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Contested Legacies of the Late Middle Ages: Reason, Mystery and Participation in Comenius and Baxter

kterou prosloví

Dr. Simon J. G. Burton

(Faculty of "Artes Liberales", University of Warsaw)

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Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670) is becoming well known as a ‘universal reformer’. Through his famous method of *pansophia* he aimed to institute not only a reform of education but also of the whole of European – and ultimately global – Church and society. Recently scholarship has begun to locate his thought more and more within a vibrant (Central) European tradition of encyclopaedism, mediated especially through Johannes Piscator and Johann Heinrich Alsted, his teachers at the Herborn academy. At the same time, as Jan Patočka insightfully recognised, Comenius was also deeply indebted to the traditions of fifteenth-century Realism and Platonism, not only that of the Hussites but also of Ramon de Sebonde and Nicholas of Cusa. Indeed, the work of Patočka himself, Pavel Floss, Detlef Thiel and most recently Simon Kuchlbauer has pointed to Cusa especially as a major influence on Comenius’ Trinitarian method.

Another important exponent of Trinitarian method was the English Puritan Richard Baxter (1615–91). While he has so far only been peripherally included in discussions of universal reformation, it is clear that he shared many of the same irenic and transformative impulses. Like Comenius, who had a significant influence on his thought, Baxter was profoundly attracted to the Trinitarian metaphysics of Tommaso Campanella, as well as to the wider traditions of Ramist encyclopaedism and Christian Platonism. At the same time his own philosophical and theological background meant that he was also deeply attuned to the traditions of late medieval scholasticism, especially the Scotist and Nominalist schools, and Reformed covenantal theology.

My paper will develop a comparison between Comenius and Baxter focussing on their different inheritances from late medieval and Renaissance thought and their ultimately divergent attitudes towards the kind of Neo-Platonism represented by Cusa. In doing so it will highlight their subtly differing approaches towards reason, mystery and the metaphysics of participation, thus situating their Trinitarian thought within a wider dialogue between Realist, exemplaristic and covenantal methods.