

Book Review—John Huss by David Schaff.

Schaff, D. S. (1915). John Huss: His life, teachings, and death, after five hundred years. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Read through the lens of independent Catholicism—by which I mean the Old Catholic, Polish National Catholic, and smaller independent sacramental bodies that affirm the Catholic faith and apostolic orders while rejecting Roman primacy—David S. Schaff's portrait of Jan Hus is strikingly resonant. Although Schaff does not explicitly trace a line from Hus to the post-Vatican I Old Catholic and independent movements, his framing of Hus as a pastorally driven reformer, a conscience-bound priest, and a champion of the Church's grounding in Scripture and moral integrity provides a basis for independent Catholic identity. The book is more than a medieval biography; it reads as a prehistory of Catholicity without papal primacy.

Four features of Schaff's Hus map closely onto key tenets of independent Catholicism: (1) vernacular and pastoral reform, (2) conciliar and national ecclesiology, (3) sacramental practice anchored in the early Church rather than curial custom, and (4) rejection of unthinking devotion and obedience to the papacy.

First, Schaff's emphasis on Hus as preacher and pastor foreshadows reforms that independent Catholics have widely embraced: worship intelligible to the people through the use of the vernacular rather than Latin; catechesis aimed at lay formation; and moral credibility among the clergy as an essential of ecclesiastical authority. Schaff's description of Hus's vernacular preaching and ministry shows how ecclesial renewal emerges from the parish outward, not merely from episcopal decrees downward. This pastor-from-below model parallels the birth of many independent jurisdictions: communities formed around concrete pastoral needs (language, cultural identity, access to sacraments) when central structures were perceived as unresponsive. For independent Catholic readers, Schaff's

narrative validates a conviction that catholicity is lived in the parish and mission, not proven solely by juridical alignment with Rome.

Second, Schaff presents Hus as neither an anarchist nor a papist but as a theologian who situated authority within the whole Church under Christ, drawing on Scripture, the Fathers, and reasoned debate in universities. Schaff carefully treats Hus's appeals to Christ as head of the Church and his critique of abuses justified by office alone. While Hus was condemned by the Council of Constance, Schaff highlights the irony that the same conciliar era advanced claims about the authority of a general council over a pope—claims that later informed Gallican, Conciliar, and, by the 19th century, Old Catholic critiques of Ultramontanism. Independent Catholic movements after 1870 did not cite Hus as their primary theological authority; they grounded themselves in conciliar tradition, local synodality, and the undivided Church's first millennium. Yet Schaff's Huss—insistent that office be judged by truth and holiness—mirrors their core ecclesiological instinct: that catholicity is safeguarded not by centralized infallibility, but by the consent of the whole Church, the witness of Scripture and Tradition, and the integrity of bishops accountable to synod and conscience.

Third, Schaff's treatment of Hus's sacramental and ecclesial teaching offers concrete antecedents for independent Catholic praxis. His account of Utraquism—communion under both species for the laity—shows a recovery of ancient practice against later restriction. Many independent Catholic bodies today presume communion in both kinds as normative, receive it as a symbol of the Church's wholeness, and ground it historically rather than polemically. Likewise, Schaff's description of Hus's esteem for the primitive Church, his insistence on preaching and moral discipline, and his reticence to embrace Wyclif's most radical Eucharistic theses portray a reformer who sought renewal rather than rupture—a posture congenial to independent Catholics who uphold sacramental theology and apostolic succession while disputing Roman definitions of jurisdiction and primacy.

Schaff's narrative of Hus's trial and martyrdom also speaks directly to independent Catholic self-understanding. He recounts the breakdown of due process at Constance and the subordination of nuanced theology to institutional self-protection. Independent Catholic histories often begin with episodes of perceived juridical overreach—local conflicts over language and property or doctrinal centralization (e.g., papal infallibility)—that seemed to leave no room for legitimate dissent. Schaff's belief that authority without holiness and justice forfeits its claim to obedience echoes the ethical rationale many independent communities have offered for separation or non-alignment. The appeal to conscience, far from being a Protestant novelty in Schaff's telling, is embedded within a Catholic quest for truth and pastoral fidelity.

That said, reading Schaff from within the independent Catholic frame also surfaces important limits. His early 20th-century Protestant sympathies sometimes flatten the sacramental and canonical concerns that independent Catholics hold dear. For instance, while he is fair-minded about Hus's theology, Schaff does not pursue questions central to independent Catholic self-definition: how reform relates to the continuity of orders, how synods and bishops share governance, and how local churches maintain communion across national lines. Independent Catholic bodies—Old Catholics of the Union of Utrecht, the Polish National Catholic Church, and various smaller jurisdictions—have wrestled intensely with precisely those questions, articulating models of episcopal collegiality and synodality that draw as much from canon law and patristic precedent as from moral critique. Schaff's focus on the moral-prophetic Hus is energizing, but it underplays the institutional creativity that any sustainable non-ultramontane catholicity requires.

Moreover, Schaff's teleology—Hus as a forerunner of Luther—can obscure Hus's relevance for Catholic, not merely Protestant, reform. Independent Catholicism self-identifies as Catholic in faith, sacraments, and apostolic ministry, even while dissenting from certain Roman dogmatic or juridical claims. A more explicitly Catholic reading of Hus would press his commitment to the Church's visible unity, his priestly

identity, and his continuity with much medieval theology. To Schaff's credit, he often resists caricature and stresses Hus's conservatism in piety; still, his framing sometimes nudges Hus toward a binary that independent Catholics reject: either Rome or the Reformation. Independent Catholicism insists there is a third space of faithful Catholic reform.

Schaff's attention to the Bohemian context—national identity, vernacular culture, and the university politics of Prague—offers additional points of contact. Independent Catholic movements frequently arise along cultural and national lines (the PNCC's Polish base in America is a case in point), not as mere doctrinal protest but as efforts to incarnate the Church within a people's language and customs. Schaff's depiction of Hus as a symbol of Czech religious and cultural self-determination illustrates how pastoral reform can become a locus of national dignity without collapsing the Church into nationalism. The lesson, implicit in Schaff and salient for independent Catholics, is double-edged: inculturation can be a charism of renewal, but it also requires constant vigilance to keep catholicity from fragmenting into tribalism.

Schaff most directly equips independent Catholic readers through his use of sources. By presenting Hus's letters from Constance and substantial excerpts from polemical and pastoral writings, he lets readers hear a priest reasoning theologically, appealing to Scripture and the Fathers, and wrestling with obedience, truth, and prudence. These documentary voices invite independent Catholics to form clergy and laity capable of similarly reasoned discernment—an ecclesial culture where conscience is educated, synods are substantive, and reform is principled rather than reactive.

What, then, is the net influence of Hus—through Schaff's telling—on the independent Catholic movement? Not a simple lineage, but a set of family resemblances and usable precedents:

- A pastoral priority: preaching, catechesis, and moral credibility as the engine of renewal.
- A conciliar instinct: authority exercised within and for the whole Church, accountable to Scripture and Tradition, not concentrated in a single office.
- A sacramental conservatism: recovery of ancient practices (e.g., lay communion in both kinds) and resistance to innovations that obscure the Gospel's clarity.
- A conscience-bound ministry: clergy who will endure loss rather than falsify the truth.

For independent Catholics, Schaff's *Hus* offers inspiration and caution. Inspiration, because reform can be deeply Catholic, patristic, and pastoral without capitulating to either curialism or iconoclasm. Caution, because the Hussite aftermath—fracture, warfare, and hardening confessional lines—reminds reformers to wed courage to patience, conscience to communion, and protest to constructive polity. Schaff's book, read this way, does not prescribe a blueprint for independent Catholicism, but it supplies a moral-theological grammar in which many independent Catholic commitments can be articulated with historical depth.

In sum, David S. Schaff's study remains a valuable ally for independent Catholic reflection. It frames Hus as a Catholic reformer whose appeal to the Gospel, the Fathers, and the demands of conscience stands upstream of later independent Catholic movements. If those movements seek not merely to be non-Roman but to be positively Catholic-rooted, sacramental, and synodal, Schaff's *Hus* provides both warrant and warning: warrant to pursue renewal grounded in truth and holiness and warning to build structures of communion sturdy enough to carry reform's moral weight.

Note: This review was drafted with assistance from BoodleBox (a generative AI platform). I provided the prompts and source materials and reviewed and edited the output for accuracy and originality.

