

Wouter Goris
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Gewalt sei ferne den Dingen!

Contemporary Perspectives on the Works
of John Amos Comenius

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Wouter Goris • Meinert A. Meyer
Vladimír Urbánek (Hrsg.)

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Contemporary Perspectives on
the Works of John Amos Comenius

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We hope that this publication is regarded as a good example of European networking and that it makes at least a small contribution to Comenius' ultimate objective: Absit violentia rebus!

June 2015
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with the editorial assistance of Vladimír Urbánek, Prague



Reproduction 1.1 The peace emblem of Comenius (© Czech Academy of Sciences)

Abstract

The leitmotif for both this introduction and the present publication was the identification of pansophic thinking in Comenius' works and, at the same time, the search for answers to the question of whether contemporary thinking in the light of global crises may profit from the works of Comenius, and whether we can practise pansophic thinking, like Comenius did, in order to profit from analogies. However, we do not know whether Comenius' era and our present time really stand in analogous relation to each other, nor do we have a clear understanding of what we mean when we speak of ›analogies‹. So what we can do now and what we should do is to honestly characterise the present state of Comenius re-

search. In our introduction, we therefore present a description of the seven parts of this publication, viewing them from the perspective of combined European and worldwide Comenius research, and we finish our evaluation with an appeal for intensified co-operation by the Chairman of the German Comenius Society, Uwe Voigt. The appeal is simultaneously meant to act as an incentive for the establishment of a European Comenius network which, in turn, invites thinking about a global network.

Zusammenfassung

Leitmotiv für diese Einführung und für die ganze vorliegende Publikation sollte die Identifikation pansophischen Denkens im Werk des Comenius und parallel dazu die Bestimmung gegenwärtigen Denkens angesichts globaler Krisen aus pansophischer Perspektive sein. Der Zustand der heutigen internationalen Comenius-Forschung entspricht natürlich dieser Aufgabe nur in engen Grenzen. Wir gehen aber trotzdem davon aus, dass es – *in the long run* – möglich sein sollte, einen internationalen Forschungsstand zu sichern, der zu Empfehlungen im Hinblick auf die globalisierten gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse führen kann, wie dies auch Comenius für seine Zeit und in den damaligen Grenzen getan hat. Angesagt ist deshalb die ehrliche Charakterisierung des gegenwärtigen Zustands der Comenius-Forschung. Die sieben Sektionen der Publikation werden in unserer Einführung aus dieser Perspektive vorgestellt. Abschließend verweisen wir auf ein Statement des Vorsitzenden der Deutschen Comenius-Gesellschaft, Uwe Voigt. Er legt dar, warum es an der Zeit ist, ein europäisches Comenius-Netzwerk zu etablieren und auch über globale Perspektiven der Kooperation nachzudenken.

1 Introduction to the introduction

In October 2013, the Comenius Museum in Naarden, the Netherlands, organised an international conference on the writings of John Amos Comenius, together with the German Comenius Society, and in co-operation with the Museum Jan Amos Comenius in Uherský Brod and the Pedagogical Museum of J. A. Comenius in Prague. The leitmotif was to find keys to solving contemporary problems on the basis of a re-analysis of Comenius' writings.

One of the crucial questions we discussed was whether and to what extent the world Comenius lived in is comparable to the present world. In other words: We asked whether the situation then and today can be seen as analogous. The adequacy of such a kind of questioning may be doubted, and it is no wonder that we find both supporters and critics in the papers assembled in this publication concerning such an idea. Besides, we have problems defining what we are talking about when we speak of global crises. But let us attempt to formulate some less abstract sub-theses:

- We live in a world without peace, and this was the same for Comenius. And still Comenius' world without peace looked very different from our world today. Comenius' emblem – see the reproduction above – may thus be a first hint for identifying the objective of a peaceful world.
- The world today is full of economic, cultural and political conflict and the same holds for Comenius and his time. But the economy, culture and politics were quite different in Comenius' world.
- We are confronted with worldwide migration in the light of unrest and civil war, and the same applies to Comenius himself as a refugee, the Bohemian Brethren, and his time in general. But to what extent can we see analogous living conditions for refugees then and now?

Of central importance for the adequacy of the comparison is Comenius' practice of thinking, which he called »pansophy«. This thinking focusses on the whole of the world, thus relating everything to everything else on an *a priori* basis; it assumes a uniting order of this world pre-supposing a system of universal ideas; it does not accept the world as it is, but constructs it as it should be.¹ Our central problem thus was the adequacy or inadequacy of comparing the present time with Comenius' world *from the pansophic perspective*.

If the problems of our time are indeed comparable to those Comenius faced, then we should try to find out whether pansophic thinking may help to solve the problems we encounter today. However, the present state of Comenius research does not allow, at least not from our point of view, adequate advice to be given to solve today's challenges. But neither the pro-thesis – we live in analogous living conditions, nor the contra-thesis – that Comenius lived in a different world, are easily proven, and this means we can neither assume a positive nor a negative answer to this question today. Let us give just one example for the adequacy of the negative answer, from the historical point of view: Since the late 19th century, many authors have tried to find parallels between the era of Comenius and modern times, and in the post-World War II period this was especially intensified in Marxist historiography and Comeniology. Among others, see the many works by Josef Polišenský (e. g. Polišenský 1989: 49–54). From our point of view, such a search for analogies between the 17th and 20th centuries can become anachronistic and therefore unacceptable. One example supporting the adequacy of a positive answer may be the transposition of Comenius' conception of general education – *omnes omnia omnino* – into contemporary models of general education, e. g. that of Wolfgang Klafki (among others, see Klafki 1985/1991: 52–54).

Comenius visualised his hope concerning the fate of mankind with the emblem which he himself called his *symbolon*, and which we have reproduced above. The picture is meant to represent the cycle of nature: The sun is shining on meadows and forests, rain is falling from a cloud, and a river is supplying water to the earth. Above

1 For more information, see Woldring in this publication.

that landscape we see the sun and seven stars. Around the picture, there is space for two sentences: »Omnia sponte fluent. Absit violentia rebus«, »Everything may flow smoothly. Violence be absent of things«. The picture is intended to show what God's un-diluted world (»heile Welt«) looks like, and that mankind should not destroy it.² The picture and the two appending sentences stand for Comenius' peace mission. They signify a state without turmoil, with order as its foundation and security as its fruit, and – at least for Comenius – all of this based on Christ's Sermon on the Mount, with God in need of human action.³ This then is what Comenius stands for: He combines theologically founded optimism with a solid appreciation of scientific insight, and he brings in global dimensions of problem identification and problem solving.

Many contemporary thinkers – philosophers, historians, sociologists, educators and others – assume that the objective of the absence of violence is a great illusion. Comenius, however, was optimistic in this respect. In following him we would have to try to construct a vision of problem solving as described and defended in his *Opus magnum*, the *Consultatio catholica*, the all-encompassing consultation, and to do this even if we do not accept Comenius' theological assumptions. He demands that only after we have shown our solutions to be wrong do we have sound reason to skip them (Comenius, Pampaedia 1960: 10).

In the next section of this introduction, we explore whether Comenius' pansophic maxim can be used to evaluate the state of research in those contemporary fields which were also his fields.

2 Evaluative rules for reflecting on the state of research in Comenius studies

We start this section of our introduction with examples of research that remind us to be careful in our assumptions.

Empirical research: As members of the Comenius community of scholars, we take it for granted that Comenius' schoolbooks *Informatorium der Mutterschul*, *Janua linguarum reserata*, *Orbis sensualium pictus* etc. were broadly accepted and highly influential in Comenius' time and later on. But we have to put evidence about the long-standing popularity and impact of Comenius' textbooks (Pilz 1967; Červenka 1959) into the context of a complex and more detailed picture of which books were used for education. Take a research project on schoolbooks sponsored by the German Research Foundation (Hellekamps et al. 2012) as an example. What was read in the ›pre-

2 Compare Fritsch 2005: 119.

3 Compare Ki Sook Kim in this publication. She analyses the complex pansophic meaning expressed by the emblem. Cf. also an analysis of Comenius' emblem in the context of the period's emblematics by Konečný 1996: 283–305.

modern classroom« was not Comenius' »Orbis pictus«, as Comeniologists may assume, but a variety of other books.

Pansophy: Our second example has to do with the importance or irrelevance of pansophic thinking. We refer to an article by Robert Ulich, a German-born, distinguished Harvard professor of education and the author of a standard publication on the history of education (Ulich 1945). His article in the Macmillan Encyclopedia of Philosophy (1967) reveals – as we see it – a great difference from what Comenius meant pansophic research and theory construction to be. Ulich describes the works of Comenius thus:

In his writings, which range from such topics as theology, politics, philosophy, and science (as he understood science) to linguistics and education, as well as in his personal life, he combined such contradictory strands of thought as world immanence, and world transcendence, interest in science and dependence on false prophets, progressivism and apocalyptic expectations. In order to understand this mingling of ideas, we must project ourselves into the baroque age, when so many illustrious minds were wandering from one extreme to another. Thus, despite scholastic and Calvinist influences during his years of study, Comenius' concept of the divine regime contained a notable admixture of Neoplatonic, evolutionary, mystical, and pantheistic ideas. God was for him the God of Nature as well as the God of Heaven. However, all these pantheistic leanings did not shake the foundations of Comenius' faith, and throughout his life he clung to the fundamentals of the Christian dogma. Nevertheless, it was the cosmic curiosity in Comenius' religion which opened his mind to the unfolding of the natural and humanistic sciences. Yet Comenius lacked any real understanding of science in the Newtonian sense (Ulich 1967, 146).⁴

Understanding Ulich's astonishment and critique presupposes an understanding of his own reality, namely the 1960s, and the related pedagogical conceptions of that time. We assume that, among other points, Ulich took for granted that a conception of the whole of education (»Pampaedia«) was not possible on a scientific level. It should be stressed, however, that Ulich could not have known the first complete edition of Comenius' *Consultatio catholica* which appeared in 1966. He was also unaware of Jan Patočka's ground-breaking studies (Patočka 1997, 1999) on the development of Comenius' philosophical thought, including his pansophy and the concept of universal improvement of human affairs (*emendatio rerum humanarum*), which were published in the 1950s and 1960s and opened up a new epoch in the interpretation of Comenius' pansophic project. In the light of our critique of Ulich's approach, we should not forget that the self-reflection of Comeniologists may have positive effects similar

4 Newton lived from 1643 to 1727. It is no surprise then that Comenius lacked an understanding of Newtonian science.

to criticism from the outside. In their paper, Júlia Ivanovičová, Katarína Račeková and Anna Klimentová show that there was a massive tendency in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia (and in all other parts of the Soviet world) to suppress the theological side of Comenius' work.⁵

Progress in history: Our hopes concerning an improvement in everyday Comenius research should integrate the critique produced by researchers who cannot be called Comeniologists. Let us consider the position of Dietrich Benner. He is one of the leading German researchers in the fields of philosophy and history of education. Benner sees a complex, principally open opposition of *affirmative* and *non-affirmative* conceptions of education, and refers, among others, to Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher's educational theory as a warrant for his position. What Schleiermacher demands is a fundamental suspension of each and every kind of affirmative education on the basis of extra-educational positive positions. Benner writes:

From the point of view of educational theory [...], affirmative education is unacceptable, because what is to be learned with insight can never be learned by a mere act of affirmation. A positive position cannot be understood via the learning subject's affirmation. What is needed is the learning subject's acquisition of something that at the beginning is alien and strange. Only what is already understood or at least known can be accepted, and this means that a concept of educational activity that renders justice to the subject's learning achievement is not possible on the fundament of affirmative [...] educational theories. (Benner 2001: 144, authors' translation; cp. Koch 2003 and Benner/Stępkowski 2012)

As we see it, Benner's thesis is relevant to our project: We have to find out whether it implies a devaluation of Comenius' works, and this means that we have to ascertain whether his pansophic thinking which relates everything to everything classifies his educational programme as affirmative in the negative sense. The systematic problem thus opens a wide field for historical and at the same time systematic educational research. Comenius research should be organised and done in such a way that Benner's systematic question does not get lost.⁶

Authors writing on Comenius have over and over again arrived at unwarranted assumptions about what his works meant and how they are to be understood.⁷ Of course, any serious research should be critical and reflective of its possible limitations, and no doubt the most important Comenius researchers of the 20th century such as

5 Interested readers are also invited to look at the paper by Hans van der Linde who felt embarrassed when he saw the selective strategy of authors of the former German Democratic Republic in their presentation of Komenský as the great European educator.

6 See Meyer in this publication for further information.

7 Take as an example Gustav Adolf Lindner, school inspector (»Schulrat«) and editor of Comenius' *Didactica magna* (5th edition 1907). His introduction to the book says much more about the Neo-Herbertians of the »Kaiserreich« which Lindner belonged to than about the didactics of Comenius.

Ján Kvačala, Dmytro Chyzhevsky, Jan Patočka or Klaus Schaller, to name just a few, were aware that Comeniology should not be closed off in ›splendid isolation‹, and that a dialogue should emerge with various disciplines and research trends within a truly interdisciplinary field. We should therefore look for critical colleagues who do not belong to the community of Comenius researchers, and our reference to Dietrich Benner can be understood this way. In such an endeavour, we can imagine considering points such as the following ones:

- Critical colleagues may claim – parallel to Robert Ulich, but with better arguments – that pansophic thinking is ›baroque‹, thereby implying that Comenius' way of doing research is inadequate for our time.
- Critical colleagues may claim that pansophic thinking is misleading because the *quest for non-violence* may motivate researchers to find harmony where there is only the illusion of it.
- They may claim that pansophic thinking will foster a world in which anything goes; however, if anything does go, there will be no state of research to be defended, there will be no place for the distinction between *good research* and *bad research*.
- They may further point to the fact that each generation will have to *detect anew* the problems they are faced with, and to relate them to their evaluation of Comenius' works.
- These colleagues may agree that fostering Comeniology is a good way to improve quality, but at the same time it will foster a tendency to remain in one's own *ivory tower*.

In addition to the caveats listed above, there should be a consensus that local or national restrictions are unacceptable in research. We therefore ask ourselves how great Comeniologists' international connections are at the present. It appears as if in some areas of research we can better speak of *research islands*, not of a European or even global state of Comenius research as explained above.⁸

There should be a further consensus concerning the importance of interdisciplinary research. A considerable share of post-World War II Comenius research is increasingly interdisciplinary, even if a division into at least six traditional branches still exists: educational (pedagogical), philosophical, theological, historical, literary and linguistic. While tensions occasionally appear between various disciplinary perspectives and methodologies, we know that there is a general consensus that without an

8 The validity of this statement can easily be checked by reading the references used in the papers of this publication. Readers will find some authors who primarily quote their own earlier publications, and other authors who only cite literature from their own home countries. You will rarely find authors from Western European countries quoting original Czech, Slovak, or Polish literature, while the situation is somewhat better with the Czech, Slovak and Polish researchers who cite their own national literature but make even more reference to Central and Western European authors.

interdisciplinary approach we cannot adequately interpret Comenius and his works, and we can take our reference to Dietrich Benner in section 2 above as an example of the complications that may arise when we combine historical with systematic analyses of Comenius' works. The placement of the papers of this publication only reflects the interdisciplinary approach in Comeniology to a limited extent. Many papers might have been placed not in the parts of this publication we finally chose, but in other parts.

And there is another task which can be identified in the present publication. It looks as if there are *different basic concepts* (openness, see Sohma's paper in this publication; dialectics, see Meyer; pansophy, see Woldring; ternary structure, see Schadel; freedom, see Sitarska etc.) which can be fruitfully combined to yield a new understanding of Comenius' writings. But this will not happen by itself. It has to be arranged. And this means that we can appreciate the work done by the great Comeniologists named above, but at the same time we have to accept that today's European Comenius research space has deficiencies and that, as a result, quite a lot of developmental work remains to be done. Our publication may represent another stepping stone in such a direction.

3 The parts and chapters of this book

We can now, after the caveats in section 2 concerning the limits and potential of research, turn to the seven parts of our publication. They focus on Comenius' concept of universal reform and what this means for the fields in which he was working.

3.1 Philosophy/Philosophie

The first part of our publication deals with metaphysics, philosophy, and transcendental questions. It was always Comenius' central interest to develop a pansophic philosophy, even though most of his contemporaries did not show too much interest in his agenda. We may thus claim that this neglect is finding some form of compensation in our time, in the 21st century. Therefore, we have to ask what kind of metaphysics is adequate for our time. Is it the case that, depending on the contemporary situation in theory building, Comenius' transcendental philosophy deserves a reconsideration and new appreciation?

But what does this mean for us today? Henk Woldring analyses Comenius' syncretic method of pansophic research (also see Woldring 2014). He stresses that Comenius hoped to achieve rational knowledge with this method, albeit not in the way of Descartes. Comenius wished to replace Descartes' rationalism with his own comprehensive pansophic rationality, and we may ask which position we hold in this respect today.

The neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty introduced the thesis that, when it comes to social questions, the basic concept binding all other concepts should be hope, not truth (Rorty 1999). He might have brought in Comenius to support such a shift in the theory of knowledge. And we might state that – putting it the other way round – understanding Comenius' concept of pansophy and his correlated syncritic method may well be relevant to contemporary research in sociology, philosophy, psychology, education etc. Comenius' idea of placing education and social well-being into *an artificial world* can thus provide a new incentive for political theory, for didactics etc. And take Shinichi Sohma's paper: He relies on a publication by Jan Patočka to develop the thesis that openness is central to Comenius' transcendental philosophy. His paper is an invitation to produce a careful analysis of the central concepts of Comenius' theory, compare them with each other and check Rorty's arguments.

Wouter Goris presents a complex and complicated part of Comenius' philosophy. He sees him as an offspring of medieval metaphysicians and at the same time an early representative of the modern world since Comenius has managed to lay the foundations for an important methodological innovation, a ›transcendental turn‹. His ›sublation‹ of all particularity into the transcendental perspective is no mere theoretical endeavour, but aims at the integration of human particularities into the universal perspective of mankind and the abolition of error.

Erwin Schadel's paper arouses interest because his topic may be even further away from thinking in today's everyday world than Goris' topic. Schadel shows that Comenius searched for and found a key to the world in the ›ternary structure‹ of everything on earth. He brings to life the pansophic conception of the entirety of the analogously combined spheres of reality, i.e. of God, man and world. Schadel's contribution can thus be read as a further warning for the present-day reader. He should not claim to have found an analogic and pansophic present-day world before a careful analysis of the ›costs‹ produced by the claim.

3.2 Theology/Theologie

In the Middle Ages, theology was the mother of all sciences, and synchronised with philosophy. Today, theology has lost this status and this is, of course, greatly relevant for Part 2 of our publication. The papers assembled here show how broad the field of Comenius research can be. But, in our publication, this is not revealed, with one exception, by a comparison of contemporary dogmatics and Comenius' theology. Instead, the following topics are discussed which show how closely any analysis of Comenius as a theologian and religious thinker is related to other fields of research, for example literary history, philology or church history.

Hans van der Linde describes the work of his father Marinus van der Linde. Against Martin Luther's *sola fide* (the only thing that matters, here on earth and in heaven, is man's trustful belief in God and Jesus Christ), and against Calvinist pre-

destination (do what you want, but your life and death are already fixed), we find the reformed engagement to improve life on earth. Van der Linde presents Comenius' pansophic idea of the world as one school, one church and one state of God in which man has to help God to realise a better world. But man cannot change things by himself. Only Christ, the new Adam, is capable of restoring everything. Man may or may not do out of his free will what he is expected to do, and we have to add that Comenius' theological and indeed his anthropological concepts are based on the idea of co-operation between man and God, human freedom being fully granted.

Quite a different approach is taken by Danuta Szymonik. She analyses religious and theological motives in Comenius' letters to his friends and colleagues from the perspective of literary genres. And different again is the paper by Jiří Beneš whose philological analysis sheds light on the old question of how to interpret the Bible. Following Erasmus of Rotterdam, Comenius strove to reform the church through the renovation of biblical theology. For him, when translating the Bible, everything depended on the translator's liberation from his own language practice. He has to find the sense of biblical passages by drawing it out from the text instead of importing his own pre-conceptions into the text.

Manfred Richter offers a further variation of pansophic theology (also compare Richter 2014). In response to the cruelties of the Thirty Years' War, the different religious groups should have found ways of communication and agreement that bring in two conflicting pre-suppositions. On one hand, the only possible solution to religious conflict is the production of agreement via the interpretation of the Bible, and that is why all participants should strive to become »Biblistae«, namely, people who know how to read the Bible. But what on earth can be done when, on the other hand, there is no agreement on how to interpret the Bible? And is this the normal state? The responsible people therefore have to strive to become »Catholic« persons capable of realising the *consultatio catholica*, the universal consultation of all groups, of all Christian »confessions«. This consultation has to be founded in an adequate interpretation of the Bible so that the circle is closed and the observer wonders how there can be one Bible and nevertheless a struggle over how to interpret it.

3.3 History of ideas (intellectual history)/Ideengeschichte

Presenting a part on the history of ideas may appear provocative for many researchers since the »real« historical development is what we should be interested in, not the unprovable »history of ideas«. Therefore, another caveat has to be issued here. Obviously, there are different and even antagonistic national traditions. It may well be that the German tradition of »Geistesgeschichte« is plagued by this problem, but in the Anglo-Saxon tradition where research of »ideas in context« is well established this is an artificial problem. Most of the history of ideas is today called intellectual history, and it deals equally with ideas, discourses, social contexts of intellectual movements,