

# **“Esels stele und teuffels schulen” - Luther’s polemics against traditional pedagogy**

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## **1 Introduction**

Through the ages theologians have discussed questions of education and true knowledge and have found Theology and Pedagogy to be related in three major dimensions: First: Church and Theology are connected through several social and pedagogical networks (to use a modern term); second: the Christian church tends to learn and to teach its members in lifelong education; third: the Christian faith creates circumstances of life in which people will be taught and learn.

Although this has been known from the very beginning it seems strange that we will not find many books or articles about the relation of Theology and Pedagogy in the Reformation. Luther’s and Melanchthon’s writings have been published in different versions and some books have been written about their pedagogy. Other authors have concentrated on systematic questions of modern times and have misused the authority of the reformers in contemporary debates. Finally some theses of the last decades have focused on questions of social history and quantitative analysis of schooling and education in the sixteenth century. Even though these books have corrected the theological interpretation they superseded the main interest—the theological and pious reform—of the Wittenberg reformers.

With these problems in mind I will reread and interpret the writings of the Wittenberg reformers dealing with the Reform of University, schools, and familial education. I will examine for the explicit relation between theology and pedagogy and find an answer to the question: Is there a theological foundation for the pedagogical reform in Wittenberg?

Because I cannot discuss my study in all its detail I will present a small part from it dealing with Luther's polemics against the pedagogy of his time. The main source of my presentation is his 1524 published writing "to the magistrates and mayors (aldermen) of all German cities that they shall found schools ..."

## **2 The Situation**

In the third decade of the sixteenth century we observe a decline in the number of pupils and students. Even though we do not know too much about the situation in Wittenberg it seems to be quite similar to other cities and universities in Germany. After the humanistic writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Konrad Wimpina and Eobanus Hessus had given a fresh impetus to the late medieval system of schools and universities, the entire educational system broke down. The socio-economic crisis in the beginning of the sixteenth century may provide one reason for this collapse. Another reason can be the appearance of certain radical reformers who taught more or less an anti-educational and anti-intellectual interpretation of the gospel. The reformation, however, started with strong criticism of scholastic theology and its educational system. But the radical reformers denied totally the necessity of academic training and even the ground level of primary education. During Luther's

absence from Wittenberg the situation became critical: The vernacular-school was closed and the teacher called the parents to take their children from school. The idea was that boys should preferably be trained as craftsmen and farmers. The house of the school was changed into a bakery. It needed the full authority of Luther and the pastor of Wittenberg, Johannes Bugenhagen, to reorganize the school and bring the situation back to the right order.

In this situation Luther wrote to the ruling authorities in the cities to ask for support of the reformation and school reform. He chose these recipients for his tract because he had found the most acceptance in the early years of the reformation there. Most of the city magistrates had founded schools since the middle ages, others had established universities. Students became teachers for the pupils and found jobs in the administration of the cities. Furthermore, the city leaders needed more and more lawyers, doctors and trained people for different duties in an urban setting

### **3 The theological foundation**

Luther starts with three theological arguments for a renewed and stronger commitment to youth education: first, to fight Satan, who strives to destroy God's creation and the renewal of the gospel; second, to retain God's mercy, which the Germans received as the successors of the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans; third, to understand and obey the commandments and the order of creation. In spite of Luther's subsequent emphasis on the responsibilities of secular authorities, these scriptural references should not be ignored: educating the young is not merely a matter of common sense, but also a theological imperative:

*Therefore, I beg all of you, my dear sirs and friends, for the sake of God and our poor young people, not to treat this matter as lightly as many do, who fail to realize what the ruler of this world is up to. For it is a grave and important matter, and one which is of vital concern both to Christ and the world at large, that we take steps to help the youth.*

As teachers and spiritual advisors, theologians have a duty to identify magisterial neglect and to suggest improvements in educational provision.

Luther then merges this joint ecclesiastical—secular responsibility with medieval reform concepts, while distancing himself from a purely secularized overhaul of the system. This duality characterizes the whole of the Wittenberg program.

#### **4 The responsibility of the secular authorities**

Because families and parents for different reasons are all most unable to educate their children properly Luther asks the government to take over this role:

*Since the property, honor, and life of the whole city have been committed to their faithful keeping, they would be remiss in the duty before God and man if they did not seek its welfare and improvement day and night with all the means at their command.*

The welfare of a society depends not only on economic power, military strength and the prosperity of its members. Education of the youth is the most important investment for public welfare and is therefore one of the main duties of the government. Even though Luther distinguishes sharply between the two kingdoms of God—the heavenly kingdom and the kingdom of the world—this is no excuse for the weakness of the ruling authorities. Indeed it is part of the created order from the beginning of the world that human beings take

responsibility in organizing their daily life. Thus one needs to educate people properly to become rulers, administrators, lawyers, writers, merchants and so on. The secular authorities are empowered by God. Thus Luther does not separate the responsibility for education from pious and ecclesiastical obedience but puts them together in a specific relation: On the one hand he stresses the governmental responsibilities, on the other he puts them into the greater context of God's merciful work. Education is not the work of the teacher alone but his work in obedience to God's commandment. The teacher has the responsibility to provide a proper lesson, but the individual success of his pupil's piety depends on God's mercy and grace. Although Luther does not mention his doctrine of justification it is the foundation of his arguments.

## **5 Contents and Goals of evangelical Education**

In contrast to his predecessors, Luther concentrates not only on education for clergy and ecclesiastical jobs but also on the secular goals of education:

Languages and the arts, which can do us no harm, but are actually a greater ornament, profit, glory, and benefit, both for the understanding of Holy Scripture and the conduct of temporal government...

In the same way he argues against a focus on the job relevant aspects of education. Education has its goal in a broad range of knowledge that helps both ecclesiastical and secular interests. Thus he argues for a proper knowledge of the languages: Latin, Greek and Hebrew. And this emphasis has several reasons: first: these languages are a gift of God which should not be underestimated; second: these languages help to defend the pious from the devils work; third: God revealed his wisdom in these languages. Forth: the

spirit is contained in these languages. To understand and follow his advice one needs the proper knowledge of these languages. God's revelation is open only for those who know to read the Bible in its original form and grammar.

As soon as people forget the original voice of the prophecy and the gospel they lost orientation, knowledge, truth and faith. Even the Church fathers—almost an example of true piety and faith—misunderstood the gospel when they tried to translate and interpret it on the basis of translation and Latin versions of the original. They needed other authorities to find a solution to the different interpretations and misleading advice. Thus Luther criticizes sharply the role of Latin interpretations and traditional teaching of the pious which replaced the original evangelical truth:

Hence, it is also a stupid undertaking to attempt to gain an understanding of Scripture by laboring through the commentaries of the fathers and a multitude of books and glosses.

The knowledge of revelation and the truth of God is necessary not only to those who teach and preach in the church but also to those who govern and administer secular aspects. In Luther's understanding there is no hierarchy between ecclesiastical and secular authorities. Luther argues for a trained elite to work and rule both kingdoms of God. Thus he can call for the proper education of girls—a modern aspect in a program otherwise formulated with mostly traditional terms.

## **6 Polemics against contemporary programs of education**

Luther carries out a demarcation from three sides:

a) the traditional school of scholastic influence had been rejected for many reasons, whereas the crucial theological argument, scholasticism's rejection of the gospel, is not mentioned. Obviously the Wittenberg theologian is of the opinion that he had explained this argument sufficiently in earlier texts and therefore could do without it here. Yet it is always behind his discourse. The confusing interpretation of the Book/Sacred Scripture is the devil's main work through which he wants to lure people away from God.

Luther criticizes in more detail the ineffective, pompous and often ridiculous educational system, which he himself had experienced with dismal results. The ecclesiastical schools for him were "ass's places and devil's schools" because they did not conform to the God-given educational order. Jesus' sentence of condemnation from Mt. 18:6f is intended for those, the child eaters and spoilers. However, they continued to oppose linguistic education and did not realize that the decline of classical education was basically their fault. Luther strongly criticizes traditional educational methods and the collection of useless and minimally helpful books, i.e. to help interpret Scripture.

Even if this critique is the most prevalent, the main point of Luther's argument goes against b) the Radical Reformers' contemporary hostility towards education and utilitarian approach. As regards the spiritualist interpreters, Luther sees most of all the danger comes of their arbitrary exegesis of the Scripture through illegitimate norms. He does not tire of proving by different examples that an exceptional spiritually founded interpretation always ends in error and heresy or rather in its practical consequence leads to sheer lawfulness or anarchy. In this context even the old ecclesiastical authorities, normally

valued by Luther, serve as a negative example of a clerical but nevertheless confusing interpretation of the Scripture.

The utilitarian hostility towards education of the merchant classes is for Luther a characteristic example of a simple life orientation directed "towards the stomach". Luther especially attacks the loss of an educational ideal in matters concerning life and in the negation of progress of knowledge. In this context Luther may also remind the sovereigns to make use of their authoritarian caring order.

Even if Luther does not explicitly discuss it, in his text he finally differentiates his plans from c) the educational program advocated by some of the humanist writers. Even though we should not speak of the humanistic educational program we could describe several of the theologians and pedagogues in the last decades of the fifteenth and in the early sixteenth century as "humanists". They all focused their interests on the sources—" *ad fontes*"—and tried to re-establish the *artes liberales* based on the classical sources of wisdom. An essential difference between Luther's ideas and this humanist reform approach is always noticeable in the definition of the goals of education. Education and training, i.e. most of all the knowledge of classic languages and texts for Luther was not an end in itself, e.g. for the development of an autonomous personality only responsible to itself, but was instead the fulfillment of God's created order transferred through parents or the authorities. Yet, this does not prevent Luther from still adopting significant and useful approaches, in particular those of humanistic writers like Erasmus, Konrad Wimpina, Petrus Mosellanus and others. These approaches include the demand to study languages and the

extension of the scholastic "*trivium*" with poetics and music, accompanied by didactic advice for playful learning on the one hand, as well as the method of imitation (*imitatio*) on the other hand.

## **7 Luther's call for an evangelical reform of traditional pedagogy**

In the first part of his program for an evangelical reform of schools and universities Luther formulates three theological arguments: first the battle against Satan; second the grace of God who gave the evangelical truth to the Germans but not forever; third, the obedience to God's commandment and the order of his creation which calls people to educate the youth. Although Luther asks secular authorities to fulfill this demand we must not lose sight of its theological foundation. Education of the youth, school, university, training of administration and economy are not a matter of natural reason alone but also a matter of theological reflection. As a professor of Theology (sacred scripture!) and as a pastor Luther points out the endangering of family and society when the government fails its educational duties. But he is not only a prophet of decline he also shows a solution and orientation to the word of God.

Luther's political ethics in the context of his doctrine of the two kingdoms are the background of a mostly traditional interpretation of the relation between secular and ecclesiastical authority. He sees them mostly intertwined. The secular authority fulfills God's will in obedience to his greater plan of establishing his kingdom of mercy. Training and education are parts of this demand. For Luther, the theological foundation of this argumentation is that schools and universities are in the first place "secular matters". They have both a secular and an ecclesiastical function and serve institutions in both

dimensions by teaching pupils and educating them to be loyal citizens of their communities and faithful believers of the church. In dogmatic terms: Luther distinguishes between education and the Gospel. Even though he takes the educational duties from ecclesiastical institutions he does not lose the intertwined relation between pedagogy and theology. He turns pedagogy into a tool, and understands it in a specific function to social purposes. This separates Luther and his successors clearly from other contemporary reform attempts.

## **8 Consequences**

Luther's letter "to the mayors and aldermen of all German cities" gradually acquired a programmatic quality, but it was written on the spur of the moment; its immediate importance should not be overstated. The author himself was extremely disappointed about its impact. Friedrich Falk, who attempted to prove the letter's effect on a number of school ordinances, arrived at the conclusion that "the historical influence of the text ... cannot clearly be ascertained. It is mentioned in letters soon after its appearance, but school foundations of regulations only rarely refer to it explicitly. The only direct quotation appears in the Göttingen church ordinances of 1531." In contrast, works by Johannes Bugenhagen and Philipp Melanchthon seem to have had more immediate effect.

More important than a textual reference, of course, is the personal influence of Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues. All of the main reformers were involved in school foundations and there are numerous written statements outlining their views. Disregarding the subtler differences between Luther, Bugenhagen, and Melanchthon, the following elements emerge as the shared core of their

programs: all three advance theological arguments to define the aim of their educational reforms, and all see their engagement as an inevitable consequence of the requirements of Protestant religion. The basic concern is to educate the young Generation in 'omnibus civitatibus, oppidis et pagis', even though the necessity of comprehensive popular education was gradually toned down because of financial constraints. There is a strong emphasis on the learning of languages, especially Latin, but less explicit guidance about the position of German schools; confronted with an ever more pressing demand for new ministers, Latin may have been a natural priority. Even so, many school ordinances refer to Luther's demand for an adequate education for girls. The letter to the 'mayors and aldermen' also addresses the needs of academic elites. Luther recommends specific measures to assist the 'prodigy of learning', and some schools seem to have heeded this advice. The adoption of the humanist *studium trilingue*, in contrast, was initially largely ignored. The study of languages still belonged only to the universities - and thus primarily of those students preparing for an ecclesiastical career. Melanchthon, in particular, opposed more general instruction in Greek, Hebrew, and also in German. Luther came to endorse this view in his 'Sermon admonishing [Christians] to send their children to school', where he recommended linguistic studies only for scholars. The reading of classical writers was meant to enable the latter to learn by means of imitation; only Melanchthon, with his strong humanist connections, seems to have put some emphasis on an understanding of the content.

Even though Luther failed to mention religious education in the letter, the 1528 visitations of Saxony and his own catechetical writings suggest that it formed an implicit part of the program. Special Bible-lessons can thus be found in nearly all school ordinances, none of which distinguish, in the 'modern' way, between worldly 'state' education and ecclesiastical instruction. Indeed, on the contrary, almost all assume a close relationship between teaching priorities and church doctrine. Many ordinances prescribe short prayer services at the beginning and the end of each day, with sermons, liturgical training, and choral exercises as further integral parts of the curriculum.

In the later years of the Reformation, particularly in the wake of the dispute between the spiritualists and evangelicals, a need for 'Protestant' interpretation re-emerged, but in the early phase—the setting for our text—such turbulence remains below the surface. At first, therefore, the new principle must have appeared as a welcome alternative to the frequent, and seemingly arbitrary, doctrinal interferences coming from Rome.

Combined with the emphasis on the 'priesthood of all believers', the approach demanded the active promotion of 'critical' public reasoning and thus an energetic educational offensive. For Luther and his fellow reformers, the primary task lay in the establishment of a system of schools and universities to make as many people as possible familiar with the Bible, in order to enable them to interpret its meaning and to restructure their lives. Everything else was of secondary importance.

Church history, to return to one of the crucial theological arguments in the letter to the 'mayors and aldermen', unfolded as a process of precipitating

decline until the second coming of Christ. Improved education was seen as a tool in the apocalyptic battle between God and Satan: the study of the past would alert people to God's omniscience and help them to understand the Scriptures and the fate of the world. Thus, it held an important place in school and university education, even though profane—and especially classical—historians were to be studied in strict subordination to the overall authority of the Bible.