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## A Lutheran Perspective on Education<sup>1</sup>

*THIS PAPER GIVES an account of some aspects of Christian education that are emphasized in Lutheran thinking on education. One of these aspects is a focus on education for everybody, not only Christians, another is the place of paradox and polar structure both in the theology and in the educational thinking. Maybe the most important paradox in this context is what Luther called the model of the two governments. The paper also mentions human finitude as a strongly emphasized aspect, and finally there are some thoughts about how a Lutheran perspective influences the curriculum.*

**Keywords:** Lutheran, paradox, polar structure, two governments, curriculum.

In one way it would be easier to write about a Lutheran perspective on education if I were not a Lutheran myself, because it may be easier to see what is particularly Lutheran if you see it from the outside. At the same time it is easier to explain the perspective if you know it from the inside. The more you know about other perspectives, the easier it may be to see your own 'specialities'. Some of what I present as being Lutheran may also be found in one or more of the other perspectives. In a way that is one of the points here, to find out where we agree and where we differ. And let me also say what may be obvious, that not all Lutherans will agree with what I say. But I think most evangelical Lutherans will have a basic understanding of their theology that is not too different from what I shall present.<sup>2</sup>

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a theologian, not an educationalist. He did not work out an educational theory. But he did two important things for education: he worked very hard to encourage education for all,<sup>3</sup> and he outlined some

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- 1 Along with other articles in this issue, this is adapted from a paper presented at the Stapleford Education Conference at St John's College, Nottingham on 4-6 January, 2002.
  - 2 Some of the content of this article, particularly the part about the two governments, overlaps with the contents of my book, *Sandsmark, Signe, Is World View Neutral Education Possible and Desirable?* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press/The Stapleford Centre, 2000) and it also overlaps with an article of mine in this journal, *Sandsmark, Signe, 'Is Faith the Purpose of Christian Education?' in Journal of Education & Christian Belief*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring 1997) pp. 25-32.
  - 3 Asheim, I., *Glaube und Erziehung bei Luther* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1961) p. 21.

important educational consequences of his theology. Bjarne Hareide presents Luther's educational thoughts under two headings: a) the necessity of upbringing, and b) the possibility of upbringing.<sup>4</sup> These two reflect Luther's concerns. He keeps telling parents and other people in authority that children need upbringing and teaching, but he also maintains that there are limits to what upbringing can achieve and that it is not a way to salvation.

This is what Luther himself focused on. Later, both theologians and educationalists have looked at other consequences of his theology. Both Luther, and others, and we today will necessarily also be influenced by the society that surrounds us and the challenges of our time when we try to find educational implications in our theological basis. What we focus on also depends, I think, on what we compare our view with.

### Education or Christian education?

One of the characteristics of Lutheran thinking is that it focuses on education in general, for everybody, not on something called Christian education or on education for Christians. It focuses on education as something that is the responsibility of the parents and the society, not the church. Parents are responsible for upbringing and for getting their children educated so that they can become responsible citizens. The state is responsible for helping the parents.

Education is something that is necessary for life in this world, not for eternity. The focus is on becoming good, active, responsible citizens – in home and society, not on becoming Christians or good, active, responsible church members. These two are certainly not completely separate, for instance what we mean by 'good citizens' depends on our beliefs and perspectives. For Christians, the basis for what good education and good citizenship are, is found in the Bible. Nevertheless, it is the society that is in focus when we ask what school and education are for, not the church.

God wants us to create and maintain a good society to live in – being good citizens, good parents, good bus-drivers, good teachers. To do our work in society is to fulfil God's calling. People need good education to govern homes, towns and countries in a wise way. Even if there were no soul and heaven or hell, Luther said, it would be necessary to have good schools – both for boys and for girls – and learned people. So education is for our life together here in this society.<sup>5</sup> It is not focused on 'Bildung', the forming of the individual personality, it is more 'outward', more concerned with doing than with being. Luther's focus is on our neighbours, how we can be equipped to help them.

This is the kind of education that everybody needs and should get, and to a large degree it can be given by people who are not Christians, as long as they stand for and teach biblical ethics. But if we want it to be a Christian school or Christian education, the Bible has to be taught, read and heard. It is not enough to have an education that is based on and conveys a Christian worldview. The Word of God has life in itself, and hearing it is the only way to salvation. Faith is

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4 Hareide, B., *Pedagogikk og evangelium* (Oslo: Land og Kirke, 1955) p. 26.

5 Asheim, I., *Orientering i religionspedagogikken* (Oslo: IKO, 1970) p. 126.

a gift, not the result of human action. The gospel is radically different from education. We need both in a Christian school, and in Christian education wherever it takes place.

### Paradox/polar structure

The American educationalist Richard T. Hughes has recently written a book called *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*, where he looks at how Christian faith relates to the requirement of an open mind that we find in higher education. He looks at different Christian denominations, and one of the resources he finds in the Lutheran tradition is the notion of paradox. For Luther, he says, the notion of paradox is at the heart of the gospel. The gospel itself is a paradox, where the cross means life and where death on the cross is exaltation.<sup>6</sup> One paradox that is important in an educational context is the one that is contained in the model of the two governments. Another is that if you want to be a master, you should be a servant.

Whether paradox is more in focus here than in other traditions I do not know, but it generates an interesting perspective. The Danish educationalist Carsten Hjorth Pedersen, in his forthcoming book on education and Christianity from a Lutheran perspective, refers to Reidar Myhre, Norwegian philosopher of education, and what he calls the polar structure of education.<sup>7</sup> Myhre's point is that in upbringing and education we often seem to have either/or questions, where the answer is not either/or, but both, in a fruitful tension. These polar tensions are different from tensions between concepts that are mutually exclusive, like truth and lie, love and hate.

An example is authority and freedom. Not either/or, but both/and. Not either individuality or community, but both. Not either forming or letting grow, but both. Not half of each so we get nothing, but both sides fully, in a tension that has to be there. This also is paradoxical, that two opposites have to be there to create a whole. No harmony, but tension.

Another Dane, the philosopher K. E. Løgstrup, uses a similar distinction when he writes of uniting opposites and dividing opposites. Dividing ones are for instance antipathy and sympathy. Uniting ones are opposites that are both necessary to give a full picture, like Jesus being both God and man, and like being both unprejudiced and uncompromising.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to know whether being Lutheran has influenced these people to think in opposites, but it goes very well together with Hughes' point about paradoxes. One paradox that he mentions is that on the one hand we will teach from a Christian perspective and we want the pupils to find the truth, but at the same

6. Hughes, R. T., *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001) p. 88.
7. Myhre, Reidar, *Oppdragelse i helhetspedagogisk perspektiv* (Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 1994) quoted in Pedersen, C. H. (forthcoming), *Pædagogik og kristendom - hvad har de med hinanden at gøre?* (tentative title).
8. Løgstrup, K. E., *System og symbol* (København: Gyldendal, 1982) quoted in Pedersen (forthcoming).

time we know that we are teachers, not preachers, and our aim is to be open to new thoughts, open to find truth in new places, and to encourage the students to search for truth themselves. If we are comfortable with paradoxes ourselves, it is easier for us to meet them in class, to let questions and dilemmas remain unsolved.<sup>9</sup>

Another paradox, or pair of uniting opposites, is upbringing and sanctification. We influence children and try to make them into good people. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is at work in those who are Christians, sanctifying them, and it is impossible to say what is the result of what. In addition, we are asked to work on our salvation, 'for it is God who works in us' (Philippians 2:12-13). From a Lutheran perspective, there is no need to try to harmonize all this, but neither to forget that all the perspectives must be there for us when we do our human part.

### The two governments

Of all the paradoxes, says Hughes, there is none so supportive of the life of the mind as Luther's notion of the two governments.<sup>10</sup> Also for other aspects of education it is an important model. It makes it difficult to operate with a clear distinction between sacred and secular, because we are under both governments at the same time.

This model of the two governments is not a dogma, but an interpretation of how the New Testament presents the relationship between God as Creator and God as Saviour. I base my account on writings by the internationally recognized Norwegian Luther expert I. Asheim and other Norwegian theologians.

According to Luther, the Bible tells us that God governs the world in two different ways, or with two hands, namely his secular (*weltlich*) and his spiritual (*geistlich*) government (*Regimente*). God created the world, and he upholds it because he wants to save it. What he does to uphold it is called his secular government and what he does to save people is called his spiritual government.

The secular government is also called the government of reason. Our rationality, and our ability to know right from wrong, good from evil, are important in this government. God has also created structures for our relationships, some orders or stations (*Ordnung, Stand*), and each individual belongs to a variety of stations simultaneously. Ministry, family and secular authority are the three basic orders, and we have various stations related to the family, the ministry, and the secular authority (being children, parents, church members, clergy, citizens, judges, rulers, etc.). Also in school there are structures and stations, some being teachers and others pupils.<sup>11</sup>

These 'Ordnungen' are where God hands out his good gifts, like love and

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9 Hughes (2001) pp. 98-100.

10 The German concept is *Regimente*, which is sometimes translated as 'kingdom', sometimes as 'government'. Hughes uses kingdom, I would rather say it is one kingdom with two governments.

11 Althaus, P., *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (R. C. Schultz, trans.) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965/1972) pp. 36-37.

justice; they are his tools for governing and upholding the world. These structures must remain if the world is to stand, although not necessarily in the shape they have in the present society. All ethical matters belong to God's secular government, Luther says, and since upbringing and education are moral enterprises, this is where they belong. They are part of God's work to uphold the world as a good place to live, with good people and useful citizens, a world where the gospel can be preached. So in a way, an indirect way, the preaching of the gospel is one reason for having schools.

Upbringing is basically about morality, influencing children to live as they ought. It is necessary because human beings are sinful, we do not want to follow God's good will for our life. Also the devil works to prevent people from living according to God's will. We are too weak to withstand bad examples and suppress bad inclinations.<sup>12</sup> The structures force us to live together and care for each other, but we need upbringing to learn to live in them. Upbringing can never make us perfect, but it can create good citizens, people who at least outwardly live according to God's creator will.<sup>13</sup>

That upbringing and education are functions in the secular government, means that it is not necessary to be a Christian to do them well. Everybody can know what is right and wrong, everybody can find out what pupils' strengths and weaknesses are and help them to develop and learn. Everybody can live to help others. But at the same time this secular government is God's government, it is his world. So the world they learn about should be the one that God created – a biblical understanding should run through everything. Upbringing and education without God is not good and right. But also non-Christians can to a certain degree do it.

If textbooks in geography, history, foreign languages, mathematics, etc. are written from a biblical perspective, a lot of non-Christians would have no problem using them and agreeing with much of the content. And many non-Christian teachers will want to teach Christian ethics. However, it is clear that Luther's society was much more influenced by Christianity than ours and that it is much more difficult today to talk of a good and right education if it is not done by Christians.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, what God does to save people, his work of salvation, is called his spiritual government, or the government of the gospel. God governs here as Saviour and Redeemer, he offers forgiveness for sins. In this government there is no way God can force people to comply with his will and his desires. In the secular government, parents have power over children, governments have power over citizens, and even the church has power structures. But there is no way of making people open their hearts and lives to God. The only means God has to influence people in the spiritual government is his Word, the Gospel, he can only invite people to receive faith as a gift.

God works through whoever preaches and teaches his Word, whether clergy,

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12 Ashelm (1961) p. 47.

13 Hareide (1955) p. 62.

14 On the other hand, it goes without saying that being a Christian does not automatically make people good parents or teachers.

teachers, parents, or whoever they are, even if they do not believe in him themselves. So when the Bible is taught in school, it gives the pupils an opportunity to learn more about God, and it gives God an opportunity to invite them to a life with him. It is a 'hear-government', where you hear the gospel and respond in faith or disbelief.<sup>15</sup> Educators have no control over this response, what comes out of the teaching is a matter between the child and God.

It is perhaps natural to think that the distinction between the two governments is a distinction between institutions – church and secular authorities – or even between people – Christians and non-Christians. But it is not, nor is it a distinction between different things we do. Bible teaching can be in the secular government, and teaching geography may be used by God in his spiritual government. And this is the key – 'used by God'. The governments are two ways God deals with the world, or rather two purposes God has in what he does. He wants to uphold the world, and he wants to save people, to give them a new life.

If this is the case, says Richard Hughes, we should not try to transform the secular world into the kingdom of God. And there is no need to separate from 'the world'. We reside in the world of nature – which is still God's world – and the world of grace at the same time. In the world of nature, we can take all voices seriously and learn together, we can reason together.<sup>16</sup>

The governments are different and must be distinguished, but we must not separate them.<sup>17</sup> They are both God's hands, working in and with his creation. But what is the point of this model if we cannot know which is which, if there is no way for us to know whether what we are doing is part of God's upholding or his saving work? There are two answers to that.

First, the model helps us to see that God has two different purposes and that we, as Christian teachers, can be used by him for both. Although his ultimate purpose is to save everybody and create for us a new heaven and a new earth, he is also concerned with this world and our life together here. And although we have no control over his 'whats' and 'hows', the model makes clear that there are two different things we as educators can contribute to. In the secular government it is necessary for people to know what is right and wrong, good and bad, and to behave according to it, so that sets us some tasks. It is also necessary for people to learn enough to function in society, both as a family member and as a citizen. In the spiritual government we know that the preaching of the gospel is necessary, so that has to be done.

Secondly, the model highlights two important points for educators. The first is the value of good education for everybody, for making them good citizens, irrespective of their being or becoming Christians. Although we may have Christian schools, even schools run by a church, schools where a biblical worldview is transmitted, Luther's model reminds us that our focus should be on the pupils' life in society and that it is a God-given task to prepare children for that,

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15 Austad, T., 'Luthers lære om de to regimenter og dens aktualitet' in *Ung Teologi*, 5, (1972) p. 3.

16 Hughes (2001) pp. 90-91.

17 Øystese, O., 'Religionspedagogiske konsekvenser av den lutherske regimentslære' in *Fast Grunn*, 42, (1989) p. 300.

all children.

The second important point is that pupils' faith is outside the control of the educator. There is no possibility of indoctrinating anybody into Christian faith, even if we try. We can give them 'Christian' habits, but life is given by God only. Our responsibility is that they hear, that they can learn about God, and then we leave the rest to him. My impression is that Lutheran schools have been more careful than many others not to assume that pupils are Christians, they have been careful not to include them automatically in prayers etc.

Before leaving this paradox, I want to mention the way the philosopher Leslie Stevenson comes to terms with it, which is less paradoxical. In his book *Seven Theories of Human Nature*,<sup>18</sup> he asks: What is wrong with mankind (diagnosis) and what can be done about this (the medicine)?

If we use this approach, from a Lutheran perspective the answer to what is wrong would be to point to the will. My human will is against God's will. Instead of letting God, the creator, be the focus of my life, instead of listening to him and his will for my life, I want to take over, to be my own authority, to be the centre of my life. For this illness there is no medicine that we can give, only God can turn us back to him and give us a desire to belong to him.

But there is another diagnosis for what is wrong with humankind, and that is lack of upbringing and education. The symptoms of the basic illness show in our egoistic behaviour. So in addition to telling people about the great healer Jesus Christ, we can treat their symptoms. We can restrict people in their self-centredness and motivate them to do good. When Luther talks about young people behaving badly, he does not say it is because of their sinfulness, but he blames parents and teachers for not doing their job. Life is a battle between good and bad, God and the devil, in the secular as well as the spiritual government, and upbringing and education are God's 'weapons'.<sup>19</sup>

So education is willed by God, and it is there to help children to become good neighbours – in their family and in society. He wants this for all children, whatever background they have, whether they know him or not. It is therefore our task as Christians to go into all kinds of schools, to teach all kinds of children, to help both with their moral upbringing and with the development of their talents so that they can serve others – giving joy and being useful. And actually, that the aim of education is service, becoming servants, is also a little paradox. We are more used to thinking that servants are those who know nothing, the lowest in society. But Jesus turns this upside down.

## Human finitude

Another area where Hughes says that the Lutheran tradition is strong, is when it talks of human finitude and the sovereignty of God. Human finitude 'points to the depth and breadth of sin that undermines our ability to fully grasp or do the good'. We know that we are fallen, that all parts of us, including our reasoning, are

18 Stevenson, L., *Seven Theories of Human Nature* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

19 Ashelm (1961) p. 23.

marked by sin. We can – and should – search for truth, but we must always remember that we may be wrong, even in our basic assumptions. This helps us to be humble and gives 'a healthy suspicion of absolutes'. We also know that God is truth and that truth therefore is not dangerous. This means that for Christian teachers and their pupils, there is freedom to question everything, without ending up in relativism.<sup>20</sup>

### Content in school

For Luther, the school should have two kinds of content: The Bible, and other, secular subjects. In both we get gifts from God, salvation and faith when we hear the word of God, and cultural gifts in the other subjects. It is important that both are there. The Bible is there so that they can learn about God and what it means to be a Christian. The school is not the place for proclamation, it is a place for teaching, for questioning and for exploring new territory. Also, the pupils are what Hughes calls 'a captive audience'. Some are there because they are sent by their parents. Higher up they have chosen to come themselves, but they have come to learn and get degrees, not to listen to sermons.<sup>21</sup> However, how God uses the content we teach, is up to him. People may be saved in our RE lessons. But they may actually be saved in our literature lessons as well.

The secular subjects – still in God's world – have three purposes: a) they can help the students to understand the Bible, b) they are useful for their life in society, and c) they can give pleasure, in the same way as silk and spices give physical pleasure.<sup>22</sup>

Long before Luther, Augustine went against the traditional 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' when he introduced the classical literature in his Christian schools. This was because he in a way saw 'through' the pagan content and saw behind it the Creator, whom everybody is dependent on to do good. All good things come from God, they are not produced by the pagans, only found by them.<sup>23</sup>

We can serve God in society as well as in church. Everybody has a calling to serve God, and no calling is more spiritual than others. This also means that it is not more valuable to read books than to do manual work. In Lutheran schools therefore practical subjects should be as important and valued as the more theoretical ones. And since pleasure is also God-given, aesthetic subjects are important.

What should be taught more specifically depends on the society the pupils are to live in, and also on their gifts. A Lutheran view of education would have two 'poles': faith and reality. Reality, what society is like, determines what they need to know something about – what they need to get a job, to be a responsible citizen, to function in a family. It is not what is taught that makes a school Christian, but how it is taught.

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20 Hughes (2001) pp. 85-87.

21 Hughes (2001) p. 144.

22 Asheim (1970) pp.123-127.

23 Asheim (1970) p. 113.

## Conclusion

Maybe one of the aspects that distinguishes the Lutheran perspective from many others is its emphasis on education being for the society. According to this view, Christians have a responsibility for education for all, not only their own children. This can be done by being teachers both in state schools and private Christian schools, but also by trying to influence the curriculum in state schools and the general teacher education. Although most societies have become very secular, it is possible to argue that aspects of Christian ethics and a Christian view of human nature will contribute to a good education for all, and that such aspects should be kept or reintroduced in state schools.

This does not mean that Lutheran thinking about education ignores salvation and eternal life. Alongside educating good citizens, Christian education includes helping the pupils to hear and understand the Word of God, so that they may get to know him. In Christian schools, this can be done explicitly. But also in secular schools, Christian teachers are Christ's letter (2 Corinthians 3:3).

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