

The Utopian Ideas of Comenius and the Dutch Republic. An Uneasy Relation

I

Opinions on utopian thinking and utopias differ greatly. Disapproval and lack of perception on one hand, appreciation and applause on the other. For the British historian Thomas Macaulay the utopian scheme consisted of a web of intellectual concepts, due to an excess of imagination: "I would rather have an acre in Middelsex than a principality in Utopia". Macaulay and his utilitarian thought have no affinity with utopian concepts. The Frenchman Anatole France approached these concepts in a more differentiated manner. For him utopia was a beginning for progress and the access road to a better future. Although each utopia contains weak points and even follies, we ought not to forget its virtues. France recognized good and bad aspects, but the positive element won the day.¹ And for the German sociologist Karl Mannheim a world without utopians was a chilly and gruesome place.

Among the utopian thinkers Comenius occupies a special place, because he left no beautifully adorned blueprint for a new world-order.² Thomas More, Tomasso Campanella

¹ Mumford, *The Story of Utopias*, 23.

² The closest resemblance to the schemes of his predecessors is found in Comenius's early writing: *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart*. The difference concerns the two-ways approach that Comenius applies. The *Labyrinth* describes the situation on earth, *Paradise* the one in Heaven. The two are not yet integrated.

and Johann Andreae sketched out clearly a place where utopia could be converted into reality. The isle of utopia, Campanella's sun-city, the new town of Christianopolis were architectural designs, clearly marked out and defined. One could walk in them and visit squares and buildings. In Comenius there is nothing of this sort. To explain this, it is essential to examine Comenius's ideas on the relationship between God, the world and man.

II

In the *Consultatio catholica* Comenius classified all parts of his lifetime work. He wrote this work in the certain belief that the millennium of peace was on the point of coming. Comenius begins this work by presuming that the six distinctive periods of the world, as stipulated by Augustinus, were coming to an end. "In the present year, that counting from the birth of Christ, we call 1655, the sixth millennium is drawing to a close. The dawn of the seventh millennium is already visible; it will be the sabbath of the church and the arrival of the time of glory for the world."³ He dedicated this work to all mankind and in particular to scholars, theologians and the rulers of Europe. "Europae lumina, viri docti, pii, eminentes, salvete".⁴ This approach calls to mind the opening phrases of the *Fama fraternitatis*, published in 1614 by the Rosicrucians. That book caused much upheaval, but greatly impressed Comenius.⁵

³ CCH, col. 663, cf. Manuel and Manuel, 215 f.

⁴ CCI, col. 27.

⁵ The title page of the *Fama Fraternitatis* says: "General and principle Reform of the whole wide World." This writing is aimed at all scholars and heads of states in Europe. Comenius was a great admirer of its author, Johann Valentin Andreae. Throughout many years they kept in contact by correspondence. Comenius's interest in pansophia and the improvement of the world was roused by Andreae. In his preambles to the *Opera didactica omnia* he refers to Andreae with gratitude, because the latter had drawn attention to the sickness inside church, community and school, but also had offered measures for impro-

The *Consultatio catholica* opens with an universal appeal (Panergesia) to all Christendom. That has to put right at long last and in earnest the *res humanae*: philosophia, religio and politia, i.e. scholarship, church and state. Comenius wants to bring them under one denomination, as the three together represent the image of God and lead to the perfection of mankind. But “scholars are inclined towards ungodly wisdom ..., the members of the church keep themselves busy with their own religious issues and do not have time to study statecraft. How absurd to aim at power, knowhow or goodwill, without knowing how any of the three must be used”.⁶ When it comes to changes or improvements, Comenius is optimistic and that has to do with these ideas which he outlines in detail in the third part of the *Consultatio catholica* which is the ‘Pansophia’.

The world is a simple organism, no dead matter; it is a tree with roots and branches, and God is the root of that tree. The branches receive impulses from the root and pass them on to leaf and fruit, all due to a godgiven force, which is active everywhere. That force he calls ‘nature’.⁷ With the creation of the world the eternal laws based on the divine principles have been laid down clearly. God’s principles are visible in the worldsystem; therefore, the world cannot be anything else but perfect and dominated by an order that is continuous.⁸ Though this makes the world unique, it does not make it everlasting. God created the world. There was a beginning, there will be an end. The type of order in the world becomes visible through *number*, *weight* and *measure*. Comenius’s classifica-

vement. Brecht, *Er hat uns die Fackel übergeben*, 28-48; Comenius, ODO, I, col. 8.

⁶ CCI, col. 38.

⁷ The comparison to a tree can already be found in Comenius’s early writings; i.a. in the *Labyrinth*. He borrows this image from Jacob Böhme. Gott ist Herz und Quellbaum der Welt. The term *arbor pansophica* goes back to the Rosicrucians. Červenka, ‘Die Grundlagen der pansophischen Idee des Johann Amos Comenius’, 77-85.

⁸ CCI, col. 608, 609.

tion of science was originally based on these principles. In his later writings he laid the stress on numbers. Order in the world depended on the correct proportions of numerology. Through numerology, the *intrinsic* harmony of the world becomes visible. The understanding of this harmony is the key to true knowledge. This notion of harmony is the starting principle for Comenius’s ‘didactica’, ‘physica’ and his pansophical designs.⁹ All that is created is interlaced and forms a coherent whole. God created the world as one great organism, which he leads and rules at times *directly*. Yet Comenius places the accent on God’s *indirect* leadership through the intervention of man.¹⁰ Man is the ultimate and also the most perfect achievement of creation. In man all is present that can be found in the world (the ‘macrocosmos’) and he is indeed the ‘microcosmos’. His body and mind belong to the *natural world*, his *soul* is of heavenly origin. The latter determines man’s higher capacities: reason, will and the ability to act. Man, therefore is part of two worlds.¹¹ The world was created for him and made to be at his service. All the same, he must take care to safeguard harmony. He is simultaneously *creator* and *creature*.¹² He stands between God and the world. Being an image of God (*mikro-theos*)¹³, he is called upon to maintain

⁹ The numbers 3, 7, 10 are of special significance.

God is three-unity (trinity); therefore everything that is created; also: there are three principles: matter, spirit, light; three elements: air, water, soil; three dominions of nature: mineral, vegetable, animal; etc. Here, Comenius adapted the mystical numerology of the Rosicrucians and Paracelsus. Influenced by his teacher Alsted this tendency was reinforced. Červenka, *Die Naturphilosophie des Johann Amos Comenius*, 164 f.

¹⁰ CCI, col. 629-668; *Mundus Materialis*.

¹¹ “Corpus illi datum e terra, ... anima ex anima mundi, spiritus autem ex ipso spiraculo Dei”, CCI, col. 561; Červenka, *Die Naturphilosophie*, 168 f.

¹² “Homo est medium quid inter creatorem et creaturam illius servus, huius Dominus, simultudine participans utrinque”, CCI, col. 1074.

¹³ “Mikrotheos item dictus (sc homo) merito, quia imago Dei in homine non est accidens sed est ipsissimi Hominis Substantia”, CCI, col. 593.

the divine work of creation by means of labour, art, morals and religion. Man, according to Comenius is above all an active creature and in being so he imitates God on earth.

Naturally, the question arises whether man can achieve this of his own accord. The just outlined ideas of Comenius show pantheistic traces and only partly fit into the Christian pansophy, which he envisaged. For this reason he tries to harmonize the Bible with contemporary scientific research. In this respect he was not alone. Already the early church-fathers attempted to explain the story of creation according to Genesis in the light of the natural sciences. God revealed himself in creation as well as in the Bible.¹⁴ Both are sources for knowing God. Central to this discussion is Augustine, who differentiated between *sacred* and *profane* history. Each proceeds by different routes. Sacred history is meaningful, profane history chaotic. The Reformation produced a shift of emphasis. There was a trend to give the Bible a dominant status, elevating it to the highest font of knowledge and subordinating all else to it. Comenius chose another way. In his case the difference between sacred and profane history disappeared. For him all of history is sacred. The history of mankind is a process of development from the lower levels to the higher ones. Despite temporary eclipses the light of knowledge and truth has steadily increased in brightness and eventually it will blaze forth in full brilliance. Having reached that stage, the dawn of the millennium has approached. The development of mankind will lead to the millennium of peace as an inborn process.¹⁵

¹⁴ The same basic idea is also the startingpoint of article 11 of the *Netherlands Profession of Faith*. (*Confessio Belgica*.) We know him (*sc* God) in two ways. First, in his creation ...: since this appears before our eyes as a beautiful book, in which all creatures, big and small alike, are letters and which discloses God's invisible things. Secondly, God reveals himself still more clearly and more perfectly in his holy and divine word ...".

¹⁵ Sousedík, 'Die "Consultatio" in der Geschichte der Utopien', 132 f.

In the 'mundus possibilis' Comenius elucidated man's opportunities.¹⁶ The creation was good, but in the fall of man (the sin of Adam) all were dragged along. What was required was a restitution through the second Adam (Christ), who forgave man his guilt and mercifully accepted him once again.¹⁷ The assignment, given in Paradise, to cultivate the earth could once again be put into practice. The universal improvement of matters was brought about in the first place through the work of Christ, but man's cooperation remained essential.¹⁸ It was the start for man's move upwards. Man's activities made it possible to trace errors, that have crept into the world, which then could be rectified. The world is not just his home, it is more: it is a school, which makes him ready to fulfill his task. The world is the theatre in which God's work becomes visible.¹⁹ Exploration of the secrets of nature is the first step of learning to understand its harmonious order. In this way, the divine world of ideas comes into view and, thanks to the acquired knowledge, man can begin recreating order and harmony.²⁰

For Comenius, creation in *all* its aspects is related to God. *Sapientia* and *pansophia* were evidence that man had been created in the im-

¹⁶ The 'pansophia' consists of 8 parts (gradus). The "mundus possibilis" or "idealistic" is the first. Next: "Mundus archetypus, mundus intelligibilis angelus, mundus materialis, mundus artificialis, mundus moralis, mundus spiritualis and mundus aeternus". It is cyclically structured. *Mundus materialis* is the end for the movement from above to below, from here begins the way up to God. God stands at the beginning and at the end. CC1, col. 320-321.

¹⁷ "... Quod per nomen eius (*sc* Jesus) obtineatur remissio peccatorum" and "Restitutos nos esse per Christum ad statum paradisi ..." CC1, col. 1089.

¹⁸ "... require tamen cooperationem nostram". CC11, col. 399.

¹⁹ "Mundus corporeus est Theatrum Dei visibile. CC1, col. 431.

²⁰ Červenká, *Die Naturphilosophie*, 171 f. Throughout the 17th century we can observe this search for order and harmony. This served as a tremendous stimulus to scientific development, particularly in the fields of mathematics and physics.

age of God. Thus, Comenius could examine knowledge in the light of man's direct participation in divine wisdom. He saw no *fundamental* difference between the two, only one of *gradation*. "Omnia in Deo sunt ut in archetypo (the original), in Natura ut in ectypo (the image of the original), in Arte ut in antitypo" (the imitation, which has to be in accordance with the original).²¹ Knowledge of creation was identical to the knowledge concerning God.

As mentioned above, in the world (macrocosmos) everything was *explicitly* present, in man (microcosmos) all is *implicitly* present, though concealed. For this reason there is no need to instill into man anything from the outside. Education had only to pick out what was inside to make it flower.²² Pansophic instruction should be in agreement with these startingpoints, thus conforming to the correlation between macro- and microcosmos. Pansophia, in this respect needs to be in agreement with the principles regarding order, enshrined in the macrocosmos: thus on number, measure and weight. In the 'Panaugia' Comenius returns to these three concepts. There he differentiates between the analytic, synthetic and syncretic (comparative) methods.²³ The analytic method divides into components, the synthetic brings order in the various components and the syncretic tries to find the principles behind the various components. All people should become 'pansophoi', thereby acquiring true knowledge of the whole and obtaining insight in the order of things, but also insight in the thinking and in the structure of language, as well as into all aims, means-used, and activities of oneself and others; he has to learn and to distinguish between relevant and incidental matters and what is innocent and what is damaging. "The object is to enlighten all men with true *wisdom* (philosophia), to bring them into order with true *politics* (politia) and to unite them with God by a true sense of *religion* (religio)."²⁴ These

ideas are elaborated in the "Panorthosia". The true *philosophy* is Christian wisdom; it is neither engaged in useless arguments and sterile hairsplitting, nor concerned with an attitude of unwavering steadfastness. Christian philosophy teaches the knowledge of nature and salvation.²⁵

True *statecraft* (*politics*) is universal. Its aim is to allow all people to live in concord and to eliminate causes leading to war. "Quod tibi vis fieri, vel non vis, alteri feceris, vel ne feceris!" This is the quintessence of all *divine, moral and civic* law. Those require three expedients: examples, legislation and proper implementation.²⁶ The best form of government is a 'regnum mixtum': *Monarchy*, because Christ is the ruler over kings, bishops and philosophers; *aristocracy*, because the best people ought to be at the head; *democracy*, because every person in his own home, enjoying freedom of conscience is the equal of any other person.²⁷ True *religion* is also universal. It comprises little theory and stresses on practice. "Theoria religionis sit brevis: praxis longa totius vitae".²⁸ Faith, hope and charity are the three elements that have to be practiced. They do away with dogmatic hairsplitting, scholastic retorics and useless speculations. To top this all off, a new universal *language* is to be used by everyone. The splintering into nations is due to the diversity of language which in its turn is responsible for the different attitudes and views among the peoples. This new language must be structured sensibly, harmoniously and clearly. The philosophers, theologians and the authorities must jointly ensure, that everyone has a competent command of this language.

The realization of this program of reforms is the responsibility of the *Collegium Lucis*, a society of scholars from all parts of the world, the *Consistorium sanctitatis*, a gathering of clerics and the *Dicasterium Pacis*, a world-

²¹ Schmidt-Biggemans, *Topica universalis*, 139-154.

²² Červenká, 'Die Grundlagen', 78-92; Schmidt-Biggemann, *Topica*, 150.

²³ CCI, col. 176.

²⁴ CCI, col. 4. Comenius's *Pampaedia or universal Education*. Dobbie's translation, 20.

²⁵ CCI, col. 499-508, chapter XI, *Panorthosia*.

²⁶ CCI, col. 508-514, chapter XII, *Panorthosia*.

²⁷ CCI, col. 514.

²⁸ CCI, col. 518.

court that looks after peace and tranquillity. The best persons (*optimati*) should be members of these *Collegia*. Thus, the wisest, the most pious and the most powerful. Preferably, each member excels in all three categories. Above these three *collegia* stands the *Concilium Oecumenicum* which guarantees the movement of reform in the world. It is worthwhile to note, that its members are not only the bishops, who are the authorities in charge, but that its ecumenical character is secured, if not only reasonable and wise men from among the theologians, but philosophers and politicians are included as well.²⁹ Who convokes this Concilium? Not the churches, as one might expect, but the kings and leaders of the republics. The principal role was not reserved for the clergy, but for the secular authorities. They are to be given the task of insuring the fulfilment of the council's resolutions. Apparently Comenius's confidence in the clergy was not so great, that they should be preferred, when it came to the enforcement of those tasks.

III

Like many utopias of the period, the *Consultatio catholica* was intended to be a rational design for a better society. Very significant was the dominant place of teaching and education as a likely means for improving and stabilizing the social order. Comenius, however, is unique in offering such a detailed

²⁹ CCH, col. 658-662. Ecumenical Councils were known in the early Christian Church. They were held from the beginning of the 2nd century, whenever there were problems. Originally, the bishops, elders and deacons had one vote each, later on only the bishops. Finally the Pope of Rome made the decisions. The protestant churches knew no ecumenical councils. At the time of Comenius, John Dury, a member of the Hartlib circle and friend of Comenius tried to bring the non Roman churches into a federative bond. Comenius, for his part, was actually drawn into one of the many religious discussions between Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists, for instance at the meeting in Thorn (Torún), 1645.

description of the road and the terms leading to the desired goal. The 'mini' problems of church, school and family with which he was confronted as leader of the Unity of Brethren had opened his eyes to see the great problems of society as a whole. This practical pedagogic experience served as a startingpoint for his later theoretical work.

A number of critical observations with regard to all of this should be made.

1. Comenius is rather optimistic on man's potentialities. This has to do with the way he saw the relationship between God, creation and the created. They were interlaced to such a degree, that no space was allowed between them, and they appeared to be a trinity. As a result, the shortcomings of creation and the created were considered to be of less importance. Man, on his own account is able to improve the world due to his in-born abilities. If he applies these in the proper (i.e. natural) way a new philosophy, a new policy and a new religion will arise. The *emendatio* of the world depends on a system of education and teaching based on the previously mentioned link. It is the only way to restrain the self-love (egotism) of man and to overcome it.³⁰ Sin and mercy have no independent function and are of secondary importance within Comenius's concept. Comenius does not make allowance, or hardly any, for human imperfection and get therefore stuck in utopian idealistic images.
2. Comenius starts off from the inner harmony of creation. By trying to emulate this within society, a harmony of equivalent value could be achieved through *imitatio* which is a creative deed, a divine principle and leads through its creativity towards a *transformatio*. Thinking and acting in this way means recreating the world.³¹ In all aspects of life man is able to imitate God, whether in the material, spiritual or religious sense.

³⁰ Seibt, *Utopica*, 222.

³¹ CCI, col. 675-690, chapter I-III, *Mundus artificialis*.

“Imitari poterunt Deum in creatione ...” even Christ can be imitated “... aut etiam Christus ipse imitandus erit”.³² The utopian idealistic picture of man, who is considered able to re-create the world in accordance with God’s design, is not only a distinct possibility, but is being postulated by Comenius as a reality. Man, equipped with such capacities has indeed become a *mikro-theos*.

3. Every utopia leans towards intolerance. Even Comenius cannot avoid it. Actually, every blueprint for a perfect society – and that applies also to the *Consultatio catholica* – starts off with uniform values, obligatory for everyone. Without them, man turns to what is wrong, resulting in chaos and corruption. Such perfection cannot be achieved in a pluralistic society. Nothing accidental is permitted. Comenius prescribes rules for dressing, for mealtimes and for eating (a maximum of four courses!). To dress according to directions, to work under supervision, the prohibition to use titles: these are just a few examples of the pedantic patronizing interference with the individual. But the community as such does not escape either. For instance: the establishment of censorship and the appointment of censors, the suppression of heathen literature and scholastic theology, the control of all public offices and officials with responsibility towards the community. Infringements are to be punished severely. Everything is to be regulated and prescribed to the smallest detail.³³

Apart from objections on theological grounds, the restriction on individual liberty became the foremost reason why Comenius met with so little response in the Dutch Republic of the 17th century. For the political development in the young republic the concept of pluriformity was a precondition for sur-

vival. I would like to explain this in a more detailed way.

After the break with Spain in 1581 the young Republic had to find a way to govern itself. After a few ill-fated attempts, the people running the Dutch Republic established in 1587 a form of government, that lasted until 1795 when a French army started its invasion. They called themselves *The United Provinces* in which each of the seven provinces had its own government. These provinces sent their delegates to The Hague for their central assembly, the so-called ‘Staten-Generaal’ (States General). A strong central government had no chance to be established. Each province was in charge of its own legislation concerning the Calvinist church and the schools. What was permitted in one province might be prohibited in another one. In the struggle for power, school and education often became a bone of contention between the provinces and the church. The provinces had no wish for a church emphasizing its own independence on social and political matters; the church had no wish for a new type of authority after having liberated themselves from Rome. A conflict of interests seemed to be unavoidable, especially as many of those in charge of government insisted that their authority, stood above that of the church. In most situations of conflict common sense and a pragmatical solution preserved the peace.

A strong humanist tradition was kept alive during the Republic of the 17th century. That tradition goes back to the 15th century (Agricola) and reached its culmination with Erasmus. The *studia humanitatis* was a guiding principle for higher education. It was considered a *moral* and *intellectual* way of behaviour and a good starting point for a life in the public service. *Pietas* and *eloquentia* were closely linked. Knowledge of the classical authors was believed to be conducive to the formation of a true Chris-

³² CCII, col. 664, 665.

³³ CCII, col. 650-655, cf Seibt, 227 f.

tian spirit. In the new “schoolordres” (schoolregulations) of the provinces, made after 1587, these basic principles were held in high esteem. Comenius’s early writing (*Pansophiae Prodomus*), shows a positive outlook on the classical authors, but in a later writing (*Didactica magna*) he had strong reservations with regard to many classical authors (Cicero, Plautus, Ovidius). Even Aristoteles and Plato were blamed by him for their arrogance and vanity. The balance between humanism and Christian religion, still favoured in the Dutch Republic, was disrupted by him in favour of religion. Many in the Dutch Republic did not agree with him as they still considered a humane education the best guarantee for a Christian way of life. Christian inspired authorities were the best guarantee for a Christian society, in which church and school could occupy their own specific positions. There was no need in the Dutch Republic for the universal reform that Comenius envisaged in his *Consultatio catholica*.

The problem of every utopia is its normative character, which permits no variations. Yet for all that, Comenius states that man cannot do without freedom. Only thanks to his free will, man can learn to know, what is good and true, and can he act in the right manner. Why does he make this choice? Because he comprehends it as good sense, as *reasonable*. In Comenius freedom is equal to spontaneity: carrying out something due to one’s own initiative. All attempts to improve human matters are doomed to failure without that spontaneity. It is the divine spark in our character.³⁴ He is convinced, that nobody who has seen the light, wants to continue to live in darkness. Thus, above all, man is seen here as a reasonable creature. But the question arises: is this really the case? An old Dutch rhyme runs, with a little sigh, like

³⁴ “Spontaneitas seu libertas, divinus in nobis character”. CCI, col. 87.

this: ‘O, were all the humans wise, this earth would be a paradise’. For Comenius every human being is guided in his or her thinking, will and actions by the *communes notiones* (general in-born ideas). They make it possible to establish a good, true adequate system of philosophy, religion and politics.³⁵

4. There will be many who do not underwrite Comenius’s anthropological concept as such, but even so, there is much to discover *within* these basic concepts that remains valid today.
 - Comenius stressed two ways of gaining knowledge: Through art and sciences, though ‘art’ remained the more important one. Art, comprised the knowledge of words, of ideas and of *actions*.
 - Knowledge is to be accessible to everyone: to the young and the old, man and woman, the high and the low, poor and rich, white and coloured. All human beings are entitled to knowledge. “And so for each man his entire lifetime is a school, from the cradle to the grave”.³⁶ Attending school, however, is to be a pleasure. “Schola vera lusio mera”.³⁷ A true school is a real and pleasant game.
 - Knowledge is something alive and lively, it is *creative* knowledge. Thanks to his thinking faculty, *man* has the ability to create a new world. Out of an idea, he creates something new. He does this in his work and in art.
 - The teacher-child relationship can best be compared to that of master and apprentice. The apprentice imitates the masterpiece created by the master, and by doing so he repeats God’s act of creation. His creativity

³⁵ CCI, col. 70; CCI, col. 83.

³⁶ “... ita Homini cuique tota vita sua aetas schola est, à cunis usque ad sepulchram”. CCH, col. 54; cf Dobbie’s translation, 58.

³⁷ CCH, col. 65.

makes an *emendatio* of the world possible. Creativity is a precondition in the search for unity amidst break-ups, also a help in solving conflicts at home, in daily live and work.

Comenius addressed himself to man by reminding him of his responsibility for what has been created.

- Comenius's plea for a single language was based on the idea that language creates a mutual bond. Language and community are interrelated. Comenius envisaged a single *universal* language, that would lead to a true *uni-versum*. However, we know that the development of national languages has led to national states.
- The present year of 1992 has shown once again, and shown clearly, that priority is still given to what is national, at the expense of what is universal.
- Comenius was a man of European stature. Even today he offers us much worth thinking about. Some of his ideas might even be brought into practice.
- Utopia : yes or no? I am inclined to follow Anatole France and to subordinate the weaknesses to wider perspectives offering prospects for a peaceful society.

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