

COMENIUS: PASTOR, PHILOSOPHER, PEDAGOGUE

by Dennis L. Peterson

In their never-ending search for better ways to teach, educators are tempted to be enamored of anything new and to eschew what they perceive to be outdated or old-fashioned. Sometimes, however, some of the best “new” teaching principles turn out to be long-forgotten or neglected old ways.

Such might be the case with the teachings of seventeenth-century churchman and educator Comenius. He has been acclaimed as “the greatest pedagogue of the Reformation era”ⁱ and is widely considered to be “the Father of Modern Education.”ⁱⁱ

BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Johannes Amos Komenski was born on July 28, 1592, in Nivnic, Moravia, in what today is the Czech Republic. His parents died of the plague when he was twelve. At age sixteen, he entered a Latin school in Prerov, where, in spite of suffering “under a difficult and unattractive method” of instruction, he exhibited an “eager love of learning.”ⁱⁱⁱ He later described the educational methods of that day as “the terror of boys and the slaughterhouses of the mind.”^{iv}

The friendly headmaster, however, recognized his gifts and encouraged him to train for the ministry. Comenius went on to study at Herborn and Heidelberg, during which time he adopted the Latinized name Comenius.

Returning home in 1614, he became headmaster of the high school; a minister could not be ordained until he was twenty-four, and Comenius was too young. Two years later, he was ordained in the church of the *Unitas Fratrum*, variously known as the Moravians, the Unity, the United Brethren, and the Unity of the Brethren. In 1618, he became the pastor of Fulnek and settled down to a life of academic study and spiritual service.

After the Thirty Years War erupted, Comenius’s life was never the same. When the Protestant army was defeated in the Battle of White Mountain, the Catholic victors invaded his town and burned it to the ground. They mandated Roman Catholicism as the only legal religion, and he was forced to flee for his life. The “common people were corralled back into the Roman Church.”^v While Comenius was in hiding, his wife and child died in the plague.

Comenius was forced to live for the next seven years “the life of a fugitive in his own land, hiding in deserted huts, in caves, even in hollow trees” in Bohemia.^{vi} Then in 1628, he fled to Poland and for the next forty-two years “roamed the countries of Europe as a homeless refugee.”^{vii} Wherever he and his Moravian brethren went, “they found persecution, caught between Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics.”^{viii}

Comenius spent much of his exile in Poland, but he also traveled to other European countries, including England, but he never again saw his homeland, Moravia. While in England, he declined an invitation to become the president of Harvard. Instead, he became the educational advisor to the Swedish government. He also helped the Hungarian government reform its school system. In spite of these high positions, he was always poor, but various wealthy and influential patrons supported him in his writing and teaching ministries.

Comenius was productive. He “ministered faithfully to the needs of his scattered congregation, supporting it with the proceeds from his writings. Strangely enough, these came mostly from his books on education—a field which he himself considered secondary to his pastoral ministry.”^{ix} He wrote 154 books, many of which were banned by the Roman Catholic Church.

Comenius made his final home in Amsterdam, “where the schoolmasters were jealous of him.”^x He died in November 1670, “surrounded by friends in an intellectually stimulating atmosphere.”^{xi} He was buried at the French Reformed Church in Naarden.

EDUCATIONAL VIEWS

Although Comenius was a pastor, theologian, philosopher, and author, his greatest fame and contributions came as an educator. A firm believer in life-long learning, he stated that the most important teaching began in the home during a child’s first six years, during which the parents—especially the mother—laid the moral and religious foundations for the child’s life.

But education went much farther than that. Jean Piaget explained, “Education, according to Comenius, is not merely the training of the child at school or in the home; it is a process affecting man’s whole life and the countless social adjustments he must make.”^{xii}

Comenius called his educational philosophy *pansophism*, by which he meant that a proper education “would lead to knowing the good (and God who established the good) and thus doing and seeking the good.”^{xiii} Smolik declared, “For Comenius there was always only one truth. The light of reason must submit in obedience to the will of God. This is Comenius’s fundamental pedagogical and pansophic principle.”^{xiv}

The purpose of all knowledge, Comenius believed, is to glorify God and to encourage people to love what is good. He did not believe, however, that everything was worth learning. Rather, learning should be organized such that knowledge “express[ed] wisdom and constitute[d] knowledge of practical utility.”^{xv} He also believed that all learning should include instruction in “morals and piety.”^{xvi}

Perhaps Gutek summarized pansophism best when he wrote,

Pansophism sought to embrace all knowledge within an integrative system, multi-dimensional in its scope but holistic in its purposes. Comenius asserted that: (1) God’s plan of creation was orderly and that human knowledge of the world should also be orderly in its organization; (2) it is possible and desirable for human beings to possess this knowledge of an ordered creation in a systematic fashion and to use this knowledge to create orderliness in their personal lives and social behavior; (3) ordered knowledge would stimulate a love of wisdom that, transcending national boundaries and sectarian divisions, would help humankind to create an orderly and peaceful social order.^{xvii}

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY TRAINING

Foreshadowing the work of Jean Piaget, Comenius wrote about his observations of the first six years of a child’s life and education. In his 1631 book *The School of Infancy*, he elaborated on the following principles:

- Children are God’s most precious gift, “an inestimable treasure,” and therefore “claim our most vigilant attention.”
- Individuals are to be concerned about their spiritual, moral, academic, and artistic development.
- “[C]hildren do not train themselves spontaneously, but are shaped only by tireless labor,” which is the task of both parents and teachers.^{xviii}

The foundation for such instruction, Comenius contended, is laid in the home during the preschool years; the superstructure is erected in the classroom.

HIS LIFE-LONG LEARNING PROGRAM

Perhaps the greatest work by Comenius is *The Great Didactic*, in which he set forth his birth-to-death educational system and described his methods for teaching effectively. His system began with the parents and proceeded to initial schooling through college and beyond.

Comenius noted that nature provides a perfect example of how best to teach. He “observed a fundamental order and purpose and from these he deduced a set of universal principles applicable to education,” which lead, in turn, to “certain conditions for effective teaching.”^{xix} He believed that it is better and easier “to work *with* the processes of nature rather than *against* them.”^{xx}

Kleinert described these conditions thus: “The child should grow into knowledge by assimilation, should not be forced but should be assisted to know, to think, and to speak. But the object should ever be to understand all that is worth knowing of God, the world, and oneself.”^{xxi}

“Quickly! Pleasantly! Thoroughly!” That was how Comenius encouraged the teachers of his day to conduct their classroom instruction. He believed that teachers should employ the students’ five senses more rather than relying primarily on rote memorization of facts. He sought to make learning interesting and fun for the students rather than a boring chore. To do that, he wrote *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (“The Visible World in Pictures”), reputedly the first illustrated children’s textbook.

As LeBar pointed out, however, not all responsibility rests on the teacher; the student has to have a strong desire to learn. The student “was to become actively involved in his own training” because “development comes from within”; the teacher, books, and various media might *help* the student learn, but “the learner must do his own growing.”^{xxii} Comenius, however, did not like the idea of using artificial incentives that produced short-lived interest that passed as soon as the incentives were no longer available. He preferred to cultivate and take advantage of the students’ natural curiosity and to direct it in the right ways rather than attempt to repress it.

Comenius was also a firm advocate of practice and hands-on learning. Students learn to read by reading, to write by writing, to sing by singing, to think by thinking, etc.—that is, by *doing*.

He believed that the teacher should bring into the classroom the actual objects about which the students were learning so they could see and touch them. Where that was impossible, Comenius advocated using models, drawings, charts, maps, globes, etc. No doubt, he would have reveled in the multiplicity of computer applications, audio-visual devices, and other tools of opportunity that we enjoy in the modern classroom! But he also insisted that periods of intense study be alternated with periods of intense physical exertion.

Yet, Comenius was balanced in this emphasis, too. As LeBar noted, “While educators through the centuries have tended to go either to the extreme of overemphasizing the disciplines of knowledge or the experience of the learner, Comenius kept these two essentials of teaching in balance.”^{xxiii}

Perhaps the central principle upon which Comenius’s philosophy of education rested was having a clearly defined goal and a curriculum that progressed in stages according to the students’ natural abilities and with discipline and genuine interest in their advancement. Achieving this goal required that the teacher understand the concepts of readiness, individuality, and mental development (i.e., *how* students learn).

Smolik notes that Comenius revealed “interest in psychology at a time when psychological consideration in education had no place at all. His instructions on how to proceed catechistically with children from the earliest age demonstrated how sensitively he took into account the ontogenesis of the child and how he complied with the levels of mental development.”^{xxiv}

Underlying all of his methodology, however, was his realization that “it is necessary to form practical and not theoretical Christians, if we wish to form true Christians at all. For religion is a real thing and not a reflection of reality, and should prove its reality by the practical results that it produces, just as a seed that is planted in good earth soon germinates.”^{xxv} Comenius concluded, “[S]chools, when they educate [students], must educate them in every way, and suit them not only for the occupations of this life, but for eternity as well.”^{xxvi}

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF COMENIUS'S PRINCIPLES

Disciples of Comenius took his teachings seriously and began using them in their education of young people. His own people, the Moravians, especially were faithful practitioners of his principles and methods. Moravian history is permeated by an emphasis on education. The largest Moravian communities in the New World developed in southeastern Pennsylvania and North Carolina, and in each location they started schools for their own children. Those schools soon became so renowned for their academic excellence that non-Moravian parents wanted to enroll their children in Moravian schools.

The Moravians long believed in the equality of the sexes, and that belief extended naturally to the education of females. Taking a long view, they believed that to educate the girls was to educate entire families. The Bethlehem Female Seminary, founded in 1742 in Pennsylvania, claimed to be the first Protestant girls' boarding school in America. Since 1954, it has been known as the co-educational Moravian College.

Salem Female Academy was established in 1772. In 1892, a new main classroom building was constructed on the Academy campus and named Comenius Hall in recognition of the philosophical influence of his teachings. That influence is still felt at the school, including in the Comenius Symposium, which it holds regularly.

Salem Female Academy is now Salem College and is located in Old Salem near Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It is reputed to be the oldest women's school that is still an all-female institution and the oldest all-female school in the South. Among the many students who attended the school were Sarah Childress, who would later become the wife of U.S. president James K. Polk, and the daughter of John Ross, chief of the Cherokee Indians. (Miss Ross had to withdraw from the school to accompany her family and nation to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears.)

Central to all of the Moravian schools, of course, were the teachings of Comenius. Adherence to these teachings produced curricula that were deep and broad and that attempted to teach not only the mind (academic) but also the heart (spiritual) and the body (physical). Their academic work was "rigorous," and discipline was strictly enforced.^{xxvii} The curriculum included not only reading, writing, and arithmetic but also "Latin, English, and German grammar; geometry and other forms of advanced mathematics; geography; history; religion; music; and penmanship."^{xxviii} Sewing, darning, and other practical instruction was also included. So thorough was their education, that, although Moravians made up no

more than one percent of the American colonial population, the influence of their educational programs was much greater than their numbers.

Moravian education was “inclusive in respect to sex, nationality, race, and religious denomination.”^{xxix} And their pedagogical practices were surprisingly modern, including such “innovations” as “parent-teachers’ meetings, school-community associations, educational and vocational guidance, student participation in school management, the homeroom, the adviser, teacher-training, supervision of instruction, books and lectures on pedagogical methods and procedures, the activities program, vocational education, adult education, evening schools, medical services,” etc.^{xxx}

Comenius might not have been able to return to his native land, and he has been long dead. Yet, his principles of education continue to influence generations of young people and families throughout the nation and the world. We can still learn from his principles.

ⁱ Harold J. Grimm, *The Reformation Era: 1500–1650*. (New York: McMillan, 1973), p. 489.

ⁱⁱ A.K. Curtis, “From the Publisher,” *Christian History* VI:1 (n.d.), p. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ John R. Weinlick, “John Amos Comenius,” *The Moravian Church Through the Ages*. (Bethlehem, Pa.: Comenius Press, 1966), p. 46.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 47.

^v Josef Smolik, “Comenius: A Man of Hope in a Time of Turmoil,” *Christian History* VI:1 (n.d.), p. 15.

^{vi} Eve Chybova Bock, “Seeking a Better Way,” *Christian History* VI:1 (n.d.), p. 7.

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} Bernard Michel, “Between Hus and Herrnhut,” *Christian History* VI:1 (n.d.), p. 10.

^{ix} Bock, p. 8.

^x Lois E. LeBar, *Education that Is Christian*. (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1958), p. 41.

^{xi} Weinlick, p. 56.

^{xii} Michel, p. 10.

^{xiii} Paul Heidebrecht, “Learning from Nature: The Educational Legacy of Jan Amos Comenius,” *Christian History*, VI:1 (n.d.), p. 23.

^{xiv} Smolik, p. 18.

^{xv} Heidebrecht, p. 23.

^{xvi} Chris Armstrong, “Christian History Corner: A Protestant Bishop Speaks Out on the Stakes of Public Education. Available at <http://christianitytoday.aol.com/global/pf.cgi?ct/2002/133/53.0.html>. Retrieved May 20, 2003.

^{xvii} Gerald Gutek, “Knowledge: The Road to Peace,” *Christian History* VI:1 (n.d.), p. 29.

^{xviii} J.A. Comenius, “The School of Infancy,” *Christian History* VI:1 (n.d.), pp. 31–32.

^{xix} Heidebrecht, p. 23.

^{xx} Lois LeBar, “What Children Owe to Comenius,” *Christian History* VI:1 (n.d.), p. 43.

^{xxi} P. Kleinert, “Comenius,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 3. Available at <http://www.ccel.org/php/disp.php?authorID=schaff&bookID=encyc03&page=168&view>. Retrieved May 20, 2003.

^{xxii} Lois LeBar, *Education that Is Christian*, pp. 42–43.

^{xxiii} LeBar, “What Children Owe to Comenius,” p. 19.

^{xxiv} Smolik, p. 16.

^{xxv} J.A. Comenius, *The Great Didactic* (Soho Square, London: A. & C. Black, Ltd., 1923), p. 225.

^{xxvi} Ibid., pp. 144–45.

^{xxvii} Penelope Niven and Cornelia Wright, *Old Salem: The Official Guidebook* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Old Salem, Inc., 2004), p. 66.

^{xxviii} Ibid.

^{xxix} Mabel Haller, “Moravian Influence on Higher Education in Colonial America,” *Pennsylvania History*, 25:3 (July, 1958), p. 221.

^{xxx} Ibid.

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