Melanchthon as Educator and Humanist
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Melanchthon the Confessor
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By CARL S. MEYER

MELANCHTHON, it seems, lacked a sense of humor. Tactful, careful, intent on weighing the pros and cons of each question, working all day even on Sunday, grubbing and grinding, this was Melanchthon according to Martin Luther, who had ample opportunity to observe his friend and colleague. These were his candid observations; some were made in admiration. Melanchthon sounds to us like a prissy scholar intent on teaching, research, and publication. Yet he has been hailed as praeceptor Germaniae, and in recognition of the 400th anniversary of his birth (Feb. 16, 1897) a monograph was published, Philipp Melanchthon, Deutschlands Lehrer.

Can we speak of Melanchthon as humanist and educator? He was both. His humanism, moreover, conditioned his educational theories. As humanist he perpetuated "the medieval ideal of true religion rooted in sound learning." 3

Melanchthon is par excellence the evangelical, Lutheran humanist, as Franz Lau calls him, whose humanistic influence pervades Lutheranism to the present day. 4

Bainton calls humanism "a wanderer between the camps" 5 of Romanism and Lutheranism. Perhaps it should be regarded as a bond between Romanists and Lutherans and between Calvinists and Lutherans, a common devotion to bonae litterae. Melanchthon was the tie; his reputation was universal, equal to, if not greater than, that of Erasmus. 6

Erasmus and Melanchthon remained close friends; Manschreck's judgment that Erasmus' controversy with Luther extinguished "the spark of friendship" between the two is too harsh, although the earlier freedom between them was now gone. 7


6 Already in 1518 Reuchlin found only Erasmus surpassing the twenty-one year old Melanchthon. Corpus Reformatorum, ed. C. G. Bretschneider (Halle, Saxony: C. A. Schwetscke and Son, 1834 ff.), I, 34, No. 17. Hereafter cited as C. R.


Melanchthon's letter to Erasmus, Sept. 30, 1524, is full of warmth. Preserved Smith and

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2 Ferdinand Cohrs, Philipp Melanchthon, Deutschlands Lehrer (Halle: Verein für Reformationsgeschichte, 1897).

3 Karl Hartfelder, Philipp Melanchthon in Præcepto Germaniae (Berlin, 1889).

4 Hill regards Melanchthon as "one of the greatest religious geniuses in the history of the Christian Church since the days of St. Augustine." Charles L. Hill, The Loci Communes of Philip Melanchthon. (Boston: Meador Publishing Co., 1944), p. 32.


6 Melanchthon's letter to Erasmus, Sept. 30, 1524, is full of warmth. Preserved Smith and
Erasmus in 1528 addressed Melanchthon as

doctissimus et eruditissimus vir. 8 Guil­

laume Postel, altogether differing with Me­

lanchthon on the papacy, tried very hard to

reconcile his views with those of the Lu­

theran humanist. 9 Jacopo Sadoleto, human­

ist, papal secretary, bishop of Carpentras,

and cardinal, wrote him, supposing that

personal contact might be established for

the reunion of Western Christendom. 10

Melanchthon was held in high regard in

England, in the England both of Henry

VIII and of Edward VI, as humanist,

scholar, educator, theologian. In the 1520s

William Paget lectured on Melanchthon at

Cambridge’s Trinity Hall. 11 It was at Cam­

bridge in 1524, it is true, that Hugh Lat­

imer, in partial fulfillment for the require­

ments for his B.D. degree, delivered an

oration against Magister Philippus, or as

he put it, "... when I should be made

bachelor of divinity, my whole oration

went against Philip Melanchthon and

against his opinions." 12 By 1533, it can be

noted, rumors were rife in the court circles

—these were the days when Henry was
dissolving his bonds with Rome and with

Catherine of Aragon—that Philip Melan­

chthon had come to England. 13 In fact,

he had been seen by a friend of the Vene­
tian ambassador—so the ambassador said. 14

These rumors confirm, for the present

purposes, the great reputation of the

learned Lutheran in England. In the cur­
riculum reorganization at Cambridge in

1535 by royal injunctions, both Aristotle

and Melanchthon were listed as prescribed

authors (i.e., required reading). 15 In the

dispute at Cambridge regarding the proper

pronunciation of Greek, Melanchthon and

Reuchlin were cited in favor of the current

Byzantine pronunciation. 16 Roger Ascham,

the English educator and humanist, in a

letter to John Sturm, the humanist and

educator of Strassburg, laments the death of

Charles M. Jacobs, eds., Luther’s Correspond­
ence and Other Contemporary Letters, 1521—30
(Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society,
1918), II, 253—255, ep. 637.

In a letter to Joachim Camerarius, April 11,
1526, Melanchthon calls Erasmus a "viper" be­
cause of his bitter attack in the Hyperaspites.
Ibid., II, 370, ep. 730. By Oct. 21, 1527, he
was advising Luther not to use "bitter words"
in his answer to Erasmus. Ibid., II, 415, ep.
775.

8 Otto Clemen, "Briefe aus der Reformat­
sionszeit," Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte,
XXXI (1910), 88, No. 4.


14 Ven. Cal., IV (1527—33), no. 858, p. 383. See also the letter of Chapuys to Charles V, Span. Cal., IV, ii (1531—33), no. 1053, p. 610. Both letters were written on Feb. 23, 1533; both reported that Melanchthon was in England.

15 Porter, p. 50.

the most learned Melanchthon. William Turner, another Englishman, speaks of him as one of the most erudite men and one of the best expositors of the Scriptures in all Europe. Thomas Cranmer addressed him as "most learned Melanchthon." Melanchthon, he believed, had to be included in a gathering of "pious and learned men" or "wise and godly men" (note the humanistic coupling of concepts), those "who excel others in erudition and judgment." Also to be included was John Calvin. Calvin, too, humanist and theologian, according to Theodore Beza in his "Life of Calvin," numbered Melanchthon with Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr among his "dearest friends."

I have stressed this aspect of Melanchthon as a "bridge" between Lutherans and Romanists and between Lutherans and Reformed because Christian humanism had an ethical and an aesthetic content rather than an exclusively theological one. Mason, in a survey of English humanism, remarks: The Humanists' duty was rather to remind people like himself of what the demands of faith and reason were: namely, to condemn if not to remedy the social abuses of Christianity in Christendom: to promote a longing for a better order: to prevent oblivion of the standards: to keep continuity with the primitive teaching of the early Church.

Christian humanism involves more than studia humanitatis et litterarum—to use Cicero's phrase—or "the perfection that poetry, painting, and writing is now brought unto"—to employ a clause of Machiavelli—or a crass imitation of the Greeks and Romans. It includes a return to the sources, ad fontes. Erasmus, the


"O PHILIP MELANCHTHON! for I appeal to thee who art living in the presence of beatific rest: Thou hast said a hundred times, when, weary with labour and oppressed with sadness, thou didst lay thy head familiarly on my bosom, Would, would that I could die on this bosom! Since then, I have wished a thousand times that it had been our lot to be together! Certainly, thou hast been reader to maintain contests, and stronger to despise obloquy, and set at nought false accusation."


prince of the Christian humanists, said: "My whole purpose in life has always been twofold: to stimulate others to cultivate bonae litterae and to bring the study of bonae litterae into harmony with theology." 24 Juan Vives, in the preface of his De disciplinis, has one of the best expositions of the task of the Christian humanist. A training in Greek and Latin, a knowledge of classical authorities purged of impiety and illumined with Christian "daylight," a pursuit of rational inquiry, these—the Christian frame of reference seemed self-evident—were his goals. 25 A Ratio discendi by Philip Melanchthon of 1522 recommended the study of the humanities under religious auspices; the languages, he said, were necessary for the Gospel. 26 Melanchthon was in full agreement with Sir (or Saint) Thomas More, that belles-lettres taught in good schools made for the complete person and made for the civilized state. 27 He, therefore, congratulated students of theology (in the preface to Luther's Operationes in psalmos in 1519) on the scholarship of that day, a day in which Erasmus, Reuchlin, Capito, Oecolampadius, and Carlstadt were luminaries. He asked them to bring pure minds to it, that is, to lay aside "all human prejudices; in short, to read Christ's book under Christ's guidance." 28 With the ethical and esthetic appreciation of good letters, Melanchthon combined a keen appreciation of art, at least to judge from his comments on Dürer's works. 29

Letters and grammar and rhetoric and Aristotle for the sake of the Gospel—this sums up the educational philosophy of Philip Melanchthon, humanist and educator. He wrote a refutation of Pico della Mirandola's argument that philosophy is superior to rhetoric, arguing that wisdom must be transmitted, not merely contemplated. 30 Wisdom is the revelation of God in the Word of God, that is, in the Incarnation and in the Scriptures. "For wisdom," Melanchthon continues, "is not only the Word of God revealed in the creation, in the salvation of man in the Church, but also the Law and the Gospel." This wisdom...
conforms to the wisdom and will of God. Sapientia carnalis and sapientia rationis are not enough to insure man's well-being.

In an autographed inscription of a Bible (1542) Melanchthon emphasized:

We should not regard this command as insignificant, to learn, read, and consider with great earnestness the Word of God revealed by the prophets and Apostles. For without this Word the human heart is full of blindness and falls miserably into the devil's snare and error and sin. May God preserve us therefrom.

In a letter to the mayor and council of Halle in Saxony (1544) Melanchthon pleaded that the salaries of schoolteachers be not reduced. Such a reduction would mean a downgrading of the teaching profession, he said. All are obligated to support Christian instruction in school and church, especially the magistrates. The older generation is living for the sake of the younger generation. Its first concern must be to teach the youth correct doctrine and the knowledge of God, "dass die jugend zu rechter lahr und erkentnuss gottes aufgezogen werde." God, he argued, revealed His hidden will about Christ and the forgiveness of sins in a book, "dass sol man lesen, hören und lernen." The study of the Christian religion is eminently necessary. Not only universities but also grammar schools must be maintained; hence, to reduce the salaries of school teachers would harm the Gospel.

Luther had emphasized that the study of plants and animals and minerals and geography and history aided the understanding of the Bible. Melanchthon, Karl Holl reminds us, embodied this insight into the Wittenberg Statutes and oriented the pretheological studies in the college of liberal arts toward this goal.

Melanchthon's greatest service to education came in 1528. Only the year before, according to Pelikan, Melanchthon had returned to his humanistic concerns. This statement, however, is not quite accurate, for Melanchthon did not lose his humanism in the period between 1521 and 1527, as Melanchthon's Latin preface to the translation of Luther's Weckruf of 1524 makes evident. However, the "Unterricht der Visitatorn an die Pfarhern ym Kur-

32 Rice, pp. 139f.
furstenthum zu Sachsen" is his greatest single contribution to education.

In the plan for the organization of schools he proposed the establishment of schools to meet the needs of the church and the state. It is not enough for a preacher that he is able to speak German, he said. Whoever must teach others, must himself be well taught. Not material gain but the command of God should motivate parents to send their children to school. "Warumb thun wir Gott nicht die ehre, das wir vmb seines befehls willen lernen?" God has promised those priests who teach correctly ("die recht leren") that He will not forget them. Other vocations are richly rewarded by God. Because there are many abuses in the schools, Melanchthon said, he set forth these instructions.

For one thing he would confine the instruction in the languages on this level to Latin—not German or Greek or Hebrew. Again, he said, the children ought not to be burdened with too many books. Thirdly, it is necessary to divide the children into divisions.

The first division—we shall use the English word "form" for "hauffen" instead of "class" or "grade"—has as its function to teach the children to read. They should learn to read their reading manuals, the alphabet, the Prayer of our Lord, the Creed, and other prayers. Donatus, the standard grammar for centuries, is to be the chief textbook. Cato is to be expounded daily, a verse or two a day, so that the children acquire a vocabulary. Slow learners should go through Donatus and Cato twice. Besides learning to read, the children are also to learn to write. They should also learn to sing. Above all they must acquire an ample Latin vocabulary.

The second form—or division—was devoted to grammar. The fables of Aesop, the Paedologia of Mosellanus, the colloquies of Erasmus, Terence, and Plautus ("etliche fabulas Plauti die rein sind") were required reading. The function of this form was to teach grammar. "Es sollen auch die kinder solche regulas grammatici auswendig auff sagen, das sie gedrungnen und getrieben werden die Grammatica wol zu lernen." What about religion? Some teachers, Melanchthon complained, taught nothing out of the Scriptures; some taught nothing but the Scriptures. The pupils must learn the foundations of a Christian and pious life. The Prayer of our Lord, the Creed, and the Decalog should be recited regularly. The schoolmaster should explain them carefully to the boys in this form. He should also teach them some of the psalms, easy psalms (in Latin, of course) in which are contained summaries of the Christian life, in other words, those that teach about the fear of God, faith, and good works. Ps. 111, Ps. 34, Ps. 128, Ps. 125, Ps. 127.


89 The Paedologia of the Leipzig humanist Peter Schade (Mosellanus) was a popular book of Latin exercises; it was published in 1518. See Stupperich, ed., I, 268 n.
Ps. 133, are listed. The Gospel According to St. Matthew, the two letters of Paul to Timothy, the First Epistle of St. John, and the Proverbs of Solomon should be taught, but not Isaiah, Romans, the Gospel According to St. John, or other difficult books of the Bible.

Melanchthon spelled out the curriculum. The details of the course of study, however, down to a listing of the textbooks, should not obscure the philosophy of Christian humanism that was basic to Melanchthon's educational program.

Melanchthon did not even shrink from the details of school management. These details—the administrative mind is concerned about class schedules—are illustrative, however, not only of the day-by-day routine of the second form but also of the philosophy of Christian humanism in action. Not all the details will be noted. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that an hour was set aside on five days a week for a divine service, and on five days a week an hour was devoted to music. The Holy Gospel for the coming day was studied on each Saturday morning. The school day began at 5:30 A.M. during the summer and ended at 4:00 P.M.; during the winter the day began at 6:30 A.M. No classes were held on Wednesday afternoons; they were held on Saturday afternoons.

The third form—the boys in this form were required, too, to speak Latin; the teachers, too, so far as possible, were to do all of their instructing in Latin—I take it that the "so viel möglich" means in so far as it is possible for the students to follow the Latin and not in so far as the teachers were able to use the Latin.

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The third form—the boys in this form were subject to the same rigorous routine—continued the study of etymology, syntax, and prosody taught in the second form. To this were added the writing of Latin verse ("Metricam"), dialectic, and rhetoric. Vergil, Ovid, and Cicero were required reading in this form. The boys in the third form were required, too, to speak Latin; the teachers, too, so far as possible, were to do all of their instructing in Latin—I take it that the "so viel möglich" means in so far as it is possible for the students to follow the Latin and not in so far as the teachers were able to use the Latin.

This does not tell the complete story of Melanchthon as humanist and educator. It does not tell about the textbooks he wrote and edited. Let me give only one example here. The English humanist, Thomas Linacre, wrote his De emendata structura Latini sermonis in 1524. The book gives the rules of Latin grammar and illustrates each rule, usually with a quotation from Cicero. Melanchthon edited one of the eight editions of this work that was printed on the Continent, an edition published in 1531. We are told of Melanchthon:

He wrote textbooks on Latin and Greek Grammar, Dialectic, Rhetoric, Psychology, Physics, Ethics, History, and Religion. From 1518 to 1544 his Greek Grammar passed through seventeen editions, and from 1545 to 1622, twenty-six editions were published. Fifty-one editions of his Latin Grammar were published from 1525 to 1737, and to the year 1737 it was used in all the Saxon schools. His Elements of Rhetoric and Dialectic passed through numerous editions and reprints. Several of his textbooks were long used in Roman Catholic schools.

Again this does not tell of the correspondence that he had with the humanists and teachers of his day and, what is even

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40 Cohrs, p. 55, drew up the schedule in table form.
42 Richards, p. 136.

See C. R., XX, for rescripts of his Greek and Latin grammar, rhetoric, historical and geographical writings. Volumes XVI to XIX contain his introductions and notes to classical authors he treated during his university career.
more significant, of the correspondence he had with magistrates and officials of 50 or more towns regarding their schools. Constantly he urged the necessity of promoting learning, *studia literarum*. His life calling was to teach. God had appointed him to instruct the youth, therefore he said, when he writes to the council of Halle, for instance, about school matters. His recommendations of candidates for various openings in the schools of Germany were in terms of their fitness for the position, their learning, and their piety. Also here Melanchthon was the Christian humanist and educator. He delivered various orations or declarations on educational topics. In 1517 at Tuebingen he orated *De artibus liberalibus*. On Aug. 29, 1518, his inaugural address at Wittenberg dealt with *De corrigendis adolescentiae studiis*. In 1520 he unburdened himself of an *Adhortio ad christiam doctrinae, per Paulum prodita, studium*, and in the following year *De studiis theologicis*. An *Encomium eloquentiae* in 1523, an *Oratio in laudem novae scholae* in Nuernberg in 1526, an *Oratio de miseris paedagogorum, his De dialectica* of 1528, and especially his *De studiis adolescentum* [1529?], all ought to be included in the present study. The variety of the topics he treated can be seen from the following titles: *De ordine discendi* (1531), *De gradibus in theologia* (1533), *De studio linguarum* (1533), *De laude vitae scholasticae* (1536), *De dignitate studiorum theologorum* (1537), *De utilitate studiorum eloquentiae* (1538), and *De restitutionis scholis* (1540). There are others, but these make a list that is impressive enough.

Whatever his failings may have been as a theologian, or as a teacher (his lack of a sense of humor, for instance), or as a humanist, Melanchthon deserves our tribute in this 400th anniversary year of his death as the pre-eminent humanist and educator of the 16th century.

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44 So in a letter to the mayor and council of Halle in Saxony, Wittenberg, May 6, 1544. See n. 34 above.
46 C. R., XI, 5—14, no. 1.
47 C. R., XI, 15—24, no. 2.
48 C. R., XI, 34—41, No. 4.
49 C. R., XI, 41—50, no. 5.
52 C. R., XI, 122—150, no. 15.
54 C. R., XI, 182—191, no. 22.
56 C. R., XI, 227—231, no. 50.
57 C. R., XI, 231—239, no. 51.
59 C. R., XI, 324—329, no. 44.
60 C. R., XI, 364—373, no. 50.

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