



continuous conversion

COMENIUS, BOHEMIAN EDUCATOR AND CHURCHMAN

BY JARDA TUSEK

Americans celebrate 1620 as the year that the Protestant Pilgrims, some of the best-known Founding Fathers, landed on Plymouth Rock in the *Mayflower* in their search for religious freedom. The Massachusetts Bay Colony which they founded, with significant help from Native Americans, laid the groundwork for the New England States and helped establish Protestantism in North America.

Yet, ironically, Czechs remember 1620 as the year that Protestantism in Central Europe suffered “an irredeemable catastrophe.”

1620: Protestant Defeat

This catastrophe was the Battle of White Mountain, fought just outside of Prague. Reflecting the complicated political and religious controversies of the day, the Bohemian, or Czech, combatants at this battle were split into two groups. One group joined the armies of the Austrian Catholic emperor Franz Ferdinand; these armies soundly defeated the hastily-assembled Protestant Bohemian armies, who were themselves split into several groups, all known as Hussites (followers of Master Jan Hus, 15th century Bohemian religious reformer).

This defeat, underscored by a humiliating scene in Prague’s Old Town Square in which 27 Bohemian nobles were publicly executed, ushered in 300 years of Catholic hegemony, empowered by the Counter Reformation, and further weakened the Protestant Church in Bohemia. (Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*).

Following this defeat, one group of Hussite followers, the Utraquists, disappeared altogether from Europe; the radical group, known as the Unitas Fratrum (Unity of the Brethren) survived largely because of the heroic efforts of the 17th-century Bohemian philosopher, educator and writer Jan Amos Komensky, known internationally as Bishop Comenius (a Latinized form of his name).



Jan Amos Komensky (Comenius)

The Life of Comenius

Comenius is best known today for his enlightened educational theories (laid out at a time when rigid, authoritarian educational practices were strictly enforced in most schools). He is also remembered for his leadership in the Unitas Fratrum after it was officially disbanded by the Hapsburg rulers. His leadership helped to preserve the faith and unity of this Protestant group as they either left Bohemia for Poland or hid their beliefs to avoid persecution by the Hapsburg authorities in Bohemia.

Comenius was born in Moravia, in the Czech Lands, in 1592. He attended his village school, where repetition, recitation, rote learning without comprehension, and physical punishment were the tools used to educate. Comenius attended the University of Heidelberg, in Germany, receiving a degree in theology.

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The Contributions of Comenius

After completing his studies in Heidelberg, Comenius returned to Moravia. He worked as a teacher and was ordained into the Unitas Fratrum; in 1625, he was elected a bishop.

In 1628, Spanish troops fighting the 30 Years' War burned his village to the ground, leaving Comenius with just his life. For several years he lived the life of a fugitive in his own land as the Hapsburg rulers sought to exterminate the Unitas Fratrum. Then, with a small group of his followers, he fled to Poland, finding a teaching job in Leszno.

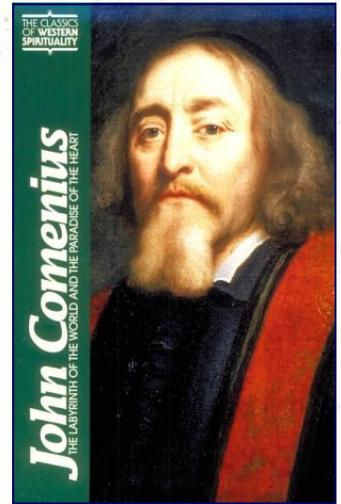
During the next decades Comenius studied and taught in a number of countries, including Sweden, the Netherlands, England, Hungary, Transylvania, and Prussia. Here he developed and tested his remarkable educational theories.

Education should be done "quickly and pleasantly," according to Comenius. The school year should be limited to 42 weeks; the teacher was responsible for making the classroom an interesting, pleasant place where children would want to learn. The teacher's job was to find ways to motivate children to want to learn, and to avoid using punishment as a tool for learning.

Much of Comenius' theoretical basis for education was derived from a study of nature ("God's second book"). In nature he found an orderly progression of development that begins with the choice of a suitable subject, with proper preparation, at a suitable time. Nature develops from

within, in an orderly, step-by-step progression. Nature leaves no operation it has commenced until it is finished; it avoids obstacles and that which is likely to cause hurt.

Comenius' most famous work is *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, an allegory on the degradation of the world. He wrote the first picture book for children, *Orbus Dictus*, and *The Way of Light*, a universal plan for education and peace.



Comenius, the Man

The fruitfulness of Jan Amos Komensky's career is all the more noteworthy when you consider the many trials he faced. Twice he was widowed; twice his home and library were destroyed by fire (once in Poland). He never returned to his native Moravia after his church was exiled, and he was at the mercy of various political intrigues as he moved from one country to the next.

Yet his writings on education gained a wide readership all over the world and helped change education from a dull, regimented routine offered only to boys to a lively, enjoyable process open to all children. His Hussite Protestant Unitas Fratrum church in exile kept alive the "hidden seed" that became the Moravian Church, which sent hundreds of missionaries all over the globe in the 18th century. Comenius' impact on education and Christianity continue to shape the world long after his death.