



# The theology of nonviolence in the writings of Petr Chelčický during the late Middle Ages

## La teología de la no violencia en los escritos de Petr Chelčický durante la Baja Edad Media

Jordi Maíz

jordi.maiz@uib.cat

University of the Balearic Islands, Spain

Recepción: 18 Abril 2023

Aprobación: 05 Junio 2023

Publicación: 14 Junio 2023

**Cita sugerida:** Maíz, J. (2023). The theology of nonviolence in the writings of Petr Chelčický during the late Middle Ages. *Sociedades Precapitalistas*, 13, e077. <https://doi.org/10.24215/22505121e077>

**Abstract:** The article explores the emergence of the Hussite movement and the establishment of egalitarian communities that embraced a lifestyle without taxes or private property. The concern of the authorities and the resulting internal conflicts highlighted significant changes and internal struggles. Leaders such as Jan Žižka adopted more aggressive and violent stances, considering Prague and other cities as enemies. In this context, Petr Chelčický, influenced by the Taborites, emerges as a prominent figure. His critical writings towards the clergy and the Church defend pacifism, egalitarianism, and communism, advocating for the autonomy of the Czech church and opposing German domination. Chelčický distances himself from the Hussites due to his rejection of violence and in his hometown, he develops an extensive body of work proposing a life free from materialism and power conflicts. His local influence is significant, leaving a legacy in the religious and social reforms of the era and beyond.

**Keywords:** Hussites, Egalitarian communities, Pacifism; 15th Century, Petr Chelčický.

**Resumen:** El artículo aborda el surgimiento del movimiento husita y la aparición de comunidades de tipología igualitaria donde abordaron formas de vida sin impuestos ni propiedad privada. La preocupación de las autoridades y la generación de conflictos internos evidenció importantes cambios y conflictos internos. Líderes como Jan Žižka adoptaron posturas más agresivas y violentas, considerando a Praga y otras ciudades como enemigos. En este contexto, Petr Chelčický, influido por los taboritas, emerge como una figura destacada. Sus escritos críticos hacia el clero y la Iglesia defienden el pacifismo, igualitarismo y comunismo, abogando por la autonomía de la iglesia checa y oponiéndose a la dominación alemana. Chelčický se distancia de los husitas por su rechazo a la violencia y en su ciudad natal desarrolla una amplia obra que propone una vida alejada del materialismo y los conflictos de poder. Su influencia local es significativa, dejando un legado en las reformas religiosas y sociales de la época y posteriores.

**Palabras clave:** Husitas, Comunidades igualitarias, Pacifismo, Siglo XV, Petr Chelčický.



*We are living in a time when men call the true faith heresy.*

*Source: Petr Chelčický*

## 1. CRISIS AND REFORM IN MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

Christianity, in the final stage of the Middle Ages, was in an almost continuous crisis. The calamities of the time and the need to remain, in the institutional sphere, at the top of the pyramid of power generated not a few political conflicts and armed confrontations. Clashes for earthly domain with the emperors and other noble powers were constant. The Church, as an institution, sometimes participated in armed conflicts to defend its economic and political interests, an issue that generated increasing criticism. Since the twelfth century and especially in the thirteenth century, the institutional Church had mutated, the world around it had changed; Western Europe had lived through a time of transformation, urbanization and migration of political, economic and cultural powers. The rural world, small towns and even small cities lost prominence in favor of the large cities of the late Middle Ages. In that stage of changes, new religious interpretations appeared. Some were in favor of greater extreme strictness and even of increasing violence and intolerance towards *others*. But also, although surely more invisible, there were those who were in favor of a moral rejection of the world in which they had lived, proposing concepts of justice and goodness in the first line. The 14th and 15th centuries were especially turbulent as far as the social question is concerned, there were various protest movements that combined their demands and aspirations with a religious background, easily confusing and mixing extremely complicated situations. They expected salvation and believed that it was about to arrive; the crisis of the 14th century or the great black plague must have been signs of the imminent "kingdom of God". For a long time, preachers, brotherhoods and heresies criticized human excesses while, they said, they prepared their bodies and souls for the new world that was coming. Medieval poverty was a mystical aspiration on the part of some believers who aspired to a return to primitive Christianity; a withdrawal that coincided with tangible evidence: much of the population barely had enough to put a piece of bread in their mouths; praying or protesting were the few options left to them. At times, the limits between hermitage, religious poverty and the reality of its people were practically imperceptible. Along this path, the demands for a more egalitarian community gained supporters in many places, the kingdom of God—during a millennial epidemic (Cohn, 1957)—should leave each one in their rightful place.

On July 6, 1415, amidst silence, the following statement was recorded: "I am ready to die." This is the final declaration attributed to the heretic Jan Hus before he perished in the flames on the shores of the Rhine in the German city of Constance. Hus had entered a monastic institution in his youth and had been notably influenced by some anti-papal leaning professors in Prague. During this time, in Bohemia and other areas of Central Europe, religious debate transcended earthly life and many debated issues that were not exclusively limited to moral and spiritual matters. Heresy and reform seemed to go hand in hand and some historians establish a direct connection between various heretical movements of the Middle Ages and various religious reforms and projects, particularly those situated between the 11th and 12th centuries (Lambert, 1977). It was shortly after, during the late Middle Ages, when heretical movements, sermons, and popular demonstrations multiplied in Central and Western Europe against an order that often harmed the same individuals. It was a prelude to the Protestant reforms and preachers multiplied. For many, the "millennium of good" was about to arrive, and millenarianism, which defended that divine government of a thousand years, was expressed in many ways. In literature, art, and in political movements, a different world was anticipated. One of the main theoretical architects of these new proposals was the English preacher John Wycliffe, whose followers increased among the university and popular layers, and his discourse became increasingly radical. The *Lollards*, Wycliffe's followers with a wide presence in some English cities, openly stated that

religious power and authority did not depend on the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but rather on the enthusiasm and devotion of its actors. As a result, Wycliffe was declared a heretic and his teachings were persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church and declared illegal in the early 15th century.

It had been relatively recently that a group of Lollards had placed a placard at the Abbey of Westminster, in the heart of the English ecclesiastical and civil power, in which their demands were reproduced. These were the *Twelve conclusions of the Lollards*, in which it was warned of the Church's interference in political matters, which would have led it away from its main function, the salvation of the institution. Celibacy, certain ordination ceremonies, idolatrous worship, and pilgrimages or the celebration of exorcisms are also criticized; everything seemed to move away from its original function. In the same way, it also criticizes the economic relationship that is beginning to be established for funerary masses in exchange for financial contributions or the practice of confession for the redemption of sins. Finally, it speaks of the need to establish a much more austere life on the part of believers and the document also criticizes with special emphasis the relationship, that for centuries, that has been established between religion and war, especially in the crusades, warning that religious scriptures are contrary to the use of violence. The relationship of the demands criticized the existing separation between the theory of dialogue, forgiveness, and love and the violent praxis exercised. At first glance, the Lollard contribution is a devastating critique against the ecclesiastical hierarchy and had little room within an institution that in the end participated in all these activities. Repression did not take long; at the beginning of the 15th century, the King of England, Henry IV, ordered the prohibition of Wycliffe's writings and translations and his followers. Similarly, Jan Hus had managed to arm a notable group of supporters under the paradigm of public criticism against the ostentatious pillars of the government of the Papacy and the Church as an institution. In a short time, the prohibition became fiercer and arrests, trials, and executions of the members of these heresies began. Finally, between 1414 and 1415, during the Council of Constance, which was to address the replacement of Pope Gregory XII by Martin V, the problem was analyzed: what to do with the heretics? While this was happening, Hus was arrested on the charge of heresy, a crime that was also applied to Wycliffe and Jerome of Prague, leaving their teachings and a large group of followers, outside the Church. It is little less than paradoxical, as Wycliffe is condemned for facts that he could neither defend himself nor respond to. The question was simple: the preacher had died about twenty years earlier, but that did not save him from being exhumed, burned, and his ashes thrown into a river. Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague, who were alive during the Council, met the same fate; after a trial and conviction, they were burned at the stake. The suppression of Lollardism was a severe blow to the emerging religious dissent in England, but it was not the end of the story, as later movements such as the English Reformation would continue to challenge the authority of the Catholic Church in England (Historie literatur slovanských, 1880).

## 2. HERETICS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR REFORM

During this time, a faction of the Hussites known as the Taborites played a significant role. They were a more radicalized group, primarily made up of people from the rural areas of southern Bohemia. Initially, the movement consisted of a small group of followers of the priest Petr Kromádka, who after Hus' death, would have started a pilgrimage to a mountainous area with surrounding farmers to establish a settlement with strong apologetic and millenarian tones. The chosen place, Mount Tabor, was a location with a nominal biblical association and was intended to accommodate the numerous Hussite followers. There, the Taborites established an egalitarian community following the precepts of the imminent arrival of the "eternal millennium of good." In full harmonious development with the brothers and sisters who joined, they managed to abolish taxes and even eliminate private property. More and more people were attracted to the place by this effervescent scenario in which farmers, in addition to ensuring salvation, also guaranteed a much more comfortable and calm life, where the feudal yoke did not exist, and paradise seemed tangible; the

concern of the authorities was increasing as the movement gained prominence. In the early months of 1420, the Taborite revolution had allowed the abolition of feudal services and tax obligations; enthusiasm took over the farmers in the area, who saw the new movement as a liberating support for their lives (Cohn, 1957). In a short time, the leaders of the new movement were identified, who increased their power, and began to differentiate themselves from the rest of the Hussites by a much more aggressive and violent proposal. The Taborites had identified a common enemy that represented earthly evil: the city and, especially, Prague. Urban centers and their way of life were, in their opinion, the responsible for the destruction of the forms of life that they claimed to represent. Millenarianism took over the area; Prague was the object of almost all the criticism, the city, with all its trappings, was identified with an earthly hell like other cities, which led to constant literary works of the time.<sup>1</sup> The arrival of new Hussites to the region also transformed the movement under the leadership of Jan Žižka and others, who, after consolidating their positions, decided to undertake military actions against those they considered responsible for their woes, the inhabitants of Prague. At that time, Prague was one of the major urban and economic centers of Central Europe. The city had rapidly grown and housed more than thirty thousand people within its walls. Despite the diversity of its people, it displayed a complex duality that was also exported to other cities. Under the religious and political influence of the great families of the Holy Roman Empire, the artisans of the area were left out of the municipal decisions. Additionally, large masses of rural inhabitants had recently arrived in the city, desperately seeking a better life. None of this was happening, neither the urban patricians shared power nor did the lower strata of the city manage to improve their living conditions, so it was not difficult for the Hussite movement to have a logical collaboration between these sectors of the city. In their search for natural order, they rejected private property, authority and the payment of taxes. Such a program placed them against the institutions of the time: the Church and the Papacy. But soon, the Hussite revolution had to face an economic war, so the debate over the taxes came back to the table. With that, the new Hussite leaders, who in part had taken power to free the farmers from the area from taxes, took charge of monitoring their activities and controlling, under the yoke of violence, those who complied with these economic obligations and those who did not. While all this was happening, the communal experience of the farmers was quickly replaced.

At the time, the capital of Bohemia was a symbol of economic prosperity; its development was particularly linked to mining and the exploitation of silver. The area was not significantly affected by the deadly epidemic of 1348, so soon there were all kinds of rumors that the area was the chosen place for the imminent salvation. At the University of Prague, founded almost in the midst of the epidemiological catastrophe, soon gathered many theologians and preachers who followed the ideas of Wycliffe initially and, later, Hus. Some of their proposals criticized the imperial authority, the attitude of the Church and lords of the area, as they enjoyed large revenues to ensure their income. In this context, it is easy to imagine that the ideas of the free interpretation of sacred texts began to circulate and gain followers (Monsalvo, 2016, p. 275).

During the Hussite uprising, the cultural characteristics of the place played a significant role; the Czechs were Slavs under the domination and oppression of the German emperor, a detail that was not insignificant. The Hussites, recognizing this, entered an alliance with the powers of Prague to face a common enemy: the Holy Roman Empire. In the area, several movements roamed between millenarianism and terrestrial radicalism, some influenced by the initial Taborism, others by the Waldensians and even by the brotherhood of the free spirit (Kaminsky, 1956). It was at this time that a new name emerged: Petr Chelčický. A young man of uncertain social origin, who was born in the town of Chelčice (Vodňany) in the southern region of Bohemia. There, in a rural and deeply religious environment influenced by the Taborites, he developed the foundations of his later thought. The biographical data we have about Petr Chelčický, although they are confusing, place him chronologically between 1380 and 1460. Much has been speculated about his social class, but all hypotheses suggest that he was a member of a peasant family or, at the very least, a member of the lower ranks of the Czech nobility. It is possible that his name is a pseudonym of the noble Petr Záhorka (Maur, 2008). Petr Chelčický's life transpired during the reigns of Wenceslaus IV of Luxembourg

and Emperor Sigismund, both of Germanic origin. Bohemia was plagued by ongoing conflicts between the local nobility and Germanic authorities; the misgovernment and constant strife greatly impacted his life. Petr Chelčický was a witness to these confrontations and observed firsthand the progression of the Hussite wars and the monarchy's response to the ongoing turmoil.

His first texts were increasingly critical of his environment. He wrote and denounced the excesses and ways of life of his contemporaries. But it was not all criticism, he also made an effort to propose an alternative to the ways of life and organization that had been found in the populous Prague. The omnipresence of the *Taborites* in the Bohemian area seemed indisputable, and their almost hegemonic expansion was more than evident. Chelčický was close to his proposals and to the criticisms that this movement exerted on the clergy and the Papacy, totally removed from the exemplarity that they claimed to find in the followers of primitive Christianity; the new priesthood, enclosed in castles and cities, leads a life of great comfort, far from the herd (Iwanczak, 1991; 1997). In this duality of the Papacy and the urban clergy facing the hermit and hermit life of the first communities, it was not very difficult to find differences, since many had seen in the accumulation of wealth and in modern life little exemplarity. But where does that criticism come from? Not a few have warned of the notable influences that some heresies would have initially exerted on the Taborites, and on the aforementioned Chelčický, due to a discourse on non-violence by the Waldenses, who practiced a certain spiritual retreat with a strong pacifist component. With the passage of time, the Taborites, during a civil and military confrontation, displayed a violent discourse that was further and further removed from the Waldenses. The Tabor Hussites had an important presence among the academic circles of Prague, from where they spread increasingly severe resistance. Petr was surely present at one of the dialectical meetings that took place at the recently created University of Prague. The young preacher had been significantly influenced by the teachings of Hus, whom he even got to know, but his initial training would also be marked by the reformer Tomáš Štítný, who in fact predated Hus and is considered one of the predecessors of the Hussites and a very prolific author with great acceptance among the lower nobility of the area (Bartos, 1958).

The environment, marked by armed confrontations between supporters of Hus after his execution, underwent profound changes. The theory of the new Husite leaders of using violence to achieve spirituality and accelerate the arrival of the divine kingdom generated great contradictions. Jakoubek of Střibro, then in charge of the University of Prague and spiritual leader of the Husites, met with Chelčický after one of his sermons to discuss references in Christian sacred texts on the use of violence in earthly matters. Jakoubek's response, which justified war and violence if they fulfilled certain purposes, did not satisfy Chelčický. The justification of violence and apocalyptic discourse accelerated disputes against those who opposed their forms, which possibly led Chelčický to leave Prague and not return (Iwanczak, 1997). In the 1420s, Chelčický began to distance himself from the Hussites. The repression carried out by armies against the inhabitants of the area and the destruction of some religious temples deeply marked his positioning, leading him to retreat to his hometown. There, in the tranquility, he was able to dedicate himself to the elaboration of much of his extensive philosophical, social, and theological work, which gradually attracted the attention of the local people. His model, radically different from contemporary hegemonies, was based on three fundamental pillars: pacifism, egalitarianism, and communalism. His disputes with the priests of Tábor were not only of a religious nature, they also actively debated about war and the use that the Taborites made of it (Bartos, 1958). Chelčický's work, of which some fifty writings have been preserved, went unnoticed initially. One of the novel aspects of his program was the complete drafting of his writings in the Czech language, which may have been conditioned by his limited knowledge of Latin, but which indirectly facilitated his ideas and messages to be easily reproduced among the peasantry and small nobility of the area, as most of them also lacked knowledge of Latin. Some authors have also seen in Chelčický a model of imperial opposition in territorial key, considering that the writer was one of the pillars of the demands for autonomy and political protagonism of the people and, especially, of the Czech church under German domination (Wagner, 1986). As mentioned earlier, his work —despite the loss of originals— is very extensive and heterogeneous. Most

of his writings are related to religious themes such as spirituality, the Eucharist, and sacramental issues, but throughout his texts there are elements that go beyond those spiritual limits and present Petr Chelčický as an author who not only stands out from the complex world of the Hussite wars, but also raises earthly problems and practical proposals for a life away from the materiality of the moment and the power struggles that characterized those times. The writer opposed the dominant political and religious currents and proposed, from a very personal prism, a faith based on the primitive community of believers and on a distance from worldly vices.

### 3. PETR CHELČICKÝ AND THE CRITIQUE OF INSTITUTIONAL CHRISTIANITY

From 1434 the Hussite movement was dynamited internally. The debates and disputes over the ways and forms accelerated and there was a clear break between the more radical Hussites and the more moderate Hussites, who collaborated in some way with the Catholics (Macek, 1965). After the battle of Lipany that same year, the *taborista* sector was defeated. From that moment, and after the Council of Florence (Mezzadri, 2001), the Slavic pastor began a stage of great literary production, ending two of his most paradigmatic works: *The Network of Faith* and *Postilla*. *The Network of Faith* is one of the author's most important and profound texts. The title, in a clear allusion to the story of the Biblical fisherman, according to which, Petr's net had been destroyed by the attack of two whales. Both cetaceans, which in sacred texts are occasionally represented with Leviathan, suggest —metaphorically— that these *monsters* have destroyed the mesh in which the fruits of labor were collected. Chelčický makes indirect references to the community of believers, to food, and to the early church. Nothing remains of all this; the action of the whales has destroyed the net to the point of turning it into little more than poorly basted threads that are of little use. To recompose, there is only the joint work of community reconstruction, against it, the secular power, and the ecclesiastical power (Chelčický, 1443, p. 199). This idea runs through practically the entire text and is the fundamental pillar of Chelčický's work. In the first place, the societal and community reconstruction and, secondly, the essential need to distance oneself from the power that has so corrupted the Christian contribution. For him, divine authority is not compatible with earthly authority, whether incarnated by secularists or by ecclesiastical ones since one contradicts the existence of the other.

In addition to striving for the impossibility of the corrupt earthly kingdom, the exercise of Christian interpretations developed by the Pope and its derived institutions promotes a regime of violence and terror that contrasts with the true essence of the Church and primitive churches (Chelčický, 1443, p. 199). The acceptance of earthly authorities (Pope, Emperor, kings, nobles, etc.) by Christians implies a renunciation of their integral proposal. Authority is acquired through economic, political, or religious power, but faith does not require arbitrary and despotic processes. To believe should not imply submission, as this act contradicts the teachings that are intended to be interpreted. This message also opposes currents such as the Hussites of submission to power; for example, the Utraquists of Prague promoted a completely different idea, as for them "among Christians the best Christian should serve as king" (Macek, 1965). The absolute break seemed not easy; to accomplish this, they will opt —as happened with other movements— for retreat, but also for the formulation of new individual and community models based on disobedience, rejection of oaths and loyalties, and denial of submission to daily practices that could be considered as improper. In *The Network of Faith* it also emphasizes the principle of "Thou shalt not kill" and makes continuous references to the contradiction of those who decide to raise the sword and exercise violence under a divine message.

On the other hand, in his text *O trojím lidu* [On the three persons] (Chelčický, 1940), in clear reference to the tripartite division of medieval order, Petr Chelčický was greatly concerned with secular power. Under the Augustinian premise of the estate division of society, the individual is under the "protection" of spiritual (*oratores*) and earthly (*bellatores Christi*), a matter that can be interpreted in clearly different ways (Augustine of Hippo, 2004). On the one hand, it facilitates the idea that external protection, especially spiritual, leaves

the believer aside from autonomy, submitting, and thus understanding it in that treatise, the individual to powers that have nothing to do with spiritual proposals. In that *trap*, the dividing category generates dependencies and relationships between the different orders, and even from different geographical areas, it is insisted on that establishment with the deployment of legal norms that go along with these ideas. Chelčický's critique is not exclusively a temporal discourse on the pressure of German nobility or the dependence of the Czech church on the political powers of the moment.

At first glance, his criticism is directed more accurately at the structure of the institution, as he believes that mere collusion with the organization and separation of functions also entails an institutional deployment that does not correspond —neither in form nor in substance— with the Christian teachings he interpreted from primitive mysticism. In that sense, he relied on the concept of *koinonia* ("primitive communism"), which some express on the basis of Christian texts in which reference is made to the common life of goods and properties of many communities that had preceded them in antiquity and that were usual in the first centuries of that era (Dawson, 1992; Hernández de la Fuente, 2014). In that treatise on the tripartite division, he makes constant references and reflections on biblical chapters and epistles in which the power and its relationship with the community is reflected. His conclusions are based on the idea of the need for insubordination to power, based on the configuration and development of it, since both in the secular and the religious it is intended for completely different purposes than those it says it emanates. In *O trojím lidu*, he makes specific reference to secular powers, which make use of coercive forces far from the teachings and communal experiences, in which in addition to the disappearance of goods and the distribution of tasks, harmony and love are well present, in them *love reigns and there is no dispute or punishment* (Chelčický, 1940). Love and power are ultimately a *contradictio in terminis*, so it is necessary to visualize that dichotomy that appears in theory in the priesthood but not so evident in practice. The corruption has a relationship with the union of religious and secular powers, a moment that refers us again to syncretism between Empire and Papacy in the end of the Roman world, a moment in which, according to his opinion, the end of a much more horizontal Christianity, of communities of believers, in favor of new organizational typologies is established (Alvar, 2007).

Criticism of the Church is one of the pillars upon which his thought rests, as he believed that the Catholic institution, based on various decrees and laws, had established a model that was increasingly bureaucratic and diplomatic, rather than spiritual. In this way, the Papacy and the regulations of the various ecumenical and religious gatherings established a hierarchization of spiritual principles and developed a strict dogmatism, which facilitated concern for the how, but not for the what. According to Chelčický, forms were prioritized over substance, and in this way the Church ceased to be the *ekklesia*, that is, it ceased to be that place of meeting, debate and brotherhood characteristic of its initial communities, becoming an institution that regulated, right and left, forms, methods, processes and elements that had nothing to do with what he understood to be the human experiential model. According to the radical preacher, the turning point of Christianity should be placed at the end of the Roman world, especially during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great. At this time, an agreement was reached between the papacy, led by Pope Sylvester, and the empire, by which Christianity became institutionalized, receiving wealth and power, and the emperor perpetuated himself in power, mutually helping each other. It was an agreement between powers, in which both parties had to come out stronger, leaving aside fundamental aspects such as beliefs, processes and even Christianity and its followers. Garrigue Masaryk positions the theologian as one of the brightest minds of his time, also highlighting the criticism of the Roman church and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few (Guarrigue, 1926, p. 18-19). Thus, he believed that the Church as an institution had changed from the 3rd century, abandoning its project, and initiating, from the hierarchy, new forms of control and power over its subjects. Specifically, he cites the "Donation of Constantine," a document, certainly forged, according to which the Papacy established its power and control over Rome and other neighboring territories. Establishing in the Italian peninsula the epicenter of an all-powerful earthly power

with which to control dogmas, wealth and the lands they were developing. The life of Constantine would be a controversy within Christianity, in which the accumulation of wealth, the repression of the faithful and the imperial and pagan idolatry would generate a change of paradigm in the discourse of Christianity that would lead to a continuous decline until the crisis of the 14th century. The Christian faith and message were completely corrupted and distant from the teachings and original projects. The true faith must be recovered and must also be manifested in firm opposition to the predominant models of the Hussite context, where the material also ended up prevailing over the rest.

#### 4. A VISIONARY VOICE AGAINST VIOLENCE AND INJUSTICE IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE?

In the late Middle Ages, the struggle for power waged by the *oratores* and *bellatores* had reached a critical point. In the transition towards the end of the medieval period, enormous violence was deployed against pre-Hussite heresies. For this reason, Waldesians, Albigenes and other minorities were repressed under the accusation of moral deviation. Likewise, behind this accusation, great concern was hidden, these heresies had a great territorial presence and could set up a counterpower in certain places (Lambert, 1977; Tourn, 2003). The heresy of the Waldesians, for example, had evolved ideologically to position itself against the use of violence in certain cases, they also reflected on the concept of "just war" and its moral implications, or on the death penalty (Lambert, 1977). Chelčický, also in *Postilla*, fully rejects the use of violence, war, and death as an end in itself, a path that had been strongly developed by the numerous mercenary companies that, with a heterogeneous composition, made violence their *modus vivendi*. According to which, his dependence on death was his way of life; even giving the paradox of acting in God's name or justice, sowing terror everywhere. Originally, the evolution of this methodology in the Christian world could be closer to the development of the Augustinian concept, according to which war can —and should— be carried out for a cause considered just. From this concept of "just war" it will evolve towards a process of sacralization that will culminate with the crusades and with the development of the so-called *warrior-monks*. There is no denying the pacifist leanings of the Czech writer. In his various texts, he fervently opposes the use of any form of violence, including spiritual subjugation imposed from pulpits and priesthoods. He views the use of force, whether through state or religious authority, as reprehensible, going so far as to assert that the *sword separates the Christian from God* (Chelčický, 1443, p. 199). The writer also critiques institutional violence that arises from the pursuit of earthly power, where ostentation, greed, and competition for control lead to deplorable behavior (Chelčický, 1443, p. 200). He also heavily critiques the economic structures of his time, where a wealthy elite exploit the monetary dependency of the less fortunate, leading to inequality and economic violence. He believes that money, debt and trade are the foundations of this oppressive system, which is concentrated in cities.

He wrote a collection of sermons that were compiled in the aforementioned *Postilla* (Chelčický, 1990), in which he alluded to important spiritual themes of the time, but also criticized the political and economic structures of that era. In this text, he refutes the ideas of previous authors such as Hus and proposes a social transformation in which faith would be nothing more than a liberating instrument (*Historie literatur slovanských*, p. 343). The text is written in the context of the defeat of the radical Hussites in the Battle of Lipany; after the battle, the more conservative sectors of Hussitism, the Utraquists, had reconciled with the Catholic Church and the situation significantly changed. In the works, criticisms against the Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy and the methods that it has developed to maintain power, based on agreements and betrayals with earthly powers and ignoring the concerns of people, who are otherwise subject to the power of the first, are evident. The use of violence and authority directly breaks their possibility of approaching the Taborites and generates a clear criticism. The *Postilla* is considered a fundamental work in medieval Czech religious and social thought, as it establishes the basis for an active critique of violence. Chelčický's stance, which openly advocates nonviolence and pacifism, was novel in his time, in contrast to the prevailing



opinions of society. The message of the Czech religious leader is reaffirmed in later texts, emphasizing the need for a break with coercive methods that were prevalent in his immediate geographical context. Chelčický believed that authority exercised a dominance that did not correspond with the religious message that believers should convey.

The only supreme authority is that of the sacred scriptures, in which it is warned of the need to oppose violence and promote teachings in accordance with the commandments of "thou shalt not kill" and "love thy neighbor". In this sense, for the author in question, there is no human authority or any source of regulations or laws emanating from temporal power, which leads to the denial and disobedience to any type of human authority, including laws, ordinances, and regulations. The initial *ekkklesia* was based on reflection and discourse in terms of fraternity, equality, and freedom, without the need to do so in elaborate temples or from large pulpits. There was no other law but that which was found in the texts, and which had to be interpreted autonomously by each individual. The dichotomy between power and teaching became evident in the consolidation of large cathedrals, which, among other things, symbolized the power and support received to assert their discourse (Duby, 1981). In opposition to these large cathedrals and other moral power centers represented in universities, personal retreat was understood as an act of positioning that, beyond the detachment from the world, also represented a hope centered on the autonomy of the individual and his capacity for self-sufficiency in the communities that were forming. The model and objective were completely different, understanding that between the Pope, the Empire, and the kings a model had been configured that had no relation to the message that should be transmitted (Historie literatur slovanských, p. 345).

From 1420, evidence of a break between Chelčický and the Hussites appears. At those times, in different theological and moral disputes in the academic circles of Prague, a good number of theologians sided with the most radical and justified not only their cause but also their methods. It seems evident that the Hussites were not a homogeneous movement, they had among their rank's followers of Hus with great spiritual and political discrepancies. Thus, for example, the *taboritas* would represent the most socially impoverished sector in rural areas and the toughest and lowest-paid trades in the cities. There, more radical positions will be concentrated on the demand for profound changes is much more evident. At the beginning of the twenties, he would have written *On spiritual warfare* (Chelčický, 1421), a plea against the Taborites and their defense and use of daily violence. The fundamental argument was simple: the academics and religious of Prague made use of violence and coercion in clear materialistic aspirations, moving further and further away from faith and belief. The use of force and aggression are totally inadmissible, in his proposal he adds that the *taborites*, with the use they make of violence, have been deceived by evil, incarnated again by the figure of the Devil.

Human kindness, through war and blood, would soon make good men terrifying; his condemnation of violence is emphatic and extends to the different sides involved in the Hussite wars (Denis, 1978). He also adds that, although some had initiated easily shared revolutionary reforms such as the distribution of wealth or the abolition of debts, their methods had a great dependence on the use of terror. These peasants, in several cases followers of the *Taborites* in whom they had entrusted a certain feudal and fiscal liberation, ended up being pressured by the most violent armed groups of the Hussites to force them to contribute financially to the cause they considered common. Chelčický was notably in disagreement with this new course that the Czech reformist movement was taking, and soon sought a way out of all these excesses. Also, part of Chelčický's communalism included a critique of the urban and his own symbolism. In this sense, the concentration of population, its *inurbation* and the limitations of movement were much more effective in urban environments (Toubert, 1973).<sup>2</sup> The medieval city, according to the Czech preacher, represented a planned action with which to control the inhabitants (Fudge, 1998). The cities had freed themselves from the yoke of feudal power, in the interior false freedom had surely been perceived, fueled —possibly— for the use of the new monarchies made of them. The cities, since the late Middle Ages, had acquired a large degree of autonomy, in some cases facilitated by the legal prerogatives of the monarchies, with a clear intention: to weaken the power of the warlords. With the passage of time, once the ties of dependency and vassalage

typical of other times were reduced to a minimum, the inhabitants of the cities saw how a patrician class took control of them and kept for themselves, under different formulas oligarchic, the control of such a suggestive business.

In 1421 he published the text *O boji duchovním* [On spiritual warfare], in which he made constant references to the divergences between earthly life and Christian moral expression. In this sense, he cites that the *Taborites*, through violence and lust, had distanced themselves greatly from their precepts. In the same way, Chelčický criticized the obligations of debts and trade, which granted some power over each other, thus generating a material dependence in favor of lenders on their debtors. The only fundamental rule, according to the Czech writer, is that of faith, from which the Church, corrupted—as he cites—from its beginnings, distances itself more and more. The rejection of these coercive practices, considered immoral, places him from a theoretical point of view as one of the first positions of a pacifist typology, along with the Waldensians, from whom he also inherits an attitude of poverty that includes a rejection of the property. In his writings it does not seem difficult to find identifying references with the mundane condition of the inhabitants of towns and cities. The *common people* to whom he directs part of his texts and in which he intersperses a satire against the ruling nobility, against oppressive systems and against all kinds of injustices (Iwanczak, 1997). Chelčický's vision seems unique and unconnected in its chronological context, he anticipates some criticism and envisions some of the programs that radicalized groups and sectors will develop in the coming centuries. The forms, however, very much in line with the thought, conform to a practical, thoughtful model, but one of firm convictions. The reformer's criticisms are directed not only against the Germanic nobility; Also accused, as we have already mentioned, is the priestly oligarchy of the *Taborist* Hussites, basically a privileged Czech priestly class. It is worth remembering that the more radical Hussites had come to power with the support of a large part of the peasantry and that their initial program included economic measures related to the elimination of rents and taxes, which facilitated a much more comfortable life for their impoverished followers. The peasants of the area, exhausted by the rents of the feudal lords, welcomed to a large extent the withdrawal of taxes and even the elimination of certain arms and other types of services. But, with the passage of time, the *Taborites*, in the context of the Hussite wars and the conflicts between different factions, found themselves obliged to reinstate some tax formulas and force some peasants to join the war. Some *Taborita* communities, which had started communal processes, without financial burdens and with unpaid shared work, were forced to go to war and with it to abandon the model they were developing. The medieval period is interpreted, from a classical and already superseded point of view, as a dark age, in which the Church significantly expanded its power and jurisdiction by extending the reach of canon law and colonizing European lands that were beyond its dominion. The Church used the coercive tools of the state, such as launching the Crusades, establishing the Inquisition, and ruthlessly suppressing rebellious heretics and quashing political insurrections. For Christian *pacifism*, therefore, medieval Christianity was a false, violent, and vindictive ideology that distorted the message of Jesus and violated the principles of nonviolence and love (Christoyannopoulos, 2022).

## 5. THE LEGACY OF PETR CHELČICKÝ: NONVIOLENCE AND EQUALITY IN A CHANGING WORLD

The figure of the Czech thinker was recovered in the European world, especially at the end of the 19th century, and Lev Tolstoy played a fundamental role. In 1885, the book *Worin besteht mein Glaube?: eine Studie* [What is my belief?: a study] (Tolstoi, 1885) was published, the German version of the book by the Russian writer who had just been censored in Russia. In that work, Tolstoy reflects extensively on the use of violence by two great institutions: Church and State. For the Russian writer, violence and oppression can never be used by any Christian and, furthermore, they go against primitive Christianity. Tolstoy's proposal is not very different from the one Petr Chelčický had proposed almost half a millennium ago. The coincidences did not go unnoticed by a professor at the University of Prague, who contacted the Russian writer by letter.

In that letter, he told him about the existence of a 14th-century Czech theologian named Chelčický and about a book, *The Network of True Faith* (Tolstoi, 1894), in which he argued in practically the same way issues as controversial and permanent over time as the use of violence by the authorities. Apparently, Tolstoy could not access the original writings of Chelčický, but he was able to approach his thought through one of the books of the critic and specialist in Slavic literatures Alexander Nikolaevich Pypin. Pypin had written, together with Włodzimierz Spasowicz and Antonín Kotík, a history of Slavic literature with special attention to Czech authors, including Chelčický (Christoyannopoulos, 2019).<sup>3</sup> After the discovery, Tolstoy quickly warned that if the Czech thinker were English, French, or German, he would be a benchmark for European social sciences (Iwanczak, 1997).

Pypin's compilation provided Tolstoy with extensive knowledge of the contributions and teachings of the Czech thinker; thus, he learned that he practically did not read Latin, that he had not had a university education and that despite this he was interested in reading Wycliffe, attending the disputes, and preaching of the Hussites, especially those that had been taking place in Prague. There, he encountered Jakubek and the heterodox of the area, in whom he sought refuge and answers to his concerns. Pypin points out that Chelčický gave material goods an extremely dangerous value for beliefs and for earthly actions; human evils arose in the accumulation of goods and properties. The hierarchical structures and institutions of the time had led to clear obstacles to the development of communities of believers, brotherhoods that were significantly influenced by the structures of the new modern world and that accelerated imbalances among mortals (*Historie literatur slovanských*, 1880, p. 343). Many texts by the Czech thinker were not widely disseminated either in his time or in contemporary times, and the question was none other than having been a writer originally in his mother tongue. Despite this, they partly summarize the feelings of a more than considerable group of peasants and poor people in the cities, for whom the world was very unfavorable. The wars of religion and the wars of the peasants were intertwined at a chronological moment in which the medieval world ended and gave way to a new historical stage. In fact, both at the end of the Middle Ages and in the early years of the so-called Renaissance, widespread uprisings of the peasantry against the landed nobility took place in the Germanic areas, even generating a *libertarian outbreak* that drew the attention of two of the main anarchist theorists, such as Mikhail Bakunin (Bakunin, 1977) and Petr Kropotkin (Kropotkin, 1909). From a Marxist perspective, certain religious currents that emerged in Medieval Europe have been positively evaluated, such as the one represented by Chelčický. Philosopher Karl Johann Kautsky openly states that "Medieval communists were generally peaceful and rejected violence" (Kautsky, 1926). Kautsky refers to the *spiritual* relationship that also existed between the inhabitants of Bohemia in the 14th century and primitive Christianity. In this sense, Kautsky warns that, despite the logic of the Hussite uprising and its heterogeneity, the violent subject has triumphed in it, perhaps turning the noble cause of the popular classes of the area into a process controlled by the most intransigent. However, he believes that there were those who took a much more peaceful and non-violent path, because they had to understand that either this was not the right path, or that this itinerary ultimately generated other forms of misery for those who had become actors in the uprising. In other words, political forces and economic elites could temporarily lose control of events, but they would eventually make the most disadvantaged pay for the excesses that may have occurred. This was not the first or last time this happened; uprisings against authorities, against the emperor or against another power entailed a period of physical repression and economic penalties, as once normality was restored, powers imposed extraordinary taxes on peasants and popular layers of the urban areas of the zone to recover what was lost and penalize the rebel agents. Chelčický is a defender of equalitarian communism from a primitive Christian perspective. To him, war is the worst evil and warriors are equivalent to murderers. Leaders force farmers and citizens to participate in war, thereby forcibly turning them into violent and murderers. Kings, nobles, and leaders do not fight alone, but instead use the inhabitants of their territories to commit these acts. Equality cannot be imposed by state power, nor by nobles or the church. It must be something natural and, therefore, the individual or group must play a leading role. According to Kautsky, *Chelčický's equalitarian*

*communism should be achieved outside of the state and its institutions* (Kautsky, 1897). The state is pagan and sinful, so nothing can be expected from it. All inequalities, whether social, political, economic, or cultural, are caused by the state and therefore nothing can be expected from it. All coercion is evil, all domination, all class creation goes against the commandment of equality and brotherhood. The Christian should not exploit, so trade should be prohibited for him. The Christian means of abolishing the state is to ignore it and exercise disobedience. This anarchist communism gained strength as discontent with the war grew.

The death of Chelčický remains shrouded in mystery, with most biographers placing his passing around 1460. Despite this, his legacy lived on through the various social and religious movements that followed in his wake. Though he never founded a movement of his own, many of his followers organized themselves into communities, and his texts and personal pacifist example had a profound influence on the later emergence of the *Unitas Fratrum*. In Eastern Bohemia, the weariness of the late war and the Church's association with it provided ample grounds for a strong critique of the continued violence in the upper echelons of political power. The misery of several generations, the burned-out fields of the peasants, and the epidemics were more than sufficient reason for a message opposing the use of violence, which in the end was far simpler and more straightforward than the ones found in the old theological debates of Prague. The power of Chelčický's discourse lay in its personal simplicity, which aimed to bring his followers closer to the primitive, rural Church, and to the vital concerns of the people of Bohemia. Hunger and war were undoubtedly ills to be fought against, and emperors, popes, and even the radical Hussites from Tabor had contributed to the development of a regime that was little less than diabolical. In the recovery of Chelčický's ideas, it seems that Gregorio or Řehoř Krajčí plays a fundamental role. At the end of the forties of the fifteenth century, there were various disputes between the so-called teachers of Prague and the priests of Tabor. In this context, a new movement began to be seen that revolved around *Brother Gregory*, who had been confined during the Hussite clashes in the Emmaus Monastery in Prague. In that abbey, where some Utraquist thinkers also took refuge, he would encounter the texts of the pacifist revolutionary thinker, which had a significant influence on him. Gregory of Prague got a group of followers to accompany him and leave Prague to settle between 1457 and 1458 in a secluded area, suitable for carrying out a community. Petr Chelčický met with some members of that movement and probably died shortly after. In 1461 a text appears in which the death of the preacher is mentioned for the first time, a fact that would have happened in the immediately preceding years (Boubín, 2005). Chelčický's proposal is highly original due to its unique focus on nonviolence and social equality. In his time, these concepts were uncommon and contradicted the predominant religious and social thought of the period. Unlike many other contemporary religious and social currents, Chelčický categorically rejected the idea that violence and war could be justified and advocated for non-resistance and pacifism in all circumstances. Furthermore, he maintained that all individuals, regardless of their origin or social position, were equal before God and deserved to be treated with respect and dignity. These ideas were particularly radical in 15th century Europe, a time characterized by wars and religious conflicts, and their influence can be observed in subsequent movements.

## REFERENCES

- Alvar, J. (2007). *Cristianismo primitivo y religiones místicas*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Augustine of Hippo (2004). *The city of Good*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Bakunin, M. (1977). *Bakunin. Obras Completas* (Vol. 2). Madrid: La Piqueta.
- Bartos, F. M. (1958). *Petr Chelčický*. Praga: Kalich.
- Boubín, J. (2005). *Petr Chelčický: Myslitel a reformátor*. Praga: Nakladatelství Vyšehrad.
- Chelčický, P. (c. 1421). *O boji duchovním* [On spiritual warfare].

- Chelčický, P. (c .1443). *The Net of Faith - Book I: The Corruption of the Church, Caused by Its Fusion and Confusion with Temporal Power*.
- Chelčický, P. (1940). *Traktáty*. Praga: Vydal Melantrich.
- Chelčický, P. (1990). *Postilla*. Praga: Comenium.
- Christoyannopoulos, A. (2019). *Tolstoy's Political Thought: Christian Anarcho-Pacifist Iconoclasm Then and Now*. Routledge.
- Christoyannopoulos, A. (2022). *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel*. Imprint Academic.
- Cohn, N. (1957). *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dawson, D. (1992). *Cities of the Gods: Communist Utopias in Greek Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Denis, E. (1978). *Huss et la Guerre des Hussites*. New York: AMS Press.
- Duby, G. (1981). *The Age of the Cathedrals Art and Society, 980-1420*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fudge, T. A. (1998). 'Neither Mine nor Thine': Communist Experiments in Hussite Bohemia. *Canadian Journal of History*, 33(1), 25-47.
- Guarrigue Masaryk, T. (1926). *Velící mužové* [Big men]. Praga: Státní nakladatelství.
- Hernández de la Fuente, D. (2014). La noción de *koinonia* y los orígenes del pensamiento utópico. *Studia Philologica Valentina*, 3, 165-196.
- Iwanczak, W. (1991). Między pacyfizmem i anarchią – nauka o społeczeństwie Piotra Chelčickiego. *Studia Historyczne*, 34, 3-20.
- Iwanczak, W. (1997). Between pacifism and anarchy: Peter Chelčický's teaching about society. *Journal of Medieval History*, 23(3), 271-283.
- Kaminsky, H. (1956). Hussite radicalism and the origins of Tabor, 1415-1418. *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 10, 102-130.
- Kautsky, K. (1897). *Communism in Central Europe in the time of de the reformation*. Londres: Fisher-Unwin.
- Kautsky, K. (1926). *Un anarquista medieval. Peter Chelchiky*. Buenos Aires: La Protesta.
- Kropotkin, P. (1909). *Anarchist Morality*. London: Freedom Press.
- Lambert, M. (1977). *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation*. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Macek, J. (1965). *The Hussite Movement in Bohemia*. Dagenham: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd.
- Maur, E. (2008). Príspevek k biografii Petra Chelcikeho. *Angelus pacis. Sborník prací k poctě Noemi Rejchrtové*. Praga: Instituti Historici Pragae.
- Mezzadri, L. (2001). I due concili (1418-1449). *Storia della Chiesa tra medioevo ed epoca moderna. Dalla crisi della Cristianità alle riforme (1294-1492)* (Vol. 1). Roma: Edizioni CLV
- Monsalvo, J. M. (2016). *Los conflictos sociales en la Edad Media*. Madrid: Síntesis.
- Pypin, A. N. (1880). *Historie literatur slovanských* [History of Slavic literatures]. Praga: Nákladem knihtiskárny Frantika Simáka.
- Tolstoi, L. (1885). *Worinbesteht mein Glaube?: eine Studie* [What is my faith?]. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.
- Tolstoi, L. (1894). *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*. London: Scott – Lane. Toubert, P. (1973). *Les structures du Latium médiéval: Le Latium méridional et la Sabine du IXe siècle à la fin du XIIe siècle*. Roma: École Française de Rome.
- Toubert, P. (1973). *Les structures du Latium médiéval: Le Latium méridional et la Sabine du IXe siècle à la fin du XIIe siècle*. Roma: École Française de Rome.
- Tourn, G. (2003). *I valdesi: identità e storia*. Turín: Claudiana.
- Wagner, M. L. (1986). Petr Chelčický: a free church separatist. *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society*, 24, 63-70.

## NOTES

- 1 An example is the poems by Giacomino de Verona, *De Babilonia civitate infernali*, in which the city of commerce and vice is contrasted with the heavenly city. Norman Cohn also uses a similar argument to talk about the parallelism between Prague and Babylon.
- 2 He warned of the phenomenon of *incastillamento* as a process by which castles, beyond their military function, fulfilled a social and political function, which generated control of the population in hinterland influence of the construction. In the same way, medieval cities came to develop a similar function in more or less comparable historical processes that we qualify as *inurbation*.
- 3 Surely the book that Tolstoy consulted was: *Historie literatur slovanských*, Praga: Náklandem knihtiskárny Frantika Simáka, 1880.