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# PHILIPP MELANCHTHON

(1497–1560)

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No great historical movement, unless it deliberately chooses to be an ephemeral phenomenon, can fail to engage in educational activities: the new body of thought has to be transmitted to future generations. These activities are, in most cases, personified by a particular historical figure or figures. Both of the above observations apply to the period of the Reformation, which had its beginnings as well as its culmination in Germany. Side by side with such historic events as the discovery of the Americas, the invention of the printing press and the replacement of the geocentric world image by a heliocentric one, the Reformation represented one of the epoch-making turning points between the Middle Ages and modern times. It brought to an end the religious and philosophical consensus that had prevailed until then in the western world on the basis of the Roman Catholic faith and the Church headed by the Pope in Rome, the personification of that faith. In terms of the history of mentalities, the religious and philosophical dualism—with Catholicism on one side and Protestantism on the other—which came into being with the Reformation marked the beginning of the pluralism which was to become the fundamental feature of the contemporary world right up to the present day.

In Germany, the Reformation is personified above all by Martin Luther (1483–1546), who gave his name to the churches based upon his faith and his theology. His message of God's unqualified love of mankind and of man's pious acceptance of that love as the sole precondition for salvation shook the very foundations of the medieval Roman Church, which had dogmatically proclaimed itself to be the only path towards salvation.

Luther himself was very much aware of the vital need for educational reflection and activity as a means of bestowing permanence upon the movement he had initiated. Apart from those of his writings that deal explicitly with the subject of educational reform, such as *To the city councillors of all German cities: that they establish and maintain Christian schools* (1524), the *Sermon propounding that children be sent to school* (1530) and the *Message to the clergy in the Electorate of Saxony on the instruction of visitors* (1538), references which testify to the importance he attached to the educational aspect of his reforms are to be found again and again at scattered points in his extensive written legacy.

Yet, everyone at the start did not accept the mutually complementary and mutually stimulating function of Reformation and teaching. Among the main currents of opinion within the new Reformation movement, there was at first one that was definitely critical of education and rejected medieval ecclesiastical-scholastic scholarship, which it equated with education as a whole (cf. Reble, 1981, p. 84 ff.). The 'Enthusiasts' attitude sometimes involved teaching and practising a form of religious spiritualism and absolutism that treated the spirituality present within every human being as a second source of divine revelation on a level with the Christian Scriptures. To illustrate this position, we may refer to Andreas Bodenstein, also known under the name of his native town of Carlstadt (ca. 1480–1541), who advocated the radical abandonment of school and university education and invited his followers to practise

agriculture instead (cf. Hofmann, 1986, p. 19). This stance reflected the old gnostic-mystical idea that the mind of every human being is the embodiment, or an emanation, of the divine force.

Luther, for his part, became aware of the importance of educational activities at an early stage. In one of his first reformation writings, entitled *An address to the Christian nobility of the German nation on the improvement of the Christian estate* (1520), he establishes a link between education and the Christian faith:

That which should be read first and most universally in the higher and lower schools must be the Holy Scriptures, and for the youngest boys, the Gospels. And would God that every town also had a girls' school wherein the maidens might hear the Gospel for an hour every day, be it in German or Latin [...] Is it not meet that every Christian should know the whole of the Holy Gospel, wherein His name and His life are written, by the age of 9 or 10?

Several aspects of this passage deserve attention: the fact that education is here, as it were, democratized—all Christians, including girls, are to partake of the enjoyment of education, a demand which, at that time, was surely well-nigh revolutionary. Furthermore, education was no longer to be a privilege of the clerics—one that was at variance with Luther's theological tenet of the universal priesthood of all the faithful. Such a call for the launching of educational efforts, motivated at first by religious considerations, naturally released other potentialities beyond the strictly religious sphere: because of its inherent formal structures, the work of education, once begun, was no longer tied exclusively to religion but could also develop naturally in other areas. This was a fact of exceptional importance to the history of Protestantism. In this way, Protestantism became an educational factor of the first order. Since Luther's day and right up to the present, it has produced countless poets and thinkers, scientists and philosophers who have left their mark upon the life of the intellect, and not only in Germany.

The man generally and rightly regarded as the German Reformation's main educational protagonist in the sixteenth century is Philipp Melanchthon, Luther's closest collaborator at Wittenberg from 1518 onward. It is surely not wrong to suppose that Luther's own ideas on education emanated to a large extent from Melanchthon. Melanchthon's importance to the German Reformation movement as an educationist and teacher is reflected in the honorary title of *Praeceptor Germaniae* [teacher of the Germans] that was bestowed upon him quite early on in his career.

## The early years

Philipp Melanchthon was born on 16 February 1497 at Bretten, an administrative centre in the Palatinate, as the son of Georg Schwarzerdt, gunsmith and armourer to the Prince Elector, and Barbara Reuter, daughter of the prominent Bretten burgher Hans Reuter and his wife Elisabeth Reuchlin of Pforzheim, a sister of Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) who was probably, with Erasmus,<sup>2</sup> the best-known humanist north of the Alps, whose services to the study of biblical Hebrew and to the freedom of scientific research were particularly outstanding. Philipp grew up in his grandparents' spacious house adjoining the marketplace at Bretten, surrounded by four younger siblings, a brother and three sisters. A tutor was employed to introduce Philipp, his brother and one of his mother's younger brothers to the Latin language.

Following his father's and grandfather's deaths in 1508 Philipp, together with his grandmother, moved to the latter's home town of Pforzheim, whose flourishing grammar school he attended. He rapidly made great strides in both Latin and Greek, receiving generous encouragement in his studies from his great-uncle Reuchlin, then living in Stuttgart as a

member of the College of Judges of the Swabian League. It was Reuchlin, too, who—as was the custom in humanist circles at that time—gave him the Greek form of his surname in the year 1509, thus turning him into Philipp Melanchthon.

After only one year's study of ancient languages at Pforzheim, the 12-year-old Melanchthon was ready in 1509 to move on to the University of Heidelberg, where he lodged in the house of the theologian Pallas Spangel. Here again the young Melanchthon completed the prescribed course of studies without any problems and obtained the degree of *Baccalaureus artium in via antiqua* [bachelor in classic arts] in 1511. The same year, his fifteenth, saw the publication of his first works—several poems included in a volume edited by the humanist Jakob Wimpfeling (1450–1528). In addition to his own studies, he acted as tutor to the two sons of a Count von Löwenstein. Finally, in the autumn of 1512, he moved on to Tübingen, where, although declaring himself to be an adherent of 'Nominalism', he continued the prescribed studies in both systems of scholastic philosophy. In 1514 he received the academic degree of Master of Arts of Tübingen University. But it was the new circle of acquaintances and friends he formed in Tübingen, all eagerly pursuing studies in humanism and the other new sciences that were beginning to flourish at that time, that was of the greatest importance to his development. Special mention may be made here of his friends Johannes Öcolampadius, later to become one of the Swiss reformers, and Ambrosius Blarer, destined to render signal services to the Reformation in the Württemberg area. Together they would read the Greek authors, study the latest discoveries in astronomy and astrology, and discuss the *Dialectics* of Rudolf Agricola, published in 1515, a major milestone towards the triumph of scholastic logic. In such a stimulating intellectual climate, new publications of his own were not slow to appear: thus, Melanchthon, together with a colleague, was commissioned by Reuchlin to write the preface to the *Clarorum virorum epistolae* [Correspondence of famous men] (1514), in which the humanist defended himself against attacks from the so-called 'Obscurantists'; this was followed by an edition of the works of Terence (1516) with an introduction on the history of comedy, Melanchthon's first major philological work. Towards the end of 1517, on the occasion of an academic celebration at Tübingen, he made a speech on the subject of the disciplines taught at the university, in which he proposed that history and poetry should be added to the original seven liberal arts, the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric and dialectics) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy), whose study at the Faculty of Arts was supposed to prepare students for the three higher faculties of medicine, law and theology.

## The meeting with Martin Luther

All these activities were bound to bring the hopeful young scholar to the attention of the intellectual world. A logical consequence of this was Melanchthon's appointment to the Chair of Greek at the University of Wittenberg created by Friedrich the Wise, the elector of Saxony, as part of that university's humanist reform. In his inaugural lecture, delivered at Wittenberg on 28 August 1518, Melanchthon again spoke about the 'Improvement of studies for the young'. The central issue for him in this context was the humanists' call for a return *ad fontes* [to the sources], and he believed that the ancient languages provided the best methodological means of achieving that end. Like the good humanist that he was, he strongly advocated the study of the ancient classical languages as a way of dethroning the degenerate medieval Latin in use at that time. But he also stressed the importance of history, the natural sciences and mathematics.

The call to Wittenberg was the event that definitively determined the course of Melanchthon's life. It was here, in the cradle of the new religious reformation movement, that he came into contact with the movement itself and with its leading figure, the Augustinian monk and Professor of Biblical Science Martin Luther, whose *Theses on indulgences* published late in 1517 had made him famous throughout Germany (and who, incidentally, had not been among the supporters of Melanchthon's candidacy for the new chair). However, a close friendship and collaboration developed very quickly between the two men, different though they were in more respects than merely that of age—the intransigent, sometimes coarse Luther, ever ready for the fray, tormented by his own existential problems, contrasting sharply with the arch-intellectual Melanchthon, the academic whose whole life was devoted to scholarship and who in almost every instance sought to achieve a compromise with his opponents.

Besides his own activities, Melanchthon attended Luther's lectures in the philosophical faculty, registered for a regular course in theology and obtained the degree of Bachelor of Biblical Studies, entitling him to give biblical lectures of his own. Luther, too, was quick to recognize his new companion's theological competence. But the close association with Luther also involved some painful choices: Melanchthon's great-uncle Reuchlin did not like to see him at the centre of the dispute with Rome and tried to obtain his transfer to Ingolstadt, a move to which, however, Melanchthon could not agree. The break with the famous relative was thus made complete.

The symbiotic association between Luther and Melanchthon, and consequently between the new Reformation movement and humanism, was to prove of importance to them both. Luther benefited especially from Melanchthon's knowledge of the ancient and biblical languages—his translations of the New (1522) and Old (1534) Testaments, those great landmarks in the history of the German language, would probably not have been possible without Melanchthon's assistance, at least not in the form in which we know them—while Melanchthon succeeded, with Luther's help, in penetrating the innermost depths of theology and in placing his newly-won knowledge at the service of the Reformation movement. Without realizing it, Melanchthon, still a young man, had thus become a centrally significant figure within the new movement and Luther's foremost companion-in-arms. He retained this position for almost three decades until Luther's death in 1545 and was then recognized as the great reformer's natural successor. Although he never matched Luther's outstanding charismatic qualities as a leader of the new movement, he nevertheless succeeded in steering the new church, with its rapidly developing institutional and organizational structures and its progressive separation from Rome, through the shoals of an increasingly difficult period, thus contributing towards its permanence.

But, in addition to philosophy and theology, Melanchthon possessed yet another competence which may well have been the most essential reason for his importance to the new movement, namely his pedagogical capacity in the widest sense, three particular aspects of which we propose to discuss here (see also Hofmann, 1963).

The first point to be made is that all educational endeavours must be founded upon an underlying anthropological concept, without which the work of education cannot be practised meaningfully. Melanchthon was well aware of this essential need for an anthropological basis to pedagogics; in his view, too, no educational action was possible without a clear notion of the whence, the wherefore and the whither of man.

Secondly, we see in Melanchthon the founder of Protestant schooling. As a scholar stamped with the imprint of humanism, he believed in the ideal of the universally and encyclopaedically educated human being aspiring to receive, as much as possible, the entire store of knowledge available in his time. In order to make this possibility available to the rising

generation, Melanchthon designed a great number of preparatory courses in various sciences belonging to a wide range of disciplines, and he strove to create a new philosophical and theological basis for the scientific system of his time.

Third and last, we propose to mention Melanchthon's ideas and proposals for the reorganization of the schools and the whole education system of his time, with special emphasis upon higher education.

## **Melanchthon, the humanist and educator**

Because of his humanist background and training, Melanchthon was greatly attached to a form of anthropological optimism rooted in the belief that man, if only he be properly formed and educated in the human virtues, is intrinsically capable of improving the state of the world. As with all humanists, his trust in the quasi-automatic power of science—*eruditio*—was initially very strong. According to this theory you need only to acquaint a person with the accumulated knowledge of mankind in order to improve that person's attitude and therefore, ultimately, also the state of the world and of mankind in general; and the human being is certainly capable of achieving this if only he or she desires to do so.

The new faith of the Reformation was, however, strictly opposed on religious and theological grounds to this humanistic trust in man's potential perfectibility. If man was to trust wholly and exclusively in God's gracious will, if his entire faith was to rest upon this, then it had to follow that man was not intrinsically capable of goodness. But, while in strictly theological terms the chief significance of this is simply that man is not capable on his own of determining his relationship to God, a strong implication of this theological tenet is that man on his own is likewise incapable of achieving goodness in his relationship to the world and to his fellow-men.

When, in the years 1524–25, Luther conducted his argument with Erasmus of Rotterdam, the uncrowned head of the humanist school, on the related question of the freedom of will, he opposed humanism and its doctrine of freewill by his theological teaching of the non-freedom of the human will, speculatively thrusting deep into the mysteries of divine determination of man and the world in order to illustrate his biblically-founded belief in the intrinsic depravity of human nature and, consequently, in its dependence on the grace of God. This disputation between Luther and Erasmus was decisive for the relationship between the Reformation and humanism, which had long been suspicious of the Reformation's critical attitude towards education and its anthropological pessimism.

Melanchthon's undoubted humanistically-founded anthropological optimism of the pre-Wittenberg period was, as it were, put to flight by theology during the first few years of his contacts with Luther. The culmination of this process of coming closer to Luther's theology is probably represented by the *Loci communes rerum theologicarum seu hypotyposes theologicae* [Basic principles of theology or theological hypotheses] of 1521, in which Melanchthon finds himself unable to concede 'any freedom whatever' to man's internal or external actions: 'Si ad praedestinationem referas humanam voluntatem, nec in externis nec in internis operibus ulla est libertas, sed eveniunt omnia juxta destinationem divinam.' [If you refer the human will to predestination, there is no freedom whatever neither for external nor internal actions, but everything that happens is by divine will] (quoted from *Loci communes* (1521), 1993, p. 44). Theological preconceptions of this kind, if strictly applied, would have reduced any educational project *ad absurdum*, which is why they could not represent the last word on the subject for Melanchthon or the Reformation movement as a whole.

When, following the clarifications and schisms of the first half of the 1520s, especially in the Reformation's relations with the 'Old Believers' and those whom Luther described as

the 'Enthusiasts', it became necessary for the Wittenberg theologians to create organizational and institutional structures in order to give permanence to the new movement, a change also occurred in the movement's theological and educational theories. So far as the anthropological concept was concerned, this meant that man was now believed to be capable of intervening usefully in the ordering of secular matters, including educational ones, and was recognized as having the right to do so. This ultimately resulted in a synergetic concept which viewed God as the unique source of salvation in all matters pertaining to the hereafter, but granted relative autonomy to the human will inasmuch as earthly matters were concerned. In this way, ethics and education could preserve their relative rights vis-à-vis theology.

Melanchthon had thus advanced towards a model synthesis of theology and education, Reformation and humanism, that was to have historical repercussions well beyond and outside the problems of the century of the Reformation. His contribution towards resolving those problems was also undoubtedly one towards the elaboration and founding of the Reformation's basic theological model of thought and action, later to be known as the Protestant 'doctrine of the two realms', which in matters of faith based all things upon God's love of man but allowed man a good deal of elbow room in matters pertaining to the shaping of immanence, thus succeeding in a characteristically complementary manner in reconciling anthropological pessimism with anthropological optimism.

In our biographical sketch of Melanchthon's early life, we have already touched upon his views on the traditional scientific theories of medieval Aristotelianism. He believed that the disciplinary system of the classical 'seven liberal arts' and the sciences studied in the higher faculties could not encompass the new revolutionary discoveries of the age in terms of either content or method. He expanded the traditional categorization of science in several directions, incorporating not only history, geography and poetry but also the new natural sciences in his system of scholarly disciplines. We have also mentioned a number of preparatory texts which he composed in his early pre-Wittenberg days with a view to introducing students to various sciences. Under Luther's dominating influence in Wittenberg at the beginning of the 1520s, and armed with the new reformed theology, Melanchthon was in danger of adopting an attitude of rejection of all human scientific aspirations in general; the theological recognition of man's need of salvation, overshadowing all else, threatened to displace learning in his scale of values. But in the debate with the 'enthusiastic spirits' and their rejection of scholarship, Melanchthon became aware once more of the importance of scientific cognition, although he also believed that scholarship should never become an end in itself and must always remain the servant of theology and the cognition of God. On the basis of these premises Melanchthon turned once more, after the mid-1520s, to the composition of foundation courses in various sciences which, without presenting any radically new research findings, nevertheless summarize the knowledge of his time in an encyclopedically-oriented manner that is exemplary as regards both content and method and which would pass that knowledge on to young students and scholars. In this way, Melanchthon became the author of authoritative textbooks in almost all scholarly disciplines of his time, from the classical 'seven liberal arts' to psychology (*Commentarius de anima* [Comments on the soul], 1540) and, repeatedly, in ethics (e.g. *Ethicae doctrinae elementa* [Principles of ethics] 1550). Many of these textbooks remained in use well into the following century and thus exerting a far-reaching influence on scholarship. As for the study of dogmatic theology, his *Loci communes*, already mentioned, which he revised several times, represented a completely new type of textbook in which the elementary *topoi* [basics] of theology were treated in turn. Lastly, within the framework of the teaching reform he had initiated at the university, Melanchthon enriched the training of students by such methods as disputation and declamation, in both of which he was himself a master ( Stupperich, 1960, p. 56).

The third area in which Melanchthon's influence reached far beyond his time is that of educational and schools policy. The exceptional importance of the Reformation to the history and development of the German school system has been emphasized on many occasions. E. Spranger and W. Flitner regarded the Reformation as that system's centrally significant 'root' or 'source'. Whereas, as we have already seen, Luther's prime concern in this area was the creation of elementary schools for the people as a means of providing all Christians with access to the word of God, as contained in the Bible, and to the elements of Christian culture. Melanchthon the humanist was specially concerned with higher education or, in other words, with grammar schools and universities. Both Luther and Melanchthon assigned the duty of organizing the new education system, as well as of protecting the new Church, to the rulers and territorial authorities, a duty which the latter were not reluctant to accept because they saw in it an additional means of extending their power in the perspective of creating the early absolutist State (Rupp, 1994, p. 36 f.). As a reflection of these early arrangements, the German schools system remained, even into the present century, a *res mixta*, somewhere between a Church and a State institution. This meant that the various sets of rules governing the Church in the sixteenth and following centuries always affected the schools as well. Melanchthon's organizational plans for the higher schools also aroused the interest of many local rulers and city magistrates, who hoped that well-ordered higher education would provide them with competent administrators, as well as preachers well trained in theology. Latin continued to be the main teaching language in these schools. Melanchthon was also concerned with having the contents of teaching concentrated upon essentials, thus reducing 'diversity' and achieving the exclusion of a good deal of superfluous matter.

Lastly, mention should be made of the structuring principle he introduced in his grammar schools, whereby students were divided into three groups according to their level of knowledge, a system which aimed at—and achieved—greater efficiency in teaching. The three-class grammar school outlined in article 18 of his *Instruction of visitors* (1538) thus became a model for the upper school for several generations. Not a few rulers of cities and principalities sought Melanchthon's advice in the ordering of their upper schools, and some of them hoped to lure him away from Wittenberg and into their own service—but without success (Stupperich 1960, p. 51). Although Melanchthon's authorship of many school statutes of the period has not as yet been clearly established, clear traces of his influence can be found in the statutes of the schools of such cities as Nuremberg and Eisleben (Stempel, 1979). His influence was equally lasting in the sphere of the reform of German universities, where again his advice was always most welcome. This is true, for example, of the universities of Tübingen, Frankfurt on the Oder, Leipzig and Heidelberg.

## **An effective figure of the sixteenth century**

When Melanchthon died at Wittenberg on 19 April 1560, feeling persecuted, as he was to put it near the end of his life, by the *rabies theologorum*, the theologians' fury, because of the arguments about the correct interpretation of Luther's theology that were raging within Protestantism, he could look back on a richly fulfilled life. The historical role of his life's work was in part assured by his skill in gathering around him friends and pupils who would carry on that work in the same spirit after his demise. The most important factor in this respect, besides his successful activities as a Professor at Wittenberg University and his far-ranging correspondence with most of the leading personalities of his time, was no doubt the *schola domestica* he established in his home, where selected students, many of them from outside Germany, lived and studied in the midst of Melanchthon's own family. From Wittenberg, frequently as a result of arrangements made by him in response to requests received from the

outside, his students and pupils went out to all parts of Germany, and indeed beyond the confines of the Holy Roman Empire, as preachers, visitors, school rectors, influential administrators, university lecturers, etc., continuing to work in his spirit and spreading their master's and Praeceptor's fame far and wide. We may surely echo, without fear of exaggeration, Robert Stupperich's comment on Melanchthon's historical significance (Stupperich, 1981, p. 324): 'He was one of the sixteenth century's most effective figures.'

## Notes

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2. A profile of Erasmus from an educational perspective can be found in: Thinkers on education—1, *Prospects* (Paris, UNESCO), vol. XXIII, nos. 85-86, 1993, p. 333-52.

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