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John Amos Comenius: The 17th Century Czech Humanist and his Legacy to Mankind

Jaroslav Pánek

When educated Americans take an interest in the personality of John Amos Comenius – and this was also evident during the Comenius Celebration in the Bohemian National Hall in New York on 29 June 2013 – they will ask in particular whether it is true that this prominent educator had been invited to the Harvard University. When told that according to testimony provided later it probably had happened and that the invitation had been most likely initiated by John Winthrop Younger, the American scholar and son of the founding governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony,1 those interested own up to the fact that they are unfamiliar with the wider context of Comenius’s life. It is highly probable that had Comenius accepted this invitation (he met with Winthrop during his stay in London, sometime around 1641-1642) and had he become a professor or even the president of Harvard, founded shortly prior to that – in 1636 – Comenius, thanks to a wide range of his capabilities, would have become one of the most prominent personalities of early American history. Yet, fate took him along a different path. Comenius stayed in Europe for religious reasons, in particular, as he was the last bishop of the persecuted Unity of Brethren, which was scattered in exile throughout several European Protestant countries, and with the profoundly felt responsibility of a shepherd he would not allow himself to abandon his flock in the time of their direst need.

As a result of his European anchorage, this Czech humanist remains a somewhat indefinite embodiment of the educational science of ages past in the American environment and except for a very narrow circle of his followers,2 his life and work remain unknown. If, then, a new periodical, founded as a result of an American-Czech initiative, adopts the name Comenius, it is necessary to expand, albeit briefly, upon this eminent personality of the 17th century. His work and ideas have continued to emit light until the present time and like the minor planet Komensky 1861, discovered in November 1970, have shone as a bright star for three centuries since the death of this remarkable man.3

From the Homeland of Moravia to the Labyrinth of Europe

The year 1592 became a symbol of life and death for the Czech nation. Seen from the vantage point of more than four centuries that have passed since then, it is radiant with the light of life into which Jan Amos Komenský – better known internationally as Comenius – was born in the extreme southeastern corner of then Czech or Bohemian state. He was to grow into a man whose unique work brought to the climax all the past cultural development of his nation, the best fruits of which he presented to the world and at the same time gave humanity a hope for a better future, it so badly needed. However, for the people who then lived in that
country in the centre of Europe, that year appeared quite different. They sensed great changes in the coming, which were hardly promising for anybody.

The ominous feeling proceeded from more concrete happenings than the dire predictions spreading throughout Europe, that this sinful world would perish with the coming of the new century, in 1600. The Czech people, and especially residents of the royal and imperial seat of Prague, had more serious grounds for real concern. Reports were coming in from the west about the civil war in France, which already since the dreadful St. Bartholomew’s Night of 1572 had evoked anxiety that a similar mass slaughter could also occur in denominationally split Prague. In the east, another major war with the Ottoman empire was looming on the horizon, another stage of the continuous battle for Hungary, for which already several generations of Czechs had been forced to pay a heavy toll in money and blood. What was most ominous, however, was that in the Czech state proper, an internal conflict was growing between the ruler and the Estates, the Protestant opposition, between the Catholics and the Protestants, between the ruling minority and the increasingly dissatisfied majority of the population.

After the dramatic Hussite revolution and the first – Czech – Reformation of the Church and late Medieval society in the 15th century, the 16th century brought profound changes to Comenius’ native land. Additional waves of Reformation swept Europe – first the German Lutheran and then the Swiss Calvinist. Both these reform trends met with great response in the Bohemian Kingdom because most of the ethnic German population now embraced Luther’s teachings, while the Czechs viewed these teachings as a confirmation and concrete realization of the Hussite principles. Most Czech Ultrasquaists found new encouragement for more radical policies and strove for the establishment of a Czech church of the Lutheran type. The Unity of Brethren, the radical reformation church of Comenius, too, found interest in the new tenets and sent its students to Lutheran universities while carefully guarding and maintaining its identity. It was only in the second half of the 16th century, when it began to establish closer contacts with the Swiss reformation and found its fellow-believers abroad among the reformed Calvinists. Thus, when Comenius was born, his country offered a most varied and mostly also confusing confessional and political picture. The population of Bohemia proper consisted of some 80 % Ultrasquaists and Lutherans, about 10 % Catholics, 5 % adherents of the outlawed Unity of Brethren, and some Calvinists and members of lesser religious sects. In Moravia, which enjoyed greater religious tolerance, this denominational mosaic was still more coloured because in addition to all aforesaid churches, it offered haven to as large-scale influx of persecuted Anabaptists, as well as to Anti-Trinitarians and members of many other religious groups.

While papal diplomats referred to Moravia as to a chaotic breeding ground of countless heresies, its inhabitants lived next to each other in rather good concord. The common people grew increasingly tolerant towards each other, while many of their feudal masters became indifferent to the religious beliefs and denomination of their subjects, recognizing their right to a free choice of confession. However, from the viewpoint of state power, this advanced religious differen-
tation was one of the main obstacles to strengthening the ruler's authority. This fact gained prominence after Ferdinand I of Habsburg ascended to the throne in 1526, and began realizing his plan the Czech, Austrian and Hungarian states into a centralized and mono-confessional (i.e., Catholic) monarchy. The Habsburg doctrine was based on the idea that a coherent monarchy could be built only if its population were religiously united, and thus all available means were being used to suppress the other, non-Catholic churches. Therefore, the first anti-Habsburg uprising in Bohemia in 1547 combined defence of the Estates' rights with defence of religious freedom, and the same represented also the Bohemian revolt in 1618-1620 in a much more radical form.

In the meantime, the Bohemian Estates forced the enactment of religious freedom for adherents of the Bohemian Confession (including the Unity of Brethren) in 1609, obtained supervision over the administration of the non-Catholic church organization and over Prague university, the main centre of Utraquist ideology. This was a tremendous victory for religious tolerance. Nevertheless, the Catholics retained their decisive position in the government and from the very beginning violated the new religious law. The Bohemian Estates were fully aware of this weak point and therefore began to build up their own executive power. A Protestant "state within a state" came into being and the dissatisfied majority was ready to respond to the provocations of the ruling minority by force and armed resistance.

The disintegration of the existing social and political relationships and forms of government was paralleled by changes in all other spheres of human life. The transition from the relatively peaceful 16th century to the war-ridden 17th century was marked by a formation of mutually hostile alliances; on the one side was the tight Habsburg-Catholic alliance, and on the other side the looser association of states of anti-Habsburg orientation, which included a number of Protestant rulers but also Catholic France. The European system of states was obviously acquiring a new shape, and it also became apparent that local wars could explode into an all-European conflict with disastrous consequences. A universal feeling of insecurity and expectation of further economic blows were reflected in the gradual replacement of the harmonious Renaissance by manneristic culture. Intellectuals lost their faith in the authorities of the Antiquity and their hope for the development of a free human being, and came to realize the horrors of insecurity and weakness of the individual in the turbulent current of history. Man found himself in an earlier unknown maze of socio-political relationships, in a situation appearing incomprehensible to human reason and uncontrollable by human force.

The idea of a hopelessly incomprehensible human "labyrinth" was not a novel one, but it became the key term for expressing the existing reality. It was this "labyrinth of the world" which was also entered by the boy named Jan (John) who was born to miller Martin Seges Komenský and his wife Anna in the lovely region of southeastern Moravia, in the town Uherský Brod or its close vicinity, on March 28, 1592. A stubborn, persistent and painful search of the way out of this labyrinth became his fate.

Comenius' birthplace laid close to the frontier of the Hungarian Kingdom where an anti-Habsburg uprising erupted in 1604. The Hungarian insurgents tried to carry the civil war to Moravia and sent there some troops which mercilessly plundered the country. Comenius, who had lost his parents already in 1604 and was left to the care of his relatives, most painfully witnessed these horrors. In May 1605, he saw his temporary home, the small town of Strážnice, go up to flames, and almost immediately thereafter the Hungarian troops plundered his patrimony, the farmstead in Uherský Brod. At the age of thirteen, the most sensitive period of adolescence, Comenius experienced at first hand the horrors of war, and his material security was suddenly shaken as well.

Within the period 1608-1611 he studied at the Unity of Brethren's school in a central Moravian town of Přerov. It gave him opportunity to learn Latin and to establish an intellectual contact with the world. It also enabled him to establish closer contacts with the Unity's spiritual and secular leaders. The Bishop Jan Lancic and the prominent Moravian magnate Karel (Charles) the Elder of Žerotín detected Comenius' exceptional talent and became the young man's patrons. They saw the Comenius' training as preparation for his eventual priesthood. Therefore, they sent the nineteen-year old young man, who had been given the Biblical name Amos, to study in Germany. They chose the "Nassau Academy" at Herborn.

There, Comenius found himself in quite a different intellectual environment than his native Moravia could offer him. A prominent member of the Herborn faculty was Johann Heinrich Alsted, one of the best known philosophers and theologians of the early 17th century. It was he, too, who wielded the strongest influence on Comenius. He impressed the young man by his bold endeavour to compile the findings of all sciences into a large encyclopaedic work, as well as by his effort to classify all knowledge and to place human findings into harmony with Biblical revelations. Although Alsted was not an original thinker, he was interested in natural sciences as well as in the "secret sciences" (alchemy, astrology, the cabala, etc.), and transmitted this Renaissance inquisitiveness to his pupil. On the other hand, Johannes Fischer-Piscator sparked in Comenius the effort to master thoroughly the Bible, just as the belief in the coming of Christ's millenial realm (chiliasm) which was to produce a universal reform of all things human. Of no lesser significance for understanding the contemporary social and political situation were the views of the former Herborn professor Johann Heinrich Althusius on the state and government. It was Althusius who claimed that a just state must be based on corporations of the Estates and that in such state contractually entrusted power must be divided between the ruler and the Estates. In this respect his views were close to the recent political practice in Moravia, which, however, was already being crushed by the Habsburg centralization drive, and indirectly supported the ideas held by the radical leaders of the Estates in the Czech lands. Thus, the two years he spent at Herborn (1611—1613) helped Comenius to absorb the heritage of European humanism. They also encouraged his own literary activity. His stay and study at Herborn gave him much spiritual inspiration to which he returned throughout his life and from which proceeded in his own, original way.

A letter of recommendation from professor Piscator opened the door for him to the Heidelberg theologian David Pareus who attracted Comenius' interest with
his efforts to reconcile the differences existing between Protestant churches. Besides the tradition of peaceful coexistence of different confessions in his native Moravia, this was another important inspiration for Comenius' later ecumenical endeavours.13

Efforts to Elevate Czech Culture

In 1614, Comenius returned home full of impressions and resolutions. He was a personality who wanted to devote his youthful energy and enthusiasm to the spiritual emancipation of his nation. He saw many tasks waiting for him and set out to deal with them with remarkable consistency and dedication. The first place where he could assert himself in practice was the school in Přerov where he returned as a teacher now. Remembering his negative experiences as a student, he began to strive "for a more pleasant method of educating children". He compared the traditional Unity's system of education mainly with the ideas of the German educator Wolfgang Ratcliff (Ratieichus), finding similarities - especially in the accent placed on the irreplaceable role of the mother tongue - but also differences which favoured the Ratcliffian educational reform. It was in this sense that he wanted to facilitate instruction of foreign languages, Latin in particular, and strove for an informal and descriptive education of all youth.14

The first results were soon to appear in the form of the textbook "Rules of Easier Grammar Instruction" (Grammaticae facilioris praeparat), printed in Prague in 1616. Mastering the grammar was not the end objective of instruction for Comenius, but only one of essential instruments. From the very beginning, language as a means of communication played in his ideas an important role as the key to the basic problems of theory and practice, and as an instrument of true understanding between individuals and nations. Comenius wanted nothing less than defining the structure of the language which he viewed as a reflection of the ideology of every nation. Already in the course of his studies he began work on a large dictionary of his mother tongue, the "Treasury of the Czech Language" (Thesaurus linguae Bohemicae). He wanted to show in it the lexical and stylistic potential of the Czech language so that in the future it would be possible to translate any highly polished Latin text into its Czech equivalent and vice versa without any detriment to the message of its content. The accent placed on the communicative and socio-organizational role of the language thus extended beyond the framework of the national culture and served as inspiration for thoughts about unification of humanity on the basis of universal education.15

Comenius viewed as another prerequisite for overcoming the bounds of provincialism the necessity of raising the level of real knowledge. This meant classification and blending of all the attained knowledge from natural science to history, philosophy and theology. He wanted to present to the Czech public an impressively conceived encyclopedia of two main divisions. The first one - "The Theatre of the Universe" (Theatrum universitatis rerum) - was to have covered the universe and nature, the world's geography, and an outline of human history. The second division - "The Theatre of the Script" (Theatrum divinum) - was to cover the sacred world and Biblical history, as well as matters of ethics and postmortem salvation. Realizing such a project would have naturally called for a tremendous effort and much preparatory work.

After having outlined his concept, Comenius also proceeded to deal with partial tasks whereby he came into close contact with the social problems of his native land. He realized that so far nobody had produced a solid outline of Moravian history and took up historiographical research. By his research work, Comenius laid the foundations for Moravian historiography and geography, and made a successful attempt to depict his native land in a map published in Amsterdam in 1627 and providing the most reliable cartographic data about Moravia until the beginning of the 18th century.16

Comenius' manifold programme of scholarly humanism was not being realized as rapidly as he would have wished. Personal and public affairs and events forced him to take a position on the growing social and political conflicts as well. After he had been ordained in 1616 and two years later appointed pastor of the Unity of Brethren and headmaster of its school in the North Moravian town of Fulnek, Comenius had to settle differences and mutual complaints between the well-to-do and the poor members of the Unity. He reacted to them in his sermons and in the treatise "Letters to Heavens" (Listové do nebe), written in 1619.17

The disastrous defeat of the Czech Estates' uprising on the White Mountain near Prague on November 8, 1620, demonstrated the military superiority of Habsburgs and at the same time disclosed the insufficient social base of the resistance movement. The continued fighting moved the stage of the horrors of war to Moravia. In the spring of 1621, the imperial troops also entered Fulnek and burned it down. The horrors of war were paralleled by restoration of Habsburg power which behaved in Bohemia and Moravia as in conquered lands deprived of all their rights and privileges. The Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia Ferdinand II abolished all the achievements of the past years and launched a policy of forcible re-Catholicization with the intention of making the entire population profess the only permitted faith and instituting confessional absolutism.18

The first victims of persecution included priests of the Unity of Brethren who in October 1621 were expelled from Moravia. Among them was also Comenius who for a long time refused to accept this fate. He hoped that the remnants of the internal opposition or a military intervention from abroad by the anti-Habsburg forces would restore religious freedom in his native country. He preferred living in hiding where he tried to continue his literary work.19 However, not even there was Comenius spared the suffering he felt when hearing negative reports from the battlefields. Moreover, he suffered a personal tragedy when his wife Magdalena and his two little sons, who had stayed in Fulnek, all died of the plague. Thus, the year 1622 marked the end once and forever of the happier period of Comenius' life. Soon thereafter, in May 1623, his library was publicly burned on the Fulnek town square; Bonaventura, a fanatical Capuchin monk, made schoolchildren watch the dismal event. Moravia, now dominated by Catholic radicals, thereby denounced the humanistic programme of its great son.20
Nevertheless, Comenius would not give up. He joined the Unity's bishop Jan Cyrillus in considering ways of saving the Unity of Brethren and with his help undertook several long journeys. His task was to win support for the Unity's members abroad and, if necessary, to prepare a new centre of their activities not far from the Czech frontier. Thus, in 1625 and 1626 Comenius travelled to Poland, Brandenburg and the Netherlands. In February 1628, also Comenius had to leave abroad with his new family and his new home was to be Leszno in Poland.

Comenius spent the years that had passed between the disaster on the White Mountain and his departure into exile by intensive literary work. However, he was unable to pursue his earlier work focussed on gathering and classification of knowledge about a harmonious world. He could only for some time to comfort himself and those closest to him with "writings of consolation" (úděšně spisy) in which he humbly placed himself into the hands of the Almighty. He depicted his inner drama with unusual artistic force in the first two volumes of his work "Despondent" (Tručlivý, 1622–1624), in which, as the principal character, he converses with Reason and Faith. He recalled painfully how "brutal and bloodstained sword destroys my beloved country... my poor people are being oppressed, tortured, murdered and imprisoned... God's truth is being suppressed, pure divine services are being prohibited, priests driven out or thrown in gaol". After such mainstay of Comenius' cultural programme, as encyclopaedism, irreligion and others had been shaken, the only thing left was the living and steadily growing chiliastic faith in the coming of the kingdom of God. This belief helped Comenius overcome his temporary scepticism and encouraged him in his endeavour to bring about such universal reform.21

Comenius well realized that more was involved than the tragedy of the Czech nation alone. Already the beginning of the Thirty Years' War convinced him that all of Europe had sunk into a deep crisis. Therefore, as an allegorical Pilgrim (Poutník), he set out on a tour of the world, symbolized by an urban labyrinth, and since he had the gift of seeing otherwise than through the customary glasses of confusion, he discovered everywhere fraud, lies, hypocrisy, and evil. There was no perfection to be seen anywhere and, on the contrary, everything was confused and deprived of all sense. However, Comenius' objective was more than superficial verbal criticism. He wanted to make an emotional assessment of all components of human society and of all its organizational forms which individually and in their sum total did not meet the needs of humanity. The "Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart" (Labyrint světa a ráj srdece), written in 1623, tied by its social criticism onto the tradition of European Utopias, in particular the work of the German humanist Johann Valentin Andreae.22 However, it did not present a new Utopian vision which would try once and forever to solve all social problems. While Comenius, too, did not avoid an indication of the ideal ("paradise of the heart"), conceived in the spirit of the Unity's traditions, but he strove mainly for a radical departure from a rigid concept of the world and suggested the necessity of seeking new ways for improving human society.

The "Labyrinth" was the climax of Comenius' literary work and of that part of his work written in his mother tongue. It was the most profound and also artistically
most mature work of older Czech literature, which under extreme circumstances blended together the contemporary currents of Czech and European humanism. At the same time it reflected besides Comenius’ outstanding literary talent also his thoughts on preaching, poesy, and theory of Czech literature in general. Although his original idea about culminating the programme of Czech humanism was quite different, it was precisely by this work that he put the stamp of worldliness on Czech humanism. At the same time he indicated the potential of Czech culture and its development, had it not been forcibly interrupted by the consequences of the defeat of the White Mountain and the exile of the foremost personalities of Czech learning and culture.23

The author of the “Labyrinth” appeared on the skies of Czech culture like a brilliant star shortly before they fell into darkness for two centuries. He wanted to rid Czech culture of mediocrity and provincialism, but after he had left into exile, it sank deeply below the standard it had in the 16th century. Nevertheless, Comenius took his high standard along. The tragedy he had experienced was the price he paid for his inner transformation from a passive observer and describer of the world to an active champion of humanity’s reform. The “Labyrinth” already encoded the turn from the theatre of things to the drama of man.24

A Religious Exile in the Struggle for New Methods of Universal Education

After the battle of the White Mountain in 1620, there was no place left for the Czech Brethren and other non-Catholics in their own country. Large numbers of noblemen, burghers and priests emigrated to the neighboring Protestant countries, but the serfs, who had no right to leave, had to flee secretly from their Catholic masters. The exiles moved towards Hungary and to Poland, Saxony and Brandenburg, but also to the Netherlands. Most of the exiles hoped that their forced departure was not permanent and that the situation would change, permitting them to return home sooner or later. Comenius, too, shared this hope and did not want to move far away, so that he could quickly return and work on the reconstruction of his ravished country. His choice was the main centre of the Brethren’s emigrés, the town of Leszno which lay on Polish territory close to the Czech frontier. A special role in the cultural and religious life of the town was played by Leszno’s Gymnasium Illustre which was to become Comenius’ new place of work.25

Comenius prepared there as a concrete contribution to a better future the reconstruction and improvement of the schools which were to educate all young people irrespective of their status in society. He wanted more than only partial improvement of instruction in different subjects. His objective was theory in general. His didactical efforts were marked by the constant endeavour to find the way out of the labyrinth of the world he lived in, and education specifically seemed to him to be the appropriate means of attaining a better future. Although he had carefully studied the views of his pedagogical predecessors, he was inspired mainly by the great philosophical concepts of his older contemporaries – the English philosopher Francis Bacon and the Italian Utopian thinker Tommaso Campanella. While Campanella intrigued him by his idea that the subjects taught so far required a thorough reform in order to fit the system of true knowledge, in Bacon he found a more specific directive for this endeavour, namely the accent Bacon placed on a new method of learning, a method that would multiply the forces of the human spirit. These ideas strengthened Comenius’ resolve to work out a process which through education would bring about humanity’s harmonious development.26

Proceeding from the ideological tradition of the Unity of Brethren, Comenius searched for a universal order of things, which he reconstructed in ideal form with the help of the symmetrical method. This method of learning proceeded from the precept that the universe was organized under common principles; some of them were cognizable through the senses or by reason, while others could be deduced by analogy. This undoubtedly ran counter to the emerging new natural science which, however, suffered from other one-sided premises. Nevertheless, if such presumption of a harmoniously organized universe were indeed valid – and Comenius firmly believed it was – then a comparison of analogical structures parallelly arranged at different levels, necessarily had to produce a harmonious result. Thus, a proper cognition of the foundations should lead to understanding of all things derived from the common principles, and therefore to wisdom. Wisdom, in turn, was to be the means of reforming interhuman relations and of instituting peace and justice. Naturally, in this philosophical perspective education acquired exceptional importance.27

The early form of these pansophistic ideas was projected into the “Didactics” (Didactice, to jest Umění umělého vyučování) whose Czech manuscript Comenius completed in 1632. In it he explained his philosophy of education as well as the objectives, scope and methods of the educational process. He also worked out the organization of the educational system which was to provide in six-year stages education ranging from the most elementary to the highest; these stages, tying one onto the other began with maternal education (in every family) and then proceeded to elementary, based on the mother tongue (in smaller communities), and secondary based on universal Latin (in larger towns), and the last stage was higher education at academies located in the provincial capitals, which was to be supplemented with travel. The Czech “Didactics” (so called Didaktika česká) already reflected the principles of all-round education of all people in all matters essential for life. The educational process was conceived as an entity, covering the period from the earliest age to adulthood, to be based on discipline devoid of force, and aiming at the attainment of good results if possible on the basis of play and joyful concentration and interest.28

The Czech “Didactics” was only one part of Comenius’ original concept. He wanted to supplement this theoretical outline with a number of special textbooks for elementary and secondary schools, as well as with instruction books for the educators, i.e. teachers and parents. Of this planned series of books, only the “Infomatorium of Maternal School” (Infomatorium školy mateřské), the first book on pre-school education in world pedagogical literature, was completed; Comenius comprehensively analyzed in it questions relating to development of the physical and mental capacity of the smallest children for further education. He
was prevented from realizing his other plans by a negative turn of events in Bohemia, which postponed the application of his didactical proposals for a reform of Czech education indefinitely.29

Comenius realized already earlier that the tragedy of his country was only part of a great European drama and that it was necessary to strive for a universal reform. After 1632 he therefore addressed his projects mainly to the Protestant world, and in order to make them generally understood, he wrote them in Latin. He translated the Czech version of his “Didactics” into Latin and rewrote it so that it addressed all of Christendom and proposed ways of improving the education of youth in general. This “Great Didactics” (Didactica magna) offered “the universal art of teaching everybody, all, that is a reliable and refined manner whereby schools may be established in all communities, towns and villages, of any Christian kingdom”. Comenius rightly considered the “Great Didactics” to be one of his supreme deeds. However, this work, whose copies he sent to his friends, was not well understood and received, which made its author postpone its publication until 1657.30

On the other hand, his textbook of Latin, based on the new didactical methods — “The Open Gate of Languages” (Janua linguarum reserata) — and first published in 1631, met with instant and unexpected success. In writing it, Comenius proceeded from a criticism of the existing language instruction which was based on reading of classical literature which not only exceeded the perceptive capacity of a child but also offered very little knowledge useful in 17th century life. Discarding memorization of Latin texts and complex theorems, Comenius offered a lively and understandable explanation and interpretation of terms from the fields of inorganic and organic nature, human life, work, culture, ethics, and religion. He fortunately applied his encyclopaedic knowledge and combined instruction of Latin with information about interesting and useful things. This revolutionary method of language instruction perfectly matched the social and cultural requirements of its time and was therefore spontaneously well received not only by Protestants but also by Catholics; in fact, in 1669, while Comenius was still living, it was published by his ideological opponents, the Jesuits of Prague, for their own schools.31

Not only pedagogical, but also pansophistic ideas did meet with a positive response among Comenius’ contemporaries who believed in the possibility of reforming the turbulent world. The strongest response came from England. There, a group of intellectuals knew some of Comenius’ Latin works and turned their attention to him especially after his book “Preludes to Comenius’ Endeavour” (Conatu Comenianorum praedicta) had been published at Oxford in 1637. This group of “Comenians” offered Comenius to participate in a project of improving English schools and science, and invited him to London. Thus, new prospects emerged for Comenius at the threshold of his fiftieth year.32

In the midst of the universal destruction brought upon the nations of Europe by the Thirty Years’ War in the 1630s, voices were increasingly heard, calling for a turn in the dismal situation. Not merely by ending the slaughter on and off the battlefields, but through a far-reaching reform of society. This involved a thorough elimination of the causes that produced wars, as well as of the hostility between states, nations, and different religious faiths. These reform projects featured two main objectives for the nearest future. The first one was the unification of the Protestant churches, the second objective was to be an educational reform which should have raised the cultural standard of the European nations and promoted their mutual understanding.

The advocates of these reform projects did not stay confined to their cabinets, but tried to establish closer mutual contacts and win other adherents, especially those with political influence. One of these prominent reform thinkers, who was a skilful organizer of written and personal contacts among them, was Samuel Hartlib, a German scholar from the Baltic town of Elbing/Ełbąg, settled in England. The second one was the Scottish preacher John Dury who became Hartlib’s friend and eagerly promoted his projects. While Hartlib concentrated on the reform of education and science, Dury’s primary interest was a peaceful reconciliation of the Protestants. Both where well acquainted with the situation on the European continent and at the same time had a close relationship to England which, they felt, was best suited as a base and centre for the reform efforts. The two men also shared the view that the most promising ideas for a reform of the people of Europe were to be found in the pansophistic works of Comenius. Therefore, Hartlib arranged the publication of Comenius’ works in England between 1637 and 1639, and tried to expand the circle of his adherents. He succeeded in rallying around himself several intellectuals who expressly championed Comenius’ pansophistic ideas. They even believed that Comenius had been sent to the Earth from the heavens in order to help the confused humanity.33

Although the invitation to London came not from the English parliament as a whole but only from a group of interested individuals, Comenius was full of optimism when he arrived in London in September 1641. For the first time he had the opportunity to realize his pansophistic ideas and to engage in educational reforms. The “Long Parliament” then in session was discussing questions of church and political reform, and thus the proposals offered by Comenius and the Comenian Group came at a propitious time. Serious interest in them was shown by the Anglican Church hierarchy, many members of the moderate opposition, and even John Pym, the leader of the revolutionary parliament between 1641 and 1643. The material aspects of the situation were also favourable because in the summer of 1641, the parliament decided that part of the confiscated church property should be used for assisting scholarly endeavours.34

As early as in October 1641, Comenius addressed the English public with two writings in which he outlined his plans. He proposed a reform of education and the schools, and explained his ideas about the way to reconcile the churches and to universal peace. At the same time he specified the tasks whereby he wanted to attain his goal; they included mainly the publication of the necessary books which he would himself write or edit, promotion of the school reform, organization of the necessary work and mutual consultations, and collection of funds for financing all the reform activities. It seemed that the institutionalization of these projects was at hand. Parliament wanted to provide the Comenians with
a financially endowed college where a team of scholars was to work on and direct
the reform of education and science. However, Comenius was at the peak of his
energy and would have probably continued striving for the realization of his pan-
sophistic dream, had the situation in England not taken a drastic turn.

At the beginning of November 1641, reports reached London about the upris-
ing of Catholic Ireland against the English rule, and speeded up the polarization
of political forces. Under the pressure of these events, the patrons of the Comen-
ian Group split to join the hostile camps of the royalists and the revolutionary
parliament. Comenius realized that the crisis shattered the recently so promising
expectations. His friends could not offer him any security for the nearest future.
Thus, in the winter months of 1641 and 1642, Comenius had no other option left
but to return to the Continent. He parted with England in a most dignified manner
and dedicated to his friends and patrons his work “The Way of Light” (Via lucis).

In this work Comenius symbolically depicted the eternal struggle between the
good and wisdom on one side and the evil and ignorance on the other side, ex-
pressing these concepts with the symbols of light and darkness. He conceived the
growth of civilization in the form of stages, the youngest of which – bookprinting
and maritime navigation – he praised as a tremendous enrichment of humanity
with new possibilities of communication. But now, in the middle of the 17th
century – he said – the human community faced the task of attaining true wisdom
as the precondition for peace and universal welfare. In order to accomplish this
goal, it was essential to fulfil four conditions – produce universally valid books,
create a general school for all youth, establish a universal advisory body, and cre-
ate a universal language in which the words would exactly express their objects
and which would ensure perfect understanding. These projects for the first time
reflected the concept of pansophy as means of universal reform, which Comenius
further elaborated for the rest of his life.

In the Service of Freedom, Peace and Humanity

An idea of special significance, which tied onto the Comenians’ debates that helped
to form the ideological model of the Via lucis, as well as onto older concepts,
was that of an international college. This world organization of scholars
was to associate pansophically-oriented researchers and guide them towards work
on pansophistic books and towards realization of common, humanity-wide ideals.
The chairman of this “assembly of light” was to reside in London and on the basis
of reports from scholars in different countries on progress made in the pansophic
efforts and on the course of public affairs in those countries, he was to draw up
a comprehensive annual report and send it to all countries, and thereby, in return,
guide the activities of the collaborating scholars. Their special task was to strive
in their respective countries for a uniform system of schools, based on the prin-
ciples of pansophy. This idea of regular collaboration of scholars, financed from
public funds, of their purposeful ties and activities guided by the same spirit for
understanding among nations, documented a new concept of intellectual activity
and joint responsibility of spiritual workers for the emancipation of their own na-
tions as well as of all humanity.

After his return to Central Europe, Comenius was fully preoccupied by the
coarse of events during the last period of the Thirty Years’ War and of the peace
congress in the Westphalian towns of Münster and Osnabrück. In this very decisive
moment the Swedish and German Lutheran diplomats accepted the actual situation
and thus also restoration on the conditions in the Habsburg monarchy as they
existed in 1624, that is the conditions instituted by the victorious Habsburgs
after the battle of the White Mountain. In the middle of the 17th century Europe
faced other problems and lost all interest in the Czech question. For Comenius
and the Czech exiles this was a crushing defeat.

Comenius went through a period of utter disenchantment and scepticism. After
the international recognition of the re-Catholicization of the Czech lands, he even felt doubtful for some time about the future of his own church which had been
greatly weakened and existed scattered in isolated groups in distant Euro-
pean countries. He parted with the church to which he tended his whole life
in his touching “Testament of the Dying Mother, the Unity of Brethren” (Książ
umírajcij matki, Jednoty bratrské). He bequeathed the Unity’s heritage to other
Protestant churches and pleaded with them for their mutual understanding and
unification. With captivating artistic power he expressed his undying love of his
country, language and nation which was to become the bearer of the Unity’s cul-
tural heritage. His visionary words – “I, too, trust the Almighty that once the
tempest of wrath has passed... thy sovereign rule shall return to thee, my Czech
countrymen!” – became a rallying call for the Czech nation, that added strength to it
until its restored independence and liberty.

In 1650, when the “Testament” was published in Leszno, the local synod de-
cided that the Unity of Brethren would not be dissolved. Comenius was chosen
to continue carrying the burden of maintaining its existence. He was to seek new
allies who would help the Brethren survive their exile and perhaps even return
to their homeland. The anti-Habsburg forces were then focussing their attention
on the Princesdom of Transylvania, a buffer state in the borderland between the
Habsburg realm and the Ottoman empire, and hoped that the conflict with France,
Transylvania, and other European powers could eventually force the Habsburgs
to make some concessions. With these considerations in mind Comenius decided
to move from Leszno to the Rákoczis residential town of Sárospatak where he
was offered the opportunity to reform the local school and apply in it his pan-
sophic system. However, in the backward, feudal situation prevailing in Transyl-
vania, he did not find favourable conditions for doing so. In spite of all his efforts,
he only succeeded in reforming the study of Latin in several classes, which was
adjusted to his language textbooks.

Comenius applied made up for the unsuccessful practical results of his educa-
tional work at Sárospatak by intensive literary work. He wrote several dozen
smaller and large books. Some of them elaborated his theory of a pansophic
school (Schola pansophica) and concept of culture (“Cultivation of the Spirit” –
De cultura ingeniorum), while others improved school instruction through greater
demonstrativeness, such as "The World in Pictures" (Orbis sensualium pictus),
or by using dramatic forms, such as those described in his book "School on the
Stage" (Schola ludus). In particular the two latter books, published in print in the
period 1656-1658, further enhanced Comenius' fame as the foremost educator
of the times. Nevertheless, Comenius' expectations about the role the Rákoczi
could play in the anti-Habsburg coalition failed to materialize either. Comenius
realized that in Transylvania he could not assert his intentions in either the political
or the pansophic spheres, and parted with the host country in 1654 with his
book "The Happiness of a Nation" (Genitis felicitas). In it he proposed profound
internal reforms in Transylvania and at the same offered a remarkably formulated
general theory of a nation, which is surprisingly close to the modern views. 39

Comenius' return to Leszno (1654) was marked by a deep crisis of the Polish
Kingdom and its battle for its very existence. At the time when Poland, his second
homeland, was invaded by the Swedish Protestant army which occupied a large
part of the country. In the course of the fighting, the Polish, Catholic-oriented
troops occupied Leszno and burned it to the ground as a "nest of (Protestant)
heretics". Although Comenius and his family saved their life and a few unpublish-
ished manuscripts, he lost in the flames of Leszno at the end of April 1656 all his
property, including his library and many unfinished manuscripts. Among others,
the flames engulfed the final drafts of his pansophic works, his sermons, and the
dictionary of the Czech language, to which he had devoted thirty years of his life.
Thus, at the age of sixty-four, Comenius again found himself practically penn-
less. It was Laurens de Geer, a rich Dutch entrepreneur, who invited Comenius to
come to Amsterdam in order to spend there the rest of his life in safety. Comenius
thus left for the metropolis he called the "glory of cities, the jewel of the Nether-
lands, and the pride of Europe". He went far away from his oppressed country in
order to expand his work and to address it to all of humanity.

Comenius was already such a well known personality of European science,
that the elders of Amsterdam received him with respect and immediately offered
him unusually generous assistance. The city granted him honorary professorship
at the Gymnasion Illustre, known as Athenaeum, which became the foundation
of the subsequent Amsterdam University. At the same time, the city council
provided a grant for the publication of already completed didactic works. The results
of Comenius' stay in Amsterdam were truly impressive. In terms of the number
of published books, that period represented the culmination of Comenius' en-
tire work, and some of the earlier projects were completed as well. A grandiose
project was the Opera didactica omnia, Comenius' assembled didactical works,
which was published by the Amsterdam city council with the date 1657 early
in 1658. This was not simply a new edition of older works on education, but a
specialy conceived complex of works, which documented Comenius' quest for
the best educational method and at the same time its concrete results. The author
arranged his works in chronological order and divided them into four parts of
which every part covered one of the principal periods of his work. In each of these
parts Comenius first offered a pedagogical and didactical explanation on the
theoretical level and then demonstrated the practical realization of the outlined

Illustration Nr. 4:
J. A. Comenius: Ksáň umírající matky, Jednoty bratrské (1650) – The Bequest
of the Unity of Brethren. Translated and edited by Matthew Spinka. Chicago,
The National Union of Czechoslovak Protestants in America 1940
COMENIUS: Journal of Euro-American Civilization, 2014, Nr. 1

objective in the form of textbooks and handbooks. After the publication of his great didactical works, the international reputation and authority of Comenius raised to its zenith. 40

Comenius believed that an opportunity to assert his pansophic and irrefutable principles in international relations was offered by the peace congress which met in Breda in 1667. Its purpose was to end the war between England and the Netherlands for trading privileges, colonies, and domination of the seas. Comenius addressed to the diplomats of both sides the appeal “The Messenger of Peace” (Angelus pacis) and at the age of seventy-five personally went to Breda. He had serious grounds for attaching such exceptional significance to the Breda congress. By then he had already reached the point where he envisioned Europe as an equitable system of states, from which he did not exclude either the Muslim Turks or the Catholics, including the Habsburgs and the Jesuits. In fact, he was considering the possibility of winning the collaboration of the Society of Jesus in the manuscript of “The Pleadings of Elijah” (Clamores Eliae) on which he was then working. The hub of this system was to be formed, naturally, by the Protestant countries and among them in particular the two greatest naval powers. Seen from this vantage point, the peace talks between England and the Netherlands appeared to Comenius not only as a means of ending a war, but also as a starting point of a reform of international relations. Comenius wanted to serve the reform with his entire work and offered to the negotiating diplomats those of his writings which formulated the fundamental principles of an equitable and just world system. These principles included a reconciliation of the churches on the basis of broad tolerance, creation of new international institutions, and regulation of the policy pursued by the European states in the chiliasm spirit. 41

Comenius—the Messenger of Peace—addressed the negotiating countries with concrete proposals which were to launch the process of reform. He appealed to the English, the Dutch, just as the French and the Swedes, to conclude an alliance and jointly defend freedom for all, because such coalition would be indomitable. Comenius remained aloof from their contradictory interests because he partly did not realize them and partly considered them a secondary matter. However, this lack of understanding, could not, at least in the long-term perspective, obscure the remarkable clearvoyance with which Comenius criticized the dark sides of the emerging bourgeois society and the politicians of the two most advanced countries of Europe. When he did so, he certainly did not want any return to the past, but a purposeful elimination of the already obvious or still only suspected shortcomings of modern humanity. Against a one-sided pursuit of profit he placed an appropriate distribution of material values among all needy people with funds available for the poor and the orphans, as well as for the educational, cultural and religious needs of society. Against monopolization of maritime navigation and markets he suggested as a desirable trend of economic progress guarantees for free transportation lanes and trade opportunities for all nations. He also rejected efforts to gain hegemony of power that led to wars which are not only damaging, but, given an equitable system of nations and states, also useless. Finally, he also understood the prospects of the just emerging colonialism. “We, the Christian

Illustration Nr. 5:
J. A. Comenius: Orbis sensualium pictus (1658). Latin-German version: Nuremberg 1769
world, Europe, do not constitute the entire humankind, since besides us there exist hundreds of nations scattered over the face of the entire Earth", and therefore it was necessary to remember also those nations and offer them the positive values of European civilization rather than merciless exploitation.  

The congress in Breda indeed resulted in a rapprochement between the two naval powers, but could not realize such a grandiose peace project. Comenius' project was too far ahead of the time of its origin. It must have appeared as sheer Utopia even in the subsequent centuries. Nevertheless, his humanity-wise concept of peace, creation of safeguards in international relations through international institutions, and his efforts to bridge differences by peaceful argumentation became a great inspiration for the future. The diplomats at Breda acted as they deemed useful for their interests and quite ignored the Czech thinker. Comenius became a true "messenger of peace" for much later generations which discovered how right he was in his insight.  

It was only these generations which were able to understand his heroic struggle for a concept of a peaceful reform of the world. However, besides his moral example, Comenius left them yet another heritage, his "General Consultation on an Improvement of All Things Human" (De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica), in which he explained in detail how to realize this far-reaching reform.  

His immense desire that the "General Consultation" should illuminate the road to the future did not leave Comenius until his death. Exhausted by his advanced age and infirmity, but also by useless polemics with his opponents, Comenius returned to his principal work on his death bed, bothered by thoughts that he had not managed to prepare it for print himself. He beseeched his son Daniel to assemble the manuscripts, arrange and edit them, and attend to their comprehensive publication. Thinking of his lost homeland and of the future generations, of "the storms sweeping over Europe", Comenius died in Amsterdam on November 15, 1670. A week later his body was laid to rest in the small church of the Walloon Reformed Church in nearby Naarden.  

**General Consultation on an Improvement of All Things Human**

In Comenius, the Czech branch of the Unity of Brethren lost its last bishop, and the Czech exiles, scattered already for half a century throughout Europe, their greatest representative. However, his work continued to live and the "General Consultation" continued to follow the calvary of its author. Daniel Komenšky and the Czech scholar Kristián Nigrin did indeed arrange the preserved manuscripts, but these were never published. Fortunately, the manuscript did not disappear and found its way to the archives in Halle an der Saale. A vague knowledge of its existence survived and in the 18th century it was pointed out by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, a great admirer of Comenius. However, in the 19th and the first third of the 20th centuries, the valuable manuscript could not be found. Finally, the "General Consultation" was discovered by the Ukrainian philosopher and philologist Dmytro Chizhevski (Čyževský). His fortunate find, announced to the scientific world in 1935, made it possible to complement partial editions, prepared still by Comenius (1656–1662) and by his later admirers, with extremely important manuscripts. Thanks to Czech, German and other Comenians, Comenius' greatest work had been gradually studied, investigated and interpreted, so that in 1966, the Academia Publishing House of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in Prague could finally publish the complete Latin text. This "first edition" was therefore quite belated, but it appeared in an age which already understood the significance of the "General Consultation". This is why interest in Comenius' key work has not ceased since then. It is being translated into different languages and is being studied by philosophers, historians, theologians, educators and other scholars in many countries in order to find inspiration for the present as well as for the future.  

Academia's two-volume edition of De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica has made public a text which came into being with utmost difficulty. Its first version, produced at the peak of Comenius' middle age, was lost in burning Leszno in 1656. It was an irreparable loss for him. "We are advancing slowly," he wrote in January 1657, "because what had been prepared for print was destroyed by fire and the pages pulled out of the flames or found with friends are unfinished or piecemeal. Everything must thus return to the anvil of the mind, but the frailty of old age cannot accomplish as the energy of youth."  

Nevertheless, and in spite of the detractors caused by other tasks, Comenius accomplished a great deal of work on his "General Consultation". He rewrote some parts as much as twenty-times in order to be as perfect as possible in expressing his ideas in the most effective literary manner. He did not reach his desired goal, unfortunately. Many things remained unsaid and some parts do indeed reflect the fatigue of old age. On the whole, however, Comenius produced a work of extraordinary ideological and literary grandeur.  

Comenius conceived his "General Consultation" as a monumental architectural work where everything aimed at the basic objective - enclosing past development with a vaulting of universal reform. He subordinated its individual components as well as each of the seven parts to the overall impact of the entire work which was to launch the process of reform. What he wanted was not a literary form of a Utopia, but a project which would serve as an introduction to a real discourse on reforms or to a general peace congress. He thought that such discourse - or negotiations - could take place already at the ecumenical talks in Poland in the 1640s, or, possibly, two decades later, at Breda, or some time in the future.  

Comenius employed all his facilities as philosopher, educator, theologian, and preacher, and projected into his work his extensive knowledge, unusually broad outlook, as well as his bitter personal experiences. He addressed the reader's reason and sentiments, referring to all authorities that could support his reform intentions. He did not want to display his originality to be admired, but, on the contrary, underlined the links with the millenial tradition ranging from the Antiquity and the Old and New Testaments through pre-reform Christianity to the great thinkers of the Renaissance, Reformation, and humanism. However, with his accent on moral precepts and calls for an active endeavour to correct human society, he tied primarily onto his immediate forerunners, on the first, the Czech
reformation, on the revolutionary pathos of the Hussite movements of the 15th century, and on the ironic heritage of the Unity of Brethren. He tried to give the final shape to this heritage in the belief that his small church would disappear but its heritage would be taken up by a “Great Unity” of not merely Protestants and Christians, but of all people in general, that from the upheaval of his days would emerge a human society cleansed by its suffering and newly organized under the principles of peace and justice.18

In the introduction to the “General Consultation”, Comenius addressed intellectuals and those in power with a reminder of their tremendous responsibility for improving the existing, dismal state of affairs. He did not hide the fact that appeals for reform had been repeatedly made in the past but without any result. In his opinion, this negative experience should not lead to scepticism and passivity. Differences of view cannot remain forever an insurmountable barrier, and concern that the final objective may not be attained should not overshadow hope for at least a partial and gradual improvement. However, it is necessary to begin with the awareness that a change for the better cannot be attained by force but only by mutual conviction and by search for a common road. People should look for what binds them and leave their differences for the time being until future development may settle them. A quest for a sincere understanding of truth should convince and win over those who at first will not agree.

The actual introduction to the “General Consultation” is the first part of Comenius’ reform work Panegoria (Universal Awakening), in which he proceeds from the premise that the disturbed society of the 17th century is markedly manifested in three basic fields of human activity, which do not meet their purpose. Philosophy or, in the broader sense, science do not reconcile man with the objects surrounding him, religion does not lead to harmony of conscience with God, and politics cannot ensure peace among people. Politics in particular suffers from great defects. It should settle the contradiction between man’s natural desire for freedom and voluntariness on the one hand, and the need for unity and order on the other hand. However, contemporary politicians lack the intellectual and moral qualifications for mastering the extremely exacting art of guiding society and at the same time respecting human freedom. Not understanding their tasks, rulers act arbitrarily, treating people like cattle, and instead of safeguarding peace and order, are engaged in petty power conflicts and wage unnecessary wars. Philosophy, too, has similarly failed in that instead of guiding people to true understanding and knowledge, it presents for belief distorting dogmas, while religion does not encourage people to work effectively for goodness, but leads to fanaticism and intolerance.

However – as Comenius firmly believed – resignation is not inherent in man, but rather a constant aspiration for improvement. Since all past reform efforts have failed – precisely because of their partiality – it is necessary to strive for a universal reform. The time is propitious because the dynamic development of society has created the essential conditions. Growth of manufacture, commerce and transport at the threshold of the Early Modern era did away with the former isolation of small groups of people and regions. A new way of life produced a natural community that overcame the boundaries of individual countries and continents. “If then we are all citizens of a single world, what prevents us from ..., hoping that we shall all become a single society, well ordered and truly and properly bound by the same sciences, laws, and religion?”, asks Comenius in the introduction to his “General Consultation”, and offers this preliminary answer: if the desire for improvement is inherent in man, on the theoretical level the road to a reform of human society is open. What is now necessary, of course, is that the learned and the powerful of this world should get together, especially those who are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs. For it is their task to seek ways of a practical reform and of attaining universal harmony.

In the quest for reform, methodological guidance was to be provided by the second part of the “General Consultation”, entitled Panaenigma (Universal Enlightenment). Proceedings from his earlier Via lucis (The Way of Light), Comenius showed in it how the growth of humanity’s cultural level increased the intensity of the light which steadily forced out the darkness of ignorance. While our early ancestors knew only the lower classes of this school of civilization, the subsequent generations also passed through its secondary school, and the people of the present era stand at the threshold of the academy. Their task is to examine the sources of this light, which include nature, the human mind, and the Holy Scripture; however, in order to win for the reform process also adherents of other religions, the Jews and the Muslims in particular, it was necessary to know thoroughly not only the Old and the New Testaments but also the Koran. Comenius’ ecumenism was obviously exceeding the bounds of Christianity and was aiming at humanity as a whole.

The process of tearing down the barriers deflecting the light of civilization was to be assisted by the third, fourth, and fifth parts of the “General Consultation”, devoted to things, the mind, and the language. Comenius tried to explain the structure of the universe and the findings relating to it in his book Panaenigma (Universal Wisdom); he himself called it also Pantaenigma to indicate that his intent was not a simple description of things but an assessment of knowledge about them and their interrelationship. This large volume is one of the less comprehensive from the literary point of view, and yet it is the key to the entire work. The author selected from the immense amount of knowledge what he considered to be essential for systematic education and especially what expressed the relationship between nature and man. In doing so, he depicted man as a creator who, while remaining dependent on nature, modified it by his work and gave it a new purpose and goal. Besides technical skills he also acquired other abilities, in particular self-dominion and administration of interpersonal affairs and relations. Thus he built on natural foundations a world of human labour, morality, and spirit.

It was precisely in this sphere, that it was most essential to cultivate the mind, which is the topic of the next part entitled Panaenigma (Universal Education). It sums up Comenius’ lifelong experience and knowledge in the area of school and educational reform. However, he subordinated individual ideas and suggestions to a grander design and drew up the project of an all-encompassing system of education. He proceeded from his belief that human nature was good but had to
be subjected to purposeful education. Gradual education, which was a process of gradual illumination of the human mind, was taking place both in the life of the individual and in the entire history of humankind. Truly good education could settle the conflict between every individual’s desire for freedom and the need of an orderly social system, because it led the individual towards voluntarily advancing to the common goal of humanity. An essential prerequisite of success was a universal education of all people, irrespective of their property, social position, or nationality. It was precisely the availability of education to all members of a nation and to all nations, which promised for the future a uniform approach to cultural values. Education permeating man’s entire life, from the preparatory, prenatal period to late age, would inject harmony into the life of every individual and would lead him towards participation in the process of building a united, reconciled and harmonious world.

Comenius considered verbal communication to be an important instrument of understanding among nations. In the 17th century he was not alone in realizing the uncontrollable retreat of Latin from its earlier position of universal language of the learned. As an educator he knew quite well how difficult it was to learn this dead language and that even earlier, Latin could not become the instrument of education of all people. Therefore, in the part entitled Panglottia (Universal Language) he considered the possibility of creating an artificial language, and included it in the system of reform. He wished such a language to combine the advantages of Hebrew, Greek and Latin, as well as of a number of living languages, ranging from English and German to Czech and even Turkish. The new language was to be most lucid and easily learned by logically combining things, terms, and words, and would not be burdened by any irregularities. While Comenius proposed some guiding principles for compiling an artificial language, he did not intend to realize the project himself because he felt that devising a universal language was possible only after pansophy had been completed, and, in addition, he preferred that an international group of learned people should do the work. He would have liked to see the realization of such a universally acceptable language which would facilitate quick communication, exchange of cultural values between nations, and brotherhood of all people. He wished that “all who meet anywhere could like brothers and sisters . . . greet each other and by mutually addressing each other inform each other of all that is necessary”.

Comenius did suspect that difficulties might arise in the application of a uniform language once it was created, and therefore also proposed other options. The most impressive of them was his humanistic appeal to learn and develop all national languages which were not to be suppressed even by a possibly successful panglottia—the universal language. His objective was to achieve such an advance of every language, which would make it possible to translate into it fully all pansophic works. He did not have in mind only the nations of Europe, and constantly thought of all other non-European nations and tribes as well. He considered it a natural duty of the Europeans who so far only exploited the other continents to help spiritually enrich and cultivate the less advanced languages. However, he urged them not to act as domineering teachers but as fellow-pupils, and they were
in particular to learn thoroughly the languages of the overseas nations and thereby promote mutual understanding. Whether on the basis of a universal language, or through mutual learning of other national languages, this form of communication was to improve substantially, and in the process of bringing different nations closer to each other was to help break the barriers of the boundaries between countries and continents.

In the preceding parts of his “General Consultation”, dealing with the penetration of the light of civilization into the dark labyrinths of things, the mind, and languages, Comenius paved the way for an outline of a universal reform of the world. In the key part of the “General Consultation”, entitled Panorthosia, meaning universal reform, he discussed a new philosophy or education, a new religion, and new civilization. He was convinced that all these spheres of man’s spiritual activity had to be based on a universal concept of humanity and had to be safeguarded by worldwide institutions. The moving forces behind his project were his certainty that by nature, man was endowed with an “insatiable desire for enlightenment”, and his chiliasm in the institution of a “new age” which had to be systematically prepared.

Comenius considered the questions of reform on the theoretical, practical, as well as applicability levels. He reached the conclusion that changes for the better could not be attained by force or by hegemony, but solely through conviction and voluntary acceptance by all. It was necessary to seek what was uniting rather than dividing individuals and nations, to realize the relative nature of truth, and to find contradictory assertions a core acceptable to both parties in dispute. In the theological sphere this meant doing away with dogmas and building a new religion superior to the older religious systems and founded only on rational truths, the authority of the Holy Scriptures, and firm moral discipline. It was precisely such a religion, Comenius believed, that by its rational content could win a universal acceptance by Christians, Jews, Muslims, and pagans. This would give rise to a universal church whose institutional centre would be a world consistory. Similarly, the new philosophy – identical with panosophy – would also be accepted precisely because it would encompass all the wisdom acquired through the senses, by reason, or by revelation. Its institutional safeguard would be an assembly of light, in other words an international academy of education and science, which would strive for the spread of uniform education throughout the world.

Comenius remarkably elaborated his idea of new politics, of a reformed administration of public affairs. Its main task would be the institution and maintenance of lasting justice, order, and peace. This would be the objective for which institutions at all levels would collaborate, and on the worldwide scale it would be pursued by an international peace court, or world senate, which would be furnished with great jurisdiction. It would attend not only to the maintenance of peace among states, but also to the maintenance of order and justice in individual states, because the two are inseparably linked. Therefore, too, the world senate would supervise national and local courts of justice and laws, so that their decisions and provisions would not run counter to the superior, universally human principles and universal law which would derive only from natural law and the laws of God. Interhuman relations would be corrected through a reform of all the components of public administration, involving a definition of their rights and duties relating to the social order and publicly beneficial work.

The same objective would be followed by a reform of the family, every member of which should live in the future in a disciplined, modest and diligent manner in the spirit of the tradition of the Unity of Brethren and in harmony with Calvinist ideals. From this ensued the duty of every adult person to work for personal, family, and community interests, but also the duty of public administration to provide everybody with the opportunity to obtain an appropriate employment. Therefore, people should not be classed according to the feudal Estates but according to the role they played in society by their work. Since “the people’s welfare should be the supreme law of any republic and any kingdom”; officials should be subject to public control in order to prevent abuse of their authority; if necessary, they would be deposed. Similarly, brutal and immoral people occupying leading posts should be removed, just as sycophants and informers who are “the most malignant kind of people”.

Comenius’ project goes into considerable detail in many respects, including ideas about the way people would eat and dress in the new society. However, this penchant for detail, typical of the times, does not basically disturb the general character of his work. All the concrete details were actually meant as proposals to be dealt with by a world consistory that was to meet in the foreseeable future at Venice, a place that was easily accessible to representatives of not only European but also Asian and African nations. The consistory was to bring together statesmen, theologians and scholars, who would discuss the suggestions contained in the “General Consultation”; in the spirit of a free consent of all the participants, the council was to agree on the means of instituting and preserving unity and peace. The measures they adopted were then to be implemented not only by the three main world institutions (the international court of peace, the world academy, and the world consistory), but also by bodies furnished with executive powers, democratically elected from all nations, and active on regional, continental, and worldwide levels. A world coordinating assembly was to meet every ten years, which would hold its sessions successively in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, so that the equality of all the continents would not be disturbed even in this respect.

However, a world of peace and prosperity could be created only by a common effort of all nations and especially of their representatives. Therefore, it was they – statesmen, scholars, and theologians – who bore immense responsibility towards all humanity. Comenius urgently recalled this responsibility in the final part of the “General Consultation”, entitled Panorthosia (Universal Encouragement). He stressed that at the time when the great majority of mankind was living in spiritual poverty and material want, subsidiary interests and petty quarrels had to swept away in order to permit the solution of the most important problems. After all, there was no greater and nobler task for all learned people than to seek ways of a thorough reform of human affairs.49
Comenius’ grandiose vision of a happy future of the human race proceeded mostly from speculative considerations and was encouraged by his chiliasm belief in an early coming of the kingdom of Christ on Earth. Nevertheless, Comenius was able to overcome this determinant ensuing from the period in which he lived. Proceeding from the European cultural tradition and with a rare openmindedness to all human values, he created an image of hopeful historical development. After a life filled with disillusionment, he offered to mankind an optimistic prospect of advancement towards peace and unity through a democratic system of interhuman relations and equality of nations. This prospect, which by far transcended Comenius’ own times, has lost nothing of its attraction even at the beginning of the third millennium.

NOTES:


2 One of the American organisations which have associated themselves most fully with Comenius’ agenda, is the Comenius Foundation. An Independent Nonprofit Organization Using Media for Promote Faith, Learning, and Love, Lewesville, NC, which expressed its relationship to the Czech educator in the following words: “John Amos Comenius was an innovative 17th century Moravian Bishop who made unusually productive contributions to the world. His ideas completely transformed education. He was a visionary, advocating equal education of men and women, rich and poor alike. Comenius also was the first person to use pictures in textbooks. He believed that learning and spiritual growth should be woven together – especially in the teaching of children. Comenius Foundation shares the ideas and values of this revolutionary educator and spiritual leader, as it seeks to weave meaningful spiritual values into its programs and projects.” http://comeniusfoundation.org (29.09.2013).

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1861_Czech%E2%80%93Bavarian_Border_Treaty (28.09.2013). One is, after all, also reminded of Comenius in the name of a small American town Komenský (a town in Jackson County, Wisconsin), in the educational project Comenius Programme of the European Union, in the names of universities (Brašlava, Slovak; Prague, Czech Republic) and university buildings (e. g. Moravian College, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania), higher educational symposia (Salem College, North Carolina), numerous high schools and primary schools, etc.

4 The most recent synthetic work on that period has been written by Petr VOREL, Velké dějiny zemí Koruny české. VII (1526–1618), Prague–Litomyšl 2005; it also lists a most comprehensive bibliography.

5 Literature on the religious history of the Czech Lands in the 16th century is rather extensive. Among the most important works I can suggest at least: Ferdinand HREJS, Česká konfese, její vznik, podstatu a dějiny, Prague 1912; Rudolf ŘÍČAN, Dějiny Jednoty bratrské, Prague 1957 (in German: Die Böhmischen Brüder. Ihr Ursprung und ihre Geschichte, Berlin 1961); Jarold K. ZEMAN, The Anabaptists and the Czech Brethren in Moravia(1525–1628), Hague–Paris 1969; Craig D. ATWOOD, The Theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius, University Park, PA 2009. A new perspective on the development of Utraquism in the Czech Lands was presented Zdeněk


11 František HÝBL, Jan Amos KomenskÝ a PÝrov, PÝrov 1974. A modern biography of Žerotín, an exceptionally well-educated aristocrat, who played an important role in the life of Comenius, was written by Tomáš KNOZ, Karel st. za Žerotín. Don Quijote v labýrintru světa. Prague 2008.


13 M. BLEKASTAD, Comenius, pp. 43 sq.


19 Antonín ŠKARKA-Josef SKALSÝ, Jan Amos Komenský v Bìblie Trienného, Havišákov Brod 1963.


36 Fritz DICKMANN, Der Westfälische Frieden, Münster 1959; Bedicha ŠINDLÉR, Veřejný řád a česká otečka, Prague 1968. - Even after the Peace of Westphalia (1648), Comenius did not abandon all his hopes and supported the preparations of a Czech exile, Colonel Václav Sedovský of Sloupsko, for resistance against the Habsburgs, which was materialised with expected, yet never fulfilled British assistance (1654-1655); cf. Jan KUMPERA - Josef HEJNÍC, Poslední pokus českého exilu kolem Komenského o zvrat v zemích České koruny, Brno-Uherský Brod 1988.

37 J. A. KOMENSKÝ, Kniha umírající mašky, Jednoty bratrské, kterým v národě svém a obzvláštnosti své dokonávají svěřené sobě od Boha poklady mezi syny a dědice své rozděluje, Lesno 1650.


42 I. A. COMENIUS, Angelus pacis ad legatos pacis, Anglos et Belgas, Bredam exsul, indique ad omnes Christianos per Europam, et mox ad omnes populos per orbem totum mittendus, ut se sistent, bellergerar desistat, pacisque Principi Christo, paeoni gentibus jam legaturum, locum faciant (1667); Metodé KLUČKA (ed.), Gentium salutis reparator, Comenii de pacis institutio et culturae universali pro pacis et beneficis cogitationes, Prague 1956.

43 A number of contributions on this theme are included in the monumental publication by Werner KORTHASE - Sigurd HAUFF - Andreas FRITSCH (eds.), Comenius und der Weltfriede / Comenius and World Peace, Berlin 2005.


49 In addition to introductory studies to the editions of "General Consultation", several other studies have been published which provide a complex analysis of this most important work of J.A. Comenius, namely Jiřina POPELOVÁ, Jana Amose Komenského cesta k věděspráv, Prague 1958; Johannes SCHURR, Comenius. Eine Einführung in die Consultatio Catholica, Passau 1981. Cf. also Dagmar CAPKOVA, Myślielsko-vychovatelsky odkaz Jana Amose Komenského, Prague 1987; Karl Ernst NPKOV, Johann Amos Comenius. Die umfassende Vision: Theologie, Politik und Pädagogik für den gotgebunen Weltfrieden, in: K. E. Nipkow, Der schwere Weg zum Frieden. Geschichte

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