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**John Amos Comenius and His Spirituality of the Heart**

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## **John Amos Comenius and His Spirituality of the Heart**

This paper examines the contribution of John Amos Comenius to the development of the heart tradition in Christian spirituality and shows its relevance to Christian faith today. To achieve this, Comenius' work, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*,<sup>1</sup> is focused on.

### **Background to Comenius**

**Comenius' world and church.** Comenius lived between 1592 and 1670. At least five major intertwined transitions marked his era: socio-economic, political, ideological, cultural, and scientific.<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastically, he belonged to, and became the last bishop of, the *Unitas Fratrum*, or the Czech Brethren.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> First written in 1623.

<sup>2</sup> *Socio-economically*, a transition from feudalism to early capitalism began occurring as the bourgeoisie and entrepreneurial aristocracy started exerting influence. *Politically*, a struggle was emerging between the monarchy (mainly the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs striving for supremacy in Europe) and other more representative types of government. *Ideologically*, it was the time of the Reformation which intended to eradicate the errors and corruption in the ruling Catholic Church and to form a unified Protestant creed. *Culturally*, the Renaissance and Humanism were coming to an end. *Scientifically*, new sciences and a new system of education were in opposition to Aristotelian thinking and canonical dogmas. These transitions led to a number of crises, including the Thirty-Year War (1618-1648), the bourgeois revolution in the Netherlands (1566-1609), and the English revolution (1640-1660). The conflicts significantly affected Bohemia and surrounding regions, and thus profoundly influenced Comenius' life.

<sup>3</sup> The roots of the Czech Reformation came from the movement inaugurated by the 15<sup>th</sup>-century martyr, Jan Hus (ca. 1372-1415), which in turn had been inspired by John Wycliffe (ca. 1330-1384), often called "The morning star of the Reformation." While Wycliffe's work was suppressed in England, it found acceptance in Bohemia and Moravia and eventually, around 1457, gave rise to the *Unitas Fratrum*, or the Czech Brethren. This was the church of which Comenius became the last bishop.

***The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart.***<sup>4</sup> The first part of the book, *The Labyrinth of the World* (chapters 1-36), is a social satire on the disconsolate misery of human selfishness, dissimulation, enmity, and envy in all professions and positions. In the second part, *The Paradise of the Heart* (chapters 37-54), Comenius shows how to seek strength through inner transformation – in other words, a new birth and renewed life through union with the living God.

### **Comenius' Spirituality of the Heart**

Comenius' spirituality, including his spirituality of the heart, is expressed in *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*.<sup>5</sup> He reflects a biblical and rich Protestant spirituality that drew from and contributed to several Christian traditions. Louthan and Sterk support this premise by writing:

Among those scholars who have touched on spiritual themes in his works, most have emphasized Comenius' indebtedness to the utopian writings of the German Lutheran John Valentin Andreae. A few have connected his ideas with late medieval mystics, particularly Nicholas of Cusa. Others have suggested the influence of Jakob Boehme and Johann Arndt or have seen Comenius as a precursor of the Pietists. Elsewhere he has been linked with Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf or with certain Puritan spiritual writers. There is some validity in all these associations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This allegorical work is considered the greatest Czech work of Comenius. Influenced by Moore's *Utopia* and Campanella's *Civitas Solis*, Comenius mentions both of these writers in *The Labyrinth*. Additionally, it is a type of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Notwithstanding, the work was inspired by Comenius' own experiences, thoughts, and convictions. With the Czech Kralice Bible, the *Labyrinth* was the companion of the Czech Brethren when exiled by the Habsburgs.

<sup>5</sup> Two other works particularly show his spirituality: namely, *Centrum securitatis* and *Unum necessarium*.

<sup>6</sup> John Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, translated and introduced by Howard Louthan and Andrea Sterk, with a preface by Jan Milič Lochman (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 28.

The overall theme of *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* is pilgrimage to the place of the soul's rest and happiness. This theme, particularly found in the first part of the book, commonly recurs in medieval spirituality.

***The Labyrinth of the World*** (chap. 1-36). Regarding this place of highest good (*summum bonum*), Comenius states: “almost all people look *outside themselves*, seeking the means to calm and quiet their minds in the world and its possessions . . .” [emphasis mine].<sup>7</sup>

The next paragraph reflects Comenius' spirituality of the heart: “David discovered that the happiest person is the one who dismisses the world from sight and mind, holds to God alone, has God as his portion, and *dwells with God in his heart*” [emphasis mine].<sup>8</sup> He closes his introduction, entitled “To the Reader”, with the words: “May the leader of light, the Holy Spirit, show you . . . the glory, happiness, and joy of the elect whose *hearts are united with God*” [emphasis mine].<sup>9</sup> The words, “dismisses the world from sight and mind, holds to God alone”, are reminiscent of the late fourteenth century work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, where the first injunction refers to the “cloud of forgetting” and the second alludes to the “cloud of unknowing”.

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<sup>7</sup> Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, 59. To the Reader, 2. Comenius adds: “. . . this one in property and riches, that one in delights and pleasure, one in glory and status, another in wisdom and learning, yet another in merry companionship.”

<sup>8</sup> Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, 59-60. To the Reader, 3. Comenius alludes to Psalm 73:25-26 – “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my *heart* may fail, but God is the *strength of my heart* and my portion forever” [emphasis mine] (NIV).

<sup>9</sup> Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, 60-61. To the Reader, 7.

Written in an autobiographical style, Comenius' allegory of the pilgrim's journey in search of the highest good resembles Augustine's *Confessions*.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the futility of seeking happiness in external things, in contrast to seeking rest in God, is an Augustinian theme to which Comenius returns numerous times.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to Augustine's *Confessions*, and also the writings of the medieval mystics, *The Labyrinth of the World* does not describe the inner development of the soul – that is, the stages or degrees in the progress of the soul. Rather, the journey through the labyrinth is based on observation and examination. The inquisitive pilgrim uses the power of human reason and judgment.<sup>12</sup> Such a spirituality of the heart may in part be accounted for by Comenius' education at the Reformed gymnasium in Herborn.

Nonetheless, in the second part of the book, the pilgrim finally enters the recesses of his own heart to find the peace and meaning he is searching for.

***The Paradise of the Heart*** (chap. 37-54). By chapter 37 of the text, the pilgrim is overcome by despair. In the midst of his anguish and desolation, however, he hears the words: “Return whence you came, to *the home of your heart*, and shut the door behind you!” [emphasis mine] (chap. 37:2). The pilgrim obeys and then confesses: “I entered into my heart and found that it was dark” (chap. 37:3). Again, here one may strongly suggest the influence of Augustine.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Comenius' later work, *Unum necessarium* (1668), bears a closer resemblance to Augustine's *Confessions*.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, time and time again, the treatise has tacit borrowings from Augustine.

<sup>12</sup> Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, 62. Chapter 1:5 states, for example: “After much struggle and inward deliberation, I came to the decision that I would first observe all human affairs under the sun. Then, after having wisely compared one with another, I would choose a profession that would somehow provide me with what was necessary for a peaceful and pleasant life. The more I thought about this course, the better it pleased me.” Comenius taught that there were three books of divine truth – human reason, nature, and Holy Scripture.

<sup>13</sup> J. Bovenmars, *A Biblical Spirituality of the Heart* (New York: Alba House, 1991), 145-146. In *Tractatus in Joannem XVII; Corpus Christianorum* 36, Augustine writes: “Return to the heart! Why are you running

An allegorical depiction of corrupt human nature follows (chap. 37:3-5) – a picture of disorderliness and obscurity prevailing in the chamber of the heart, characterized by darkness, broken ladders, plucked wings, scratched and deformed pictures, as well as scattered and broken wheels.

Comenius' spirituality of the heart is further seen in what transpires next in relation to the pilgrim's conversion of heart. While the pilgrim ponders over the disrepair, Christ breaks into the dark chamber of his heart in a burst of brilliant light and warmly greets him. Christ then describes what it means to be united to himself. This theme dominates the rest of the treatise.

In a chapter entitled, “Their Betrothal”, Comenius uses bridal language to convey the relationship between the Christian and his Lord. The pilgrim describes the delight of his soul evoked by his encounter with the living Lord. In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries a great number of commentaries appeared on the Canticle of Canticles.<sup>14</sup> These may have influenced Comenius' use of bridal language.

While the gaze, the kiss, the embrace (common terms in descriptions of mystical union) are anticipated from Christ, they are used here to describe the pilgrim's response to God's tender love and care. Furthermore, the *Paradise of the Heart* says little about the actual experience of union with Christ, but rather emphasizes its effects in the life of the Christian and the church.<sup>15</sup> For example, after the “betrothal” description, the pilgrim's

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away from yourselves and do you get lost away from yourselves? Why are you entering deserted ways? You are roaming around, come back! To where? To the Lord . . . Return to the heart; see there what you can learn about God, for the image of God is there. In the interior man dwells Christ; in the interior man you are renewed after God's image; in his image come to know its maker.”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>15</sup> Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, 35-36.

words are: “But from this hour I desire no delight apart from you. Now, at this moment, I submit myself wholly to you” (chap. 39:16). A radical transformation occurs as a result of the pilgrim’s surrender to Christ. In sum, although Comenius focuses on the heart and soul of the believer, it is the individual’s total response to Christ that becomes prominent.

Along with the need of a new birth, Comenius stresses the necessity of a truly changed life. An inner transformation occurring within the heart must express itself outwardly. In a chapter entitled, “The Code of True Christians”, Comenius highlights the love of God *and* neighbour: “The essence of the entire law is that he should love God above all that can be named and sincerely wish as much good to his neighbour as to himself” (chap. 44:2).<sup>16</sup>

Comenius’ emphasis on the new birth and the subsequent renewal of the believer’s life is also found in Johann Arndt’s popular devotional classic of the time, *True Christianity* (1606). The restoration of the damaged image of God was a prominent metaphor of the Pietists, as well as of Augustine.

Comenius’ highlighting the love of God *and* love of neighbour bring to mind Rahner’s contemporary spirituality of the heart. As Callahan states, “Rahner transposes devotion to the Sacred Heart into the essence of Christianity which is the unity of the love of neighbour and the love of God.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, likewise emphasizes the bond between the love of God and love of neighbour – a bond that is unbreakable.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 204-205. Later, in the same chapter, he writes: “For as the finger of God shows us in our hearts what we desire ourselves, we owe it to our neighbours to do likewise” (chap. 44:3).

<sup>17</sup> A. Callahan, “Towards a Spirituality of the Pierced Heart”, in *Karl Rahner’s Spirituality of the Pierced Heart: A Reinterpretation of Devotion to the Sacred Heart* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), 120.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), par. 16, <[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html)> (28 December 2010). The Pope writes that “one is so closely connected to the other that to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbour or hate him altogether.” Historically,

Comenius does not address such themes as an exchange of hearts or the purification of the heart, seen in medieval writings.<sup>19</sup> Also absent is any strong devotion to Jesus' passion, or a special love for the Apostle John. In addition, he does not attempt to define the term *heart*, or to develop a theology or anthropology concerning the image of the heart.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Comenius' spirituality of the heart involving a union with God is not mystical. Also, it does not have, in the words of Wright, "the baroque, even rococo, visualizations of the heart that pervaded Catholic Christendom."<sup>21</sup> Rather, his heart spirituality is more ethical, involving love and will.

Toward the end of the *Labyrinth*, the pilgrim sees in a vision the glory of God enthroned in heaven (chap. 52). From the midst of this majestic scene, the Lord Jesus addresses the pilgrim for the last time. Evident is a further aspect of Comenius' heart spirituality. After assuring the pilgrim of his forgiveness and being received into God's household, the Lord commands him to return to the world: "Remain in the world as a pilgrim, a tenant, an alien, and a guest as long as I leave you there . . . Be sensitive to the miseries of your neighbours . . . With your soul serve me alone, with your body, whomever you can or must" (chap. 53:1).

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another Pope who stressed both the love of God *and* the love of neighbour was St. Gregory the Great, a monk who became Pope.

<sup>19</sup> Bovenmars, *A Biblical Spirituality of the Heart*, 143. The purification of the heart, however, had already been mentioned towards the middle of the second century by Hermas. For example, "Purify your heart from all vanities of this world . . ." (*Pastor*, Mandatum 9, 4 + 7; also Mandatum 12, VI4 + 5).

<sup>20</sup> W. Wright, "'That Is What It Is Made for': The Image of the Heart in the Spirituality of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal", in *Spiritualities of the Heart: Approaches to Personal Wholeness in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Annice Callahan (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 143. Interestingly, in the writings of Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and Jane de Chantal (1572-1641), who were contemporary with Comenius, the term heart is also not clearly defined.

<sup>21</sup> W. Wright, *Sacred Heart: Gateway to God* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 63.

The aspect of Comenius' heart spirituality, touched on at the close of his treatise, is that, in the words of Louthan and Sterk, “a transformed individual and a renewed church must bring about renewal in society.”<sup>22</sup> While Comenius may have longed for peaceful enjoyment of intimacy with Christ in the heart, to retreat from the world was irreconcilable with the Brethren’s tradition of activism, based on the understanding that believers submitted to the rule of Christ in their heart would in turn change society.

Comenius’ understanding that a spirituality of the heart cannot be devoid of action is also reflected today, for example, in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* produced by the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace.<sup>23</sup> This document shows the need for a commitment to justice and peace in building up social, economic, and political life. This is achieved through the indwelling of the Spirit of God in human hearts, “predisposing them to thoughts and designs of love, justice, freedom and peace.”<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Comenius’ spirituality of the heart, expressed in his work *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, illustrates his discovery of a profound intimacy with Christ in the heart, which in turn “served as a source of unsurpassable joy, strength, and hope for a better world.”<sup>25</sup> His heart spirituality remains relevant for Christian faith today with its emphasis on the love of God and neighbour, as well as its commitment to justice and solidarity in the building up of various segments of society.

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<sup>22</sup> Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., par. 63.

<sup>25</sup> Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, 43.

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