

# THE THEOLOGICAL LEGACY OF CZECH MODERNISM IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF FRANTIŠEK BÍLEK

## ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the life and work of the artist František Bílek in relation to the theological legacy of Czech Catholic modernism at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century over three chapters. Its objective is to answer three questions: Was the artist the mystic he was perceived to be at the time? Can he be termed a modernist? What were his reasons for joining the Czechoslovak Church when it was founded in 1920? The study uses the method of hypotheses which are stated in advance in the questions posed, and then subsequently tested. Another method used is an analysis and comparison of the approach and attitudes of Czech society to the artist during his life. The introductory chapter describes the study's key indicators with a brief description of the issues, and also the form and structure used.

Part A looks at the environment during the emergence of modern Europe; in particular the conditions giving rise to the struggle for modernism, the circumstances of the First Vatican Council, the Czech Catholic reform movement and the European modernism movement in relation to the central subject of this thesis, artist František Bílek.

Each of the three chapters looks at one of the artist's three periods/pillars. They are divided up according to the dividing lines in František Bílek's life and are based on the divisions given by his biographers Emanuel Chalupný and Josef Richard Marek. The first chapter focuses on the first period/pillar of the artist's life – *youth, or human guilt*. This period ends in 1901. In the second chapter, the second period/pillar in his life – *adulthood, or Christ*, the idea of Jesus Christ become central for Bílek. In the works he completes, Bílek more closely approximates the needs of contemporary society. A period of anchoring of his philosophical series occurs: *Journey, Construction of a Future Domestic Church*. This fruitful period ends at the start of the First World War. Over the course of the war, interest in Bílek declined. The establishment of an independent Czechoslovakia and the founding of the Czechoslovak Church on 8 January 1920 led to the next new period in the artist's life and works. These significant changes in Czech society mark the transition to the third chapter, to the period/pillar of – *maturity, or national consciousness*. This applies to the years of 1920-1941. The third chapter looks at Bílek's change in religious denomination after the establishment of the Czechoslovak Church and his active work within the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Part B focuses on answering the three questions posed. It also notes the timeliness of Bílek's ideas and his place in contemporary Czech society.

The conclusion presents the benefits of the thesis, and Bílek's theological legacy in relation to his development and focuses over his life. The thesis is supplemented with findings from the documents acquired about the artist from audiovisual and digitised

archival sources about the period when he actively worked for the Czechoslovak Church after it was established. Finally, it should be noted that in his designs and creative output, artist František Bílek engages themes contained in the Holy Scriptures. He was not involved in profane themes. He also focused his interest on the creative completion of artworks of great figures in Czech history, which many times involved Jan Hus, John Amos Comenius, Petr Chelčický and others. He was responsible for honouring their memory even in the twentieth century.