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## “As Gold is Purified by Fire”: Comenius’ Understanding of the History of the *Unitas Fratrum*

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We can negate history as such and proclaim a perpetual present. We can perceive history as the flow of so-called “accidental” events. Or we can raise laws and regularities which, more or less, compellingly determine the course. We can understand history as an expression of the creative human will – be it the will of individual persons, of groups or nations, or “humanity” as such. Or is history simply subject to the course of nature with all its laws and accidents? Or, finally: is it God, who rules history? And where does Antichrist or the devil interfere?

To think about history is quite often somehow “academic”, far from life, even superfluous and needless. Yet it immediately changes, as soon as we are confronted with struggle and suffering. Scarcely anything makes mortals as abruptly and persistently think about the course of history and its sense as their suffering. Why is there suffering? Is suffering a consequence of human imperfection and thus probably of humanity’s perverted lust for power? Or is suffering caused by the eternal struggle between the empire of the evil and the empire of the good? Or is suffering part of what God has allotted us for our life on this earth?

Again and again Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670), the last bishop of the old *Unitas Fratrum*, faces these questions, especially in the context of the persecutions of his brothers and sisters in faith.

### 1. A theology of the persecuted and dispersed

In 1632, during his first stay in exile in the Polish town of Leszno, Comenius wrote *A History of the Persecutions of the Bohemian Church*. It was not published until 1647/48, in Leyden in Latin, after which a Czech translation was issued in Leszno in 1655.<sup>1</sup> In 1660 he published *A Short History of the Slavic Church* (in the following: *Historiola*) as the first part of the volume *De bono unitatis*, in which Comenius exhorted the Churches of England to follow the example of the *Unitas Fratrum* with their discipline and Church leading.<sup>2</sup> Not too modestly Comenius

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<sup>1</sup> *Historia persecutionum ecclesiae Bohemicae iam inde a primordiis conversionis suae ad christianismum, h.e. anno 894, ad annum usque 1632* (Leyden, 1647) published in Czech under the title *Historie o těžkých protivenstvích církve české, hned od počátku jejího na víru křesťanskou obráčení* (Leszno, 1655).

<sup>2</sup> *Historiola ecclesiae slavonicae brevis historiola*, first part of *De bono unitatis* (Amsterdam, 1660). The *Historiola* was first published in a Czech translation by Jaroslav Bidlo under the title *Jana Amosa Komenského Krátké dějiny církve slovanské* (Prague, 1893). Josef Hendrich edited a new translation together with a detailed commentary under the title *Stručná historie církve slovanské* (Prague, 1941) which served as the basis for the edition in VSK 6:303–383. Next to an introduction and the *Historiola* the volume *De bono unitatis* comprises the church rules of the *Unitas Fratrum* (*Ratio disciplinae*) and an *Exhortation to the Churches, namely the English* concerning the best form of Church leadership (*Paraenesis ad ecclesias, nominatim Anglicanam*). The introduction and parts of *Paraenesis* have been edited in Czech translation in VSK 6:291–302 and 385–399. A complete edition of both texts can be found in *Jan Amos Komenský. Poselství Jednoty bratrské o vzácném statku jednoty, řádu, kázně*

already explains in the title his understanding of the ecclesiastical development in the Slavic world: *A Short History of the Slavic Church, immediately established by the Apostles, disseminated by Jerome, Cyril and Methodius, especially embodied in the Czech people and accomplished in the Unity of the Czech Brethren*. What sort of understanding of history do we find in this short writing? How does Comenius explain the persecutions and the suffering of the “Bohemian Church”? What theological reasons does he give for his historical view?

As a starting point Comenius takes a verse of the Song of Solomon: “Who is he, who rises up like the morning star? As beautiful as the moon? As pure as the sun? As terrific as an army in its line of battle?” (Song 6:9) In a traditional way Comenius relates the Song of Solomon to the love between Christ and his Church and accordingly this verse to the Church, or to the historical churches (§§1–7).<sup>3</sup> Some churches are new, “are just about to rise, their light is like the morning star; others are already more developed, their brightness is increasing like the moon; others enjoy the full light of faith, love and hope for his [God’s] eternal grace like the sun; from others finally – beyond the inner brightness of the house – fear goes out like from a well lined up army, which already by its line of battle and its standards fill its enemies with fear.” Applying this verse to the Church it depicts its history from its beginning (“the time of the morning star”, see: Rom. 13:11f.; 2 Pet. 1:19) to the time of the struggle against the “heretics” and the dark times under the “Antichrist” (“time of the moon”), the time in which “better than at any time before the truth has been investigated up to its deepest fundamentals” (“time of the sun”, see: Is. 30:26) until the time when even the sun has turned dark (see: Matt. 24:29; Sirach 17:30). “But as, due to the divine intervention, also the renewed Church suffers from darkness, lo, there the goodness and wisdom of the heavenly bridegroom give hope that the time will come, when finally the church will be horrible for its enemies.” (§6) This will happen, when she gives up her discords, finally reunites and joins with the bond of discipline to become impenetrable for her enemies as a well-installed line of battle, while she can penetrate everywhere. What a bellicose description of the ecclesia triumphans! Does Comenius strive for the simple inversion of the actual situation, i.e. the brutal oppression and extermination of the “Antichrist” in Rome and all his followers? Actually, it is quite a surprising interpretation of a verse of the Bible by a member of a small oppressed church! Will the truth rule like its enemy with violence?

Another short description of the history of churches can be found in the following paragraphs. “Certainly, the Son of God could have let the whole world know his Gospel, when he stepped into this world in a human body to fulfil the mystery of salvation. But this did not please him...” (§11) He appointed a certain number of men, the Apostles, who should go to the whole world and announce the treasures of heavenly grace to all people. The Apostles themselves should pass on their ministry to others and so forth until the end of the world (cf. Matt. 28:20). Indeed the Apostles could disseminate this light, rather as mere sparks in some persons or families than a full light of the people (§12). It was not until the fourth century when under the rule of Constantine the Great whole nations and peoples were converted,

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*a poslušnosti* (Prague, 1940). The Church rules have been edited in Latin and Czech in VSJAK 17:2–155.

<sup>3</sup> In the following, quotations from the *Historiola* are indicated by the paragraphs from which they are taken.

started to give up heathendom and openly confess to Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Especially among the Slavic peoples “the seed of the Gospel has already been sown in the times of the Apostles”.<sup>5</sup> Gradually it expanded, sometimes rather into breadth, then again rather into depth, waxing and waning like the moon, and it took eight centuries until it reached its full harvest (§13). This gradual work of divine Providence in the Slavic church Comenius wants to expose in his short writing.

Comenius stresses, that the Slavic peoples, among them also the Czechs, have been converted first by the “Eastern churches” (§17). The beginnings of the salvation of the Czech people soon came into the disfavour of Satan, the enemy of salvation, and he brought to action all his agile forces. The Pope too was constantly looking for opportunities to get the whole church under his power. And so the Czech came under the control of the Roman Tsar. Comenius enumerates different examples of how the Pope again and again forced the Czechs under his control, which however can only partially be confirmed by historical research.<sup>6</sup>

Comenius quotes in detail from a letter to Jan Hus from 1410, which he attributes to John Wyclif (§24).<sup>7</sup> It is worth having a closer look at this letter, as here the theological understanding of history which is characteristic of the Bohemian Reformation can be found in short terms. “I have heard, brother, how the Antichrist is depressing you by bringing many different kinds of troubles to Christ’s faithful people. It is not surprising, that such things happen among you, as nearly all over the world the Law of Christ suffers oppression by its enemies, and the huge red and many-headed dragon, about which John talks in his Revelation, has spat a torrent after the woman, to seize her.” (*Loc. cit.*) Note the oppositions: there Antichrist and the dragon, here Christ; there Christ’s faithful people and the woman described in Rev. 12, which stands for the Church; there the torrent flowing out of the dragon’s throat, here the Law of Christ. “But the most faithful Lord will certainly save the faithful bride.” (*Loc. cit.*) No oppression for Christ may break us, “as we know, that the Lord punishes those, whom he accepts as his sons. For according to the will of the father of grace we have to be examined through adversities already in this life, so that he can preserve us later on, for the highest artist wishes the gold which he has chosen to be purified through fire already here, so that later it can be put to his purest eternal treasure.” (*Loc. cit.*) Life on earth is short and transient; but the life which expects us in the future is blessed and eternal. What a most notable reversal takes place within these lines! First it was the Antichrist, who raged against Christ’s faithful people and oppressed them – now it is God himself who wants adversities to purify his chosen people, as gold is purified by fire!<sup>8</sup> However, a short while later the

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<sup>4</sup> Comenius’ attitude towards Constantine the Great was ambivalent. On the one hand he could call the time between his rule and the rule of Rudolf II (1576–1612) a time of the Antichrist, because of the hidden number 666 (cf. Rev. 13:18) in their names (*Independentia* VI,6; *Clamores Eliae* DJAK 23: 104). On the other hand he stresses the merits of Constantine for the spread of Christianity (see: *Gentis felicitas* 131 DJAK 14: 59; *Didactica* Introd. 14 DJAK 15/I:45). A negative judgement on Constantine because of the connection of worldly and religious power under his rule can be found already in the writings of Jan Hus, e.g. in *De Ecclesia* 15 (Praha, 1958) 121.

<sup>5</sup> Comenius refers to Romans 15:19; 2 Tim 4:10, falsely considering the Illyrians and Dalmatians as Slavs.

<sup>6</sup> See the commentary of J. Hendrich in the 1941 edition of the *Historiola* 92f.

<sup>7</sup> In reality, the letter was written by Richard Wyche, a scholar of Wyclif. It is dated 8 September 1410 in London and can be found together with an old Czech translation in Novotný No. 22 (see: *Historiola* 1941, 93).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 1 Pet. 6f.; Prov. 17:3; Is. 48:10; Wisdom of Sol. 3:6; Sirach 2:5.

struggle is again one of the Lord against the Antichrist. From the bottom of our heart we should ask God for help, in order to fight manly in this struggle. After the will of the Lord the Antichrist will soon come to his end. The exact relation between God and the Antichrist thus remains hidden. Is it a dualistic fight of good against evil? Or is it rather a relationship between God and Satan, one of the sons of God, as described in the book of Job?

“Let’s labour, as long as we have time, in order to be considered worthy entering that room.” (*Loc. cit.*) If we follow the narrow path in the footsteps of Christ who said: Where I am, there will also be my servant. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame.” [Heb.12:1-2a] (*Loc. cit.*) Striking in these statements is the stress laid on labour and patient (!) haste to the struggle. There is no word about justification alone through faith (*sola fide*), but the whole stress is on the obedient imitation of Christ under the cross. Instead of “justification” another keyword can be found: “truth”. It already stands in the salutation: “Dear brothers in the Lord, whom I love in truth and not only me, but all who have recognized the truth! The truth, which stays in us and will be with us for eternity through the divine grace. I was very pleased, when your brothers came and gave testimony about your truth, that you walk in the truth.” (*Loc. cit.*)

Later on we find the expression “path of truth”: “But you, Hus, beloved brother in Christ, whom I have never seen, but whom I know in faith and love (for not even the boundaries of the orbit can tear those apart who are joined by the love of Christ), strengthen yourself in the grace, which has been given to you. Struggle as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, with words and deeds, and call all those back to the path of truth whom you can; for neither because of the false and deceptive decrees nor the mistakes of the Antichrist one may keep the truth of the Gospel secret.” (*Loc. cit.*) We shall love the Law of Christ from the bottom of our soul and resolutely lead us, as God gives it, in all things and be zealous in all divine things, in hope and the eternal recompense. Such understanding of truth is especially characterized by two aspects: on the one hand the movement from the knowledge of truth to strive and struggle in truth in the sense of the imitation of Christ towards the eternal recompense. In faith, love and hope, three terms, which we find in the letter of a scholar of Wyclif, the Brethren saw the “essentials” (*essentialia*) of this movement. Almost as a synonym the expressions the “truth of the Gospel” and the “Law of Christ” are used, which clearly means, that the truth is not accessible by a mere cognitive act but only in the movement of the *imitatio Christi*. On the other hand the understanding of truth is clearly Christocentric. In Christ truth has its centre, Christ is the truth and the path (cf. John 14:6). When we perceive the truth, we also perceive Jesus Christ. He is in us and with us and will be with us during all our way in his Imitation here on earth as well as in eternity.

On the basis of this understanding of history Comenius describes in the following the history of Hus and the wars which broke out after his violent death (§§25–37). All Czechs were longing to struggle against the Antichrist after the example of Master Jan Hus, yet without his leadership they soon split up in many different groups. Comenius sharply criticizes mainly those who stood on the side of the pope and the emperor. They had provoked quarrels among themselves and among the people, and had even stirred up hatred among the Taborites against the

representatives of “pure teaching”, the Waldesians, whom they called “Pikharts” (§36). Comenius also condemned the Council of Basle, which took place in 1432: “It hurt many people, most of all the ardent Taborites, that one withdrew from Hus’ traces and started to return into the camp of the Antichrist. They opposed as well as they could, and again war broke out. The Taborites were defeated and their whole military force collapsed, and so, further on they could only defend themselves with the sword of the Word and with patience.” (§40) The inner discord reached its highest point under the king, George of Poděbrady, and the vacillation of Archbishop Jan Rokycana, and so here the prophecies of Isaiah against the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim of the impenitent kingdom of the North were fulfilled (Is 9.15–20). Although Rokycana at times considered the pope to be the Antichrist according to the book of Daniel, at the end he was not ready to assume disgrace and the cross together with the “God’s people” (§49).

Now Comenius describes the founding of the *Unitas Fratrum* (§50ff.). Their brothers and sisters had originally called themselves Brethren of the Law of Christ. But as this name had led to misunderstandings and false accusations, they then decided to call themselves the Fraternally United Church (*Církev bratrsky sjednocená*) or *Unitas Fratrum* (*Jednota Bratrská*). “Church” for them meant the “community of those called out of the world to participate in the salvation in Christ” (cf. Ps. 133; Eph. 4 etc.). But Satan did not take pleasure in the beginnings of this church, which had begun to renew itself according to the laws of the Gospel. So he started a new cruel storm for their annihilation. Rokycana himself joined the enemies of the *Unitas*. In March 1461 his nephew, Brother Gregory, was arrested by a village mayor at a meeting with brothers in Prague with the following words: “All those who want to live piously in Jesus Christ will suffer persecution [cf. 2 Tim. 3.12]. Therefore you, who are here, must come with me to prison.” (§52)<sup>9</sup> Gregory then was tortured by order of his uncle. During torture he had a vision: “He was led to a very pleasant meadow, in the middle of which there was tree heavily burdened with fruits, which were eaten by all sorts of birds, which were sitting on the branches. In their midst stood a young man and led them with a rod in such a way, that nobody dare break out of the order.” (§54)<sup>10</sup> With this vision, God obviously wanted to give an image to the small church for whom Gregory was, in a sense, the patriarch. By God’s will, the Brethren were persecuted along with the Waldesians. It was not until the death of King George of Poděbrady that the persecution subsided for a while. “It seemed as if the times of peace would return, for God saved this small flock in such a wonderful way. Thus the prophecy of Matthias of Janov (*Matěj z Janova*), who a century before had been the father confessor of Charles IV, was fulfilled, according to which an “insignificant people would rise, without sword or external power, which could not be overwhelmed by the enemies of truth.” (§64)<sup>11</sup>

The Brethren started to search for a people, “who were purely serving Christ and which they could join completely as if it was the true Church of Christ.” Therefore they sent messengers to Greece, to Thrace and Bulgaria, to Russia, to Asia, Palestine and Egypt, but all of them had to report that Christians all over those

<sup>9</sup> Comenius adds that the village mayor most probably was an honourable man who could not act differently because of the order given to him!

<sup>10</sup> For the image of the tree see: Dan. 4:7–9; Rev. 22:2; Gen. 2:9f., Ezek. 47:12.

<sup>11</sup> Cf.: “Now the supremacy of evil of the enemies of truth, but this will not stay forever. For an insignificant people will rise without sword and without power, and its enemies will not be able to overcome it.” (§23)

places were sinking into indecency and superstition. The first theologian in whom the Brethren found a renewer of pure theology was Erasmus of Rotterdam. Comenius quotes in detail a passage out of Erasmus' introduction to the New Testament about the true theologian, in which the author stresses the significance of Christian life in true devotion (§71). Soon after that, the Brethren joyfully took note that Martin Luther, too, perceived the "light of truth", and they got in intensive touch with him (§74). However, they soon had to realize, "that he did not take discipline into consideration properly, wherefore they broke off their contact with Luther for eight years" (§75). Finally, as they met again in 1536, Luther "expressed his sorrow that right from the new blossoming of the Gospel he had admitted everybody to the table of the Lord without any distinction and that he had not introduced a similar discipline as among the Brethren" (§77). The Brethren shared more agreement on their views on discipline with Martin Bucer and the Swiss Reformation, as Comenius extensively proves on the basis of numerous excerpts of letters (§§79-107!).<sup>12</sup>

After the comprehensive discussion of the Brethren's discipline in the eyes of the reformers and their followers, Comenius turns back to the History of the Unitas Fratrum in Bohemia and Moravia. He reports about good and bad times, about the persecution under Maximilian (§108ff.), the confession of the Brethren and their judgement by protestant theologians, about the publication of the Bible translation in Kralice, the common Bohemian confession of 1575, the Imperial Charter (*majestát*) of 1609 of Rudolf II. Here Comenius' description finds a surprising turning-point. On the one hand the reader might be frightened by the way in which Comenius enthusiastically welcomes the removal of everything non-evangelical. "A purer form of religion blossomed and gradually the false Hussitism was removed in the whole kingdom, and thus hardly anybody was left who did not know the evangelical teaching" (§123). Here is fulfilled what had to be suspected after Comenius' interpretation of the verse of the Song of Solomon: Comenius not only mentions the eradication of everything that was non-evangelical – the false Hussitism – with satisfaction, but even calls it "freedom of religion"! However, he sees this freedom in contradiction to discipline and so it inevitably had to lead into destruction. "Alas! With freedom of religion also informality of life increased and in a strange measure discipline became loose (also among those, where it had flourished before). Not all pious people welcomed this freedom, with which corporal carelessness came along, and some began to anticipate the coming evil: until Ferdinand's terrible storm overcame us and the prophetic voice was fulfilled: In times of peace bitterness is most bitter." (§123) Secretly the "enemies of the Gospel" prepared to bring down the Czech church, which had opposed the papacy of Nimrod<sup>13</sup> for so many centuries. Comenius wrongly charges the council of Trent, that it had decided to start the reconquest of the lost lands in Bohemia. The Evangelicals were punished by executions and expulsions. All this happened, "because our sins outweighed the righteousness of our cause, and because God allowed his enemies, that they finally also fulfilled in us the measure of cruelty against the holy people of God." (§124)

<sup>12</sup> At this place Comenius refers in detail to the description of the Unitas Fratrum by Jan Łasicki, which had been conserved only in manuscript and out of which Comenius himself published an excerpt under the title *Pana Jana Łasického, šlechtice polského, Historie o původu a čínech Bratří českých kniha osmá, jenž jest o obyčejích a řádách, kterýchž mezi sebou užívají. Pro potřebu přítomných časů tak obzvláště vydaná* (Leszno, 1649).

<sup>13</sup> Nimrod was "the first who won power on earth," a "mighty hunter before the Lord." To the beginning of his empire belonged, among others, Babel, from whence he came to Assur and built Nineva and other towns (Gen. 10:9; cf. Mic. 5:5).

Thus after God's trial and the rage of the Antichrist Comenius introduces a third way of explaining the persecution and misfortunes: they are God's punishment for having fallen off the discipline in the Law of Christ. Comenius' message to the Evangelical is clear: Persecution will not have an end until the Evangelicals reunite in the discipline before their Lord.

Comenius concludes his historical review with a remarkable "theology of the dispersed rest" (§§126–135). He closely follows the patterns of the Old Testament, thus it is worth having a closer look at the quotations in their original context. His general hermeneutical approach is the following: In Holy Scripture we can discover connections and structures, which are in analogy to our life and the present situation in the world on the whole. He never simply tries to find suitable Bible quotations to authorize his own thoughts. Instead, he wants to take his reader to a sort of "travel" through the book of Holy Scripture, in the course of which he strives for such an intensive acquaintance with it, until – figuratively spoken – sparks begin to fly from the "electric field" between the books of Holy Scripture and the world in which we live. Then, little by little, we perceive the analogies between Holy Scripture and the present world, until, when reading in Scripture, we cannot help coming face to face with a strange world but also with a mirror of our world and ourselves.

Comenius begins his description of the current situation following the words of Isaiah: "It will even be like the reaper gathering the standing grain, it will be like one gleaning ears of grain in the valley of Rephaim; like the shaking of an olive tree and gleaning will be left in it, two or three olives on the topmost bough, four or five on the branches, declares the Lord, the God of Israel." (Isaiah 17:5–6; see: §126) And did not Jeremiah hear the following word of God: "all your lovers have forgotten you, they do not seek you. For I have wounded you with a pitiless chastisement because of your great guilt and because of all your sins. Why do you cry out over your injury and over your desperately bad suffering? For I have done these things to you because of your great guilt and all your sins." (Jer. 30:14ff.) As Comenius sees it, the rage of the Almighty has justly come over the whole people (cf. 2 Mac. 7:38). Even the remaining Protestants were like the sons of Edom, who, as Jerusalem, the city of their brothers, was falling, had just shouted: "Raze it, raze it, to its very foundation! (§127; Ps. 137:7) For the time has come for the judgment to begin, and it begins with the household of God (§131; 1 Peter 4:17; cf. Ezek 9:6). But if already the judgment over the house of God is that terrible, how will it be for the impious? (§131: cf. Luke 23:31.)

In detail Comenius paraphrases a passage in the Lamentations: "For these things I weep, because far from me is my comforter, nobody is here, who restores my soul. My sons have passed away, for the enemy has prevailed. (Lam. 1:16) Zion stretches out her hands, but there is no one to comfort her (v.17). I called to my friends, but they forsook me (v.19). See, O Lord, for I am in distress (v.20). They hear how I groan, but no one comforts me; all my enemies are glad (v.21). Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our humiliation! (5:1) Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our houses to aliens (v.2). We are orphans without a father (v.3). We endure persecution, suffer, there is no rest for us (v.5). Servants rule over us, and there is no one to deliver us from their hand (v.7). The joy of our heart has ceased; our dancing has been turned into mourning (v.15). Thou, O Lord, dost rule forever; thy throne is from generation to generation (v.19), why dost thou forget us forever? Restore us to thee, O Lord, and we will return; renew our days as of old! (v.21)" (§128)

Comenius asks God for mercy. "Great is our Lord, and abundant in strength; his wisdom is infinite. (Ps 147:5). Everything he wants, he makes in heaven and on earth (Ps 135:6). For the Lord will not reject his own people forever, but, if he causes grief, then he will have compassion according to his abundant loving-kindness (Lam. 3:31f.)" (§130) But without the co-operation of men, without repentance and conversion to the good God's mercy cannot be expected. If we have sinned so far, by having hidden our talents, so let's improve ourselves by presenting them in public!" (§133) Like the Israelites when the Tabernacle was built spontaneously brought artefacts as offerings (Ex. 35:23f.), we too should bring as much offerings as we can for the building of Christ's throne in the churches, namely the discipline. We shall not seek persuasive words and wisdom, but the demonstration of the Spirit and of virtues (cf. 1 Cor. 2:4). (§133f.) Comenius concludes with a prayer, in which he closely follows the words of Daniel 9: "To thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame [*nam pak zahanbeni tvare*], to all of us nearby and far away, where you have driven us because of all our trespasses. 15. And now, O Lord our God, who hast brought thy people out of the (spiritual) land of Egypt with a mighty hand and hast made a name for thyself, as it is this day, 16. let thine anger and thy wrath turn away from thy (Christian) people. 17. Listen, O God, to the prayer of thy servant and to his supplications, and let thy face shine on thy sanctuary, desolated for thy sake. 18. Incline thy ear, O God, and listen. Open thy eyes and see our desolations and the city which is called by thy name. For we are not presenting our supplications before thee on account of any merits of our own, but on account of thy great compassion. 19. O Lord, listen and take action, do not delay! For thine own sake, O my God, because thy people are called by thy name. Amen!" (§135)

We can find a short summary of Comenius' theology of persecution, largely corresponding to the thoughts of the *Historiola* in the first chapter of Comenius' *Historia persecutionum*. In the year 894, thanks to the mission of Methodius, the "light of the holy Gospel" was brought to the Czechs for the first time. "But Christ did not want it without the cross, he, who had founded the Church with his own blood. So he let them too, in order to become more fertile, shed the blood of their martyrs. For this is the wisdom of God's Providence, that we should learn not to have hope in Christ for this life."<sup>14</sup> With this way of explaining persecutions Comenius gets close to a thought which can be found in the apocryphal book of Jesus Son of Sirach and in similar way in different books of the Old Testament: "As gold is purified by fire, those who please God are purified in the furnace of humiliation" (Sir 2:5). In the *Historiola* this way of explanation rather remains in the background, compared to the acting of Satan and the Antichrist.<sup>15</sup> It seems, as if Comenius could think the acting of Satan together with the acting of God, just as it can be seen in the trials of Job through Satan and at the same time through God. In affliction our faith is exposed to trial. This affliction can be the punishment for our sins, for our fall-off from the "path of the truth", for our missing discipline. Comenius mainly refers to this way of explanation for the peaceful period after the Imperial Charter of Rudolf II and the following cruel persecutions of the Thirty Years War. But as the example of Job shows, suffering as a hard trial can also hit every pious man, independently of all present circumstances. In the end God's trials remain incomprehensible, his ways unexplorable. Thus Comenius also renounces giving an unique and final answer to the question of why the *Unitas Fratrum* was hit by persecution to such an extent.

<sup>14</sup> *Historia persecutionum* 1:2.

<sup>15</sup> On the other hand see: *Retuňk proti Antikristu a svodům jeho* DJAK 2:9–224.



However, it remains clear, that “all, who want to live piously in Christ, will endure persecution.” (2 Tim. 3:12)

In his *Historiola* we find a specific “theology of the persecuted and dispersed”. This analysis has shown, that Comenius closely follows patterns from the Old Testament, but puts them into the frame of a Christian history of salvation. At first glance this history of salvation shows some very questionable aspects, as Comenius can hardly understand times of peace and well-being in a positive manner. Not only does his martial interpretation of Song of Solomon 6:9 nowadays seems questionable to us, but also the way he approves of the oppression of all non-evangelicals – the pseudo-Hussites – and even calls this “freedom of religion.” It also seems questionable how he sees in the consequence of every decrease of persecution the relaxation of discipline and thus a sort of going astray from the “path of truth.” Certainly Comenius, with a great complaint, turns against persecutions and cruelty. But according to his view of history, a lasting life in peace and freedom seems to be impossible for mortals – for, as soon as such a state has been reached, the discipline fades away and in consequence God imposes an even far more terrible punishment on humanity. The history of humanity seems similar to the fate of Sisyphus: Obedience to God – well-being – falling-off from God – punishment, war and persecution – repentance and conversion to obedience to God – God’s mercy – well-being – falling-off from God etc. etc. “Moderate” oppression and persecution seem to be the best that can happen to God’s people. Is there no way out of this vicious circle?