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In Response to Bengt Hägglund: The Importance of Epistemology for Luther's and Melanchthon's Theology

Wilbert H. Rosin

Dr. Hägglund has given us much to think about on a very basic topic for understanding the sixteenth century Reformation and for meaningful theological discussion today. In a few well chosen words he has provided a corrective in the debate over Melanchthon versus Luther. He is breaking with the nineteenth century theory that there was a fundamental antithesis and basic disagreement between Melanchthon's and Luther's theology. Dr. Hägglund states that Luther and Melanchthon were essentially in agreement, though they differed on some points, at least in their exposition of them. I believe that Dr. Hägglund is basically correct in his interpretation, though obviously he could not exhaust the issues in one essay.

That varying opinions about Melanchthon would develop is quite understandable, for scholars cannot empty themselves completely of their prejudices, emotions, and predispositions and cannot achieve *Voraussetzungslosigkeit*. Each person in the sixteenth century who knew anything about Luther and Melanchthon formed his own ideas about them, just as we today have our individual opinions of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Hans Küng, or John Paul II. In their zeal for truth, the contemporaries of Melanchthon naturally feared that dire consequences would follow from any kind of compromise. Who was the real Melanchthon? The debate over that question was to intensify after both Luther and Melanchthon were gone.

A number of questions remain. Among them are these: (1) Why did the historians of the last century emphasize the differences rather than the similarities in Luther's and Melanchthon's theology? What does this mean for the theology of today in a practical way? (2) How did Luther and Melanchthon agree or differ on the matter of freedom of the will and predestination? (3) How clear was Melanchthon's thinking on the matter of adiaphora? (4) Did Melanchthon make a "fruitful mistake," as Dr. Hägglund puts it — a *felix culpa*, a fortunate error — in some matters of policy and in matters involving the state? (5) Why did Luther and Melanchthon condemn certain theological positions, and how does this play into the Lutheran stance towards ecumenism today? (6) Did Melanchthon's contemporaries really understand him? Do we understand him? Can we? How can we best get a more objective evaluation?!

Dr. Hägglund has devoted most of his essay to the period up to the Interim prior to the deep controversy that develops when the views and counter-views of the Melanchthonians or Philippists, the Crypto-Calvinists, and all the others become almost hopelessly entangled, especially after Melanchthon died in 1560 and before the Formula of Concord was completed in 1577. I shall not undertake to answer directly the questions just raised. Instead I want to speak about a key topic that impinges on all of these questions. To understand Luther as compared with Melanchthon, it will be helpful and perhaps necessary to know something about the philosophy of these two men, especially their epistemology — their view of how we come to know.

In dealing with the broader question as to whether Melanchthon was good or bad for the movement, the trend for the last century has been to say that Luther was existential — that is, he divorced theology and philosophy, faith and reason, *absolutely* — and that it was Melanchthon who was the villain, as it were, in reinstating Aristotle's authority in theology. For example, Richard R. Caemmerer in an article entitled "The Melanchthonian Blight," takes that position.² It is true that Luther, especially in the early years, declared Aristotle to be a pagan pig, the man who through the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, the great admirer of Aristotle, distorted all theology. Luther also took an anti-Aristotelian point of view on other matters.

However, we need to digress for a moment to understand first the debate in philosophy that was going on at the time. We need to know what is meant by "realism," "nominalism," and "moderate realism." Through the five senses we have a knowledge of material objects. This knowledge is specific and concrete. It is individualized. We speak of *this* particular mountain, *this* flower. But we can also think of a flower *as such* entirely apart from thinking of a particular, individual flower. So we have an abstract concept of flower or mountain — a universal idea of flower or mountain that can be applied to any number of flowers or mountains. But is this universal concept *real*? In late medieval scholasticism one group followed the Platonic realist point of view, namely, that the idea is the real thing, and the particular is just a shadow and represents an example of the eternal idea which is indestructible. A second school, the most prominent spokesman of which was William of Occam (who died in 1349), represents the nominalist point of view, contending that only the particular flower exists but not the concept of flower. One can see immediately that a consistent nominalist view would make it very difficult to hold such concepts as the Trinity or transubstantia-

tion in the Lord's Supper. In addition to the realists, who held that the idea is the only real thing, and the nominalists, who contended that only the particular (and not the abstract concept) exists, there were moderate realists, such as Aquinas, who followed Aristotle, the pupil of Plato. Aristotle said that the particular thing alone has real existence, but the human mind can abstract common elements from any number of individual things such as flowers or mountains so that one acquires a concept of flower or mountain as such, a universal concept as compared with the particular thing (*universalia in re*). To use a different example, it is possible to think of pinkness without having anything specific that is pink in mind. (Obviously, we are oversimplifying the three positions for the sake of discussion).

Now what does all this have to do with Luther and Melancthon? We noted before that Luther is commonly said to be totally opposed to Aristotle. Luther was very much influenced by William of Occam, the nominalist. But when it came to epistemology, that is, how we come to know, Luther was not an extreme nominalist, but a moderate realist. In other words, Luther believed that one could have an abstract concept *and* also know the particular or individual thing. In that respect Luther was like Aristotle. In his later years Luther relented and came to say that Aristotle was a great philosopher, and the evidence shows that it was not just Melancthon who reintroduced Aristotle. A well known book by Peter Petersen, *Geschichte der aristotelischen Philosophie im protestantischen Deutschland* (Leipzig, 1921), shows that Aristotle was never dead, but that his views dominated the philosophical faculties and the science faculties of the northern European universities all the way through to the early seventeenth century, when, thanks to Galileo and other scientists, Aristotle's comprehensive authority was broken. So far as theology is concerned, it was quite natural that Melancthon should have reintroduced Aristotle's rules for good thinking and rhetoric. But what some analysts of Luther and Melancthon forget is that Luther also was an ontologist. He was philosophically not an existentialist but held the concept of essence prior to existence and experience. He believed that reason tells us that there is a God; Luther did not rule out *all* use of reason, and to that extent Luther could also make room for an Aristotelian approach to the question of realism. He denied that reason could tell us that God is gracious, a burning cauldron of love — a truth which God revealed in Christ, despite the negative evidence of nature and history.

What made Luther so opposed to Aristotle in the early years

was the fact that most of the intellectual world of his day, including also the theologians, had been taken in by Aristotle's philosophy. The theologians had been influenced by men like Thomas Aquinas who overemphasized reason and argumentation and logic in matters of theology and faith. Thomas Aquinas, who is considered the most important theologian who applied Aristotle to theology, did not believe that one must put faith in one category and reason in another; he believed that the one can support the other. But he overemphasized the use of Aristotelian logic and reason in theology. Luther commented, "Thomas has been seduced by metaphysics. Therefore he is so loquacious." Luther based his theology in the Scriptures and held to what comes to man through revelation.³

It would be interesting to explore some of the implications of nominalism and realism for the questions which Dr. Hägglund has raised. While the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper can never be described to the satisfaction of human reason, the moderate realism of Luther and Melancthon made it somewhat more acceptable to speak of the ubiquity of Christ's body and at the same time of the Real Presence, a topic which Ralph Quere has discussed in a number of articles.⁴ Likewise it was possible to speak of individual Christians, particular Christians, and at the same time use the concept of the universal church with all the implications for ecumenism. A moderate realist could speak, in one context, of the abstract concepts of state and authority and, in another context, speak of individual citizens and their responsibility.⁵

The controversy between nominalism and realism has significance for today. Realism stood for the old order; its trust was placed in authority, and the group was considered more important than the individual. Nominalism stood for the order which was to come in the modern age; it revolted against authority and state (the concept of state), and the individual was considered superior to the group. That point, in turn, could lead to discussion about the attitude toward authority today. Nominalism also stood for inductive science, just as realism favored deductive philosophy. Moderate realism, of course, would take in both the group and the individual, the nation and the individual, the concept of church and the individual Christian. Today the positivists and empiricists are the legitimate intellectual descendants of the nominalists. Their dominance represents the triumph of natural-science approaches to philosophy and epistemology. Philosophically, then, and specifically in terms of epistemology with its important implica-

tions for theology, Melanchthon and Luther were very close to each other.

The relationship between Melanchthon and Luther was always very subtle. They understood each other, and they complemented each other very well. Melanchthon was not a functional psychologist, but he was trying to be more precise in terms of human psychology. In terms of anthropology Melanchthon thought that man was more complicated. Melanchthon was trying to explain how the Christian accepts — what is involved in terms of his mind, his will.⁶ Luther does not go into the matter on that level. He just said that the whole man — body, soul, and spirit — accepts and trusts. As a technical theologian Melanchthon had a somewhat more perceptive theological insight than Luther. For example, when Luther interpreted St. Augustine as a Paulinist, largely on the basis of his anti-Pelagian writings, Melanchthon perceived that Luther was himself a better Paulinist than was the Plantonically-tinged St. Augustine. Melanchthon was technically a careful theologian.

As we have observed, Luther was not philosophically an existentialist, as some contemporary theologians imply. The Finnish scholar, Lennart Pinomaa, in an early book emphasized the existential element in Luther's theology.⁷ Luther stressed that every man must do his own believing, just as every man must do his own dying. The most important words in religion, he held, are the personal pronouns — "I," "thou," and "he, my brother." His, like Martin Buber's, was an I-thou theology. Luther's theology had an existential element, but his philosophical presuppositions were basically in line with a traditional ontological position. The existential element in Luther's theology has been emphasized by some contemporary theologians who speak of the *viva vox* (the living voice) of the Gospel and stress the *kerygma*, the one glad proclamation of the Gospel, and thereby do not take into account the whole counsel of God. Critics of Luther such as Joseph Lortz claim that Luther was *nicht voll hörend*, that he stressed only St. Paul's Gospel. But Luther produced straightforward commentaries on the four Gospels and on so many other books of the Bible that Lortz's assertion lacks credibility. But Lortz makes a valid point when he asks the question, "Did Luther think ontologically?" ("Hat Luther ontisch gedacht?"), and answers in the affirmative. Melanchthon, too, was a student and exegete of the whole of Scripture and no less than Luther emphasized the centrality of the *kerygma*, the evangelical proclamation.

Dr. Hägglund makes a good point when he observes that Luther was complimenting Melanchthon when he said that

Melanchthon spoke “softly and lightly.” It is the kind of compliment that Luther pays to Melanchthon over and over again. Luther says, “Well I’m crude. I stomp on the chinaware, and Melanchthon knows how to handle these things and how to speak like a good Christian.” Part of the difference between the two men was a difference of style.

There may be a temptation to look upon the discussion of Melanchthon’s relation to Luther as no more than an esoteric topic for debate by impractical theologians who crave theological and intellectual stimulation, however unnecessary or useless that may be. But it is not just interesting to know whether or not Luther and Melanchthon agreed. We are really getting close here to the jugular vein of theological understanding. This matter has practical implications — for Lutheran doctrine itself, for the subject of ecumenism, for our view of church-state relations today, for understanding why there has been a strong anti-Melanchthonian bias throughout the past century. We are discovering that Melanchthon had a more positive influence on Luther throughout the years than scholars have appreciated in the past. Melanchthon contributed to Luther’s ever increasing appreciation of the classics and humanist learning.⁸ There is strong evidence that Luther’s clear understanding of faith and justification with all its implications did not come suddenly in the *Turmerlebnis*, or even earlier, as some have said, but that it came as late as 1518, and that Melanchthon figured into Luther’s understanding and later formulation of the doctrine of justification by faith.⁹ It is therefore appropriate that pictures of Melanchthon and Luther should be placed side by side, as Dr. Hagglund observes. It is probably significant that both men are buried in the front part of the nave of the Castle Church in Wittenberg and that their statues are standing on the same level in front of the Rathaus in Wittenberg, as Helmar Junghans of the University of Leipzig shows in his *Wittenberg als Lutherstadt*. (1979) Luther, the outsized man, the rough-hewn, overtly forceful, courageous Reformer, surely deserves full recognition and credit. There also seems more than enough to discuss about Philipp Melanchthon, that mere wisp of a man with the unusually high forehead, one shoulder lower than the other, a frail body, a tendency to stammer, but a profound and brilliant mind, who, in the phrase of one biographer, Clyde Manschreck, through his “struggle with the ageless problem of reason and revelation” became the “quiet Reformer,” “a finite man seeking to serve an infinite God.”¹⁰

Footnotes

1. A number of other questions concerning Melancthon's role in Reformation history are raised in Franz Hildebrandt, *Melancthon: Alien or Ally?* (Cambridge: University Press, 1946).
2. *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XVIII (1947), pp. 321-338. A decade later this view was questioned in Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melancthon, The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 15.
3. Cf. Wilhelm Link, *Das Ringen um die Freiheit der Theologie von der Philosophie* (München: C. Kaiser, 1955).
4. Ralph W. Quere, "Melancthon's Motifs in the Formula's Eucharistic Christology," in Lewis W. Spitz and Wenzel Lohff, eds., *Discord, Dialogue, and Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 58-73. Cf. also Ralph W. Quere, *Melancthon's Christum Cognoscere, Christ's Efficacious Presence in the Eucharistic Theology of Melancthon* (Nieuwkoop: De Graff, 1977).
5. Cf., for example, Eike Wolgast, *Die wittenberger Theologie und die Politik der evangelischen Stände* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1977).
6. Cf. Erdmann Schott, *Fleisch und Geist nach Luther's Lehre unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Begriffs "totus homo"* (Leipzig, 1928). Also Erdmann Schott, "Luthers Anthropologie und seine Lehre von der manducatio oralis in wechselseitigen Beleuchtung," *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie*, IX (1932), pp. 585 ff. Concerning Luther's formula "Sunt duo toti homines et unus totus homo," Heinrich Bornkamm in *Luthers geistige Welt* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1953), p. 87, states: "Dieses Bild des totus homo, des Menschen der wir immer ganz sind, ist Luthers grundlegende anthropologische Intuition."
7. Cf. Lennart Pinomaa's more recent work, *Sieg des Glaubens, Grundlinien der Theologie Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1964).
8. For a stimulating discussion of Luther and the humanists cf. Lewis W. Spitz, "Headwaters of the Reformation," in Heiko A. Oberman, ed., *Luther and the Dawn of a New Era*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), pp. 89-116. Cf. also Lewis W. Spitz, "The Course of German Humanism," in Heiko A. Oberman, editor, *Itinerarium Italicum. The Profile of the Italian Renaissance in the Mirror of Its European Transformations* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), pp. 371-436.
9. Cf. Wilhelm Maurer, "Motive der evangelischen Bekenntnisbildung bei Luther und Melancthon," in Martin Greschat and J.F. G. Goeters, eds. *Reformation und Humanismus, Robert Stupperich zum 65. Geburtstag* (Witten: Luther Verlag, 1969), pp. 9-43, for an interesting contrast between Luther, who learned from the history of the early church that open confessional statements were necessary, and Melancthon, who became a spokesman for Wittenberg theology.
10. Clyde Manschreck, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 21.