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Schools, ideals, gardens

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I recently visited a local Christian school and was given a tour of its new garden. It was considerably more than the modest patch of sample vegetation that one might expect. A significant section of the school grounds was in the process of being transformed into extensive and varied landscaping. It included an enclosed growing space where children were cultivating vegetables and selling them to the community, learning about agriculture, biology, economics, and healthy eating along the way. A native plant area had been labeled by students and was attracting a range of pollinators. A series of themed miniature biomes offered a small taste of rocky ascent, sandy wilderness, and the vegetation of the Middle East; these were intended as experiential settings for learning about Bible stories. A small open-air amphitheater provided space for outdoor worship, and at its rear stood a kind of xylophone that was available for students to play at any time. As we walked through these areas, some students rushed up, concerned about the health of one of the chickens in their care. It did not take any great powers of imagination to see the range of interconnected learning opportunities that had been created with the reshaping of soil, rock, and greenery.

This garden project was informed in part by earlier conversations in which I had been able to introduce the school staff to John Amos Comenius and his vision of schools as gardens of delight. Comenius drew his garden imagery from biblical sources, and so it speaks of more than what we now think of as nature (Smith, 2017). In Genesis, humanity is placed in a garden that offers associations with beauty, generosity, and responsible toil and care (Genesis 1–2). In the Prophets, the same garden becomes an image for city communities when they flourish, when life is at peace and well-ordered and just, and all can thrive (Joel 2:3; Isa 5:1–7; 58:6–12; Ezek 36:33–36). In the Wisdom writings, and later the Church Fathers, the garden becomes the self and speaks of God’s indwelling and shaping of the human soul (Psalm 1; Prov 3:13–18; *Epistle to Diognetus*). In the heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation, the garden’s story culminates in the city of peace, with its trees whose leaves heal the nations (Rev 21:2–4; 22:1–3). Scripturally, gardens speak of original goodness and beauty, moral drama, societal flourishing, justice, and spiritual

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connection or loss. When Comenius pictured schools, teachers, and students as wildernesses that stand under the call to become gardens of delight, it was this collection of biblical resonances that animated his imagery (Smith and Felch, 2016).

Yet Comenius' garden talk was also quite literal, something imagined in terms of concretely shapeable environments. Comenius advised that schools should have gardens, and that through them students should learn quiet reflection and care for the creatures with which they shared the world. We can see this intimate connection between metaphorically mediated vision and concrete practice in a telling passage in the *Panorthosia*, a late volume in which Comenius laid out his vision for the comprehensive reform of society. There he recommends that each town should have a botanical and zoological garden. His reasoning is worth quoting in full:

It would also be a good idea to have a paradise of delight in every kingdom, state, and market-town, that is, a full range of vegetables, minerals, and animals of land or sea or air, and lastly a full range of manufactures, for the following reasons:

1. This would be one effective remedy for cultivation among all nations.
2. it would be an outward symbol that the new Adam has opened up for us not only a heavenly paradise but also an earthly one, Isaiah XI, 6–9;
3. it would afford pleasure to the pious people who rejoice in the reform of our affairs, and
4. it would have a healthy effect on the body of the people and present a special challenge to the human mind for each individual to have his own incentive to plant such a garden of delight within himself.” (Comenius, 1995: 117)

The “paradise of delight” (the *paradisum voluptatis* of Gen 2:8) evokes, as we have seen, biblical themes of spiritual and moral growth, sin and redemption, and the just community in which all can flourish. It functions as an ideal image—an imagined site of the realized kingdom of God. Yet it also names a concrete, material location requiring the everyday, mundane kinds of sweat and toil for its creation and sustenance. The task of doing so, writes Comenius (1995: 117), “should be entrusted to someone who had a burning desire for such a paradise and wished to make it his own life’s work.” It is to be the context for concretely enacted care; as Comenius writes elsewhere, the young should learn to care well for other creatures:

What cruelty is inflicted everywhere on all things that are put to improper uses through the wickedness or 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). (Dobbie, 1986: 25–26)

The garden of delight is neither just an inspiring biblical image nor just a plot of ground to be worked. Comenius sees no disjuncture between the purposes of providing pleasure, promoting bodily health, inviting reflection and self-examination, turning the mind and heart to God's purposes in the world, promoting economic and cultural development, and seeking social change. He sees all of these refracted simultaneously in the imagery and practice of gardening.

For Comenius, writing in the late seventeenth century, this simultaneity rests on an underlying theory of panharmony—the conviction that the creation of the one God must be coherent, and that therefore everything, if perceived rightly, must exist in harmonious and mutually confirming relationship to everything else. This is what led him to conceive of the process of thought as made up of three tasks: the familiar analysis and synthesis, but also *syncretism*—the discerning of the parallels and connections among things—the cultivation of an awareness of how things fit together. Heaping up facts without a sense of this primordial interconnectedness was for Comenius a kind of betrayal of the order of the world—a loss of its proper center, and a descent into fragmentation (Hábl, 2011). Humans must learn to be human, and this calls for a vision of what being human authentically entails (Hábl, 2017).

A great deal of intellectual history has passed since Comenius advocated for municipal and scholastic gardens of delight. Town parks and school playing fields are among us, but the story sustaining them has shifted. They still afford bodily health, recreation, and perhaps sometimes space for introspection, but I wonder when any of us last walked into a park or a botanical garden and found ourselves prompted to reflect on social justice, inner and outer reform, or the progress of redemption in the world. Our green spaces have become tilted to the bodily, and in any case we increasingly seek our delights elsewhere. We have also become accustomed to leaning on analysis, viewing the world as in principle reducible to a collection of things that can be separated for clarity and control. We are used to a tree being a biological entity, or a natural resource, or a beautiful object, but not so much a *sign* calling us to care, faith, and renewal, or a chance to discern the connections among the goods toward which the well-lived life is directed. And to the degree that our shared imaginary acculturates us to teaching about things as merely things, adding faith language can feel like an out-of-place gloss, trying to “stuff” religion where it does not fit (Cooling et al., 2016). Insofar as this is true of our curricula, our approach to learning no longer inhabits Comenius' panharmonic world of coherent creation and all-encompassing redemption.

Indeed, the philosophical tools that allowed Comenius to assume that everything would fit harmoniously together if we would just do the sum right are to a significant degree the tools of his time. Relating them to the rather different philosophical horizon of the present is no small or simple matter. We have rightly learned to be suspicious of premature claims to possess the tidy map on which everything and everyone has its proper place. If Comenius still speaks, he does so in significant ways from the past, and we will have to hear from the present. And yet, as two young Christian school students are reassured that help is on the way for the

chicken placed under their care, and I continue with my guide through green spaces that invoke biblical allusions, worship, local ecology, diet, economics, taxonomy, and music, the philosophical complications seem less compelling than the possibility that in this actual, concrete garden all of these things might in fact fit together in students' learning, helped by teachers who are willing to see and trace the connections. I think Comenius would have enjoyed a visit.

The articles in the current issue continue the task of expanding our understanding of how faith might inform educational practices around the world. Laura Boele-de Bruin and Bram de Muynck contribute a study of how the professional ideals of committed believers are intertwined with their religious convictions. They report data from open-ended interviews with Dutch teachers from conservative Protestant primary and secondary schools. The authors explore how teachers' ideal of a good Christian life lived out of sincere faith informs their view of the purpose of teaching, yet also remains disconnected from material and instructional choices.

Graeme Cross, Glenda Campbell-Evans, and Jan Gray set out to empirically investigate the common assumption that private, faith-based schooling might offer a sheltered experience that reduces the future social integration of students. The authors focus on the Australian context, where there has been strong growth in faith-based schooling in recent decades. They investigate how development of the social and civic competencies required to become active and relationally engaged citizens is influenced by the environment of a religious school. They conclude that their evidence does not support the idea that these competencies are undermined by the socialization processes of faith-based schooling.

Eric Rackley focuses on the Scripture reading processes of Methodist youth in the USA. Drawing upon reading comprehension and comprehension strategies research, Rackley identifies five strategic reading practices that Methodist youth used to understand Scripture. The young people in his study drew inferences about possible meanings, made connections between the Bible and other texts, made personal comments, recognized when they were confused, and applied prior knowledge. Rackley offers these data as a contribution to understanding the relationship between Scripture reading, faith, and literacy.

Finally, Cristóbal Madero turns our attention to the Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis*, promulgated in 1965 during the last session of Vatican II. Noting the relative lack of attention to this document compared to other documents from the Council, he examines the reception of *Gravissimum Educationis* in Latin America by examining the Second, Third, and Fifth General Conferences of Latin American Bishops. He offers a critique of this reception seen against the relationship of schooling to the missionary nature of the Church.

As always, we commend these latest studies to your thoughtful attention and hope that they will stimulate further investigation of the relationship between Christianity and education.

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