Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670): Reformer of Humanity

A Cosmopolitan Contribution to the 17th century Discourse on World Peace

Janne E. Nijman*

Contents
1. Introduction
2. Context
3. Universal Peace and Bohemian Revolt: Global Institutional Reform
   3.1. The Use of Force – Comenius’s Pacifism
   3.2. “Fair Trade” – Amsterdam Context of the Tract Angel of Peace (1667)
   3.3. Institutional Proposals for World Reform
4. Conclusion

1. Introduction

The history of international law scholarship tends to be presented as a primarily Western European Affair.¹ This misrepresentation squeezes in particular when it comes to the early ages of international law, for example, the 17th century, when those contributing to international law scholarship were all inhabitants of the Pan-European Republic of Letters, which stretched out geographically from Ireland to Poland and the Baltic Sea. At the time, international law scholarship was indeed non-exclusive in two ways: first of all, scholars from all over Europe wrote on what was then called ius gentium et naturae – the law of nations and nature – and secondly,

* Assistant Professor, Department of International Law, Universiteit van Amsterdam, the Netherlands. This article is part of the research programme ‘The International Constitutional Order’ of the Amsterdam Center for International Law, Universiteit van Amsterdam. Many thanks to Catherine Bröllmann for her comments on an earlier draft.

¹ Reibstein, Nussbaum, and Grewe present the usual list of names for the founding fathers of international law.
most of these scholars were not primarily jurists. At this early stage in its history, the identity of international law was only in the process of becoming separate from politics, on the one hand, and (in its normative dimension) from moral theology, on the other. But Christian theology is still part of the deep structure of international law. For one thing, the study of Comenius’s work contributes to our understanding of this birthmark.

At this critical time in the history of international law thought, the Czech Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius) – who was born on 28 March 1592 in Bohemia and died in 1670 in Amsterdam – lived and worked as a true European intellectual and made a significant contribution to our discipline. One of the last Renaissance humanists, Comenius was carrying on a philosophical tradition that would soon be considered passé. When put next to one of his contemporaries and discussion partners, René Descartes, Comenius is usually presented as somewhat old-fashioned. Descartes, and subsequently Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), were rather negative on Comenius’s philosophy. The repeated reference to their critique may have informed the general perception of Comenius as a “chief crank of a totally lost cause”. 2 But we should realise this critique mainly relates to Comenius as a modern philosopher. For instance, the recognition of his educational and pedagogic ideas has been much more enduring.

This dominant prism on Comenius in the general history of philosophy should not misguide us. Although his philosophical and political thinking passed into oblivion soon after his death, in the context of our discipline it may be mentioned that one great European mind admitted Comenius’s influence on his own thinking: G. W. Leibniz (1646–1716). Leibniz recognised this during his lifetime and wrote Comenius’s obituary. 3 Indeed, once one becomes familiar with Comenius’s thinking it improves our understanding of Leibniz’s work in general and his universal jurisprudence in particular. 4 Like Leibniz many years later, Comenius argued for universal structures aimed at universal justice. But unlike Leibniz, Comenius, who was a firm supporter of the Bohemian cause, renounced emperor and papacy. In

3 Which Leibniz ends with the words: “The time will surely come, Comenius, when multitudes of men of goodwill shall pay homage to thee, thy deeds, thy hopes and thine aspirations.”