

COMENIUS

LET VIOLENCE BE FAR FROM THINGS

by **CHRISTOPH TH. SCHEILKE**

To educate people towards humanity, towards international understanding, towards peace: hardly anyone worked more vigorously for these ideals than John Amos Comenius, a distinguished European thinker with Hussite roots. He did so in the course of countless practical attempts as a teacher and school principal, but also in over 250 works he wrote as a philosopher, pedagogue, and theologian.

Born in Moravia in 1592 as Jan Amos Komenský, he worked tirelessly for the realization of a worldwide ecumenical reform to “improve human affairs” during a time of political terror, the Thirty Years’ War. He believed that joint consultations undertaken by the world’s leading minds in science, politics, and the churches could succeed in overcoming war and violence once and for all. “Let everything flow freely, let violence be far from things,” was his motto.

The key question he posed was: “What do human beings need as human beings?” His answer: “Wisdom, i.e. they must know how to deal [rightly] with things, with other human beings, and with God. The first of these is called philosophy, the second politics, and the third religion; without the knowledge and practice of these three, human beings would not be human beings, but rather creatures devoid of reason, even if they were fully endowed with riches, honour, and every possible convenience.”

Wisdom was for him the key to peaceful coexistence in freedom. “We must strive unconditionally to give back to the human species its freedom: freedom of thought, religious freedom, and civic freedom.” Human beings were endowed with this freedom from creation. The democratically-elected Czech presidents Tomáš Masaryk and Václav Havel have expressly appealed to the example of Comenius.

The work of educating towards wisdom and peace must already begin in schools. Children must learn what things are, why and for what purpose they exist. Only someone who recognizes the order of the world together with all the things in it is capable of understanding them and their causes. Such a person uses them, cares for them, and enjoys them. “Everything that exists must be known; everything that is mandatory must be done; everything

granted by God's grace should be enjoyed." For this reason, all people must learn all things thoroughly (*omnes, omnia, omnino*). This holds true for both the rich and the poor, for both boys and girls. Schools should become "workshops of humanity."

Schoolbooks such as the *Orbis pictus*, an illustrated primer for elementary instruction, and his Latin textbook made him famous throughout the world. He believed one must call things by their proper name and be able to communicate in a universal language. Comenius is considered the founder of modern pedagogy. The nineteenth century celebrated him as a "teacher of the peoples." He himself avowed: "Everything I wrote on behalf of the young, I wrote as a theologian." Comenius was, of course, not only a teacher, but also a preacher and a bishop of the Moravian Church (*Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine*). This peace church with roots in the Reformation, well-known for its Daily Watchwords, has over a million members throughout the world today.

Improving schools was just the beginning. Comenius aimed towards a "universal" reform of education, church, and society to be achieved by means of joint consultations which would take place in an ecumenical council. In order to prepare for this, leading scientists were to form a "College of Light," the churches were to constitute a world council of churches, and statesmen were to form a "Council of Peace." These three bodies were to draw up suggestions for reform and submit them to the council.

Comenius became involved in pedagogical, philosophical, political, and theological issues throughout Europe. Expelled from Moravia, he assumed the leadership of a school in the Polish town of Lissa (modern Leżno). An initial draft of his philosophy was published in England. Soon after, he was welcomed by Parliament. In Holland, he engaged in debate with Descartes. He turned down offers of professorships in Paris and at Harvard University. While in the employ of Sweden he prepared schoolbooks – including some for the use of Queen Christina. In Hungary he reformed the schools in Sárospatak at the request of the local prince. A "living encyclopedia" took shape, consisting of theatrical plays that condensed the state of knowledge at the time – including scientific knowledge. In this way he put into practice his principle that learning should take place quickly, provide amusement, and be reliable. In the aftermath of the "great" fire that destroyed Comenius' library and his writing workshop in 1656 after returning to Lissa, he fled to Amsterdam. He lived there until his death in 1670, enjoying high respect. The

Amsterdam city council gave him financial support, leading Comenius to dedicate his collected didactic works to it: “All well-being to the distinguished city of Amsterdam, the most renowned marketplace of the world, and to the wise city council!”

His chief work, the *Consultatio Catholica*, remained incomplete, however. During his entire life, Comenius acted as a practical intermediary in confessional disputes between Catholic and Protestant, but also between Reformed and Lutheran Christians. In the final years of his life, he vigorously championed political peace, investing the experience of a lifetime into this cause. At the age of seventy-five, he beseeched the delegates of England and the Netherlands in an open letter entitled *Angelus Pacis* (“Angel of Peace”). In it he admonished them as Christians to put an end to the Second Anglo-Dutch War. Once again he sought to bring about a universal reform that would enable worldwide peace. For this purpose he addressed his missive not just to the negotiators themselves, but “thereafter to all peoples throughout the world, that they may pause, abandon war, and leave room for Christ, the prince of peace, who already wishes to proclaim peace to the peoples.”

Throughout his life, Comenius was of the steadfast conviction that peace can only grow wherever human beings are educated to become human beings, where people speak to one another, identify differences clearly, and join together throughout this one world of ours in awareness of their responsibility before God, the creator and sustainer of life.

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