

THE CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH IN THE WRITINGS OF JAN HUS AND LEONARDO BOFF

El concepto de la Iglesia en los escritos de Jan Hus y Leonardo Boff

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RESUMEN: El artículo analiza las similitudes en los escritos de Jan Hus y Leonardo Boff. El autor trata de explicarlas mediante la aplicación de la metodología comparativa, incluyendo el análisis de textos y elementos de prosopografía. Al parecer, las condiciones socioeconómicas comparables y caminos de vida similares pueden tener impacto a las obras de los dos teólogos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Jan Hus, Leonardo Boff, pre-Reformación, Iglesia católica, teología de la liberación.

ABSTRACT: The article discusses the similarities between the writings of Jan Hus and Leonardo Boff. The author attempts at explaining them by conducting a comparative study, including text analysis and elements of prosopography. Apparently, comparable socio-economic conditions and biographies may have influenced the works of the two theologians.

KEYWORDS: Jan Hus, Leonardo Boff, pre-Reformation, Catholic Church, liberation theology.

INTRODUCTION

The tragic story of Jan Hus is well placed in the general European tradition. His works have been discussed for centuries and have become an important part of the dispute between the Catholic and Protestant churches.

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Hus himself became to some a symbol of a martyr and “the first Reformer” (a century earlier than Martin Luther), to others – a heretic (even if “misfortunate”) or an ideological source for the cruel and horrible Hussite Wars that devastated Central and Eastern Europe in the 15th century. Finally, his role in shaping the national identity of the Czechs and Moravians, as well as his impact upon the development of the Czech and other Slavic languages, cannot be underestimated. In Prague, his statue in the Old Town Square is one of the most iconic places in the city.

However, in recent decades, his theological treatises were rarely the subjects of major studies. For instance, the last English translation of his major work – *De Ecclesia* – was published almost a century ago². His *Letters*³ were translated and published by Matthew Spinka in 1972. The same scholar also published *John Huss and the Czech Reform* in 1941 and 1966⁴, as well as some other papers and books dedicated to Hussitism.

Interest in Hus' work was inspired by the process of ecumenical reconciliation, which led to Pope St. John Paul II issuing a formal apology for Hus' cruel death in 1999⁵. A good example here can be an article by Daniel Didomizio about Hus being a predecessor of the Second Vatican Council (Vaticanum II)⁶. Recently, Thomas A. Fudge wrote *Jan Hus: Religious Reform and Social Revolution in Bohemia*⁷. These two authors begin their works by concluding that Hus' heritage (maybe with the exception of the Czech Republic and the neighboring Central European states) is now very much obliterated by the public⁸.

² J. Huss, *De Ecclesia. The Church*, translated by David S. Schaff, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1915. The name of the Czech reformer is written in three different ways in English: either the Czech original is used (Jan Hus) or one of the two anglicized versions (John Huss or John Hus).

³ J. Hus, *The letters of John Hus*, translated by Matthew Spinka, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1972.

⁴ M. Spinka, *John Huss and the Czech Reform*, Archon, Hamden 1966.

⁵ T. Maćkowiak, “Przeprosiny za śmierć Husa”, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 20.12.1999.

⁶ D. Didomizio, “Jan Hus' *De Ecclesia*, Precursor of Vatican II?”, in: *Theological Studies*, vol. 60, is. 2, 1999, <http://www.questia.com/read/1G1-54989009> (accessed: 07.09.2014).

⁷ T. A. Fudge, *Jan Hus: Religious Reform and Social Revolution in Bohemia*, I.B. Tauris & Co., London 2010.

⁸ D. Didomizio, “Jan Hus' *De Ecclesia*...”, op. cit., T. A. Fudge, *Jan Hus*..., op. cit.

Nonetheless, his writings still find followers and influence new thinkers. A good example here is Leonardo Boff, the famous Brazilian theologian of liberation, who even admits that Hus was one of his sources of inspiration in at least one of his books⁹. A closer look at his major writings clearly shows that some of his theological and philosophical concepts closely resemble those introduced or used by the Czech reformer. Thus, the main goal of this article is to analyze the works of Hus and Boff. At the same time, it does not aim to analyze the theological issues and declare their conformity (or lack thereof) with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

The article's main methodology is comparative research with elements of prosopography. In order to better understand the context of Hus' activities and their possible impact upon Boff, some general historical information on the medieval Kingdom of Bohemia will be presented in the first part of the article, as well as a brief outline of his biography. Then comes a brief presentation of the socio-economic situation in Latin America with some biographical notes on Boff. This is followed by a comparative document analysis, mostly based upon *De Ecclesia* and some of the more prominent works of Boff, namely *Church: Charism and Power*¹⁰ and *Cristianismo: Lo mínimo de lo mínimo*. To facilitate comparisons of the content, the official English translations of both theologians' books are used, as detailed linguistic analysis of medieval Latin and Brazilian Portuguese does not seem to be of decisive importance here¹¹. Some of the books by Boff, which were studied by the author, are cited from their Spanish translations. The Bible edition used is the King James Version¹².

⁹ L. Boff, *Cristianismo. Lo mínimo de lo mínimo*, Editorial Trotta, Madrid 2012.

¹⁰ L. Boff, *Church: Charism and Power. Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, SCM Press Ltd., London 1985.

¹¹ The author would like to express his gratitude to University of Navarra in Pamplona, where a significant part of his research on the works of Leonardo Boff was conducted.

¹² *The Holy Bible, King James Version*, Cambridge Edition 1769, <http://www.kingjamesbible-online.org/> (accessed: 12.07.2014).

THE BOHEMIAN KINGDOM AT THE TURN OF THE 14TH AND 15TH CENTURIES

Medieval feudalism, in Central and Eastern Europe in general and in Bohemia in particular, adopted a specific form. The typical vassal-lord dependence was relevant only to some dukes or kings, whereas the gentry as such held their lands as their property and their military obligations resulted mostly from allegiance to superiors, but not from typical feudal dependence¹³. This meant that in the entire region there was a natural tendency towards self-government and equality (of course, among the noble ones) than to authority.

At the same time, Bohemia was not very heterogeneous, contrary to other states in the region. However, the Kingdom of Bohemia frequently ruled Silesia (with a predominantly Polish population), Moravia (Czech-speaking, but with a strong sense of identity), Lusatia and periodically Brandenburg (Lusatian and German-speaking), which caused certain ethnic and linguistic tensions in the state. What is more, Bohemia was exposed to German influence much more than other Central European states. Bohemian dukes recognized the supremacy of the Emperor and there was a tendency to Germanize the political elites. But, the relationship was more complex as the position of the Kingdom of Bohemia within the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation grew with time. In 1356, the Golden Bull elevated the King of Bohemia to the rank of the first imperial elector. The ties were mutually strong. At the same time, this was the period of active German colonization of Central and Eastern Europe. In many cases, the colonists lived peacefully with autochthonic populations or even assimilated. But, in many cases, there were outbursts of economic tensions¹⁴.

Within this particular context of brewing ethnic conflict and the growing prestige of the Kingdom of Bohemia, the Charles University in Prague was established in 1348. It was the first university not only in Central and Eastern Europe but also outside of the former Roman Empire. It was on-

¹³ P. S. Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom: A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Routledge, London 2001.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

ly later followed in 1364 by the Cracow Academy, renewed in 1400 as the Jagiellonian University. The one in Prague became an international academic and scientific institution for Czechs, Bavarians, Saxons and Poles, and later also Hungarians¹⁵. Jan Hus was soon to become the rector of the university.

Last, but not least, the social and economic situation of the Kingdom of Bohemia at that time was also very complicated. Roughly one-third of the land belonged to the Catholic Church, making the clergy very powerful in the agriculture-dominated medieval economy. The conduct of many clergymen also left much to be desired and their corruption and worldliness was the subject of criticism, especially on behalf of the lower nobility and lower classes. As noticed before, the elites, including the religious elites, tended to Germanize. The lower-rank priests remained Czech and, thus, their teachings had a good deal of “nationalism” (Piotr Wandycz even writes about “xenophobia”) in them. Again, the most prominent of them was Jan Hus¹⁶.

Hus originated from Husinec and was the son of a peasant family, which is betrayed by his last name. “Hus” in Czech means “goose”. In 1402, he was appointed to the role of a preacher in the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague and, subsequently, the rector of the university. Hus called for moral reform of the Church and criticized many phenomena of the time, including the sale of indulgencies and the corruption of priests and monks. He was greatly supported by common people and some nobility, yet with time he met strong resistance from the ecclesiastical and secular hierarchy (though in the beginning he was supported by King Venceslas and the archbishop of Prague). Hus consequently disobeyed penalties inflicted upon him (including censorship, interdiction and, finally, excommunication) and refused to travel to Rome for a trial. In 1412, he left Prague and went into exile in South Bohemia, where he wrote the majority of his works, including *De Ecclesia* in 1413. In 1414, he was called to the Council of Constance and decided to travel there, having received the promise of safe conduct. It was soon cancelled as Hus continued to preach and celebrate Mass. The Czech reformer

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

was imprisoned, tried, and condemned to death for not recanting his teachings. Finally, he was burnt at the stake on July 6, 1415¹⁷.

THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT

Though the distance between Latin America in the last 40 years and Kingdom of Bohemia in time and space is significant, one may notice some resemblances. Latin American societies are rather homogenous in terms of the language (though not ethnicity), but there exist very sharp contrasts in income distribution. As the author's (and only his) experience shows, the rich often have a tendency to imitate external (foreign) habits and cultures. The economic inequalities on the international level have led to the emergence of dependency theories claiming that there is a structural oppression favoring the Western economies over the peripheral ones. A strong resentment towards the former colonial empires and the United States – considered a regional hegemon – is a major influence on international relations in the region. This goes hand-in-hand with desires for self-determination. In short, this may be briefly recapitulated as anti-colonial nationalism¹⁸. As we can see, in both cases the cultural influence, (post)-colonialism and economic issues played a major role. It is no wonder then that Latin America was a place very vulnerable towards all kinds of revolutionary ideas.

The ecclesiastical affairs also seem to be similar. The issue of certain opposition between the lower-rank clergy, originating from the local population, and higher hierarchy, in many cases coming from Europe, has been described many times in the past¹⁹. To the point, it is even the case of Boff him-

¹⁷ Brief biography of Hus is based upon the article of D. Didomizio, "Jan Hus' *De Ecclesia...*", op. cit., and D. S. Schaff "Introduction", *De Ecclesia*, op. cit., pp. VII-X.

¹⁸ J. Ward, *Latin America. Development and Conflict since 1945*, Routledge, London 2004.

¹⁹ E.g. A. Pietrzak, "Duchowni katolicy wobec emancypacji politycznej Ameryki Łacińskiej", in: K. Krzywicka (ed.), *Dwieście lat niepodległości państw Ameryki Łacińskiej. Perspektywa historyczna i wyzwania współczesności*, Wyd. UMCS, Lublin 2012.

self who many times related how in fact foreign-born or foreign-educated superiors supervised him during his monastic career²⁰.

Genézio Darci Boff was born in 1938 to a poor family of Italian immigrants in the state of Santa Catarina in Brazil. He joined the Franciscan order and, because of his talent, was sent to Germany to study theology. Having defended his doctoral thesis in theology, he returned to Brazil. At first, he had many supporters among the hierarchy, including Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the eventual Pope Benedict XVI. The striking poverty of the Latin American reality and his general sensitivity made Boff a follower of liberation theology, calling for major reform of the Catholic Church in Latin America. With time, Boff was to become one of the most prominent figures of that current. He was (and still is) a renowned theologian and university professor. His major work, which led to him being silenced and censored for not complying with the Catholic Social Teaching, is *Church: Charism and Power*. Unwilling to cope with sanctions imposed upon him, he abandoned the priesthood and continues his work as a secular philosopher²¹. As it can be noticed from the brief biography presented above, in many aspects his personal experience is similar to that of Hus.

HUS'S DE ECCLESIA

Similar to the theology of liberation, never condemned by any of the popes as such (though individual issues and authors were subject to criticism, suspension or even excommunication), Hus' teachings essentially remained within boundaries of Catholicism. Moreover, the period of his activity as a reformer of the Church was relatively short-lived. He was only 46 when he was burned at the stake in Constance in 1415, having become

²⁰ L. Boff, *El precio de la libertad*, entrevistado por J. M. Castillo y J. A. Estrada, Universidad de Granada, Granada 2007.

²¹ This brief biography was based mostly on: L. Boff, *El precio...*, op. cit.; J. M. Vázquez Carballo, *Trinidad y sociedad. Implicaciones éticas y sociales en el pensamiento trinitario de Leonardo Boff*, Secretariado Trinitarios, Salamanca 2008.

a preacher only in 1402, and having taught for about 10 years. Therefore, his *opus magnum* remains *De Ecclesia*²².

The views presented by Hus were shaped mainly by two factors: one of them was John Wycliffe's writings. The other factor was his polemics with other theologians and Rome. The influence of the several decades earlier English philosopher in Hus' works is undeniable, especially in the aspects related to basing the faith upon the Bible in the first place, return to evangelical poverty of clergy and definition of the Church as consisting mostly of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Yet, they were interpreted in the specific Czech context, and many of Wycliffe's other concepts were not shared by Hus (e.g. the concept of David being Peter or the Temple of Solomon as the symbol of the Church). Moreover, Hus is considered to be much more important than Wycliffe from the point of view of impact upon theology. Wycliffe's writings were hidden for generations, Hus' – distributed and discussed for centuries. Moreover, had Anne of Bohemia not married Richard II of England and Wycliffe's works had not been brought to Prague, his works would probably never have been popularized²³.

De Ecclesia consists of 23 chapters, of which the first 13 are of particular importance to the topic, as they discuss various aspects of ecclesiastical organizations in general and in particular. They contain the most important Hus' theses about the necessary reform of the church:

- chapter VII titled "The Roman Pontiff and The Cardinals Not the Universal Church" is a major discussion and critique of identifying the institutional Church with "universal, Catholic Church", clearly arguing for the "community of believers"²⁴;
- in the same chapter Hus analyzes the history of the Papacy and its conflicts with other Patriarchs, also mentioning the case of the supposed female Pope Joan. They led him to the conclusion that the Roman Pontiff was not inerrant²⁵;

²² D. Didomizio, "Jan Hus' *De Ecclesia...*", op. cit.

²³ *Ibidem*; D. Schaff, "Introduction", op. cit., pp. XXV-XXXI.

²⁴ J. Huss, *De Ecclesia...*, op. cit., pp. 56-66, esp. p. 58.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

- again in chapter VII, the Czech reformer questions the monarchic power of the Pope by interpreting the words of Jesus directed to St. Peter “and I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18) as referring to Peter’s faith and not to him personally. This should be understood in the light of chapters I and V, where Hus claims that there is only one united Church and Christ is its head. Following that, one must come to the conclusion that the Pope is not the head of the Church and the Church can exist without the Pope²⁶;
- the above requires some explanation. The times in which Hus lived were the period of a huge debate about whether the Church should be ruled individually by the Pope or collectively by Councils. It is known as the conciliarist debate. It was a particularly vivid topic during the Council of Constance (the one where Hus was tried, sentenced and executed), which was convened by John XXIII, who was later himself declared an Antipope. The fact that there were two hierarchs calling themselves Roman Pontiffs definitely was harming the authority of the Church²⁷;
- though the Pope was not treated by Hus as the head of the Church (as only Christ could be), he still was the Vicar of Christ on Earth, and the ecclesiastical authority is superior to secularism. Yet, traditions like foot kissing and other habits cannot be applied²⁸;
- the Church itself should return to evangelical poverty. Hus heavily criticizes these clergymen that “seek more the money of those subjects than salvation”. He sees the root of that in Donation of Constantine, a copy or a forgery of an earlier document granting the Catholic Church major economic benefits in the Western Roman Empire. In that respect, he repeats the thought of Wycliffe, who called the pope “son of Constantine, not of Peter”²⁹;
- as for predestination, Hus makes a lot of statements on the issue of predestination to salvation and present grace. Although, according to him,

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ D. Didomizio, “Jan Hus’ *De Ecclesia...*”, op. cit.

²⁸ J. Huss, *De Ecclesia...*, op. cit. Chapters XIII and XIV are entirely dedicated to the issues of Papacy.

²⁹ J. Huss, *De Ecclesia...*, op. cit., p.150-151, 226.

nobody is doomed to damnation and the present behavior of a given human in a given moment is not enough to judge about his future. He quotes St. Augustine: “some are sheep by predestination and ravaging wolves according to the present grace”. But this concept of predestination assumes that there is both good and evil in the institutional Church, as well as outside of it. Some are good by predestination, even if they are not Christian; some are in the Church by present faith. Hus goes further and speculates that one may be baptized in the Holy Spirit. This leads him to a fundamental question: is the Catholic Church really the universal one³⁰?

Of course, these themes do not exhaust the topic of the theological richness of Hus’ thought, but what is interesting here is to see how similar the points made by Hus are with those made by Leonardo Boff in his writings.

BOFF’S *CHURCH* AND OTHER WRITINGS

In the case of the Brazilian theologian, the analysis requires looking at some more volumes, since his time of activity is much longer than that of Hus. Yet, in many places there are some similarities to the above-selected motives:

- the institutional Catholic Church suffers from many pathologies due to its ill, hierarchical structure. It is the topic of the entire Chapter 6 of *Church: Charism and Power*. Boff, in many places, presents shameful and scandalous episodes from the history of the Church, e.g. the Cadaver Synod³¹ or the document *Dictatus Papae*³². The latter included the traditions like kissing the Pope’s feet, which Boff rejects;

³⁰ J. Huss, *De Ecclesia...*, op. cit., pp. 16, 25, 40, 44, 56. Although Hus does not analyze Trinity as a major topic of any of the chapters, Holy Spirit is an important part of his deliberations from Chapter IX to Chapter XV, pp. 73-160.

³¹ L. Boff, *Cristianismo...*, op. cit. The Cadaver Synod was a posthumous trial of Pope Formosus held in Rome in 897. His successor, Pope Stephen VI, ordered his body to be removed from the grave. Later it was dressed in pontifical clothes, placed in the room where the Synod took place and sentenced. Eventually, three fingers of the corpse that Formosus used for blessings were cut and the body cast to the Tiber River.

- Catholicism should be syncretic. There are a lot of values in other cultures that are to be converted into Christianity and there is salvation outside of the institutional Church. He also makes a strong distinction between the Church and the Kingdom of God, making the second concept much wider and similar to Hus' idea of predestination. He elaborates more on that in *Cristianismo*, where he notices that many different cultures contributed to the present form of Catholicism, naming a few of them (Greek, Roman, Jewish, German, Spanish, African and American)³³;
- the social thought of Boff is deeply rooted in his Trinitary concepts, in which he pays a very special attention to the Holy Spirit as embracing the entire world. The Church, in fact, becomes the "Sacrament of the Holy Spirit"³⁴;
- the Brazilian frequently questions the monarchic and autocratic authority of the Pope in the Church (as well as the previously-mentioned *Dictatus Papae*), starting with exactly the same interpretation of Mt 16:18 as Hus. According to him, Jesus did not mean Peter personally, but his faith³⁵. Again, only Jesus is the head of the Church. Boff even states that "on the rock of today's Vatican, Christ would never be able to build the Church"³⁶;
- the writings of Boff are full of his deliberations on "the Church of the poor", compassion for poverty as such, and criticism of the excessive wealth of some clergymen. Poverty is the starting point of *Introducing Liberation Theology*, where apart from statistical information, some shocking memories of Clodovis and Leonardo Boff are presented. However, it has to be noticed that very special attention to poverty is also a part of Boff's Franciscan formation. On the other hand, in several places, he diagnoses the roots of these "worldly pathologies" of the Church as the heritage of the late Roman Empire, mainly its law, hierarchy, bureaucracy and expansive character. Moreover, he states that the

³² L. Boff, *Church...*, op. cit. *Dictatus Papae* consists of 27 statements that are attributed to Pope Gregory VII. It can be found in his register under the year of 1075. In practice, these statements constitute absolute power of the Pope in both spiritual and earthly matters.

³³ *Ibídem*; L. Boff, *Cristianismo...*, op. cit.

³⁴ L. Boff, *Church...*, op. cit., pp. 144-153.

³⁵ L. Boff, *Cristianismo*, op. cit.

³⁶ L. Boff, *Church...*, op. cit., p. 40; L. Boff, *Cristianismo*, op. cit., pp. 94-95.

conversion from the persecuted, illicit religion to a state religion, was too fast, Christians were not ready for that and therefore a lot of mistakes were committed while shaping the future of the Church³⁷.

CONCLUSIONS

As seen from the above, there are several important similarities between the thought of both theologians, living in different space and time. Most likely, it is the effect of a few interdependent factors.

One of them is probably the consonance of biographies. Similar socio-economic aspects seem to have determined their background. They originated from lower-class poor families. Both of them experienced analogous ethnic, economic and social problems and conflicts related to property ownership, wealth distribution and national/cultural identity. Both chose ecclesiastical and academic careers and came to conclusions that the Church of their era was going through a serious crisis related to its worldly position. There were important Councils taking place - in Constance and Vatican II. Eventually, both entered an open conflict with the Church hierarchy, of course with much less severe consequences for Boff than for Hus.

The other factor may be identified as an inspiration passed by Hus to further generations. First of all, earlier authors, most notably John Wycliffe, influenced Hus himself. However, as it has already been noticed, the writings of Hus became much more widespread than those of Wycliffe. The Czech reformer became a source of inspiration for Martin Luther and other Protestant theologians, as well as for some Catholic reformers, including those who prepared *Vaticanum II*, as Daniel Didomizio claims. In his works, Leonardo Boff frequently refers to both groups.

It can also be concluded that the problems facing the Church suffered have remained constant. The problems related to the wealth and pro-

³⁷ L. Boff, *Church...*, op. cit.; L. Boff, *Cristianismo...*, op. cit.; L. Boff and C. Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, Orbis Books, New York 1987.

perty of the Church remained a vivid and important question over the centuries, leading to Reform, Reformation and schisms.

Last, but not least, it has to be observed that both authors work basically with the same sources, namely the Bible with the writings of the Fathers of Church (St. Paul, St. John, etc.) and earlier Christian theologians and philosophers (St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Origen, etc.). To some degree, this definitely narrows down the number of possible conclusions that can be drawn, especially if similar biographies are taken under consideration.

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