

Abstract:

The concept of *cultura universalis* as found in Comenius still is a challenge for our time because it encourages us to see cultural differences as opportunities for mutual cooperation and completion.

Zusammenfassung:

Der Begriff der *cultura universalis*, wie er sich bei Comenius findet, stellt eine Herausforderung für unsere Zeit dar, weil er uns dazu ermutigt, in kulturellen Differenzen Gelegenheiten zu wechselseitiger Zusammenarbeit und Ergänzung zu sehen.

Keywords:

civilization; culture; intercultural encounter; ontology
follows

Cultura universalis in Comenius – a Challenge for the 21st Century?

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Our time faces the challenge that once more cultural differences seem to play an important role for our everyday life as well as for global politics.¹ Part of this challenge is to understand what these cultures and the civilizations carrying them² really are and how they are and should be related to one another. In this regard, the concept of *cultura universalis* in Comenius can be seen as a welcome corrective to some recent approaches to the phenomenon of culture.³

1. The Concept of Culture: Some Philosophical Sources of Its Recent Resurgence

Why has culture become such urgent a topic during the past decades? Apart from political events and social trends, this resurgence seems to have some eminent philosophical sources,

¹ See e.g. the challenges mentioned at the beginning of Meinert Meyer's contribution to this book.

² Here and subsequently I will not differentiate between 'culture' and 'civilization'.

³ Cf. Voigt 2011a.

i.e. sources on a plane where a confrontation with the thought of Comenius might immediately make sense: In his influential work *A Study of History* (1934-1961), Arnold Toynbee pictures civilizations as entities with profound and decisive influence on history and current politics, entities which are developing, flourishing and declining also because of their mutual contacts which pose challenges to them that demand proper responses. After the demise of the City of God resp. Devil, the classes and the races and of similar agents, Toynbee obviously has found decent 'big' subjects of history which can be referred to without hurting what today is called political correctness. From the late Wittgenstein, arguments can be derived that we even *must* refer to such collective subjects,⁴ because understanding as a basic human activity can take place only in the context of a concrete given, historically grown culture: In order to understand anything at all, you have to understand the whole way of life wherein whatever you are trying to understand is embedded.⁵ This makes civilizations necessary and insurmountable frames of mutual human understanding which also are mutually opaque to one another. Therefore today we are very wary of the seemingly self-understood presuppositions an author – and be it Comenius – uses to justify his best and up to our own days attractive intentions.⁶ They might be just a heritage from a passed-away civilization remote from and no longer adaptable to our own.

2. Recent Formations of the Concept of Culture

Against this background, it is easy to see why the concept of culture resp. civilization figures so prominent in some recent publications which have had a huge impact way beyond academia: Francis Fukuyama (1992) depicts western civilization sees Western civilization with its technological mastering of nature and its emphasis on universal human rights as the ultimate and soon-to-be only form of civilization which can peacefully await the extinction of all of its competitors which have no choice but to resolve into it. Hence results the universality of a particular culture. This view, which is closely echoed by the later Richard Rorty,⁷ has found its counterpart in Samuel Huntington's concept of the 'clash of civilizations' (1996) according to which the very dominance of Western civilization strengthens the self-awareness and triggers the resistance of other civilizations; together with the impending slow social and economic decline of the West, this is supposed to lead to a continuous dynamic competition between the various civilizations.⁸ This conception, too, endorses some kind of universality: the very particularity of each and every civilization is acknowledged and hypostasized into a seemingly general and eternal condition under which all civilizations forever have to exist as black boxes mutually closed against one another, in the final analysis blind self-reproducing, and in doing so changing, mechanisms just trying to survive and propagate themselves into the next generations at the costs of other civilizations. Whatever change is involved herein is not intentional in that sense that it aims at a purposeful improvement of the mutual relations of

⁴ Cf. Kogge 2002, Part 1.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, § 23, in: id. 1984, 250.

⁶ Cf. the last section of Meinert Meyer's contribution to this book with his reference to Rorty. Of course, Meyer does not draw the radical conclusion that we do no longer have any access to Comenius but shows that we cannot simply adopt his point of view without regarding that we always have to proceed from our own perspective.

⁷⁷ Cf. Kogge 2006, p. 333 and also the contribution of Meyer to this publication.

⁸ For a discussion already in the perspective of the concept of peace in Comenius see Beck 2005, 537.

civilizations but remains within the emerging framework of ‘mutation and selection’, laying bare the Darwinian foundations of this conception.⁹

3. *Cultura universalis* in Comenius

Of course we cannot find our contemporary concept of culture or civilization directly in Comenius – and even if we could, this would bereave him of the value he may have for us as a ‘distant mirror’ which does not just reflect our own perplexities: Comenius is a topical thinkers although or because he is not a contemporary thinker and therefore may help us to overcome possible shortcomings of our concepts also and especially in the field of culture.¹⁰

What we do find in Comenius, however, is the concept of *cultura* within a context which reflects the tension between particularity and universality which is also at the core of our current problems with culture.¹¹ The basis for this reflection is laid by the fact that Comenius conceives of *cultura* as a threefold relation which is fundamental for the human being as such: its relation towards nature, fellow humans and God (*Pampaedia* III 10; CC II, col. 23). In the center of these relations the human being is placed with freedom as its essential feature; a freedom which implies the obligation to shape these relations and to bring them to perfection – which in turn presupposes the self-formation of the human being through education. Comenius repeatedly stresses that human freedom is the essential presupposition of and at the same time a possible danger for this process, making it on principle fallible, although Comenius is led by the unshakable hope that thanks to Divine grace the good end can and will be reached.¹² Any dialectical relationship between human freedom and the teleology of history¹³ remains implicit in Comenius; if he takes a stand on this issue at all, it seems to be close to the position of Jakob Böhme who stresses the contingency of free action and therefore also of the evil that may result from such free action without eliminating this contingency on the higher plane of an all-encompassing dialectical system.¹⁴

Education, however, can take place only in cooperation with the instances towards which the human being as the excentric center of this threefold relation is directed (*Pampaedia* III 10; CC II, col. 23f.). So, due to its very core, the concept of *cultura* is not closed but presupposes an essential openness towards the other, what Jan Patočka called the ‘open soul’ in Comenius (cf. Voigt 2006). This openness is closely connected to the understanding of *cultura* in connection to the idea of *cultus* (CC I, p. 11; cf. the entry in *Lexicon Pansophicum Reale*; CC II, col. 914), of the caring cultivation of given foundations.¹⁵ Seen that way, *cultura* basically is a process of mutual completion. This is an idea we find very early in the thought of Comenius: Already his *Prodromus Pansophiae* can – and should – be understood as an “invitation to intercultural

⁹ The critique of an ‘evolutionist’ understanding of civilizations, which has to remain implicit here, does not necessarily mean the radical break with every ‘evolutionary’ approach which might also be situated in the context of an ontology which closely resembles that of Comenius, as can be seen in Beck 2004, 222-226.

¹⁰ This is shown by Dörpinghaus 2008-2009, especially p. 32.

¹¹ Cf. Popelová 1983; Nolte 1992

¹² On freedom in Comenius cf. Voigt 2011b.

¹³ On this see Meier in this volume.

¹⁴ On this conception in Böhme cf. McGrath 2014.

¹⁵ Cf. Schnitter 2011, pp. 62-66.

dialogue”, as it conceives of different ages, regions, ideologies and even religions as sparks of wisdom scattered throughout space and time which have to be collected and to be brought into a functional order.¹⁶

In order to underwrite the possibility and even the necessity of the mutual completion of cultures, Comenius outlines an according ontology (Pampaedia I 2-5; CC II, col. 4) which has its cornerstones the three concepts of ‘nothing’ (*nihil*), ‘something’ (*aliquid*) and ‘everything’ (*omnia*). This triad can be understood by looking at it from its top:

As is well known, ‘everything’ in Comenius always has a qualitative ring to it, meaning not only and also not in the first place the total extension of some or any range of objects but rather the totality of perspectives from which any given object or kind of object cannot just be dominated or conceptually grasped, but be brought to its utmost perfection – as vigorously elaborated time and again by Klaus Schaller.¹⁷ The ontological level of ‘everything’ is the one on which in Comenius the transcendental determinations of Being – unity, truth and goodness – fully come to bear.¹⁸ So this level in the eyes of Comenius is not just there for descriptive purposes; in this developing world, at least, it is not just there at all, but a task to be fulfilled, a goal to be reached: Our world is only as a possible world in the state of ‘everything’ which also would be a state of unity, truth and goodness; to bring it into such a state much remains to be done in what Comenius hopes for as a Divine and human cooperation on a final, millenarian stage of history.¹⁹

In the meantime, we live in a world of ‘something’: We always are confronted with some kind and portion of something united in itself, something good and true; but, nearly tragically, these fragments of a possible wholeness are torn apart and tend to take themselves for the very whole they are supposed to integrate themselves into, so that the resulting conflicts are fought in the name of the aims they, as conflicts, by themselves frustrate.²⁰ So ‘something’ for Comenius indicates the presence of a participation in principles which in themselves are valuable, but a participation which is flawed and imperfect and therefore in order to succeed tends to go beyond itself, in the direction of ‘everything’.

With ‘nothing’ Comenius touches upon one of the basic problems of ontology which has been discussed in a controversial manner ever since Parmenides (and the sequel of the dialogue Plato named after him, the Sophistes): How can we talk or think about what supposedly lacks any determination, which blatantly is not there? Is not even the attempt to do so a piece of misunderstood language and logic? On the other hand, is not the very talk and thought of nothing so essential to our human understanding of ourselves and our world that we cannot eliminate it? This is one of the couple of questions that lies at the heart of the classical conflict between Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Carnap in the late 20s and 30s of the previous century. Heidegger famously claims that the nothing, as revealed by an ‘angst’ showing that we as beings in the world are within and at the same time different from that world, would annihilate (“Das

¹⁶ Cf. Beer 2005, pp. 324-332.

¹⁷ Cf. Schaller 2010, 53f.

¹⁸ On these attributes and the quest of Comenius for a transcendental perspective fitting his pansophical project cf. Goris in this publication.

¹⁹ Cf. Woldring in this publication.

²⁰ Cf. e.g. Comenius, *Via lucis* III 9-14, pp. 298f.

Nichts selbst nichtet”), as it makes us feel or own nothingness.²¹ Carnap blames this statement for violating elementary rules of logic and semantics, for turning a syntactical part of a negative existential statement into the designator of a pseudo-entity.²² In a certain way, however, as Puntel has observed, Carnap approaches Heidegger’s concept of nothing when distinguishing between conceptual frames within which we speak of certain objects and questions transcending these frames.²³ This gives a valuable clue for how to understand ‘nothing’ in Comenius: It is the point where the framework of transcendentals present in ‘everything’ and participated by in ‘something’ breaks down – the point where this participation has not been reached (i.e., for Comenius, God has not yet created something which could do participate in everything). or failed (which Comenius typically depicts as an eschatological return into darkness²⁴).

Also *cultura* starts with *nihil*, in the sense of the not-yet. Obviously influenced by Eurocentric beliefs, Comenius still sees this starting-point present in remote ‘barbarian’ tribes (Pampaedia I 3; CC I, p. 15). However, we can abstract from this (also very cultural) limitation in the thought of Comenius and find his general position: As a process, *cultura* is not something given which can and be just received and passed on willy-nilly; it is rather something to be brought about and to be shared with others as an interactive process – something which cannot emerge in ‘remoteness’, in the lack of mutual communication, which just needs this communication as the realm in which one’s own freedom encounters the freedom of the others. During this on-going process, *cultura* manifests itself indeed as *aliquid*, i.e. some-thing: as what we now could call the specific culture of a certain civilization, a specific culture which nevertheless is supposed to serve the perfection of the human beings within and without of that civilization. Comenius states that different “nations, sciences, arts, languages and the other disciplines of higher learning” divide up this kind of *cultura* among themselves (ibid., I 4; CC I, p. 15). This means: The *status quo* as seen by Comenius is better than the absence of any culture, but it is by no means the best of all possible states; it is a typical ‘something’-state in which contents which can and ought to be connected still remain separated across different fields of human efforts. This easily can be transferred to the connection between different civilizations, and Comenius has made this transfer, as we have seen above in the reference to Pansophiae Prodomus: The fundamental relation between civilizations is not separation but connectedness based on human freedom which is to be realized and shaped at the same time in mutual interaction.

Accordingly, ‘some culture’ as such is oriented towards the *omnia* of *cultura*: the optimal relation of the human being towards the mentioned three instances, in which Comenius also finds the maximal realization of human freedom, which at the same time is the optimal ‘reconciliation’ between the human being and the ‘image of God’ this being in its very freedom for Comenius is meant to be (ibid. I 5; CC I, p. 15).²⁵

²¹ Heidegger 1929/1978, 113.

²² Cf. Carnap 1932/2004, 93-98.

²³ Cf. Puntel 1997/2007, 281-287. Puntel’s paper as a whole offers a good introduction to this controversy.

²⁴ Cf. e.g. Pansophia, Mundus aeternus IX (CC I, coll. 1296-1303). Comenius notes here right at the beginning one could not say strictly that the “monsters of the world tom come” return to nothingness but in their lasting separation from God they come to feel their *own* nothingness – their failure to fully participate in the wholeness of Being.

²⁵ The *imago Dei*-doctrine as a central “sense construction” in Comenius is discussed by Meyer in this publication. As Comenius finds the *imago Dei* to be damaged and distorted, maybe one could also talk about a “sense reconstruction” in this context.

3. The Challenge

In the previous paragraph we have seen that there is no easy identification of our concept of culture and of *cultura* in Comenius. Rather, what is *cultura* in Comenius would put some normative constraints on our understanding of culture: Can and should we understand our different civilizations – and in order to be able to do so, our own civilization in the first place – as limited and interdependent resources for the individual and global development of a human freedom linked with human responsibility? Can and should we understand the very particularity of our particular civilizations – and in order to be able to do so, the particularity of our own civilization in the first place – as a way towards a universality which does not negate but fully realize human freedom together with its particular cultural backgrounds? Of course Comenius cannot answer these questions for us; but at least his heritage can enable us to ask these questions and to find appropriate answers, in an appropriate, intercultural way. Any intercultural way, however, always is the way of cultures in their mutual encounters and therefore rather an array of ways with their own histories, their own benefits and desiderata, their own problems, and, on yet another level of complication, with problems which may themselves have been evolved out of and involved in intercultural encounters. We are thrust into the situation of ‘something’, to speak with Comenius: Something is going on within a mixed-up world and we have to deal with it. And in the first place we have to acknowledge that we are in this situation; in the second place, however, we may also come to know that we are in this situation together. This is one step that can lead to questioning oneself, one’s own tradition which resources it offers to deal with this situation. Here we encounter Comenius with his claim that we should handle such situations so that all of us – all civilizations or cultures with all of the human beings in them – can go on together in them and maybe even search a way for all to overcome them. Which way to which goal – this still remains, and will forever do so, what has to be discussed in the framework of a universal consultation. As argued for by Lischewski,²⁶ Comenius was very confident that the basic structure of this framework is above any human contingency. Such a confidence, even if we had it, however, would not have to prevent us from approaching other positions open-minded (or vice versa); on the contrary it might give the confidence needed for an – in the final analysis open-ended – exposure towards the other.²⁷ Such an exposure can be entered in the spirit of Comenius with the conviction that cultural differences are opportunities for mutual cooperation and completion.²⁸ This is – and always will be – a challenge, but Comenius may encourage us to regard it as worthwhile.

Bibliography:

²⁶ See his contribution to this publication.

²⁷ Cf. Voigt 2008.

²⁸ This is the condensed result of the international research project “Creative Peace through Encounter of World Cultures” initiated by Heinrich Beck (Bamberg). In the context of this project, Erwin Schadel and with his aid I came to appreciate Comenius as an exemplary representative of this way of intercultural thought and practice. See Voigt 2011c.

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