The memory and motivation of Jan Hus, medieval priest and martyr

Abstract:
Jan Hus (1371-1415) was not the morning star of the European Reformations. He was not the forerunner of Martin Luther. He should not be characterized as a proto-Protestant. In fact, Hus should not be approached at all, in so far as possible, through the prism of Protestantism or the turbulent world of the sixteenth century. It seems more prudent to take Hus on his own terms, which we can do given the bulk of his authentic surviving writings. He was a medieval priest committed to the Latin church and completely devoted to its reform. That unswerving devotion eventually led Hus to a rather precipitous downfall. As a reformer, Hus also embraced the sharp tools of polemic. He did not spare corrupt priests or prelates. Even popes came under his withering rhetoric. He cultivated no toleration for lukewarm faith or apathetic religious practice. His sermons and various writings, including his valuable correspondence, reveal strength of character and conviction, fervent zeal, eloquence, and even flashes of brilliance. But for all of these virtues he was politically naive and went about his duties as a priest and polemicist seemingly blind to the fractious climate he helped create in Prague and elsewhere. He was either blissfully unaware of the dangerous enemies his sermons and statements created, or he underestimated the virulence which began to mount against him. One might even find evidence to support a theory that within this popular priest there was an unformed holy innocence. That he engendered a movement of considerable durability and diversity cannot be denied. But it would be too ambitious to claim Jan Hus as the first Hussite. Like so many other reformers, he harboured no secret desire to found a new church or give his name to an alternative form of the Christian faith and religious practice.