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Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Erasmus and Melanchthon

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A CLOSER EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ERASMUS AND MELANCTHON—contemporaries who were both Christian humanists and ecclesiastical reformers, though they never met each other face to face—illuminates several significant aspects of the complex interrelationship between Christian humanism and the Reformation.

"A Study in Causation" is the subtitle posed for this essay. The study focuses on the relationship between two men. One of them is a well-known humanist, the other a reformer known by name and little more. Erasmus is the older of the two perhaps by 28 years, perhaps by 31, depending on which date one accepts as the year of his birth—1469 or 1466. He made his fame as a Christian humanist, a satirist and a wit, a theologian, and a seeker after reform. The other was also a humanist, a theologian, and a reformer, known to subsequent ages as praeceptor Germaniae. When Melanchthon was 21 years old, he was compared favorably with Erasmus, the established scholar.

1 Robert Stupperich entitled one of his works Der unbekannte Melanchthon (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1961). Michael Rogness, Philip Melanchthon: Reformer Without Honor (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), says, p. v.: "Melanchthon's works are not widely known; indeed, they are seldom read. We have learned of him largely through second-hand opinions, and he had the unhappy experience of being caricatured by friends and foes alike."


Melanchthon's works will be cited from the Corpus Reformatorum, Philippi Melanchthonis opera, quae supersunt omnia, ed. C. G. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindseil, 28 vols. (Halle, 1834 ff.); cited as CR. Also used was Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl, ed. Robert Stupperich, 6 vols. (Götterloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1951 ff.). If translations are used, they will be noted.

Implied was the promise that he would soon surpass the prince of the humanists.

Melanchthon was not under the immediate influence of Erasmus. It is not correct to label him an "Erasmian." It would be folly to assert, however, that Melanchthon was not indebted to the humanist from Rotterdam. Few intellectuals, at least of Northern Europe, in the first half of the 16th century escaped his orbit. There were other factors, too, that influenced Melanchthon, a truism also for the others of his generation. Our study of causation, therefore, must allow for a plurality of causes. Indeed, Christian humanism and the Reformation do not stand in a simple cause/effect relationship reminiscent of the behaviorists' stimulus/response formula. Cause becomes effect in the complex interrelationships between Christian humanism and the Reformation, and effect becomes cause. The interactions and complexities of these movements are highly involved. Erasmus, the Christian humanist, is also a reformer, although in time he becomes an opponent of Martin Luther. Melanchthon is a Christian humanist and a reformer; he is Martin Luther's companion and co-worker. But in the controversy


7 See the references in n. 64.

between Luther and Erasmus he manages to keep the friendship of both men without sacrificing his own convictions.9

Perhaps this tells us that we need to define our terms more precisely, at least to describe what we mean by them. The Christian humanists had a high regard for pagan letters and literature; they would not deny the importance of the study of classical letters, the studia humanitatis, for the upbringing of the well-rounded individual. Nor would they denigrate the need to return to the sources, ad fontes, both of the pagan past and of Christian antiquity. The study of the Sacred Scriptures was to them primary.10 Erasmus pleaded that the pope should wield "the sword of salvation, which is the word of God"; 11 it is his chief duty, he said, "to sow the seed of the Word of God."12 The Christian humanists also returned to the fathers of the church, to Origen, Jerome, Chrysostom, Augustine, to name only a few. Erasmus edited the works of Jerome and others.13 Melanchthon turned to Hypolytus, Cyril, Chrysostom, and others.14 An extremely important element in Christian humanism was the emphasis on pietas, which made for a strong ethical orientation.

The roots of Christian humanism went deep. Not only the traditions of the church but also movements such as the devotio moderna and the revival of Augustinianism contributed to it. Rhenish mysticism was one of the factors in this movement, but so was also the establishment of new universities, such as the University of Wittenberg. No one would want to discount the importance of Gutenberg's invention for both Christian humanism and the Reformation. Independent scholars and those subsidized by merchants or princes played their part in promoting Christian humanism. The complexities of the origins of this movement (not exhausted here) alert us to the complexities of the relationships between humanism and the Reformation.

Allow me to illustrate these complexities by showing how Erasmus and Melanchthon went to two different schools of Biblical interpreters among the church fathers. Erasmus favored Origen of Alexandria (A.D. 186—255) and Jerome (d. 420).15 Melanchthon had a high regard

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13 Bainton, Erasmus, p. 131.


for Cyril (d. 386) and John Chrysostom (d. 407).\textsuperscript{16}

Origen was first and foremost an interpreter of the Scriptures. He produced the \textit{Hexapla}, which presented various versions of the Scriptures in parallel columns. He wrote commentaries on all the books of the Bible, we are told. In his interpretation of the Bible he used not only the literal method, but he developed a Biblical typology that allowed him to postulate typical, spiritual, and mystical interpretations of the Scriptures. He used the hermeneutical methods of pagan philosophers, methods which they used to explain and interpret the text of Homer's poems. Jerome at the beginning of the fifth century also wrote commentaries of the Scriptures. His Latin Bible, the Vulgate, makes him one of the foremost moulders of the culture of the Middle Ages. He did not follow Origen in his theology, but he continued his method of interpreting the Scriptures. Jerome thereby transmitted the method of allegorization,\textsuperscript{18} a method which Erasmus favored.\textsuperscript{19}

Melanchthon was greatly indebted to Cyril of Jerusalem. Cyril did not write commentaries after the number of Origen. His addresses to catechumens, given during Lent, explained the Christian creed and the sacramental rites to new converts. It is not clear how closely he was connected with the school in Antioch, which became a center of Biblical scholarship and which did not favor Alexandrian allegorization.\textsuperscript{20} The school at Antioch encouraged a literalistic kind of exegesis (Biblical interpretation), of which Theodore of Mopsuestia was the foremost proponent. He was a friend of John Chrysostom, perhaps the most famous pulpit orator of the ancient church. Chrysostom was known also for his commentaries on the New Testament in which he used the literal type of interpretation that was favored by the school of Antioch.\textsuperscript{21}

This brief orientation may give an indi-
cation of two kinds of Biblical humanism in the early 16th century. Perhaps it illuminates somewhat the oversimplification of a statement that says that both Erasmus and Melanchthon went back to the patristic literature as one of the sources of Christian humanism.

There are oversimplifications, too, in the concept "the Reformation." If we differentiate between "reform" and "the Reformation," our task of describing what we mean is made easier. It seems, however, that it would be better to speak about "the reformations of the 16th century" or "the reform movements of the 16th century" than simply to speak about "the Reformation." Someone may wish to contend that it would be still simpler to speak only about the "reformers of the 16th century," although this plagues us into the oversimplification of the "great man" theory of history. Under the term "Reformation" we can include all the movements revolving around Luther, Calvin, Knox, Menno Simons, Contarini, John a lasco, and a host of others. Broadly we define the term as the movements of the 16th century, particularly between 1517 and 1564, which sought reforms and alterations within the Christian church of western Europe in doctrine and practice.

The microcosm of the individual, however, permits us to make an analysis of the relationships between two movements in the life of that individual. These may serve as illustrations of generalizations about causations or interrelations, processes, and outcomes.

Erasmus had a powerful influence on various reformers of the 16th century, not least of all on Zwingli of Zürich and Bucer of Strasbourg. They were not as intimately connected with Luther as was Melanchthon. We find Melanchthon a most apt subject for the investigation of the interrelationship between humanism and reform.

A Dutch authority has declared: "Melanchthon was meer Humanist dan theolog" (Melanchthon was a humanist rather than a theologian). It might be more accurate to call him a humanist and a theologian.

Four men primarily shaped the life of the praeceptor Germaniae: Johann Reuchlin (1455—1522), Johannes Stöffer (1452—1531), Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469—1536), and Martin Luther (1483—1546). Reuchlin came into his life during the most formative years, between the ages of 11 and 21. Melanchthon's father died when young Philip was 11 years of age (27 October 1508) and his granduncle, the great Reuchlin, became his guide. Reuchlin's reputation as a scholar, as a master of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, put him into the front ranks of the Northern humanists. It was Reuchlin who gave Philip the name "Me-

24 Maurer, Junge Melanchthon, in his two volumes has validated this observation.
lanchthon," a Greek rendition of his name "Schwarzerdt." "When one is transformed from a 'Schwarzerdt' into a 'Melanchthon,' his life is dedicated to humanism." 26 He was a scholar at the University of Heidelberg when this happened. There were other humanists at Heidelberg, for example, Jacob Wimpfeling, who introduced the young scholar to the upper Rhenish reform movement—Melanchthon wrote an elegy for Geiler von Kaysersberg. 27

Reuchlin's preeminent influence on Melanchthon continued during the six years he spent at Tübingen (between the ages of 15 and 21). During these years Melanchthon matured into an independent personality going deeply into debt to Reuchlin and others for his intellectual enrichment—the kind of debt that most teachers like to see students accumulate, even though students do not always recognize it. Reuchlin was Melanchthon's ideal of the vita activa of the public citizen and the vita passiva of the scholar. His thorough knowledge of the Greek language and Greek literature he owed to Reuchlin. 28 Melanchthon gave Greek the palm rather than Latin. 29 While at Tübingen, where he received his magister artium in 1514, he read widely—Gerson, William of Ockham, Ficino, Quintillian, Cicero, Plato, and others. And already during these years he demonstrated that he had "writer's itch," the ambition to be an author, at any rate the author of textbooks. 30 Early in life Melanchthon was a praeceptor. He was a tutor of Greek at the age of 17 and remained a schoolmaster all his life.

How much he owed to Reuchlin for this proclivity to teach and write is difficult to say. To Reuchlin Melanchthon owed the heritage of the love of the ancient languages. To him also he owed a strong leaning to Pythagorean philosophy and his readiness to follow the Platonism of the Florentine Academy. Marsilio Ficino was the guide he followed; 31 Erasmus favored Pico della Mirandola. 32 Again we see that

30 Textbooks were in great demand in Germany especially for instruction in the humanities. Melanchthon was required to give instruction in dialectics and rhetoric; he published his Rhetoric in 1519 and his Dialectic in 1520. But even before this he published classical authors and reissued standard works. The first of these standard works was the Dialogus mythologicus, originally compiled in 1489 by Bartholomaeus Zehender (closely associated with the devotio moderna). Melanchthon took over as its editor in 1514. The book enjoyed 40 editions, beginning in 1514; it had already appeared in seven editions. Melanchthon re-edited a Latin grammar in 1516, which had originally been a product of the Aldine Press. He wrote a Greek translation of the medieval Media vita. A Greek grammar by Melanchthon was published by Anselm of Tübingen in 1518. In 1516 he produced a school edition of the comedies of Terence. Maurer, Junge Melanchthon, I, 43—50.

31 Lewis W. Spitz, "Reuchlin's Philosophy: Pythagoras and Cabala for Christ," Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, XLVII, 1 (1956), 1 to 20, is the only satisfactory treatment of Reuchlin's philosophical concepts. He stated the opinion, p. 16, that "Luther and Melanchthon disparaged cabalistic nonsense, though Melanchthon found some good in it." Maurer, Junge Melanchthon, I, 49, 100—3.

32 Louis Bouyer, Erasmus and His Times, trans. Francis X. Murphy (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1959), has a chapter on
humanism itself was a complex movement. Melanchthon’s Neo-Platonism was colored by a high regard for the ethical teachings of the Stagirite.\(^{33}\) We must note, however, that Melanchthon did not follow Reuchlin’s interest in the Cabala.

During the six years that Melanchthon was at Tübingen the conflict between Reuchlin and the theologians of Louvain raged. It produced not only the \textit{Epistolae vivorum clarorum}, to which Melanchthon wrote a preface and which contained a letter by Erasmus, but also the \textit{Epistolae obscurorum vivorum}, which Erasmus did not approve.\(^{34}\)

Reuchlin and Erasmus were not so closely related that this relationship of necessity would be determinative for the young Melanchthon. There were relatively few years of intimate correspondence between the two men (between 1515 and 1519), and the two met only once.\(^{35}\)

Melanchthon did not meet Erasmus face to face even once. However, Melanchthon’s acquaintance with the writings of Erasmus before 1515 may be taken for granted. In 1515 Erasmus wrote a few highly laudatory sentences about the Tübingen scholar in an excursus to \textit{1 Thessalonians 2} in his commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Thessalonians.\(^{36}\) Melanchthon returned the compliments in a Greek poem in which Erasmus was hailed as a ward of Athena, a friend of the gods, whose eloquence was renewed by nectar and ambrosia.\(^{37}\)

But an exchange of compliments tells us little about the relationship between Christian humanism and the Reformation. The recommendation of Erasmus to John Fisher, chancellor of the University of Cambridge and bishop of Rochester, that Melanchthon teach at Cambridge\(^{38}\) is testimony already in 1516 that the young scholar was regarded as a Christian humanist. He was more than a grammarian; rather he was one who would fit into the company of John Fisher, Thomas More, and John Colet. During the years 1515 and 1516 Christian humanism was exerting an influence also at the University of Wittenberg because of the writings of Reuchlin and Erasmus.\(^{39}\) The University

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\(^{34}\) See Meyer, “Erasmus and Reuchlin,” p. 74, n. 2, for the pertinent literature.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., pp. 65—80.
of Wittenberg, little as the University of Cambridge, did not have to await Melan­
chthon before it became a center of Christian humanism.

The year 1516 must be emphasized for its importance for the relationship between Christian humanism and the Reformation. In that year the Novum instrumentum, Erasmus’ edition of the Greek New Testament with his translation in Latin, was published. A second edition was published in 1519. The introduction, the Paraclesis, not only promoted Biblical studies but also set forth the philosophia Christi, a way of life that embraced both piety and learning.10 Luther and Melanchthon both knew this work. The importance of the publication of the Novum instrumentum cannot be overestimated for either Christian humanism or the Reformation.41

Among the writings of Erasmus known to Melanchthon were the Adages of which the Συλλογή 'Αλκιβιάδου (Sileni Alcibiadis) clearly set forth a program of re-
success which Biblical and Patristic studies, as well as Greek and Latin studies in general, had enjoyed among the students.” See p. 29.


chthon, II, 15—24.


41 Bainton, Erasmus, p. 134: “Despite all of the defects the magnitude of his achievement is not to be deprecated.”

form.42 In this sketch Erasmus decries the luxury, property, and wealth of the bishops and mourns the sad state of the church. He wrote:

They say that the Church is being hon­oured and adorned, not when piety is growing among the people, when vices are diminishing and good behaviour increasing, when sacred learning is in full bloom, not when the altars glitter with jewels and gold; nay, even when the altars themselves are neglected, and the accumulation of property, troops of servants, luxury, mules and horses, expensive erection of houses or rather palaces, and all the rest of the racket of life, make the priest not better than satraps.43

The bishops should follow the ideals ex­emplified by Paul, Erasmus writes:

I wish the Popes to have the greatest riches — but let it be the pearl of the Gospel, the heavenly treasure. . . . I wish them to be fully armed, but with the arms of the Apostle: that is with the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness, the sword of salvation, which is the word of God.44

Melanchthon recommended this work to his students.45 How far it shaped his own thinking we cannot estimate. It is one of the links between Erasmus and Melan­chthon, between Christian humanism and re­form. Moreover, Erasmus’ frequent return to the Scriptures in this piece — there are no less than 15 references on 18 pages —

45 De rhetorica libri tres (Basel: John Fro­ben, 1519), p. 7. The copy in the library of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., was used.
could not fail to impress the author of the oration on St. Paul's doctrine. 46

References to the Sileni Alcibiadis are found in Melanchthon's Rhetoric. 47 The Rhetoric, published in early 1519, was based on Quintillian, Cicero, Terence, and Erasmus. 48 Reuchlin had issued a Rhetoric in 1504, meant for preachers, who, on the basis of the Sacred Scriptures, should encourage their hearers to practice the virtues and meditate on divine matters. 49 Melanchthon put great store on the study of rhetoric. In his inaugural address as professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg on 29 August 1518 he encouraged the study of history and poetry, the ancient languages, dialectics, and rhetoric. He coupled history and rhetoric into a nexus that included not only Xenophon and Herodotus but also the Old Testament prophets, and he followed Erasmus in recommending Hesiod. 50 Erasmus, too, recommended the study of history, although he did not value it nearly as highly as did Melanchthon. For instance, Erasmus did not find in history examples for the orator as did Melanchthon. 51 Yet Melanchthon relied heavily on the Dutch humanist. However, when Melanchthon made rhetoric more important than dialectics, he showed himself to be independent of Erasmus and dependent on Aristotle. 52 Insofar, then, as Melanchthon is a humanist, he shows dependence on and independence of Erasmus in his Rhetoric of 1519.

This is true, too, of Melanchthon insofar as he is a reformer. Melanchthon had been in Wittenberg less than a year when this work was published. In it he recommended the Paraphrases of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans by Erasmus. 53 He knew the Wittenberg theology and quoted the saying: "Legem non iustificare, gratiam iustificare." 54 He also cited the Augustinian phrase of the dead letter and the life-giving spirit, known from Karlstadt's tract and used by Erasmus. 55 Melanchthon used this distinction, which goes back to St. Paul, to define the Law not only as the corpus of ceremonial laws given to the Hebrew nation, but also as the civil and moral laws of this people. 56 In this he differed with


47 De rhetorica, pp. 7, 40.


50 St. A, III, 29—42.
Erasmus, who reserved the term for the ceremonial laws of the Jews. Melanchthon went farther than Erasmus in maintaining that there are no differences between natural law and social sanctions.

In the 1519 *Rhetoric* Melanchthon as a pedagog advocated the *loca*-method. The method goes back to Aristotle; Melanchthon based his judgment of Aristotle's method on Cicero, reinforced by the writings of Porphyry and Themistios (both fl. ca. 400). Among the humanists he praised Rudolf Agricola, Conrad Celtis, and Erasmus for their use of this method. Erasmus valued the *loca*-method not only for its pedagogical value but also because it has a formative effect on those who live in the world. Melanchthon emphasized both of these objectives. His *loca*-method is grounded in dialectics; ethical conduct rises out of an understanding of ethics neatly ordered according to topics. Again the humanist is also the reformer.

This is perhaps most evident in the short section which Melanchthon devoted to homiletics in the 1519 *Rhetoric*. Melanchthon did not follow the *Ars praedicandi* issued by Reuchlin in 1502, which was centered in the rules for the orators of antiquity. Melanchthon focused on the interpretation of the text from Holy Writ; hermeneutics lent exegesis its value. In his applications Melanchthon used the *loca*-method also for the art of preaching. His insistence on Scripture was learned not only from Luther but also from the Greek church fathers. The Biblical humanist contributed an extremely significant methodology for the Reformation in this section of his *Rhetorica*.

There are many topics that need further investigation to document adequately the relationships between Christian humanism and the Reformation in the relationships between Erasmus and Melanchthon. Melanchthon's role in Luther's *Kleiner Galaterkommentar*, his *Loca communis* of 1521 with its emphasis on Law and sin and grace, the Law-Gospel dichotomy of Lutheran theology, and its anthropology that spoke of man's unfree will, the debate between Luther and Erasmus on this selfsame question, the contacts (direct...

62 Schnell, pp. 60-63.
and indirect) between Erasmus and Melanchthon at the 1530 Diet of Augsburg, the mutual concerns of these men for ecumenism or the unity of the church, are recognized that "Erasmus had attacked the very center of Luther's thought." He concludes that later Melanchthon broke with Luther on this question. See pp. 363 f. and p. 10, n. 8.

66 See, for example, Bainton, Erasmus, pp. 262--64.


Carl S. Meyer, "Melanchthon, Theologian of some of the topics that ought to be investigated and presented.

Enough has been said, however, to show that Biblical humanism in its relation to the Reformation was extremely complex and extremely significant.

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