
Reflection on the Religious and Political Roles of the Czechs in Europe in the Early Modern Age*

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Czech religious and political thought of the early modern period reflects the special position of the King of Bohemia, the Bohemian Kingdom, and the Czechs in general in the history of the world, Europe, and Christendom. Its deep roots reach far into the ecclesiastical and political context of the High and the Late Middle Ages. Speculation about the “Czech Question” reaches, in fact, into thirteenth century, when Přemysl Otakar II was cast into the role of a new Alexander the Great, a defender of Europe and Christendom against the mysterious and pagan East. And his son Wenceslaus II, who would extend the Přemyslid power over the neighbouring Poland and Hungary, even worked according to his father’s intention for a *translatio imperii ad Bohemos*, which was reflected in the internationalism of the Prague Court, as well as (above all) in the cultivation of court literature in Latin, Czech, and German. Without exaggeration, we can speak about the birth of a Bohemian imperial idea, which escalated under the Roman Emperor and Bohemian King Charles IV, who consciously continued the tradition of his grandparents, Emperor Henry VII of Luxembourg and King Wenceslaus II, the Přemyslid. Charles IV is also the chief inspirer of the new self-confidence of Bohemian elites at the turn of the fourteenth century, for whom the Czechs are the elected nation, a new Israel, called to renew the Church and the world.¹ They are that “sunny nation” of Marignola at the time of Charles IV,² which was the heir of the Greek glory and to which Alexander the Great had transferred

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¹ See, for instance, Petr Hlaváček, “Role Českého království ve středověkém křesťanství aneb dialog Evropy a Asie v literárních dílech české provenience 1300–1400” [The Role of the Bohemian Kingdom in Medieval Christendom or the Dialogue Between Europe and Asia in the Literature of Bohemian Provenience, 1300–1400] in: *Odorik z Pordenone: Z Benátek do Pekingů a zpět. Setkávání na cestách starého světa ve 13.–14. století* [Odorik of Pordenone: From Venice to Peking and Back; Encounters on the Roads of the Old World in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries], ed. Petr Sommer and Vladimír Liščák, *Colloquia mediaevalia Pragensia* 10 (2008) 173–184.

² *Kronika Jana z Marignoly*, FRB III:522.

by his privilege the rule over Europe and the world.³ Pulkava of Radenín, likewise writing at the behest of Charles IV, dates the origin of the Slav (that is, Czech) language to the Babylonian confusion; he derives the name of Bohemia (*Bohemia*) from the Slavic word for God “*boh*,” that is, unabashedly from the name of God.⁴ The Czechs are also *sacrosancta natio bohemica* of the stormy Jerome of Prague. And from this angle of vision, the entirety of the Bohemian Reformation – calling in the writings of Jan Hus, Jan Želivský, Jakoubek of Strěbro, Jan Rokycana, or Václav Koranda the Younger, for a new definition of the Church’s catholicity – is the universal message of a nation, which has a specific mission in the history of salvation.⁵ Thus, we have the right to speak about a Czech messianism, a special religious and political self-perception, which had affected all major European nations, be it the French, the Germans, and the Italians, or the English, the Swedes, and the Poles.⁶

The self-confidence of the Czechs, both the Utraquists and the *sub una*, was indeed immense and its “disproportionality” irritated even the humanist Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II. The latter in his *Historica Bohemica* (1458) sharply criticised the Czechs. He noted that the Germans were satisfied with claiming a Roman origin, and the Romans and the French sought their roots in Troy. Only the barbarous Czechs wished to be more ancient at any cost, when they claim to have participated in the building of the Tower of Babel, where their language had its origin. Except for the Jews, there was no other nation in the world, which would esteem its origins as highly as the Czech. Perhaps at some point the Czechs will come up with the assertion – Piccolomini notes with a measure of irony – that their nation sprang up directly from the womb of Eve [*ab utero Evae*].⁷ The German Dominican

³ Anežka Vidmanová, “K privilegii Alexandra Velikého Slovanům” [Alexander the Great’s Privilege to the Slavs] in: *Husitství – Reformace – Renesance. Sborník k 60. narozeninám Františka Šmahela*, 3 vv., edd. Jaroslav Pánek, Miloslav Polívka, and Noemi Rejchrtová, (Prague, 1994) 1:105–115.

⁴ *Kronika Pulkavova*, FRB V:4.

⁵ Petr Hlaváček, “Christianity, Europe, and (Utraquist) Bohemia: The Theological and Geographic Concepts in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times,” *BRRP* 7 (2009) 19–41.

⁶ Such self-perception was nothing unusual in medieval and early modern Christianity; see Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples. Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford, 2003). On Czech messianism in the Middle Ages, see František Šmahel, *Idea národa v husitských Čechách* [The Idea of the Nation in Utraquist Bohemia] (Prague, 2000) 90–143; on the specifics of the national conflicts in Bohemia, see Petr Hlaváček, “Lingua contra linguam, natio contra nationem. Der Nationalpartikularismus unter den böhmischen Franziskaner-Observanten im ausgehenden Mittelalter,” in: *Die Länder der Böhmisches Krone und Ihre Nachbarn zur Zeit der Jagiellonenkönige (1471–1526). Kunst – Kultur – Geschichte*, [Studia Jagellonica Lipsiensia, 2], edd. Evelin Wetter (Ostfildern, 2004) 261–267; idem, “Die deutsch-tschechischen Streitigkeiten unter den böhmischen Franziskanern auf dem Generalkapitel in Urbino (1490),” in: *Language of Religion – Language of the People. Medieval Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. edd. Ernst Bremer, Jörg Jarnut, Michael Richter, and David J. Wasserstein (Munich, 2006) 373–385.

⁷ *Aeneae Silvii Historia Bohemica*. edd. Dana Martínková, Alena Hadravová, and Jiří Matl (Prague, 1998), [Fontes rerum Regni Bohemiae I] 12–15.

Felix Fabri has described his sojourn in the Holy Land in 1484, in which he related that the tower of Babel – the symbol of human confusion – was allegedly built by the Czech King Boemus together with the giants. Fabri caustically comments this story: Well, what also could have come up from these “Bohemian heretics?”⁸ Staying in Bohemia as a student-beggar in 1490–95, Johannes Butzbach still mentioned that, according to the Bohemians, the Czech tongue belonged among those seventy-two languages, which sprang up from the Babylonian confusion, and that Prague was founded soon after the time of the primeval father Abraham.⁹

At the dawn of the modern age, the earliest attempts seek to interpret Czech ethnogenesis on the basis of the known ancient and early medieval historiography.¹⁰ The Utraquist savant, Martin Kuthen, in his *Kronika o založení země České* [Chronicle About the Foundation of the Land of Bohemia] (1539), summarises the various theories about the origins of the Czech, including the opinion that the Czechs emerged immediately after the Great Flood. Kuthen, however, in a more sophisticated, although far from reliable way, flaunted his own knowledge of ancient history and of its humanist derivatives. He tells us that the Celts and the Vandals inhabited Bohemia and that Maroboduus, the King of the Markomanni (whom he called Moravians), had his capital there. According to Kuthen, the primeval inhabitants of Bohemia were Teutonic and only during the reign of Emperor Constantine in 639 a certain man by the name of Čech brought in a Croat nation from Illyria, and Kuthen adds: “...and at that time the two nations became amalgamated.” Thus, in Kuthen’s opinion Czech ethnogenesis was based on a compound of Teutonic and Slav elements.¹¹ The priest *sub una*, Václav Hájek of Libočany, described the origins of the Czech nations in the same parameters in his *Kronika česká* [Bohemian Chronicle] (1541): “We, the Czechs, have our homeland from the Germans [i.e. Teutonic peoples] and our descent

⁸ *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti peregrinationem*. [Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins 3] ed. Konrad D. Hassler (Stuttgart, 1849) 358.

⁹ *Wanderbüchlein. Chronika eines fahrenden Schülers*, transl. Josef Becker (Leipzig, 1912) II: 48–49. On the humanistic views on the role of Bohemia in Christendom, see Petr Hlaváček, “Respublica Christiana aneb spiritualita a církevně-politické představy Bohuslava Hasištejnského z Lobkovic” [Respublica Christiana or Spirituality, and Ecclesiastical and Political ideas of Bohuslav Hasištejnský z Lobkovic] in: *Sborník Národního muzea v Praze* (Řada C – literární historie) 52,1–4 (2007); *Bohuslav Hasištejnský z Lobkovic a kultura jeho doby*. ed. Marta Vaculínová (Prague, 2007) 5–7.

¹⁰ On the medieval roots of the discussion, see Andrzej Pleszczyński, “‘Fetyszym początków’ w ideologii władzy czeskiego średniowiecza,” in: *Origines mundi, gentium et civitatum*, edd. Stanisław Rosik and Przemysław Wiszewskij, *Historia* (Wrocław, 2001) 153 153–159.

¹¹ Martin Kuthen, *Kronika o založení země České a prvních obyvatelích jejích, tudíž o knížatech a kráľích i jejich činech a přiběžích velmi krátce z mnohých kronikářův sebraná* [Chronicle About the Foundation of the Land of Bohemia and Its Inhabitants, Also About the Dukes and Kings as Well as Their Deeds and Stories, Very Briefly Selected from Numerous Chroniclers] (Prague, 1539) f. B1a – B4b.

and language from the Slavs.”¹² The Utraquist priest, Bohuslav Bilejovský, presented the Christianisation of Bohemia in a very original manner in his *Kronika česká* (1532/1537). According to him, the Utraquist Church was not a new creation, but a part of the Catholic Church, in which from the time of Cyril and Methodius the liturgy was sung in Czech and the Lord’s Supper administered in both kinds. This lasted until the reign of Charles IV, when a persecution of faithful Czechs began. The Lord, however, aroused in 1412 Jan Hus as a reformer of the Church, who was not the founder of a new sect, but a restorer of the old orders in the Church of Bohemia.¹³

The Czechs remained an important topic for Europe and Christendom during the entire sixteenth century. Once more ideas about the origins of Czechs retained an important ecclesiastical and political role, being variously reformulated by commentators from the diverse corners of Europe, particularly from the neighbouring German lands. Albert Krantz († 1517), the Chancellor of Rostock University, maintains unequivocally in his treatise *Saxonia* (written from 1502 on): The Wends – or properly speaking Vandals – although speaking a Slav tongue, actually stem from the Teutons, whose primeval ancestor, Tuiscon, ruled from the Rhine to the Don rivers – thus, also over the Slavs. And from this “Pan-German” perspective, designating the Teutons as Europe’s first rulers, he rejected all theories of autonomous origins of nations, above all the Slav prehistory, featuring Čech, Lech, or Krok. Likewise, he rejected the Czech origins after the Babylonian confusion or, for that matter, the Trojan roots of the French. In other words, according to Krantz the German hegemony in the Empire, in Europe, and in the entirety of Christendom has a fundamental historical justification.¹⁴ The Bavarian savant, Johann Aventinus († 1534) was somewhat more conciliatory in his treatise *Rudimenta gramaticae* (1517). According to him, the Slav (*windisch*) tongue actually originated at the time of Babel, just like German and Italian. The Teutons’ progenitor, Tuiscon, who led the Germans into Europe, was the ruler over the people of two tongues, namely, the German and the Slav. The historical kinship of the two languages was subsequently respected also by Emperor Charles IV, as Aventinus deduced from certain imperial edicts, and specifically from the prescriptions for the Electors in the Golden Bull of 1356.¹⁵

The Saxon humanist, Hieronymus Emser († 1527), Erasmian in his orientation, probably did not please the Czechs very much when, during the Leipzig Disputation (1519), he compared “the Czech heresy” to that “old Tower of Babel” as the source of all the confusion in Christendom.¹⁶ The

¹² Václav Hájek z Libočan, *Kronika Česká*, ed. Václav Flajšhans (Prague, 1918) I:36–39.

¹³ Bohuslav Bilejovský, *Kronika česká*, published as *Kronyka Cýrkewntí*, ed. Josef Skalický (Prague, 1816) 7–12, 24–25, 46.

¹⁴ Albert Krantz, *Saxonia. De Saxonicae gentis vetusta origine* (Frankfurt/Main, 1575) 1–4.

¹⁵ Johann Aventinus, *Rudimenta gramaticae* (Augsburg, 1517) f. S–3.

¹⁶ Hieronymus Emser, *De disputatione Lipsicensi*, [Corpus Catholicorum 4] ed. Franz X. Thurnhofer, (Münster, 1921) 29.

Germans now saw themselves – not for the last time – as the chosen nation, the new Israel, and felt that limits had to be imposed on the impudent religious and political aspirations of the Czechs. This was despite the fact that the same Luther, *Hercules Germanicus* – in whom also some Czechs saw the prophet of a Church renewal – would issue the famous flowery exclamation: “We are all Hussites,” thereby connecting the German Reformation with the Bohemian one. Andreas Althamer († 1539), a Lutheran pastor in Ansbach, invented in the year 1529/1536 “a new historical and political narrative,” a new myth about the European role of the Germans: Tuiscon, that *rex Germanorum et Sarmatarum*, was properly speaking the progenitor of the Teutons, the Sarmatians, and the Scythians, that is of the Teutonic and Slav nations.¹⁷ To the contrary, Beatus Rhenanus († 1547), a humanist from Schlettstadt, scoffed in 1531 at the theories about Tuiscon and also at all the “fables” about national origins which, according to him, were so widespread especially among the French, the Scots, and the Czechs.¹⁸ Christoph Hofmann († 1534), a Benedictine in Regensburg, in the same period, however, naively wrote in his *Chronik der Behemen* – apparently drawing on a German version of Dalimil or on Pulkava in Latin – that the progenitor of the Czechs was Lech, later known as *Čech*. He was one of the builders of the Tower of Babel, and during the ensuing confusion received a Slav language “*windisch*.”¹⁹ Yet, in 1572 the Upper Rhenish lawyer and writer, Johann Fischart († 1590) again ridiculed the fables about the progenitors Čech and Lech.²⁰ Theobald Hock († 1658), a Lutheran from the Palatinate, who lived in Prague, came up with another modification in 1601. According to him, the biblical Noah already dispatched the progenitor Tuiscon to Europe – thus a long time before the great language mix-up at Babel – and the Germans were, therefore, the oldest nation in Europe and in the world. German and Czech languages, however, were so greatly intermixed that the Germans and the Czechs are, properly speaking, close relatives. Thus, Hock’s narrative evidently encoded a call for a German-Czech Reformation alliance, by which these “two oldest European nations” would challenge the hegemony of the Romance nations that formed the main support of the Roman Church.²¹

Thus, in the period of European Reformations, the formerly “heretical” Bohemia was again perceived as the central part of the continent. In 1537, Johannes Bucius created his pictorial allegory of Europe “*in forma virginis*,” which was frequently reproduced and modified. The Kingdom of Bohemia was here depicted as a precious medal, resting on the chest of Europe,

¹⁷ Andreas Althamer, *Scholia in Cornelium Tacitum* (Nuremberg, 1529) f. 5r–5v.

¹⁸ Beatus Rhenanus, *Rerum Germanicarum libri III* (Basel, 1531) 68.

¹⁹ Christoph Hofmann, *Chronik der Behemen*, in: *Scriptores Rerum Austriacarum* II, ed. Hieronymus Pez (Leipzig, 1725) 1046.

²⁰ Johann Fischart, *Geschichtsklitterung*, ed. Albert Alsleben [Reprint 65–71] (Halle/Saale, 1891) 37–38.

²¹ *Schönes Blumenfeld*, ed. Max Koch (Reprint 157–159) [Halle/Saale, 1899] 124, 128–130.

personified as a Queen. *Bohemia* and *Praga* were perceived as the actual heart of Europe, *cor Europae*. So Bohemia became again an important subject of theological, geographic, and political interest of Europe's intellectuals. The iconography of Europe as a Virgin/Woman/Queen attained to full flourish exactly in the sixteenth century. An important variant of this cartographic and iconographic type can be found in the manuscript of the Evangelical pastor, Heirich Bunting, from 1579 that was published in 1582 under the title *Itinerarium sacrae scripturae*. Bunting wrote in his commentary on the map: "Against the sunset you will find Europe, the first part of the world, which resembles a lying virgin. The head is Spain, the chest France, the heart Germany." Yet, we read something different in the second edition from Magdeburg (1589). I am citing: "The Alps and the Rhine are like a necklace around Europe's neck, and the Bohemian Forest with the entire Kingdom of Bohemia is like a golden pfennig or a round pendant and jewel, which hangs on the chain of the Rhine..." We see a similar map – with Bohemia as the centre and heart of Europe – on the copper etching of Matthias Quade from the year 1587, known as *Europae descriptio*, and afterwards with a special symbolism in the *Cartographia* of Sebastian Münster (1588). By the end of the sixteenth century this cartographic form of Europe had spread all over the Roman Empire, the Netherlands, and Bohemia as well as England, Denmark and Sweden. Since the inception, this map communicated an important geopolitical, or ecclesiastico-political message, namely, that Spain was the head and ruler of Europe. It represented at the same time a very ostentatious glorification of the Habsburg dynasty and an allusion to the idea of a European and a world-wide universal monarchy headed by the Habsburgs, as it already had been propagandised by Emperor Charles V. The Kingdom of Bohemia, which was also ruled by the Habsburgs, occupied an exceptional place in the Empire, especially while the King of Bohemia was not just one of the Electors, but for extended periods also the Emperor. Under Emperor Rudolf II, Prague was moreover the imperial residence and a political centre of Europe of the first order.²²

In the year 1584, Václav Budovec of Budov wrote his eschatological "*Krátkej spis o zlatém budoucím a již nastávajícím věku*" [A Brief Treatise About the Future, and Already Commencing, Golden Age], in which he recalled the "Golden Age" of the Czechs in Hus's time and, despite the many current crises, anticipated a renewal of Europe and of Christendom in the near future.²³ The issuance of the Letter of Majesty was to him a symbol of this renewal, as he had written to Johann Grynaeus to Basel on 8 September 1609. The entirety of Europe allegedly was turning its sights onto Bohemia,

²² Wolfgang Schmale, "Europäische Identität und Europa-Ikonografie im 17. Jahrhundert," in: *Studien zur europäischen Identität im 17. Jahrhundert*. edd. Wolfgang Schmale, Rolf Felbinger, Günter Kastner, and Josef Köstlbauer (Bochum, 2004) 88–94.

²³ Noemi Rejchrtová, *Václav Budovec z Budova* (Prague, 1984) 203, 208–213.

which was considered the true *spectaculum Europiacis*.²⁴ The Jewish sage David Gans, pupil of the famous Prague Rabbi Judah Loew, composed around 1600 a world chronicle *Zemah David*, in which he maintained that Prague was founded earlier than Troy and that the Jews had settled in the Bohemian capital as early as the time of the Second Temple. Prague was, next to Jerusalem, the oldest still existing city in the world. Thus, the Bohemian Duchess Libuše was not the founder, but merely the restorer of Prague.²⁵ Similarly, the Prague humanist, Bartholomeus Martinides had no doubts – in his description of Prague (1615) – about the central position of Bohemia in Europe, or about the special role of the Czechs in the history of salvation: “Prague, a city of God Almighty and fortress of all the Bohemian regions, a large city, and a seat of the archbishop, the king, and the emperor, [this city] lies in the centre of Europe.”²⁶ Professor of the Prague University, Adam Rosacius († 1624) celebrated, in his *Oratio panegyrica de Boemiae reviviscentia* from 1615, the confessional freedom in Bohemia, which followed the adoption of Rudolf’s Letter of Majesty (1609). At the same time, this Evangelical savant recalled “the glorious time” of the reign of the catholic Emperor Charles IV, when the Praguers were the “lords of the world” (*rerum domini*) and Prague was the “capital of the world” (*caput rerum*). And he stressed that these most glorious times had returned with Emperor Rudolf II who, as a new Solomon, was the founder of another golden age for Bohemia, Europe, and all Christendom.²⁷

The perception of Bohemia’s significance peaked in the period of 1618–1620. The Bohemian ecclesiastico-political crisis at the start of the Thirty Years War caused the country to be viewed as the main axis of a Protestant Europe, around which a *corpus evangelicorum* emerged in cooperation with England, the Netherlands, and the Palatinate. Elector Friedrich of Palatinate, chosen King of Bohemia in 1619, was presented as a *Hector*, a Protestant hero, and Bohemia as the heart and hope of Europe. After the Battle of the White Mountain in November 1620, the glorious *Triumphus Bohemicus* mutated into a *Böhmische Tragödie*, as fittingly described by the actual titles of contemporary flyers concerning the Czech situation. The image of the Bohemian “Winter King” Friedrich of Palatinate was readily transformed in propaganda from “a Protestant hero” to that of “a Protestant martyr.”²⁸

²⁴ Václav Budovec z Budova, *Korrespondence z let 1579–1619*, ed. Julius Glücklich (Prague, 1908) 78.

²⁵ Peter Demetz, *Prague in Gold and Black: Scenes from the Life of a European City* (New York, 1997) 209–210. See also André Neher, *Jewish Thought and the Scientific Revolution of the Sixteenth Century: David Gans (1541–1613) and His Times* (Oxford, 1986).

²⁶ *Poselství ducha. Latinská próza českých humanistů* [The Message of the Spirit: Latin Prose of the Bohemian Humanists], ed. Dana Martínková (Prague, 1975) 209.

²⁷ Adam Rosacius, *Oratio de Boemiae reviviscentia*, [Fontes Latini Bohemorum, V] ed. Dana Martínková (Prague, 2000) 174–175, 218–219.

²⁸ Jaroslav Miller, *Falcký mýtus. Friedrich V. a obraz české války v raně Stuartovské Anglii* [The

In the late Middle Ages and in Early Modern Times, the Czechs were perceived by their own and by European elites as a great and self-confident nation, which determined its own fate autonomously and at the same time participated both in the religious history of salvation and in the actual political events of all Europe and Christendom. Self-confidence was then a matter-of-course for the Czechs as a political nation. And exactly in the seventeenth century a radical change occurs in Czech society and its self-perception. Bohemian messianism and ecclesiastico-political activism is replaced by defensiveness, a sense of aloneness, and despondency. For sure, the diagnosis is clear and the chronological parameters of the tragedy easy to define. The population was decimated by the Thirty Years War (1618- 1648), the economy was in ruins. Outstanding personalities of the Czech elites left for exile, the Kingdom became subject to so-called Re-Catholicisation. Of course, probably the most drastic change was the systemic intervention into the political constitution of the Bohemian Kingdom via the Renewed Land Ordinance of 1627. Its application systematically eradicated Czech political customs, and the constitutional statehood; it nullified the powers of the Bohemian Diet, and thereby the existing Czech parliamentary tradition. The Kingdom of Bohemia thus became both *de facto* and *de iure* a mere province of the absolutist Habsburg monarchy. Czech political, ecclesiastical, and intellectual elites were downgraded into the roles of bystanders without political influence, reduced to intriguing at the absolutist court. Czech patriots, like the Jesuit, Bohuslav Balbín, pointed with regret to the greatness of the Czech nation and its significance in Europe, which had by then vanished into an irretrievable past. Their commentaries are reminiscent of the lament over a great nation, doomed to political insignificance. Nothing but empty phrases are the retrospective apologies that the so-called Re-catholicisation returned Bohemia among the cultured European nations by rejoining the country with the cultural centres of the Mediterranean region, or conversely that it had safeguarded Bohemia from a Protestant Germanisation. These apologetic efforts have sought to conceal under a mantle of Baroque aesthetics the hideousness of the Czech tragedy which for almost two centuries, or even longer, would erase Bohemia from the political map of Europe.²⁹

Translated from the Czech by Zdeněk V. David

Myth of the Palatinate: Friedrich V and the image of the Bohemian War in Early Stuart England] (Prague, 2004) 63–81.

²⁹ Petr Hlaváček, "A Reflection on the Political and Religious Role of Bohemia in Christianity (1200–1700)," in: *East-Central Europe in European History. Themes & Debates*, edd. Jerzy Kłoczowski, Hubert Łaszkiwicz (Lublin 2009) 131–155.