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For the birds: Absence and vision in teaching texts

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Birds are excellent indicators of environmental health and ecosystem integrity . . . Results from long-term surveys, accounting for both increasing and declining species, reveal a net loss in total abundance of 2.9 billion [95% credible interval (CI) = 2.7–3.1 billion] birds across almost all biomes, a reduction of 29% (95% CIs = 27–30%) since 1970. (Rosenberg et al., 2019: 120)

The most successful second language textbook in the history of the discipline, a text used in a wide range of countries for centuries after its publication, was the *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (*World of Sensory Things in Pictures*) by John Amos Comenius (1658). It went through at least 248 distinct editions stretching from the late 17th to the mid-20th century (Pilz, 1967). Though the frequent claim that it was the first illustrated children’s book is false (Good, 1942), it was innovative, influenced later textbook design, and is still studied (Michel, 1992). The text was organized into 150 illustrated chapters, each offering a woodcut image of a scene with numbered items corresponding to words in the bilingual text beneath it.

The *Orbis Pictus* includes no less than six chapters about birds. The first (“Living Creatures: and First, Birds”) begins with the sentence, “Animal vivit, sentit, movet se; nascitur, moritur, nutritur, & crescit; stat aut sedet, aut cubat, aut graditur” (A living creature lives, perceives, moves itself, is born, dies, is nourished, and grows; stands or sits or lies or walks). The living beings exemplified

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in the first instance by birds are introduced as agents with lives of their own, the subjects of a string of verbs. In the subsequent chapters, different kinds of birds are depicted and described in various groups—domesticated birds, singing birds, birds of the fields and woods, rapacious birds, and aquatic birds (Figure 1). As well as teaching the names of various birds and the parts of their eggs and bodies, the text comments on the peacock's pride in its feathers, the sweetness of the nightingale's song, the imitative abilities of the Jay, the dirty habits of the hoopoe, the fishing methods of the heron, and the wagging tail of the wagtail. The chapters convey a delight in the array of feathered creatures and their peculiarities.

As well as providing a compact and vivid introduction to speaking about the world of birds, these chapters are connected in at least two ways to Comenius's larger theological and philosophical concerns. First, they form part of a lengthy sequence of chapters in which the learner is introduced to a panoply of creatures, ranging from rocks and metals through plants and birds, insects and cattle, creeping things and fish, and culminating in human beings. The sequence loosely follows the narrative of Genesis 1, and is itself a subset of a larger arc stretching from God and the world (chapters 2–3) to the day of judgment (chapter 150), which is in turn bracketed by a call to wisdom and an exhortation to continue its pursuit. The student is being introduced not to a simple collection of objects but to an ordered cosmos in which each creature has its place in the whole and the whole relates to God (Smith, 2020). Second, as the wisdom frame implies, this panoply of creatures is connected to the formational goals of the student's learning. The preface admonishes that learning should benefit living and that this will happen if it prepares the

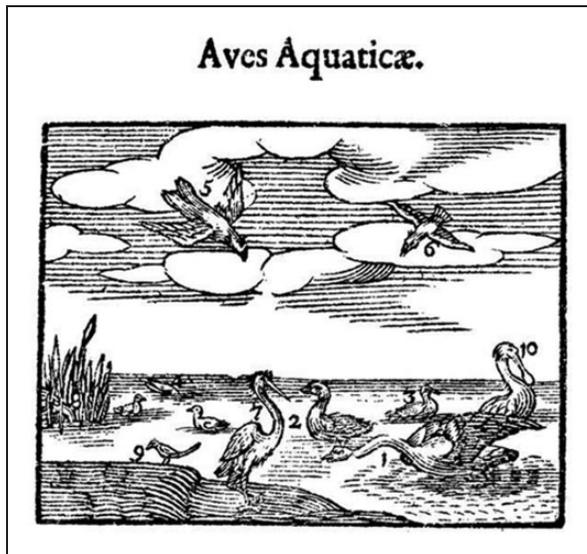


Figure 1. Orbis Pictus, Aquatic Birds.

mind for wisdom, the tongue for eloquence, and the hands for appropriate action. An important part of this wise, practical living was understanding the human calling to care for other creatures. As Comenius later put it in the *Pampaedia* (II.13, in Dobbie, 1986: 25–26),

Material things also are affected by the education of all men to a rational life so that they too benefit from wise handling by wise men. Just as it is better for a garden to be under a good gardener . . . so also it is better for any material things to be under owners who use them in their own right, provided that they know how to use them legitimately. There is a memorable saying of Solomon: “A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast, but the wicked man is cruel” (Proverbs XII, 9). What cruelty is inflicted everywhere on all things that are put to improper uses through the wickedness of ignorance of men! The apostle hinted at this when he declared (Romans VIII, 20) that all creatures are subject to vanity, and that they pray and long and hope for deliverance from such iniquitous bondage. It is desirable in any case that this hope and longing of creatures should be fulfilled, and that everything everywhere should advance correctly, and that all creatures should have cause to join us in praising God (Psalms CXLVIII).

The birds are there not just because we need to know the names of things but because we have a duty of care and because they have their own desire for delight that is affected by our recognition and actions.

The avian chapters in the *Orbis Pictus* were to be something of a high water mark for the career of feathered creatures in language textbooks. Already in *The London Vocabulary*, a truncated and significantly reworked imitation of the *Orbis Pictus* from 1711, the section on birds is reduced to a single page on which a selection of birds is visually depicted in rows, devoid of habitat or context, and linguistically depicted as a list of nouns for memorization. Birds, like much else in *The London Vocabulary*, have become simply enumerated things (Figure 2).

Turning to my own shelf for an example of a currently successful language textbook, the one that comes to hand is an edition of *Deutsch Heute* (Moeller et al., 2010). In this first-year German textbook, the linguistic material on birds has been reduced to a single word—the glossary contains the entry “der Vogel,” “bird.” Realistic images of birds are entirely absent. Birds are depicted three times in cartoons. One shows a pet penguin being taken to the vet inside a fridge and asking how long it has to wait. Two depict chickens as tourists planning or enjoying vacations. These anthropomorphized fowl, one complete with a camera hanging around its neck, have been reduced to mirror images of the tourism-oriented individual consumers toward which *Deutsch Heute*, like many other contemporary language texts, appears to target its content. *Deutsch Heute*, too, has a vision of its readers’ place in the world. It does not seem to be one that includes a priority placed on care for other creatures (or even their relevance outside the frame of consumption) or delight in the natural world. The chapters on God and judgment have vanished as one might expect, but so have the chapters on birds (and fish and



Figure 2. The London Vocabulary, Of Birds.

insects and snakes), creatures disappearing along with their creator in uncritical echo of the precipitous declines and extinctions besetting our larger environment.

These brief examples do not amount to a systematic survey of language textbooks. I have skipped centuries, and other current volumes may vary, though I suspect not significantly. What I think this quick comparison illustrates once more is that the relevance of Christianity to education is not restricted to the subject of religious education, the faith formation of students, or the moments in school when theology is mentioned. Theology, imagination, and education are connected in richer and more subtle ways. Charles Taylor has described the social imaginary as consisting of

something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.

This shared imagination underpins the possibility of shared expectations and creates a local sense of legitimacy, such as the sense that it is simply normal to learn other languages without talking much about the natural world, or the sense that learning to speak is naturally embedded within a divine calling to exercise one's

power over other creatures in a virtuous manner. Such imaginations are carried and reinforced in, among many other things, comments on nightingale song and cartoon pictures of chickens in books prepared for the education of the young. Our changing visions of the world and of our role within it, including the theological roots of those visions, may be visible in the chapters on birds in the textbook used in the language classroom, and in their absence, displaced by more material on travel and shopping. For this reason, I hope that *IJCE* will continue to attract submissions from a wide range of disciplines and subject areas, well beyond the confines of religious education.

In this issue, Ken Badley and Monique Verhoef address the topic of character formation in Christian higher education in light of demographic and cultural shifts. They focus on the roles of clarity around mission and intentional work on creating and sustaining campus climate. The desired climate that they describe focuses on trust and dialogue, attends to the values implicit in the slow movement, and recognizes diversity.

Matthew Walz also focuses on formation, this time in light of John Paul II's "Pastores dabo vobis." Walz argues that although this document focused on the formation of seminarians, it has relevance to young adult formation more widely in its human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions. Walz's analysis focuses in particular on the nature of study and its relationship to successful personal formation.

Julia Smith examines a sexual orientation and gender identity statement widely used in Christian schools, arguing that its commitment to treating all students with compassion and dignity is undermined by failures to address the harms LGBT+ students experience in schools. Smith suggests ways in which the statement and associated practices could be revised that would improve LGBT+ student safety and support in Christian schools that hold a traditional view of marriage.

Anne Knowles and Thomas Smith explore Year 3 students' use of critical thinking and taking the second-person perspective when interpreting and resolving life issues. Their research focuses on a 10-lesson curriculum with Personal Viewpoints Pedagogy applied to narratives from the Book of Acts and a "do unto others" focus. Pre- and posttest comparisons shed light on how the intervention supported the Personal Viewpoints Pedagogy's impact on social thinking processes.

Philip Barnes turns our attention to the historical development and nature of controlled schools and of religious education in Northern Ireland, responding to a recent account in this journal by Gracie and Brown. Barnes develops a complementary perspective to illustrate how the relationship between the Protestant churches and Controlled schools has evolved. He examines Gracie and Brown's claim that the type of education and of religious education practiced in Anglican schools in England provide a model for Controlled schools to emulate.

As always, we commend these articles to your attention and hope that they will help to further develop research conversations about Christianity and education.

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