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Through wisdom to humaneness and democracy : Jan Amos Komenský and Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

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Introduction

It is somehow symbolic that the first month of spring, along with evoking the image of awakening nature, saw the birth of two great men who imprinted on the Czech nation deep humane feeling, specifically, Professor Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first Czechoslovak president, born in Hodonín on 7th March, 1850, and Jan Amos Komenský/ Comenius, the last bishop of Unitas Fratrum, born in Nivnice on 28th March, 1592.

What was it then that the two minds had in common? Principally, it was unwavering belief that a successful future of the Czech nation can be secured only by ethically grounded education. Humaneness, according to Masaryk, makes the sense of Czech history in the same way as Comenius' humaneness is connected with the idea of "a free community of the human race" where all contentions will be settled by a peace tribunal as a basic tool for removing violence, war or universal distress.

Comenius in the 17th-century political labyrinths

Although in Comenius' time the Czech nation was an agrarian society in its own right, it did not lack any attributes of the new trend, i.e. transition to capitalism. Foremost among its distinguishing features was intense social mobility of middle classes (the Comenius family not excluding) and the country's specific position within the integrated Czech state whose population of four million made it, before the Thirty Years' War, an economic power. The real control was centred in the hands of twelve noble houses, namely about thirty families that were given priority by the Hapsburgs when Ferdinand

I came to the throne in 1526 and ruled the country until 1564. The aristocratic ranks henceforth became infiltrated by prosperous burghers constituting about ten percent of the urban population. All in all, it was a time full of contradictions, precarious and antagonistic because of its dogmatic ideology on the one hand, and fraught with pretentious pseudo-tolerance on the other. Not to mention the fact that the 17th century was prominently an age of savage partitioning of the European continent during the thirty years of religious wars.

Be that as it may, the period witnessed a visible social improvement as well as some measure of thought toleration after Maximilian II, dictated by circumstances, confirmed by word of mouth the religious and political programme of *Confessio Bohemica* allowing a common profession of faith as propounded by representatives of the Lutheran Church and the Moravian Brethren. Thus not only the followers of Calvinism and Lutheranism did return to resume residence in Czech lands, but even *Unitas Fratrum* was recognised officially. A minor denomination in size (associating about 3 per cent of population in some 150 chapels), this communion had rather an urban than rural following (including, beside craftsmen and peasants, mainly middle classes), at one time boasting even aristocratic membership. The favourable process culminated in 1609 with Rudolf II's Imperial Charter granting political and religious liberties to the Czech estates. Because it was issued against the will of Catholic courtiers as Rudolf's mainstay aiming at rebellious nobility led by his brother Matthias, all the above mentioned documents were repealed by Ferdinand II after the battle of White Mountain.

The general atmosphere at the time of Comenius' birth may have been strained, but his middle-class origin (as the son of a burgher), together with the formative family climate, provided enough stimuli for his future life. Despite being left orphaned quite early, he managed to gain control of his activities, bolstering his lot through unremitting application and purposeful orientation of his own career. It is reflected in his entrance to grammar school in Přerov (1608), where he showed great brilliance and determination as a hard-working, prominently inventive student who could not remain unnoticed by Jan Lanecius (1550–1626), the Moravian leader of *Unitas Fratrum*. Importantly, this communion was to epitomise to Comenius, from the very beginning, a strong bond, fixed steadiness of his faith and fervent desire for knowledge. The school years became a crucial period in Comenius' life, since it was his first contact with the humanistically oriented teachings of *Unitas Fratrum* and the first encounter with the powerful Žerotín family as

well. Karel of Žerotín, the owner of Přerov estate, sponsored gifted students intending to enter Calvinist academies (colleges) in Germany, which was the only way to accomplish a desirable level of their own reformist learning. N.B. the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, Prague, then offered only low standard teaching and Jesuit Catholic academies in Olomouc and Prague had no place for Protestant students or rather refused to admit them at all.

Comenius' path to foreign studies led to Calvinist academies in Germany, where he joined the Calvinist Academy in Herborn aged nineteen, and no more than two years later, having transferred to Heidelberg College, he contemplated bringing European learning within the reach of his nation. Notwithstanding Comenius' failure to bring his university studies to formal completion, they had a profound significance for his subsequent spiritual development: he took his first step on the world's stage. Familiarised with the contemporary Protestant culture and trends in philosophy, he succeeded in abandoning both scholastic dogmatism and ancient Aristotelism while gaining a thorough knowledge of Latin and German.

Masaryk in the 19th- and 20th- century political labyrinths

Our reflection upon the life and works of 'the teacher of nations' will now suggest parallels with another great figure in Czech history and the first president of the independent Czechoslovak nation, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937). They both, and still each in a different way, had a far-reaching influence on the concept of freedom as related to man's moral values. At this point, it is worth mentioning that Comeniologist studies, currently focusing on understanding the philosophical message of Comenius' works, more than one hundred years ago found a devoted recruit in Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who adopted Comenius' legacy, incorporating it in his concept of humaneness and democracy.¹ Masaryk's native land was southern Moravia, a fertile region and land of hard-working people who were rooted in the springs of faith, piety, unique nature and kind-hearted spirit. Yet with Vienna as the capital city of the Hapsburg Empire not being far away, an enduring impact on the social and economic activities of the local population, which was somewhat brought under imperial subjugation, was exerted by the bureaucratic Viennese administration. Even though slavery was abolished in 1781, serfdom still persisted here until 1848. Not surprisingly, south Moravian families were interconnected by relations between nations and minorities, with mixed marriages being fairly common. In the same way, the Masaryk family represented a union of Moravian and Slovak nationalities.

The life story of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk's family was in great detail described by Alain Soubigou in his extensive eponymous monograph, published in Paris in 2002 (the Czech translation 2004). It refers to Masaryk's mother's family as follows: "*Mother came from a German speaking parish in the municipality of Hustopeče, regardless of the fact that most of the local population spoke Moravian. Mother's family were fluent in Moravian because they came from the region of Haná.*"²

Young Tomáš's mother was a deeply religious woman whose Catholic belief must have influenced the whole family. Masaryk "*always kept in mind the picture of his praying mother – and knew it could be a truly human feeling and, in a sense, deeper than mere knowledge.*"³ Just as mother implanted in him strong and emotional belief, there was yet another personality to influence his firm and unfailing faith and thought development - Catholic priest František Satora (1826-1885), who introduced Masaryk into the sphere of creed, the sphere of foreign languages and the sphere of knowledge. It was through him that young Masaryk discovered the visceral contradictoriness of words and facts, as Satora did not hesitate to rebel against higher ecclesiastical dignitaries on account of their indifference to social issues. "*Seeing the man Satora and his bitter fate, Masaryk could not retain his Catholic belief. Yet for the same reason he could never discard it completely.*"⁴ Masaryk's determination to abandon the Catholic Church was stimulated by Professor Franz Brentano (1838-1917), his teacher in Vienna, who in protest against the dogma of papal infallibility left the Church. And Masaryk followed suit. But the sense of indispensability and power of faith, cultivated by his family upbringing, prevented his complete withdrawal from the church uniformity and led him to convert to Protestantism for a time. This still did not bring his spiritual quest to an end and the short interlude was followed by a solid reflection of the young intellectual on the evolutionary maturation of any idea resisting the rigidity and infallibility of the religious order.

Masaryk as an interpreter and follower of Comenius' works

Masaryk was a modern-age man whose attitude to learning and the indispensability of education was as veritable as Comenius' attempts at universal improvement through the advancement of wisdom. Both Comenius and Masaryk perceived this harmonisation of the world and man as closely related to moral and social values. They both possessed the sense of human mutuality and love, which was primarily conveyed to their spouses, the women who constituted part of their life. Comenius' love for his family and

his love of family life is transposed even to the picture of his improvement of the world where the image of school is initially viewed as a workshop of humaneness, and in his *Informatorium školy mateřské* [Maternity-school informatorium], the mother and family become the cradle of the child's pleasure and future life.

No wonder that Masaryk's wife Charlotte Garrigue, having been brought up in the spirit of American Protestantism, followed the ideals of freedom and religious tolerance. Like Masaryk, she rejected orthodox Catholicism as well as Protestantism. It was Charlotte who urged him to remain in his homeland and fulfil the mission for which he was predestined rather than emigrate. She spared Masaryk for his nation and suffered for him all the time he was in the world building the image of the future independent state. Comenius, by contrast, was a reformer, so what was it then that brought their personalities so close together? Our aim is to show how each of them had formulated and ensuingly endeavoured to implement improvement, his own particular road to wisdom which should lead to ethicalness and genuineness. The social and political opinions of both men are so near that they fade into each other. In Comenius' vision, the ideal man is associated with wisdom, morality and piety. Masaryk hence transposed this ethicalness to a flawless democratic ideal that he materialised in a system of government which, in Comenius, never went beyond the speculative stage. Comenius' republic was hypothetical, Masarykian's was actually democratic. The humaneness of both was propitious, not egoistic or pragmatic. Masaryk was inspired by Comenius' idea that education and instruction are the key to the universal improvement of man, society and life in general.

Referring to one of Masaryk's first public appearances where he defended Comenius' views, it is necessary to go back to 1892 and the proposed celebration of the 300th anniversary of Comenius' birth. As expected, the Viennese government, represented by Minister of Education and Culture P. Gautsch, banned all public celebrations, even at schools. Masaryk however, unable to resist an urgent appeal of students and teachers, delivered a lecture, police surveillance notwithstanding. There he said: "*The exiled Comenius was a symbolic victim of repressions that followed the defeat on the White Mountain – his was a political issue. Many generations of Catholic adversaries and historians defamed him, calling him a demagogue, charlatan, rogue and traitor.*"²⁵ The lecture, given on 27th March 1892 in Slavia, a students' literary and oratorical society, consequently made Comenius' life and works threatening and unacceptable for Austrian authorities. Here it is necessary to mention one fact that remains rather unknown and scarcely emphasised:

*“Masaryk’s writings from the 1880s include a preserved, 700-page handwritten record of the series of lectures on the history of philosophy, delivered by him in the summer term of 1889.”*⁶

Providing a historical outline of philosophy (from early Greek thought to David Hume’s scepticism), it featured one aspect noticeably different from the then standard Czech surveys of the history of thinking; namely because it attached special importance in the history of European thought to Czech thinkers like John Huss (with his reference to John Wiclif), and Petr Chelčický along with John Amos Comenius, logically drawing a comparison between European Reformation and the teachings of Unitas Fratrum.⁷ In the celebrated lecture of 1892 Masaryk obviously extended earlier notes and references to his university lectures, effectively diverting scholarly attention to Comenius the thinker when he said: *“Comenius is more drawn on as a philologist than a philosopher.”*⁸ Masaryk’s view is based on the evaluation completed by František Palacký, the Czech historian who regarded Comenius as the most distinguished man of all times and nations that may have lost his home country but as a champion of mankind won recognition all over the world.

Masaryk deemed Comenius not only a visionary but man of action as well, who in many European countries advocated the idea of humanising people’s life through education and therefore devised an organised system of schooling and teaching methods. Masaryk appreciated Comenius’ orientation towards the coming generation, i.e. youth, especially esteeming his visualisation of school as a small state and the idea of building his school as a workshop of humaneness.⁹

Masaryk himself discerned the true origin of these pedagogical concepts in theoretical conclusions contained in the comprehensive volume of *Consultatio*. The school system expected to be in accord with the principle of universal education was in Comenius connected with a harmonious social order. *“Comenius thirsts for the unity of philosophy, religion and the entire management of life. The purpose of philosophy as a quest for truth is to bring us peace and to reconcile the spirit with things; the purpose of religion instilling in us reverence for the absolute good is to bring our conscience in peace with God; and the purpose of politics is to unite people, enabling them to thrive rather than hinder each other’s activities, its purpose being to guard peaceful minds of all.”*¹⁰ What Masaryk truly appreciated in Comenius’ *Consultatio* was the idea that the main purpose in our life and thought is order, since the essence of pansophical method is the advancement of our knowledge from the lowest degree to the highest. *“It is a renewal of*

*what to the old teacher Socrates was his maieutical method – as if growing, originating, conceiving one from another. Thus Comenius’ scale of intellect - scala intellectus - is at the same time the forerunner of Comte’s hierarchy or scale of sciences.”*¹¹ Along with it, Masaryk grasped the substance of this scale of intellect which, in addition to comprehensiveness, also includes orderliness and universal knowledge. It is a road to harmonisation and wholeness in everything and everywhere.

In his lecture on Comenius, Masaryk also gave his opinion on the social position and importance of the teacher. The basis of the teacher’s competence is continual learning. The teacher not only teaches but he cannot stop learning himself. Self-education and self-learning comprise interaction between the learner and the teacher. Masaryk’s ideas on the importance and position of school are concluded in the following terse formulation: “School is not separated from real life. School forms the solid basis of state and social order in general.”¹² If, according to Comenius, school is to become a workshop of humaneness, Masaryk’s ideal school is to be democratic and humane – school is to be a social and political state institution. Masaryk sees school as a political body, it is to become the first political institution. This is where Masaryk’s view somewhat differs from Comenius’. (“*School, state and society are all in one to him: school is like a small state.*”) ¹³, who perceives school mainly as an institution to provide education, moral influence and religious guidance.

Our analysis of Masaryk’s lecture on Comenius would not be complete without reference to the idea of humaneness which in Masaryk involves the ethics of humaneness. The concrete manifestation of practical humaneness is love for one’s dearest. “*The dearest of our near relations would be, to all of us, our children. Long ago we were told: Honour thy father and thy mother. But I think we should add: Honour the soul of your child. Remember the future generations. Let our love be mutual, yet do not rest with mutuality.*”¹⁴ Both Comenius and Masaryk conceptualise humaneness as a relational category. It is a concrete expression that in both cases is perceived as positive, in direct contrast to the selfish egoism. It is humaneness lacking the background of hate and hostility. In both cases such a concept might be construed as conciliatory and resigning, yet the opposite is true. The effect of positive humaneness consists in its activeness, in its endeavour to help someone and something. It is effective because it performs, doing something for one’s neighbour, balanced and patient.

Conclusion

For Masaryk, the First World War was a historic turning point which he construed “*as a crossroads at which mankind can and must part with theocracy, with the supremacy of monarchal principle supported by church prelates, with the despotism of inherited privileges, and set out for democracy.*”

¹⁵ It was a period that he dedicated to the work for his nation, fighting for its independence. In the same way as Comenius once left his mother country, Masaryk went into exile – so they both were ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their ideals.¹⁶ Their pursuit of ideals was long and complicated. Masarykian idea of democracy and Comenius’ humane school did stand the test many times just like they were defeated. Difficult as it must have been to strive for the goal determined by the ideas and actions of the two men, their life and works set an excellent example of working for one’s own and other nations, too..

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Essentially, the groundwork for democratic societal development and the fulfilment of man's humane mission is laid by ethically guided education. Both in Masaryk's and in Comenius' thought, humaneness is a concrete expression conceptualised as a relational category. They both perceive its positive aspects, which are in complete contrast to selfish egoism. Their humaneness lacks the background of hate and hostility. Such a conception of humaneness might be construed as conciliation and resignation, yet the opposite is true. Positive humaneness is effective through its activeness, through its endeavour to help someone and make something happen. It is a societal category fostering the ground for new human coexistence, wise thought and competent handling of human affairs.