

N. F. Capek and Prometheus Bound – or Price for Bringing the Fire
Rev. Dr. Petr Samojký

This year, on June 3, 2010, the Czech Unitarians will be celebrating a 140th birthday anniversary of Norbert Fabian Capek (pronounced Chah-peck). Capek is a key figure of the history of the Religious Society of Czech Unitarians, as he called to action the liberal religious people of the early established Czechoslovakia, after the First World War. As we are preparing for the celebrations, as a minister of the Prague Unitarian Congregation I have been pondering the way we should celebrate this event, as well as I have been revisiting the role of Capek.

One day I was approached by a member of the congregation. He requested a visit with me, so he could give me a present for the Prague Unitarian Congregation. Bruno Hartl, as he is called, had published several books in the past, so I guessed what kind of present I could expect. And truly, I received a book in two thick volumes titled *Prometheus Bound*. He told me about the work, which he, together with the circle of other scholars, put into the book, over forty years! The book was a gift for me as well, I found right away after his visit, when I started to read the book, with thoughts rotating around Capek in the back of my mind.

The ancient story of Prometheus, the benefactor and protector of people, who brought the fire to humankind came to life as I was reading the book, and I was struck with its overlap into the story of Capek. Here is the connection:

It would be unfair to demote Prometheus to the position of merely an igniter of brushwood, to the bearer of small utilitarian fires. Once, even a common household fire was considered sacred, to a certain degree. Mystical images were heard in the expression „fire“. For example: „fire, which will come, will pass judgement on everything and will fascinate“.

Prometheus gave mankind the majestic fire obtained from heaven. He ignited something superior in the people, a participial Promethean spark.

The activity of the philanthropic god concerns both the mind and the soul. Prometheus' igniting act was aimed at man's soul. This is comprehensible. The naively immediate realism of the people's belief found a relationship of fire, life and soul.

. . . According to some views, Prometheus gave the people the soul by bringing a branch burning with divine fire to the human chest.^{1a} That is why Prometheus is sometimes depicted with a torch in his hand – and near to him a butterfly is fluttering as a symbol of souls (the same symbolism was accepted also by the early Christians). (Bruno B. Hartl, L. Lichtenberg and a Circle of Authors, *Prometheus Bound*, Praha: Musa Polyhymnia Foundation, 2009, 71-73)

Years ago, when I was learning about Capek's life, I was struck with his passion for people. Long ago before he started organizing the Czech Unitarian movement, he had deeply in his heart hidden desire to help the others. True, this is to be expected from any person of cloth of any denomination, but in the case of Capek it might be a bit something else. Let us hear his own voice, through his thoughts which he inscribed into the page of his personal diary: „**I feel that I have my biggest life work still ahead. It has smouldered inside; and the fire has to spread somehow and to light others!**“ (*Diary*, June 1909)

The story of Capek goes as follows. He came to Czechoslovakia in 1921 directly from the USA, where he gained support for his „missionary efforts“ from the American Unitarian Association. He started and soon, in fact after only several months, a large enough body of people gathered and officially established the Unitarian movement. The church was growing, the original Prague Unitarian Congregation (called originally Free Brotherhood) was dropping out new fellowships in different cities of Czechoslovakia. Capek's fire, we could say, really

caught on. Capek not only built the denomination of several thousand members, but played also an important role in the public life. However, in 1938 the German invaders took over and Czechoslovakia changed into a public jail. Capek preached against the occupation and it did not help him either that earlier he typologically analyzed Adolf Hitler and described him as a ruthless, cruel person and dangerous figure in the field of politics.

As more and more individuals were incarcerated or taken into concentration camps as „public enemies“, Capek’s life was threatened. It was clear to him as well as to the people in the church, and the leaders of the foreign Unitarian bodies knew it too. Therefore, Capek was approached by Frederick May Eliot, the president of the AUA in 1939 and was invited to come back to the USA to save his life.

Capek thankfully rejected the offer and chose to stay, writing in his response to F. M. Eliot: „As to the actual plan I must say that my conscience would make me very unhappy if I were compelled to desert my people in these days. I therefore feel that I cannot leave my people no matter what suffering may be involved.“ Finally, in 1941 the Gestapo came for him, put him in jail, and even though the court found him not guilty, he was taken into the concentration camp in Dachau, where he was put to death on October 30, 1942. As we learned from the witnesses who shared their path with Capek in Dachau but were fortunate enough to make it back, Capek kept the fire on until his very last day. All ill, aged and weak, he was supporting others in the concentration camp, giving them hope.

He too brought the sacred fire to the people, just like Prometheus. The fire of faith, we could say. And he too was punished for it, just like Prometheus. He had to pay for his earnest desire to bring the fire, the light of Truth to the people. Deeply felt desire to help the others, so deeply felt that it is stronger than the instinct to save one’s own life, it is a mark of truly admirable an attitude.

On the other hand, Capek would not be willing to give up his life easily and had no desire to die as a martyr. His decision to stay was not perceived by him as a sacrifice of any kind. Knowing the odds, he still wanted to pursue his mission regardless of what was happening around him, and if the circumstances should be dangerous, he would not care. He simply did what he felt he needed to do, and by no means would want to be celebrated or even worshiped as a martyr.

This was the case of Prometheus as well:

Prometheus could do without temples. . . As there was no interest in expensive sacrifices, Prometheus did not require any priests for himself, let alone any devotees specially charged with maintaining the cult distinguished from the public by a special status. Priests of different specializations were functioning but (classical literature) does not recognize the notion „Prometheus’ priest“. (Hartl, 78)

Capek did not care for temples either. „I do not need temples, where the deity sits on the throne,“ he says in one of the hymns he wrote. God, in Capek’s framework of faith, was not a deity which should be worshiped in a temple, and therefore no human being should be given a special status as well. Saying that, it implies his characteristic Unitarian attitude, as it relates to Jesus as well. Capek’s God is alive in the labor for good, in one’s self improvement, in improving one’s relationships, or, in the words of John Dewey, God appears within „the active relation between ideal and actual.“ (John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1934, 51) For this kind of God no temples are needed, no temples are required.

Capek was walking in the steps of Prometheus. He felt deep in his heart the urge to bring and spread the fire, and he followed this voice and brought it to the people. And he was bound for it. Just like Prometheus, we do not need to worship

him or build him temples, he is not a saint of any sort, and he would be the first to reject such honor. However, we should remember him and give him our respect and gratitude. We should be inspired by his example, and we should measure our commitment by his dedication to an ideal. But, perhaps most of all, we should cherish the fire he brought to us! We must not let it die, we need to feed it and spread it around to help the others. In this way, it is our Promethean task.

I am very much grateful to Bruno for giving the book to the congregation. It is a work which offers much inspiration as we learn about Prometheus, the prototype of Jesus as well as other messianic figures. And since this work is available also in the English language, it is offered as gift anybody interested on the web site www.prometheusbound.info.

Regardless if we are inspired by Prometheus, Capek or any other great figure of this or mythical world, let us cherish the fire and spread it around!