

BECOMING ACQUAINTED WITH THE UNKNOWN COMENIUS

by Werner Korthaase

According to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), professor of Philosophy and Education at the University of Berlin and founder of the “comprehending humanities”, Comenius created the first European theory of educational methodology. Just as Descartes and Bacon adopted a methodical approach to research, so Comenius devised a methodical approach to teaching, the ultimate goal of which was to promote the happiness of all mankind and to establish peace through education. The arguments on which Comenius based his didactics proved influential. He called for a school system to educate the entire population and discovered the principles of a general methodology of teaching. And he developed didactics as part of the natural system of society’s strategic coherence. For these reasons, Dilthey concludes that Comenius was perhaps “the greatest educational thinker that Europe has ever produced”.¹

I.

But what do we know about him today? Amazingly this “educational genius”, whom Dilthey placed on a par with Socrates, Plato, Abelard, Pestalozzi, Froebel und Herbart,² is neglected by leading educationists. Outside the Czech Republic, and notwithstanding the major work done on him there, Comenius’ name does not appear in the lists of new titles.³ Very little effort is put into the translation and editing of his writings. Such neglect of past theorists is not uncommon in the field of education studies, but in Comenius’ case it beggars belief: Comenius is unknown, despite the fact every good encyclopaedia

¹ *Wilhelm Dilthey Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. IX: Pädagogik. Geschichte und Grundlinien eines Systems.* Stuttgart, Göttingen 1960, p. 169.

² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

³ See Herrlitz, Hans-Georg: *Comenius in Deutschland.* In: *Comenius-Jahrbuch*, Vol. 7. Baltmannsweiler 1999, p. 100.

contains an entry on him (with the notable exception of an illustrated lexicon recently published in Moscow⁴).

It is as though Comenius had never received the accolades of Dilthey and others, for these too are ignored. Also ignored is the view of the renowned Swiss psychologist and educationist Jean Piaget (1896–1980), who, in a study for UNESCO in 1957, wrote of Comenius' relevance to the present day: “Comenius is one of those authors who do not need to be corrected, or, in reality, contradicted, in order to bring them up to date, but merely to be translated and elaborated.” “What accounts for the paradox and explains, in general, why Comenius is still so up to date despite his antiquated metaphysical apparatus, is the fact that, in all the matters he took up, he was able to give an extremely practical significance to the key concepts of his philosophy.”⁵ Given such testimony, it is truly hard to understand the current neglect of Comenius by educationists, and this is common not just among German, but also among British, American⁶ and French scholars. Instinctively they reject all those who lived before Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and the European “enlightenment”. None is willing even to glance at the works of those who allegedly attempt to manipulate the character of children in order to subject them to Christian dogma.⁷ Just how little Comenius is known in Germany, and indeed everywhere outside of the Czech Republic, is evident not least from the fact that none of the publications by writers seeking to promote the equality of women

⁴ The *Illjustrirovannyj enziklopedičeskij slovar'* (which is over 1,000 pages long!). On this astonishing omission see the review in the *Comenius-Jahrbuch*, Vol. 8–10, Baltmannsweiler 2002, p. 195.

⁵ Piaget, Jean: *The significance of John Amos Comenius at the present time*. In: John Amos Comenius 1592–1670. Selections. Introduction by Jean Piaget. Paris: UNESCO 1957, p. 30.

⁶ The present writer has attempted to examine all British and American dissertations on Comenius. He has also attempted to establish how often and in what manner Comenius is cited in educational writing and will report on his findings on another occasion.

⁷ This at least was asserted by a well-known Berlin university lecture at a conference on “Children in Pietism and Enlightenment” at Halle/Saale in 1997. When asked on what works of Comenius he had based this conclusion he proved unable to name a single one.

mention the passage from Chapter 9 of the *Didactica magna* in which Comenius pleads passionately for women's rights.⁸

And yet, today, over 350 years after it was written, Comenius' *Didactica magna* is still being printed and translated into various national languages, not just out of historical or "antiquarian" interest, but rather because it continues to provide us with new insights. By contrast, alas, Comenius' second definitive work on education, *Pampaedia*, reaches a much smaller audience, particularly as there are few translations. Few people know that Comenius developed the ideas of the *Didactica magna* to create a concept of life-long learning or adult education, for which he also made detailed proposals. Similarly, Comenius' posthumously published *Mathetica*, with its forward-looking views on learner autonomy, is largely unknown.⁹ And to appreciate fully Comenius' views on education, it would also be necessary to read his critiques of society and his proposals for a universal social reform. It is therefore of great importance to provide scholars with good translations of Comenius' works together with sound commentary. This would at least encourage scholars give the views of Dilthey and Piaget the consideration they merit. And this in turn would be just one of many reasons to investigate Comenius' writings.

The present writer knows from his own experience of teaching how greatly students benefit from reading Comenius. People unfamiliar with Comenius may object to his allegedly "anachronistic" religious world view. Yet the individual bias of academics should not be binding on all. The present writer's students¹⁰ were not scandalised by references to God on nearly every page, but were rather fascinated Comenius' by numerous analogies from nature, by his vivid images, by the contrast between his direct and unaffected language

⁸ The present writer drew the attention of two such authors to the passage and sent them copies of parts of Chapter 9. Despite this, the passage remained unacknowledged.

⁹ Despite the appearance of a German translation in 1996 (printed in: Golz, Reinhard; Korthaase, Werner; Schäfer, Erich (eds.): *Comenius und unsere Zeit. Geschichtliches, Bedenkenswertes und Bibliographisches*. Baltmannsweiler 1996, pp. 130–147).

¹⁰ who were not attending lectures at a theological college, but Berlin universities.

and the language of today's academic texts, and by his high philanthropic goals. These reactions are echoed in at least some publications.

Kenneth Smart, for example, praises Comenius' *Pampaedia* in a book review in the *British Journal of Educational Studies*: "As regards the intrinsic qualities of Comenius' text, there is hardly a page which does not repay pondering. True, Comenius was a pillar of his church, and not all modern students will readily accept the explicitly Christian premises on which he bases his scheme of universal education or enjoy the occasional elaborate analysis of moral issues. Nevertheless, the scheme aims at comprehensiveness, and there are numerous sections in which one finds Comenius raising matters of a startling modern relevance. The duties of parents and teachers; the style of text-books; the stages of education and the relevant moral and psychological factors of each stage; aspects of careers guidance and choice; vocational training; the educational needs of old age; sex education – all major issues are considered, and by one who had had first-hand experience of what it meant to 'have chanced upon times of ceaseless activity and a conflict' (Chapter IX). There is stimulus to thought in almost every paragraph."¹¹

In the 1960s, Jerome K. Clouser described Comenius as "a giant among educators", whose "insights into the educative processes" were "centuries ahead of his time". "Few people could combine religious, scientific, encyclopaedic, and Humanistic points of view into one comprehensive scheme." Clouser concluded: "Undoubtedly his own suffering and persecutions aroused in him an awareness of the plight of others. It was this concern that inspired Comenius' educational reforms, which are timeless by any standards... That education is, perhaps, the best means for bringing about desirable social change was a theme as close to Comenius as it was to Dewey. Comenius was more than a teacher. He was a prophet." The author also refers to Comenius' political objectives: "Luther did contribute to Comenius' educational reform, however, through his

emphasis on the social aspects of the Reformation. Luther stressed education as an instrument for bringing about and maintaining civil order throughout the states of Germany. Aiming higher than national boundaries, Comenius a hundred years later proposed education as a means for ensuring world peace.”¹²

These two recent views are reason enough for those who regard Comenius as obsolete to re-examine their views. Older authorities are no less enthusiastic. Leaving aside the remarks of his Czech compatriots, which might be inspired a little by patriotic fervour, and of German educational writers at the beginning of the 20th century, who were no less enthused by him, we can quote a number of North American and British scholars, who are unlikely to have been moved by national feeling. They bestow on J. A. Comenius such impressive titles as “The evangelist of modern pedagogy”¹³, “Apostle of modern education”¹⁴, “The Prince of Schoolmasters”¹⁵, “The greatest and most important of all the reformers”, “The prophet among educationists”¹⁶, or “A very great thinker and educational pioneer”¹⁷, and “The world’s first great international educator”.¹⁸ We read: “His *Great Didactic* still remains as the first book which formulated the universal principles of instruction and puts all education on a scientific

¹¹ Smart, Kenneth, ‘*Comenius’s Pampaedia*. Op. cit., 1988, p. 84.

¹² Jerome K Clauser: *The Pansophist: Comenius*. In: Nash, Paul; Kazamias, Andreas M.; Perkinson, Henry J.: *The Educated Man: Studies in the History of Educational Thought*. Malabar (Florida): 1984 (Original Edition 1965), pp. 168, 172, 167, 172, 174.

¹³ Will Seymour Monroe: *Comenius, the Evangelist of Modern Pedagogy*. In: *Education. Devoted to the Science, Art, Philosophy and Literature of Education*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Boston, 1892), p. 212.

¹⁴ William Earle Drake: *John Amos Comenius – Apostle of Modern Education*. In: *School and Community*. Official Organ of the Missouri State Teachers Association, vol. 28, no. 4 (Columbia, Mo., 1942), p. 158.

¹⁵ William Henry Burnham: *Comenius, The Prince of Schoolmasters*. In idem: *Great Teachers and Mental Health* (New York, London: Appleton, 1926), p. 141.

¹⁶ Ossian Herbert Lang: *Comenius: His Life and Principles of Education (Teachers’ Manuals, 17)*. (New York, Chicago: E. L. Kellogg, 1891), p. 3.

¹⁷ Kenneth Smart: *Comenius’ Pampaedia*. In: *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Oxford, 1988), p. 85.

¹⁸ Charles Henry Dobinson. In: C. H. Dobinson (ed.): *Comenius and Contemporary Education* (Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education, 1970), p. 7.

basis”.¹⁹ And in a North American history of educational thinking we find the following statement: “The place of Comenius in the history of education, therefore, is one of commanding importance. He introduces and dominates the whole modern movement in the field of elementary and secondary education. His relation to our present teaching is similar to that held by Copernicus and Newton toward modern science, and Bacon and Descartes toward modern philosophy.”²⁰

In 1912 Will Seymour Monroe reported on Comenius’ “permanent influence”: “A second recent manifestation of the permanence of the Moravian educator’s influence is the Comenius Society (Comenius-Gesellschaft), with headquarters in Germany, and numbering among its members most of the leaders in educational thought in the world. It was organized in 1891.” “The membership of the society, while overwhelmingly German, includes a considerable number from Austria-Hungary, Holland, Great Britain, The United States, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Switzerland, France, Greece, Belgium, and Denmark. The society inspired the numerous celebrations in commemoration of the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of Comenius (March 28, 1892). These celebrations, held at most of the educational centres in the Old World, and at a number of places in the New, revived the memory of Comenius, and brought his teachings to thousands of teachers who had known him before only as a name.”²¹

These views, though not recent, concerned as they are with “permanents in human nature”, continue to carry weight. Historians, who have a better

¹⁹ John Lewis Paton: *The Comenius Celebration*. In: *The Journal of Education*, vol. 73, no. 867 (London, 1941), p. 424.

²⁰ Nicholas Murray Butler: *The Place of Comenius in the History of Education*, in: *Proceedings of the Department of Superintendence of the National Educational Association at its meeting in Brooklyn, N. Y., February 16, 17, 18, 1892* (New York: Press of J. J. Little, 1892), p. 221.

²¹ Will Seymour Monroe: *Comenius and the Beginnings of Educational Reform*. New York, 1912), p. 170–171.

consultatio catholica, published more than 15 years ago, have been ignored. With a sole exception,²⁴ they even have not been reviewed.

In Russia and the Ukraine, the only literature available to students dates from Soviet times. And although the Russian Academy of Sciences has recently published selected texts of Comenius, rather than write a new introduction they reprinted the report of an exiled Ukrainian first published in 1939 in the Czechoslovak Republic.²⁵ The entire commentary in this work is taken from two Comenius publications dating from 1982 (Komenskij, Ja. A.: *Izbrannye pedagogičeskie sočinenija* – with minimal changes affecting Soviet terminology).²⁶

In Spanish, one of the world's major languages, Comenius is hardly present at all, except in works long since published. And although a compilation of all the works on Comenius published in various countries might suggest that a great deal is being written, this impression is false. Such compilations even contain the minutes of totally unimportant events and which are published in tiny editions and are often unavailable in bookshops.²⁷ And by the way it is only a drop in the ocean of the millions of books published every year.

Comenius' greatness on the one hand, and the "bitter part of the story" of the "nearly forgotten Comenius" on the other hand are most aptly described by the American author, Jerome K. Clauser:

²⁴ Smart, Kenneth, 'Comenius's *Pampaedia*. Translated by A. M. O. Dobbie. Dover: Buckland Publications, 1987,' [Book Review] *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Oxford, 1988), pp. 83-85.

²⁵ See: Subbotin, A. L. (Hg.): *J. A. Komenskij: Sočinenija*. Rossijskaja akademija nauk. Institut filosofii (Pamjatniki filosofskoj mysli), Moskva 1997, pp. 5–12 (The article in question was by Dmitrij Čiževskij „Komenský a západní filosofie”). (See the review in: *Comenius-Jahrbuch*, Band 8, Baltmannsweiler 200, pp. 125–128).

²⁶ New is: *Komenskij, J. A.: Pampedija. Iskusstvo obučenija mudrosti*. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo URAO, 2003 (Perevod s latinskogo M. M. Sokol'skoj).

²⁷ An example of an uncritical compilation which totally overrates the works it lists is the Vienna doctoral dissertation: Michalek-Kornhofer, Claudia: *Ist Comenius zum „Lehrer der Völker“ geworden? Eine Dokumentation der weltweiten Aktivitäten aus Anlass der 400sten Wiederkehr des Geburtsdatums des Jan Amos Comenius im Jahr 1992*. University of Vienna,

“Although his didactic writings had many faults and trivial inconsistencies, these weaknesses should not obscure the obvious strengths of his works. Theorizing long before the birth of modern psychology, Comenius accurately anticipated many educational practices that were later substantiated empirically. That students should progress methodically from the simple to the complex, from the general to the specific, sounds remarkably like modern educational psychology. That education should be publicly supported, open to all regardless of sex, age, or nationality, is a principle espoused by many nations in the world today. Graded schools with appropriately graded texts are almost as common now in Afghanistan as they are in Chicago. The abundance of training aids and teaching devices reflects Comenius’ emphasis on sense realism. The gradual decline of the emphasis placed upon verbalism recalls Comenius’ exhortation that education deal with things, not with words about things. Vocational education, physical education, and kindergarten training as integral parts of the curriculum were all suggested by Comenius at least two hundred years before they became fairly common practices in many school systems throughout the world. Although Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Herbart are widely recognized today as contributors of unique educational theories, it is impressive to see how much of their work had already been anticipated by the nearly forgotten Comenius. Although most of Comenius’ prophetic educational theories have now become commonplace practice, just how much of this achievement is attributable directly to Comenius’ efforts is not very clear. Perhaps this is the saddest part of the Comenius story. In his day he was highly regarded by many. While there were critics who questioned the quality of his Latinity, or philosophers such as Descartes who scoffed at his pansophy, Comenius had as many loyal supporters who sought his aid and advice. Few men of any period have had as many of their works translated into as many languages as Comenius,

Diss. phil. 1997. (Cf. the present writer’s review in: *Comenius-Jahrbuch*, Band 8, Baltmannsweiler 2001, pp. 142–146).

in his day. Yet, the bitter part of the story is that he was virtually forgotten after his death. [...]. Finally, the whole body of Comenius' suggested practices was simply too radical for his times. Since the practices were not widely accepted, they were quickly forgotten when Comenius died. Many of his suggestions seriously threatened the established governments of his day. For example, while an educated citizenry might tend to maintain civil peace and order, it is rather unlikely that this same enlightened citizenry would unquestioningly to accept the divine right of kings. In an age of monarchy, Comenius' democratic notions of education were potentially explosive."²⁸

III.

The retention of meaning and of the colorations of a text in translation is no mean feat, though we may not agree that "even in languages so close to each other as German and Dutch, a translation in the proper sense of the word is impossible" (J. Huizinga 1939). But one should certainly never "blur too anxiously in what is of alien origin the traces of the alien" (ibid.). Nor should the dimensions of time and language be neglected. Certainly, one reason why Comenius remains "unknown" is that there are few good translations of his work.²⁹ There are many translations which are not only factually inaccurate, but which also fail to convey the force of his writing. Since 1908, there has been a German translation of Comenius' main literary work, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*. Yet although it is in many respects unsatisfactory, none the experts in Czech studies currently working in Germany

²⁸ In: Paul Nash, Andreas M. Kazamias, Henry J. Perkinson: *The Educated Man*. Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger, 1984, pp. 185–86

²⁹ We can imagine how difficult it must be to translate a text like Comenius' *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* into an oriental language. Nevertheless a Japanese translation appeared in 2006 (Edited by S. Sohma. Published by Toshindo Publishing Co., LTD, in Tokyo, 2003).

has been willing (or able?) to provide a better translation.³⁰ A 1992 Swiss translation turns out to be sloppy and cannot convey the power and beauty of Comenius' use of language to a German-speaking reader.³¹

Even good translation has not been given the attention it deserves. A. M. O. Dobbie's work in this field has been praised by Kenneth Smart: "It all reads smoothly, in a style which avoids the extremes of both turgid literalism and slangy colloquialism. As regards Chapters 1-5 and Chapter 7, one has the added pleasure and stimulation of being able to read this version direct from the Latin side by with the previous version translated from the Czech – a comparison from which the present translator emerges with great credit."³² Smart concluded: "We should rejoice at having at last one of the great works of a very great thinker and educational pioneer."³³ Nevertheless, the English-speaking world has paid no attention at all to *Pampaedia* and Smart's review of the translation was the only one. Neither educationists nor philosophers have taken any notice of Dobbie's other translations from Comenius' main work: *Panaugia, or, Universal Light* (1987), *Comenius's Panegersia* (1990), *Panglottia, or, Universal Language* (1989), *Panorthosia* (chapters 19–26, 1993), *Panorthosia* (chapters 1–18 and 27, 1995).

In the Russian Academy of Science's 1997 edition of Comenius' works ("Sočinenija"), the commentary uses, not the conventional term for "universal" – "vseobščij" – but rather the term "vselenskij". This change is perhaps due to a

³⁰ In conversation with some of the experts in question I gained the impression that they did not feel able to undertake such a translation. In addition they did not appear to consider the translation of Comenius to be a matter of great importance.

³¹ See: Komenský, Jan Amos: *Labyrinth der Welt und Paradies des Herzens*. Aus dem Tschechischen übersetzt von Irina Trend. Burgdorf (Schweiz): A und O Verlag, 1992.

³² Kenneth Smart compares translations of chapters of *Pampaedia* from "the UNESCO version" (*John Amos Comenius 1592–1670. Selections*. Introduction by Jean Piaget, Paris: UNESCO, 1957) (Smart, Kenneth, 'Comenius's *Pampaedia*. Translated by A. M. O. Dobbie. Dover: *Buckland Publications*, 1987, [Book Review] *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 36, no.1 (Oxford, 1988), pp. 83-85, S. 83). Piaget received the English translations from Czechoslovakia. They were made on the basis of the Czech translation of *Pampaedia* by Josef Hendrich (Prague 1948), even though the Latin original had been in Prague since 1945.

³³ Smart, Kenneth, 'Comenius's *Pampaedia*. Op. cit., 1988, pp. 84, 85.

wish to avoid the term used in Soviet times and come closer to what Comenius meant.³⁴ Yet the term “vselenskij” does not achieve this: it means “a common gathering of churches”, which was not the meaning intended by Comenius. This example illustrates the aptness of Comenius’ view that translation must be done with diligence regardless of deadlines. Fortunately, the first Russian translation of *Pampaedia* has returned to the term “vseobščij”.³⁵

IV.

Comenius was a very prolific writer and it is difficult even to gain an overview of his total output.³⁶ The sheer abundance of the material in turn makes it difficult to gain a perspective on the “whole Comenius”. Indeed it is difficult to come to grips even with a single work such as *Pampaedia*, because of its length, but also because of the organisation of the content. Nevertheless our aim must be to fathom the “whole Comenius”, if only because no other thinker has so boldly connected the fields of education and politics, focussing on the responsibilities of the individual and of mankind. Frank Edward Manuel, historian of philosophy at Harvard University, has written:

“The Comenian educational utopia embraced all humans at all stages. The whole of his life is a school for everyman, from the cradle to the grave. Except for the paradise of the elect in heaven, no previous utopia had broken down barriers of sex, age, class, ethnic status, to fling open the gates to knowledge. Comenius may have hesitated about the equality of intellectual endowments in nature, but he never retreated from his conviction that all persons could be developed to the uttermost limits of their capacities. He would make of the

³⁴ Op. cit., pp.428 ff.

³⁵ Komenskij, Ja. A.: Panpedija(!). *Iskusstvo obučenija mudrosti*. Moskva: Izdatel'svo URAO, 2003, pp.252 ff.

³⁶ It would be most useful if Jan Kumpere's comprehensive Comenius biography with its valuable descriptions of the content of Comenius' major works (“*Jan Amos Komenský. Poutník na rozbraní věků*”, Ostrava 1992) were translated into English, so that it could be used in libraries abroad and provide students with an overview.

school, and by extension the world, a ‘little Paradise, full of delights’. In his educational system Comenius would have the teacher and child repeat the relationship that obtained in any original discovery or invention. The pupil-teacher bond was akin to that of an apprentice and a master artisan, and a discovery somehow imitated God’s way with nature. When Leibniz, fascinated with the art of invention, tried to persuade the great scientists to record down to the minutest detail how they had chanced upon a new discovery, he was attempting to gain insight into the divine act of creation through thinking by analogy with an artisan who invents a new technique. Reading these reflections one thinks primarily in utilitarian terms, as if Leibniz were only searching for some principle of creativity or for a mechanical way of accelerating the advancement of scientific knowledge. In the world of Pansophia to which Leibniz and Comenius belonged separate compartments did not exist.”

Significantly, Manuel stresses the importance of Comenius’ pansophic goals: “Pansophia has nothing of the primitivist fantasy in its baggage train. While recognizing that things, states, religions have been corrupted, in seeking to restore them Comenius envisions an ideal state that is not a primitivist paradise, but paradise altered through human art. Art imitates the secrets of nature, but is itself not primitive nature. The Comenian utopia, which was born in libraries and schools and princely courts, was urban.”³⁷

A great deal of work awaits the friends of Comenius, but we may express the hope that we are carried forward by his spirit and genius and succeed in reviving Comenius studies. Scholars must share their insights into the ideas of humanity’s greatest theorists to the end that all are edified.

So what can we do to make the unknown Comenius better known?

1. First we need good translations, ideally into as many languages as possible, but at least into English, today’s lingua franca.

³⁷ Manuel, Frank Edward; Fritzie Prigohzy Manuel: *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979, pp. 316, 318).

2. Further volumes of Comenius' *Opera omnia* must be published.

3. A complete translation of all of Comenius' works is unnecessary. Anthologies of well-selected extracts will suffice to acquaint the reader with the essence of his thought. It would be impracticable to read through the entire corpus, given its length and structure.

4. In addition to Comenius' educational writings, the anthologies should include poetic and satirical works such as *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, the reform programme *Via Lucis*, the social critique *Letters to Heaven* and, in excerpts, the *Panegersia*, *Panorthosia*, and *Panorthosia*, which contain Comenius' programme of political and social action.

5. We need to offer sabbaticals at the excellent Czech Comenius museums. Participants will have to cover their own expenses if governments and universities are unwilling to provide funding (although this is possible Japan!). It is important for Comenius students to read Czech secondary literature, and this should be facilitated by means of English translations.

6. Societies for the promotion of Comenius studies should be founded.

7. It is important to ensure that libraries throughout the world are supplied with the latest Comenius literature. Comenius studies should everywhere be part of university curricula.