



Speech on the occasion of the presentation of the Comenius Award
by Jonathan Israel, Saturday, March 18, 2017 Naarden.

"Of all the sixteenth and seventeenth-century precursors of the Enlightenment none had a broader or more impressive vision of how to improve human life and society than the Moravian reformer Jan Jan Amos Komensky known to us Comenius. Comenius lived from 1592 to 1670 and was therefore, very significantly, a contemporary of Descartes and Spinoza.

Comenius was much more than just a great reformer and innovator in the field of education. He was also a great social philosopher and religious thinker who saw education as the best tool for elevating and generalizing what is best in humanity and, by that means, creating a better world. His educational ideas were certainly revolutionary and arguably represent an even more stunning leap in the progress of the human mind - what Enlightenment thinkers called the *l'esprit humain* - than do Rousseau's ideas on education. Comenius' innovations in education theory were revolutionary because they represent the first comprehensive rejection of the medieval conception of education as specialized knowledge for a small elite of society that should be couched in a language – such as Latin - and in a terminology accessible only to those specially trained in its technicalities and mysteries. He is the first educationalist to spell out in a series of books that if education is to fulfil its potential as a generator of moral truth and human dignity to the fullest, it must be equally taught to everyone, male and female, in the same way: it must be universal in the sense that no national, ethnic or theological denominational discrimination can be allowed, and must be taught in the vernacular using the familiar terms current in society in each country. Comenius studied and taught not only in his native Moravia but also in Germany, Sweden

Poland, Transylvania, England and Hungary as well as the Netherlands. For a seventeenth-century savant his learning and experience was almost uniquely cosmopolitan, internationalist, and broad in scope, and mobilized to counter and reject the essentially elitist, denominational and national.

His ideas on education were revolutionary also in another way. In his one long discussion with Descartes, in 1642, which took in place in Holland, at Endegeest, near Leiden, he refused to accept that reason and knowledge should be seen as purely abstract in the Cartesian sense or that knowledge can be effectively imparted to children in an abstract manner. It is well known that for Comenius, using illustrations, pictures of all kinds and diagrams was fundamental to his educational technique for children at all stages in their development. He believed that the visual *and* the sensual in all its dimensions were fundamental to knowledge and a basic part of reason itself. In place of Descartes' pure abstract reason, he developed a conception of human reason based on a dialectic of rationality working with sense-experience which infuses all our perceptions, inferences and conclusions. In envisaging the human mind as a dual mechanism processing our responses to everything in terms of reason dialectically interacting with sense-experience he was at odds with Descartes and also with another great philosopher, John Locke, who thought that the mind is an empty slate, a *tabula rasa*, that gets filled with experiences after which all our valid inferences are subsequently derived by each individual applying his or her reason. For Comenius, by contrast, there was no such thing as sense experience first and pure reason making deductions afterwards. For him, the two things, experience and inference, go together and are always inseparable.¹ This placed him in direct conflict with the philosophies of Descartes and Locke which are both based on a strict dualism of mind and body, sharply separating the processes of thought from the sensual process of feelings and impulses. This means that Comenius was revolutionary in his attack on medieval education and on the prevailing philosophical systems of his age. For however much Descartes and Locke departed from the medieval format in other respects, they followed the medieval scholastics in separating reason from bodily experience. .

If Comenius was a revolutionary figure in education and in his conception of the true character of philosophy, he was also revolutionary with respect to religion. This is the part that often gets left out of eulogies of Comenius. Of course, it is true that Comenius was a fervent Christian, a man of faith and a believer in the doctrine of the Trinity to the extent of getting into long and arduous debates with Socinian preachers in Poland, Transylvania, Holland and elsewhere over the true nature of Christ and Christianity; but it would be quite wrong to assume that Comenius was a precursor of the 'Religious

Enlightenment' as that term is normally understood - that is as a thinker who sought to harmonize Enlightenment reform with deference to religious authority, churchmen and traditional theology. On the contrary, Comenius remained not only a sworn enemy of Catholicism and the Catholic Church but also of all the major churches, and of religious authority and Christian theology in the sense understood by Calvinists and Lutherans. It is important to remember that Comenius' mother and father belonged to the Protestant sect known as the Moravian Brethren, or *Unitas Fratrum*, and that he was himself brought up within that movement and became one of its principal religious leaders. Thus, Comenius belonged to a small sect, often surviving persecution only underground, whose founder Jan Hus was burnt at the stake as a heretic in 1415 and whose followers, after the defeat of the Protestants at the Battle of the White Mountain, in Bohemia, in 1620, were condemned and persecuted throughout the Austrian Habsburg empire. Like other Protestants, the Moravians insisted on religion being proclaimed and taught solely in the vernacular, not in Latin, and rejected what they regarded as the abuses of Catholicism, but they also went further in stressing that religion is pious conduct, not belief in doctrines, emphasizing the pastoral role of their religious leaders, and their abjuring the use of theology to create fixed and definitive confessional allegiance, or alliances with rulers.

There can be no doubt that throughout his career Comenius was strongly attracted to the Socinian-Unitarian conception of rational religion with "reason" as the supreme and only decisive criterion of truth providing a basis of what in German is called "kritischer antikirchlicher Antidogmatismus", hence to Socinianism's thoroughgoing breaking of the hegemony of dogma and ecclesiastical authority. But while he shared the Unitarians' stress on rationality and education as the basis of a better society, he also believed that the future of Christianity lay in shaping an undogmatic and enlightened religion that retained the doctrine of the Trinity as a spiritual inspiration at its core. This one mystical element in his thinking was related to his conception of the unity and oneness of the world, of all knowledge and awareness of all reality, to his idea that theology and philosophy must be subsumed into a single entity, that men must be taught to recognize the essence of things and not lose themselves in the vastness of detail and diversity.² This was the basis of his universalist 'pansophy'

It is reasonable therefore to view Comenius as a precursor not just of the Enlightenment in general but more specifically of the Radical Enlightenment. Partly because of this religious background, but mainly because of his unprecedented emphasis on education instead of belief or allegiance as the means to elevate mankind to a higher level, and also his ardent commitment to the need to bring peace

to humanity and end all persecution, fanaticism and intolerance, if mankind as a whole is to be elevated morally. The redefining of religion as pious conduct, rather than belief, his rejection of a professionally-trained separate priesthood and of religious authority possessing a role and knowledge different from that of the community, along with his demand that education be universal and tied to rejection of all intolerance and persecution, placed Comenius close to the category of eighteenth-century Unitarian democrats like Richard Price and Joseph Priestley who sought to combine a rationalized and de-theologized Christianity with one-substance philosophy and universalism in morality. What for the Protestants was the great disaster of the Battle of the White Mountain, and the consequent flight from their native country of most leaders of the Moravian brethren, caused Comenius to become a political as well as religious and educational leader of his co-religionists.³ To him it seemed obvious that without some kind of revolutionary overturning of the oppression and persecution imposed by monarchy in alliance with ecclesiastical authority, the exile, persecution and marginalization of his group would never end. And this revolution which he envisaged and planned was of its essence an Enlightenment revolution: in his view it is only by extracting men from their ignorance - the ignorance that supports and justifies oppressive governments allied to theologically-based religious authority - that man can be redeemed and enter the realm of universal justice and charity presided over by a kind of universal college functioning as a higher spiritual court designed to adjudicate and ensure harmony and peace.

This brings me to my last point, the role in our world today of the kind of enlightened moral and political universalism that Comenius envisaged. Of course, I agree with our last year's Comenius prize-winner, the Belgian statesman Herman graaf Van Rompuy, who stated in his Comenius Award speech: "De vrede blijft het hoogste goed ook omdat de oorlog het grootste kwaad is. Ze veegt alle menselijke waardigheid weg," and when he stated: "De vrede is het werk van vele factoren. In de eerste plaats van instellingen." Referring to the European Union, he rightly said that "Een geheel van verdragen, bestuursvormen en regels moeten ons beschermen tegen onszelf." However, we should add that treaties, laws and institutions on their own cannot save the European Union from breaking up in the face of the resurgent, renewed Nationalism, chauvinism, one-country "first" rhetoric, and "deal-making" between big powers that we see today surging up on all sides. On the contrary 'deal-making between big powers', between Russia and the United States, for example, can only take us back to the deadly great-power rivalries of the nineteenth century and will provide no security at all against aggression, expansionism and war.

Van Rompuy expressed the hope that the age of religious war is long past and that we will not sink back into the nationalistic wars of the nineteenth century because of the institutional framework of the European Union. It is here, I believe, that Comenius might be especially relevant and helpful to us today. Comenius' central point is that international peace is inseparable from raising the awareness and moral level of humanity and that this process of elevating mankind cannot be done by a political structure like the European Union's institutions and laws alone, any more than by belief or any church. If at all, it can only be done by educating everyone to comprehend the world we live in and understand how society, politics and community function and interact. Education, Comenius argued, besides being universal and the same for everyone, should by no means be mainly vocational or practical – for that is entirely to misunderstand its vital importance to us. Rather, education must be moral, social and based on civics, the opposite of what Mrs Thatcher taught the British. Education has to teach religion understood as just and charitable conduct toward others, it must inculcate a higher morality which in the end is the sole barrier against aggression and war, and the only true foundation for a network of institutions based on universal and equal human rights such as the European Union. This ought to make us think again about the way our schools and universities function: do they do enough to inculcate into children a shared sense of the enlightened moral and political secular universalism that ought to underpin the edifice of the European Union as it should the United States, the United Nations and all the major political entities of our world.

¹ Further on this see, Pavel Floss, "The Problem of Comenius' Sensualism", in Symposium Comenianum 1982. The Impact of J.A.Comenius on Educational Thinking and Practice ed. M.Kyralova and J. Privratika (Uhersky Brod, 1984), pp. 103-5

² Simon Kuchlbauer, *Johannes Amos Comenius' anti-sozialistische Schriften. Entwurf eines intergrativen Konzepts von Aufklärung* (Dresden, 2001), 70-5

³ Marcelle Denis, *Comenius* (Paris, 1994), 20, 123-4