COMENIUS - Curated Transcript of BBC In Our Time podcast
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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

Vladimir Urbanek
Senior Researcher in the Department of Comenius Studies and Early Modern Intellectual History at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Suzanna Ivanic
Lecturer in Early Modern European History at the University of Kent

Howard Hotson
Professor of Early Modern Intellectual History at the University of Oxford and Fellow of St Anne’s College

Producer: Simon Tillotson

Transcript:

[Melvyn Bragg] Hello. In the 17th century, the Czech educator Comenius had a great plan to address the deep antagonisms behind the wars that were devastating Europe. The plan was universal education in which everyone could learn about everything and better understand each other and so tolerate their religious differences. His ideas had a great influence on education, even if the conflicts that had forced him into exile proved intractable in his lifetime. With me to discuss Comenius are

Susanna Ivanic, Lecturer in Early Modern European History at the University of Kent,

Vladimir Urbanek, Senior Researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences and

Howard Hotson, Professor of Early Modern Intellectual History at the University of Oxford and Fellow of St. Anne's College.

[Melvyn Bragg] Howard Hotson, Comenius was born in 1592 and lived for 78 years. Can you tell us about his early life?

[1:10]
[Howard Hotson] Yes, well, that's a very important consideration. He was very long lived and he spanned several different historical epochs. And the epoch that he was born into was Central Europe several generations after the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation, which is kind of reaching a fever pitch of confessional tension. More specifically, he's born in Moravia. Moravia, along with Bohemia, are at the center of the Czech Crown, the modern Czech Republic. The Czech Crown, in turn, is the largest polity in the Holy Roman Empire. The Holy Roman Empire is very different from the consolidating monarchies of Western Europe, composed of hundreds and hundreds of principalities and each one of them different from the others. And that certainly applied to Moravia. Southeastern Moravia was a place where different Protestant cultures mingled together, some of them going back 100 years before the Reformation. Comenius was born in that cultural context as a member of the Czech Unity of Brethren, and he was orphaned early in life. So one of the distinguishing characteristics of this great educationalist is in fact that his own education was set back by, you know, a lack of resources in the early period of his life. So his lifelong devotion to developing means of education, which allowed his contemporaries to learn as much as possible with slender financial resources in the least amount of time, was very deeply rooted in his own personal experience.

[2:44]
[Melvyn Bragg] He devoted himself largely to education, Howard. How did the mosaic that you've alluded to briefly, how did that affect the role of education in that region, that vast region?

[Howard Hotson] Well, that's an excellent point. Traditionally, Central European historians and certainly German historians have bemoaned the fact that Germany, rather than Consolidating, along with France or England or Spain, remains fragmented into literally hundreds of semi independent city states and principalities. And perhaps this wasn't the ideal seed bed for great internationally important universities, although, of course, there were many of those in Central Europe as well. But it's a fabulously fertile seed bed for educational experimentation. All of these little polities are sharing borders with neighbors. Many of those neighbors are political antagonists or confessional antagonists. Each one of these tiny principalities or city states is trying to develop the capacity to give sort-of quasi-university education, but on the slender means of a very small city, state or county. This turns the fragmented heart of Central Europe into a kind of educational laboratory where multiple educational experiments are going on simultaneously. And particularly at the lower end of the sort of educational and political hierarchy, you have educational experiments, new institutions, new ways of teaching being developed with the needs of ordinary people in mind. So this is really the place in Europe where you get new pedagogical developments designed to meet the needs of ordinary people, to teach the maximum amount of useful knowledge to the largest cross section of the population in the most efficient possible time. This is

exactly the routes in which Comenian universal education, and the whole reform movement built on top of it, originates.

[4:35]
[Melvyn Bragg] Susanna, Comenius was a member of the Unity of Brethren. What was distinctive about this group and what attracted him to it?

[Susanna Ivanic] This is a really fascinating group of Protestant reformers and they come from the Bohemian Reformation, which, as Howard said, started 100 years before Luther, originating with Jan Hus, who was one of these late medieval theologians who railed against the excesses of the Catholic Church, in particular against indulgences and he was excommunicated and burned in 1415. And his followers, the Husites, were a very heterogeneous group. But by the mid 15th century, two main groups had emerged. One, the more conservative Utraquists, who we might kind of liken to high Anglicans in being quite close in their liturgical practices to Catholicism, and this more radical group, the Unity of Brethren. But when I say radical, I don't mean anything too radical. They advocated a simple and humble life. They focused on the Bible, they wanted to encourage education amongst their followers, and they also promoted singing as a main part of their devotional culture.

[6:09]
[Melvyn Bragg] How old was he when he joined that and what made him join it?

[Susanna Ivanic] Well, this was really the context into which he was born. In Moravia at the time, by the end of the 16th century, more than half of Protestants in Moravia and Bohemia were Unity of Brethren. So he was educated in that system.

[Melvyn Bragg] Did he hold to the principles of that throughout his life?

[Susanna Ivanic] He did, very much. Although what Howard has talked about - Moravia and Central and Eastern Europe is this seed bed for education. That's the thing that actually drove him to first leave Moravia. And he was educated in Herborn in 1611 at the age of 18, at a Calvinist academy, supported by his Unity of Brethren pastors, and also then at Heidelberg. So he had this connection with Calvinist thinking as well. But he returns immediately after to become a pastor and to lead the Unity of Brethren School in Moravia.

[7:22]
[Melvyn Bragg] Vladimir, what happened in 1618 that caused so much change for Comenius?

[Vladimir Urbanek] 1618, of course, was a crucial year, not only for the Bohemian state, but also for the whole of Central Europe and indeed for Europe, because the 30 Years War started in that year. But I would like to mention one very important event which preceded 1618, and it was in 1617 already, [concerning] Ferdinand of Styria, an important member of the Habsburg family and a cousin of the ruling Emperor Matthias II, King of Bohemia and King of Hungary. This Ferdinand was confirmed by the Diets of Bohemia and Hungary as Matthias' successor. And Ferdinand, of course, at that time was already well known as a very staunchly Catholic, enthusiastic Catholic, devoted

Catholic, who introduced counter-reformation in inner Austrian provinces already at the end of the 16th century. In Bohemia there was a different situation. In Bohemia, the Letter of Majesty issued by Rudolph II in 1609 granted religious freedoms both to different Protestant factions and it granted religious freedoms, of course, for the Catholics as well. And what was even more important, it granted religious freedoms to all social groups, nobility, burgers and subjects. Despite this, the confessional tension increased and the Bohemian revolt began on the 23rd May, 1618, by the famous Defenestration of Prague. So the Bohemian rebels established a provisional government; they raised the army and they elected a Calvinist leader, Frederick V of the Palatinate, King of Bohemia.

[Melvyn Bragg] This began an enormous upheaval, 30 years of savage war. Comenius was on the run for most of that time. For most of that time he went from city to city, state to state, sometimes losing his property, sometimes losing all his notes. Can you give us some idea of the first impact this had on him?

[Vladimir Urbanek] The crucial thing was that the Bohemian revolt was defeated at the Battle of the White Mountain on 8th November 1620. And this was the turning point, not only in the military and political history of Central Europe, but in Comenius' private life as well. In the following years, he lost his family. His wife and two sons died in the epidemics of plague. He lost his library and manuscripts that were burned. And so he was hiding in [an] eastern part of Bohemia. And from the mid 1620s, the Bohemian Brethren prepared themselves for exile. It was decided that the Brethren from Moravia would go to Upper Hungary and the Brethren from Bohemia would go to Poland. Comenius found refuge in the Polish town of Leszno and Comenius started to teach at the local school and started to write his first sketches of the textbooks and also books dealing with the reform of education, didactics, et cetera.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Howard, this takes us to the start of the heart of the mission. How did Comenius view the crisis around him. Where did he see the fault lines?

[Howard Hotson] Well, this comes as a terrible shock, as you can imagine. As Susanna suggested, the Bohemian Reformation had gone on for 200 years. There was this period where the lands in which he lived were a kind of oasis of religious tolerance right across the whole religious spectrum and then suddenly this sharply and catastrophically ended. It took some time for Comenius to develop, first of all as an educational theorist, but also then further as a universal reformer. But he came to see the times in which he lived his maturity as three intersecting crises kind of colliding simultaneously with one another. One of these was the religious crisis going back not so much to Hus as to Luther and Calvin -- protestant theologians extremely opposed to the established Catholic Church; their communities also, as it were, in theological warfare with one another. Then the counter-reformation growing in strength and setting up this enormous conflict in Central Europe and, of course, spreading, unlike the Bohemian Reformation, across Europe. So Europe as a whole is engaged in this absolutely fundamental and deep-seated historic religious crisis. This then, in 1618, issues into a military and political crisis. And in fact, it's not just one crisis, it's a whole series of overlapping military conflicts which spread across northern Europe. There's the 30 Years War itself, 1618 to 1648, which is the sort of centerpiece of all this. There are the Irish, Scottish and English Civil Wars, which Comenius paradoxically also

experiences. He's in England exactly the period where this breaks out. He then heads back to Transylvania and to Poland, where he's caught up in the Northern wars. And simultaneously, the end of the 80 Years War, the Dutch revolt between Holland and Spain is going on. So the whole of Northern Europe, as it were, is in flames. This is the second crisis, the military crisis, and then simultaneously to that, there's an intellectual crisis going on, crisis of orthodoxy undermining the authority of Aristotle, of Galen, of Ptolemy, the whole unified synthetic medieval world view, but without a clear sense at this point of what is going to replace it. Now, the crucial thing is that Comenius saw all these crises as inextricably interrelated with one another, and that's the reason why he eventually germinated this notion of Universal Reformation. It was not going to be possible to solve any of these conflicts without solving the other ones. We needed a reform of religion, to reform man's relationship with his Creator above him by means of faith. We needed a reformation of politics to reform man's relationship with his fellow human beings, and a reformation of philosophy, particularly natural philosophy, reformation of our understanding of, and relationship to, the world beneath us by means of sense. So the synthesis of all these things was what he called Pan Sofia, or universal wisdom, and it was this universal wisdom which was going to be propagated by pampaedia -- universal education. This became a lifelong project for Comenius. When he died, he was still very much involved in working this whole program out in enormous detail. And I think this is what's most extraordinary and distinctive about Comenius, that he devotes a lifetime to trying to solve this systemic problem, and in doing so, envisaging not only a future state in which some kind of peace and enlightenment will be established across all these domains, but also the means to get us there. So it's not merely a utopian vision that we don't have access to. It's not merely a milenarian vision where we wait for divine intervention. It's something that we actively participate in bringing into being. I think this is the most extraordinary aspect of Comenius' entire life's work.

[Melvyn Bragg] It's extraordinary, the work, the length of it, the breadth of it. Susanna, can we take that up? Can you tell our listeners more about the idea of Pan Sofism and why that was crucial to him, to Comenius?

[15.37]
[Susanna Ivanic] Comenius gives us this insight into a whole scheme of thinking. You can't actually separate his intellectual ideas, his religious ideas, his pedagogical practice. They are all part of this one matrix, this one sort of cosmos that is underpinned by Pansofism. And I think that's very useful for us, thinking about the period as a whole.

[Melvyn Bragg] What does he mean by "Pansophism"?

[Susanna Ivanic] Howard mentioned it. If you break it down into its Greek parts, the Pan being universal and the Sophia being wisdom, and this extends from all sorts of elements of knowledge in the world. And again, the three kind of lightning rods there are knowledge sources of God, human and nature. And whilst pansofism is really put into text by Comenius, he's one of the first to use that word. But it actually draws on something that is a wider phenomenon. If you think about Rudolf II, the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor in Prague around 1600. He's known for his collections, his Kunstkammer, which often unhelpfully talked about as cabinets of curiosity. But actually what he's doing there is a Pan Sophic project as well. He's trying to collect all

parts of the natural world; art: he brings Albrect Duerer's Feast of the Rosary over the Alps; artists; scientists; musicians and even animals to his menagerie. All on the castle hill in Prague. And what he's doing there is not just a display of power and wealth, but also it's to have knowledge at his fingertips. And that's, again, not just an intellectual thing, it's a spiritual thing. It's to be able to understand God's world. And it's that sort of pansophism and that sort of universal knowledge that Comenius is really tapping into and crystallizing, I suppose.

[Melvyn Bragg] Vladimir, in 1631, Comenius wrote a book that made him famous. We're told it went into hundreds of editions, which is enormous and influenced many people. Can you tell us about that?

[Vladimir Urbanek] The title of the book is in Latin, "Janua Linguarum Reserata" or, in English, "The Doorway of Languages Unlocked". This was the most successful and well known of Comenius's works in the 17th century. It is a language textbook which consists of 8000 words, thousand sentences and 100 thematic chapters. What is important about it, and very innovative at that time, was that it was based on the idea of an encyclopedia for children describing in short Latin sentences the whole world, in fact: cosmos, nature, animals, human body, for example, crafts, human society, schools, virtues, games and of course, religious issues. The main idea of the textbook was to replace traditional learning of Latin which was very much based on rote and repetition. This textbook was received really enthusiastically by teachers, educationalists, but I must add, also by publishers because it soon became a real best seller. As you mentioned, Janua was soon translated into eleven European languages and it was republished more than 100 times during Comenius'life. Even the Jesuits used it in the Catholic schools in the Czech lands.

[Melvyn Bragg] Howard, this idea of Latin and Neolatin. Is this is the lingua franca of the time or what's going on there? Why is it so important?

[Howard Hotson] It's the absolute foundation on which the whole European intellectual enterprise rests. It was the language of the medieval university and continued to be through Comenius his whole lifetime. If we were speaking in the university today we would be conversing in Latin with one another. It was, of course the language of Renaissance Humanism; this whole enterprise of going back and rediscovering the culture of classical antiquity by thoroughly mastering the history and culture via the Latin language. It was the language of the Roman Empire, crucially important for law as well as the literary and intellectual heritage of antiquity. And of course, it's of practical utility as well. The Holy Roman Empire is that part of Europe where the three great European language families the Romance, the Germanic, the Slavic all come together and communication is an enormous challenge. And of course it's the universal language and for a universalist like Comenius, that's also fundamentally important. The crucial thing is, of course, that one needed to master Latin. Not merely the capacity to read it, but the capacity to speak and write it. And Latin is a complex language; the standards of Latinity in this Neolatin period were very very high when we're supposed to speak the perfect Latin of Cicero. This was a very laborious and time-consuming business. So what you did before university was attend a grammar school, the purpose of which was precisely to equip you with fluency in the universal language of learning. So the pre-university curriculum was this rather sterile exercise in quite literally beating into students the abstract rules of Latin grammar. In fact, the emblem of the

grammarian was the birch rod, the sting of which on the palm of the hand was supposed to help the student memorize these complex grammatical rules. And this is really the starting point for Comenius' reforms. He wanted to accelerate that process. He wanted to make it easier and simpler for people. He wanted to make it pleasant and enjoyable rather than literally painful. And he wanted to ensure that while they were learning the language, they were also learning about the world that that language was intended to describe. And this is where this encyclopedic approach that Vladimir mentioned comes in.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank-you. Susan, looking a little bit ahead, why did Comenius add pictures to the book? This first encyclopedia, the History of Everything and All Things?

[22:27]
[Susanna Ivanic] Yes. In 1658, he published in Nuremberg the Orbis Sensualium Pictus, which he had put together in the previous years whilst he was in Transylvania in Sárospatak. And this was a version of this textbook of which there are many versions, aimed at different levels of children's education. And this one was for the most elementary, and it was designed to be put straight into the child's hand. And each page of this Orbis had an image at the top that was a woodcut, just a little bigger than a large postage stamp. And it was a simple image, but packed full of details, a synoptic image on one of those chapters which has been mentioned, for example, the minerals of the world and stones. And it would depict the crystals, but also on a table next to it would be beads, and each element would be numbered. And below in the text, that was the key to what these were, coral beads or salt or so on. So it was an incredibly appealing book and it was also incredibly popular. And it was aimed to go straight to the child and draw on the idea that children could understand pictures before they could understand texts, and that pictures would also keep their attention. And I think Howard wanted to say something here.

[Howard Hotson] I was just going to point out that these textbooks had two columns. One was for the vernacular language and the other was for Latin, the learned language. So you could also use the vernacular to help you learn the Latin. And then now you can use the pictures to help you learn both the vernacular and the Latin. It's a much more sort of comprehensive learning package. The Orbis is sometimes called the first picture dictionary, but it's not a dictionary because it's organized, not alphabetically, but systematically. It's a sort of comprehensive survey of the world. It's a very small and compact book, and it brings together for the first time a whole set of really powerful aids to accelerating knowledge, not merely of the language, but also of the whole world in which we live.

[Vladimir Urbanek] In fact, I would add it was another example of his encyclopedia, this time illustrated encyclopedia for children. And it can be used indeed for learning Latin through the vernacular, but also to learning other languages, other vernacular languages through Latin and vernacular.

[Howard Hotson] Indeed. And just to stress that point a little bit further, one of the most astonishing aspects of Comenius' pedagogy is this encyclopedic approach. Even prior to school. He has a book called The Mother's School which is about how a mother can begin the process of educating her children in this encyclopedic way. And he literally goes through all the disciplines of the encyclopedia. You take them outside, you show

them the sun, the moon and the stars and you're teaching them about astronomy. So it's an extraordinarily holistic approach to education. And it begins from birth and it ends at death, which again, is an exceptionally modern idea.

[Melvyn Bragg] How much in demand, Vladimir. How much in demand was Comenius over Europe with his ideas?

[Vladimir Urbanek] Well, he was invited from many European countries, of course. He was invited to England by Samuel Hartlib and other reformers who were very much interested both in his ideas about the reform of schools and education, but also in his pansophic ideas. After spending half a year, more than a half a year in England, he was invited in fact, he received three invitations to France from Cardinal Richelieu to perhaps to Harvard (it is not 100% sure if it was true or not) and to Sweden. And because of the Swedes, who were Lutherans and fighting in the 30 years war Comenius decided to go to Sweden. He was invited to Sweden by a very important entrepreneur, Louis de Hairs. He and his family supported Comenius for next decades in fact. After the end of the 30 Years War, he returned to Leszno and after two years he was again invited to Hungary by the princely Calvinist ruling family in Transylvania. He returned to Leszno in the middle of the war between Sweden and Poland. Leszno was burned down during that war by the Polish army and Comenius lost a considerable part of his manuscripts and his library and he appeared again on the run. Fortunately, he received invitation from the Herr family to move to Amsterdam where he spent last 14 years of his life and produced enormous number of works published in Amsterdam.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Can I come back to you, Howard? Can you dig in for the benefit of our listeners and say what was radical about the way Comenius was approaching education at this time? Can you just give us more about that, please?

[28:15]
[Howard Hotson] Well, I suggested earlier on that he's deriving some of his fundamental principles and aspirations from educational experimentation going on in the Holy Roman Empire before he was born and during his youth. But one also needs to stress the remarkable variety of ways in which he pushed beyond that consensus. And we've mentioned a couple of them already. He discarded the Humanist attention to the classics as the primary means for teaching Latin, and of course, this became highly controversial. Many of the most celebrated and prestigious scholars in Europe objected to departing from the Humanist tradition in that way. He discarded these brutal and stutifying methods for language learning -- stressing play and joy and delight as an incentive. He discarded this exclusive focus on language and turned people's attention to things as well as words. He established this comprehensive encyclopedic curriculum and deployed it at every level of the educational process. But I think the most astonishing aspect of Comenius' universal education program is that he sought to make it available to absolutely everyone. And the treatise on universal education and this culminating masterwork of his, he begins by describing Panpaedia, which again means universal education, as a universal education of the whole human race. The emphasis he gives to this, I think, must be absolutely unique, not only within his day, but perhaps for centuries afterwards as well. He says, by this I mean all nationalities. I mean all classes of society, I mean all families, I mean all individuals without exception. I mean young and old, I mean rich and poor, male and female, but also the blind, the deaf. He talks about people blind from birth who become distinguished

musicians. He talks about deaf people who become excellent painters and sculptors and craftsmen. He talks about people missing arms and hands who've used their feet to become writers. So he literally means every single human being. And this is partly rooted in his universal reforming impulse. The only way to achieve universal reform is this education, which everyone has access to. But it's also rooted in his theological anthropology, his conception of the human condition, which is really difficult to square with either sort of orthodox Catholicism or, as it were, mainstream Protestantism of Luther and Calvin. He sees human beings as being made in the image of the likeness of God and the purpose of education is to restore this tarnished image and this is why it's something of inestimable value to every single person and must be available to everyone. I know this phrase is bandied about an awful lot, but Comenius is literally centuries ahead of his time and it's really only in the 19th century that the implementation of universal education leads to this kind of rediscovery of this remarkably farsighted pioneer.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Susanna, for three decades, war devastated Europe, and then in 1648, there was peace. What changed then for Comenius?

[Susanna Ivanic] Well, this was a moment of great disappointment for him. He had hoped that the Unity of Brethren might be one of those protected Protestant groups. But the Treaty of Westphalia, the Peace of Westphalia, depending on your emphasis, in 1648, only protected Calvinists and Lutherans. It was really a reemphasis of the Peace of Augsburg 100 years earlier, in 1555, but it added Calvinism. But there was no way in which this relatively small group of Protestants would be included in that. So on top of that, he had the unfortunate geographical issue that whilst other territories had the rule of cuius regio religio, whoever's rule it is, it's their religion that will be implemented but you can have private worship of the other Protestant faiths. In the Habsburg lands, that was not the case. And in the Habsburg lands, Bohemia and Moravia, Ferdinand III was ruling and he was from this incredibly staunch Jesuit-educated background advancing the Marian culture of the immaculate conception, everything that was against Protestant devotional culture. So there was really no way back in 1648 for him.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Howard, towards the end of his life, did Comenius realize or think that his universalism wasn't in step with the time?

[33:18]
[Howard Hotson] Yeah, that's a really interesting question, and in fact, I think Hartlib is an interesting way into that. Hartlib is the person who invites Comenius to England in 1641. This huge crisis has been going on in Central Europe for two decades at that point. England is entering this period of upheaval and Comenius has the glimmerings of a solution, a universal reform program which is going to pacify and extinguish all of this upheaval. And he writes a book called The Age of Light, which I think we can really regard as the first really prophetic vision of the Age of Enlightenment, brought about partly by technological advances like the printing press and the European voyages of discovery, but also representing a sort of culmination of secular and divine learning. Twenty-five more years later, Comenius dedicates this book to the newly founded Royal Society in 1668 and the extraordinary thing is that in this 25 year period, the tenor of English intellectual thinking has completely diverged from this universal reform vision that Comenius is still maintaining. And the crucial point is here, of course, that

these three crises which provoke his universal reform mission have all, to some extent, subsided. We mentioned that the 30 Years War ends with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The upheaval in the Stewart Dominions ends with the restoration of the Stewart Dynasty in 1660. With the resolution of these religious crises, the political and military crises die down as well. In central Europe, for instance, it becomes evident to both Protestants and Catholics that the real enemies are not their confessional opponents inside the empire, but their political opponents outside it -- the Ottoman Turks to the east, the French to the west. And the intellectual crisis has also resolved to some extent, as the foundation of the Royal Society suggests: there are new institutions for pursuing new approaches to understanding the natural world. But, of course, for Comenius, the crisis has not been resolved. He and his community, as Susanna suggested, were not restored to their homeland by the intervention of the Swedes or by the negotiations in the Peace of Westphalia. So he's still in this era of crisis, while the rest of Europe, as it were, is transitioning to another period. And it's at this point where, as it were, the more religious and millenarian aspects of his universal reform program come to the fore. And, of course, this is deeply unfortunate because this is entirely out of keeping with the emerging thought of the European Enlightenment. And it's in fact, shortly after his death, when millenarianism surges up in the French Protestant world, that Comenius' reputation is seriously damaged by one of the crucial figures of the early Enlightenment, Pierre Bayle, in one of the absolutely canonical works of the early Enlightenment his Historical and Critical Dictionary. If you read his article on Comenius, it's a savage attack on Comenius' millenarianism as a way of attacking the millenarianism of Bayle's French Protestant refugee community. And it's this real asynchronicity the fact that Comenius has lived so long that he's seriously out of step with the rest of his times, which tarnishes his reputation during the Age of Enlightenment. And that's the reason why, as you suggested at the beginning, he's a less familiar figure today than he might otherwise be. He missed out on the sort-of-18th-century when the canon of our intellectual and cultural heroes was established, largely because he outlived that period of crisis and was still pursuing this universal reform agenda in a period that was no longer receptive of it.

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you go along with that, Susannah?

[Susanna Ivanic] Absolutely. I think perhaps a good lens to look at that is through how we see the Age of Reformations as it can be built now. It's almost as if in 1517, when Luther nails that 95 thesis to the Wittenburg church door, that christendom and Europe fragments almost immediately but actually there's this incredibly long, slow burn. And the saying history is written by the winners also comes in here. Compared to Martin Luther and John Calvin, Comenius is really not one of those. So those things together, I think, we should refocus on Comenius and see him as this slow burn of the Reformation, but also somebody who prefigures the Enlightenment. But just to add to that, I think he's very important for rewriting the history of religion in the early modern period because he gives us an insight into more about what everyday life and everyday experience of religion was. So, for example, if you look at what people owned in Prague in the 17th century, for a long time, they owned a plethora of different objects from different confessions. You have Catholic prayer beads strung together with amuletic wolf's teeth. You have a Lutheran sermon book alongside a Unity of Brethren hymn book. So people draw on all of these different strategies and it's that universal and pansophic and encyclopedic approach to the world that I think he gives us a crucial insight into.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Vladimir, we're coming to the end now. So could you tell us, in your view, what impact he's had? And more importantly, where can we find his legacy now?

[39:23]
[Vladimir Urbanek] Howard has already mentioned that Comenius' picture, his image during the era of Enlightenment was mostly negative because of the criticism of Pierre Bayle. And Comenius was in fact rediscovered as a thinker and educational reformer at the end of the 18th century and during the 19th century. He was considered by German educationalists, for example of the 19th century, as the father of modern pedagogy and predecessor of thinkers like Pestalozzi, Fröbel or even Rousseau. So at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, his importance as a pioneering figure in the history of education was widely shared. But his importance as universal reformer, philosopher, and outstanding figure of European intellectual history became clear only after the Second World War, and this was because of the two discoveries the discovery of the Hartlib papers, which includes a lot of Comenius' manuscripts and correspondence, and because of the discovery of the manuscript of his major work, General Consultation on the Improvement of Human Affairs. And between the 1960s and 1990s, scholars devoted a lot of time to research these new sources to draw newly the picture of Comenius as an important intellectual person who contributed to European intellectual history with this very important project of universal reform of human affairs.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much indeed.

And the In Our Time podcast gets some extra time now with a few minutes of bonus material from Melvin and his guests.

[Melvyn Bragg] What would you like to have said that you didn't say?

[41:54]
[Susanna Ivanic] Well, I was very lucky to see a copy of the Orbis Senualian Pictus, which, because it was so successful in its day, not many copies survive because they were so well used. The pages were torn, and so they haven't been preserved in our collections. But this copy in the Canterbury Cathedral Archive had a very interesting point. It was one of the English editions so it was "The Visible World Depicted", which is the usual translation, but in the preface, it really, really brought out the importance of the senses. And I just wonder if we should be paying more attention to this, that the whole nature of knowledge in this period is linked to this idea that knowledge has been in the senses first. It's not just an intellectual, abstract, textual thing. It is about engaging with the material and visual world around. And, of course, Orbis itself, in the way that it's set out, shows us this. And I think that we should pay more attention to how knowledge is made and received and understood, not just by children, but by everybody in this period, by making things, by engaging with them, by being trained to interpret them through your senses, through your eyes, through your ears, and so on.

[Melvyn Bragg] Vladimir?

[Vladimir Urbanek] His correspondence is really a fascinating source from which we can learn how his ideas spread across Europe in what was called the "republic of letters", this community of learned people who corresponded and exchanged ideas, books, etc. We know today 570 letters of Commenius and this is clearly just a small portion of the original number of his correspondence. In addition to that, we do not know his early correspondence. We only know correspondence which followed his exile to Poland. But this is very interesting how he especially after the publication of the Januae Lingvarum - the language textbook we talked about - how his name became well known in the european republic of letters and how his network of contacts expanded rapidly in the 1630s because he was in Poland, so naturally there was an interest in local centers of scholarship and education as was, for example, the major Baltic port and the center of scholarship Gdansk (or Dansig). There was a lively literary circle there, including around the local Latin academy, including important professors of rhetoric but also a famous poet, Martin Opitz and, for example, astronomer Johannes Hevelius, the author of The Atlas of the Moon, with whom Comenius corresponded. But perhaps the most important circle and indeed pan-european network of communication was that of Samuel Hartlib in London. Hartlib, of course, was another exile from Central Europe or northern part of Central Europe. He was an anglo-german intelligencer of knowledge, as it was called already at that time, and he was really fascinated by Comenius' projects of the reform of schools and of his pansophic efforts. He published several of Comenius' works, including his early draft of Pansofia called Padromus Pansophica. He translated this book into English and he used his network for distribution of Comenius' manuscripts and also published books. He even employed one scribe to transcribe some of Comenius' letters and his manuscripts and Hartlib sent them to different corners of Europe to inform his friends and colleagues about the new Comenius' efforts in the field of pansophia.

[Melvyn Bragg] Howard do you want to come up?

[47.09]
[Howard Hotson] Sure. I think what I'd like to suggest is that for me anyway, the real fascination of Comenius is providing a really illuminating and very unfamiliar perspective on the era in which he lives. And this represents, I think, something of a departure from the constituencies which have studied and appreciated him to date. I mean, as an educational reformer, he was rediscovered in the 19th century as Westerners began to consider the possibility of universal education. As a literary figure in the history of the Czech language and the author of a classic work the Labyrinth of the World And The Paradise of the Heart, he has another constituency there. His very unusual theological ideas and of course, his ideas as universal reformer have also attracted some attention. But from my point of view, the really remarkable and to a large extent sort of unexploited aspect of Comenius is the vantage point he gives us for looking on his incredibly crisis-ridden century. I mean, his life straddles that perfectly and he looks at it from all kinds of sort-of-marginal positions. He's not Catholic, but he's not mainstream Protestant either. He's off to one removed. He's not in one of the great European capitals. He's moving around these areas on the periphery of Europe. He's not a specialist. You can't put him into any particular disciplinary category. He's a universalist. He writes on religion. He writes on politics.

He writes on philosophy, science, education, language and he provides a perspective on that extraordinary period where all these crises overlap with one another which I think is really unique and hugely illuminating. And if there is any way to repair that defect that you mentioned at the beginning and integrate him in some way into the way in which early modern European history is taught, I think it's probably by using him as a vantage point to get a new perspective on what is really a formative period of european history. I mean there is a sense in which there is a kind of europe building up to this period of crisis in the mid 17th century and then there's a period sort-of moving away from it. I mean the 17th century is often not even taught as a unit because it's kind of decisively broken in the middle. And I think this is one of the great watersheds in european history whether religious, ecclesiastical, whether philosophical and scientific, whether political and military. And Comenius provides a really valuable and virtually unexploited standpoint for looking at that. And if he's going to make his way under the history syllabus I think that's the way it's going to happen.

[Melvyn Bragg] Vladimir?

[50:05]
[Vladimir Urbanek] Comenius was against any violence in these three spheres of human activities, that is, violence in education, violence in religious matters. He was against any violent conversion of people and violence in politics. And this is very important, of course. Of course one can speak about how it was in tangent with his expectations of the Bohemians returning to the Bohemian lands which he understood very well that it should have been done by some military action, et cetera, et cetera. But his theoretical works very much focused on the idea of non-violence in all these spheres of human activities.

[Susanna Ivanic] And the universalism there. It's interesting because he is often cast as reacting against the crises, the political, the confessional crises. But I wonder also here if we should be thinking about the enormously expanded horizons of europe in the preceding years. Columbus has discovered so-called America. We have this incredible influx of new goods, new exotic materials that are more and more affordable and to really get to grips with what is this world that we thought we knew and actually God made a lot more of it that we now know a bit more about it. Universalism can also be a form of trying to control that, perhaps.

[Howard Hotson] I think that's an excellent idea and it's something that Comenius dwells on explicitly. It's not that we have to kind of reconstruct this. The last steps in this way of light towards universal enlightenment are the invention of printing and the European voyages of discovery which Comenius sees precisely from this universalistic standpoint. Printing gives us the opportunity to converse with great sages of all ages and trans-oceanic navigation gives us an opportunity to interact with these other cultures and the other places around the world. You couldn't have had that vision much earlier. It took a long time for the printing press to begin to show its potential and perhaps even longer for the significance of this new sort of dawning era of globalization to begin to register on European intellectuals. So it's not all doom and gloom. This is part of the reason that Comenius has this very optimistic view of the future because he's acutely aware of the fact that europe is also going through this kind of technological transformation which is opening up possibilities which are almost

literally unthinkable before. And that's another really revealing aspect of his thinking this tension between the acute crisis that he's living through, on the one hand, and these much brighter prospects which are opening up. And ultimately, he's an optimist. And this is, I think, from a biographical point of view, perhaps the most astonishing thing. If you go through all the trials and tribulations that this man suffered including repeated loss of his library and his manuscripts on which he had been working for centuries the loss of his wife and family the destruction of his whole confessional tradition, the dispersion of his confessional communities repeated transplantation from one part of europe to other by fire and sword. Every single one of these movements is precipitated to one degree or another by this whole set of interlocking congress. It's absolutely astonishing that he should have maintained his constancy of purpose and his optimism for the future. It's an absolutely extraordinary thing. And that, too, is grounded in kind-of secular technological considerations about education, learning, science, discovery, communication, on the one hand, and by his very optimistic theological anthropology where he, in striking contrast to Luther and Calvin, believed that, yes, we were fallen creatures but we had the capacity to reform ourselves and to reform our world. This is, I think, again, one of the really extraordinary and unusual aspects of Comenius. He almost, in this respect, falls between the two stools of Protestantism and Catholicism, right? Because he effectively, implicitly rejects this cardinal notion that we are all so completely corrupted by sin that we lack the capacity to contribute to our own reformation in any way. This is a cardinal principle of mainstream Lutheranism and Calvinism. Here's this guy who represents a protestant tradition which goes back a century before the Reformation and perhaps as a consequence of that still maintains a much more optimistic belief in human capacity to reform themselves and reform the world in consort with, in collaboration with, as it were, higher powers. It's something which really marks him off from the Reformation/Counter-reformation divide and provides, at a very deep theological level, some of the optimism necessary for him to continue working in these extraordinarily difficult circumstances towards this magnificent project of his.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, thank you very much.

In Our Time with Melvin Bragg is produced by Simon Tillotson.