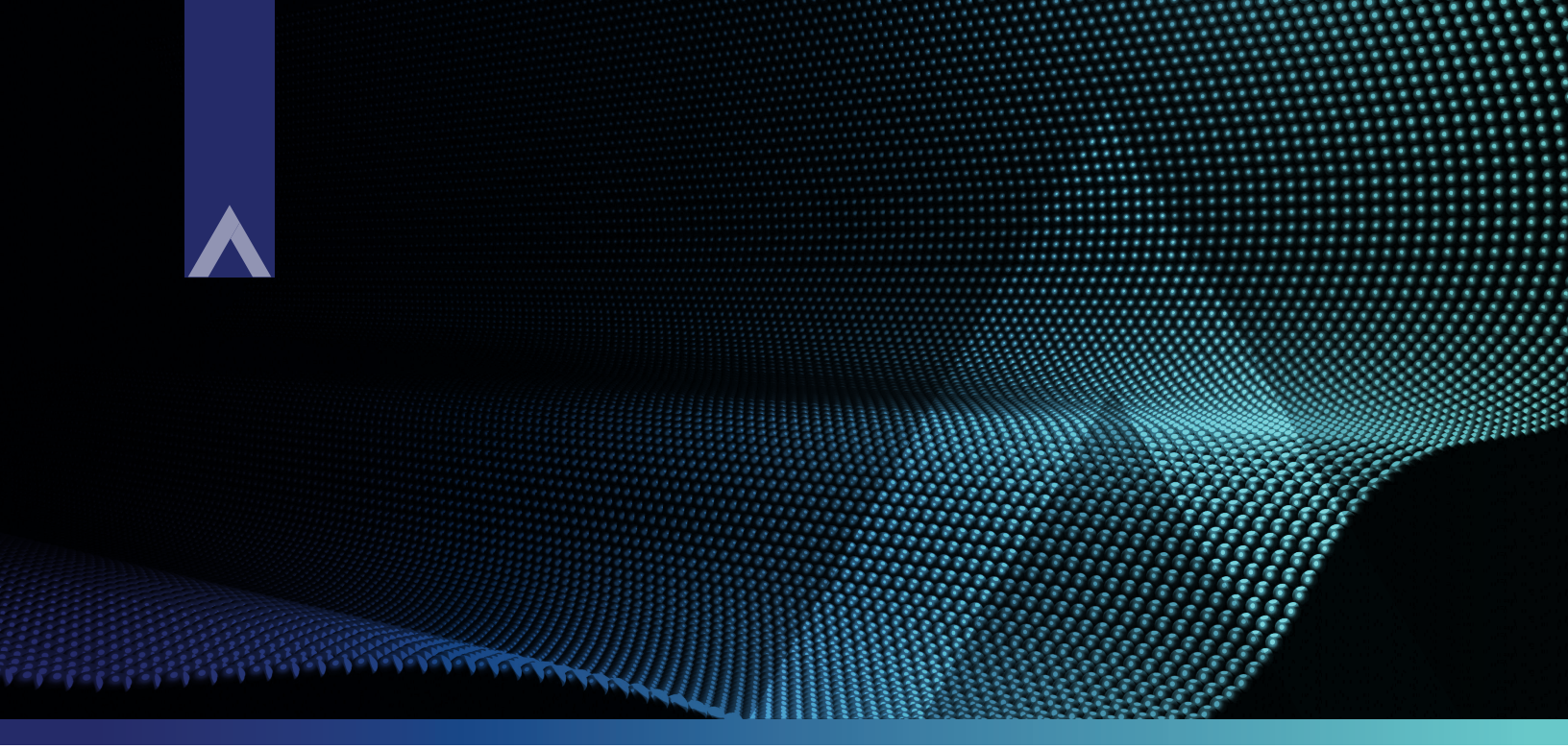

Schooling and Delight

What We Can Learn from Comenius About Why We Educate

David I. Smith

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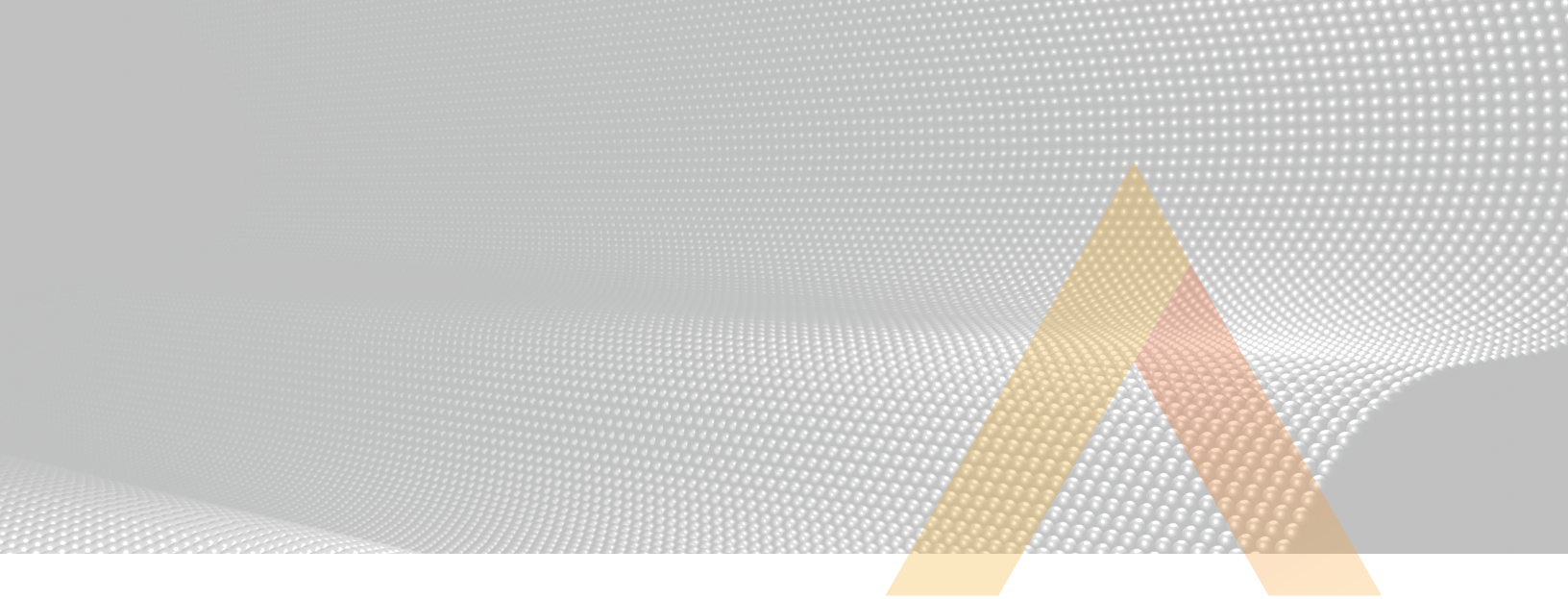

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About the Author



DAVID I. SMITH has an international reputation as a thinker and practitioner at the intersection of faith and teaching. He began his career teaching French, German, and Russian in public secondary schools in the United Kingdom, where he became fascinated by the question of how our beliefs, values, and commitments can shape and guide our approaches to teaching and learning. After graduate work in philosophical theology, philosophy of education, and curriculum studies he moved to Calvin University, where he has received awards for innovative teaching and for cross-cultural engagement in teaching as well as the University's Presidential Award for Exemplary Teaching. He is the founding director of the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning, coordinator of the de Vries Institute for Global Faculty Development, and professor of education. He also serves as the senior editor of the *International Journal of Christianity and Education*. Smith is a Cardus senior fellow in Education.

About Cardus Education

Cardus Education exists to cultivate education for the common good and to convene education leaders through original research and policy studies on educational pluralism, excellence in education, and graduate outcomes.

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Key Points

- This paper explores the purpose of education as understood by John Amos Comenius, a seventeenth-century reformer, educator, and scholar more widely known as the father of numerous features of modern education.
- Comenius's philosophy of education was inextricable from his theology and leads to key ideas about who should be educated, for what purpose, and why and how schools serve that purpose.
    - Education should be universal because of the value God places on humanity. Not only are humans created in God's image, but God himself became human in Christ; therefore, how can we not commit to developing human gifts?
    - An educated person is someone who can wisely navigate and integrate these three fundamental human needs: to think well, to use power well, and to delight in the right things.
    - What we do with our reason and our power is rooted in what we do with our heart. What we delight in shapes how we love. Reason, power, and delight are therefore inseparable in their roots and effects.
    - Delight has a structure. It involves glimpsing a call to goodness in the beauty of the world, learning to order the self toward justice, and becoming suffused with God's mercy, which in turn is worked out through transformed human agents in active care for the world.
- Schooling cannot help being rooted in beliefs and fostering implicit and explicit choices about how to delight. Schooling is inherently particular and traditioned, inherently rooted in faith, even as it is necessarily directed toward the flourishing of all. Schools, therefore, are for the learner's intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation and for the common good.

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Introduction

As we wrangle repeatedly over the purposes of schooling and who gets to define them, what might we gain by taking a moment to listen to a thoughtful voice from a place and time not defined by our own mix of prejudices? I invite you to listen to such a voice, one speaking from a different era amid different anxieties and in a different idiom yet addressing questions that remain pressing. It is a voice shaped by a lifetime of educational engagement and reflection in the constant shadow of violence, yet, to the last, invested in the pursuit of delight. The voice belongs to Jan Amos Komenský, a Moravian reformer, educator, and scholar more widely known to posterity as John Amos Comenius and regularly claimed (with varying plausibility) as a founding father of numerous features of modern education.[1] I focus here on what he thought schools are for.

Who?

First, a little context. Comenius was thinking about schools amid significant social upheaval.[2] Born in Moravia in 1592, he was twenty-six years old, a young pastor recently graduated and married, when the Thirty Years War broke out. The consequences were devastating for his region and for him personally. He soon lost his wife and two small children to the plague that stalked the fighting. Like other local Protestants, he was required to convert to Catholicism or leave the region. After some time hiding on friendly estates, he hiked with his congregation to Poland, now and permanently a refugee. He spent the next five decades in exile, though initial hopes of a possible return helped fuel his writing for schools. His early works, written in Czech, were directed to comforting his congregation and planning for a restoration of Moravian culture through improved schooling. As his reputation began to grow, his audience expanded internationally, and he began to write in Latin. Komenský became Comenius. He was drawn into school reform efforts in Hungary and Sweden and spent time in England consulting on educational reforms there.

Over time, the scope of his writing expanded from devotional and educational works into linguistics, political theory, literature, philosophy, and more. Yet his original vision of reforming schools remained. In 1661, toward the end of his life, he wrote in a letter, "I never intended to write anything in Latin, let alone to publish it. Early in my youth I had the desire to compose some books in the mother tongue for the benefit of my nation, and this desire has not left me for fifty years."[3] His desire to serve his nation exerted an influence far beyond its

1 J.C. Sturm and L. Groenendijk, "On the Use and Abuse of Great Educators: The Case of Comenius in the Low Countries," *Paedagogica Historica* 35, no.1 (1999): 111–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/0030923990350107.

2 The most substantial biography of Comenius remains M. Blekastad, *Comenius: Versuch eines Umrisses von Leben, Werk und Schicksal des Jan Amos Komenský* (Universitetsforlaget/Academia, 1969). A shorter account in English can be found in M. Spinka, *John Amos Comenius: That Incomparable Moravian*, 2nd ed. (Russell & Russell, 1969). A compact overview can be found in the first chapter of D. Murphy, *Comenius: A Critical Reassessment of His Life and Work* (Irish Academic Press, 1995).

3 Letter to Peter Montanus, December 10, 1661, in Jan Amos Komenský, *Listy přátelům a příznivcům* (Lidové nakladatelství, 1970), 177. All translations of Comenius in this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

boundaries. He remains a major figure in the history of education and of European thought, not least for his advocacy of universal education. Yet he insisted that he wrote all his works as a theologian, pushing us toward consideration of what theology could contribute to thinking about education.[4] Few thinkers in the history of education offer a more richly woven take on the slippery relationship between religion and schooling.

Comenius's reception history has been tortuous. His theological leanings earned him disapproval from Enlightenment thinkers. His didactic works were later retrieved and celebrated, sometimes in gushing terms, by nineteenth- and twentieth-century educators, yet often with little reference to his theology. To many modern readers of Comenius, it seems almost self-evident that theology should be kept separate from philosophy and education. To take an example almost at random, a recent article on Comenius's ethics emphasizes the difficulty of separating "the theological and philosophical elements of Comenius's system" because they are "intermingled organically," yet immediately proposes that separating them is "worth the effort."[5] If we are used to thinking of theology as something quite distinct from public discourse about education, perhaps something marginal or even harmful to the educational enterprise, we may expect little help from a theologian unless we can extract the educational nuggets from their theological substrate. Yet the recurring effort to separate strands that for Comenius were closely intertwined has led to the suggestion that "the history of the interpretation of Comenius's legacy is thus at the same time the history of the misinterpretation of the meaning of his most distinctive statements."[6] It has not helped that some of his most important work was lost for centuries, that much of his writing remains untranslated into English, and that much of what has been translated is difficult to access and sometimes inaccurate.[7] Yet his ideas have remained appealing to those of various faiths or none, despite their roots in a specific theology. He remains worth getting to know, not least for his distinctive take on how faith and schooling intersect, and I propose that it is well worth the effort to understand how his theology interacted with his ideas about schools. We might, after all, learn something about the fraught relationship between religion and education that could inform our own context. As a way in, I will start where he does, with the basic question: Schools for whom?

Yet he insisted that he wrote all his works as a theologian, pushing us toward consideration of what theology could contribute to thinking about education.

4 J.A. Comenius, *J.A. Comenii Pro Latinitate Januae Linguarum Suae, Illusque Praxeos Comicae, Apologia*, in *Opera Didactica Omnia* (Academia Scientiarum Bohemoslovenica, 1957), 4:27. See further, e.g., A. Molnár, "Zum Theologieverständnis des Comenius," in *Comenius: Erkennen-Glauben-Handeln, Internationales Comenius-Colloquium Herborn 1984* (Schriften zur Comeniusforschung Band 16), ed. K. Schaller (Verlag Hans Richarz, 1985), 61.

5 L.E. Misseri, "Comenius' Ethics: From the Heart to the World," *Ethics & Bioethics (in Central Europe)* 7, nos. 1–2 (2017): 15, https://reference-global.com/article/10.1515/ebce-2017-0004.

6 P. Hošek, "On Earth as It Is in Heaven: The Theological Basis of Comenius's Universal Restoration," in *The Restoration of Human Affairs: Utopianism or Realism?*, ed. J. Hábl (Wipf and Stock, 2022), 131.

7 In the hope of improving the situation a little, I am working on an anthology of freshly translated excerpts to be published by Eerdmans in 2027 or 2028.

For Whom?

The right to attend school was not a given when Comenius was writing. In multiple treatises, Comenius begins to build a radical case for universal education by dwelling on what is special about human beings and reflecting theologically on where that special status comes from.[8] What is it that makes humans worth educating?[9] Why invest the considerable resources needed to educate people in general, rather than the few who can buy the privilege? As he rightly realized, this question has implications for our ideas about which kinds of people have value and why.

For a theologian, an obvious place to turn is the idea that humans are made in God's image and thereby endowed with inalienable value and dignity. He does turn there, but only to immediately relativize that argument. In the *Czech Didactic* he notes that human beings are material creatures just like rocks, beasts, and birds, yet with remarkable minds. They share spiritual qualities with angels yet are embodied images of God. But none of this turns out to be the fundamental argument:

> Humans are the most glorious beings not only because they stand above all earthly creatures . . . [or because] Divine Wisdom created humans in its own image at the creation. . . . That the same Divine Wisdom then took on the image of humanity when it wanted to transform corrupted humanity, that alone is the glory of which humanity can boast above all the angels.[10]

Yes, he grants, humans are made in God's image, and yes, they seem to have a role in the world different from that of other creatures (he has the idea of human rule often inferred from Genesis 1 in mind, an idea we'll revisit later). But the key point is that even when humanity was fallen and corrupt, God set such value on humanity that God became human in Christ.

The same move is rearticulated in his later reworking of the *Czech Didactic* in Latin, the *Great Didactic*. There he pictures God addressing humanity as follows:

> I have appointed you to be my companion in eternity; for your use I have prepared earth and heaven and what they contain; in you I brought together into one all that other creatures have singly: being, life, perception, reason. I appointed you over the works of my hands and placed everything under your feet, sheep and oxen and the beasts of the field, the fowl of the air and the fish of the sea and crowned you with glory and honor (Psalm 8). And finally, so that you would lack nothing, I gave you myself in a hypostatic union, joining my nature with yours in eternity in a way granted to no other creature, visible or invisible. For which other creature in heaven

8 J.A. Komenský, *Didaktika Česká* (I.L. Kober, 1937), 19–21 (1.1–1.4); J.A. Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, in *Opera Didactica* Omnia (Academia Scientiarum Bohemoslovenica, 1957), 1:17 (1.1–1.4). (Parentheses refer to Comenius's numbered paragraphs to allow for location in different editions or translations.) There is a dated English translation of the *Great Didactic*: M.W. Keatinge, *The Great Didactic of John Amos Comenius* (Adam and Charles Black, 1907).

9 For a broader overview of Comenius's views on human nature, see J. Čížek, *The Conception of Man in the Works of John Amos Comenius* (Peter Lang, 2016).

10 Komenský, *Didaktika Česká*, 1.3.

> or on earth can boast that God was manifested in its flesh and seen by angels? (1 Timothy 3:16).[11]

Here again he notes that humans have unique gifts, abilities, and power over their environment, only to move on to the clinching argument: The "hypostatic union" refers to the joining of the human and divine natures of Christ, fully God, fully human, an idea at the heart of Christian theology. This, he says, is what makes humans worth the trouble: God's choice to be intimately and irrevocably bound to them in spite of everything. If this is so, how can we not commit to developing human gifts?

This might seem like an arcane theological argument, but notice the implications. If the fundamental reason for investing in education is the worth conferred by God's union with humanity in Christ, then the accidents of our individual identities are not in play. In Christ, God united himself with humanity per se, not just with the clever, rich, or powerful. At the beginning of *Pampaedia* ("Universal Education"), a later elaboration of his educational vision, he writes:

> First, the desire is for full formation into full humanity not of any one individual, or a few, or many, but of all people and every individual, young and old, wealthy and poor, of high or low birth, men and women, in a word, including whoever is born as human, with the ultimate goal of eventual restorative cultivation of the whole of humanity, throughout every age level, social status, sex, or ethnicity.[12]

The Incarnation, Comenius believed, was for the salvation of the world. The divine willingness to engage sacrificially even with fallen, failing humanity implied a profound value placed on humans simply in their status as humans, even as it opened a door to human restoration. This restoration was to happen through grace, repentance, and trust in Christ, yet Comenius emphasizes that God works in the world through material means. Education is one of God's means for restorative cultivation and the unfolding of constructive human possibilities.

If the Incarnation was not just for the male or the privileged, then neither is education. A little later in *Pampaedia*, Comenius asks whether those with mental or sensory impairments should be included in schooling. His answer, characteristically, is not built upon their capacity for economic or cultural contribution, but rather upon their inherent worth. "There is no exclusion from human education," he writes, "except for non-humans."[13] If you are a squirrel or a caterpillar or a rock you don't get to attend school. If you are human, you are worthy of an education.

Now, the next question is on the horizon. The idea that humans require restorative cultivation suggests that they are not already whole, that something in them requires intentional formation and guidance rather than just unfolding of its own accord. What are the core things that unaided

11 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 17 (1.3).

12 J.A. Comenius, *Pampaedia. Lateinischer Text und deutsche Übersetzung* (Quelle & Meyer, 1960), 14 (1.6). *Pampaedia* in English can be found in *Comenius's Pampaedia*, trans. A.M.O. Dobbie (Buckland, 1986).

13 Comenius, *Pampaedia*, 46 (2.30). There are places where Comenius echoes assumptions of his time—for example, with regard to gender roles—when discussing practical arrangements, yet his statements of fundamental principles are far-reaching in their implications.

humans do poorly and need to get better at? Comenius offers complex answers that range beyond the bounds of this paper. Here I will focus on understanding his reflections on how delight relates to learning. At the heart of the various ways in which humans fail, he argues, is a tendency to get lost in labyrinths that lead us away from joy. The kind of learning that assists in our restoration is a learning that leans into delight, more specifically a kind of delight that is linked to healing, justice, and restored relationships. We require an education, says Comenius, that helps us to delight well and bring delight to our affairs in the world.

For What?

Comenius approached his wide-ranging works on social reform with a particular view of "human affairs," the *res humanae*.[14] He set out to clarify the defects, prospects, and relationships characterizing three basic human affairs: education, politics, and religion. He saw these three human activities as echoes within the world of God's wisdom, power, and goodness; the created world bears the stamp of its Creator. Humans desire to know and understand the world. We also have power over the world and over other people. Whether we use that power for good or ill is related to how we understand, but also to how we believe and where we find delight. We are not just thinking machines. We have an unavoidable need to find a trusted centre of peace and delight that can orient us amid the whirling chaos of life.[15] An educated person is someone who can wisely navigate and integrate these three fundamental human needs: to think well, to use power well, and to delight in the right things. In the *Great Didactic*, Comenius writes that

> it is indeed clear that humans are positioned among the visible creatures with the plan that they should be:
>
> 1. A rational creature.
>
> 2. A creature which is the Lord of creatures.
>
> 3. A creature which is the image and the joy of its Creator.
>
> These three aspects are so united that at no time can any separation between them be admitted, for the basis of the present and the future life has its foundation in them.[16]

These three needs imply that learning, virtue, and piety are core goals of education, with an accompanying insistence that they cannot be separated, that proper education requires an

14 J.A. Comenius, *Panegersia*, in *De Rerum Humanorum Emendatione Consultatio Catholica*, (Academia Scientiarum Bohemoslavica, 1966), 2:50–53 (4.1-4.26). For *Panegersia* in English translation see *Panegersia or Universal Awakening,* transl. A.M.O. Dobbie (Peter Drinkwater, 1990).

15 This image is elaborated especially in J.A. Comenius, *Centrum Securitatis*, in *Opera Omnia* (Academia, 1978), 3:473–548. See J. Hábl, *On Being Human(e): Comenius's Pedagogical Humanization as an Anthropological Problem* (Pickwick, 2017).

16 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 20 (4.2).

intimate integration of thinking, virtue, and delight.[17] This is simply and elegantly stated but opens into a rich tapestry of reflections. I will say a little more about each point in turn.

A Rational Creature

Humans, Comenius notes, are not the strongest, fastest, or fiercest of creatures, but they do have a uniquely open-ended capacity for thinking. No matter how many things we think about or discover, there is room in our minds and appetites for more.[18] Trying to keep us from thinking about things is like telling the tide to stop. It is not just that we keep track of things for practical purposes, the way a gazelle keeps an eye on a sleeping lion. We seek to understand causes, to classify, to order our perceptions, to name, to narrate, to grasp. Developing our ability to do this well, to know what is valid, reject what is false, and understand how things hang together is a key purpose of schooling. If our powers of thought are not developed, our human potential and responsibility are frustrated.[19]

At this point it may seem that Comenius supports views of education that focus centrally on the development of rational capacities, capacities for deep understanding and critical thinking. Yet he would resist such views as soon as they made intellectual development a self-sufficient purpose of schooling. The proper human response to the glories of the world is not just to analyze them. When we look at creation, we should not just be seeing inert matter, raw material, or intellectual puzzles. The world is a kind of moral test, meant to teach us love and delight.[20] He puts it this way in the *Great Didactic*:

> [When contemplating the world, we should] be seized by admiration for the creator, pushed onward in knowledge, and enticed to love, through the dependability, beauty, and sweetness that were, to be sure, invisible and hidden in the abyss of eternity, now shining forth everywhere and offered to be touched, seen, and tasted. So, this world is nothing other than our seed-plot, our source of nourishment, our school.[21]

The world nourishes not just our minds, but our senses, our affections. More than that, it is meant to invite and nourish our capacity to love. Our mind is in intimate conversation with the inclinations of our will.

A Creature Which Is the Lord of Creatures

Humans are not armchair commentators. We affect other people and other creatures through our choices. We have power over their well-being. Human misunderstanding harms other creatures as well as ourselves, but so do human malice and misdirected human desire. The problem is not just

17 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 20 (4.5).

18 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 18 (2.7).

19 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 34–36 (6).

20 D.I. Smith, "It Would Be Good to Have a Paradise: Comenius on Learners Past and Present," in *The Restoration of Human Affairs: Utopianism or Realism?*, ed. J. Hábl (Wipf and Stock, 2022), 29–44.

21 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 21 (3.3).

what we think, but what we want. Humans are prone to wilful corruption and abuse, and other humans, other creatures, and the wider environment suffer as a result. Education has to reckon with the reality and consequences of human power and its degradation.

Of course, the language of humanity being the "Lord of creatures" has a historical context. Comenius regularly mentions the dominion of humans over creation that he sees portrayed in Genesis 1, and he often does so in a familiar seventeenth-century manner that emphasizes human ownership and freedom. Humanity is, he says, "intended to govern the lower creatures."[22] In other words, he can sound a lot like the kind of early modern thinker that more recent ecological discussions and more nuanced readers of Genesis have warned us against—out to exploit the earth for religiously justified human benefit, over-invested in human superiority, and heedless of the damage done to the world.[23]

I am not sure we can completely exonerate Comenius from being a child of his time on this score; some of his metaphors are a little aggressive. But the matter is not so simple. If we complete the phrase quoted a moment ago, we find it saying that humans are "intended to govern the lower creatures, themselves, and their neighbour."[24] Whatever Comenius has in mind when he says humans are intended to "govern," it has to be something that applies to our relationships to ourselves and to one another as much as to the rest of the world, and it has to fit with his repeated emphasis on gentleness and non-violence. The human power that he has in view here includes self-control, the ability to govern our own selfish impulses and curb our tendency to seek satisfaction in profit and power. Humans' use of power is meant to imitate God's use of power to protect and sustain, and should embody Christ's virtues of gentle humility, for

> he himself says: "Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart." See him commanding us to clothe ourselves with his gentleness and humility! And if we do this, he promises that we will find rest for our souls. What holy advice this is! How certain! How true! Examine this, everyone, try it out, put it to the test, you will come to know and confess. Whoever (it is said) learns to be gentle and humble will find rest.[25]

This applies to how we learn to treat non-human creatures, because the way we are educated affects the ability of other creatures to thrive:

> That all humans be developed toward a rational life is also a matter of concern to things themselves, so that they too might be better under the wise direction of wise people. . . . Things are better under humans who justly possess and use them if they know how to use them fittingly. It is notable what Solomon says: the just man also cares for the life of his beast of burden; but the wicked man is cruel (Proverbs 12:10). Oh, how great is the cruelty that all things everywhere experience through the wickedness or ignorance of humans who use them illicitly! The apostle pointed

22 Comenius, *Pampaedia*, 46 (2.29).

23 The classic statement (which has since been much discussed and qualified) of this thesis is L. White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–207, http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf.

24 Comenius, *Pampaedia*, 46 (2.29).

25 Comenius, *Centrum Securitatis*, 512–13.

> to this, testifying that all creatures are subjected to vanity and sigh, desire, and hope to be liberated from such wicked servitude (Romans 8:20). It is certainly desirable that what creatures long and hope for should be pushed forward, and everything everywhere should proceed more justly, and all creatures should have cause to praise God with us (Psalm 148). Therefore, it is also to be desired that all people be taught to know and understand things rightly and to use and enjoy things rightly; for without the cultivation of dispositions this has never been brought into existence, nor will it ever be.[26]

The emphasis here on cultivation of human dispositions is a further clue. The problem is not just lack of understanding, but also misdirected desires, and so the answer is not just information but moral formation. When Comenius says that humans need to be educated as the "Lord of creatures," what he has in mind is not a celebration of the power to exploit, but an education in virtue that might make human power over self, neighbour, and the rest of creation more just and less destructive. If all creatures are to rejoice with us, then schooling must help foster the disposition of approaching them with love.

What we might today call environmental education is, on this view, not just a topic in the curriculum or a part of the natural sciences. It is part of the basic purpose of having schools. In fact, Comenius makes the interests of non-human creatures part of his argument for universal schooling: The need for universal education is obvious, he says, "if we attend to how God, humans, and things themselves have a stake in it."[27] We will not make headway, he emphasizes, unless we reflect on why we are here, and why other creatures are here with us, and unless we actively foster the conditions for divine, human, and creational delight.

The Image and the Joy of Its Creator

Now we might seem to have tilted from an education focused on intellectual training to one focused on moral formation—but Comenius would reject that option too if it were taken to be the new master key. Learning has to involve more than thinking, choosing, and attending to practical affairs,

> otherwise in all our striving we will be nothing but squirrels imprisoned in the cage of our futility; and the more energetically we train for the external skills and business of life, the more we will grow weary and find no escape from the cage of the world.[28]

The inspiration for our drive to understand and to act comes from the centres around which we orient ourselves, our objects of reverence and our sources of joy. Dispositions are connected to beliefs and commitments. What we do with our power is rooted in what we do with our heart. Questions about learning therefore stand in the shadow of questions about where we find our

26 Comenius, *Pampaedia*, 32 (2.13).

27 Comenius, *Pampaedia*, 22 (2.3).

28 Comenius, *Pampaedia*, 64 (3.27).

Making our ambitions and possessions the centre breeds fear and domination. A proper centre nurtures the virtues that might keep our understanding and choosing from being dangerous to ourselves and other creatures. What we delight in shapes how we love.

source of purpose and delight. If we find it in our own appetites and "selfwardness,"[29] or in objects and possessions, we become like an erratically spinning wheel with an off-centre hub. Our proper centre, Comenius urges, is in the gift of God's delight in us and our delight in God. Making our ambitions and possessions the centre breeds fear and domination. A proper centre nurtures the virtues that might keep our understanding and choosing from being dangerous to ourselves and other creatures. What we delight in shapes how we love. Reason, power, and delight are therefore inseparable in their roots and effects.

Because these three are inseparable, schooling that proceeds as if they are not connected is not, for Comenius, a sound education. Learning, virtue, and piety are not goals that can be approached one by one, for instance by a science education that ignores faith and beauty, or a religious education that is divorced from study of the natural world, or an intellectual training that neglects ethical consequences. Back to *Pampaedia*:

> We desire that every human be rightly formed and fully cultivated not in some single respect, or a few, or many, but in all respects that perfect human nature. To know the truth and not be deceived by the false; to love the good and not be seduced by the evil; to do what should be done and not let in what should be shunned; to speak wisely with all about everything as needed and be speechless about nothing; in sum, to not deal with things, people, and God rashly, but to act reasonably in all things.[30]

Goodness, Action, Delight

If you have been following along closely, you might have noticed some slippage in the third element of the triad. I noted that the basis for Comenius's conception of the *res humanae* was an idea of God's wisdom, power, and *goodness.* He formulated human learning needs in terms of reason, power, and *delight*—a delight connected to being God's image. These needs entail formation in learning, virtue, and *piety*. Another closely related variant, in *Panegersia* (Universal Exhortation), refers instead to humanity's intellect, powers of choice, and capacity for *action*.[31] Comenius often varied his formulations under the influence of his emphasis in the moment, but unless we assume he was playing at random with terms that were quite basic to his whole way of thinking, we need to consider (in this instance) how goodness, delight, piety, and action might be different ways of talking about the same concern.

Comenius sees schooling as oriented toward action in the world, not just toward theoretical understanding. In the *Great Didactic* he offers the principle that when anything is taught, the

29 I here attempt a translation of Comenius's neologism *samosvojnost*, which refers to the self wanting to be its own ground, destination, and point of orientation. Comenius, *Centrum Securitatis*, 498–99.

30 Comenius, *Pampaedia*, 16 (1.7).

31 Comenius, *Panegersia*, 11 (4.7).

teacher should "at the same time [teach] its practical application in everyday life."[32] But when he says "practical," he does not mean quite what a modern, secular culture might mean. He certainly does not mean that everything should be tied to material or economic benefit or to fixing technical problems. Being practical means knowing how to deal wisely with God, with other people, and with other creatures, so that we might live life well. A practical education is an education for wisdom amid the core relationships that shape human existence.[33]

The need for wise action connects to our status as God's images. In *Panegersia*, Comenius says that although personal salvation is a proper focus for individual concern, it is false to think of the salvation of the rest of creation as God's problem. Salvation, in Comenius's account, does not just mean the rescue of souls. It entails the restoration and protection of the whole of the human relationship to God, neighbour, and creation.[34] God is restoring wholeness to all things, and specifically religious experience is just one part of this. In this work of restoration, God chooses to work in and through humans, his images. Comenius explains:

> If God cares for everything, then so should we who are the image of God. You who are reading this, approach a mirror; you will see an image of yourself that corresponds to yourself, and it will act as you act. Do you blush? It does the same. Do you turn pale? So does it. . . . Here is a lesson for you, O human being, in how you are meant to be a living image of God. Do you see God being good? Take pains to be good also. Do you see God sharing his goodness? Be the same way. Do you see God inviting others to share in his goods? Do likewise. Do you see God going to any length to keep his creatures from ruin? Commit to acting the same way or think of yourself not as the image of God, but as the corpse of an image.[35]

Here we see some of our threads converging. The human capacity for action is part of how humans image God, who has not only infinite capacity for action, but an inclination to act out of a fundamental goodness manifested in kindness to creation. God's actions are good and are directed to the good and preservation of creatures. Comenius, living in exile amid a brutal, three-decade war during which he buried multiple wives, children, and friends, knew better than many that the world as we experience it is violent, deceptive, and cruel. Yet he repeatedly returns to the conviction that God wills good for the world, that God is restoring the world, and that God wants to work through his creatures to that end.[36] Human actions should mirror the goodness and universal care of God's actions, and they fall short when they do not. Piety means yielding the self to God and receiving grace, and then it means obediently taking up the responsibility to

32 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 86 (17.44).

33 See the preface to *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*: J.A. Comenius, *Joh. Amos Comenius's Visible World*, trans. Charles Hoole (John Sprint, 1705).

34 H. Schröer, "Reich Gottes bei Comenius," in *Comenius*, ed. Schaller, 87–93; J.M. Lochman, *Comenius* (Imba/Friedrich Wittig, 1982), 42–47.

35 Comenius, *Panegersia*, 75 (8.27).

36 I. Kišš, "Renewal of the World Through Jesus Christ and Human Participation in It by Comenius," in *Comenius als Theologe*, ed. V.J. Dvořák and J.B. Lášek (Nadace Comenius, 1998): 160–65.

live as God's living image, using the capacity for action in a way that reflects God's good agency.[37] That in turn requires both growth in understanding and formation in virtues, because ignorant and wicked actions do not image God. "If we are inspired by this hope," Comenius urges, "let us investigate ways of fulfilling it! By promoting the common good of mankind let us be ministers of the goodness of God!"[38]

The intent here is not enforced moral conformity (Comenius saw kindness as incompatible with coercion) or a grim determination to do the right thing. It is more about learning to delight in the good and to foster delight through the good, because such delight is proper to our nature and essential to our relationship to God—we are the "image and joy" of God. In the *Great Didactic*, Comenius says that the purpose of human existence is "to serve God, creatures, and ourselves, and to enjoy the delight that God, creatures, and we ourselves disclose."[39] He draws that idea from Proverbs 8, which characterizes a personified Wisdom that was at God's side as creation was shaped:

> 27 I was there when he set the heavens in place,
> when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep. . . .
> 30 Then I was constantly at his side.
> I was filled with delight day after day,
> rejoicing always in his presence,
> 31 rejoicing in his whole world
> and delighting in mankind.[40]

Creation is attended by a divine wisdom that delights in God, in humans, and in other creatures. Humans as God's images within creation become wise by learning to delight in God, in other people, and in other creatures. That delight should orient thought, will, and action.

I hope that some sense is emerging by now of "delight" as a specific concept that encompasses a joy found in beauty, care, kindness, gentleness, self-forgetfulness, and healing, and yet remains distinct from some other kinds of enjoyment. For all Comenius's emphasis on the sweetness shining forth in creation, he was cautious about our tendency to become over-invested in shiny objects for their own sake. Students, he recommended, should be asked to dress and eat simply to avoid "a tendency to wanton over-indulgence in food, clothing, and all material things" and to escape being "captivated by the love of sensual things."[41] When the sweetness of the world is mixed with the human impulse to "selfwardness" and turned inward on the gratification of the self, the delight found in goodness recedes. When the beauty of things draws us to care,

37 See B. Stalla, "Das Zusammenwirken von 'Wissen—Handeln—Glauben' als Grundlage für die Verbesserung der Welt in der 'Pansophia Humana' von Jan Amos Komenský," *Siedlce Comeniological Research Bulletin* 6 (2019): 201–4.

38 Comenius, *Panegersia*, 73 (8.16).

39 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 46 (10.8).

40 Proverbs 8:27, 30–31, NIV.

41 Comenius, *Panorthosia*, in *De Rerum Humanorum Emendatione Consultatio Catholica* (Academia Scientiarum Bohemoslavica, 1966), 2:325 (22.20).

compassion, and service, it is a genuine source of delight. Immediately after defining the purpose of life in terms of service and delight, "the delight that God, creatures, and we ourselves disclose,"[42] Comenius specifies the delight in self as consisting in "that sweetest delight when a person dedicated to virtue rejoices in a good inner disposition, seeing themselves ready to do all that the order of justice requires."[43] He then immediately notes that "pleasure in God is the greatest joy in this life," resulting from being "plunged completely into God's mercy."[44]

Delight, then, has a structure. It involves glimpsing a call to goodness in the beauty of the world, learning to order the self toward justice, and becoming suffused with God's mercy, which in turn is worked out through transformed human agents in active care for the world. Much more recently, Yale philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has expressed the same basic vision in terms of the Hebrew concept of "shalom," a kind of fundamental flourishing based on healed relationship:

> There can be no shalom without justice. . . . Shalom goes beyond justice, however. Shalom incorporates right relationships in general, whether or not those are required by justice: right relationships to God, to one's fellow human beings, to nature, and to oneself. The shalom community is not merely the *just* community but is the *responsible* community, in which God's laws for our multifaceted existence are obeyed.
>
> It is more even than that. We may all have acted justly and responsibly, and yet shalom may be missing: for the community may be lacking *delight*. . . . Shalom incorporates *delight* in one's relationships. To dwell in shalom is to find delight in living rightly before God, to find delight in living rightly in one's physical surroundings, to find delight in living rightly with one's fellow human beings, to find delight even in living rightly with oneself.[45]

This specific vision of delight is intimately woven into Comenius's account of what schools are for. They are places for us to learn delight.

Why?

And so we return to the question of what schools are for. Schools are for the learner's intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation and for the common good. They are part of the salvation of the world, the rescue of life on earth through divine agency from the consequences of basic human selfwardness and the cultivation of kindness, justice, and delight. This includes the capacity to make a living, to become "skilled in the ways and means of gathering life's necessities and rightly using and enjoying them,"[46] but it includes many other things that keep the economic from taking centre stage. It includes the capacity to preserve life and health, to think well, to

42 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 46 (10.8).

43 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 47 (10.13).

44 Comenius, *Didactica Magna*, 47 (10.14).

45 N. Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education* (Eerdmans, 2004), 23.

46 Comenius, *Panorthosia*, 316 (20.14). For an English translation of this section of *Panorthosia*, see *Panorthosia or Universal Reform, Chapters 19–26*, trans. A.M.O. Dobbie (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

deal wisely with other people, to be self-controlled, to care for other creatures. We distort the picture, says Comenius, if we look to career, success, and financial betterment as the core goals of schooling rather than recognizing that they are subordinate goods within a larger whole. He puts it this way in *Panorthosia*:

> Isn't the goal of most schools self-display? Or avarice, or some kind of pleasure sought in literature and knowledge of external things. But what should we make of this? Bernard [of Clairvaux] observed that most people want to know for the sake of knowing, which he calls shameful inquisitiveness; or for the sake of being known, which he calls shameful vanity; or for the sake of selling knowledge for money or honours, which he calls shameful profiteering. How shameful to misuse God's beautiful gift of wisdom as a trick for making money![47]

Note that the point here is not that securing material well-being is bad; he has just named it as one of the goods of learning. The focus is on motives and priorities and on what we make the central source of delight to which other goods are relativized. Desires for mental titillation, reputation, and wealth are part of the selfward self, turned in on its own individual benefit and away from genuine delight. Coherent schooling requires an idea of the proper delight that should bid to supplant such desires.

What Now?

Dragging any past thinker across the centuries and "applying" their ideas in a very different present context is inherently fraught with difficulty. There are ideas in Comenius's account that still seem important today, though they must be articulated afresh with today's tools. For now, we might note in general terms that it follows from Comenius's account that schooling can be grounded in a very particular theology yet oriented to the common good. His conception of how "Christian" grounds "education" is not geared toward protecting the interests of the tribe or avoiding social contact with outsiders. Yet it also follows from his account that the common good will not be well served by ignoring questions about the specific beliefs and commitments that might sustain the delight and rightly oriented self-surrender that in turn sustain goodness. He does not think that such delight emerges from generic moral rules. Humans have to choose a centre. They do not function well when they choose the wrong one. Therefore, seeking the common good through education does not, on his account, imply that schooling should avoid being based on specific beliefs and commitments, a specific faith and piety. Healthy piety seeks and sustains the common good. The familiar modern division between private faith-based education and secular public education does not do justice to Comenius's questions.

Rather than turn in the direction of what this might mean structurally for contemporary schooling, a question that lies outside my main interests and competence, I would like to close by offering two brief examples of how the kinds of questions pursued by Comenius might intersect with curriculum and students' learning today.

47 Comenius, *Panorthosia*, 324 (22.14).

Therefore, seeking the common good through education does not, on his account, imply that schooling should avoid being based on specific beliefs and commitments, a specific faith and piety. Healthy piety seeks and sustains the common good.

I turn first to a college class for students training to be teachers that I taught this past spring. The class focused on exploring the connection between faith and education. In one part of the course we considered how virtues and vices impact the actions and perceptions of learners and teachers, and how our cultural bent toward efficiency, control, and social acceleration can undermine attention to the shape of our hearts and the health of our surroundings.[48] Amid our reading and discussion, I assigned students to choose a tree, observe it for at least ten minutes, and journal about what happened.

This is not conventional homework. One student reported telling his friends about it and being advised that the task was stupid and he should pretend he had done it and invent the journal entry. (He decided to do it anyway.) Another student wrote the following, one complex reaction among many:

> The things the tree was feeling I was also feeling, so the wind, the cold, some of the drizzle. I was thinking about how round the trunk was and how old the tree must be. Then it got me thinking about how much this tree has seen in its lifetime. It's behind my rental house so I was thinking of all the people it has seen come and go and live in the house. How I'm just an occupant of it for 2 years and then more girls will come and live after me. And something about that idea of time and how much it has seen almost made me respect the tree in a way, which is weird for me to say. Just knowing how many, like, storms it must have survived makes it seem strong and the idea of its strength is something that I respect. The whole concept of me respecting a tree still seems a little weird and it's hard to articulate but I feel like from now on I will have this kind of weird connection with this one tree in my backyard that seems unique to our relationship (if you can even call it a relationship).[49]

Setting aside the complicated question of exactly how much trees perceive, I see here a student wrestling with the new and uncomfortable question of whether it is appropriate to respect a tree, a creature that has until now been taken for granted as a background object. There is uncertainty about the kind of language appropriate to a new awareness of admiration. There is also an emerging sense of responsibility rooted in appreciation, perhaps a step toward what Comenius meant by "delight." These reflections immediately impinge upon bigger questions: If we view a tree primarily as potential lumber, or as aesthetic adornment, or as a creature that we could approach with respect, we are already on the verge of larger societal disagreements and tensions. What is the world and what is it for? What underlying beliefs and commitments might fund any of those views of trees? How might the simple act of contemplating a tree raise questions about what is real and who we are? How might our need to choose how to act require committing to answers to those questions?

48 See H. Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (Columbia University Press, 2013).

49 Student journal, quoted with permission.

Next, I turn to a second-language classroom.[50] Comenius wrote the most famous language textbook in history, the *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, which went through almost 250 editions across a 300-year span starting in 1658.[51] It begins with a grand tour of creatures that students might encounter; humans do not become the focus until chapter 36. There are six chapters on birds, each chapter placing a different cluster of birds within their environment. The text describes some of their behaviours, the beauty of their song, and how they find food. Fast-forward to language textbooks that I have used in my own classroom.[52] In an edition of *Deutsch Heute*, the word "bird" appears in the glossary, but we learn the names of no specific kinds of bird.[53] The only bird images I can find are cartoon pictures of a penguin in a fridge and chickens depicted as tourists.[54] The absence seems both haunting and oblivious when we reflect that long-term surveys in North America show "a net loss in total abundance of 2.9 billion birds across almost all biomes, a reduction of 29% since 1970."[55] More broadly, there are very few verbal or visual representations of non-human creatures in the book. A teachers' edition of *Kontakte*, another current German textbook very similar in its themes, explains that the second chapter, titled "Possessions and Pleasures," is about "the [students'] immediate environment outside the class," which consists of "things they have, things they would like to have, and what they like to do."[56] The environment consists of possessions and potential possessions. The "pleasures" emphasized here seem starkly at odds with Comenius's "delight."

Being a teacher requires me to make daily choices about whether to reinforce, resist, or ignore these impulses toward particular kinds of relationships to the world. Being a student involves being exposed to and encouraged in a finite set of learning experiences shaped by the prior choices of teacher, school, community, and society. Comenius's account of education resists the idea that things are just things, that information is just information, and that it is possible to learn about trees, or virtues, or German vocabulary and grammar without responding to the questions of meaning that frame them and the stories about our life together within which we place them. Understanding is connected to will and to action. Human action is not automatically good, but is steered by what we give ourselves to, what we trust, where we find fundamental delight. Learning about things therefore also means learning how to relate to things, what to do about things, how to make sense of things, how to enjoy things. That in turn drives us back to our basic faiths, our traditioned senses (Christian, Muslim, materialist, rationalist, liberal, secularist, etc.) of what makes the world hang together. Schooling cannot help being rooted in beliefs and fostering implicit and explicit choices about how to delight. Those beliefs

50 I discuss this example in more detail in D.I. Smith, *Everyday Christian Teaching: A Guide to Practicing Faith in the Classroom* (Eerdmans, 2025).

51 K. Pilz, *Johann Amos Comenius. Die Ausgaben des Orbis Sensualium Pictus: Eine Bibliographie* (Stadtbibliothek, 1967).

52 These are not the most current editions of these texts, and I do not intend to imply a scientific sample or survey of recent language texts here, merely to illustrate how asking Comenius's questions about schooling might inform the choices facing a present-day language educator.

53 J. Moeller et al., *Deutsch Heute* (Heinle & Heinle, 2010).

54 Moeller et al., *Deutsch Heute*, 25, 133, 285.

55 K.V. Rosenberg et al., "Decline of the North American Avifauna," *Science* 366, no. 6461 (2019): 120–24, https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aaw1313.

56 T.D. Terrell, E. Tschirner, and B. Nikolai, *Kontakte: A Communicative Approach*, 5th ed. (McGraw Hill, 2004), 79.

and choices emerge amid specific traditions, communities, and constellations of practices, the particularity of which does not prevent them from being an essential resource for the individual or the public good. Schooling is inevitably rooted in faith and the pursuit of specific delights. A clean division between private faith and public secularity is false. Schooling is inherently particular and traditioned, inherently rooted in faith, even as it is necessarily directed toward the flourishing of all. Solutions to the conundrum of schooling in plural environments that do not honour both impulses fall short.

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