

Comenius: Between Hagiography and Historiography. Reflections on the Changing Image of the Czech Reformer

Few personalities in Czech and European cultural history have undergone so many changes of image as Johannes Amos Comenius (Jan Amos Komenský). His European reputation achieved its first peak during his life, although his language textbooks were generally more accepted and more widely published than his reform proposals and treatises. He became during his own lifetime a respected and distinguished educationalist, despite the fact he considered himself – maybe a little self-confidently – a universal reformer of human affairs.¹

In Comenius's view education should be more comprehensive, more democratic, more practical and useful and wholly more universal (*omnes omnia omnino*): language teaching represented in his system only the first step on the road to real wisdom. This education philosophy and scheme, the so called 'pansophy', was proposed by him as the only remedy for ailing mankind, as the true exit from the 'labyrinths of the world', the right way to 'universal enlightenment', and consequently and gradually the means to establish the perfect 'Christian society' (a free, peaceful and pros-

¹ Comenius's reform-oriented philosophical treatises did not meet with as much success as his language textbooks. While *Prodromus pansophiae* (his most popular reform outline) was published during Comenius's life four times (1637, 1639, 1644 and 1657), his successful *Janua linguarum* appeared up to 1670 in more than 100 editions (among them 25 various editions in the Netherlands).

perous community of all nations).²

Many of his contemporaries (especially in England and the German-speaking Reformed countries) admired and supported Comenius's ambitious plans, which partly resulted from the millenarian mystical traditions of the European as well as the Czech Reformation. However, there were scholars who criticised his fusion of sciences and theology as very doubtful and misleading (e.g. Descartes and the Cartesians), while some diehard Protestant divines (both Lutheran and Calvinist) found his theosophy dangerously heretical and socially destabilizing.³

Nevertheless, when he died in 1670 he was much esteemed, although he was better known abroad than in his homeland where the victorious Hapsburgs tried to wipe out the memory of the native Reformation. But even Comenius's arch-enemies, the Jesuits, respected his educational achievements by printing his textbook *Janua linguarum* in Prague.⁴

The following era of enlightenment was, however, already pushing Comenius into oblivion. The age of reason angrily condemned Comenius's pansophy as a misleading and misguided philosophical concept. At the end of the seventeenth century, the famous French rationalist Pierre Bayle created in his influential *Dictionnaire critique* a distorted image of Comenius. His sarcastic and ironic picture of the Czech reformer represents a very unflattering caricature. Comenius was presented as a man of doubtful mental abilities who might, perhaps, have written a few good textbooks but who was otherwise a dangerous religious sectarian and fake, fanatically spreading foolish revelations and permanently searching for money from his naive patrons. The former Huguenot Bayle, like

² Educational philosophy has been recently systematically studied in the Czech by Čapková and Palouš.

³ Without doubt, the heaviest attack against Comenius was launched by his former friend Maresius, the Dutch Calvinist of French origin.

⁴ The Czech-Latin-German version of *Janua linguarum* was published in Prague in 1669, one year before Comenius's death.

many converts, condemned in Comenius his own past and his former life in Dutch exile (the *Dictionnaire* was published soon after the Edict of Nantes in 1685). Bayle had once been a leading Huguenot theologian and in his youth he had believed in revelations similar to those of Comenius. Bayle's portrait of Comenius became generally accepted, his *Dictionnaire* being reprinted several times and translated even into German.⁵

At the end of the 'enlightened' eighteenth century the German literates with Adelung chose Comenius as a striking and infamous example for his popular book *Geschichte der menschlichen Narrheit* (*History of human foolishness*).⁶

Comenius seemed to be almost forgotten and ridiculed, even his textbooks were published less frequently. No wonder the 200th anniversary of his birth in 1792 was not remembered at all. His spiritual legacy survived only in small Bohemian exile groups in Germany – groups which partly inspired the German pietistic movement (A.H. Francke in Halle) and the newly founded Moravian Church in Saxonian Herrnhut (*Unitat der Mährischen Bruder*).⁷ Comenius's slow comeback into European cultural history is closely associated with the new philosophical and literary movement Romanticism. It was the German philosopher J.G. Herder who described Comenius as one of the most noble and magnificent spirits of Europe, whose reform endeavours should be highly appreciated.⁸ Similarly positive evaluations were formulated by the French historian Jules Michelet, the Swiss educationalist Pestalozzi, and many other influential Europeans. Comenius finally found his way home into Bohemia and Moravia. His literary and theological works, especially those written in his mother tongue,

⁵ Bayle's attitude to Comenius has been recently thoroughly explained by Válka in his study 'Komenský v Baylově slovníku'.

⁶ Adelung, *Geschichte der menschlichen Narrheit* 1, 242.

⁷ The Herrnhut community was established in 1722.

⁸ Herder, *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, 31-51.

were permitted to be published for the first time after the Act of Toleration in 1781 (under the enlightened Emperor Joseph II). Despite its lasting problems with censorship, Comenius's work slowly became one of the mighty sources of inspiration for the Czech national revival in the 19th century.⁹

The first modern biography of Comenius, written and published in 1829 (both in Czech and German) by the foremost Czech historian and politician F. Palacký (son of a country protestant teacher), pictured Comenius as above all a great patriot.¹⁰ This nationalistic image was a natural response to the official Viennese centralism and Germanization (Palacký, of course, saw Bohemian history as an everlasting struggle between 'Slav democracy' and 'Teutonic autocracy'). And so Comenius became a symbol of the anti-Hapsburg Bohemian tradition and national striving for independence. From that point of view it is hardly surprising that the Viennese government tried to prohibit the celebrations of the 300th anniversary of his birthday in 1892. These celebrations nevertheless became a cultural and political demonstration of national identity, led by the democratic intelligentsia.¹¹ Czech teachers in particular adored Comenius as their great example – Comenius's portraits, statues and busts decorate almost every school built in the last third of the 19th century and this tendency continued into our own century.¹² The enthusiastic portrait of the great

⁹ The Czech-written Comenius writings belonged until 1781 to strictly forbidden books (*libri prohibiti*). The whole of Comenius's work was first released by Austrian censorship in 1860!

¹⁰ Palacký, 'Život J.A. Komenského', 19-55.

¹¹ Vienna saw in Comenius a symbol of the anti-Hapsburg Czech mood and emancipation strivings. An Austrian minister of education even banned Comenius celebrations at all schools (which was not systematically respected in Bohemia). More on Comenius's role in the Czech national revival in my book *Jan Amos Komenský*, 160-167.

¹² No other personality among the Czech greats has as many portraits and statues. Nevertheless, the first statue of that 'teacher of nations' was not erected until 1873 (in Přešov in Moravia).

Czech teacher heading the Slav democrats against Austrian-German oppression was naturally very limited. Comenius was actually a bilingual, studying and living for many years in a German-speaking environment. He was, of course, a passionate and devoted patriot in 17th-century terms, but his patriotism was deeply associated with the Protestant faith, and this is the reason he preferred exile to the enforced conversion his countrymen had to endure.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Comenius's work was again becoming internationally acknowledged. Since the end of the 19th century his writings were edited in critical editions, not only in Bohemia but all over Europe, and translations were made from Latin and Czech into several modern European languages. The new scholarly approach (by Kvačala, Novák and Hendrich, for instance) stressed the educational values of his work.¹³ His philosophical and religious writings were considered by the positivist generation of the first half of the 20th century to be less important, being rather controversial and often obscure.

Postwar political and ideological changes adjusted the portrait of Comenius again into the new hagiographical frame. Unlike the nationalist idealization of the 19th century the new Marxist view, represented by the historian and the first communist minister of education Z. Nejedlý and his close associate, the educationalist O. Chlup, portrayed Comenius as a highly 'progressive' personality, anticipating (in spite of 'the reactionary religious disguise') socialist and communist school reforms and ideals.¹⁴ Comenius, now pictured as not only anti-feudal but also latently anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist, was placed in school-galleries of progressive revolutionary

¹³ The European audience (esp. in the German speaking parts of Europe) was acquainted with Comenius thanks to Kvačala's writings, particularly to his biography *Johann Amos Comenius*. The largest Czech scholarly book on Comenius so far is the voluminous survey of Comenius's work and life written by Novák and Hendrich.

¹⁴ Kumpera, *Jan Amos Komenský, 170-171*.

figures alongside Makarenko and Lenin. His ideas on human freedom, peace in liberty and Christian reformation were, of course, not remembered in official speeches or propaganda brochures. Still, the official recognition of Comenius as 'a pioneer of socialism' did at least enable in the 1950s the editing of his educational books, thus creating some space for Comeniological research (to a certain ideologically limited degree).¹⁵ Since the late 1950s and early 1960s the entire Czech cultural and intellectual scene, including historiography and Comeniology, was going through deep changes, caused by the destalinization process. The more reform-minded and sophisticated opinions influenced non-orthodox Marxist interpretations of Comenius's work and personality. R. Kalivoda, J. Polišenský and J. Popelová contributed substantially to the more complex philosophical and historical portrayal of Comenius.¹⁶ But even non-marxist studies of Comenius (mostly from Protestant scholars) began to appear: works of high quality are represented by publications of J. Patočka and A. Molnár.¹⁷

The general decline in the humanitarian sciences after the revival of the Stalinist system in the early 1970s had a restrictive impact on Comenius research, although this seemingly ideologically 'harmless' issue was not closely observed by the Party censors. The newly founded review *Studia Comeniana et historica*, published by the Museum of J.A. Comenius in Uherský Brod since 1974, be-

¹⁵ E.g. the Amsterdam edition of *Opera didactica omnia* was republished in Prague in 1957.

¹⁶ Kalivoda's studies mirrored Comenius as a key figure of the late Bohemian reformation and at the same time as one of predecessors of modern anthropological philosophy. Popelová analysed Comenius's way to universal emendation and Polišenský interpreted Comenius's strivings from an historical point of view.

¹⁷ Patočka's works could be published only in Western Europe after 1968 and before 1989. The late Molnár († 1991) represented the evangelical tradition in Comenius research; this Christian approach to Comenius may be traced also in works of Floss.

came a good platform for relatively free scholarly discussions (unfortunately shadowed by the politically motivated publication ban on some outstanding scholars such as Patočka or Kalivoda).¹⁸ This comparatively open and scholarly spirit has prevailed also in the regular Comeniological colloquia, organized every year at Uherský Brod, which has become the major and internationally respected centre of Comenius research.¹⁹ Also, the Prague Academy of Sciences, despite many political setbacks, is succeeding in the gradual realization of its remarkable and ambitious programme of a complete edition of all of Comenius's writings, a program which was begun in 1969.²⁰ Recent research, not only in Czechoslovakia but also abroad, contributes to a rounded picture of this unique universal reformer and thinker whose work has both Czech and European roots and dimensions. Increasingly, interdisciplinary cooperation and interpretation is bearing its fruits in contemporary Comeniological research.

The image of Comenius has always played a highly important political, cultural, psychological and emotional role in Czechoslovakia. It is significant that the three Czech democratic presidents (Masaryk, Beneš and Hável) appreciated Comenius's work very much for its humanistic values as a part of the common Czech-European heritage. Comenius's picture has always been influenced by contemporary social and intellectual approaches. In his case there will be always a danger of hagiographical idealization, modernization

¹⁸ Nevertheless, the organizers of Comenius colloquia have tried to do their best. *Studia Comeniana et historica* has published more than 40 volumes with priceless studies and articles (unfortunately only in Czech but at least with English or German summaries). The older and academically official *Acta Comeniana* (with a tradition dating back to 1910) has already reached its 33th volume. This international review is published by the Academia in Prague in the major world languages.

¹⁹ The Comenius documentation centre was established in 1957.

²⁰ Until now, only 11 of the planned 26 volumes of *Comenii Opera omnia* have been published.

and one-sided 'black-and-white' interpretations. But the quartercentenary of his birth in 1992 should not be only the obligatory official tribute to this great European scholar, but it should also inspire research in recreating a more colourful, plastic and truthful portrait.

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