

Jan Hus
Commemoration of the Medieval Visionary
On the 600th Anniversary of His Martyrdom

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Brothers and sisters in Christ, at this commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the martyrdom of Jan Hus, I bring you warm greetings from the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. I also thank you for allowing me this opportunity to share with you some thoughts about Hus, a great hero not only of the Czech people and of Protestant Christians but also of people everywhere who honor courage in the pursuit of truth.

Jan Hus was a man of the early fifteenth century who clearly saw the Roman Catholic Church's need for both moral and doctrinal reform. Others at this conference have dealt with this aspect of his life already; therefore, I will limit my observations as to his significance to three other areas.

First, Hus believed in academic freedom. As a university professor, he insisted on the right to read the works of John Wycliffe even if he was wrong on some points. University education, he argued, must be free. Books, therefore, should not be burned but studied, evaluated, and refuted where wrong. He quoted church fathers such as Augustine, Ambrose, and Chrysostom to support this view.

The right of academic freedom, whether in Hus's time or our own, inevitably poses certain dangers and is therefore suspect. This is especially true for institutions with a religious agenda.

In the nineteenth century Catholic thinker Cardinal John Henry Newman continued to ponder the perplexities of academic freedom. In his book *The Idea of a University* (1851) he concluded that a university – even a Catholic university – should not be dominated by religion. A religious department clearly has a place in a university, but he believed it must not be allowed to erect artificial barriers to limit the pursuits and conclusions of other departments. Newman insisted that academic freedom be a cornerstone of the university because he believed that all truth is God's truth.

Second, Hus believed in the right of individual conscience. Though he did not embrace a modern notion of individualism, he believed that individuals must be

able to read the scripture for themselves and come to their own conclusions. In contrast, the medieval church insisted that the church would determine doctrine and that its conclusions trumped individual conscience.

In the week before he died, Hus wrote to the University of Prague to assure his friends and colleagues that he had not wavered. “Be confident,” he said. “I have not revoked or abjured a single article. I refuse to renounce unless what the council charged against me shall be proved false from scripture.”

My own Reformed tradition insists on this point, as the Westminster Confession boldly states: “God alone is the Lord of the conscience.”

Protestants in many respects led the way in this area, but we should not be too proud as both Protestants and Catholics were guilty of intolerance. It was only in the increasingly pluralistic world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that Protestants reluctantly came to see tolerance and then freedom of conscience as necessary. Today we have progressed so far that most nations have signed the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which provides for freedom of conscience. Yet the sad reality is that our world is better at paying lip service to this principle than honoring it in practice. “Hypocrisy,” as François de La Rochefoucauld said, “is a tribute that vice pays to virtue.”

Third, Hus believed that truth will triumph. He was an optimist who said, “Above all else truth triumphs.” He believed that once the truth was revealed, everyone would accept it. This gave him the courage to travel to the Council of Constance believing that, if he could have a fair hearing, he would set the church on the course of reform.

In his optimistic belief that truth will prevail he is joined by many famous thinkers. For example, John Milton in the *Areopagitica* wrote that truth and falsehood should be allowed to grapple, for “in a free and open encounter” truth would not be worsted. And later, Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson agreed. Later still, political theorists such as John Stuart Mill and jurists such as Oliver Wendell Holmes would endorse this principle as the best argument for freedom of speech. They believed that in the free “marketplace of ideas” truth will ultimately prevail.

Less sanguine is twentieth-century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Known as a Christian “realist,” he believed that there is no ultimate truth in human affairs, where all solutions are proximate and provisional. Writing during the dark days of World War II, he affirmed the biblical doctrine that human beings are fallen creatures who are also made in the image of God. Therefore, he argued, we are neither wholly good nor wholly evil. This view, he believed, was the best argument for democracy, of which he famously wrote, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

It is hard to say what Hus would have made of this. He lived in a highly stratified society that honored the social hierarchy as divinely ordained. On the other hand,

there were limits to his credulity. He did not believe that popes or kings should be obeyed when their demands ran counter to the Scriptures. Also, he refused to be tried in Rome where he knew he would not obtain a fair hearing, and he only went to Constance when he had obtained the promise of a safe conduct from the emperor – a promise that was not kept. Though he was generally an optimist, his idealism was tempered at times by an almost Niebuhrian realism.

Hus is an enduring reminder that truth does not always win – at least not in the short run or even in the middle run. And often it is opposed by people who are not necessarily evil but rather are simply protecting a cherished tradition, shielding the precious candle by which alone they see the way forward. Because this is so often true, the world will always need its courageous, lonely pathfinders, those like Hus, dauntless souls who guide us confidently to an uncertain future and are willing to pay a fiery price for their stubborn refusal to compromise or recant.