
Comenius' Syncritic Method of Pansophic Research between Utopia and Rationalism

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Abstract

This paper deals with Comenius' ideas of the Chiliastic prophecy of a new millennium. To prepare for the realisation of this prophecy, human beings should practise brotherly love and, consequently, achieve an almost utopian society. This paper investigates the arguments Comenius employs to clarify that utopian ideas may come true in and through those institutions, and their interdependence. After discussing ideas of the Hermetic philosophy that significantly influenced Comenius' pansophy, this interdependence will be clarified by Comenius' syncritic method of pansophic research. Using this method, Comenius hoped to achieve rational knowledge, although not in the way of Descartes' philosophical method. Comenius wished to replace Descartes' rationalism with his own comprehensive pansophic rationality. However, Woldring's conclusion is that Comenius' syncritic method does not produce evidence but may instead generate hypotheses that should be investigated by empirical research.¹

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit den chiliastischen Vorstellungen des Comenius über ein neues Millennium. Um die Realisierung der Prophezeiung des neuen Millenniums vorzubereiten, sollten die Menschen brüderliche Liebe praktizieren und so – als Konsequenz aus diesem liebevollen Umgang – eine fast utopische Gesellschaft realisieren können. Der Beitrag untersucht die Argumente, die Comenius einbringt, um herauszustellen, dass utopische Ideen in diesen Institutionen, durch sie und in ihrer wechselseitigen Abhängigkeit wahr werden können. Woldring diskutiert dafür zunächst Konzepte der Hermetischen Philosophie, die die Pansophie des Comenius signifikant beeinflusst haben. Anschließend wird

1 A pre-version of this paper was published in German in Jahrbuch 20-21 (2003/2004) of the German Comenius Society, St. Augustine: Academia Verlag.

die wechselseitige Abhängigkeit von Utopie und hermetischer Philosophie mit Bezug auf die synkretische Methode der pansophischen Forschung geklärt. Mit dieser Methode wollte Comenius vernunftgetragenes Wissen gewinnen, dies aber nicht im Sinne der philosophischen Methode des Descartes. Comenius möchte dessen Rationalismus durch eine umfassende pansophische Rationalität ersetzen. Das Ergebnis der Darlegungen ist jedoch, dass die synkretische Methode des Comenius nicht empirische Erkenntnis produziert, sondern sich dafür eignet, Hypothesen zu generieren, die in empirischer Forschung untersucht werden sollten.

1 Introduction

This paper is constructed like a triptych. Part I deals with Comenius' ideas of the Chiliastic prophecy of a new millennium. To prepare for the realisation of this prophecy, human beings should practise brotherly love and, consequently, achieve an almost utopian society. Since he demonstrates that the idea of an almost utopian society is achievable partly by interdependent social institutions, I will show the arguments Comenius employs to clarify that utopian ideas may come true in and through those institutions, and their interdependence.

Part II continues the discussion of the interdependence of social institutions, in particular, by explaining the ideas from the tradition of Hermetic philosophy that significantly influenced Comenius' pansophy, which includes the idea of the mutual interdependence of all things. To answer the question of what characteristics may be attributed to this interdependence, Comenius' syncretic method of pansophic research will be described.

Part III continues the discussion of the syncretic method that tends to acquire rational knowledge. In discussing Descartes' one-sided rationalism Comenius wishes to replace this rationalism with his comprehensive pansophic rationality. To clarify the difference between their philosophical approaches, Comenius employs arguments that refer to the syncretic method. In my conclusions, I show that his syncretic method does not produce evidence but may instead generate hypotheses that should be investigated by empirical research.

Part I: Utopian road preparing for the Chiliastic prophecy

2 Prophecy of a new millennium

During his student days in Herborn (1611–1613), Comenius' professors Johann Heinrich Alsted and Johannes Piscator introduced him to the Chiliastic prophecy of a new millennium (Hotson 2000: 15–26).

After 1620 the idea of this millennium turned out to be an existential challenge. The movement of the Counter-Reformation became dominant in Central Europe, including the Czech domains of Bohemia and Moravia, and the Catholic government in Prague compelled Protestants by force to return to Catholicism at the risk of a death penalty or exile. In this desperate situation of persecution and the threat of death, Comenius and many of his fellow Protestants set their hopes on the Chiliastic prophecy of a new millennium.

The last book of the Bible, Revelation 20: 1–4, is about a new millennium in which Jesus Christ will rule the world. During his 1,000 year rule, all nations of the world would obey his government, the power of the devil would be broken, and peace would exist all over the world. The description of this new millennium is often related to Isaiah (2: 1–5) and other Old Testament prophets who speak about an empire that would be so remarkable and perfect that it would exceed all existing empires.

After his escape from Fulnek in 1621, and after the deaths of his wife and two little boys in 1622, Comenius wrote *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*. In this book, published in 1623 and written in the most hopeless period of his life, Comenius writes speculatively about the prophecy of the new millennium. He believes that the realisation of this prophecy would not happen in the hereafter but would soon be achieved by divine intervention in human history. Moreover, he defends the idea that human beings could actively prepare for this divine intervention. People should practise brotherly love, and would be able to achieve a society of order and peaceful rest, joy and abundance, freedom and truth. In this society, the rich would not be proud to be rich or disdainful to the poor, and the poor would not be jealous of the rich. Everyone would be happy with their possessions and would not be in want of anything more. Relationships between married people, as well as relationships between citizens and the government would be harmonious. If any of these things were not the case everyone would feel sorrow and all would suffer from the shortcomings. In this society, people would hardly need any law or regulation to do justice and no harm.²

2 Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World* (1623): 42, 5–7; 44, 3, 5, 7; 46, 2. Comenius, *Via lucis* (1668), VI, 13–15; VII. Also Comenius, *Angelus pacis* (1667): 41–47. Comenius, *Böhmische Didaktik* (1628–1632): 9–10. Cf. A. Lischewski, *Die Entdeckung der pädagogischen Mentalität bei Comenius* (2013: 63–64).

Comenius was a Christian who believed in the working power of the Holy Spirit in the life of human beings. This means that the Spirit of God not only inspired the authors of the Bible, but people in later times as well. He supported contemporaries like Nicolas Drabik, Christoph Kotter and Christina Poniatowska who had claimed that they had received divine revelations, which they expressed in prophecies. In these prophecies, they wrote, for instance, about the final victory of the Protestants over the Catholics. Since these prophecies appeared to be evidently wrong, critics asked questions about the reliability of human interpretations of divine revelations, and interpretations of Biblical prophecies as well. Comenius was very conscious of these questions, and investigated the prophecies of the three persons just mentioned. He was convinced of the sincerity of their prophecies. However, since the prophecies were plainly incorrect, he was criticised because his research had not been critical enough.

Another question is whether Comenius had really been critical with respect to human interpretations of Biblical prophecies of a new millennium. Therefore, the question arises about what the relationship is between Comenius' vision of the new millennium and his philosophy.

3 Utopian ideas in Comenius' philosophy

Comenius elaborated his philosophical ideas in a pansophy: universal or all-embracing knowledge of the world, useful for all people and all nations. When he lived in Amsterdam (1656–1670) he wrote his pansophic work *De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica* (*Universal Consultation on the Improvement of Mankind*, seven volumes). He published a summary of his pansophic ideas in *Via lucis* (1668). In these books, he reveals he is convinced of the idea that in his time the new millennium was near. He argues that people should prepare themselves for this divine intervention in human history. He proposes to organise a world conference of scholars, clergymen and politicians from all over the world to discuss how to improve education, school systems, economic, religious and political institutions, and how to achieve a universal language. He does not mean a language for scholars only, like Latin in former days, but a language that everyone in the world could employ to understand each other in a better way, and to promote a universal common good. A period of »light and peace for all nations« would dawn (Comenius, 1668/1992, XIX, 6, 15).

When universal education and a universal language would be introduced in all countries of the world, the »world would be open for all its inhabitants to travel in all directions, and [...] to teach and to learn without any obstacle. If all human beings will understand each other, they all will be almost a unity or a God dedicated nation, people, home, and school« (Comenius 1668/1992, XX, 7).

Since Comenius believes that these ideals would not devolve to people in the hereafter but that they could achieve them in the »penultimate period« in the near future,

according to Schaller, his description of the society that should prepare for the new millennium includes a blueprint of a »concrete utopia«: ideas which are not yet put into reality but which are realisable (Schaller 1973: 91).

Although Comenius has in mind some ideas of the millennium that are products of fantasy, his fantasy was inspired by the idea of a new world-society based upon certain fragments of Old Testament prophecies. There would be no violence anymore in the world, the power of the devil would be broken, the working of evil would be constrained, righteous people would occupy the earth, and peace would reign over the world. In short, the new millennium would arise just as it is described in the last book of the Bible (Revelation 20: 3).

Comenius' pansophy is an all-embracing philosophy intended to prepare for the millennium at hand. His pansophy is neither meant to improve the quality of life for individuals nor for their communities, but to improve the quality of life for mankind. However, the fragility of his pansophy is not only its world-embracing character but its direct connection to divine prophecies. Both its world-embracing character and the idea that human beings could prepare for a new millennium make many critics interpret his pansophy as a utopia.

4 Partly achievable Utopian ideas

In general, and in brief, one may argue that a utopia demonstrates the shortcomings of the existing human world, and that it may mobilise forces to change it (Van der Linde 1979: 46). More precise is Karl Mannheim's description of a utopia as a thought experiment that is a theoretical substitute for the desire to change society. A utopia contains a question, a direction and a perspective from which one can get hold of the existing reality (Mannheim 1987: 246–247; Woldring 1986: 193–194). These three issues – question, direction, and perspective – will be explained below.

First, the *question* arises from Comenius' desire to transcend the existing society, and to design an almost perfect society for preparing for the new millennium. His Chiliastic vision does not end with the idea of an almost perfect society, but points beyond itself. His vision contains an experiment of thought that inspires new ideas and a new understanding of society that aims to improve it.

Second, the *direction* of his utopian thought can be understood in such a way that Comenius' pansophy contains a metaphysical principle which ascribes priority to theoretical thought over being. This metaphysical principle inspires to pass from the spectacle of ordinary things, and to prepare the renewal of society. We may compare Comenius' *The Labyrinth of the World*, on one hand, and Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly* and More's *Utopia*, on the other. All three are manifestations of non-dogmatic Christian thought: creative and literary-aesthetic essays, critical of society of the time, and stimulating a renewal of the construction of society and its future. Like the essays by Erasmus and More, Comenius' *The Labyrinth of the World* sprouted from his fan-

tasy but, despite this, it contains certain ideas that are meant to be taken seriously. We therefore have to investigate which parts of his utopian vision can improve the world.

Third, the *perspective* of Comenius' pansophy can be understood to mean the description of a utopian society. Although Comenius' utopian vision of society cannot be achieved completely (his idea of a universal language seems to be fictitious), this society is the only one that has any right to call itself a commonwealth, i. e. a society in which people are truly involved in promoting their common as well as particular interests in and through various social institutions, and their interdependence.

5 Social institutions and their interdependence

When preparing for the new millennium, people should strive to achieve (brotherly) love, social justice and solidarity in social institutions. Comenius argues that in educational institutions, like families, parents should pay much attention to various aspects of education by teaching children elementary knowledge of trees and flowers, their own body and hygiene, music and plays. However, the most important characteristic of a family is that it is an institution of love.

In educational institutions such as schools the intellectual and moral education should also be characterised by love (Comenius 1632–1633, chapters I and XII). Comenius argues that practising love would encourage children to become well-balanced adults with a sense of moral responsibility in economic, religious and political institutions (Comenius, *Via lucis*, 1668/1992, XVII: 5–6).

Yet in economic institutions like commercial relationships, and relationships between rich and poor people, situations are more difficult. Comenius argues that the exploitation of employees and poor people should be forbidden. Rich and poor people should respect each other, and practise moral values of brotherly love, social justice and solidarity. Despite preaching these moral values, he was aware that many employers and rich people who called themselves Christians were violating these values. He claims that many rich people had many more possessions than they needed, and that poor people were lacking in food, clothes and other elementary necessities. Many were used to accepting their social position, but Comenius argues that this social order was not according to God's will. Some people had to work hard to earn their living and yet did not have enough to make ends meet, while others wasted their money. Comenius refuses to accept this situation as a morally righteous one. He argues that people should attempt to improve this situation. In his book *Letters from Heaven* (1619), he takes a stand against the exploitation of the poor by the rich (Comenius 1619/1992: 68–99). Although he describes an almost morally perfect situation as an alternative that has not yet been achieved, he argues that those improvements should and could be achieved in part (Comenius 1623/1986: 6–7).

Religious institutions like local and regional congregations are to be characterised by their confessions that should include mutual brotherly love and tolerance. In a va-

riety of publications Comenius argues that the representatives of these congregations should meet in a national conference to promote peace within and between countries. He propagated this conviction throughout his whole lifetime and, in particular, he defended this conviction during his stay in Elbing. Here he participated in a conference (the »Colloquium Charitativum«) in 1644–1645 to settle conflicts between the Lutherans, Calvinists and Roman Catholics. He held a reputation as an irenic, righteous and tolerant mediator (cf. Richter 2013: 111–324).

Political institutions like national governments should guarantee to maintain the rule of law and public justice in order to promote a society of peace and general welfare (Comenius 1970a: 376–379). According to Comenius, for this purpose the government should promote the idea that all young people, including children of poor parents, receive an adequate school education (Comenius 1968: XVII, 5–6). Moreover, self-interest and avarice do not only characterise individuals but communities as well. If governments take care of just their national economic interests, without regard for other countries, they are a threat to world peace. If they hinder the righteous commercial interests of other nations then they are doing wrong, and pursuing a policy of injustice (Comenius 1667/1931). Government should promote public justice and, through inter-confessional conferences, governments should guarantee at least social peace.

Although the above description is somewhat schematic, it comes down to the following: in and through educational, economic, religious and political institutions moral values (brotherly love, social justice, solidarity and tolerance) may be strengthened. The process of the moral strengthening of social institutions is essential for the quality of their functioning and, consequently, their interdependence. Moreover, this process of bolstering moral values in and through social institutions may promote public justice in society at large and, thereby, promote general welfare.

6 The quest for interdependence

Two issues have been discussed with regard to Comenius' utopian thought: first, the characteristics of various types of social institutions and, second, their interdependence. This interdependence not only means that institutions are interconnected, but that they essentially depend on each other. That is to say, an institution can only realise its goals adequately if other institutions function adequately at the same time. Interdependence can degenerate to relationships of dependence if the rights and interests of one institution dominate, and operate at the cost of the legitimate rights and interests of other institutions. Interdependence thus has an inherent normative dimension, and this means that institutions should develop simultaneously in an interconnected way. In short, a variety of institutions and their interdependence constitute society at large, and its survival. In part II, I will uncover the key components of this interdependence, as Comenius sees it, by clarifying the syncritic method of his pansophic research.

7 First results of the argumentation

I have discussed Comenius' ideas of the prophecy of a new millennium, and preparation for it. According to his description, the society preceding this millennium is not a perfect one, yet it is such an ideal society that it seems to be a utopia which appears to be only partly achievable.

Although human beings are unable to achieve a perfect society, they may improve their world. This goal will be achieved by realising moral values in and through interdependent social institutions. The characteristics of this interdependence will be clarified as I now turn to Comenius' research method.

Part II: The Syncritic Method of Pansophic Research

8 Significant scholars

During his study in Herborn and shortly afterwards Comenius showed great interest in new ideas of German Lutheranism. In this time, i. e. in the second decade of the seventeenth century, the development of his thought was significantly influenced by Johann Heinrich Alsted, the Rosicrucians, Johannes Valentinus Andreae, and Jacobus Böhme. These philosophers will now be discussed. They have certain ideas in common that refer to the tradition of Hermetic philosophy (see Ritman 1992: 40). In this philosophical tradition Comenius elaborated his pansophy that starts with the idea of the mutual interdependence of all things. To answer the question of which characteristics may be attributed to this interdependence, the ›syncritic method‹ of Comenius' pansophic research will be discussed.

Already in his youth Comenius believed that he lived in an originally harmonious world in which everything had its own and suitable place. During his study in Herborn, he was impressed by Alsted who made him familiar with the idea of the complicated and harmonious relationships between the macrocosm and microcosm: relationships between God and the universe, and human beings, and between growth of embracing scientific knowledge of the universe and the progress of mankind. In 1612, Alsted published his *Systema physicae harmonica* in which he integrated various philosophical theories of nature, and he introduced Comenius to secrets of alchemy, astrology and mysticism (Blekastad 1969: 31–35; cf. Hofmann 1985: 22–29).

In Herborn Comenius also appeared susceptible to the ideas of the Rosicrucians. The movement of the Rosicrucians, which started in 1604, became widely known by the publication of *Fama Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis* (1614, *Fraternity of the Order of Rosicrucians*) that had already circulated a couple of years before in circles of German scholars. Comenius would have been familiar with this publication. The move-

ment of the Rosicrucians was named after Christian Rosenkreuz (1378–1484) – the *Fama Fraternitatis Rosae Crucia* contains a short biography of him. As a young man he wandered through various Arab countries. In Syria and Egypt, Arab scholars introduced him to physics, mathematics and biology, and to their philosophical ideas. Back in Germany, he founded a secret fraternity and made its members familiar with the knowledge he had acquired.

In contrast, the movement of the Rosicrucians was not a secret fraternity. They were inspired by Christian traditions mixed with Patristic and Neoplatonic, Arab and Eastern-mystic influences. Moreover, they discussed the idea of universal wisdom that starts with research of nature. They wished to overcome the fragmentary results of knowledge, and were interested in all-embracing knowledge and wisdom of a harmonious world. Comenius argues that the Rosicrucians possessed the »philosopher's stone« that enabled them to recover from all illnesses, and would guarantee a long life (Comenius 1623/1983: 13). Notwithstanding their knowledge of magic and alchemy, the Rosicrucians rejected the »ungodly and accused gold making ... by adventurers and villains« (*Mysteriën van het rozekruis* 1912; cf. Wittemans 1924: 39). They wished to overcome the Babel-like confusion caused by the large number of different languages by developing a universal language. The Rosicrucians had an enduring influence on Comenius, in particular on the development of his pansophy.

The biographical novel *Chemic Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz in 1459*, written by the Lutheran theologian Johann Valentin Andreae (1586–1654) and published in 1616 was important for Comenius. Andreae had been an adherent of the Rosicrucians in his youth, but later dissociated from them because of distasteful polemics about their ideas. Although he left the fraternity (around 1619), he did not abandon the Christian faith. Inspired by Christian tradition and in cooperation with some kindred spirits, in 1620 he founded the secret *Societas Christiana* that intended to bring a group of orthodox Christians together who would support each other in an »endeavor to cultivate true religion, improve dissolute morals, and restore knowledge« in Europe (Thomson 1999: 12).

Soon after arriving in Lezno (1628), in a letter to Andreae Comenius asked for information about the *Societas Christiana* and then asked to become a member of that society. They recognised each other as intimate kindred spirits and maintained a close relationship thereafter. Later, Comenius would often refer to Andreae as the person who had promoted the development of his pansophy (Blekastad 1969: 152–154, 158–161).

Jacob Böhme (1575–1624), a German Lutheran and a Rosicrucian, was an adherent of Paracelsus (1493–1541). A professor of medicine in Basel, Paracelsus was a specialist in magic, and an important promoter of alchemy that during and after the Renaissance became influential and even popular. In his research and philosophy, Böhme appears to have been influenced by Neoplatonism. Böhme studied mysticism and alchemic literature, and integrated many of Paracelsus' ideas into his philosophy. Although Comenius never met Böhme in person, he was familiar with his work and,

consequently, with Paracelsus' philosophy as an integral part of it. Probably already during his student days, Comenius read Böhme's book *Morgenröthe im Aufgang* (1612, published subsequently under the title *Aurora*). A couple of years later, in 1621, he published his book *De signatura rerum (or the Origin and Meaning of all Things)* that was also influenced by Paracelsus' alchemy. In this book Böhme wrote about the »philosopher's stone«. Although he was familiar with the philosopher's stone as the essential component in alchemical processes, he transcends this restricted interpretation by identifying Jesus Christ as the philosopher's stone. This means, according to Böhme, that the cornerstone of philosophy refers to divine love in this world that reveals itself in Jesus Christ (Böhme 1997: 581–583).

9 Significant ideas

In developing his pansophy Comenius was influenced by the philosophers just mentioned, who made him familiar with Christian theological ideas of divine love, and with alchemist, mystic and Neoplatonic ideas (cf. Holzhey, vol. 4/1, 2001: 72, 80). These ideas (mixed with Gnosticism and magicism) are well-known components of the Hermetic philosophy that is named after the legendary Hermes Trimegistus who has been identified as the Egyptian god Thoth, and was perceived to be a contemporary of the law-giver Moses (13th century B.C.). The Hermetic philosophy includes ideas that come from different philosophical traditions and, at the same time, integrates these ideas into a philosophical system. Significant philosophers of the Renaissance and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were influenced by hermetic ideas. Paracelsus was a key figure, as already mentioned. He promoted Hermetic philosophy, and considered the magical approach to nature to be an attractive feature of Hermeticism. However, others like Alsted, the Rosicrucians, Andreae, and Comenius as well wished to avoid magicism in their interpretation of Hermeticism.

The treatises attributed to Hermes Trimegistus, which were compiled by Alexandrian scholars in the second and third centuries A.D., have been preserved in Greek codices, which we now call the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Another Hermetic work, widely known in the Middle Ages, bears the title *Asclepius: The Complete Revelation of Hermes Trimegistus*.

The central idea of the Hermetic tradition is the interwoven nature of man as the microcosm in the animated context of the macrocosm (*Corpus Hermeticum* 1996, VII, 5; *Asclepius* 1996: 10). Human beings are endowed with the divine gift of reason to acquire knowledge of the macrocosm. In earthly life, however, this divine force within the human soul is darkened since the human body is bound to earth. For this reason, human beings will never achieve a perfect image of the macrocosm. Yet their soul will be enlightened by the divine light to achieve an intuitive insight in its unity with God and the cosmos (*Corpus Hermeticum* 1996, I and IV; *Asclepius* 1996: 4).



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