What Has Mussolini to Do with Hus?[1]

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Introduction

In this lecture to celebrate the launch of *Unio cum Christo* I propose to look at how the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini approached the life and thinking of John Hus.[2] It is no real surprise to find that someone like Mussolini would appropriate a figure like Hus. If you travel to Europe today, in Germany many statues of Martin Luther are on view, almost all from the nineteenth century. The rise of German nationalism fueled interest in Martin Luther, and in nineteenth-century Europe generally there was a renewal of interest in earlier European figures. So it is not surprising that a public figure like Mussolini would be interested in an historical figure like Hus. It fits in with the pattern, on a more sophisticated level, that debates in important streams of thinking in the twentieth century take place through dialogue or in appropriation of past events. In discussions of the English Civil War, for example, in debates between the likes of Christopher Hill and Conrad Russell, the question as to whether the English Civil War was the last of the great wars of religion or the first of the class

[1] This article is a revised transcription of the lecture given on October 20, 2015, at the launch of *Unio cum Christo* at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. The oral tone of the original has been largely respected.

[2] Benito Mussolini, *John Huss: the Veracious* (New York: Italian Book, 1939). *Giovanni Huss il Veridico* was published by Podreca and Galantra in Rome in May 1913, translated into English in 1929, and republished in 1939. For more details on the topic, see Pavel Helan, "Mussolini Looks at Jan Hus and the Bohemian Reformation," trans. Zdeněk V. David, *Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice* 4 (2000): 309–16.

revolutions had implications for the understanding of Marxist theory.[3] This goes back to one of the influential nineteenth-century histories of the peasant war by Friedrich Engels, who plundered the sixteenth century for insights, or propaganda, in order to prop up his and his colleague Karl Marx's view of history.[4] We are familiar with philosophers using history to provide strength to the narrative of their analyses or perhaps, most influentially at the moment, Charles Taylor, the Roman Catholic sociologist, for whom the late medieval period and then the Reformation is a turning point in the development of the secular mindset.[5] So to find an important twentieth-century political actor engaging with a theological figure from the past is neither unusual nor unexpected.

Why does Mussolini do it? To answer that question I propose to first of all give a brief life of Hus, which is not as familiar as the life of Luther, because a high percentage of academic Reformation courses focus on Luther.

I. *The Life of Hus*

A brief life of Hus (1369–1415), who was executed six hundred years ago, will illustrate how Mussolini came to use him.[6] Hus was a Bohemian educated at the University of Prague; he took his B.A. in 1393 and his M.A. in 1396, and in 1400 was ordained a priest. In 1402–1403 he served as Rector of the University of Prague at a time when it was about to be plunged into what we would call now serious ethnic strife, or certainly political strife. At roughly the same time, Hus became preacher at Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, which you can still visit. And interestingly enough, the communists never got rid of the signs of Hus, the statues, in Prague. Hus is appropriated by Mussolini as much as a figure of socialist significance as of anything. Four aspects of Hus's life are particularly relevant to understanding him.

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[3] See for example, Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1965); Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the Civil War: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[4] Cf. Friedrich Engels, *The German Revolutions: The Peasant War in Germany, and Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, ed. Leonard Krieger, Classic European Historians (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[5] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 77–88, 243–44, 264–67.

[6] For more details on Hus's life, see Daniel Bergèse, "Jan Hus: A Reformation before the Reformation," *Unio cum Christo* 1.1–2 (Fall 2015): 61–76.

1. *Oxford and Prague*

First of all, he was part of a movement within the University of Prague that was inspired by the close connections that had developed between Bohemia and England in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Richard II, the ill-fated king of England, married Anne of Bohemia of the House of Luxembourg, the eldest daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, in 1382. The diplomatic relations thus forged facilitated the transfer of intellectual talent and property between the University of Prague and Oxford University, the latter of which in the fourteenth century was dominated by the thinking of the realist philosopher John Wycliffe. In popular Protestant hagiography, Wycliffe is often presented as a proto-Reformer, which is problematic because it represents a considerably anachronistic analysis of him. But Wycliffe's work was marked by a number of things that were to be of significance for the University of Prague in general, and for Hus in particular.

First of all, Wycliffe had a critical approach to the Lord's Supper that was in many ways more consistently Aristotelian than one finds in the doctrine of transubstantiation. For Wycliffe, if the accidents of a substance were present, then the substance itself had to be present as well. His interest on that point derives from an epistemological concern that if the accidents of something are present without an underlying substance a radically skeptical epistemology is implied. The world could simply be a bundle of accidents with no underlying relevant substance, which would be lethal for transubstantiation. Wycliffe's own view of the Lord's Supper appears to have approximated something like what Luther later advocated, where the substance of the bread and the wine and the substance in the body and blood are both present in the elements. The difference between Wycliffe and Luther is that Wycliffe was working on philosophical premises, attempting to apply a purified form of Aristotelianism, whereas Luther repudiated philosophy and simply set forth an article of faith.[7] There are superficial similarities, but underlying significant differences. The question of whether Hus holds to Wycliffe's position on the Lord's Supper is debated. Certainly he was condemned for it. But it is unclear whether Hus advocated Wycliffe's position or whether he merely expounded it in the University of Prague. Certainly, Wycliffe had an impact on Hus.

Secondly, Wycliffe brought to bear a radical emphasis on predestination that would be crucial for Hus, a quintessential medieval figure in that he

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[7] Cf. Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 39, 57.

did not believe that any individual Christian could have assurance of faith short of a direct revelation from God. He held to a radical understanding of predestination, and this became a critical tool for undermining the authority of the visible church. For Hus, if you cannot know that you are predestined (and the church is the totality of the predestined), then the pope can make no claim to be head of the church. The pope cannot know he is part of the church and therefore his power is pulled out from under him.[8]

What is perhaps most significant concerning the impact of Wycliffe in Prague is that within the University, profoundly divided between the Bohemians, the Bavarians, the Saxons, and the Poles, he gave the Bohemian faction, of which Hus emerged as the most significant figure, a theological idiom for expressing their identity and their differences from the other parties.

The struggle in the University came to a head in 1409 when King Wenceslas gave the Bohemian faction three votes in determining University policy and one each for the Bavarians, the Saxons, and the Poles. So essentially, Wenceslas handed significant power to the Bohemians. Hus is to be understood against the background of the ethnic struggle, and that hints at one of the ways that he will appeal to Mussolini; it is not difficult to appropriate a figure of nationalism (even though nationalism is a creation of post-Napoleonic Europe) and read back into history with relative ease.

2. *The Crisis of the Papacy*

The second factor that shaped Hus's life was the crisis of the papacy. In 1409 the Council of Pisa elected Alexander V as pope. The other popes at the time, Gregory and Benedict, refused to acknowledge him. The pressing problem in Western Europe at this point was the stabilizing of the church. Who appoints the pope? Who is the legitimate pope? Hus and the Bohemians gave their allegiance to Alexander, who, despite this, issued a papal bull to proceed against Wycliffism in Prague. Alexander died in 1410 and was succeeded by John XXIII, one of three to have held that title in history, the last being the pope of the Second Vatican Council. (The first was the fictional Pope Joan of the Middle Ages, recognized to be woman apparently by giving birth while sitting on the papal throne, who pops up in Hus's writings, since he believed it to be true.) John XXIII launched a crusade against the rival Pope Gregory and those who sought to protect him. He raised an indulgence to finance this action, which became a focal point of Hus's preaching and criticism.

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[8] On Hus and the Leipzig debate, see Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 41–42.

3. *Council of Constance*

The third factor was the Council of Constance. Hus and his ideas had gained significant influence by 1412, but he had failed to find decisive support in either the king, the pope, or the council. His language shifted at this point, making direct appeals to Christ as an authority. It is not surprising, for this reason, that Luther saw an earlier kindred spirit in Hus, as the Hus of 1412 was not dissimilar to the Luther who emerged in 1517. When Luther realized that neither the papacy nor the councils were going to come to his support, he was forced to reflect upon the issue of authority that underlay his protest without him realizing it. In 1412, Hus began to reflect significantly on the issue of authority.

In the wider sphere, however, in 1414 the empire decided to convene the Council of Constance, which ran for four years, in order to end the crisis of the papacy. Wenceslas's brother, Sigismond, king of the Romans and functional ruler of the empire, summoned Hus to attend the Council of Constance under safe conduct. In popular Protestant hagiographical accounts, that Hus was given a safe conduct to the Council where he will be arrested, tried, and executed is one of the great scandals. However, there are strong pointers that Hus knew the safe conduct was not to be trusted and he even fixed his last will and testament before departing for the Council. In the medieval context, everybody knew that the safe conduct would not be worth the paper it was written on: he went, was arrested, tried, and executed on a series of charges of heresy. Subsequently Bohemia would erupt in war, a war that only ended in 1436 at the Council of Basel. So Hus, a significant, provocative theological and political figure in his day, perished at the stake, but his significance in some ways lies in what happened afterwards, as is often the case in church history: the way figures are appropriated by later tradition makes them significant.

4. *Luther and the Significance of Hus*

Before we address Mussolini's approach, it can be pointed out that the significance of Hus has come primarily through Luther. Legend quickly grew up as to how, as Hus was being burned at the stake, he made a prophecy to the effect of "Today you burn a goose, but a hundred years from now a swan will arise."[9] Luther was very enamored of this prophecy. He definitely saw himself as a Hus-like figure. In Lutheran churches today the lectern is often in the shape of a swan, an aesthetic allusion to Luther's appropriation of this legendary prophecy about a swan that was to rise a hundred years

[9] Hus is similar to the Czech word for goose, *husa*, and Hus is supposed to have played on this ambiguity.

hence. Hus was burned in 1415, and Luther came into the national/international limelight in 1517–1518, almost exactly one hundred years later. So there is a certain symbolic significance. Luther, of course, even though he was cautious not to identify himself with the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, generally liked to be seen as the fulfillment of positive prophetic figures.

Hus becomes pointedly significant in the Luther story at the Leipzig Disputation in 1518. The University of Leipzig had historical links with the University of Prague and the Bohemians. Indeed, after the Kutná Hora decree handed power in the University or Prague to the Bohemians, there was a mass exodus of students and academics from the other ethnic or linguistic groups to Leipzig; and out of that exodus the University of Leipzig was born. So not only would Hus's temporary triumph at the University of Prague lead to the founding of the University of Leipzig, but also Hus would become a bone of contention in Leipzig at the time of the Reformation.

At Leipzig Luther chose to preach the night before the Disputation on Matthew 16:18, a provocative text to choose, on Jesus's commission to Peter and the promise that the church would not fail. Luther preached in a manner that emphasized that the church is the place where the Holy Spirit dwells and is not identified with a particular institutional hierarchy. Johann Eck, probably one of the sharpest scholastic minds and one of the best debaters of his generation, set the scene for the debate that night. Leaving the lecture theatre where Luther had delivered his sermon, and having heard Luther preach, he was reputedly heard to say, "That is completely Bohemian." Eck was already making a connection between what he heard from Luther and what Hus said at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the significance being that Hus had been condemned as a heretic. If Luther walks into the "Hus trap" in the Leipzig debate, then Eck has the upper hand; if Luther backs somebody already condemned as a heretic, then it is the endgame, and that of course is what Luther did. Luther was lured by Eck into identifying himself with Hus. He describes Eck at one moment in the debate this way:

> Then, coming to the last point, he [Eck] rested his case entirely on the Council of Constance which had condemned Huss's article alleging that papal authority derived from the emperor instead of from God. Then Eck stamped about with much ado as though he were in an arena, holding up the Bohemians before me and publicly accusing me of the heresy and support of the Bohemian heretics, for he is a sophist, no less impudent than rash. These accusations tickled the Leipzig audience more than the debate itself.[10]

[10] Martin Luther, "The Leipzig Debate, 1519," trans. Harold J. Grimm, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 31:321–22.

What Eck proceeded to do at Leipzig was to press Luther on the issue of authority: "So Luther, the papacy's got it wrong. So Luther, now you are saying the Council of Constance made errors, and Councils can't help us in terms of authority, so where do you place the issue of authority, Luther?" Hus in 1412 wrestled with the same problem as Luther before Eck in 1518 at Leipzig. Hus is significant for Luther because he exposed the novelty of papal authority and the issue of authority underlying the debate as a whole, as in Matthew Spinka's work, where Hus emerges as a Czech hero.[11] Of course, during the immediate post-war era Czechoslovakia was a satellite of the Soviet Union, at times under Soviet occupation, and Hus became a hero of Czech nationalism.

II. *Mussolini's Interest in Hus*

Mussolini was not a Bohemian, so what was his interest in Hus, and why, in 1912–1913? The English title of his work *Giovanni Hus, il veritico*, "John Hus, the Veracious" (and not the voracious, even if Mussolini was voracious!). Hus had in fact featured a couple of times previously in Italian nationalist history.[12]

Giuseppe Garibaldi, the father of modern Italy, was invited in 1869 to attend a celebration of the quincentenary of Hus's birth in Prague. Though we have a letter from Garibaldi declining the invitation, that he was invited is interesting, because 1869 is the year of post-Napoleonic nationalism in Europe, when the nation-state was being forged. Garibaldi was one of the key men in that story. And it is obvious that there was something of a network in Europe. Different national movements were connected with each other. As the Czechs were pressing for nationhood, so the Italians were. So, one of the ways in which Hus made his way back into common political discourse in the nineteenth century was through nationalism.

The other impulse is free thinking. At the heart of Rome stands a statue commemorating Giordano Bruno, and on certain days the local atheists and free thinkers lay wreaths at the statue of Bruno, a Dominican, a scientist, a kind of Galileo figure. He developed theories about the planets and the stars and was also ultimately tried and executed by the church for heresy, not for his understanding of planetary circulation. But in the nineteenth century, Bruno was appropriated by the burgeoning free-thinking movement

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[11] Cf., e.g., Matthew Spinka, *John Hus: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); *John Hus at the Council of Constance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

[12] For Hus's reception in Italy, see now Lothar Vogel, "Die Rezeption und Wahrnehmung von Jan Hus in Italien," *Communio viatorum* 57.1 (2015): 53–70, esp. 59–61 on Mussolini.

and became a hero of freedom of conscience. His statue in the Campo de' Fiori, like those of Luther in Germany, is a nineteenth-century tribute to free thinking. On the statue there are other figures carved, and one of them is Hus. So in the nineteenth century Hus was appropriated in two ways: as a figure of nationalist importance and as a figure of free thinking. Both are anachronisms because Hus was neither a free thinker nor really a nationalist. The background of Mussolini's interest in Hus is not a particularly theological one; Hus would have been known to Mussolini because he was a nationalist and a free thinker.

In 1911 before he became a fascist, Mussolini was a Marxist and a socialist. He only made his move to fascism during the First World War in a break with the Socialist Party over support for the war. Mussolini was initially opposed to the First World War but then broke with the party line and became a supporter of the war, which is the critical moment in his political development. At that time he was still a socialist and in close contact with the international organization of free thought. The Czech division of this organization decided that it would hold its 1915 meeting, three years hence, in Prague, on the five-hundredth anniversary of the burning of the great champion of free thought, John Hus. It appears that Mussolini was either commissioned or decided that it would be a good thing to write a book on Hus which he could then take to the conference in Prague. Of course, the conference never took place, because the First World War intervened. In 1911–1912 Mussolini also happened to be in prison for five months after inciting riots against the Italian war in Libya, a not-uncommon thing for him, as he was a real rabble rouser. Subsequently, he wrote the book as an expression of his commitment to free thought. However, something more than free thought and socialism emerge in this book, which represents a significant turning point in Mussolini's thinking.

III. *Contours of Mussolini's Analysis*

The book is relatively short, in translation about 150 pages. It is heavily dependent on secondary literature, rather than a reading of Hus's own sources, and it contains a number of errors as well, the most obvious being that Mussolini seemed to think that Wycliffe was executed for heresy (a reasonable assumption for the fourteenth century—if you are a notorious heretic you will get executed for it). In fact, Wycliffe died relatively peacefully, but after the Council of Constance he was exhumed and burned at the stake. Chapter 1 is significant for seeing where Mussolini is coming from and focuses on the corruption of the church in the fourteenth century,

which will contribute to the interesting afterlife of the book during Mussolini's dictatorship. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with Hus's life, work, and death, while chapter 4 focuses on his writings and, interestingly enough, mostly on *On Simony*, an economic study criticizing the corruption rife in the church.[13] The fifth chapter is on the Hussite wars, and Mussolini interestingly distances himself from Hus, considering them far too violent, and comments that the Hussites became as bad as the church. Mussolini is not a "violence for violence's sake" man. The sixth chapter is a repudiation of the Roman Catholic Church's negative views of Hus. Finally, there is an appendix, in which Mussolini provides a translation of Luther's preface to Hus's letters with excerpts from nineteen letters. A number of interesting themes emerge.

1. *Socialism*

Hus, in this work, emerges less as a figure of national significance and more as a mouthpiece for the ordinary man. When Mussolini rereads Hus's work, what he sees is a charismatic union organizer. On page 17 of the translation, he says, "In fact every heresy disclosed a social content, at times socialistic."[14] This hints at Mussolini's Marxist background: "The heretics spoke to the people and for the people," and "John Hus, the Veracious," is *il veritico*. One of Mussolini's favorite journalistic pseudonyms was "*vero heretico*," which sounds similar, meaning "true heretic." Mussolini clearly regards heresy as an idiom of socialist protest.

2. *Mysticism*

Having said that the socialism is more prominent, nationalism is also in evidence. There is a kind of mysticism at work in this book, a mysticism that transforms Mussolini's socialism and that often characterizes Marxist historiographies: mysticism is the key to revolution. Hus is inspired by a deep profound mysterious idea. Revolution requires religious fervor, built on a kind of mythology, which is certainly present at the start of the twentieth century. Marxism changed in the mid-twentieth century, but certainly the idea that religion was an inherently pacific thing was strong in Marxism at the start of the twentieth century. Mussolini clearly considers that religion has a powerful and pungent social revolutionary activist aspect. And the mythology that he sees in Hus has a distinct national dimension to it. He finds in Hus both religious fervor and a sense of nationhood. In other

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[13] For an English translation of this work, see Jan Hus, "On Simony," in *Advocates of Reform*, ed. Matthew Spinka (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 196–278.

[14] Mussolini, *John Huss*, 17.

words, Mussolini is moving towards fascism, and will be a fascist within five or six years.[15] Written at a point before he breaks with the Socialist Party, this analysis offers an interesting and unconventional insight into religion that is significant for his later thinking.

A naive assessment of Marxist socialism might describe it as an eschatological movement. It looks forward to the New Jerusalem, which is why it had a strongly industrial aspect to it. While they are proud of Fidel Castro, Marxists tend to look down on rural ways of life. It was an industrial movement that looked forward to the end of history. Fascism, by contrast, is a protological movement. It looks backward to Eden, to the myths of national origins and foundations, and it often has an agrarian aspect. That emerges in Mussolini's presentation of Hus: it is socialist but with a transformation that will have significance for the twentieth century. Secondly, it is anticlerical from the outset, presenting a negative view of the church. And the big question in Italian politics, post Garibaldi, is always, What is the relation with the church? It continues today with issues of crucifixes in classrooms. The Catholic Church is powerful politically in Italy, and the question in Mussolini's day was always, What is the relationship between state and church? This book is part of Mussolini's polemic against the power of the church, which will make the afterlife of this book interesting.

3. *The Great Man*

Thirdly, we see here the emergence of the idea of the great man. Hus is presented throughout as the great virtuous seeker after truth, and there is no doubt that Mussolini sees himself identified in that figure. Hus in the subtitle is termed *veritico*, which sounds very much like *vero heretico*, and the verbal similarity of the pun probably amused Mussolini, who as a socialist saw himself as the heretical opponent of power and establishment. Here is the emergence of the great man as the embodiment of the great idea, which is so significant in the twentieth century. The Duce and the Führer were not just heads of state; they were embodiments of a great idea and of the state. Mussolini uses Hus to develop what will become one of the most influential and damaging political philosophies of the twentieth century.

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[15] Cf. Paul P. Bernard and Bentley B. Gilbert, "Mussolini on Huss: Notes on the Birth of a Fascist," *Colorado College Studies* 1 (1958): 25–28.

IV. *The Book's Afterlife*

Parts of the book were reprinted in January 1918 in the post-socialist newspaper Mussolini founded as he was developing fascism, *Il Popolo d'Italia* (*The People of Italy*). It was probably part of his support for Czechoslovak efforts in the war at that time, stoking anti-German sentiment. When Mussolini assumed power on October 28, 1922, after the famous march on Rome, the book's fortunes declined rapidly. One reason is obvious: anti-establishment revolutionism is fine when you are not the establishment. Mussolini quickly became the establishment after 1922, and a once-helpful ideology was not so helpful anymore. Secondly, Mussolini needed to stabilize church-state relations. In the Vatican City there is a straight road between the Vatican and the centers of power in Rome, built by Mussolini to symbolize the 1929 Lateran Pact, which granted Vatican City independence and (in contradiction to everything Mussolini writes in this book) to recognize Catholicism as Italy's state religion, granting significant benefits, powers, and favors to the Church which continue to be a problem in Italian politics today. So Mussolini withdrew his book from circulation and even from libraries, although his pride in the work was evident from the fact that he continued to reference it and have it referenced in other works over which he had editorial control. He remained proud of it, even if he felt it necessary to censor his own work.

Conclusion

Hus, the fifteenth-century heretic, plays a significant part in the development of European politics in the twentieth century because of the way he was appropriated by Mussolini at a critical point when he was about to break with the Socialist Party and found his own Popular Front Movement, which became the Italian fascist party.

A second translation of this book was published in 1939 in America.[16] It was sponsored by the superficially friendly but ominously named Italian Book Company of New York. In the introduction we see the rationale of the translator and the publisher for this edition:

> We publish [this book] as a reverent homage to the Duce, to bring out the figure of a great writer who remains in the shadow of the statesman. We will know that the

[16] Ed. note: the book was already translated and published in New York in 1929; however, the 1939 translation is new and added an English preface. See Helan, "Mussolini Looks at Jan Hus," 316.

Duce, in his modesty, does not like to speak of his past struggle and glory and seems to wish to ignore his early work as a writer and polemist. The past hardly interests him now as a positive man looks only to the future with a serene eye. To a friend who tells him to have religiously preserved some of his letters he answers: "The past is not an end to itself, but a period of transition of an unlimited line which is called progress. To stop means to fall back. We must go on, in order to improve and uplift ourselves evermore."[17]

[17] Mussolini, *John Huss*, 6.