

Introduction. A Sketch of Comenius*

Johannes Amos Comenius – in Czech Jan Amos Komenský – (1592-1670) is the national pedagogue and protestant theologian of Czechoslovakia. He is regarded as the most important symbol of opposition against foreign political domination (the Habsburg monarchy) and ecclesiastical tyranny (the Catholic Church). His greatest reputation is for being a utopian thinker who transcends nationalism. Even today he is seen as an idealist from whose thought ‘über “schwierige” politische Grenzen hinweg – ein für unsere Zeit wertvoller Impuls zur Völkerverständigung ausgehen kann’.¹ Certainly in this sense he is often regarded as an exponent of an idealized European culture. This idealism has been noticed and used for ulterior motives throughout Czech history. A curious example is the commemoration of Comenius’s death in 1920. On 15 November of that year a newspaper of the workers’ party eulogized Comenius in an editorial under the title ‘J.A. Comenius – the first Czech internationalist’.² Comenian studies could remain part of educational and editorial projects after the communist takeover precisely because of the utopian and societal character of his thought. There is also a tendency for social and political minorities to annex Comenius for their own causes on ac-

¹ E. Schadel, ‘Einleitung’, *Johann Amos Comenius. Pforte der Dinge, Janua Rerum*, übersetzt von E. Schadel, Hamburg 1989, ix.

² J.V. Polišenský, ‘The World Comenius Lived In’, *Symposium Comenianum 1986*, eds. M. Kyrlová, J. Přivratská, Prague 1989, 49-54: 49.

count of his great exemplary struggle for political and religious tolerance. A good case in point that illustrates this is Joseph Ruaix’s recent Catalan translation of important parts of Comenius’s *Consultatio catholica*.³ Especially for many in Central and Eastern Europe, Comenius, more than Erasmus, is the symbol of a modern open-minded Europe.

Comenius was born in the community of the Unity of Brethren. Already as a schoolboy he was confronted with the expansionist policies of the Habsburg monarchy, instantiated in his case by an attempt to close his secondary school at Brod. Comenius went on to study at the Herborn Academy in Germany, where Johannes Piscator and Johannes Alsted were his most influential teachers. Herborn put down the foundation for his fundamental theological humanism, and the roots of the millenarianism that would later cement his friendship with Petrus Serrarius (1600-1699) in Holland also lie here. After a short stay in Amsterdam and further theological studies at Heidelberg, Comenius returned to Moravia and became the pastor of the *Unitas Fratrum* at Fulnek and concurrently rector of the local school.

Comenius’s European career began tragically in 1621 when, at the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War, Fulnek was looted and destroyed by Spanish Habsburg troops. His library was burnt down and, shortly afterwards in 1622, the plague carried off his wife and two children. Comenius was forced to leave Moravia. He became one of the many international intellectual exiles who roamed Europe in the seventeenth century. After long and arduous travels through Poland, Scandinavia, England, Germany and Poland once more – where he saw his newly assembled library and manuscripts again go up in flames – he finally settled in tolerant Holland. He died in 1670 and was buried in the *Waalse Kerk* at Naarden.

Two main themes run through Comenius’s

³ J.A. Comenius. *Consulta universal sobre l’esmena dels afers humans*, Introducció de D. Čapková, Traducció de Vicenç Esmarats i Josep Ruaix, Vic-Osona 1989.

encyclopedic works: first his great love for teaching and general education that he theorized at great length in his distinctive didactics and pedagogy, and second, his expectation and hope that the 'new' inductive method that had been developed by his older contemporary Francis Bacon (1561-1626) would bring to a halt the fragmentation of scholarship and the sciences into independent disciplines. His pedagogic works, especially the *Didactica magna* and *De rerum humanarum emendatione Consultatio catholica*, develop the idea that education is most effective when it seriously takes into account the different stages of the psychological development and ways of learning of children. This child-centred pedagogy expands the circles of knowledge around the child as its own interests become more wide-ranging. According to Comenius, knowledge and universality go hand in hand. Basing himself on the story of the arrogant building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11, 1-9) and the subsequent destruction of the fabric of society by the confusion of tongues, Comenius concluded that similarly in modern times man's pride had turned him away from God and from true knowledge. Thereby he has lost the power of interhuman communication and become the victim of personal and national strife and discord. In order to become happy again, people must renew themselves and relearn to communicate in the same tongue. This consideration led him on practical grounds to see in Latin the universal language that could be used to describe man's noblest thoughts and the highest kind of knowledge for the mutual benefit of all people.

Yet, Latin in Comenius's day no longer had the glow and fervor of the early humanist era of Leonardo Bruni Aretino, Lorenzo Valla, Rudolph Agricola and Erasmus. It was now taught on the basis of a dry, didactically dead description of words and grammar. Above all, Latin had lost the sense of cultural and political immediacy that is found in the first humanists. Comenius seems not to have had very much feeling for the elegance and the literary values of Latin and certainly not for the intellectual ideals of classical Latinity. Indeed, until at least 1633 he had resisted

writing in Latin. Not before his non-Czech friends had pointed out how important his ideas could become in the European context did he grudgingly begin to publish in Latin. Much more important for Comenius than the traditional humanist, somewhat elitist love of the classics for their own sake was the idea that Latin could serve in everyday practice as the linguistic heart of a method for the construction and dissemination of universal knowledge and for making interhuman exchange humane and possible.

In order to give this programme a solid foundation Comenius decided to revive the teaching of Latin and, never at a loss for practical solutions, he wrote a methodological handbook for Latin instruction through a 'natural method'. This 'natural method', that was at the bottom of all his didactic endeavors, meant taking the situation of the pupil as the point of didactic departure. An analysis of this situation would lead to a didactic and pedagogic practice that would be able to bridge the gap between ignorance and knowledge, between narrow nationalism and a multinational European utopia. For the teaching of Latin this meant taking the vernacular of the child's home as a basis. The first edition of Comenius's Latin grammar (*Janua linguarum reserata*) printed the Latin next to the Czech and illustrated both with pictures of actual things in the child's world. Soon afterwards other vernaculars were substituted for the Czech, and Comenius's work quickly became famous throughout Europe in Protestant as well as in Catholic educational circles.

This 'natural' method (part of the *pam-paedia*) was developed in order to lead boys and girls towards *pansophia*, a kind of encyclopedic synthesis of all possible knowledge of reality, which was meant to afford insight into the structure of the cosmos, to give guidelines for political stability, and, ultimately, to lead to religious enlightenment. This insistence on pedagogy as the basis for scholarship and his accentuation of the technical value of Latin earned for Comenius the name of 'humanist'. He did not, however, love and espouse these humanistic ideals on their own account, but he used them as a basis

for his religious and cultural utopian programme. In this sense he is an exponent of European culture and perhaps the most idealistic and universalistic of the utopian thinkers of the seventeenth century.

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