

JOHN AMOS
Comenius:
A VISIONARY
REFORMER OF
SCHOOLS

GIANTS IN THE
HISTORY OF EDUCATION



David I. Smith, PhD

Series Editor: David Diener, PhD





John Amos Comenius: A Visionary Reformer of Schools

© Classical Academic Press®, 2017

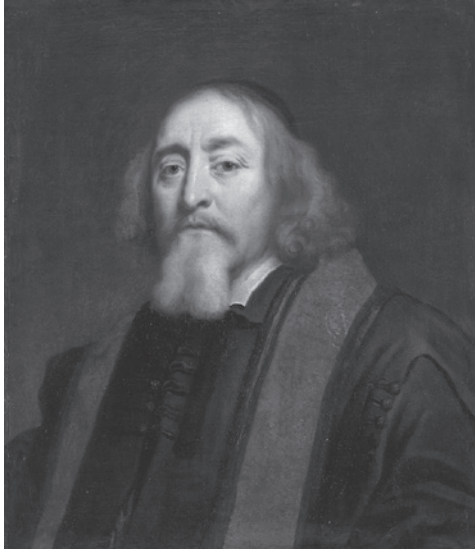
Version 1.0

ISBN: 978-1-60051-316-9

All rights reserved. This publication may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of Classical Academic Press.

Cover and interior design template by Lenora Riley

Classical Academic Press
515 S. 32nd Street
Camp Hill, PA 17011
www.ClassicalAcademicPress.com



*Portrait of Jan Amos Comenius,
Jürgen Ovens, 1650–1670*

YOUTH AND EXILE (1592–1627)

Comenius was born in Moravia (in the modern-day Czech Republic) on March 28, 1592. He was a lifelong member of the Unity of Brethren, a small Christian denomination that grew out of a fifteenth-century Reformation movement in Bohemia (next door to Moravia). This movement, emerging from the teachings of Petr Chelčický, had both similarities to and differences from the more widely known Western European Reformation movements. The Unity of Brethren were characterized by a distinctive combination of emphases on moral purity, peaceful unity with Christians of other confessions, and responsible service to society.²

After the early death of his parents, Comenius went to live with relatives, where he was put to work at a mill and was not sent to the

2. See Craig D. Atwood, *The Theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

LXXXIII.

Eques.

Der Reiter.



Eques 1
 imponit *Equo* 2,
Ephippium, 3
 idq; laccingit
Cingulo; 4
 infertur etiam.
Dorsuale; 5
 ornat cum
Phaleris,
Frontali, 6
Antilena, 7

Der Reiter 1
 legt dem Pferd 2
 den Sattel 3 auf/
 welchen er ihm angürtet
 mit dem Gurt; 4
 er legt ihm auch auf
 den Schaberaß [Rück-
 zieret es (deckt;)] 5
 mit dem Kopfzeug/
 dem Stirnriemen/ 6
 Brustriemen/ 7
 &c Po.

Figure 1

The book begins with a reference to Adam's task of naming all of the animals (Genesis 2:19–20) and an invitation to learning, accompanied by an image of a teacher and student (figure 2).



Figure 2

In this image, to the left we see unformed nature, under a clouded sky; to the right are the rays of the sun in an open heaven, and there are buildings. Teacher and student stand on a path that runs, left to right, from nature to a well-formed community, from merely organic life to a porch, framed between the teacher's staff and robe, that offers entry to the world of learning.⁶ The teacher wears a pilgrim's hat; the child holds his hat in polite deference. The teacher can be trusted as a godly guide, while the student has learned manners and self-control and is ready for schooling.⁷ The rays of the sun shine through and frame the teacher's countenance, and their line continues to the student's head, signaling a divine presence that connects teacher and

6. Comenius refers to the three levels of textbook in his planned curriculum as the *Vestibulum*, *Ianua*, and *Atrium* (porch, gate, and courtyard), forming from their initials the word VIA, meaning path or way, and the image likely alludes to this. See Turner, "Visual Realism," 122. Turner also notes that between the trees and the buildings is a single tree with a branch touching the ground, a symbol for education (Turner, 123).

7. Ayers Bagley, "An Invitation to Wisdom and Schooling," *University of Minnesota*, 2010, <http://iconics.cehd.umn.edu/OrbisSensualiumPictus/Lecture/default.html>.



Figure 3

We then embark on the 150 thematic chapters. These are not a mere list, but are carefully arranged to reflect the harmonious order of the world. The first chapter is about God, and the last is about the Day of Judgment, thus together forming an encompassing frame. In between we survey the world, its elements, and the creatures that live in it; the physical and spiritual makeup of human beings; a wide range of human callings and occupations and the community locations in which they are pursued; various means of travel and communication; the scholarly disciplines; the geography of Europe; moral philosophy and the virtues; marital and family relationships; laws and commerce; medicine and death; various forms of play; the military and war; and comparative religion. The scope is impressively broad, yet also concise.

A closer look at one of the chapters on human callings reveals more of Comenius's design (figure 4).



Figure 4

Here, as elsewhere, key vocabulary is numerically linked to images to facilitate student learning. The accompanying text begins, “The potter, 1. sitting over a wheel, 2. makes pots . . .” and continues to name the items numbered in the illustration. However, the picture is not just for decoration or to aid memory; it is intended to help students exercise their senses and imagination as a path to understanding and to provide a point of focus for reflection and conversation about wise action in the world.

This picture is also typical of the *Orbis Pictus* in that, unlike some kinds of picture dictionary, it does not depict isolated objects extracted from their context for the purposes of naming. Rather it places objects within their real-world relationships and amid purposeful human activity. Learning is for wise action, not simply abstract erudition. As is typical of descriptions in other chapters, the daily activity of the potter is described concretely and without pious glosses. The potter is not used as an occasion to remind us that God is the potter and we are the clay. Rather his activity takes place within the frame created by the God/Day of Judgment chapters and stands on an equal footing with the chapters on virtue and faith. As we have

seen, on one hand reason, virtuous action, and piety are understood as inseparable: Take human activities out of their ethical and spiritual context and they become vanities, parts of the labyrinth. On the other hand, this does not mean that the way to relate every human activity to God is to collapse it into devotional practice and turn every topic into Bible study. All human callings are shown to have dignity and integrity, and should be pursued wisely in their own right.

Finally, a brief look at a chapter on moral philosophy will illustrate the breadth of Comenius's turn to the real world as he addressed the topic of patience (figure 5).



Figure 5

The foreground character sits in gloom beneath dark clouds that obscure the sun. A lash wielded from the sky, lightning, and a sword indicate the pressure of life's calamities and wrongs, so familiar to Comenius. Despite all this, the figure looks to the partially glimpsed sun and prays patiently and meekly, like the lamb shown at her side. A ship, tossed on the sea, is attached to the anchor on which she leans, signifying hope. By contrast, a figure to the left wails and rages, like the barking dog at his side, without having any effect on the circumstances. He has abandoned reason and succumbed to