



SEC-IASR 2013

## The influence of the protestant reformation on education

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### Abstract

The Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century led not only to deep changes in the doctrine, the rituals and the leadership of the Church, but also to an aftermath that may be seen on an ecclesiastic level, as well as on a larger level, socio-cultural and political. This European movement also had repercussions in point of education, and the Reformers constantly evinced, among others, the necessity of a consistent religious education provided to the young, based on the Scripture. The Protestant Reformation proved favourable to the education of the masses, of all children, regardless of gender and social status.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Sports, Education, Culture-Interdisciplinary Approaches in Scientific Research Conference.

*Keywords:* Reformation, education, Bible, ministry;

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## 1. Introduction

The European Reformation continues to draw the attention of a large category of researchers: historians, philosophers, economists, jurists, political scientists, pedagogues and of course theologians. The Protestant Reformation may be considered as the most important event in the history of 16th century Europe, John Calvin was a notable theologian through the depth of his thinking, but at the same time he was a visionary and a man of action who, together with Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli and Philip Melancthon decisively influenced the evolution of a large part of Europe and North America.

The numerous works devoted to the Protestant Reformation evinced the impact he had in point of philosophy, culture, economy, law, theology, but only a few books and studies focused on the effects of Protestantism on education. The Reformers in the first half of the 16th century aimed at being mainly religious pedagogues, able to provide people with a sound Christian education based on the Word of God; it is also worth noticing that the later Middle Ages highlighted the close connection between education and lay piety, as well as between education and the reformation of monasteries (McGrath, 2004, pp. 12).

The Renaissance humanism embraced a set of values or cultural and educational ideals, showing a marked interest in the Greek and Roman Antiquity, and the scholars of the time searched for the best means to improve human nature. They accurately sensed that the relationship of man with the divinity and his fellow humans can only undergo a change for the better by education; in addition, many of the famous philosophical and theological treatises of the time bore the title “institutio”, which may be translated by “education”. The logical conclusion may be that no change on a social-political or institutional level may be achieved unless preceded by a similar change in intellectual and spiritual education, prone to giving a new orientation to the attitude of man, created “ad imaginem Dei”, towards the world and life in general.

The major role ascribed by the Reformers to learning classical languages may be explained not only by virtue of the well-known Renaissance recourse to the fascinating wisdom of the ancient Greek Roman world: the fathers of Protestantism wished to reach the state where any Christian would be literate, able to read the Bible in the original so that to find God’s will in regard to people and how far the tradition of the Church has strayed from the divine commandments. That is why, to the 16th century Reformers who stressed the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, Christian education and evangelization were quite similar, which was why they focused on drawing up catechisms and founding institutions of theological higher learning which reached notoriety in their time and are still quite famous today (McGrath & Marks, 2004, pp. 56ff).

The present paper aims at reviewing certain pedagogical aspects of representative figures of the 16th century Reformation, such as Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Philip Melancthon and John Calvin. We shall naturally start with the initiator of the Reformation, also the most important Protestant leader in Germany: Martin Luther (1483-1546). He stressed the idea that a preacher has significant educational responsibilities and so has to possess a good academic and oratorical background, as he needed to face successfully the polemics of the time. Criticising the scholastic education of the time, Luther published two catechisms which were an indispensable tool in the activity of the Christian initiation of children, irrespective of gender or social class. He was not attracted only to the ecclesiastic or liturgical reform, but also the educational reform, looking for the best means to make the Scripture known to the masses, clergy and laymen alike, in its German translation. And anyway, an ecclesiastic reform presupposes a re-evaluation of the public system of education meant to have a solid study of the Bible at its foundation.

## 2. A New Pedagogy

Luther himself was a university professor, as well as a very prolific writer: he produced many “treatises, popular tracts, educational works, and letters” (McKim, 2003, pp.241). All the prominent personalities of Protestantism were perfectly aware of the fact that without a solid education provided by well-trained teachers nobody may behave in a civilised manner or adequately distinguish right from wrong, and truth from falsehood: without proper education nobody has the ability to accurately grasp “the essentials of the Christian faith” (Green, 2009, pp.13; Hillerbrand, 1968, pp.275).

In Luther’s vision, education is an opportunity to serve God better and to support one’s fellow humans, as an educated man copes better with the challenges of his existence than a man without education. He constantly stressed the idea that the children’s duty is to obey their parents. Obedience is of utmost importance, as without it order gives

way to chaos, and the lack of discipline in families poses a threat to the mere existence of the state: “For what is a city but a collection of houses? How then can a city be well governed, when there is no government in the separate houses, and neither child nor servant is obedient? Likewise, what is a province but a collection of cities, towns, and villages? When, therefore, the families are badly controlled, how can the province be well governed? Verily there can be nothing but tyranny, witchcraft, murders, thefts, disobedience. A principality is made up of districts; a kingdom, of principalities; an empire, of kingdoms; these are all composed of families. Where the father and mother rule badly, and let the children have their own way, there neither city, town, village, district, principality, kingdom, nor empire, can be well and peacefully governed” (Painter, 1889, pp.114-115).

The important role of education and discipline is also evinced by the German reformer on several other occasions, both in the “Large Catechism” and the “Small Catechism”. The Bible clearly states that husbands should love their wives, wives should obey their husbands, and the young should pay respects to their elders: likewise, parents should not abuse the authority they have on the young (Lull, 1989:495) but instead all should abide by the rule of love and piety. Parents are responsible for the future of their children, parents have first and foremost pedagogical duties towards the younger generations, and they are called to teach the children the “Ten Commandments” from the very beginning.

Education is somehow double-natured, as it pertains to man’s quality as a God-created being living in society who thus has to abide by the rules of the human community he is part of. Luther insists that parents are responsible in God’s eyes for the good education given to their offspring. “Parents should consider that they are under obligations to obey God and that, first of all, they are conscientiously and faithfully to discharge all the duties of their office; not only to feed and provide for the temporal wants of their children, servants, subjects, etc., but especially to train them to the honor and praise of God. [...] If we wish to have worthy, capable persons for both temporal and spiritual leadership, we must indeed spare no diligence, time or cost in teaching and educating our children to serve God and mankind” (Luther, 1908, pp.77).

The Father of the German Reformation values most the children’s religious education within the family. Without being properly educated, nobody may be orderly, faithful and obedient. But it is not just the youth’s domestic education which is at stake; Luther strongly advocates enrolling children in public schools. The ecclesiastic reform in the 16th century was closely linked to an educational reform; if medieval education revolved around monastic schools, the German Reformer pleads for an unrestricted education to which all young people should have access, irrespective of their gender or social class; he rejects the medieval opinion according to which only the clergy have a real religious calling, as Protestantism states that any individual is responsible before God for his own salvation, and an ordained minister of God does not have a privileged position in point of an alleged sacred hierarchy as compared to the rest of the believers.

In this respect we may recall two of Luther’s texts. One is “Appeal to the German Nobility” (1520), and the other - “To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524). The latter is richer in ideas regarding the beneficial character of public education provided to young people (most of the principles in this text are also found in “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School” - 1530). Education is expensive, but at the same time it is extremely useful for everyone and for society as a whole. Luther’s phrase is full of pathos: “My dear sirs, if we have to spend such large sums every year on guns, roads, bridges, dams, and countless similar items to insure the temporal peace and prosperity of a city, why should not much more be devoted to the poor neglected youth-at least enough to engage one or two competent men to teach school?” (Lull, 1989, pp.707; Lindberg, 2010, pp.123)

Thus, one may draw the conclusion that the entire society cannot survive without properly instructed citizens, cultivated leaders, as ignorance negatively affects inter-human relations, and has nothing positive or illuminating, on the contrary. No country may have cultivated citizens if it has no properly trained teachers or well endowed libraries. “For if the gospel and all the arts are to be preserved, they must be set down and held fast in books and writing [...]. This is essential, not only that those who are to be our spiritual and temporal leaders may have books to read and study, but also that the good books may be preserved and not lost, together with the arts and languages which we now have by the grace of God” (Lull, 1989, pp.730).

A people can only make progress through culture, and Luther’s analytical spirit and his patriotic feeling make him deplore the precarious state of the education in the German territories. First, the Reformer is a critic of the higher education of his time, opining that the universities are devoid of vigour, becoming merely un-Christian, without any genuine spirituality. Parents, realizing this state of fact, refuse to send their children to school any

longer, to keep them away from a corrupted system (Luther, 1970, pp.100). Besides, many of the adults, being themselves devoid of any genuine Christian education, are more concerned about providing a better living than the genuine reference frames of a Christian life.

Schools should benefit from public support, the German Reformer believes that the education provided to underprivileged children is “an excellent investment” (Lull, 1989, pp.708). The most important task of adults, here on earth, is to take care of the young generation’s education, as nothing is useful to adults if they do not care for their children. Luther is very radical in this respect, i.e. the need for parents to care for their children’s education, and the following assertion is proof of this vision: “What would it profit us to possess and perform everything else and be like pure saints, if we meanwhile neglected our chief purpose in life, namely, the care of the young? I also think that in the sight of God none among the outward sins so heavily burdens the world and merits such severe punishment as this very sin which we commit against the children by not educating them” (Lull, 1989, pp.710).

Neglecting children is a deadly sin, as parents give birth to children all over the world, but unfortunately too few are willing and know how to care for the education of their offspring. There are several reasons why adults fail in doing their duty towards their children. These adults are either lacking in goodness and decency, rather manifesting cruelty, or content themselves with bringing children into the world without caring for their future. And how may one allow, he asks rhetorically, that the youth grow uneducated, so that they may pollute others with their ignorance, thus contributing to the ruin of the whole community they live in. Many of the parents have no education themselves and have no clue about how they should instruct their offspring: they are solely concerned with the material aspects of life and do not value anything that pertains to the spiritual.

It’s true however, says Luther in the same text, that the less blameable situation may arise when parents have both the will and the ability to care properly for their children, but they lack the necessary time and opportunity, being too absorbed in domestic chores. In this case society should be of assistance, providing them with the possibility to send their children to public schools, especially in the case when they cannot afford hiring a private tutor.

Besides, society should consider that some of the children are orphaned, and the responsibility of their care falls to the public authorities (Luther, 1827, pp.136). It goes without saying that the wealth of a city consists not only of the treasures it has managed to amass in time, but also the human quality of the people inhabiting it. The explanation is easy to find: ultimately, only citizens who are learned, wise, honourable and well-educated are really able to properly use and increase a state’s wealth

The Reformer Martin Luther pleads in favour of a “classic” system in schools, proof of his humanist background. He rejects the idea that people enrolled in schools should learn all subjects in German, leaving aside the study of Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Classical languages are “fine and noble a gift of God, with which he is now so richly visiting and blessing us Germans above all other lands” (Lull, 1989, pp.715). Although the Bible has God as the author, yet nobody should forget that it reached us through the classical languages, sacred languages, and it should be preserved in the same manner. Luther praises the value of these ancient languages, directly and indirectly orienting people to study them as thoroughly as possible.

In his opinion, this study is not a mere task of linguistic or intellectual nature, but also a higher, moral and religious responsibility: “The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself paints out [Matt. 14:20], they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall not only lose the gospel, but the time will come when we shall be unable either to speak or write a correct Latin or German” (Lull, 1989, pp.717). And in this vein it is also worth mentioning that the German Reformer is not only in favour of the study of theology or the languages of the Bible, but he also considers that besides Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, young people could really benefit in schools from the study of literature, history, music and mathematics. Just like law and medicine.

When talking about the influence of the Protestant Reform on education, one should not confine oneself to Martin Luther’s vision, but refer as well to other religious reformers who were inherently concerned with the quality of the educational system and the university curriculum. The examination of the pedagogical thinking of the Reformation may continue with another important leader, Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), the author of a short treatise called “On the Education of the Youth” (1523).

Zwingli took upon himself the task of reforming the schools in Zurich, militating just like Luther for a better knowledge of classical languages, in view of a deeper study of the Bible. In the paper mentioned earlier he makes remarks regarding the religious education of young people, as to his mind education plays an extremely important role in the overall moral and intellectual development of an individual. He rightfully senses an aspect of utmost importance on the educational level, which is largely neglected in our modern world: taking up the moral duty is closely linked to knowing the religious truth. The mission of the school in a Christian society is not only cultivating and capitalizing the youth's intellectual skills and abilities, but also transforming them into genuine Christians. "It seems to me to be quite in keeping with Christ's own teaching to bring young people to a knowledge of God in and through external phenomena. For as we bring before them the fair structure of the universe, pointing them to each part in particular, we learn that all these things are changing and destructible, but that he who conjoined them (and many other things besides) in so lasting and marvellous a whole is necessarily unchanging and immutable" (Bromiley, 2006, pp.104). That is why one should not be surprised if in this short work (as most of the works of the Reformers) one finds a presentation of the basic teachings in the Bible, as by definition the Protestant religious education is of biblical nature.

The Zurich Reformer focuses on the importance of the spiritual cultivation of people, which aids them in getting to know themselves better, expressing themselves accurately, and wishing to live in decency and moderation, proving self-control, nevertheless without neglecting their physical training. The spirit is more important than the body, but the latter is not devoid of value either, hence the need to maintain its vigour and health through physical exercise (Bromiley, 2006, pp.116) and a healthy lifestyle. A vigorous well-trained body aids the young man in pursuing a military career, but he should under no circumstances forget that all aspects in man's life on this earth are regulated by God: "But if the young man does undergo military training, he must see to it that his only purpose is to protect his own country and those whom God approves" (Bromiley, 2006, pp.113).

Luther and Zwingli are the most notable first generation reformers. Their followers furthered the reflection on issues of theology and pedagogy. Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) was Luther's close colleague and disciple, a systematic thinker, a university professor, and just like Luther, the author of a prestigious religious work. He is also known as the Teacher of Germany (*Praeceptor Germaniae*) due to his pedagogy-related concerns and because he closely supervised the reform of the educational system in Germany, and got actively involved in the establishment of new schools. Like Luther and Zwingli, Melancthon believes in the beneficial character of learning classical languages, mainly old Greek: as an expert in his doctrine opines, "Melancthon stresses the necessity of Greek for any renewal of learning and piety" (Ben-Tov, 2009, pp.140; Woodward, 1906, chapter XI).

Melancthon closely studied the field of the Ethics of Education. Like his magister Martin Luther, he proved to be an advocate of the liberal arts and a knowledgeable student of ancient philosophy. A passionate supporter of the evangelical faith, Melancthon was convinced that the ecclesiastic and social reform can only succeed to the extent it was coupled with an educational reform, in other words the implementation of a high quality education system. He stresses the fact that education is absolutely necessary for any man's progress and the survival and prosperity of the entire society. By education Melancthon meant religious education, as well as philosophical, and implicitly philological education. If nobody may know the divine truth through philosophy, nevertheless the latter is apt to urge people to value civic virtue in order to preserve social peace and harmony: "listeners need to be warned to banish the error which already occupied their minds, namely that the writings of the pagans are unworthy of being read by Christian people, and that Christians should give a wide berth to philosophy. [...] Philosophy does not provide confirmation of the will of God, nor does it instruct on the fear of God and the trust in Him; that pertains properly to the Gospel. However, apart from these things, precepts for civic life are necessary, which teach how men may live peacefully with each other. [...] Since Christians should cherish and support this civil society, this teaching of civic morals and duties has to be known by them" (Kusukawa, 1999, pp.81).

The study of philosophy is not meant to replace the study of theology, and conversely, the study of the Bible does not invalidate the study of the ancient philosophers of the Greek Roman world. Melancthon considers that it would be a grievous error to believe that the Gospel is in total disagreement with the classical antiquity: in fact he militates for the institution of a certain relation between the Christian and the pagan culture, which would not operate by mutual exclusion or an exclusivity that would be really harmful to the entire social order. In this respect Melancthon appeals to the authority of the classics, quoting Xenophon who, in his "Household Management" stated that all that is more useful and more beautiful to man is order. Culture constitutes an indispensable ingredient for the preservation of social life, thus the German Reformer contradicts those who unreasonably believe that

humanities are not useful and therefore devoid of interest: “Therefore, just as that divine order in the totality of things is perturbed if one element is removed, so there can be no articulated sound if the consonants are discarded. And in the same way, just as there is a natural relationship of the various letters with each other, the various arts are associated and yet separated. And those who feel that the lower disciplines are useless for life, because their benefit is not so visible, disturb this chorus of the arts” (Kusukawa, 1999, p.5).

However, the Bible itself may be read and explained only by those who have a good command of the classical languages, that is why these languages prove to be a vital tool in interconfessional polemics, in combating erroneous doctrines. Besides, a solid culture constitutes the premise for a happy life. It would ensue that the happiness to which each man naturally aspires and which Christianity sees as closely connected to knowing God, also depends on attending school. Melanchthon constantly promotes the idea that the Church itself needs well educated ministers in order to face any dispute they may get involved in: “It is a great mistake to imagine that ministers can be carved from any wood, and that the teaching of religion can be grasped without erudition and without long training. [...] Therefore in all ages there have been the most violent disputes in the Church. However, for the explanation of the major controversies one needs not only a ready mind and a certain knowledge of the sacred books, but also the art of disputation, fluent speech and a knowledge of history, antiquity and judgments of the past” (Kusukawa, 1999, pp.16).

Man is a social being, his need of communication is an essential one, and a fruitful dialogue only exists to the extent of mastering the art of eloquence. The Church and society as a whole need cultivated people who are equally good orators, literate, articulate, and able to support their opinions. Melanchthon makes the apology of erudition, showing that it is not a purpose in itself, but an extremely effective means in the religious debates of the age (and of any age, in our opinion), in order to support good and defeat evil: “Then even more difficult is the defence of religion, in which it is necessary to bear in mind the quarrels of all ages, to reveal snares, to refute sophisms, to remove the disguise of false convictions and to make clear and fortify the true opinions. No one can do these things without a great variety of skills and without erudition” (Kusukawa, 1999, pp.18).

The stress the Reformers placed on the education of the young generations – tomorrow’s religious and political leaders – may be better understood in the context of a change of vision, occurring at the end of the Middle Ages, in regard to the child and his condition. During the Middle Ages the idea of childhood was virtually non-existent, as society was not concerned with the peculiar nature of the child, who is too fragile to count in the world of the strong, of the grown-ups, but starting with the 14th century something significant changes in the mentality of the time, the emergence of the tendency to express the child’s specific personality in art and religion. It seems that the Renaissance did not exhibit the same indifference towards childhood: “There was an abandonment of the concept of the child as an immature adult, and his [the child’s] emergence as a creature recognized as having special needs and aptitudes” (Luke, 1989, pp.2; Ariès, 1962, pp.128-129).

In dealing with this issue of the influence of the Reform on education, special attention should be given to the contribution to the field of the most important Protestant thinker in history, John Calvin (1509-1564). The famous Reformer of Geneva authored no paper on education; however, it may be said that his entire life and numerous writings dealt with the crucial issue of the Christians’ spiritual and intellectual elevation. He is the founder of the University of Geneva and many other prestigious European universities were founded by the adepts of the Reformed faith.

It is noteworthy that in all that he did, the Reformer’s interest was predominantly religious, attempting to transform Geneva an example of Christian cohabitation and an welcoming refuge for the Protestants persecuted in their countries of origin. That is why he made a lot of effort towards a better organisation of Church life, as well as the socio-economic and political life in the city where he spent most of his life. He was fully aware that religion and education have to be unitive, as true faith is not blind, but knowledgeable: as a result, it was necessary that the School and the Church stay together to cooperate in spreading the Word of God. Some may be tempted to believe that the Reformer made no clear distinction between “preaching” and “teaching” (Montgomery, 1984, pp.233-234), but one should not forget that even if the preacher also teaches his audience at the same time, yet Calvin placed the doctoral office and the pastorate on different levels, for the good reason that these responsibilities dispose of their specific character (Montgomery, 1984, pp.262).

Calvin took care that the higher education institution he had founded in 1559 could benefit from the services of the best teachers of the time, experts in classical languages (Hebrew, Greek, Latin), philosophy, theology, physics, literature, mathematics, French, law and medicine; the experts in the life and work of the Academy founder consider

that this institution was in fact “the crown of Calvin’s Genevan work” (Walker, 1906, pp.367; Wendel, 1963, pp.105).

The Reformer was not just an organiser, but also a man of action deeply involved in the reality of his time, and a visionary theoretician, which is obvious mainly in the “Ecclesiastical Ordinances” (1541), as well as the rest of the books he published during his lifetime in Latin or French, which were subsequently translated in all the languages of the world. A passionate and optimistic supporter of public education and public schools maintained and controlled by the state, his philosophical-religious ideas largely contributed to the rise of the modern world, a democratic and creative one, where the main concepts would be tolerance, performance, and individual responsibility.

He highlights the special dignity of the calling of a teacher, comparable to that of a pastor, even if the two may not be considered equal. Calvin brings forth the special meaning of the knowledge act – knowledge of God and of oneself -, but he does not forget to warn his readers against an intellectual pseudo-faith deriving from a pseudo-knowledge saturated with philosophical speculations, which is truly harmful in point of spirituality. Real knowledge constitutes the premise of the saving faith: the extent to which the Reformer privileges the act of knowledge is the same to which he privileges the teaching profession.

“Sola fide” is one of the basic principles of the Protestant Reformation. But it is through this idea that the Reformation indirectly focuses on the cognitive act of the human being, as well as on his attempt to transmit his fellow humans and offspring a collection of ideas and feelings, i.e. his own life experience. Faith involves knowledge, this conviction makes Calvin reject the notion of “implicit faith”; in a fragment of his main work, “*Institutio Christianae religionis*” (1559) he states: “Faith rests not on ignorance, but on knowledge. And this is, indeed, knowledge not only of God but of the divine will. We do not obtain salvation either because we are prepared to embrace as true whatever the church has prescribed, or because we turn over to it the task of inquiring and knowing” (Calvin, 2006, pp.545).

On the spiritual level it is not enough for man to believe what he is told, without understanding and researching the validity of the information he receives, so Calvin only exhorts his contemporaries and descendants to carefully and systematically study any piece of information which is given as true, simultaneously indicating the harmful effect of ignorance and the beneficial character of knowledge. No teacher on earth is infallible, that is why no pupil is spared the effort of personally checking the information provided. If the truth is important to man, then education should be of equal importance.

### 3. Conclusions

It is common knowledge that the Reformers were accomplished cultivated men, and the Reformation itself came to be as a result of the consistently systematic reflection on the Bible, and on the degree to which the doctrine of the Church of the time observed the Scripture. The Protestant scholars merely resume and promote words originating in Antiquity: “*Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*”. Man cannot just believe anything, ignorance is to blame, and gullibility is the cause of man’s ruin. The man who is well-educated and believing in God analyses, compares, verifies, and draws conclusions in the know, as par excellence “the understanding is joined with faith” (Calvin, 2006, pp.546).

This final assertion of Calvin’s is emblematical, tending to reflect the mentality of an age which could wisely reconcile science and faith: it would be a great accomplishment if we, the ones living in the 21st century, could at least try to meditate more on this spiritual balance that our predecessors found and we seem to have partially lost along history!

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