

Martin Luther's Contribution to the Cause of Universal Education

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As an embodiment of the great changes that occurred in human development at the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the modern, Martin Luther was a complex and sometimes contradictory representative of both the forces of change and conservation. The objective of this paper is the investigation of Luther's role in the history of the change from the education of the elite to the education of Everyman.

Any attempt to accomplish this purpose necessitates a discussion of the school systems in Europe prior to the Reformation, especially those in Germany. A second necessary consideration is Luther's own educational experience and the influences that led him to advocate more universal education. A third area for examination is Luther's writings and efforts concerning who should be educated. Two subordinate themes are developed: the role of Humanism in influencing Luther's view, and the role of the religious reformation in the decline of the schools, along with Luther's efforts to save them. Finally, consideration is given to the immediate impact of Luther's writings upon German education, and upon the cause of universal education.

PRE-REFORMATION VIEWS AND PRACTICES IN EDUCATION

During a large portion of the medieval period, the primary method of obtaining an education was attendance at a monastic school, possibly followed by attendance at one of the universities which developed during the period. With the growth of towns during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, there developed “. . . a demand for a somewhat broader curriculum, a demand which was met by the cathedral

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schools.”¹ These schools were oriented toward the professions, including the ministry, but were not exclusively theological. Another type developing during the middle ages was the chantry school, which resembled the cathedral school in curriculum, but differed in method of financing and size.

Chantry foundations were income-producing property granted by an individual to support a priest in return for prayers and masses for the souls of the grantor and his family. The chantry priest's duties occupied but little of his time, and it became customary to stipulate that he should teach the children of the community.²

The last type of school to be developed during the medieval period was the guild school, resembling in some ways the chantry school. Guilds often hired priests to care for the spiritual needs of members at marriages and funerals, and in times of sickness. Like the chantry priest, the guild priest spent his spare time teaching the children of guild members. Some chantry and guild schools evolved into new forms as urban culture developed and municipal governments became more independent of the church. Some schools also came to have lay teachers as a consequence of municipal or secular control.

Economic conditions and the rise of Humanism also influenced the educational situation prior to Luther's time. In Germany, as in other European countries, the age of discovery had greatly increased trade, causing an influx of gold and a consequent rise in the spirit of materialism. This change has been summarized in the following manner:

If a youth were not destined for the church or for one of the learned professions—theology, law, or medicine—why should he waste his time in acquiring an education which had no direct relationship to the world of trade and industry? Let him rather learn a trade at an early age and thus assure his livelihood.³

The rise of Humanism also made an impression in Germany and the Low Countries. A lay religious order, the Brethren of the Common Life, had

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1. Walther I. Brandt (ed.), *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), XLV, 341.
 2. *Ibid.*
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

previously founded a large number of schools that offered a curriculum including the Latin classics. In Germany, these evolved into the *Trivialschule* which nearly every Humanist attended. The humanistic movement was greatly influenced by the emphasis on the *trivium*, which included Latin grammar, logic and rhetoric.⁴ Schwiebert says,

This training was considered essential for all students who were seeking an advanced education. As was common practice, this school was divided into three Haufen, or groups. First there were the Tabulisten, or beginners, who learned the ABC's of Latin, which was largely a memorization of elementary forms and the contents of the *Fibel*, or Latin primer The second group, often called the Donatisten, was so named after the *Donat*, a medieval Latin textbook. The *Donat* was published with a German interlinear, making possible the study of grammar by the direct method. The study of the Latin language in this division became much more formal Thus, by about the completion of the sixth grade, the student was quite familiar with most parts of the Catholic church service and had mastered the elementary grammar of the Latin language. . . . The upper division group was known as the *Alexandristen*, named after a textbook by Alexander de Ville Dieu, in which the student was given more advanced Latin grammar and syntax. It also had a German introduction and made ample use of this native language in the explanations. These students also began to use a Latin-German dictionary. Obviously, the student who had finished good *Trivialschule*, such as the one at Mansfield [where Luther attended], was ready to attend the University, where all assignments were made and delivered in Latin.⁵

Practice varied, but in some locations there were schools set up to study the *quadrivium*: music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. These were either intermediate schools, or else were part of the *Trivialschule*.

The humanistic emphasis combined with the effect of the Reformation, which will be discussed, actually tended to depress education. The educational program of the Humanists, while creating the well-

4. *Ibid.*

5. Ernest George Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 111-112.

educated man, tended to be remote from the interests and materialistic motives of the common man. Thus, just prior to the Reformation there was an alienation of education from the practical pursuits of the masses. A result was the rise of the "vernacular schools," which were devoted to reading and writing German alone for business purposes. Both Luther and the Humanists bitterly opposed these schools. The materialism and the Humanism of the age did not create, then, an especially auspicious situation for the advent of the Lutherans.

LUTHER'S OWN EDUCATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON HIS PERSPECTIVE

While the exact date when Luther began his formal education is unknown, he was apparently quite young. The normal age was seven, but some scholars suggest that Luther entered in 1488 when he was about four and a half.⁶ Luther was apparently unhappy in school, and it may be that the instructors and methods were less than desirable, although opinion varies. Corporal punishment probably played nearly as large a role as Luther described, although he may have been exaggerating later in life to make a point.⁷

Luther seems to have had his own intellectual talents awakened in the school at Eisenach by the outstanding principal, Trebonius. Luther was first exposed to Humanism and its methods while there.⁸

At seventeen Luther entered the University of Erfurt, which was one of the best of his day. As McGiffert points out, "The new humanism, with its devotion to classical learning, was making rapid headway and was disputing for supremacy with the dominant scholasticism of the age."⁹ Philosophy, the classics and logic composed the core of the curriculum. This classical Humanism was the dominant influence upon Luther's later educational ideas.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

7. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *Martin Luther; The Man and His Work* (New York: The Century Company, 1919), p. 9.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

9. *Ibid.*

LUTHER'S VIEWPOINT CONCERNING WHO SHOULD BE EDUCATED

The Influence of Humanism on Luther's View. The humanistic movement emphasized the value of ancient languages. Luther adopted this high view of languages, especially arguing their importance for the study and exposition of the Bible. He also claimed value for them in the training of good citizens and leaders.

Every community, and especially a great city, must have in it many kinds of people besides merchants. It must have people who can do more than simply add, subtract and read German. German books are made primarily for the common man to read at home. But for preaching, governing, and administering justice, in both spiritual and worldly estates, all the learning and languages in the world are too little, to say nothing of German alone. This is particularly true in our own day, when we have to do with more than just the neighbor next door.¹⁰

While Luther advocated the study of the Bible by everyone who was able to obtain a copy, neither of the above statements (concerning the value of language for Bible study and for service in the secular state) forces the conclusion that Luther was advocating universal education, especially in the languages. Advocacy of universal education cannot be founded on these statements alone, or the influence of Humanism alone; rather, a more definite statement must be sought.

While Luther was indebted to the Humanists and their emphasis upon the reform of educational ideals, he actually pressed beyond them. The Humanists advocated reform of teaching methods and occasionally even the reform of morals and religion,¹¹ points at which they were united with Luther. However, the Humanists and Luther separated over a variety of points, one of which was Luther's desire to add history, literature and Christian training to the curriculum.

The Impact of the Reformation on Education and Luther's Reaction. Luther made some rather contradictory statements over the length of his career. Consequently, he was quoted by both sides of the

10. Robert C. Schultz (ed.), *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), XLVI, 215.

11. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

educational spectrum in the German school controversy. Following the initial stages of the Reformation, a great variety of sects developed which were inimical to the cause of education. One such group was the Bohemian Brethren (whom Luther called Waldensian), probably influenced by the more radical Taborites.¹² Luther felt constrained to answer their arguments eventually.

The attack upon education did not come only from such peripheral groups, but also from some of Luther's own followers who took their leader too seriously. Some of the Reformers reasoned that if the doctrines and practices of the Church at Rome were erroneous and inimical to salvation, then parents should not send their children to schools which taught these doctrines. Following this same reasoning, at least publicly, some nobles and municipal authorities siezed, in the name of the Reformation, the endowments by which the schools were supported. More likely they were motivated by greed. Such aberrations were not surprising, for while Luther consistently advocated the right kind of schools, he also attacked the existing schools heavily in the period from 1520 to 1523.

He referred to the monastic and cathedral schools as "devil's training centers," and stigmatized their textbooks as "asses' dung." He went so far as to say that rather than send a boy to such a school he would prefer that he received no schooling at all.¹³

Even the doctrine that every man was his own priest, and was thus able to communicate with God directly, led to difficulties. Some reformers assumed that this meant no formal education was necessary for the priesthood. Since God through the Holy Spirit could speak to a man directly, the "inner word" was independent of formal education. Andrew Karlstadt and Thomas M nzer opposed all learning as sinful.

Small wonder that schools and education declined sharply in the areas where these ideas penetrated. At Wittenberg, where Karlstadt dominated the scene during Luther's enforced exile at Wartburg, attendance at the University fell off markedly, to be restored later through the combined efforts of Luther and Bugenhagen. Matters

12. Brandt, *op. cit.*, p. 365 n.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

were still worse at Erfurt, where the activities of a small group of the Karlstadt-Münzer persuasion were instrumental in reducing the university enrollment to less than fifty students.¹⁴

All the activity undermining education caused Luther much concern, and did not coincide with his own respect for learning. He felt compelled by 1523 to begin speaking more strongly for a new educational system. He wrote, accordingly, to Eoban Hess the Humanist,

Do not be troubled by the notion that letters will be overthrown by our theology and we Germans become more barbarous than ever. Some people fear where there is no fear. Without the knowledge of letters, pure theology, I am persuaded, will in the future be unable to flourish, as in the past it has most miserably fallen and lain in ruins whenever literature has declined. Never, I can see, has there been a signal revelation of the word of God unless, as by a John the Baptist, the way was prepared for it by a revival of languages and letters. No youthful crime would I decry more than the failure to study poetry and rhetoric. It is my earnest desire that there be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, for by these studies, I perceive, as by no other means men are made apt for undertaking and skilfully pursuing sacred employments.¹⁵

In February of 1524 Luther expressed his concern over the effects of materialism in the pamphlet *To the Councilmen of All German Cities*, as Schwiebert states:

In this document the Reformer sought to shake the indifferent German parents from their lethargy toward higher learning. Since monastic education no longer offered an easy retreat for the youth and the lucrative church positions were not a part of the new Lutheran system, Luther feared that the phlegmatic German might conclude that there was no longer a need for higher education.¹⁶

In this same leaflet he advocated the erection of public schools and public libraries. Although his primary interest was religious reformation, he argued the advantages of education to the state in the following terms:

14. *Ibid.*, p. 343.

15. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-269.

16. Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

Even if we had no souls, and schools and languages were not needed for God's sake and the Bible's, there would still be ground enough for establishing the best possible schools for both boys and girls, for the world needs fine and capable men and women to conduct its affairs, that men may rule land and people wisely and the women keep house and train their children and servants as they should.¹⁷

Luther continued his campaign in 1525 in the "First Preface" to *Walther's Hymn Book*, saying,

I do not hold the opinion that all the arts are to be completely discarded through the Gospel, as some super-spiritual people would have it; but I would like to see all arts, especially music, placed in the service of Him who has given and created them.¹⁸

In that year he also advocated an educational survey which was carried out in 1527 in Saxony and several other states, pointing out the tragic need for schools. Again in 1529 in the preface to Justus Menius' *Book on Christian Housekeeping* Luther says,

And nowadays no one wants to educate children in any other way but for cleverness and ways of making a living; they simply have no other thought but that they are free and that it rests with them to train children as they please; just as though there were no God who had commanded them differently, but they themselves are God and lords over their children. But if there were a strong well-ordered government in the world, and such pernicious, wicked people were found as would refuse to change for the better and to educate their children differently, then the government ought to punish such people altogether in body and goods, or chase them out of the world. For such people are the most poisonous and harmful people on earth.¹⁹

In this passage we see some of the bitter invective for which Luther was famous. Also noticeable is the beginning of the attitude that

17. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-270.

18. P. E. Kretzmann, *Luther on Education in the Christian Home and School* (Burlington, Iowa: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1940), p. 85.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

Luther later developed more extensively, namely that the government would have to intervene where private individuals would not assume their responsibilities in education. By 1530 he had developed the view that it was

. . . the duty of the temporal authority to compel its subjects to keep their children in school If the government can compel such of its subjects as are fit for military service to carry pike and musket, man the ramparts, and do other kinds of work in time of war, how much more can it and should it compel its subjects to keep their children in school.²⁰

Thus, in these passages may be seen the eventually complete development of Luther's thought about education, and his justification for it. According to his developed views there are two reasons men ought to be educated: to serve God and the Church as worthy Christians, and to serve the state as worthy citizens. The developing realization may also be seen that parents were not going to do as Luther wished, and thus municipal authorities would have to intervene and found public schools.

In this period Luther began to move from a more restricted view toward universal male education, as becomes more apparent in the *Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School*. In that volume he advocated the study of Latin even for the boy who intended to learn a trade, for from the church's point of view " . . . you will have him in reserve, to labor as a pastor in case of need; and such knowledge will not interfere with his gaining a livelihood and will enable him to govern his house all the better."²¹ This last point might be questioned, and yet it contributed to the support of more universal education. In the same sermon Luther advocated education for all on the basis that so many more books were available that it would be a waste and a "shameful thing" if they were not used.²² That Luther was intending to move toward universal education is evidenced by the fact that he thought provision ought to be made for both the poor and the slow learning children. He said in the same sermon,

Such promising children should be instructed, especially the children of the poor; for this purpose the revenues of endowments and monasteries were provided. But also the

20. Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

21. Kretzmann, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

22. *Ibid.*

boys that are less promising should learn at least to understand, read and write Latin. For we need not only learned doctors and masters in the Scriptures, but also ordinary pastors, who may teach the Gospel and the Catechism to the young and ignorant, baptize, administer the Lord's supper, etc. If they are not capable of contending with heretics, it does not matter. For in a good building we need both large and small timber; and in like manner we must have sextons and others to aid the minister and further the Word of God.²³

By 1530 there existed yet another extension of Luther's position of true universal education: He included girls. In that year he published a pamphlet entitled *That Children Should Be Kept in School*, in which he included a statement in support of compulsory education. With this new emphasis he restated the obligation of the wealthy to provide scholarships for the support of indigent students of promise.²⁴

Considering the writings of these seven years as a whole, one may see that Luther resorted to every weapon he could find in a war to support education for the people. He argued that "old people" live only to "care for, teach, and bring up the young."²⁵ He spoke of the advantages of travel and trade in foreign lands, company with scholars, and the joy of study. He warned of the possibility of incompetents assisting at court. He emphasized the sinfulness of neglect:

It is indeed a sin and a shame that we must be aroused and incited to the duty of educating our children and of considering their highest interests, whereas nature itself should move us thereto, and the example of the heathen affords us varied instruction.²⁶

This statement was certainly not calculated to offend the Humanist. Luther did seek a slightly more practical education, pressing for history, mathematics and music, and less of the philosophy of the past.²⁷ While most of the discussion was directed at the elementary level of education, Luther did not neglect the role of the university. However, he

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

24. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

25. Kretzmann, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

26. *Ibid.*

27. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

regarded the university as a place for advanced study and advanced students, and thus of small concern in the struggle for universal education.

Perhaps the best brief summary of Luther's completed position, civil and religious, appears in the *Large Catechism* on the "Fourth Commandment":

For if we wish to have excellent and apt persons both for civil and ecclesiastical government, we must spare no diligence, time or cost in teaching and educating our children, that they may serve God and the world, and we must not think only of how we may amass money and possessions for them. For God can indeed without us support and make them rich, as He daily does. But for this purpose He has given us children, and issued this command that we should train and govern them according to His will, else He would have no need of father and mother. Let everyone know therefore, that it is his duty, on peril of losing divine favor, to bring up his children above all things in the fear and knowledge of God, and if they be talented, have them learn and study something, that they may be employed for whatever need there is to have them instructed and trained in a liberal education, that man may be able to have their aid in government and in whatever is necessary.²⁸

THE IMMEDIATE AND CONTINUING IMPACT OF LUTHER'S IDEOLOGY

Luther was well read in the Roman works on education, especially in Cicero, Quintilian and Verro. He was aware of the importance of understanding in true learning. He was aware of the economics of education in his day. It must be concluded that his grasp of the breadth of educational ideas prior to his day (especially Roman) and in his day (especially humanistic) led to the wide influence that his ideas enjoyed. McGiffert concludes that,

In much of this he was laying foundations upon which our modern educational systems are built in no small part. In spite of his break with humanism and his primary

28. Kretzmann, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

interest in religious reform, he rendered incalculable services to the cause of popular and secular education.²⁹

Changes came in Germany immediately. Following the publication of *To the Councilmen of All the German Cities* in 1524, Magdeburg (under Nicholas Amsdorf), Nordhausen, Halberstadt, and Gotha took steps to establish public schools. Eisleben (under Melancthon) and Nürnberg followed in 1525 and 1526.³⁰ Bugenhagen helped establish over forty schools in Brunswick, Luebeck, Hamburg, Bremen, Pomerania, Denmark and Norway.³¹ Steps were also taken in "territorial church orders" to assure the existence of schools in the involved territories. Many small towns founded schools at the insistence of the citizens when the councils hesitated.³² From 1525 to 1560 there was a continuous growth in number and quality of schools through the efforts of Luther, Bugenhagen and Melancthon. After 1560 there was a decline in leadership and quality.³³ There were also adult lecture courses established in a few cities.³⁴ The German "Gymnasium" and "Folkschool" were both rooted in the schools developed in Luther's day.

It must be realized, of course, that several centuries passed before the ideals of universal education and common availability of library facilities were realized.

CONCLUSION

Martin Luther served as a catalytic element in a system ready for change. Prior to his time, a variety of types of schools had evolved, including the monastic, cathedral, chantry, guild and vernacular schools. Luther attended the *Trivialschule* which had greatly influenced the humanistic movement, which in turn influenced Luther. He borrowed the Humanist's emphasis on languages and the need for reform of teaching methods. In reaction to the ideas and effected results of the radical reformers, Luther began a seven-year writing program that culminated in the revival of the

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29. McGiffert, *op. cit.*, pp. 271-272.
 30. Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
 31. Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 678.
 32. Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 216.
 33. Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 677.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 681.

schools. At the same time he developed the concept of universal education. It has been said that “It is to Luther that Germany owes its splendid educational system in its roots and in its inception. For he was the first to plead for a universal education—for an education for the whole people, without regard to class or special life work.”³⁵

35. Frederick Eby, *Early Protestant Educators* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1931), p. 15.