

The Cultural Inheritance of Comenius

To develop all men towards full humanity

Pampaedia

The important contribution to European culture by Comenius is his methodological emphasis on an integrated whole of spiritual, mental, practical, individual and social activity of mankind which will lead to a new system of culture, based on the defence of and respect for life, on universal life-long all round education for everyone based on truth, love and tolerance, and on the participation of all men in discussing *emendatio rerum humanarum*. All of this has one single aim: to achieve the peaceful cooperation of all people universally but beginning in Europe. This utopian endeavour is especially important in the late twentieth century now it has been recognized once again how dangerous and inhumane rigid authoritarianism can be. Many modern authoritarian systems were built upon a one-sided and one-dimensional application of the natural sciences and rationalism to human society. This scientism began in the seventeenth century and in its rapid development separated reason from other human activities. The natural sciences were increasingly separated from the more slowly developing humanities and social sciences, and a gap came about that we today call 'the two cultures'.

It has been recognized that even the most advanced science and technology have not been able to answer man's global questions as long as they are separated from the moral,

emotional, social and spiritual development of human beings and indeed of society. Scientism and technicism are menaces to life on this planet.

Inspiration in solving this human conundrum can be found in the conceptions of Comenius, starting with *formatio hominis* and culminating with the conception *cultura universalis* within *emendatio rerum humanarum*. The all-embracing principles of *pansophia*, *pampaedia* and *panorthosia* offer an alternative way to Baconian and Cartesian philosophies which lie at the heart of the development up to our own days of a split world, full of chaos, injustice, prejudices and violence. In this context this paper will discuss Comenius's concept of *cultura universalis*.

Comenius's work was one long endeavour to improve society as well as the life of individuals. This yearning permeates his work in his homeland as well as in his exile in various European countries, where he labored as a teacher, a minister of *Unitas Fratrum*, a theologian, a historian, a philosopher and a theoretician of education, and as an untiring worker for peace. He reacted to the complexities of his time when crucial changes lead to modern society. The religious, political and social conflicts of the Thirty Years' War affected Comenius, his church and nation. Comenius hoped to bring an end to inhumanity if all people could be stimulated to work for universal reform involving everyone and everything with a view to a better world.

Comenius drew his inspiration from ancient ideals, such as the Greek *paideia* and the Stoic ideal of *humanitas*. He followed the Renaissance faith in man's ability and the Baconian endeavour to make man master of Nature. However, he also developed Christian ideals of *fides*, *spes*, *caritas*, especially in his interpretation of the Czech Reformation, of its defence of truth and of religious and social justice. Influenced by various forms of Neoplatonic philosophy and the ancient idea of *panharmonia*, he elaborated his *pansophia* and applied it to didactics. Finally, he elaborated his ideas to all human affairs and claimed a universal culture for everybody and

a broad social reform *omnes omnia omnino, cultura universalis*.¹ He emphasized that the process of perfection could continue, if mankind were to recognize that there was a need to reform everything simultaneously² and not in an isolated way, and that besides everyone had to begin by reforming oneself.

In line with the Czech Reformation, Comenius developed biblism, adherence to the text of the Bible. In one way this was a hindrance to the scientific observation of the natural world, but on the other this tradition stressed the moral and social aspects of life, the search for truth, and the regard for both theory and social practice. Comenius was here also in line with his life-long constant search for perfection in the *Unitas Fratrum*, which sought a balance between freedom and order, tolerance and peace. Comenius admired scientific progress and technical inventions as is clear from his correspondence³ with friends in England who welcomed his *pansophia* as far as they understood it as a selection and unification of individual items of knowledge. However, they rejected its general methodological meaning as a pansophic metaphysics to be introduced into all human activities, both physical and mental, material and spiritual. Comenius could not accept the way of Bacon or Descartes, who separated their scientific investigation from other manifestations of man. Although they retained their religious faith, they did not touch upon it in their scientific works. Their new rationalism aimed at factual knowledge derived from new methods of research into the natural world. Their results were remarkable but the concurrent mechanistic view of human nature and society had negative consequences which were not recognized until later. Comenius, on the other hand, thoughtfully warned against any partiality⁴, against onesidedness and disregard of man in his individual and social development. His criticism involved him in polemics

¹ CCH, col. 4 and 5.

² CCI, 27.

³ Cf. the collections of correspondence of Comenius edited by Patera (1982) and Kvačala (1898 and 1902).

⁴ Comenius, *Via lucis*, Preface.

with his contemporaries.

Descartes conceived of the world as a great mechanism and he made man an observer of the world from the outside, not seeing man and the world of Nature as a unity. In order to unify the sciences – one of the urgent problems of the time – he applied arithmetic and geometry to all things and all phenomena. Mathematical deduction and logical causality stood central in his method. Methodological doubt was the Archimedic fulcrum of his analysis, and he looked on man as only a thinking subject (*res cogitans*). Thus he attempted to examine the certainty of knowledge in a subjective approach.

Comenius, however, saw man as an organic part of the world. He investigated the interrelations between man as Microcosm and the great world as Macrocosm.⁵ A study of the process of the intellect seemed insufficient to understand man. It was his aim to integrate all human activities, capacities, and potentialities of the personality. While Bacon sought a new scientific method for the investigation of Nature and Descartes studied the processes inside the human mind, Comenius pursued a universal life-long culture of everybody and of the whole of human society. His pansophic method was thus a complex approach which included especially analysis and synthesis. To these he added syncrisis as a particular way of comparison that should penetrate to the substance of things and phenomena to find truth.

The type of rationalism developed by Comenius differed radically from contemporary scientism. It was methodologically based on a holistic view of reality studying the whole of man in his relationships to Nature and Society and to God. The *Consultatio* indeed also shows an idea similar to the Cartesian 'cogito, ergo sum'.⁶ This kind of rationalism was not sufficient for Comenius, however: the main principles of his pansophic metaphysics were not only the *notiones communes* of Stoicism or in the work of Herbert of Cherbury, but also *instinctus* and *facul-*

⁵ Comenius, *Didactica magna* v.

⁶ 'Cogitat mens, ergo est', CCI, col. 334.

tates.⁷ The fact that Comenius enriched his system of metaphysics with ethical and socially pragmatic aspects made his pansophical metaphysics quite different from other systems.⁸ Therefore, his pansophical metaphysics as laid down in his 'Mundus possibilis', part of his *Pantaxia*, is not only introduced into the *Pansophia*, but also into the *Pampaedia*, the *Panorthosia*, and likewise into all theoretical and practical human activities. Most importantly, it was constitutive for 'chresis', that is to say the use of things for a right goal⁹ in agreement with the order of the world. This concept of 'chresis' lay for Comenius at the very heart of his conception of naturality.

The Comenian concept of rationality was also intimately connected with pedagogic and didactic procedure – asking what is understandable and learnable, as based on spontaneity, – and with social studies and the involvement in politics. It was Comenius's intention to instruct man in his relations with Nature, in those with other men including the relation with himself, and with God as the *archetypus* of the highest perfection. The results of his synthesis became the basic premisses of the *formatio hominis*¹⁰ and of a *cultura universalis*.¹¹ In his conception, knowledge of Nature could never be separated from the knowledge and reform of human affairs, and Science could not be separated from other aspects of humanity. Comenius did not want man only to master Nature but Nature should be integrated with this mastering itself. Following Francis Bacon's concept of motion, Comenius extended it to the development of man, his life-long education, and to the evolution of the history of society. Comenius's concept of quantity was

⁷ For these principles of pansophic metaphysics: *Mundus possibilis*, cci, col. 283.

⁸ Cf. Červenka, 'Problematika Komenského metafysiky', 27-71; Čapková, *Neznámý deník Komenského*, 20-34.

⁹ cci, col. 91, 94.

¹⁰ *Didactica magna*, Cap. vi: 'Hominem, si homo fieri debet, formari oportere', 67; see also Cap. viiff.

¹¹ See note 1 above.

applied teleologically to anthropology and it plays an important role in his system and hierarchy of values. Science thus contained not only intellectual, but also ethical, pragmatic and social elements.

Not only from educational positions but also as a theologian, Comenius rejected a passive role for man. He much opposed a dualistic scheme of lifeless passive matter and active principle. His position was a triadic one, interposing a third active principle between matter and spirit; this principle he saw as giving rise to *qualitative* change. He showed that problems concerning human life could be solved only by co-operation between different disciplines, integrated on the basis of common goals in reforming all human affairs – namely philosophy, politics, theology – and in restoring a peaceful world society.

Comenius's methodological unity stressed the specific character of the different methods required by individual disciplines, but showed at the same time that these could be combined in a complex pansophical approach, ensuring that each question is studied *omnino*, from all sides, so that integration would lead to a higher scientific quality. He showed in great detail how this broad and deep concept of pansophy combined with theory and practice, and how it could help in solving educational questions. A good example can be found in the principles in his *Didactica magna*, concerning natural, rapid, thorough, easy and pleasant learning and teaching. Accepting developmental schemes, Comenius avoided the danger of accepting scientific principles once and for all. He spoke about *terra incognita*¹² to characterise further research. In his view, acquisition of knowledge is an on-going process, beginning with sensory reactions to reality and continuing with rational treatment of the knowledge acquired for the solution of a given problem and of historical pluriform experience; this could all be gained also through books, particularly through the Scriptures, and through a process of invention and discoveries. This complex of activities forces man to creative social communication, by

¹² cci, col. 744.

word of mouth and in print, and to a socially oriented assessment of knowledge which, together with other experience, enriches life.¹³

It is typical of Comenius to set his categories of ends and goals, content and methods of education against the aims, content and way of life of all men and of the whole of society. Naturally, Comenius expressed himself in the terms of his religious background. That philosophy, politics and religion, philosophy and education, education and politics, education and religion should be unified was seen by Comenius to be his task, and the rationalist core of his pansophy went beyond the narrow limits of any religious sectarianism. He would not accept dogmatism, intolerance or superficial philosophizing based on piecemeal engineering, but he considered that life, like the world, is a single whole. Therefore, schools must be schools for life, schools as workshops of humanity. This was why he regarded Cartesianism as an over-simplification, a restriction of the complexity of life and all its relationships: he stressed these as a complex whole and as irreducible to only *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

For Comenius the whole was not only the sum of its parts but a complex of relationships between all parts. He was concerned with the relation of each part to the whole, with their differences, their mutual relations, mutual influences, so as to clarify their basic qualities and the superior phenomenon which ensued from them. For this reason he emphasized crucial, basic relationships, such as the relation of men to the whole world, the interrelations between the general and the particular, the abstract and the concrete. He regarded these interrelations as the view from different sides of similar problems. The omnipresent questions: what, how, by what means, why and for what purpose, placed all questions in the context of daily life and further development. Such a universal education of everybody and of humanity as a whole could finally realize universal reform.¹⁴

The idea that all men should be educated

¹³ CCII, col. 370-372.

¹⁴ CCII, col. 411, 567 ff.

throughout their lives and the idea of life-long creative activity, recalls the development after the death of Comenius when his line of thought lost ground, the scientific trend prevailed and man was gradually removed from the natural world, from the fullness of life and from spontaneous development. The rationalist principle *more geometrico* rejected natural development as well as historical national traditions. Applied to education, these ideas led to a lowering of standards, paradoxically to irrationality and to profound misunderstanding of how human personality is formed in constant interaction with the whole real world. No attention was paid to the change from one stage to another, from pre-school to school age, from school to active adult life, from adult life to old age. No attention was paid to the relation between general and particular aims in life, at different stages of development, and to the need for systematic education in all periods of life to prevent conflict situations and to help solving problems.

By his theory that personal activity helps towards personal perfection as well as towards *emendatio rerum humanarum*, Comenius wanted to show that under proper education the whole of life in its variety of forms and its complexity is an upward process which cannot be simplified. Man is the most complicated, the most changeable, the most mysterious of all creatures to be educated.¹⁵ The quality of human activity, human responsibility to himself, to other men, to God, to Nature, affects the process of his life and of its improvement. This idea of universal culture included a dynamic structure of the past, the present and the future, with the crucial element that all would teach all and learn from all, thereby contributing to the *general* good. In this way Comenius developed the tradition of mutual teaching and learning practised in the *Unitas Fratrum*. His considerations are based on a dynamic concept of substance: he examines the interrelations between quantity and quality, space and time, the way of constant activity of man and woman in

¹⁵ *Didactica magna*, 'Lectoribus Salus', 5; cci, col. 549, 930.

their cooperation with God in the reform of the world.

On the basis of a critical analysis and interpretation of contemporary phenomena, Comenius demonstrated what according to him was essential for better human interrelations and understanding and what it would take to stop hatred, to introduce tolerance, to apply universality, simplicity, essentiality, and spontaneity, nonviolence, respect for man and his freedom, to order life, to introduce harmony into human relations, to develop self-control, self-education and to realize the principles *scire, velle, posse*¹⁶, that is to acquire deep knowledge, to decide thoughtfully in the practice of life and in correct dealing with Nature, men and God.

Comenius tackled many problems that concerned man and his individual and social development. His solutions were to a great extent utopian, and he experienced inner conflicts that his aim was a task beyond the powers of a single individual, as well as many discrepancies in his struggle against the conditions of life during the Thirty Years' War, in exile, and for the Czech cause. Many of his problems have to be solved in every epoch of history. Comenius came too soon with his demand that scientific research should be concerned not only with the natural world, but with man and society as well. While his Mosaic idea of physics bound him to the past, in other respects he saw far into the future. Thus he built a bridge towards our own century and to days to come. The difference between this bridge and other similar bridges is in the fact that Comenius conceived the whole of man in relation to the whole of the world. In this way he addressed the problem of the interrelations between science, philosophy, religion, and politics, which are again to be answered in our own contemporary world.

¹⁶ CCI, col. 277; 1966, *Synopsis Mundi Possibilis* I.

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