

The Life of Peter Chelcick (c. 1390 – c.1460)

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As the Protestant Reformation swept through Europe, John Wyclif's teachings inspired Jan Hus, a Czechoslovakian, to initiate reform in his own country. During the years of 1415–1419, Jan Hus organized the Czechoslovakians in a movement that would be known as the Hussite Revolution. Hus, in turn, inspired several others including Martin Luther and Peter Chelcicky to question the Catholic Church's deviation from Christ's teachings. The Hussites published the heretical Four Articles of Prague, which were a kind of forerunner to Luther's 95 theses. The four articles included: 1) Freedom to preach the Word of God, 2) Celebration of the Lord's Supper (bread and wine to priests and laypersons alike), 3) No secular power for the clergy, and 4) Punishment for the mortal sins. After the martyrdom of Jan Hus, the Protestant Reformation movement splintered and quickly became violent. In this turbulent social and political context, Peter Chelcicky was born.

Most specifics surrounding the life of Peter Chelcicky remain disputed –everything from his exact date and place of birth to the manner in which he earned a living. Although his works have made him the most famous Czech philosopher of the medieval period, events surrounding his personal life have sadly been confined to historical obscurity. Scholars do agree, however, that he was born no later (though perhaps earlier) than the year 1390 during the reign of King Václav IV of the Luxembourg Dynasty. Most believe that he was raised in Chelčice, a village near Vodňany, though all agree that he lived most of his later life there. He proclaimed that he was a peasant, though that has also been disputed; several believe that his identification with the lower class was ideological rather than literal. Others have suggested that he was everything from a priest to a cobbler, a squire or a nobleman. Chelcicky's limited understanding of Latin implies that he lacked formal education, and taught himself to read and write simply because he desperately desired to express his convictions. His opponents tried to dismiss Peter's radical thoughts by scoffing at his humble academic background; but frankly, they could not ignore his persistent passion for history and the issues of the day, which proved him a formidable, though unconventional, agitator. One scholar has written, "Though he was not a master of the seven arts, he certainly was a practitioner of the eight beatitudes and of all the divine commandments, and was therefore a real Czech Doctor, versed in the law of the Lord without aberration from the truth."

Born with a deep desire to reconcile his religious life and beliefs with his understanding of the political and ethical turmoil of Bohemia, he eagerly read John Wyclif, Jan Hus, Thomas of Stitny, and others of the Waldensian tradition. However, Chelcicky's more radical reading of the New Testament compelled him to renounce the reformist views of his predecessors and proclaim that, "You cannot improve society without first destroying the foundations of the existing social order." In his most famous work, *Siet' viery*, or *The Net of Faith* he denounced the pope and the emperor as, "whales who have torn the true net of faith." Claiming that both the church and the state had corrupted Christ's teachings, he became a medieval Christian anarchist who would be revered years later by Leo Tolstoy. Chelcicky had many radical and interesting views about pacifism, economics and any kind of church authority. He unabashedly wrote, "This Net of Faith was written by me, Peter, amid the confusions of Bohemia and Europe, at the time prophesied in the Second Woe of the Apocalypse, when Satan, whose one horn is Protestant and the other Catholic, shall be loosed upon the earth." He chose to break from both the traditional orthodox church as well as the oftentimes violent rebellion of the reformed churches. Perhaps for this very reason, of his 56 known works, very few have been translated into English.

Brief Descriptions of Chelcicky's Major Ideas

ANARCHISM

“He who obeys God needs no other authority.” As the quote mentioned in the brief biographical sketch illustrated (regarding the pope and the emperor –taken from *The Net of Faith*), Chelcicky believed that Christ's kingdom had deteriorated from the power and majesty of its humble beginnings to a self-righteous secular empire that ruled nations with Christianity as a false banner. Chelcicky believed that Christ's authority and His laws were preeminent and sufficient to rule true believers. Supporting state authority only weakened man's connection to Christ and deferred to manmade artifices of political and economic ranks. He asserted that even taking part in the government was sinful –as one was then complicit to the wars and injustices of which the state was guilty. As far as criminal justice was concerned, Chelcicky believed that no man or earthly power was qualified to judge another, and that God would judge righteous judgment of sinners –for us, it was given to simply forgive. Most of his opinions regarding government agree with fellow Christian anarchist Leo Tolstoy. In fact, Tolstoy venerated Chelcicky and referenced his works in his book *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and admitted that he was very much influenced by his writings.

PACIFISM

Chelcicky was a strict pacifist –preaching forgiveness rather than retaliation. He denounced a standing government military, offensive and defensive war, capital punishment, and violence of any kind. He stated, “God never revoked His commandment ‘You shall not kill.’” He believed that Christians should refuse to serve in the military, arguing that if the poor refused to fight the king's wars, noblemen would have no one to go to war for them. Refusing to condone murders committed in wartime, Chelcicky asserted that soldiers were just as guilty for shedding blood as any common criminal. His decision to follow the Prince of Peace entailed personal pacifism as well as the desire to spread his convictions. “Our faith obliges us to bind wounds, not to make blood run.”

ECONOMICS

Taking Christ's teachings (regarding service and charity) absolutely literally, Chelcicky was a Christian communist; he believed in complete economic equality. He believed that true Christians would never consent to live in wealth while their brothers and sisters lived in poverty. He maintained that social stratifications were a tool used by the State to subjugate the poor and create status among the noblemen. Any artificial divisions among God's children were merely products of pride and selfishness. He also denounced war as an economic device merely meant to manipulate borders and increase property. “Wars and other kinds of murder have their beginning in the hatred of the enemy and in the unwillingness to be patient with evil. Their root is in intemperate self-love and in immoderate affection for temporal possessions. These conflicts are brought into this world because men do not trust the Son of God enough to abide by his commandments.”

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