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## Teaching as gardening

For John Amos Comenius, teaching was a form of gardening. The great seventeenth century Moravian educator regularly writes of learners as plants, learning as organic growth and the educational setting as a garden under the care of the teacher. In his most influential work, the *Great Didactic*, he declares that the seeds of learning, virtue and religion are “naturally implanted in us.”<sup>1</sup> The human mind, he says, is like a seed which, “if placed in the ground, puts forth roots beneath it and shoots above it, and these later on, by their own innate force, spread into branches and leaves, are covered with foliage, and adorned with flowers and fruit.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Great Didactic*, V, XIV. All quotations from the *Great Didactic* are taken from Keatinge, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> *Great Didactic* V:5.

Comenius sees the school as a garden in which the task of the teacher is to “water God’s plants.”<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, he suggests that the different textbooks to be used in the different classes should have horticultural titles which “please and attract the young and ... at the same time express the nature of their contents.” Thus, “the book of the lowest class might be called the violet-bed, that of the second class the rose-bed, that of the third class the grass-plot, and so on.”<sup>4</sup> In keeping with this fondness for garden metaphors, Comenius urges as the overarching goal of education that each person is to become “a garden of delight for his God.”<sup>5</sup>

Comenius’ writings are important milestones in the history of education, and his richly metaphorical language helps to make them engaging and colourful. But how are his metaphorical habits relevant here, in the midst of a discussion of the Bible’s relationship to education? This chapter will begin to explore the idea (pursued further in the two chapters which follow) that metaphors such as those used by Comenius can play a significant role in relating the Bible to education. Comenius’ garden metaphors not only inform his educational thinking, they are also an important aspect of his attempt to think in the light of Scripture, as will become clearer below. Before looking at Comenius in more detail, however, it will be helpful to first get a more general sense of why metaphors might be important.

### The relevance of metaphor

There has in recent decades been a marked shift in the prevailing view of metaphor. Until fairly recently the standard view saw metaphor as a poetic decoration designed to make language more colourful but at the same time less truthful and trustworthy.<sup>6</sup> On this view, metaphors

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<sup>3</sup> *Great Didactic* XVI:2.

<sup>4</sup> *Great Didactic* XXIX:11. The suggestion is worked out further in the *Pampaedia* (*Pampaedia*, X in Dobbie, 1986), where the progression is amended and extended to the nursery garden, the seed bed, the violet bed, the rose garden, the shrubbery and the park.

<sup>5</sup> *Great Didactic*, Dedicatory Letter.

<sup>6</sup> This view emerged particularly from seventeenth century empiricism. See e.g. Soskice, 1985:1-14.

are like water lilies on a pond. They add to the beauty of the scene, but they must be skimmed away if we want to penetrate beyond the surface and find out what is going on in the depths below. The following extract from a discussion of language by philosopher John Wilson offers a forthright example of this kind of perspective:

The beliefs of men, and perhaps particularly their religious beliefs, tend to seek expression in the most poetic form. The greatness of the Bible, for instance, lies not least in its high literary value. Prayers, political songs and slogans, proverbs and moral injunctions, and formalised ritual sayings of all kinds tend to acquire poetic force. This is desirable for many reasons, provided only that we do not lose sight of their prose meaning. Pure poetry is one thing; nobody 'takes it seriously'. Pure prose, such as a scientific text-book, is another; nobody feels inclined to read it in the sing-song, faintly mystical voice which we reserve for poetry. But mixed communications are dangerous, for we may easily allow their poetic force to blind us to the prose meaning...Prose communication consists of words of which we are intended to make logical sense: words which we are supposed to understand with our reason, not appreciate with our feelings. It is with this sort of communication that we shall be concerned, because this is the type of communication which we ought to use in arguing, discussing, solving problems and discovering truth.<sup>7</sup>

The implications of a view of metaphor as poetic decoration are clearly spelled out: if we are concerned with factual truth, we are urged to purge our language of such dubious appeals to the passions and stick to unadorned prose.<sup>8</sup> What is particularly interesting in the

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<sup>7</sup> Wilson, 1956:49-50.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Lundin quotes the admonition from the seventeenth century British scientist Thomas Sprat that we should banish "Specious Tropes and Figures" from "all civil Societies as a thing fatal to Peace and good Manners", and that the Royal Society should adopt instead "a close, naked, natural way of speaking...as near the Mathematical plainness as they can" (Lundin, Walhout, & Thiselton, 1999:39)

present context is the explicit reference to the status of the Bible. Here again, the implications are clear. The fact that both religious language in general and the Bible in particular are laden with metaphor may be valuable in some way, we are told. We should, however, remember that if we want to find out the truth of the matter then the poetic images in the Bible must either be converted into cold prose or regarded as having no legitimate bearing on the facts. On this view, the metaphorical dimension of Scripture is likely to hinder rather than help in the task of relating it to education.

This view of metaphor is now widely regarded as untenable. Scholars in a wide variety of disciplines, including the natural sciences, have explored the essential role which metaphors play in our understanding of reality. Seeing electricity as a current or light as a wave or particle are not mere poetic aberrations, but a way of extending our knowledge by looking at one thing in terms of another.<sup>9</sup> Becoming accustomed to thinking in terms of a certain metaphor or group of metaphors can focus our attention in particular ways and guide us into certain patterns of practice.

A striking example of this is offered by Lakoff and Johnson in the opening pages of their book *Metaphors We Live By*.<sup>10</sup> They point out that in Western cultural contexts we tend to talk about argument as a form of warfare. We *attack* others' *positions* and *defend* or *buttress* our own. Our criticisms may be *on target* and if so may *demolish* or even *shoot down* an opposing argument. This, Lakoff and Johnson argue, is not merely poetic embellishment – it is the normal way for us to talk about arguing. It both reflects and helps to shape what we actually do when we argue.

In order to make the point clearer, they suggest that we should imagine a culture where argument is primarily viewed as a dance. We might then look at arguments more in terms of the ways in which the participants cooperate through turn-taking (a point obscured by warfare metaphors), and see the ideal as a poised performance which

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999; Ortony, 1993; Sacks, 1979. Definitions of metaphor vary; for present purposes, the broad definition of metaphor offered by Soslke will suffice: "metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another" (Soslke, 1985:15).

<sup>10</sup> Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:3-6.

leaves both parties and any onlookers enriched and satisfied. The key point here is that while some metaphors may be one-off poetic images, others become much more deeply and pervasively embedded in our ways of thinking. They may shape both the way in which we see the world and the way in which we live in it.

### **Educational metaphors**

To return to education, the metaphors which come to dominate our thinking about teaching and learning can have a significant impact on how we shape and experience education.<sup>11</sup> To take an example familiar in many Western contexts, once metaphors of economic production gain a hold on our perception of education, then those who lead schools become the *senior management team*, the curriculum becomes a *product* which we *deliver* to the children and parents who are its *consumers* and/or the school's *customers*, its delivery must be subjected to *quality control*, the school must *market* itself to parents and employers, and so on. The same metaphorical perspective can colour descriptions of the learning process itself, as in this example from an article on second language learning:

If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on their investment – a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources.<sup>12</sup>

Such networks of imagery are not merely a poetic way of describing what happens in schools – they both reflect and in turn help to create and sustain certain ways of doing and experiencing education.

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<sup>11</sup> On the importance of metaphor for education see e.g. the papers in Munby, 1986; Ortony, 1993; Taylor, 1984; Thornbury, 1991. On metaphor and Christian education see e.g. Shortt, Smith, & Cooling, 2000; Sullivan, 2000; Van Brummelen, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Peirce, 1995:17.

The realisation that metaphor is more than mere decoration calls for a re-evaluation of the role that it might play in relating the Bible to education. Educational discussion is inhabited and moulded by metaphors. Religious language and in particular the language of the Bible are richly metaphorical. Could there be a connection between the two? This question returns us to Comenius and his gardens.

### **Teaching as gardening**

The image of the school as a garden in which the learners are little plants which will blossom and flourish if given space to thrive can readily be associated with child-centred education in the Romantic or progressive tradition stemming from Rousseau. This tradition commonly sees the learner as innately good and the civilising intervention of the teacher as a potentially damaging intrusion. It is typically contrasted with a more teacher-centred pedagogy, which tends to see learners as blank slates or empty receptacles to be written upon or filled with knowledge by the teacher. Comenius' talk of the innate seeds of learning watered by the teacher sounds close in spirit to the Romantic view.

As Daniel Murphy has recently argued, however, things are not that simple. Murphy notes that Comenius has often been seen as belonging to the progressive tradition, but he goes on to distinguish two strands of thought sharing broadly learner-centred ideals:

The first of these strands includes educators such as Comenius himself, Oberlin, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Novikov, Pirogov, Tolstoy and Buber – all of whose works deeply reflect their origins in the cultural traditions of Christianity and Judaism. The second, which begins with Rousseau and reaches maturity with Dewey, stands in marked contrast to the first, by virtue of its advocacy of learner-centred ideals within the framework of a philosophy which is predominantly secular in character.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Murphy, 1995:3.

How, then, does this deep difference in the relationship of these educators' ideas to Christian belief become evident? In the case of Comenius, the use to which he puts his gardening metaphors provides an interesting avenue of investigation.

At times, Comenius does sound very close to Rousseau. The imagery of naturally implanted seeds of virtue, and of education as organic growth, echo common progressive themes. The modern reader who is led by this imagery to expect an earlier version of Rousseau is, however, in for some puzzlement, for Comenius is happy on other occasions to view the school as a workshop, education as the operation of a printing press imprinting knowledge upon the learner, or the human person as a clock.<sup>14</sup> He also presents the teacher not only as one who is to “open the fountain of knowledge that is hidden in the scholars”, but also as one whose mouth is “a spring from which streams of knowledge issue and flow over them” or who, like the sun, should be the centre of attention.<sup>15</sup> This sounds much less like the child-centred classroom. Was Comenius just confused? Closer attention to the contexts that inform his imagery suggests that this would be a premature conclusion.

### Interpreting the garden of delights

First, it is helpful to consider the *experiential* context of his garden metaphors. A few years ago, a visit to a medieval stately home in

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<sup>14</sup> The machine images seem to evoke for Comenius, standing at the dawn of modernity, a sense of wonder rather than more jaded present-day perceptions of determinism, deism or disenchantment. The vision is not of rigid structure but of a harmonious movement together of all the parts, whether limbs or levers. Cf. *Great Didactic* XIII:14 : “If any part get out of position, crack, break, become loose or bent, though it be the smallest wheel, the most insignificant axle, or the tiniest screw, the whole machine stops or at least goes wrong, and thus shows us plainly that everything depends on the harmonious working of the parts.” Schaller (1992:24) argues that for Comenius the machine metaphor represents “alles, was ... für den unkundigen Zuschauer verblüffende Wirkungen zeigt.” (everything which shows astonishing operations to the unknowledgable onlooker).

<sup>15</sup> *Great Didactic* XVIII:23; XIX:19, 20.

Derbyshire, England, made the contours of Comenius' image visually vivid. The route laid out for visitors led through the house and out into a very beautiful and carefully patterned flower garden. On one side of the garden was a path edged by a low wall, offering views of rolling open countryside beyond the garden's boundaries. The contrast with the modern urban experience of gardening was striking. To the modern city dweller, a garden is a small intrusion of nature in the territory of culture, a vulnerable patch of green offering relief from the overwhelming dominance of human artefacts, a clearing in the concrete jungle. At this historic country house the garden was, as for Comenius, an island of culture in the sea of nature, a place where disciplined beauty was brought forth from the unruliness of nature. With the garden metaphor as with many other metaphors, including those in Scripture, apt personal experience plays an important role in interpretation.

Second, the garden metaphor has a developed *theological* context in Comenius' writings, a point that becomes evident if we consider his understanding of 'nature'. Comenius states that:

by the word nature we mean, not the corruption which has laid hold of all men since the Fall (on which account we are naturally called the children of wrath, unable by ourselves to have any good thoughts), but our first and original condition, to which as a starting-point we must be recalled."<sup>16</sup>

Talk of human 'nature' does not refer simply to the way things are, to humans as we find them around us, but to the good creation, now distorted by the Fall, but recoverable through the processes of redemption. The world should by rights be a garden, but has become a wilderness. God's work through 'natural' agencies such as education is, in Comenius' view, to play a significant role in the process of renewal.

Moreover, even apart from the distorting effects of sin, human 'nature' is not a given thing, completed and self-sufficient, but rather a "starting-point" for a process of development which is to continue throughout this life and into the next.<sup>17</sup> Human 'nature' is not a

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<sup>16</sup> *Great Didactic* V:1.

<sup>17</sup> *Great Didactic* II:5.

possession already within our grasp – it is a calling from which we have stumbled and which must be progressively recovered and realised. It will only be attained “in full plenitude” in the presence of God in eternity.<sup>18</sup>

Once we see how Comenius understands ‘nature’, it becomes clear that to compare the development of the child with the ‘natural’ growth of a seed does not discourage the teacher’s formative intervention – it *invites* it. As Comenius points out, “Herbs and grains have to be sown, hoed and ground; trees have to be planted, pruned and manured, while their fruits must be plucked off and dried; and if any of these things are required for medicine, or for building purposes, much more preparation is needed.”<sup>19</sup>

Leaving ‘natural’ processes unattended is not a benevolent but an irresponsible course of action: just as “a wild tree will not bring forth sweet fruits until it be planted, watered and pruned by a skilled gardener, so does a man grow of his own accord into a human semblance (just as any brute resembles others of his own class), but is unable to develop into a rational, wise, virtuous and pious creature, unless virtue and piety are first engrafted in him.”<sup>20</sup> A garden is not a refuge from civilisation but rather something to be shaped in God-pleasing ways by a wise and careful gardener.<sup>21</sup> Again we find that the garden

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<sup>18</sup> *Great Didactic* II:10.

<sup>19</sup> *Great Didactic* VI:3.

<sup>20</sup> *Great Didactic* VII:1. Comenius cites examples of children who were raised by wild animals and whose human faculties remained undeveloped (*Great Didactic* VI:6). Cf. *Pampaedia* II:3: “nature should not be allowed to lie neglected and contribute neither to the glory of God nor to man’s salvation.” Cicero’s statement that “the seeds of virtue are sown in our dispositions, and, if they are allowed to develop, nature herself would lead us to the life of the blest” is explicitly rejected – not because such seeds are not present but because something more than nature is needed to bring them to fruition (*Great Didactic* V:13). Contrast Rousseau’s complaint that “Man...not content to leave anything as nature has made it,...must needs shape man himself to his notions, as he does the trees in his garden” and his admonition “Do you not see that in attempting to improve on [nature’s] work you are destroying it and defeating the provision she has made?” (Boyd, 1956:11,17).

<sup>21</sup> *Great Didactic* XVI:2. Cf. *Pampaedia* I:15.

for Comenius is not an image of unspoiled nature, but rather of nature carefully brought under discipline that it might bear greater fruit.<sup>22</sup>

Third, the garden metaphors in Comenius' writings are explicitly rooted in the text of the Bible. The opening chapters of the *Great Didactic* are devoted to an exposition of what it means to be created in the image of God, a significant theme of the opening chapter of Genesis. According to Comenius, this includes lordship over creation, understood not as exploitative mastery but as service. True lordship is a wise tending of the garden and involves working to bring all things to their proper fruition so that "all creatures should have cause to join us in praising God".<sup>23</sup> The opening chapters of Genesis come even more explicitly to the fore in the dedicatory letter, which opens with a description of the original paradise:

God, having created man out of dust, placed him in a Paradise of desire, which he had planted in the East, not only that man might tend it and care for it, but also that he might be a garden of delight for his God.

Humankind is not just to tend a garden, but to *be* a garden. After a description of the delights of Paradise, the "pleasantest part of the world" in which "each tree was delightful to look at," Comenius reiterates that "each man is, in truth, a Garden of Delights for his God, as long as he remains in the spot where he has been placed". He goes on to state that the church, too, "is often in Holy Writ likened to a Paradise, to a garden, to a vineyard of God".<sup>24</sup> Hovering behind Comenius'

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<sup>22</sup> See e.g. *Great Didactic* XVI:48; also (Schaller, 1992:24): a garden for Comenius is to be read as "nicht Natur, sondern gestaltete Natur" – not nature but nature given form.

<sup>23</sup> *Pampaedia* II:13. Cf. *Great Didactic* IV:4: "To be the lord of all creatures consists in subjecting everything to his own use by contriving that its legitimate end be suitably fulfilled; in conducting himself royally, that is gravely and righteously, among creatures ... [not being] ignorant where, when, how and to what extent each may prudently be used, how far the body should be gratified, and how far our neighbour's interests should be consulted. In a word, he should be able to control with prudence his own movements and actions, external and internal, as well as those of others."

<sup>24</sup> *Great Didactic*, Dedicatory Letter.

garden imagery is the garden of Eden as described in Genesis chapters 1-3, and in its train the whole subsequent network of garden and vineyard imagery in the Bible. For Comenius, the garden images are not just homely comparisons; they are a way of drawing the imagery of Scripture into his account of education.

### **Metaphor, the Bible and education**

In Comenius we see a biblical metaphor playing a formative role in educational thinking. Comenius was not the only educator to see the educational context as a garden, but his use of garden metaphors is rooted in a biblical image of gardening – to be specific, in the Bible’s representation of the garden of Eden. His talk of gardens therefore evokes not merely natural growth but the biblical drama of creation, fall and redemption. Through the conscious echoes of Eden, the garden metaphor evokes themes of God’s pleasure and displeasure, of human calling and responsibility, of failure and guilt, and of redemptive re-formation.

It is against this background that the garden of delights becomes a fertile image for Comenius, helping him to develop and articulate a particular vision of schooling. Gardens are seen as places of disciplined cultivation leading to fruitfulness and to shared divine and human pleasure. The learning process must accordingly be both ordered and enjoyable, involving both discipline (cultivation) and playfulness (delight). A high view of learners and of the potential which God has placed in them is coupled with a strong sense of the teacher’s responsibility to ‘plant, water and prune.’ These are the contours within which Comenius’ more detailed proposals unfold.<sup>25</sup> The garden image both plays a role in shaping Comenius’ ideas and helps him to capture his readers’ imaginations, enticing and enabling them to see education as he saw it.

The garden imagery resonates with a particular theology, but it is not replaceable without loss by any single doctrinal formulation. In his talk of schools as gardens of delight, Comenius offers us not a set of

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<sup>25</sup> A detailed exposition of Comenius’ pedagogy would be out of place here. For further detail, see Smith, 2000b.

premises or propositions from which to make deductions, but rather an image to think with, something to set our imaginations going along biblically oriented lines. The image alone, bereft of its theological context, could carry a variety of contradictory meanings, Christian or otherwise. The image taken in context plays a significant role in Comenius' attempt to think about education in the light of Scripture.

In this chapter we have tried to illustrate how metaphors can forge connections between the Bible and education. In the next two chapters we will explore this kind of process in more detail, attending first to the ways in which individual images get taken up into wider networks of meaning and then to the benefits and problems which flow from the tendency of metaphor to be open to a variety of interpretations.