The Legacy of John Amos Comenius

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John Amos Comenius (Jan Amos Komenský), born in 1592 at Uhersky Brod in eastern Moravia in the Kingdom of Bohemia, was the youngest of five children born to Anna and Martin Komenský, people of modest means and members of the Unity of the Brethren. Bohemia was Comenius’s homeland; the Unity of the Brethren was his mother. From Bohemia, Comenius received a deep sense of national consciousness and pride. From the Unity of the Brethren, Comenius inherited an unshakable faith in Jesus Christ, a belief in the radical separation between faith and society, and a tradition of strict discipline.

From within this milieu of homeland and faith, John Comenius envisioned a daring kind of Christianity that sought to be faithful to his received tradition, yet free from the overpowering notion of Christendom that had silenced the missionary witness of the Reformers. The experiences of Comenius’s life and his ecumenical spirit produced a prophetic word to the church in its missionary encounter with the world.

Pilgrimage

“This is only a pilgrimage.”

The Bequest of the Unity of the Brethren, pp. 18–19

The first of many tragedies that shaped the direction of Comenius’s life and thought was the death of both his parents when he was twelve years of age. He made his way through a number of schools, beginning with secondary education at the Latin school at Přerov (Ger. Prerau, in today’s Czech Republic), and ending with the University of Heidelberg, which he entered in 1613.

After his studies, he traveled to Holland and England and then returned to Bohemia to become rector of the Unity school in Přerov. Between 1616 and 1618 he was ordained as a priest, married Magdeline Vizovská, and served as pastor in Olomouc (Ger. Olmütz) and Fulnek, both in Moravia.

In 1618 decades of conflict erupted into what became known as the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648). Three years later, Spanish troops in support of the re-Catholicization of Bohemia devastated Fulnek, burning Comenius’s home and books. He fled for his life to the estate of Count de Zerotin in eastern Bohemia. He never saw his wife and small son again, as they died from the plague brought to Fulnek by the soldiers. On July 31, 1627, the people of Bohemia were ordered to accept the Catholic faith or leave. Comenius set out for Poland in the spring of 1628 and took up residence in Leszno (Ger. Lissa). Thus began his lifelong exile from his beloved Bohemia.

In The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart (1623), Comenius recounts his personal loss and establishes his identity as a pilgrim. Written as an allegory, the story is “no fable, even though it may have the appearance of one.” The main character, Pilgrim, like Comenius, journeyed through the world seeking to make sense of the confusion, difficulty, and deception that he encountered in language, religion, politics, and relationships. After much searching, Pilgrim discovered peace and contentment not in the circumstances of life but in fidelity to the Divine. At the end of his journey, Pilgrim heard the welcome words, “As long as I leave you in the world, remain there as a pilgrim, a stranger, an alien, and a guest; but with me you are a member of my household, for I grant you the right of citizenship.”

The pilgrim identity became a mode by which Comenius and the Brethren existed in a hostile world and remained faithful in their witness to Christ. Because they found themselves without political sponsorship, they were suppressed by both Catholics and Protestants. As victims of the religious-political crossfire, they defined faith simply as a disciplined life, a love for the brethren, and steadfastness in suffering. Their pilgrim existence was best fitted for journeys, the prison cell, or exile. They had no city or country to call their own, and they were out of step with the society around them. Their faith was not particular to a locale or tied to an earthly ruler, and thus it could be both universal and missionary.

Universality

“Nations come running to the Light radiating from Zion.”

The Way of Light, 21.3

In 1632 Comenius was elected a bishop of the Brethren and in 1648 became its twentieth and last presiding bishop. While exacting in his leadership of, and devotion to, the Unity, Comenius espoused a universality that led him to speak of Christ’s reign beyond the Unity, Bohemia, and Europe that would embrace all peoples, even the Turks. Comenius’s universality was a means to a greater end: nothing less than “the conversion of all peoples to the Church, so that Jehovah shall be King over all the earth.”

Universality, for Comenius, was expressed as panasphism, the integration of all knowledge “into one, all-embracing, harmonious world-view.” The missionary intent of his universality evidenced itself not in its attempt at comprehensive knowledge but in viewing knowledge as a reconciling principle. Comenius’s brand of universality maintained that in knowledge there existed a reconciling force that united nature with faith, one person with another, and an individual person with God. Knowledge universally applied changed everything. Comenius wanted “to have every man so enlightened that whosoever hath eyes may see, whosoever hath ears may hear, and whosoever hath the heart for understanding may understand.”

Comenius never indicated the source of his panasphic aspiration. It can be assumed that his teacher at the Academy at Herborn, Nassau (today in Hesse in Germany), Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1638), author of one of the best-known encyclopedias of the seventeenth century, Encyclopaedia scientiarum omnium (1630), tutored Comenius in the science of gathering information. In addition, Comenius’s study of Ramon Llull of Majorca (1232–1316), the medieval philosopher, mystic, and missionary best known for his Ars generalis ultima (The Ultimate General Art, 1305–8) and Ars brevis (The Short Art, 1308), provided Comenius with a model for his panspheric project and missionary motivation for its application. In Ars generalis ultima, Llull combined symbols, numbers, and diagrams to create a complex system of “art,” which formed a basis for understanding reality and a means to defend the Christian faith. Llull envisioned the conversion of Muslims in North Africa through his system, which was “a new method and new reasons by which those in error might
be shown the path to glory without end and the means of avoiding infinite suffering.” While less complex than Llull’s, Comenius’s pansophic plan served the same goal.

**Education**

“internal light . . . shining in the mind of the rational creature”

Panaugia, 2.9

The backbone of Comenius’s scheme of universality was universal education. To address the problems of humankind, Comenius developed a plan based on a fourfold formula: “common textbooks, common schools, a common research college of learned men, and a common language.” He spent his life teaching, writing, and crusading to effect this solution. The aim of Comenius’s plan was “to provide opportunities, not only for all nations and tongues and orders of men, but for every single individual to rise out of the darkness of ignorance and barbarism.” His revolutionary proposal was for every person in the world to be educated—male and female, all nations, and every stratum of society.

True to the Enlightenment spirit, Comenius believed in the centrality of human intellect and the regenerative capacity of knowledge. If any change in human behavior was to take place, the intellect must be purified. Human nature was “so designed that all its actions, good or bad, are rooted in the intellect. The limbs move in obedience to the Will, which rules like a queen.”

Thus, rational knowledge led to re-creation or renewal of the image of God already present within humankind. Comenius believed that, in the end, every man and woman in the world would “return to the image of God within him . . . and similarly every family group, every state and church, and finally the entire world.”

The eventual renewal, return, or regeneration of the image of God in the individual and humanity as a whole meant that humankind would be able to “move towards the perfect fulfillment of human nature.” As a result, the possibility of the human intellect producing a change in the nature of men and women gave universal education more than an educational or moral role—it served as a missionary means.

**Language**

“universal interpreter of All things to All Men”

Panorthosia, 14.9

In Comenius’s scheme of universality, language served as the forum for understanding and reconciliation. Because the multitude of languages was a source of confusion and division, Comenius proposed that particular languages should cease to exist or be blended into a new universal language. In this way “the whole world should become a house accessible to all, and all the inhabitants of the earth one family of God, linked by the common bond of a universal language.” Language became the tangible means to ensure that “all should be enlightened and restored to harmony.”

Comenius intended that the spread of this universal language would “increase the universal Kingdom of God.” Just as a ruler would impose a new language on a conquered people, “surely Christ, the new monarch of the universe, will impose some new language on his World.” Comenius connected the missionary intent of the new language with the reign of Christ. He concluded that Christ’s wish that the Gospel be preached to the nations “will surely require a new gracious language, and that naturally since nations are at last to be fully gathered together into one kingdom of Christ they must be bound together in the bond of one spirit and one language.” Thus the agents of Christ’s kingdom would be those who preach to the nations in the universal language, which Comenius called the “final seal of apostleship.”

One of the creative works that emerged from Comenius’s attention to Ramon Llull was developed in his Janua linguarum reserata (The Gate of Languages Unlocked, 1631). Comenius’s goal in Janua was both to introduce a better way to teach Latin and also to extend Christ’s kingdom through language. Just as Llull had sought to extend Christianity through literary means, so Comenius hoped that Janua would facilitate the spread of Christianity among Muslims in the Middle East and Native Americans in North America. The literary success of Janua was amazing, being translated during his lifetime into sixteen languages, including Persian, Mongolian, Arabic, Turkish, Polish, German, and other European languages.

**Christ**

“one supreme monarch”

Panorthosia, 10.10

Paramount in the doctrinal heritage passed on to Comenius from the Brethren was the kingship of Christ over the church and the entire world. Christ alone was seen as “the king of Zion who shall speak peace unto the heathen, and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea.”

The reign of Christ truly reconciled “all sects and partisan desires,” as “all philosophies become one supremely good philosophy under one supreme teacher, Christ, and all religion will become one supremely good religion under one supreme priest, Christ.” Comenius’s ultimate hope was not in a political system or a religion that triumphed over others but in Christ.

The main focus of Comenius’s life was the proclamation of Christ to all the nations, because for him Christ was the only reconciler of the world. It thus followed that Christ’s words were to be received and then communicated with universality, simplicity, and agreement to the whole world. That is, Christ was to be preached to all (universality), without pomp or ritual (simplicity), and without coercion (agreement). The reign of God, of which Christ is the exemplar, is like no earthly kingdom in its arrival and its rule. His supremacy does not require auxiliary or circumstantial powers, which other rulers depend upon.

**Mission**

“The final apostles should go forth to the nations.”

Panorthosia, 14.15

In Comenius, universal hope united with unshakable faith in the supremacy of Christ to produce a strong missionary conviction. The various influences upon his life, together with the development of his system of pansophism, brought him to the conclusion that missionary work must be an essential practice for the true church.

While the missionary obligation is implicit in much of Comenius’s writings, it becomes particularly clear in De regula fidei judicium duplex (On the Rule of Faith, a Double Investigation, 1658). In response to the teachings of Valerian Magni, a Capuchin monk, Comenius stated here that evangelization was an unavoidable responsibility of the church. The true church would exist as the instrument of world missions. In addition to making this direct appeal for missionary work, Comenius reproved those who were “only idle spectators playing no part in the promotion of God’s work,” for this was “surely to tempt God and to commit a grievous sin, making a mockery of the Lord’s
Prayer.” He maintained this position because “people who claim to have received God’s revelations are under obligation to communicate them.” Comenius did not take up the argument for or against apostolic succession as a necessary condition for mission but instead pragmatically presented the apostolic task as obvious. There was no place for passivity; instead, the church was to cooperate wholeheartedly with God in his witness to the world. “The conversion of the world will be achieved by those who go forth as preachers, the Lord working with them.”

Comenius maintained that apostolic preachers should be skilled in theology, use appropriate means to communicate their message, and respect unconverted people, conveying the sense that they were friends rather than enemies. Preachers were not to attack the religious error of Jews or Muslims but persuade them of the truth through noncoercive means. To illustrate this missionary methodology, Comenius referred to Paul’s approach at Mars Hill in Athens, where the apostle directed his hearers to an unknown god whom they already worshiped (Acts 17:19–33). Thus Comenius not only appealed for missionary work but also urged that it be done in a culturally appropriate and persuasive way.

Closely linked to Comenius’s idea of mission was persecution. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) crushed any hope for religious liberty and thus sealed the fate of the dwindling Unity of the Brethren. In An Exhortation to the Churches of Bohemia (1661), Comenius compared the persecution of the Unity with that of the early church in Jerusalem. He recounted the Unity’s forty years of suffering at the hands of Jesuits and cautioned that even if there were “not verily so much as one Church remaining,” they were not to despair. He reminded them that “the dispersion of the Apostolical church at Jerusalem was very sad, and yet it was nothing but the dissemination of the Gospel amongst other Nations.” In like manner, their “stumbling may be the enriching of the World, and [their] diminishing, the riches of the Gentiles.” The example of the early church’s persecution encouraged the Brethren to hope in the advance of the Gospel through their own imprisonment, suffering, and death. They could take heart that “no violence, no tortments, no executions, [can] hinder the propagation of Christianity [and] shall not be able to stop the course of the Gospel.”

Comenius not only promoted the missionary idea, but also lived a missionary life. An example of this life was his initiative to translate the Bible into Turkish. Although Turks were at the time largely considered to be hostile or indifferent to the Gospel, Comenius sought a common ground of understanding with them for the purpose of reconciliation and conversion. In 1658 Comenius contracted with Levin Warner to do a Turkish translation of the Bible, and Laurence De Geer, Comenius’s benefactor, agreed to finance its publication. The completion date was set for 1660 but then was delayed until 1663. In anticipation of its publication, Comenius composed a preface addressed to the sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Mehmed IV, in which he affirmed that “all the peoples of the earth [are] the children of the same God.” Comenius reasoned that since God is one, as taught by Moses, Jesus and his disciples, and Muhammad, and because the
Qur'an is based on the Old and New Testaments, it is only right that Muslims and Christians should understand each other and live in harmony. He then invited the sultan to take the Bible and read it for himself. In the end, however, the translation was deemed to be a poor one, and Comenius abandoned the project.

As evidenced in his *Generall Table of Europe* (1670), Comenius knew the religious conditions of people around the world. He listed nations not only according to political and geographic information but also by their religious affiliation, with comments on the progress of the Gospel in each land. He was acquainted with mission work in China, India, and the Americas and considered what he might do to assist these endeavors. In *Via lucis* (Way of Light, 1642), he wrote specifically about Native Americans and enthusiastically projected how the Brethren might do mission work among them.

**Fruit**

*the hidden seed*

In *The Bequest of the Unity of the Brethren* (1650), Comenius lamented the demise of his beloved church and yet at the same time expressed faith in its vitality, but only as a seed that might yet come to full fruition. He reminded the Brethren that this seed, cleansed of chaff and preserved through persecution, would eventually be sown among the nations. With the death of Comenius in 1670, this seed died and fell into the ground. It lay dormant only a short time before it sprouted and bore fruit in Herrnhut, Saxony, where the Moravians emerged approximately fifty years later under the leadership of David Nitschmann (1696–1772) and Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760).

The ensuing worldwide mission effort of the Moravians is part of Comenius's legacy. The Brethren who arrived on Zinzendorf's estate had a certain missionary consciousness, having the reformation spirit of Jan Hus, a spirit of the suffering and discipline learned as Brethren, and the convictions and example of John Comenius. What Comenius wrote and practiced was in full view of the intimate family of the Brethren, and his writings provided hope and encouragement to the exiled church. The Brethren arrived at Herrnhut as a pilgrim people. They were schooled in suffering, which defined their allegiance, and in universality, which opened before them the possibility of worldwide missions.

The Moravians' unusual expression of mission is often credited to the genius of Zinzendorf—to his mission awareness, Pietistic beliefs, and Christocentric mysticism. These factors undoubtedly had their effect on the group and fomented the ensuing mission fervor, but they cannot fully account for the remarkable missionary initiative of the Moravians. Zinzendorf's Pietism and heartfelt missionary concern converged with the belief of the Brethren in the universality of faith and the reign of Jesus Christ over the entire world to produce a zeal for mission unmatched in modern times.

The fruit of Comenius remains for the postmodern era.
Although the twenty-first century is certainly different from the seventeenth, Comenius’s message of the universal reign of Christ, of a vital faith that embraces both the sacred and the secular realms of life, and of the identity of God’s people as pilgrims could provide fresh alternatives to the sectarian and mechanistic modes that often characterize today’s mission endeavors. Quite possibly, the full fruit of Comenius’s thought is yet to be completely realized.

Notes
1. The Unity of the Brethren, or, in its Latin form, Unititum Fratrum, emerged from the martyrdom of Jan Hus (1415) and the ensuing Bohemian rebellion against Catholic domination. They grew in strength and influence during the period prior to Martin Luther but because of their pacifistic convictions were severely persecuted and eventually driven from their homeland during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48).
4. For a comprehensive definition of pansophism, see Matthew Spinka, “Comenian Pansophic Principles,” Church History 22 (June 1953): 155.
14. See John Comenius, Unum necessarium, unpublished translation (1589) by Vernon Nelson (in Reeves Library, Moravian College and Theological Seminary, Bethlehem, Pa.), 1.6; see also Panaurgia, 14:2.
15. Comenius, Panorthosia, 5.21, 10.10.
16. Ibid., 14.7, 9, 15; see Panaurgia, 15.8.
18. Comenius, Panorthosia, 10.9, 10.

Selected Bibliography

Works by John Amos Comenius
Comenius was a prolific writer, producing some 144 larger works and 49 smaller or incomplete works on subjects ranging from education to history to church catechisms. Archival material can be found at the J. A. Komenský Pedagogical Museum and Library in Prague and the Archiv der Brüdergemeinde in Herrnhut, Germany.

1623 Labyrinth svieta a ráj srdce (The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart).
1631 Janua linguarum reserata (The Gate of Languages Unlocked).
1642 Via lucis (The Way of Light).
1643 Panorthosia (Universal Reform).
1644 Historia persecutionum ecclesiae Bohemicae (History of the Persecution of the Bohemian Church).
1650 Ksášt umírající matky jednoty bratrské (The Bequest of the Unity of the Brethren).
1656 Panegersia (Universal Awakening) and Panaugia (Universal Enlightenment), first printed as parts of De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica (The General Deliberation on the Remedy of Human Matters).
1657 Lux e tenebris (Light in the Darkness).
1658 De regula fidei judicium duplex (On the Rule of Faith, a Double Investigation).
1660 De bono unitatis et ordinis, disciplinaeque ac obedientiae (An exhortation of the churches of Bohemia to the Church of England).
1668 Unum necessarium (The One Thing Needful).
1670 A General Table of Europe.

Works About John Amos Comenius