the rupture with his colleague and the prominent representative of utraquist humanists, Viktorin ze Všehrd.

### 1.3 Viktorin ze Všehrd

Viktorin was a selfmademan originating from bougeoise family, studied in Prague and became a lawyer at the court and was a member of Hasištejnský's circle. In 1494 the until then friends broke their contacts and became, at least intellectually, irreconcilable rivals. Viktorin then unreservedly formulated his dislike for literature written in Latin, represented by Hasištejnský. In his foreword to the translation of Johann Chrysostom's *De reparatione lapsi* (1495) he stated that: „anything, what can be said in Latin, or Greek, not speaking about German, can be said in Czech too. There is not a Greek or Latin book, which could not be translated in Czech, supposing that I am not misled by the love to my language.“<sup>10</sup> Spreading a book in the native language has beneficial effect on social atmosphere, as we can see in neighbour Germany, where the production in native language led to their „life in peace, welfare, repute, reverence and wisdom“ although Všehrd himself considers German language as „rough, bartery and abstruse.“

Although Všehrd's faith in native language allowed to literature historians of 20<sup>th</sup> century to promote this dedication to the manifest of a new literary era,<sup>11</sup> we should realize, that Všehrd did not say anything new. Czech utraquist incunabula printers, unlike printers abroad, had for almost 20 years been coping with import of foreign language book production by asserting the Czech production (for comparison; 87 % of incunabula printed in Bohemia are in Czech, in contrast to only 30 % of German incunabula that are in German). What is more important for us, is, that modern interpretations suppressed, namely Všehrd's admirations for the German circumstances, where

almost all obtainable Greek and Latin authors were translated for the lay audience, and therefore Germany flourished. And secondly, we should notice Všehrd's criticism of insufficient home production, targeted on printers, translators and publishers.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.4 Czech national humanism in modern historiography

Czech historians and literary historians dealt with humanism in Czech lands since the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Often, however, they focused too much on the relation between the specific Czech environment to the Renaissance and Renaissance humanism, which was sometimes defined very vaguely or imprecisely. Widespread was the designation of humanism as a movement that in 14 to 16 century wanted to reclaim ancient medieval education interrupted.<sup>13</sup>

Josef Truhlář describes renaissance as the „religious movement which arose in Bohemia almost together with Petrarca and which was developing almost parallelly with italian humanism“<sup>14</sup> and resulted in Four Prague articles and compactata. Truhlář submits, that those utraquists, who at least partially admired „new italian doctrine“ dealt mostly with texts of Greek and Roman Church Fathers and used pagan classics only as a propedeutic to further study, as they learned from st. Basil.<sup>15</sup> And since according to Truhlář renaissance literature was based on plain paganism, conditions for the adoption of Italian humanism in Bohemia were not good. There is a striking difference in reception of antic pagan classic in the utraquistic and catholic milieu. Catholic humanists thanks to their higher education received often in Italy were more skilled in new literary form, the utraquists used new method for critic of social and spiritual failures. Neither side absorbed the spirit of tolerance and as Truhlář said again, both camps „were usually choosing from the new spiritual armatory weapons for old religious fights“ and neither side was able to fully step out from the medieval spiritual environment.<sup>16</sup> Except those two main streams there were groups of humanists simply imitating classical patterns and producing only flat and inanimate texts, without even trying to engage in contemporary polemics and keeping the feeling of elitism.<sup>17</sup> But in fact this production was nothing more than more or less skillful craftsmanship, nonetheless it influenced heavily the humanist poetry later in 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> The principal merit of Josef Truhlář is that he strongly averted the attention of literary historians. So far researchers focused on the literature written in Czech, since that time the latin literature was revealed. Nonetheless Josef Truhlář described the humanism in Bohemia as Czech humanism.

<sup>8</sup> HASIŠTEJNSKÝ Z LOBKOVIC, Bohuslav, *Farrago Poematum I* (1570), p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Hasištejnský for example answered abusively on Czech translation of his poem by Řehoř Hrubý z Jelení, because he considered the translation of his work in Czech as dishonesting. Czech language was for Hasištejnský rude and rustical. LEVÝ, J. *České teorie překlada* (1957), p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Knihy čtvery* (1501), fol. A4a-A4b.

<sup>11</sup> PRAŽÁK, E., *Český humanismus a husitská tradice* (1963), p. 50–59; PRAŽÁK, E., *Řehoř Hrubý z Jelení* (1964), p. 26; KOPECKÝ, M. *Pokrokové tendence v české literatuře* (1979), p. 16–17 a KOPECKÝ, M., *Český humanismus* (1988), p. 49–57.

<sup>12</sup> Milan Kopecký omitted this part in his edition of Všehrd's preface. KOPECKÝ (1988), p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> HANUŠ, J. J., *Františka Petrarky: Knihy o lékařství proti štěstí a neštěstí – přeložil Řehoř Hrubý z Jelení a vydal r. 1501 v Praze*, Časopis Českého Museum 36/I, 1862, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> TRUHLÁŘ, J., *Humanismus a humanisté v Čechách* (1894), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> TRUHLÁŘ (1894), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> TRUHLÁŘ (1894), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> TRUHLÁŘ (1894), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> TRUHLÁŘ (1894), p. 4.

Josef Jakubec describes the conflict between Všehrad and Hasištejnský as a split of Czech humanism and although he appreciates the efforts to write and publish in national language, he sees the Czech humanism as uniform. New concept is born several decades later. Jaroslav Vlček in his History of Czech Literature stated, that Viktorin ze Všehrad established Czech humanism with the above mentioned preface as its manifest.

This division in Latin and Czech branch was then the main platform for researchers in 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 20<sup>th</sup> century and was fully adopted by marxist literature historians. It fully congrued with the classification of renaissance humanism and reformation as the superstructure over the base of class struggle represented in this case by antagonism between ruling aristocracy and emerging bourgeoisie.<sup>19</sup> Within this context renaissance humanists' effort to study the sources of classical antiquities and reformation in early christianity is interpreted as their effort to „revive“ national culture. This interpretation encodes the label „Czech national humanism“ for the Czech branch of renaissance humanistic activities.<sup>20</sup>

Huge efforts were put into describing and highlighting the importance of Czech national humanism as specific Czech phenomenon, which should have connected social, artistic and national progressive tendencies. Besides the nationalist accents researchers also emphasized as fulfillment of progressive ideas of czech humanism the suppression of elitism and deeper concern in lower classes.<sup>21</sup> Another progressive tendency of Czech national humanistic literature was its effect of laicization and secularization.<sup>22</sup> With this effect it was posed as a countbalance to the elitist cosmopolitan latin humanism pursued mostly by catholics and aristocracy. The theory of marxist literature historians, that those translations were destined as „enlightenment“ for educated persons, is unsustainable, because these people had enough possibilities to read these works in original and mostly in better technical quality.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, duration of Czech national humanism in its narrow meaning is very short, from cca 1490 till 1520. The actual impact, however, is doubtful. „In wider public the renaissance humanism is spread only thanks to the activity of Daniel Adam z Veleslavína in 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 16<sup>th</sup> century.“<sup>24</sup>

Very important element of marxist historians was incorporating the hussite tradition within the concept of Czech national humanism. The hussite thinking bear some patterns congruent with ideas of italian humanism, but it is only the external similarity, based on different ideological roots (anthropocentrism, using native language in all

aspects of cultural life, superiority of secular government over ecclesiastical) and developed independently. There are not any straight connections between italian humanism and hussite thinkers and ideologists.<sup>25</sup> Prove is given by large amount of translations of contemporary works of italian humanists and Erasmus.<sup>26</sup> The works for translation were chosen as demanded in national humanism – the content was comprehensible, so they were acceptable for wide public, and full of christian morality with reform nature. Simultaneously they harmonized with domestic tradition of didactic works.<sup>27</sup>

Since 1980 Czech historians started slowly revise the attitudes to the hussitism and post hussite period and expressed some critical remarks. Radical and controversial opinion expressed Josef Macek, major socialist on Jagiellonian period. Macek concluded that in the period till the end of 15<sup>th</sup> century, usually indicated as period of renaissance and humanism, was in Bohemia mainly the reform period, only partially penetrated by some renaissance elements.<sup>28</sup> Macek points out, that we cannot equalize reformation and renaissance only because both movements tended to the past patterns: renaissance to antuquity, reformation to the first apostolic church. „The medieval concept of time did not know the progress and development. Therefore medieval mentality was always looking to amendment and improvement from the past, to return to the good old times, and values destroyed over time. Both the reformation and renaissance grew up from purely medieval concept of time“.<sup>29</sup> But renaissance fundamentally differs from reformation tending to return the values so far omitted or insufficiently known, but mostly execrated and condemned as pagan.“<sup>30</sup>

Specific enviroment, developed in Bohemia in 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 15<sup>th</sup> century, caused, that „renaissance humanism in Bohemia and Moravia did not asset as a leading cultural element, but remained on the periphery as a marginal phenomenon and therefore in Czech lands did not appear and break through any personality able to engage in evolution of humanism in all European measure.“<sup>31</sup>

Macek's opinion with designation of all period from hussitism to White Mountain as reformation and denial of humanism and renaissance in Bohemia raised frenetic dialogue, continuing up to this day. Macek's oponents brought plethora of rejecting arguments. Nevethless, the fact of specific Czech enviroment impedes the dialogue and even the biggest oponents admitted, that we can not talk about pure humanism in Bohemia and tried to find some adequate definition of this period, as, for example „revival“, because

<sup>19</sup> PRAŽÁK (1964), p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> In this sense the term used as first Josef Hrabák. HRABÁK, J., *Problém střídání literárních směrů* (1958), pp. 229–240.

<sup>21</sup> PRAŽÁK (1964), p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> KOPECKÝ (1979), p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> PRAŽÁK (1963), p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> KOPECKÝ (1979), p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> KOPECKÝ (1979), p. 11. PRAŽÁK (1963), p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> PRAŽÁK, E., *České humanistické překlady* (1959), pp. 320–324.

<sup>27</sup> PRAŽÁK, E. (1959), p. 322.

<sup>28</sup> MACEK (1988), p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> MACEK (1988), p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> MACEK (1988), p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> MACEK (1988), p. 22.

„the profile pattern of this period is revival of so far medieval culture by classic ancient culture, or revival of original christianity in case of reformation.“<sup>32</sup> But in this case we risk another confusion with Czech national revival of late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### Conclusion

Research in renaissance humanism in Bohemia and within Czech culture as a whole needs new point of view, not burdened by ideologically motivated opinions. This task is more difficult, when we realize, that czech renaissance humanism was very closely connected with contemporary confessional struggles but also with as delicate issue as the emancipation of national language in multinational society. Czech renaissance humanism is still primarily a cultural phenomenon.

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<sup>32</sup> KOPECKÝ, M., *Humanismus* (1990), p. 34.

