

Comenius
A new philosophy of education (1/2)

By Brother Étienne Krotky

«Education is a grandiose work: it is, indisputably, one of the most magnificent man can undertake» (Opera Didactica Omnia II, col.64,3).

It is always easier to understand an institution, a doctrine, a change of ideas, when they are seen in their historical context. The same is true also, evidently, of the work accomplished by St John Baptist de La Salle and his first disciples. The purpose of this article is to give an outline of the philosophy of education of Comenius (1592-1670), the first philosophy of education in the West.

This article will restrict itself to an examination of only three aspects of a very long work, very long because its author «considered the question of education in all its amplitude» (J. Piaget).

1. The purpose of education

Comenius was exiled to Leszno in Poland in 1628 and found employment teaching in a college. All pupils, and not only those taught by Comenius, found the study of Latin very difficult and unrewarding. Comenius thought how he might make this study easier and more profitable. His thinking took him beyond the consideration of Latin conjugations and declensions. He discovered that the children he had before him were beings in whom mysterious forces were at work, each with its own laws and its own rhythm. Comenius realised that he was in the face of «one of the most profound mysteries of the world and of our salvation» (1). He began to identify the laws which played a part in this process of growth by likening it to «the formative process at work in all beings». For J. Piaget, this was a stroke of genius (2). We will not describe how Comenius set about identifying these laws. Suffice it to say, that by his efforts he succeeded in creating a new science, and that he became the «Galileo of education», as Michelet calls him.

The purpose of this process of growth must be the formation of a MAN. Comenius describes the characteristics that distinguish him:

1. The ability to think, to know things, to reason - called Reason (Ratio);
2. The use of articulate language, thanks to which he is capable of communicating his thoughts and feelings to others;
3. The ability to act, to make new things, called OPERATIO in his philosophy. It was a great novelty in those days to consider a person under this aspect.
4. The ability to act morally, to decide freely to do one thing and not another;
5. The ability to turn to God, to honour him, to unite oneself to him, and to deserve to enjoy his company for all eternity.

These characteristics describe HUMANITY, something all members of the human race possess, or at least, ought to possess. These characteristics are like imprints left by God

on man when he created Adam. 'Because of these imprints, man resembles God, and is his «image».

But, and this is fundamental for Comenius, these abilities are not given to people at their birth in their fully developed and perfect form. This, however, is what his contemporaries thought. Malebranche, for example, wrote the following: «Little children have a reason identical with that of adults, but they simply lack experience...They need to be trained to make up their own minds using the reason they have been provided with». Fénelon says likewise that children already have, at a very early age, «all the ideas and all the general principles they will have subsequently». What they said was simply the application of mechanistic philosophy, brilliantly expressed by Descartes, which was essentially creationistic and atemporal.

The position of Comenius is based on a philosophy which is opposed to that of mechanism. He believed that «It is the law of all created things that they begin from nothing and grow progressively» (3). This law applies also to the human mind: «Where would our mind obtain the privilege of being perfect by itself and of itself, if it were not formed previously to do so?» (4).

Consequently, the 5 characteristics which constitute HUMANITY exist in each individual when he is born, but only potentially, simply as «propensities»: they exist only in seed form. For a seed to grow, it must be put into soil which suits it, and enjoy favourable conditions of heat and humidity. This explains the inescapable need for education. Deprived of this essential human help, some babies and little children became so-called «wolf-children». Comenius considered the case of these children (5).

He gave the name «school» to any institution or anything that helped to create a favourable atmosphere for the development of the potential capabilities with which the child was endowed. He said, rather amusingly, that the school is a «officina humanitatis (a humanity workshop or laboratory)». He demands that «schools, those laboratories of humanity, succeed in transforming every child that goes to them into MEN» (6).

Can one give a school a finer purpose?

His ultimate purpose does not exclude other aims, such as that of preparing a child for the life he is going to lead and the profession he will follow, provided that he is trained to use his human qualities, his intelligence, etc. Comenius, in fact, insists on giving this kind of preparation to children. On the other hand, by contrast with this purpose, certain aims proposed for schools may appear rather shabby, such as that of «social preferment», or the acquisition of knowledge in order to escape manual labour, especially its most demanding forms. This temptation is a constant one, as is attested by the «Satire on professions», written many centuries ago in Egypt, during the 11th dynasty (between 2106 and 1963 BC). In the text, a father exhorts his son to have enough courage to learn hieroglyphics and become a scribe, because «all those who work with their hands...are as miserable as they are unfortunate».

Do we, like Comenius, have to go so far as to ask teachers to form the MAN in the child? It is well understood, of course, that a teacher influences children most by what he is himself. A person who has achieved in himself the ideal represented by man, helps a child to become a Man by his very presence. While all this is very true, the fact that one does or does not explicitly enunciate this purpose is not a matter of indifference. In the 16th and 17th century, for example, the purpose of the «Little schools» and the colleges was to promote the spread of Christian instruction and to produce good Catholics or good converts. «If the Company of Jesus...decided to open colleges for the formation of youth, it did so...for strictly apostolic motives. The Jesuits never hid this aim» (Codina Mir. S.J.) (7). The consequence of this aim was that other aspects of education were inevitably not given their proper value. In the Middle

Ages, for example, science was tolerated only as the «handmaid of theology» and, in our own days, in totalitarian countries, only to the extent it serves the purposes of the regime. As the Jesuit Fr de Dainville wrote: «Despite the care that they lavished on it, the education of minds was only a secondary aim for the Jesuits, or rather, only a means. The purpose they pursued, the basis of their whole pedagogical system, was to form good Christians» (8). This could have serious consequences.

But, there is more. During the period under consideration, Christians were divided up into different camps which were violently opposed to each other, and in the hands of one (the Catholics) or of the other (the Protestants), education was simply «a more important weapon than military arms» (M. Debesse). The work of Comenius, however, is completely free of any ideological contamination (although he was very committed). It is characterised by pedagogy that is perfectly untainted.

From the notion that school is necessary as a context in which to encourage the growth of human potential, it follows quite naturally that education should be extended to ALL people. This was the justification, from 1630 onwards, for what was later called the «democraticisation» of education. «All men who are born have the same destiny - to become truly men...If therefore we make education available only to some and exclude others, we commit an injustice» (9). Comenius has an extraordinary sense of the universal and of man's identity: «Human nature is one and identical in all men, wherever they live in this world» (10). He explains what he means by the word «all»: «ALL men, that means, all peoples, States, families and persons without exception» (11). This universality has to include explicitly the so-called barbarians and savages (who were enslaved without scruple). «We must accept that even totally barbarian people should be enlightened and freed from a darkness due to a lack of instruction, because they too are a part of the human race» (12).

In a given country, the need for this education includes all people without distinction, whatever their social rank. «It is not only the children of the rich and of important people who should be admitted to schools, but all children, on an equal footing, whether poor or rich, whether noble or commoner, whether boy or girl, whether living in towns or villages or hamlets...for the image of God has to be restored in everybody» (D.M.XI,1).

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that UNESCO has recognised Comenius as «its spiritual master», since he «was one of the first propagators from whom UNESCO drew inspiration when it was founded...for he promoted the idea of school instruction for everyone and education for adults...and because he championed the idea of collaboration between the peoples of the world and their peaceful organisation» (13).

2. Creation of a complete educational system

During the period under consideration, there were, of course, places where education was given, but these establishments did not form a homogeneous whole. The principal institution which dispensed learning to young people was the so-called Latin college, which originated in the medieval faculty of Arts. The colleges were completely independent of one another, not only as regards administration, but also the spirit which inspired them and the courses of study they offered. The only exception occurred when an institution (a religious order, for example) founded a series of colleges and imposed the same guidelines and regulations on them. A good example of this is offered by the colleges founded by the Jesuits who, in addition, gave them some standing. Normally, future students of these colleges learned to read and write at home with the help of a private tutor. The college was a self-sufficient educational establishment.

The «Little Schools» were founded mostly by ecclesiasti-

cal authorities (to implement the decrees of the Councils) and to provide children with religious instruction and, in some cases, to teach them also to read and write. These schools were normally dependent on the parish priest. They were so many little centres of popular culture. They offered their pupils no preparation at all for continuing their studies in a college.

On the other hand, and this is more important, there was no clear concept of what a child was. To oversimplify, but not by much, one can say that the idea that childhood was a period of life with its own characteristics and its own specific needs, did not exist. Apart for their size and their physical strength, children were similar to adults. It was thought that they could reason like adults - we have only to recall what was said by Malebranche and Fénelon. It was sufficient, therefore, to teach them what one thought they ought to know, by putting them immediately into contact in the colleges with material on which adult life was based. An exception was made, for moral reasons, when it came to obscene passages which occurred occasionally in the writings of the Ancients.

If, today, we have a different idea of what constitutes childhood, it is because, at a certain point, there occurred a «Copernican revolution». The responsibility for this revolution lies with Comenius, who was the first in our history to have considered the child as a separate entity, different from an adult, a being with its own interests and its own specific needs, which do not correspond to those of adults, but which adults must recognise and respect, and to which they must adapt.

Comenius had the audacity to suggest that the reason, with which children are born, is not, in fact, already formed and ready to function, but that its capacity is only potential and has to be developed, by passing through some necessary stages, during which it is capable only of activities of a certain level, which pedagogy can identify. By passing progressively from one level to a higher one, reason achieves maturity and acquires its definitive form.

This development passes through four stages.

1. The first stage is «early infancy» (infantia) which starts at birth and continues till the age of 6. The only form of intelligence at this stage is the ability to distinguish one object from another. This enables children to manipulate and to use them. However, «They are still unable to see objects as ideas...and so we cannot speak to them in abstract terms». Their mind develops when they engage in concrete activities such as «building little houses», etc. We must give them toys because the fact of handling them «will help them to understand things in their own way».

Comenius wrote an educational work for this age, entitled «Schola infantiae» (Infant School), which is «the first pre-school textbook in world literature» (14), and which makes its author «the founder of school pedagogy» (D.Capkova). This fact has been arrogantly ignored in French cultural circles.

2. The second stage is that of «childhood» (pueritia), which goes from the age of 6 to 12. Physical contact with things and their handling has developed the mind of the young child who, in this second stage, becomes capable of reasoning, but only on the basis of «tangible facts».

3. «Adolescence (from 12 to 18 years of age) is characterised by its ability to reason. The adolescent is not satisfied with knowing that a thing exists: he tries to discover its nature and why it is the way it is and not different» (M.L.N.X,12).

4. Maturity is reached at the end of the fourth stage which is that of «youth» (from 18 to 24 years of age). The mind becomes capable of the highest forms of abstraction and of new inventions. The young man acquires also self-control. In a word, he becomes totally independent.

.../...